

Minutes of the Select Committee for Policy Review

23rd November, 2016 at 6.00 pm
at the Sandwell Council House, Oldbury

Present: Councillor Worsey (Chair);
Councillors Cherrington, Gill and Sandars.

Apologies: Councillors Edwards and Hickey.

In Attendance: Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care
(Councillor Shackleton).

1/16

Sandwell Council's Approach to Preventing Loneliness and Isolation

The Select Committee received a presentation on loneliness and isolation.

There were various factors that could lead people to suffer loneliness and isolation. These included:-

- Increasing numbers of people living alone;
- An ageing population (while loneliness was not just a problem that affected the elderly, vulnerability increased with age);
- Breakdowns of family support networks;
- Increasing numbers of people whose first language wasn't English;
- Poor transport services.

It was reported that, according to research, lacking social connections was as damaging to health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Socially isolated adults were more likely to be admitted earlier to residential or nursing care, were at greater risk of emergency admission (and re-admission) to hospital and were at increased risk of a range of health problems including depression, paranoia, addiction, heart disease, stroke and suicide.

The Select Committee noted that, nationally, 23% of people aged 75 and over who lived alone did not see or speak with someone every day.

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Mental health problems and loneliness, while not always both present at the same time did impact on each other; mental health issues could cause people to withdraw or become isolated and social isolation was damaging to mental health.

In Sandwell there were over 1000 organisations delivering support and activities for local people. These helped address loneliness and social isolation through providing opportunities for people to meet, socialise, keep active and volunteer.

The Places of Welcome initiative was discussed, which was a network of churches, community spaces and cafés which held events to provide a social space for local residents. The Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care spoke about her experience at a Places of Welcome event in her town, which provided residents with an opportunity to meet and chat with tea and coffee.

There was a range of existing befriending services in Sandwell which catered to different needs and different communities. For example Better Understanding of Dementia for Sandwell (commonly known as BUDS) undertook home visiting for people with dementia, and Brushstrokes provided mentoring to isolated newcomers to the borough. There were also organisations providing luncheon clubs, home visiting, day care and social activities.

The Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care had begun planning a survey of all councillors to develop an understanding of the range of community groups and facilities that operate across Sandwell. The Chair of the Select Committee for Policy Review undertook to take up this piece of work, in collaboration with and on behalf of the Cabinet Member.

The Select Committee was informed about the Community Offer. This was a pilot funded by Adult Social Care as part of the Better Care Fund from September 2014 until March 2017. The Community Offer was designed to test whether community based support reduced demand on health and social care services. The Community Offer provided a needs assessment for every service user, connecting them to a range of agencies that could best meet their needs and brought them into longer term community-based support from local groups, volunteers and good neighbours.

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The Community Offer had been evaluated and although it was acknowledged that the support offered had reduced isolation and loneliness it had not demonstrated the benefits required to sustain future funding. It had not been possible to identify any reduction in demand on health and social care services as a result of the investment in the Community Offer.

A Prevention Strategy was in development and it was confirmed that loneliness would be an element within this Strategy. The Strategy would provide an overarching focus and give direction for all Council prevention services, with a collaborative approach across all departments.

The Chair of the Select Committee commented on the opportunities that were possible with intergenerational work, highlighting a project he was aware of in London called North London Cares that brought elderly people and younger professional adults together.

From the comments and questions by members of the Board, the following responses were made and issues highlighted:-

- The Community Offer had recruited over 200 volunteers. These had been from mixed ages, although it was reported that quite a lot had been older people.
- The Cabinet Member had visited a project involving sixth form students from a Sandwell school that worked to address loneliness amongst people in the school's local area.
- Due to the financial constraints on the Council, if it were decided to commission services to reduce loneliness or isolation it would be necessary to decommission other services.
- The Council maintained a list of local care and community organisations which it listed in an online database called Information Point. While this information was available to the public, members highlighted that some of the most vulnerable and isolated members of society may not be able to access the information.

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- Although the Council had funded the Friends and Neighbours initiative it was managed by a committee of volunteers and, as a voluntary sector organisation it was independent from the local authority.
- Sustainability of funding (from whatever source) was an important issue for third sector organisations.
- It was suggested that where smaller organisations didn't wish to be advertised more widely, there could be a list available to councillors who could put people who were experiencing loneliness or isolation into touch with appropriate organisations in their local areas.

Resolved:-

- (1) that the Chair of the Select Committee for Policy Review, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, carry out a survey exercise of elected members to ascertain the breadth of community groups and facilities that are involved in ward areas with activities that contribute to the prevention and reduction of loneliness and social isolation;
- (2) that the Interim Director – Resources be requested to arrange an event in early 2017 on loneliness and social isolation with appropriate organisations invited to allow networking to take place and to develop a strengthened understanding of what is already available in Sandwell;
- (3) that, after the event referred to in resolution (2) above, the Select Committee for Policy Review considers what policy recommendations it wishes to make to the Cabinet on the Council's approach to preventing loneliness and social isolation.

(Meeting ended at 6.42 pm)

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