

Connecting communities to avoid isolation Scrutiny Review

1. Background

At the meeting on the 11th July 2017, the People Scrutiny Committee agreed that its in depth project for the current municipal year would be on the following topic – ‘Connecting communities to avoid isolation’ (Minute 170 refers). The membership of the project team was Councillor Cheryl Nevin (Chairman), Councillors Helen Boyd, Steve Buckley, Mo Butler, David Garston, Chris Walker, Margaret Borton, Caroline Endersby and Lawrence Davies.

The project plan was agreed by the project team in October 2017 and endorsed at the People Scrutiny Committee on 10th October 2017 (Minute 374 refers). Updates were taken to the Committee meetings on 28th November 2017 (Minute 518 refers) and 30th January 2018 (Minute 696 refers).

The project team held 5 meetings in total, including a facilitated workshop session on 22nd November and an evidence gathering session on the afternoon of 12th January 2018.

2. Background / Context

According to an Age UK study¹, loneliness and isolation, or social isolation, are often discussed together and even used interchangeably. While they are related, they are distinct concepts.

It has been established that loneliness can be understood as an individual’s personal, subjective sense of lacking desired affection, closeness, and social interaction with others. Although loneliness has a social aspect, it is also defined by an individual’s subjective emotional state. Loneliness is more dependent on the quality than the number of relationships.

Age UK explain that social isolation refers to a lack of contact with family or friends, community involvement, or access to services. It is possible to be lonely but not to be socially isolated - research shows that it is also quite possible to be socially isolated but not lonely. Some people who live on their own or in remote places may not feel or report loneliness.

Loneliness causes feelings of disconnectedness from others, and not belonging, but it is not just an unpleasant experience, persistent loneliness can have profound impacts on physical and mental health, and quality of life. For example, loneliness can be as harmful for our health as smoking 15 cigarettes.

¹ https://www.ageuk.org.uk/documents/en-gb/for-professionals/research/age_uk_evidence_review_on_loneliness_june_2015.pdf?dtrk=true
accessed on 11th June 2018

Age UK highlight that studies have also found that loneliness leads to poor lifestyle behaviours; for example, alcohol has been shown to be used by people in order to alleviate a sense of a meaningless life, depression, anxiety and loneliness. Studies have also found a link with drug abuse and bulimia and loneliness. But loneliness does not just directly affect health and well-being; it can also become a vicious circle: research has shown that lonely people are more likely to view social encounters with more cynicism and mistrust, rate others and themselves more negatively, and expect others to reject them. In addition, lonely people tend to adopt behaviours that increase their likelihood of rejection.

3. The review

The scrutiny review explored issues around connecting communities and isolation focussing on the enabling role of the Council, partners and also the role of elected members.

The agreed project plan stated:

The central aim is to reduce social exclusion and avoid isolation to increase individuals, families and carer's wellbeing in promoting physical and mental health. This will promote opportunities to connect and mobilise both individuals and communities, encouraging positive relationships with a range of diverse organisations to encourage integrated working.

The project will be instrumental in building a strong and connected community developing assets within a strengths based approach and learning from communities lived experience. Effective partnerships will be supported by appropriate signposting, professional transparency embracing person centred values to enhance co production and empower people to be actively engaged in 'the life of the town'. Through creating innovative opportunities individuals can take control of their own lives within a safe creative and unique community.

The project team held an evidence session in October 2017 and heard about the community engagement work being done locally (for example the intergenerational work at Earls Hall School) and also about the development of an interactive map, which identifies relational opportunities in the community. The project team also heard about work being done by Leeds City Council, who set up "Neighbourhood Network Schemes" over 20 years ago and the positive outcomes from that.

The project team held a workshop session in November 2017 and explored applying an asset based approach in Southend (looking at for example the west central area and east central area localities) and then spent time preparing for the evidence session in January 2018. The project team had previously indicated they would like to speak to a number of people / organisations as part of the review, as set out in the project plan. In the light of discussions at the workshop, the project team agreed the key organisations / people they would like to invite to the session.

The following attended the session on 12th January 2018:

- Traci Dixon and Stuart Long, South Essex Homes

- Alison Semmence, SAVS
- Matt King, Trust Links
- Reverend Hannah Bucke
- Councillor Lesley Salter, Chair Southend Health & Wellbeing Board
- Maurice Sweeting, Chair Education Board
- Gert Sheepers, University of Essex
- Karen Bayliss and Verbena Barker-Newyear, EPUT

The session was run in a world café style and facilitated by officers from the Service Transformation Team within the Department for People at the Council.

The key messages from the session were reported to Scrutiny Members at the People Scrutiny Committee meeting in January 2018 and are attached as an **Annex**.

At the Scrutiny Committee meeting in April 2018 the Committee agreed that the final report would be considered at the first meeting in the 2018/19 Municipal Year.

4. Our Conclusions and Recommendations

- 4.1 That following on from the workshop in January, the Service Transformation Team continue to work with members to establish how some of the key messages can be explored further. This will be aligned closely to the Southend 2050 work and, in particular, the Locality Approach.
- 4.2 To promote the offer of skills training to give residents confidence to write bids, to access grants and funding, to build trust between residents and the Council, enabling small groups to become more sustainable. Service Transformation are developing a template/checklist in this respect. An example of a successful small bid will be made available on the website in the near future.
- 4.3 To undertake a review of the Councils event policies with a view to removing unnecessary obstacles for small events to happen led by community groups.
- 4.4 Create an environment where local groups can link up with each other with the assistance of community catalyts/mentors/champions.
- 4.5 Continue to promote a strength based approach via our community hubs through a variety of means, including the website, in support of the Locality Approach.

In depth scrutiny project – ‘Connecting communities to avoid isolation’
Witness Session 2 & project team meeting
Friday 12th January 2018 - 14.00 – 16.30
Committee Room 5, Civic Suite, Southend-on-Sea

In attendance:-

Project Team

Cllr Cheryl Nevin (Chairman), Cllr Helen Boyd, Cllr Steve Buckley, Cllr Caroline Endersby Cllr David Garston and Cllr Chris Walker

Officer support

Rob Walters, Fiona Abbott and Tobias Hartley

Facilitators

Sarah Baker, Nick Constantine, Maxine Nutkins, Kamil Pachalko, Mark Carrigher and Catherine Benford

Invited guests

Traci Dixon and Stuart Long (South Essex Homes), Alison Semmence (SAVS), Matt King (Trust Links), Reverend Hannah Bucke, Councillor Lesley Salter (Chair Southend Health & Wellbeing Board), Maurice Sweeting (Chair Education Board), Gert Sheepers (University of Essex), Karen Bayliss (EPUT) and Verbena Barker-Newyear (EPUT)

Apologies were received from Cllr Margaret Borton, Cllr Mo Butler and Cllr Lawrence Davies, Sharon Houlden and Mousumi Basu (EPUT)

Notes from feedback discussion

The questions which were explored at the session were:-

1. *How can we build sustainability (and also flexibility)*
2. *How can we put information out and draw people in and have conversations about their lives ('give and get')*
3. *What might be the obstacles involved and how can they be avoided?*
4. *How can we identify and use those willing to be active, connecting to others (community leaders)?*
5. *How you see as the Council role – within existing assets and personal role (using our networks)*

The following key points were highlighted:-

How can we build sustainability (and also flexibility)

- Communities have changed – our role – adapt to it
- Co-production – different narrative needed
- Move from deficit to asset / strengths approach
- Be bold and honest about prevention

- Physical / subtle barriers too – some people need skills / confidence to go to groups etc.
- community infrastructure needs to be sustainably funded to enable the community to build and sustain capacity making its assets available
- Start early! E.g. Kindness Club
- Ensure that we do things with people, not just for people

How can we put information out and draw people in and have conversations about their lives ('give and get')

- Community Champions – Use people already in the public eye, such as postmen, hairdressers and car mechanics that may be able to help in a less intrusive way
- Reach out – use underutilised spaces / methods
- Hear stories and learn from 3rd sector
- Use a range of mediums to reach everyone that may be suffering. Use the typical mediums such as posters, leaflets and events but also try add things such as radio advertisements
- Use video diaries to show people's stories and their journey to loneliness. This can help show people it is not an isolated incident but is a wide-range issue
- Utilise the student community in Southend

What might be the obstacles involved and how can they be avoided?

- Obstacle of bureaucracy sometimes e.g. DBS checks
- Accessing grants / funding can be complicated process and could be simplified and introduce levels of access such as a more simply application process for smaller amounts of money
- Can't do things to people – need to be co-produced
- Embed community ethos when young (start young!)
- People might not enjoy the typical events such as coffee mornings – Include a diverse range of activities that everyone can be part of – be creative
- Some isolated people might lack confidence or suffer from anxiety. Cater for this accordingly and maybe run events that do not necessarily involve lots of other people – need to meet people 'where they are'
- Stigma of isolation/loneliness an issue
- Gender tailoring needed?
- Some isolated people might not have means of transport – Run a transport system to help people get to certain events or places
- Isolation is usually stereotyped to older people – Include younger adults and even children in all campaigning and show that this stereotype is not true

How can we identify and use those willing to be active, connecting to others (community leaders)?

- Have strong asset base already – issue is how they are mobilised
- Use community champions and utilise the infrastructure that is already in place e.g. GPs, milkman, school teachers etc.
- Listen to needs of each community / locality – ask what they want to focus on
- 'bottom up' approach
- Can technology make us more isolated?

How you see as the Council role – within existing assets and personal role (using our networks)

- Council is facilitator and enabler. – need light touch, partner approach instead
- It's around building trust – both ways - don't come with an agenda
- Can use its wide reaching media team and influence to spread the word
- The council could start a PR campaign to build this trust. This should be approachable, easy and simple. Encourage connectivity