

Environment and Living Scrutiny Committee

11 FEBRUARY 2016

PRESENT: Councillor M Winn (Chairman); Councillors S Jenkins (Vice-Chairman), A Bond, A Cole, S Cole, B Everitt, B Foster, A Hetherington, C Poll and R Stuchbury

APOLOGIES: Councillors P Agoro

1. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 8 December 2015 were agreed as a correct record.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3. MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

The Environment and Living Scrutiny Committee received a report detailing information about mental health and wellbeing services available in Aylesbury Vale. The Assistant Director of Public Health from Buckinghamshire County Council was in attendance to provide additional information to the Committee. It was noted that mental wellbeing encompassed more than assistance for mental health issues. Members noted that improving mental health and wellbeing was associated with significant impacts for individuals and society, including better physical health, longer life expectancy, reduced inequalities, healthier lifestyles, improved academic achievement, enhanced community participation, reduced sickness absence and improved productivity as well as reduced costs from welfare, health and social care. The Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project (2008) also referred to mental capital, which was an individual's cognitive and emotional resources which can influence their ability to cope with the ups and down of life.

Members were advised that two of Buckinghamshire County Council's Select Committees were looking into mental health services in the County. The Health and Adult Social Care Select Committee had finished a review into mental health services, and the Children's Social Care and Learning Select Committee would be undertaking a review in 2016. It was noted that the causes of, and influences on, mental wellbeing were wide ranging. Often issues occurred because of adverse events in people's lives, but they can also be influenced by other circumstances or risk factors, such as poverty, unemployment, levels of supportive networks and levels of education. The broader social environment also affects how resilient a person could be in coping with challenges. As the environment surrounding a person would have an effect on their mental wellbeing, it could be said that all organisations in the District had an impact on mental wellbeing.

Resilience training was being carried out with 26 schools to help young people improve their mental health capacities and provide them with skill sets to overcome challenges. It was questioned what support was available to young carers, and it was advised that young carers were a key group and that sessions on resilience training had been run for young carers.

It was noted that an annual personal wellbeing survey was undertaken by the Office of National Statistics, where respondents were asked to rate themselves on a score of 1-10 on life satisfaction, feeling worthwhile, feeling happy and feeling anxious. Members

were advised that the results for Buckinghamshire were better than the national average for all categories other than anxiety, where residents indicated that they felt more anxiety than average.

The District Council provided a number of services that can support the give ways to wellbeing programme and therefore would help to improve mental wellbeing. Some examples of this include:

- The provision of leisure facilities, including parks and open spaces
- The provision and promotion of physical activities, such as the new Active Vale programme
- Support for older people through our ageing well programme which is being rolled out across Local Area Forums
- Support for the voluntary sector through the grants programme and Vale Lottery.

The majority of Council services did have a contribution to mental wellbeing. It was suggested that there should be increased measuring of the impact the Council had on this. Members questioned how employees of the Council were supported, and were advised that there were several schemes available to employees of the Council. One of these was a mental health first aid training scheme, which aimed to help employees identify mental health issues in colleagues and equip them in how to have a conversation on the subject.

Members suggested that it would be beneficial for members of the public if it became more of a social norm to become more active and take use of the local natural resources. The Active Bucks scheme aimed to help achieve this. A recent report stated that a large number of children nationally hadn't been to a park in the last 12 months. It was asked what the Council was doing to encourage higher levels of activity in children. Members were advised that Buckinghamshire had much higher levels of childhood activity than the national average. Schools were also working on physical literacy, as physical activity between the ages of 4 and 7 helped children to develop motor skills.

It was questioned what impact social media had had on mental health. It was noted that, on the one hand social media connected people who had previously struggled to connect with other people, however online bullying could increase the chance on mental health issues. Buckinghamshire County Council had produced a report on internet safety, but the effects of social media on mental health were not fully known.

Members were advised that work was undertaken with small and medium businesses regarding promoting mental health and wellbeing a couple of years ago. A mental health programme was promoted through the Local Enterprise Partnership, and it was noted that there had not been a positive response at the time. Businesses stated that they did not have the resource or capacity to implement a policy at the time. Larger businesses were likely to have their own mental health policy. It was noted that the military had an Armed Forces Health and Wellbeing Forum, which had a mental health action plan and that the military were alert to mental health issues. It was stated that mental health issues also arose years after a person had ended their service with the military, and therefore it was important that GPs were aware of a patient's veteran status. The National Armed Forces Covenant also enabled veterans to have fast track access to certain services.

Members asked whether the Council would be monitoring the level of need for access to mental health services for vulnerable groups during the change in the benefits are delivered. Members asked for additional information to be given regarding monitoring of mental health in children, and whether this was likely to be affected by the removal of some Sure Start centres.

The Environment and Living Scrutiny Committee thanked the Assistant Director of Public Health from Buckinghamshire County Council for her attendance, and

RESOLVED

That the Mental Health and Wellbeing Update be noted.

4. ENCOURAGING THE USE OF PARKS AND OPEN SPACES

The Environment and Living Scrutiny Committee received a report outlining the variety of district wide green spaces owned and managed by Aylesbury Vale District Council, how they are used and how the Council actively encourages the spaces to be used. It was noted that quality green spaces were important for the District, and this included the facilities provided within them and events that were held upon them. Councillors were advised that there was an error in the report circulated regarding the pitch hire usage figures in Appendix 1. The corrected figures are attached to these minutes.

Aylesbury Vale District Council managed 190 hectares of green spaces within the District. The majority of the spaces were owned by the Council, with the exceptions being the six closed churchyards at Aylesbury, Buckingham, Hulcott, Marsh Gibbon, Stoke Mandeville and Wing. The types of green spaces managed included parks, playing fields, children's play areas, woods, meadows, other natural areas and grassed areas.

Importance was placed on the ensuring quality, well maintained green spaces as these were community assets that were essential to the local economy. Good maintenance standards were stated to be essential in ensuring quality spaces and ensuring they remain in good quality. The day to day maintenance of the green spaces was carried out by the Council's joint horticulture and street cleansing contractors John O'Conner and SITA UK. The existing contract would be in place until 2020 and was noted to operate to ISO standards for Environmental Management and Quality Management.

The Council's Supplementary Planning Guidance for Sport and Leisure Facilities detailed the type of sport and leisure facilities that should be provided per development. An engagement process was carried out with users, stakeholders and ward members before the building of new facilities or improvement of existing facilities.

Several of the AVDC owned sites were available for hire. Improvements had also made to existing access routes, and new access routes were also provided to and through the green spaces, which also enabled increased usage. A variety of licensed events were also run on Council owned parks and open spaces, and these included 'fitness bootcamps' and large scale events such as fun fayres. The Communities Team supported a number of projects which take place in Council owned parks and open spaces.

Members were advised that local residents were initially made aware of major park or open space improvement projects through the Council's engagement process, which may via articles in publications, letters to residents, emails to established residents groups or school presentations. Resident groups increasingly used social media, which increased levels of engagement and also response rates. Once projects were completed, press releases were issued and official opening were organised to which the ward Members, user groups, stakeholders and local media were invited. Ongoing promotion of parks and play areas was carried out through the Council's website, and individual clubs also promoted the facilities for hire.

Aylesbury Vale District Council was noted to actively support a number of national campaigns that help to promote the use of our parks and open spaces. One such national campaign that had also attracted the attention of community groups was the Clean for the Queen. Councillors noted that this was an ideal opportunity to increase community ownership of their local spaces, and it was stated that Parish Councils would be reminded of the campaign. A campaign would take place which aimed to reduce the amount of litter. There would be a display in Aylesbury Town centre of the volume of litter that was collected daily. Members questioned whether members of the public were fined for littering, and were advised that work was being undertaken on education, as enforcement was an expensive option. Enforcement did take place for fly tipping offences. Members were advised that there was a dog warden employed for 10 hours a week. Town and Parish Councils were responsible for the provision of dog bins, but it was noted that the level of dog fouling in the area was too high.

Members suggested that a list of all parks and open spaces should be kept by the Council, so that the authority was aware of the spaces available to the public. It was noted that there was information held on play areas, but that there was not enough capacity to create and maintain a list of open spaces in the District.

It was noted that the pitch hire figures had decreased. It was noted that this was due to a variety of reasons, including an increase in cost to hire. Some groups, such as the Hockey Club, were now using different facilities for some of their matches. It was noted that while football was a rich sport, local clubs received a lack of funding.

The team could comment on applications as part of the planning process to ensure provision of open space. Shared service provisions were in place regarding ground service. Ground service was provided for Bucks Fire, and also for some Parish Councils.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

5. PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING REGENERATION POLICY

The Environment and Living Scrutiny Committee received a report outlining the proposed Private Sector Housing Regeneration Policy. The policy set out the existing private housing sector housing grant and loan schemes offered by the Council and suggested additional and alternative scheme that could be adopted to better enable regeneration of the private sector housing stock in the Vale. The policy focussed on assisting target groups of residents including older people, disabled people, and vulnerable groups (e.g. those on low incomes living in poor quality housing). It also suggested the provision of a landlord loan scheme to help to improve conditions in rented private sector housing stock.

Members were advised that the inclusion of a landlord loan scheme would help to encourage landlords to provide a higher quality of housing for their tenants. It was important to note that this would run alongside the enforcement powers granted to the Council under the Housing Act 2004 to raise standards in the private rented sector and deal with rogue landlords. The Council also operated mandatory and additional licensing schemes for houses in multiple occupation which aimed to improve standards and protect vulnerable tenants living in this type of housing stock. It was noted that the policy regarding Homes of Multiple Occupancy was agreed by the Council and implemented in June 2015. It was noted that there was a link between poor quality housing and poor health. It was proposed that the scheme be reviewed to move away

from small amounts of grants and loans, and that it would be important to ensure sufficient review of the new policy.

The Council currently offered the following private sector grant and loan assistance:

- Minor works grant up to £2500
- Mandatory disabled facilities grant up to £30,000
- Empty homes loan
- Flexible home improvement loan.

Members were advised that the report recommended that the Minor Works Grant be replaced with an Essential Repairs Grant of up to £10,000. In addition the following grants and loans would be offered alongside the mandatory disabled facilities grant, empty homes loan and flexible home improvement loan.

- Discretionary DFG top-up of up to £20,000
- Relocation Grant of up to £30,000
- Urgent Hospital Discharge Adaptation Grant up to £10,000
- Landlord Loan Scheme up to £10,000.

It was noted that there were currently 222 long term empty properties. The Council received a New Homes Bonus grant for bringing empty properties back into use. The Council would work with the owners of the properties to aim to bring the property back into use, and could also use Compulsory Purchase powers. Members were advised that there were 10-20 properties where compulsory purchase may be explored.

The Stock Conditions survey was last carried out in 2007. It was noted that this had previously been a mandatory function for the Council to undertake, however it was no longer mandatory. It was an expensive survey to carry out, and had previously been carried out in conjunction with the other District Councils in the County to reduce costs. The most recent survey had been used during the formulation of the policy, and Members stated that they were concerned that the data used was not up to date. Members were informed that additional data was used, such as the Public Health England data and the most recent census. It was also noted that it was not unusual for this survey not to have been carried out more recently than 2007. The Environmental Health Manager had noted the potential financial outlay in the budget in the next 12 to 24 months to carry out the budget. The Environment and Living Scrutiny Committee asked that it be recommended to Cabinet that the survey be carried out to inform the Council's policy going forwards.

Members supported the proposals in the policy, and stated that it would be important to publicise that the funds were available to members of the public and partner organisations.

Members thanked the Environmental Health Manager for her report, and

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

6. WORK PROGRAMME

Members of the Environment and Living Scrutiny Committee considered the work programme, and

RESOLVED

That the work programme be noted