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Wellbeing Objective: Tackling Loneliness and Isolation

The (draft) delivery plan for this Objective, produced for July 2021's PSB considered the impact that the Covid-19 has had, and continues to have, on this objective and the ability to deliver on both the shorter-term outputs and longer-term outcomes.

Identified 'quick wins' for the 2021-22 PSB year were to:

1. revisit and reinvigorate the Befriending Network;
2. explore how children and young people are experiencing and managing loneliness and isolation, particularly through working with schools and building on the work of well-being ambassadors; and
3. improve public sector signposting / support for those experiencing feelings of loneliness and isolation, including opportunities for 'Loneliness Champions' in the public sector.

Progress to date 2021-22:

1. A new Tackling Loneliness and Isolation Development Officer has been appointed for Cwm Taf. Karen Vowles has re-established the Befriending Network which is going from strength to strength and has now appointed a Chair Pauline Richards, with a Vice Chair hopefully by the next meeting. Karen will be meeting with the Chair on a monthly basis and developing the agenda, speakers and training sessions alongside her. The next meeting is for 15 February (delayed from 8 February owing to clash with the Social Value Forum) and it is planned that a Terms of Reference will be agreed.
During the November meeting a group work session, with the use of a Jamboard, undertook a piece of work which highlighted some areas of concern and areas for opportunities for the Network members. As an outcome of this session the Network will set the agenda for the next few meetings and potentially hold specific subgroups/task and finish groups to address some of the concerns highlighted. Joint training sessions via Teams/Zoom will also be held. Examples of these are Safeguarding, Dementia Awareness, Substance Misuse Awareness, etc.
2. There is now a separate 'Children and Young Persons Forum' through VAMT, supported by Tim Carter. Both RCT and Merthyr have submitted applications to the National Lottery Community Fund for the 'Mind Our Futures' project looking at empowering young people and creating and implementing a vision for a more resilient and mentally healthy future for young people in their community and addressing mental health inequalities that have been made worse by the pandemic.
3. The learnings from the mental health scoping review carried out in early 2021, research from the Bevan Foundation, discussions from the Befriending Network and other engagement including for the regional assessments are being used to understand our communities. The need for essential befriending services has been highlighted over the last 20 months, with sustaining support and funding the key priorities.

A Hackathon was planned, developed and delivered in Merthyr Tydfil for older people on 30th November in partnership with Jenny Mushiringani Monjero. Fifty attendees had

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originally booked places which dwindled to 30 the week prior to the event. This was around the same time that the media were highlighting the Omicron variant and cases were climbing in the Merthyr area. On the day only 10 individuals attended.

PSB Support Officers have been attending Neighbourhood Networks across RCT and Merthyr Tydfil speaking with groups and partners, as part of our engagement work, to understand feelings of loneliness and isolation in our communities. Karen Vowles has also been running sessions in Calon Las Hub, informing the engagement work of the Assessments. Further consultation sessions are planned for January but Covid compliance means these may need to be rescheduled.

In terms of the broader elements of the PSB Well-being Plan around understanding, connecting, volunteering and the promotion of it work is ongoing, but we must recognise that we are in a very different situation now to when the everything was written in 2018 with significant flooding, Brexit and a global pandemic all impacting on our communities, and this has caused significant shifts in attentions and priorities.

Upcoming focus:

Befriending Champions

Merthyr Tydfil CBC have been approached regarding this project. Expressions of interest were requested via Democratic Services and we are still awaiting responses. In RCT, discussions have been held with Syd Dennis who is very interested in taking this forward.

We would ask for support with engaging with Police and Fire & Rescue services to have conversations with them regarding the project within their services.

Future project under development

Having 'Cuppa and Chat' tables in cafés is currently on hold due to the Covid pandemic and restrictions. The aim of this project is to develop tables in cafes which will actively encourage people (strangers) to get together and chat. The pilot will be established in Cynon Valley and Merthyr Tydfil initially and reviewed after three months. These will be specifically scheduled sessions e.g. 'Tea Pot' café in Mountain Ash every Friday between 10.30 and 12 noon. A sign will indicate the table, timeslot and that the table is specifically for people to join with you and chat. This project promotes sustainability, and it should need a small amount of staff/volunteer time which can be gradually withdrawn when the table becomes 'established', and people become "regulars" at the table. This is not meant to be a table to share intimate details of life but to develop a network of social support and potentially friendships to combat social isolation.

(Ongoing) Challenges

It has been almost two years since storms Dennis, Ciara and Covid first hit, the community and voluntary sector response and mobilisation was, and continues to be, an enormous effort. Food sufficiency networks have been established and have achieved great success, with Merthyr's Food Prosperity Network having been identified as an example of good

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practice and RCT recently becoming part of the sustainable food places network. The inequalities that exist in the region, driven by poverty, are manifested in many ways and can drive feelings of isolation, not being able to participate and struggling to cope with rising living costs. Understanding these challenges, what matters to our communities and how we can work together to address them is one of the key actions identified for tackling loneliness and isolation and one made all the more important in the context of Covid.

The main challenge for the Third Sector delivery is the funding issue. Short term funding for a long-term issue and the challenges of burn out for both staff and volunteers during the last two years, combined with a continuing change of face to face to telephone befriending, based on the frequently changing covid guidance/directive is also impacting on the delivery of befriending services.