

THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

20 January 2014

HOW WE RESOLVE EXCLUSION INFORMAL SCRUTINY GROUP

REPORT OF THE ISG CHAIR, COUNCILLOR THERESE EVANS

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RECENT REFERENCES

None

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At a meeting of The Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 18 February 2013 it was agreed to establish an Informal Scrutiny Group (ISG) to consider the level to which City Council services are accessible to vulnerable groups and how the Council tackles exclusion.

This report describes the review process and sets out the recommendations of the ISG.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That The Overview and Scrutiny Committee consider the recommendations of the ISG and recommend to Cabinet the following:

1. That the Winchester City Council Reception area should join the Tourist Information Centre and the RPLC as an additional designated safe place under the 'Safer Places' scheme. This should be publicised in WCC communications.
2. Additional signage should be provided in the main City Council Reception area to make it clear to people that rooms can be offered for confidential discussions. These should be made freely available.
3. Ensure that the confidentiality and anonymity of rehoused victims of domestic violence and abuse is protected in all contacts with the Council.
4. That the Council should consider the policy of having one key contact officer for residents with Autism and other mental health issues.
5. The Council should ensure continuity of information between departments in cases where there is a change to the key contact officer.
6. The Council should ensure that language used in contact communications with residents with Autism and mental health issues should be unambiguous and clear.
7. Relevant City Council officers should receive appropriate training to ensure that they can address the needs of vulnerable adults, particularly those with mental health issues including Dementia. WCC should also arrange specialised training for a number of key officers in how to deal with people with Autism. There should be a regular in-house check to ensure all departments currently have staff with appropriate training.
8. Trigger Tool training should be included as part of the staff induction process for all staff and members. Consideration should also be given to extending the training to the Council's contractors.
9. Training opportunities should be extended to elected Members and WCC contractors where appropriate.
10. Consideration should be given to putting procedures in place whereby vulnerable or at risk tenants can, with consent, be identified on the Council's Orchard Housing systems and can also be 'flagged' up between departments.

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DETAIL:

1 Introduction

1.1 At its meeting on 18 February 2013, The Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSC) appointed an Informal Scrutiny Group (ISG) to look at the accessibility of City Council services to vulnerable groups and how the Council tackles exclusion, with particular reference to:

- Individuals with Mental Health/Asperger's/Autism;
- Individuals at Risk/Vulnerable (e.g. children or young people at risk, people facing domestic violence, abuse, harassment, intimidation);
- Aged/Infirm/Immobile;
- Access (communication and physical access) by those living outside the City;
- Training across these fields, sharing of information, maintaining standards and reviewing provision periodically, Trigger Tool training and cascading.

1.2 The Members of the ISG were Councillors Evans (Chair), Byrnes, Mason, Pines, Power and Verney. The supporting officer was Lorraine Ronan in her capacity as Head of Health & Wellbeing.

1.3 OSC noted the need to review and narrow the focus of the ISG in order to ensure best use of officer/Member time and to avoid any duplication with the work of previous ISGs.

1.4 Details about the programme of meetings, evidence provided by expert witnesses and the ISG recommendations have been included in the final report which is shown at Appendix 1.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:

2 SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY AND CHANGE PLANS (RELEVANCE TO)

- 2.1 The work of this ISG is directly relevant to the Access to Services priority in the Community Strategy as it is seeking to ensure fair and equitable access and is looking at ways to remove any barriers. It also supports our general aim to be an Efficient and Effective Council.

3. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 From the outset, the ISG was mindful of the need to ensure its recommendations were both realistic and achievable. Implementation of the recommendations set out in this report should have no significant resource implications over and above staff time and a small sum for improved signage in main Reception which can be found within existing resources.

4. RISK MANAGEMENT ISSUES

- 4.1 There are no significant risk management issues associated with this report.

5. EQUALITIES

- 5.1 The Council has a legal obligation to ensure that no one is unfairly disadvantaged, excluded or subject to discrimination when accessing its services.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:

Minutes of the ISG, held by the Democratic Services Team.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Final Report of the How We Resolve Exclusion Informal Scrutiny Group

FINAL REPORT

OF THE

**HOW WE RESOLVE EXCLUSION
INFORMAL SCRUTINY GROUP**

1. Introduction

1.1 This report describes the conclusions of the 'How we Resolve Exclusion' Informal Scrutiny Group (ISG). The ISG was established by The Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 18 February 2013 under its initial title of 'Access, Exclusion and how we address it'. It was established to look at the issue of access to, and possible exclusion from, City Council services by specific vulnerable groups and to consider whether any improvements should be made to ensure fair and equitable access for all client groups. The specific groups and issues identified were:-

- Individuals with Mental Health/Asperger's/Autism;
- Individuals at Risk/Vulnerable (e.g. children or young people at risk, people facing domestic violence, abuse, harassment, intimidation);
- Aged/Infirm/Immobile;
- Access (communication and physical access) by those living outside the City;
- Training across these fields, sharing of information, maintaining standards and reviewing provision periodically, Trigger Tool training and cascading.

1.2 An informal preliminary meeting was held in May 2013 involving Councillor Evans (ISG Chair), Councillor Pines, the nominated lead officer and Democratic Services support officers. The aim of the meeting was to discuss the scope of the review to ensure the most efficient use of Member/officer time, and also to agree a provisional schedule of topics to be covered by the ISG meetings. Those present agreed that the scope of the review was potentially too broad and that draft terms of reference should be drawn up to clearly define its focus. These would be presented to the first full meeting of the ISG.

1.3 The ISG met on five occasions as follows:-

Meeting 1 – 17 June 2013. Theme: Review initiation meeting.

Note: In the absence of Councillor Evans, who was prevented from attending due to severe traffic problems, the meeting was chaired by Councillor Pines.

The following terms of reference were agreed:-

- To consider the way the City Council communicates with vulnerable individuals whether face to face, online or written.
- To take a detailed look at the services provided by the Housing Services and Revenues and Benefits teams.

- To listen to the views and opinions of a range of expert witnesses, Council officers, external partners, elected Members and service users to establish the main areas of concern and to help identify examples of best practice.
- To consider the training currently available to staff and Members and identify and potential gaps in provision.

Within these terms of reference, the ISG agreed that the two key areas to be addressed were:

- Mental health issues – examining how WCC officers dealt with customers with mental health issues, particularly those on the Autistic Spectrum.
- Individuals at risk – how at risk customers were ‘flagged’ and how sensitive information was shared between departments.

It was agreed that the ISG would **not** focus on issues of physical access to services, geographical access to services, or older and physically disabled individuals as they were currently or had previously been addressed by other groups or ISGs.

Following discussion it was agreed that the name of the ISG should be amended from ‘Access, Exclusion and How we Address it’ to ‘How we Resolve Exclusion’.

Meeting 2 – 15 July 2013. Theme: Corporate training, Equality Impact Assessments and Housing Services.

Councillor Tony Coates, Portfolio Holder for Housing was in attendance at this meeting.

The ISG heard from the following key witnesses:

- Alison Gavin – Equalities, safeguarding and corporate training.
- Dr Ian Barrett – Equalities Impact Assessments.
- Amber Russell – Addressing the needs of vulnerable tenants and the work of the Housing Equalities Group.

An additional bullet point was added to the previously agreed terms of reference:-

- To consider how City Council services deal with at risk individuals and those suffering from Mental Health.

During discussion it was clarified that 'at risk' individuals included, but were not limited to; ex prisoners, rough sleepers, individuals leaving home at a young age, and victims of domestic abuse/violence.

Meeting 3 – 2 September 2013. Theme: Expert evidence, multi-agency working, and commissioning.

Councillor Tony Coates attended part of the meeting.

The ISG heard from the following expert witnesses:-

- Janet Chierchia – Winchester and District Mencap, member of HCC Learning Disabilities Partnership Board, Chair Winchester District Older People Partnership, Executive Director Healthwatch Hampshire.
- Andy Wilshire – Strategic Commissioning Manager for Mental Health, HCC Adult Services.
- Katy Bartolomeo – Senior Commissioning Manager for Learning Disabilities and Mental Health, NHS West Hampshire Clinical Commissioning Group.
- Michelle Gardner – Chief Executive, Trinity Winchester.
- Sandra Tuddenham – Head of Community Safety, WCC.
- Sergeant Richard Blackford – Hampshire Constabulary, Public Protection Unit.
- Paul Wood – Customer Service Manager, WCC.

The expert witnesses gave a background to their role within their respective organisations and answered questions from Members.

Meeting 4 – 30 September 2013. Theme: Expert evidence and the experience of a service user.

The ISG heard evidence from the following:-

- Dr Gloria Pepe – Consultant Psychiatrist.
- Dr Jacqueline Morgan – Paediatrician.
- Survivor of domestic abuse/violence and friend.
- Jane Petty – Deputy Head of Revenues, WCC.

The doctors had been invited to give an insight into the challenges faced by people on the Autistic Spectrum when accessing services.

The survivor of domestic violence was invited to give an account of her experiences with WCC services.

The Deputy Head of Revenues explained how the needs of vulnerable customers were addressed by the Revenues and Benefits team.

Meeting 5 – 21 October 2013. Theme: Conclusions and wrap up meeting to discuss recommendations for final report.

Discussion was based around the document circulated by Councillor Evans which suggested a number of recommendations and observations that could be included in the final report.

2. Main findings of the ISG - Training

- 2.1 Specialised training was one of the main recurring themes of the ISG discussions, particularly the need to ensure that relevant sessions and courses were incorporated within the corporate training programme on a rolling, as opposed to a 'one off', basis. Officer roles and responsibilities are constantly changing, hence the need to maintain an ongoing programme. This should be relatively easy to achieve.
- 2.2 The Older People's Wellbeing Trigger Tool has been very well received since its inception in 2010. The Trigger Tool training package was expanded in May 2013 to incorporate further issues relevant to vulnerable older people, including falls, dementia, nutrition and abuse. Some Members of the ISG had benefited from Trigger Tool training and thought it should be extended to all Members. The ISG also felt that it could be part of the induction programme for all new staff and possibly be offered to Council contractors too.
- 2.3 The evidence submitted by the two doctors highlighted the challenges faced by adults on the Autistic Spectrum when trying to access services. People with Autism or Asperger's were often bright and intelligent but would have difficulties with communication and could find it difficult to carry out simple everyday tasks. They often lack the ability to process situations or problem solve. It was noted that open or ambiguous questions could cause stress for people with Autism and that they benefit greatly from having single point of contact to deal with agencies on their behalf. As many people with Autism function well it is often not immediately obvious that they have a mental health issue.
- 2.4 ISG Members felt that WCC should arrange specialised training for a number of key officers in how to deal with people with Autism. Autism awareness training should be offered to all staff. It was noted that Job Centre Plus staff were currently being trained. It was suggested that HCC may be able to provide this training.

2.5 ISG Members noted that safeguarding training was ongoing with staff and that a new e-learning tool had recently been developed in partnership with other local authorities in Hampshire. It was suggested that Members should also receive this training and it was noted that Contractors, such as Osborne, were obliged under the terms of their contracts with the Council to provide safeguarding training to their staff.

2.6 It was noted that Dementia is a growing issue both nationally and locally and is one of the most significant mental health issues facing society today in terms of prevalence and its impact on individuals, families and their communities. WCC staff must be able to address the needs of people with Dementia. The Group felt that Dementia Awareness training should be made available to all staff and elected Members with more specialised training for relevant officers. Consideration should also be given to extending the offer to WCC contractors.

3. Housing Services

3.1 It was acknowledged that the Housing Department was doing some excellent work through the Housing Equalities Group (HEG) to address the needs of vulnerable clients and to ensure that services were accessible to all. The regular programme of staff training was worthy of particular note. Housing officers were skilled in dealing with the needs of vulnerable tenants.

3.2 ISG Members were concerned that the department did not as a matter of policy 'flag' individuals with mental health issues or at risk of domestic abuse on the Orchard system, although a system was in place for violent clients. It was noted that it would be very difficult to identify individuals with mental health issues, unless they volunteered the information. The Group also noted that sensitive information of this nature could not easily be recorded and passed from department to department or organisation to organisation. It was, however, explained that many frontline staff have been trained sufficiently to recognise individuals with mental health disabilities. It was stated that the Housing department had, in the past, forwarded relevant information about individuals to departments that needed it. However, the Group still felt there should be a Council wide system in place to 'flag' vulnerable individuals with mental health problems and those at risk of domestic abuse.

3.3 Although the team liaises with a range of external agencies on a case by case basis e.g. Adult Services, Children's Services, Probation, Community Mental Health Team, it would be helpful to have dedicated named contact for each.

- 3.4 In answer to a series of questions about the accessibility of the Choice-Based Lettings system to vulnerable individuals, it was explained that the service had been subject to a robust Equalities Impact Assessment and that a series of enhancements had been implemented. The operation of the scheme is constantly monitored to ensure it is accessible to all. A process is in place whereby officers can bid on behalf of certain vulnerable clients who are unable to use the bidding system themselves. In addition, partner organisations with support worker responsibilities receive training on how the system operates in order that they have the skills to effectively support their clients.
- 3.5 The group expressed concern about the complexity of some of the housing forms although it was accepted that officers were available to assist vulnerable clients who may find it difficult to complete them.

4. Revenues and Benefits

- 4.1 ISG Members were generally satisfied that once vulnerable people made contact with the department they were dealt with them in an appropriate and sensitive manner. They were often accompanied by support workers or family members. It was more difficult for the Revenues and Benefits team to make contact and assist people in privately rented accommodation as less information and support was available.
- 4.2 It was noted that Trigger Tool Training, Safeguarding Training and Mental Health Awareness training were not regular enough to keep staff knowledge up to date, particularly as it was only feasible to release one member of staff to attend at any one time in order to maintain appropriate office cover.
- 4.3 The Benefits Team had really good working relationships with the Nightshelter, HCC Adult Services and Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB). Internally the team had excellent links and worked closely with the Housing department.
- 4.4 The Benefits Team run a 'Special Requirements' notebook on their IT system which can provide background information about specific customers. However, officers would only check the notebook if a customer made contact with the department. It did not prevent any automatic letters or other documents being sent out to customers.
- 4.5 Customer calls into the Revenues & Benefits team were directed to a Revenue & Benefits officer directly rather than having to be filtered through the Customer Service Centre. In addition, the Revenues and Benefits Team had a separate area of the main Council reception.

- 4.6 It was noted that there is a council tax exemption for people classed as Severely Mentally Impaired. This can be a difficult subject for staff to broach with a customer.
- 4.7 ISG Members commended the use of the Special Requirements notebook but were disappointed it was only used within the team. They were also concerned about the complexity of some of the forms that customers were expected to complete but appreciated that staff were available to assist.

5. Witness Statements

- 5.1 The Group heard from a survivor of domestic abuse about her experience of City Council services. Although it was just one fairly extreme example, it did highlight the importance of identifying a single point of contact or caseworker for vulnerable clients. This witness felt that the anxiety caused by having to constantly explain her troubled past to different officers could have been alleviated with a single point of contact. She was also not aware that she could have requested a private room in the Customer Service Centre which would have avoided the need to explain the reason for her visit in a busy public reception area. The Group felt that this was another reason to 'flag' at risk individuals on the Council's systems. The witness also felt that there was a general lack of support for victims of domestic violence in Winchester. Other concerns raised by the witness with respect to her individual circumstances have subsequently been addressed by relevant officers.
- 5.2 The group also heard from a range of external partners and other commissioning agencies to get a feel for the level of activity already taking place to address the needs of people with mental health issues and other vulnerable groups both now and in the future. Members were somewhat surprised at the level of partnership and multi-agency work taking place at a strategic level. However, they did wonder whether coordination between agencies could be improved for individuals in 'the system' particularly those that fell just outside the threshold for referral to specialist services or other support.

6. Examples of best practice

- 6.1 The work of the Housing Equalities Group was commended. It was noted that this good practice should be shared with other teams.
- 6.2 The use of the Special Requirements notebook in the Revenues and Benefits team was noted as an example of good practice, but there was discussion on whether this information could be shared with Housing and/or other departments due to the sensitive nature of the information.

- 6.3 The Supporting Families Programme which operates on a whole family, single key worker approach with multi-agency input, seemed to be working well.
- 6.4 The Group was pleased with the level of collaborative working between Council teams and outside agencies, both statutory and voluntary. The partnership work of the Community Safety and Neighbourhood Services teams and the district Health and Wellbeing Board were worthy of particular note.
- 6.5 The Safer Places scheme has been operating in Hampshire since 2012. It provides designated safe havens for vulnerable people, primarily those with learning disabilities, when out in the community. If people feel lost, bullied or anxious they can go to one of the designated areas which can be identified by a Safe Place sticker. The individual will have a card which they show to a member of staff – it will have their name and an emergency contact number. Staff will phone the number on the card and the person can wait in the Safe Place for a support worker or family member to collect them. The Group felt that consideration should be given to extending the scheme to cover people with Autism and possibly Dementia. There are in excess of 20 designated Safe Places in Winchester including the River Park Leisure Centre and the Tourist Information Centre. Members felt that the City Council Reception should also be a designated Safe Place.
- 6.6 It was noted that an autism alert card for people with Autism was available from the National Autistic Society.

7. Concerns and issues that need to be addressed

- 7.1 There is a need to establish a rolling programme of training opportunities for staff. The current ad hoc arrangements are not sufficient.
- 7.2 The ability to 'flag' vulnerable and at risk customers on the Housing system and between departments should be investigated.
- 7.3 Wherever possible vulnerable and at risk individuals should have a nominated officer as their single point of contact. This is particularly important for individuals on the autistic spectrum or those fleeing domestic abuse.
- 7.4 The group felt that WCC letters and documents were not always written in Plain English and were often quite complicated to complete. This was particularly the case for customers with Autism who find it difficult to respond to open or ambiguous questions.

7.5 It was suggested that additional signage should be provided in the Council's main reception area to highlight the fact that a private room was available for sensitive discussions.

8. Recommendations to Cabinet

1. That the Winchester City Council Reception area should join the Tourist Information Centre and the RPLC as an additional designated safe place under the 'Safer Places' scheme. This should be publicised in WCC communications.
2. Additional signage should be provided in the main City Council Reception area to make it clear to people that rooms can be offered for confidential discussions. These should be made freely available.
3. Ensure that the confidentiality and anonymity of rehoused victims of domestic violence and abuse is protected in all contacts with the Council.
4. That the Council should consider the policy of having one key contact officer for residents with Autism and other mental health issues.
5. The Council should ensure continuity of information between departments in cases where there is a change to the key contact officer.
6. The Council should ensure that language used in contact communications with residents with Autism and mental health issues should be unambiguous and clear.
7. Relevant City Council officers should receive appropriate training to ensure that they can address the needs of vulnerable adults, particularly those with mental health issues including Dementia. WCC should also arrange specialised training for a number of key officers in how to deal with people with Autism. There should be a regular in-house check to ensure all departments currently have staff with appropriate training.
8. Trigger Tool training should be included as part of the staff induction process for all staff and members. Consideration should also be given to extending the training to the Council's contractors.
9. Training opportunities should be extended to elected Members and WCC contractors where appropriate.
10. Consideration should be given to putting procedures in place whereby vulnerable or at risk tenants can, with consent, be identified on the Council's Orchard Housing systems and can also be 'flagged' up between departments.