

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

19 March 2024

Subject: Update on Community Conversations

Cabinet Member: Cllr Richard Clewer - Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Climate Change, MCI, Economic Development, Heritage, Arts, Tourism and Health & Wellbeing

Key Decision: Non-Key

Executive Summary

As part of Wiltshire Council’s commitment to creating stronger communities by empowering the people of Wiltshire to live full, healthy, and enriched lives, the Community Conversations programme was initiated. The intention of the programme is to recognise the inequalities which affect our population and to provide a bold, holistic, and innovative approach to understanding the lived experience of residents across the county, developing new sustainable methods of support, which are based in communities themselves. The programme is in the process of expanding from 2 to 5 communities and is expected to be expanded into further locations in the future.

Proposals

It is recommended that Cabinet note the range of activity underway to support these communities and the ongoing opportunities for community activism and tailored support.

Reason for Proposals

N/A

**Terence Herbert
Chief Executive**

Wiltshire Council

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Purpose of Report

1. To appraise Cabinet of activity arising from the ongoing pilots of Community Conversations.

Relevance to the Council's Business Plan

2. Creating stronger communities in Wiltshire is Wiltshire Council's vision as defined in the council's Business Plan. Guiding themes in the Business Plan include improving social mobility and tackling inequality. In everything we do, we consider the impact of the action on social mobility and ask how we can help to tackle the disparities in opportunities that exist within Wiltshire.

Background

3. In early 2022, senior leaders from Wiltshire Council, the NHS, Wiltshire OPCC, Selwood Housing Association, and Trowbridge Future undertook community visits to Studley Green in Trowbridge and Bemerton Heath in Salisbury, two areas within Wiltshire identified through the national Indices of Multiple Deprivation to be amongst the six most deprived areas in Wiltshire. The community visits were structured as an initial opportunity for leaders to hear directly from residents and other community representatives, what the lived experience in Wiltshire was for them.
4. The result was the Community Conversations programme, designed to build trust between communities and public sector organisations. Generating fresh insights for supporting residents for whom no individual need is severe enough to qualify for support, but the cumulative amount of need they experience, impacts profoundly on their ability to thrive.
5. Using the vision and principles generated by senior leaders, members of the Transformation Team began a pilot exercise in engaging with the communities of Studley Green and Bemerton Heath in September 2022.
6. Typical concerns raised by residents in Bemerton Heath and Studley Green include:
 - a. Anti-social behaviour, particularly from young people and after dark. Residents have also reported a lack of things for young people to do in both areas.

- b. Volume of traffic and lack of parking causing damage to grass verges when people park.
 - c. Uneven pavements and lack of dropped curbs.
 - d. Littering, particularly around retail units, and of large “bulky waste” type items left in gardens and on the street.
 - e. Access to high-quality low-cost food.
 - f. Open drug use, dealing, and commonality of alcohol abuse.
 - g. Lack of community spaces, events and “things to do”.
 - h. Insufficient travel options, particularly for small distances and for the elderly.
 - i. Increasing mental health concerns
7. Both communities also highlighted issues associated with an increase in cost of living, including:
- a. Rising energy costs
 - b. Rising food prices
 - c. Rising travel costs
8. The Community Conversations approach is related to Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) – making use of what a community already has and using these things to make the area better for the people who live there. This has also been described as ‘using what’s strong to deal with what’s wrong’. Other methodologies are being incorporated into the approach including:
- a. Design Thinking - a problem-solving approach that emphasizes empathy, ideation, and prototyping to create innovative solutions. It involves understanding user needs, brainstorming ideas, and iterating through cycles of testing and refinement.
 - b. Critical Systems Heuristics - a framework for analysing complex social systems. It provides a set of heuristics, or rules of thumb, to help individuals and groups critically reflect on and improve their understanding of these systems. It aims to uncover value conflicts, power relations, and ethical considerations within systems to support more informed decision-making and systemic change.
 - c. Soft Systems Methodology - an approach to addressing complex, ill-defined problems in human systems. SSM is particularly useful in situations where multiple stakeholders have diverse perspectives. It involves a series of structured steps, including problem exploration, conceptual modelling, and redesigning systems based on a better understanding of the problem context. SSM emphasizes learning, communication, and collaboration to bring about systemic improvements.
9. There are similar pre-existing examples of this type of approach in Wiltshire, including community led action planning using local Joint Strategic Needs Assessments and a Wiltshire Centre for Independent Living [ABCD project](#) in Devizes. The community led model for healthier communities in Wiltshire has also been a significant success, recognising that ideas to connect people with sport and physical activity can’t be ‘done to’ communities, they can only ever be ‘created with’. However, these programmes have usually started with an idea already formed as to ‘what’ a community may need within a defined theme, rather than having the ability and support to start with building trust with communities and having an unscripted conversation about what matters most to them where they live. A Community Conversation.

Main Considerations for the Council

Growth of Community Conversations

10. Community Conversations is growing, drawing on what people like about their area, what can make it better, understanding motivations and how people may like to be involved in change. Partners in a range of community groups are already becoming involved in connecting with our communities, including Wiltshire-wide organisations such as the Community Foundation and Wessex Community Action and those involved in the very different local ecosystems of community groups (such as tenant engagement officers, police community support officers, patient participation managers, community venue boards, parish, town and city councils etc). The intention is to generate further interest from the communities, experiment, and prototype ideas for better delivery of support in the short-term and plan a bold movement over the long-term to reduce reliance on council services and resources.
11. The development of a movement for the longer term in the two original areas (Bemerton Heath and Studley Green) has identified shared purpose, values, and experiences in those locations and between stakeholder groups. These will be used as a foundational starting point for an additional 3 – 4 localities in identifying meaningful actions, rewards, and engagement. These need to be supported by sustainable resource, data, communications activity, and organisation over the long term. It involves creating an understanding of how residents perceive their reality, and what can be done with people alongside public service providers to deliver sustainable positive change in improving people's lives.
12. Examples of significant work completed to date include:
 - a. Formation of the Bemerton Heath "Bright Ideas" UKSPF panel and receipt of bids for funding for community projects
 - b. Creation of Beautiful Bemerton Group
 - c. 2 x Public Health Improvement Coach Apprentices – residents of Bemerton Heath recruited to these positions and thriving in their roles.
 - d. Other local groups such as Brothers of Bemerton, Grandparent's group and book club.
 - e. Formation of the Studley Green "Bright Ideas" UKSPF panel.
 - Engagement with Wiltshire Council services through Community Conversations working group, creative workshops, and Heads of Service Whilst the areas of higher deprivation in Wiltshire are those being targeted initially through Community Conversations, there are other communities within Wiltshire that can benefit from the Community Conversation approach who would not naturally show up within the indices of multiple deprivation.
 - These include our boater community along the canal, and some smaller very rural settings where deprivation can be hidden amongst more affluent population data. Work has already been carried out by the public health team to start Community Conversations with our residents who live along the canal in boats, and a great deal of trust, relationship building, and evidence collection is already underway amongst this community.
 - In addition, a focus on small 'micro-spots' of deprivation in large rural settings has been added to the wider council Community Conversation working groups priorities, and a pilot programme for education and support in areas like this will start during 2024.
 - Funding for a community bus which will take residents to Aldi to provide better access to high-quality, low-cost food.

13. Work will expand internally at Wiltshire Council to affect both operational and cultural transformation. This will align services with the Community Conversations approach, amplifying resident voice, and increasing the organisation's capacity as a system leader.
14. Looking to the longer term, we are working closely with our partners in the NHS BSW Integrated Care System and have confirmed priorities for the Wiltshire Integrated Care Alliance that will see the development of 'Neighbourhood Collaboratives' through Primary Care Networks (PCNs).
15. These have developed from a Neighbourhood Focus Site project, and the model supports neighbourhoods (PCN footprints) to establish collaborative groups, working in a population-health management focussed way to make changes aimed at addressing health inequalities.
16. The idea of these Neighbourhood Collaboratives is that:

"Wiltshire residents will be able to inform and affect local change to improve services that matter to them; Neighbourhoods are able to work together to identify and reduce health and care gaps by working together without boundaries; and professionals and communities have a way of working together to design and implement solutions to inequality gaps and to work through delivery of key required changes."

17. The Neighbourhood Collaboratives complements the Community Conversation approach and will support resident's when health or health service-related concerns are raised as a part of Community Conversations. The Health and Wellbeing Board has warmly welcomed the proposals and further background information is available [here](#).

Funding opportunities

18. Whilst the main ethos around Community Conversations is creating trusted relationships and empowering communities to be the change that they require, there are inevitably some costs associated with change in communities that additional funding can be beneficial for. The UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) has been made available to Wiltshire through the national UKSPF. This funding amounts to approximately £1,000,000 to be shared between 5 deprived localities in Wiltshire, to be distributed to community projects which improve well-being and/or productivity in that area. The investment plan stipulates that decision-making authority on allocation of funds should be held by a panel of community members. At present, the Community Conversations programme is facilitating the creation of such panels in Studley Green and in Bemerton Heath, where the panel has received its first applications for project funding, which include:
 - a. Formation of a slingshot club.
 - b. Pump track.
 - c. Formation of WI group.
 - d. Extension of toddler playgroup.
 - e. British sign language training.
 - f. SEND garden at Sarum academy.
 - g. Request for tools and supplies for an existing arts' club.
 - h. Community bus.

- i. Disabled access pathway on Pinewood Park.
- j. Disabled access pathway on Gainsborough Close community garden.

19. In addition, Wiltshire Council is committing £2m in transformation reserves to fund activity which may not fall under the remit of UKSPF, but which is considered too significant to ignore. It will also be used to resource appropriate facilitative activity within the pilot areas. This includes recruiting 3 additional Community Conversations Leads who will be assigned to new areas in Chippenham, Melksham, and Westbury with a likely start date at the beginning of February. Other resourcing is requested via the Community Conversations working group which acts as a gateway from the programme into the whole organisation. Specific examples of projects/initiatives which have been council funded include:

- Community transport from Bemerton Heath to Salisbury Aldi

Safeguarding Implications

20. Specific consent is sought on a case-by-case as appropriate for participation in Community Conversations.

21. As the programme expands, further detailed advice will be sought from the council's internal safeguarding leads to identify risks and ensure mitigations are considered. This may include appropriate level of safeguarding training for the staff working in the community areas.

Public Health Implications

22. The community conversations and related activity intend to improve social mobility and tackle inequality. This aligns clearly with activity on the social determinants of health.

Procurement Implications

23. Delivery of the delegated funds could be either for the neighbourhood group to determine which measures are to be financially supported and the Council awarding grants and contracts to each delivery organisation; or for the Council to openly select a body to hold delegated funds and award contracts to delivery organisations as determined by neighbourhoods. In Bemerton Heath the panel is developing an approach where Wiltshire Council acts as a procuring agent on behalf of the community panel. If successful it is likely this approach will be adopted in other areas as a best fit to meet the procurement needs of the panels and to ensure compliance with UKSPF reporting requirements.

Equalities Impact of the Proposal

24. Improving social mobility and tackling inequality is a guiding theme for the council's Business Plan. In everything we do, we consider the impact of the action on social mobility and ask how we can help to tackle the disparities in opportunities that exist within Wiltshire. The two pilot, and three subsequently selected, communities were chosen based on their deprivation score according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) and with the intention of spreading the approach across communities in multiple towns.

Environmental and Climate Change Considerations

25. At this stage there are no environmental considerations

Workforce Implications

26. Ongoing support for the community conversations is being provided through the council's transformation team working in partnership with representatives of the whole organisation through the Community Conversations working group.

Risks that may arise if the proposed decision and related work is not taken

27. No decision is required to be made, report is for information and update.

Risks that may arise if the proposed decision is taken and actions that will be taken to manage these risks

28. No decision is required to be made, report is for information and update.

Financial Implications

29. At this stage there are no direct financial implications for the council. The activity set out is being undertaken through officer time amounting to...

- i. 2 x Grade M Community Conversations Leads (permanent Transformation Team)
- ii. 3 x Grade M Community Conversations Leads (secondment to Transformation Team)

UKSPF funds deployed to Bemerton Heath and Studley Green amounting to:

- iii. 2 x £187,000 (to be allocated as grant funding for community projects)

Legal Implications

30. There are no legal implications at present but may be arising should the Council inherit any ongoing liabilities from community proposals. The aim is to avoid this happening wherever possible.

Overview and Scrutiny Engagement

31. Aspects of activity set out within this report have been considered by overview and scrutiny. A briefing for HSC Chair members on the impact of community conversations on neighbourhood collaboratives would be welcome.

Options Considered

32. None required, report is for information and update.

Conclusions

33. Wiltshire Council is committed to improving social mobility and tackling inequalities through expansion of the community conversations pilot schemes in Studley Green

and Bemerton Heath to communities in Chippenham, Melksham, and Westbury. Alongside this, insight and learning gained will be used to make tangible changes to Wiltshire Council's internal operating methods service planning approaches to incorporate the key principles of community conversations. We are looking forward to positive change in those areas and expect in due course to adapt and roll this approach out even further elsewhere in Wiltshire.

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Appendices

None

Background Papers

None