

Community focus for youth services

Thursday 15 May 2014

Area: All areas

Plans to develop a network of community youth officers dedicated to supporting young people and helping coordinate youth activities in each community area have been given the go-ahead.

The new service model will ensure as many young people as possible are able to access community activities, while ensuring the service gives taxpayers value for money.

Council leaders voted to accept the recommendation to develop the community-led approach – the preferred option of four – at a Wiltshire Council extraordinary cabinet meeting on 15 May 2014. The meeting was attended by more than 40 young people as well as representatives from existing community youth groups across Wiltshire. They contributed to the two-hour debate, asking a wide-range of questions and offering their views.

Key features of the planned new model include the development of a community-led youth offer in each area where young people and the community will be encouraged to identify and design a varied menu of youth activities.

To support this, funding will be devolved to area boards which will each have a named community youth officer. Their role will shift from providing direct youth work to enabling voluntary and community groups to develop provision to meet local needs. They will be the ‘go to’ person for advice and support on youth related issues, with a strong focus on building community capacity by assisting voluntary and community sector groups, encouraging volunteering and making the most out of community resources.

Community youth officers will have close partnerships with a range of youth settings, including schools. They will also have an important role in coordinating positive activities for young people with disabilities.

The plans also include giving more of a voice and influence to young people by replacing youth advisory groups with Local Youth Networks (LYNs) as a sub group of community area boards. LYNs will advise area boards, recommend local priorities and help monitor the quality and effectiveness of youth activities.

Laura Mayes, cabinet member for children’s services who presented the report to cabinet, said:

“It’s clear young people want support from a trusted member of staff and they also want a greater voice and more influence – these plans give them this. Young people have also told us

they want a service that meets their individual community's needs recognising their area's unique identity and these proposals ensure they have this by devolving power and funding to area boards.”

Detailed work on implementing the plans is continuing and will include development of an appropriate staff structure to deliver the new model.

A review into the youth activity element of the youth service was launched earlier this year. A comprehensive 10-week consultation began in February with the council keen to hear from communities – particularly young people – on how funding for youth activities could be targeted more effectively and benefit more of the county's young residents.

The consultation generated 2,403 individual responses – of which 2,338 were from young people. This included 1,770 young people who completed an electronic survey, more than 500 took part in focus groups and 21 young people sent in letters or emails with their views. Six groups of young people also presented at area boards and five petitions were received.

Laura Mayes added: “We started this review with a lot of questions about what the future of youth services should look like and how we could ensure it reflects young people's modern lives. The feedback we have received has given us answers and I'd personally like to thank everyone who took part in this consultation – to see so many young people engaged in local democracy has been excellent.”