



North Warwickshire Community Partnership Quarterly progress report – September 2017

Champion: Report by Bob Trahern

Theme: Tackling Poverty (previously Access)

Commentary on Project Progress – achievements to date (and any slippage)

Actions since last report in September 2017

During the last 3 months we have continued to make good progress building on the written update provided in June in relation to the commitments in respect of the “Tackling Poverty” agenda. All activity has continued to focus on

- Reviewing enhancements to the Councils Food Operation
- Reviewing and understanding the size of the problems to address issues being faced by customers Impacted by the Welfare Reforms
- Consolidating and promoting the use of the Community Hubs & increasing volunteer activities
- Supporting the Councils Channel Shift and Digital Agenda ambitions

Progress since the last report

Debt Project

The Council continues to show strong performance in its collection of monies due in year plus arrears (which have just dropped below £1m) on which we will continue to have significant focus over the rest of this financial year. We currently remain on target to achieve the matching of last years very high performance in spite of the ongoing economic challenges faced by the Council and which is bucking the National trend

This very high performance and our inclusive approach has again received National recognition when in November we retained our title won in 2016 by winning the Public Collections Team of the Year 2017 announced at the Customer and Credit Services award. This is a fantastic achievement that continues to recognise the very proactive and innovative approach being taken by the Council to support customers and collect monies due. The Council were also finalists in the categories Best Customer Service Provider and the Best Creditor Support Initiative and despite not winning the ultimate prize against strong competition gain shows the Council in a very positive light and as a National leader in our field.

Our approach will feature in a case study to be undertaken by the Money Advice Service and it is also pleasing that the Council has been identified as an exemplar in

its reduced use of bailiffs services by the Money Advice Trust and its approach in pursuit of monies due to the Council which again are all very positive. See also the food hub update that highlights further award success and National recognition

In addition to excellent in year collection, we continue to make good progress since we last reported on the exercise which is looking at the likely propensity to collect old and large debts using credit rating records to inform this view and to pursue only those cases where there continues to be little or no engagement and which appear to provide the best potential for success via committal to prison proceedings, bankruptcy or serving charging orders where deemed appropriate.. We have instigated a number of actions after review of some of our bigger debts and over the next 6 to 12 months we will be continue to work across the Council and our partners to either recover or deliver support / remit some of the other debts that are currently outstanding prior to migrating onto a new Revenues and Benefits system in December 2018

As part of this exercise we have identified and flagged an issue we have previously flagged up with WCC regarding the cost effectiveness of pursuing many of these debts that are less than £2,000 (some 94% of debts of which about 44% are closed) due to the fact that whilst the Council picks up the full cost of recovering these monies it only retains 13% of the income generated. We are hoping that the proposal to help fund a proportion of the costs we incur to recover these monies on an “invest to save principle” will be supported by the County from available WLWS underspend and hope that these discussions can be progressed in the next couple of months to allow the more effective recovery of debts due.

In September, we also reported that we had re-launched with internal staff and then with partners on 21 September the on line referral form to be used for accessing appropriate help and advice. The new improved multi agency referral form which incorporates a Discretionary Housing Payment application form, income and expenditure form with hyper links to partner help and a self referral form for food and other support is now live and we already have seen some very good case studies demonstrating how it is delivering support in practice. If it continues to work as planned this will inform us better of residents' issues and circumstances to help better decision making going forward and will see us take decisions in a structured and informed way on those debts that “can't as opposed to won't” be paid. To date we have had in excess of 300 forms completed by staff and members of the public seeking help and support from a variety of our partners and will continue to develop our approach to make this approach an increasing and common feature of our approach.

Finally, the impact of welfare reforms on households continues to be a key issue that is being monitored. Whilst it is positive that overall collection rates are excellent, with further and more significant changes due to be implemented over the next 12 to 18 months including Universal Credit which has recently be deferred from starting in May 2018 to September 2018 in respect of those signing at Atherstone job centre these will make the Councils job in recovering money due in respect of rent and council tax ever more difficult as we move forward. This is evidenced by Rugby who have been a National pilot since 2014 who have seen a four fold increase in arrears and NBBC who having only been live for 4 months have seen rent arrears already increase by a third. This will mean our proactive approach will become ever more important in working closely with Housing and third sector partners to identify help and support needed to assist payment at the earliest opportunity.

Our approach and commitment to be proactive in identifying help and solutions saw

us repeat the very useful money matters 8 page spread we produced in the Winter edition of North Talk in 2016 again in the 2017 edition which is promoting our Financial Inclusion messages. Whilst difficult to evaluate the usefulness of this information in promoting action by individuals, we know that we are getting information communicated to every household whether it is acted upon or not.

It remains incredibly positive that the work of the Council and our Financial Inclusion Partnership stand as exemplars from which others are encouraged to learn. The local CAB recently won an award with others for its early adoption of a casebook approach and it is very positive that we have expanded the work of our FIP to incorporate NBBC so they can adopt similar methods to ourselves based on our ever closer shared working across Revenues and Benefits. This has also seen us get many of our partnership objectives raised as countywide priorities via the countywide FIP. We hope that this will see an improved understanding of issues and a more joined up approach being adopted with county services that continue despite having objectives around the reduction of child poverty and better support of customers often sees them operating in isolation of Districts.

In conclusion, it remains pleasing that this joined up approach which has been promoted and advocated by the Council for a number of years is becoming evermore widely accepted as being key to delivery of positive outcomes with the reduced resources available and been accepted as the way to deliver positive outcomes (see also the food hub update below).

Welfare Update

We are now very much in the process of preparing ourselves for the impact of the full roll out of Universal Credit service across the whole of the borough despite some changes being announced in the Chancellors budget that will see our implementation of the service in Atherstone delayed from May to September 2018. The changes announced will also see us needing to implement a number of policy changes to assist customers deal with the transition period from legacy benefits or the loss of work to this new benefit in a different way that hopefully will mean that supporting customers impacted can be better managed to avoid them falling into arrears.

Based on the experiences of Nuneaton and others, we are also undertaking preparatory work that will see us adopting an approach to increasingly work with JCP colleagues to support people in need of personal budgeting support and wider ICT help as a key role for us going forward. The roll out of the new on line referral form will be key to delivering this objective and we expect to see an increase in the number of food parcels that will need to be issued due to delays created between application and the first payment. One of the key changes implemented as part of the budget is the removal of the very penal charge to access the DWP helpline which we have overcome locally for a number of years by offering such a facility from the community hubs. This is a pleasing development that will help people access help and advice without penalty

In view of these changes and further proposed tax credit changes, it has been agreed that the Council will again adopt a scheme with no change to its maximum 91.5% Council Tax Support scheme for 2018/19. This is the sixth consecutive year the scheme will be held at this level and mean the Council has the most supportive scheme in Warwickshire for those on low incomes). It is hoped this will maintain the Councils position in terms of its excellent collection record and best support customers impacted by these changes if agreed by members in 2018/19.

However, as part of discussions and to streamline / align the many benefit schemes now in operation, it is proposed that we will be working with NBBC and RBC on a more simplified banding scheme to replace the current CTS scheme from 2019/20 onwards. Full consultation and impact assessments will be undertaken before any changes are proposed

Food Projects

Since the last report, I am pleased that things continue to gain real momentum under the Ediblelinks brand that is now fully being coordinated by the Healthy Living Network

In summary;

At the CCS Awards in November, the project run with the Healthy Living Network and supported by Ocado won the Charitable Initiative of the Year meaning that we were the only double winner on the night

In addition, the Ediblelinks project which is delivering ground breaking work in supporting communities, schools and individuals. have also recently been made finalists in two categories at the biggest Local Government Awards of the year run by the Local Government Chronicle to be announced in March 2018.

The categories are Best Public/Private Partnership and Best Innovation and we will keep our fingers crossed for those and against mainly unitary Councils, AND London Boroughs is a huge feather in our cap to even be recognised.

In spite of these accolades, the highest priority continues to be is to secure income. The application made to the Big Lottery Help through Crisis fund for 3 years funding, which will provide enough time to test a sustainable model of working by charging community groups for membership continues to be dogged by delays and setbacks as various funds that were available have been pulled at short notice despite very positive comments being made regarding the need and innovative approach of the work being done. However, we remain hopeful via ongoing work with lottery staff that a solution can be found and proactive steps continue to be taken.

The project has also been subject of an independent review by WCC who have provided some of the funding from the WLWS monies provided by Central Government to help the project over the last 4 years. This fund remains underspent and has over £700,000 still available to be allocated and it is hoped that if the discussions to access funding from an external fund provider remain unsuccessful or are delayed further that this project should be given access to utilise further funds from this underspent budget to continue based on the excellent work it is delivering across predominantly NBBC and NWBC but increasingly the rest of the County. This is both in terms of health and educational benefits as well as welfare support which the project was initially set up to address.

During the 12 months since the Healthy Living Network took over the project they have doubled the number of community groups benefitting from its work, linked it closely to health message, increased significantly the volumes and collections of food stuffs, set up a network of honesty shops and linked its outputs to many health and wider benefits We are also planning the current Xmas Eve Turkey Run that again will support many individuals and groups support many activities in the run up and over the Christmas period which this year will involve both the Mayors from NWBC and NBBC in promoting its good work.

The project also continues to recruit, train and support volunteers and has become evermore proactive with their use of social media to promote messages which is showing how valued the project is in the area

There are so many positives from the work undertaken that it will be key to find a solution to ensure the ongoing work of the project that currently remains subsidised by the Council, NWBC and WCC in 2017/18 to hopefully see the food hub continue to develop and grow in its support of so many residents across the borough and beyond in what is seen as a totally unique project.

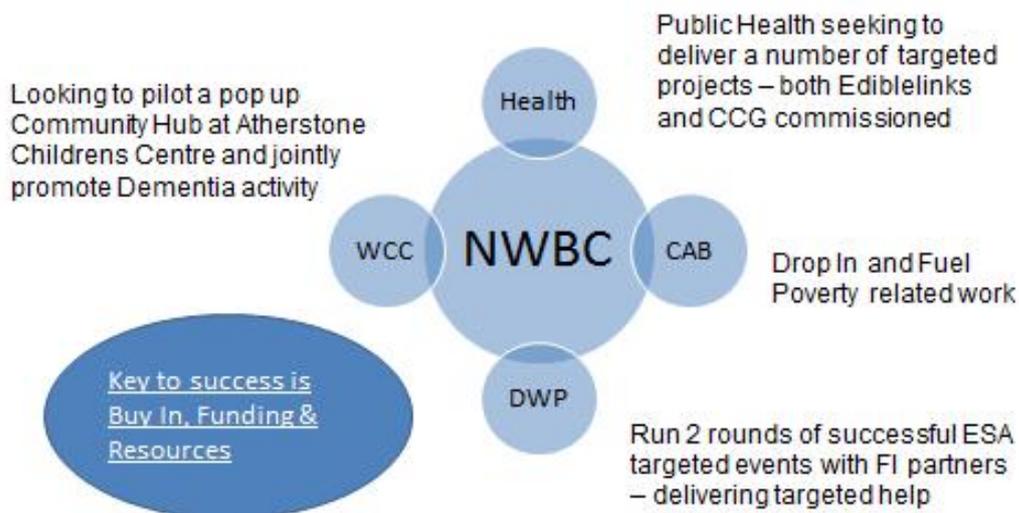
Community Hubs

The work on supporting the community hubs continues but the different ambitions and nature of the 6 hubs is making this task challenging and it is hoped that the hubs be aligned with the expectations of the ambitions of Public Health outlined in the Health report to ensure they can be sustained and made viable

Meetings have continued with Public Health and WCC to establish how we can better work together to deliver shared priorities and ambitions by utilising the best locations (these may be different to those currently supported) and that this needs to be achieved with paid resource and activities that will help fund room hire. These discussions will hopefully progress well over the next 3 months otherwise it may be necessary to review if the community hub project should continue beyond 2018/19

Key Partners Needed to Ensure Sustainability and Use

We would hope that key partners would have regular contact with the hubs and would run regular drop ins/activities within the hubs



As part of the wider commitment to promote digital services and channel shift we will continue to promote accessibility to ICT in community hubs and the BOB Bus but we have accepted that this need which was the key reason for setting up the hubs in 2012 when access to technology was much more restrictive is no longer a major hook in encouraging the use of hubs due to the widespread use of mobiles and access to cheaper broadband or free wi fi.

Changes to the action plan

Making progress is largely dependent on being able to access internal / external resources and funding and is being delivered against the backdrop of the ever challenging environment in which we work. As such, we will continue to review our ability to continue to deliver on the many fronts we are currently engaged in what amounts to a very small team. The need to work in partnership with internal colleagues (e.g.) Housing, Community Development, DWP, WCC and other third sector partners is integral to us continuing to be successful and maintaining momentum on the wide ranging, proactive and innovative work undertaken to date and is something we are working on and trying to align actions and priorities.

Expected Outcomes

Positive engagement with a wide variety of customers and improved access to a wide range of services and information are being delivered in partnership and innovatively. This has seen us be flagged up as a site of excellence by our peers and has seen us be very successful in bidding for external funding. Our approach has built on our member and officer commitment to these agendas and the positive results that continue to be delivered many in partnership and despite the difficult financial and economic climate are testament to this.

Expenditure (SCS Funding)

	Predicted Expenditure	Actual Expenditure
No allocated budget remains. The corporate access to services budget that is funding ongoing hub costs are the only funds available		
We have been allocated monies to support customers migrating to universal credit although at this time it is considered that it is unlikely to be sufficient based on our experiences on the SMART project. We will be reviewing how we are best using this money on a regular basis and will monitor this position		

Publicity

- We continue to attend a significant number of internal and external officer and partner meetings to raise awareness, review better partnership working and plan future activity of all related activities.
- Proposals on how we continue to promote our work as outlined in this report continues to be key to ensuring residents in the borough are aware of what support, help and opportunities are available. .

Lessons learnt

- Relying on volunteers and third sector partners who have limited capacity and resources to develop new projects and support ongoing initiatives is hugely challenging and means significant demands on limited officer time continues to be needed.
- Ongoing difficulties with recruiting volunteers remain because of employment opportunities in the area and the general lack of numbers coming forward locally

despite ongoing promotion

- Making progress in these difficult times and partnership working continues to get ever harder and our ambitions are not always met by our available resources

Sustainability of project

This is a key requirement and aim of all work being carried out to date and a key feature of any activity agreed to see how it can be supported long term by changing working practices to free up resources or identifying a suitable revenue stream where a need arises. There are clear examples that this is demonstrated in all parts of this report as to how we are seeking to make the work we are doing possible at a time of reducing resources.

In essence the work being promoted by the partnership around tackling poverty has become embedded into the Councils corporate and service plans making the activities undertaken part of the “way we do business” as opposed to a separate strand of activity.

Whatever happens, our work in this area is now about consolidation and utilising the resources we have and arrangements set up to help support customers improve their life chances and circumstances by providing access to the most appropriate tools and help available.