

Referral to Scrutiny: Walsall Health Inequalities Strategy

The LINK wishes to refer the following issues to the Health Scrutiny Panel and examine areas for joint work in tackling the concerns.

1. Background.
 - 1.1. The United Kingdom has the highest level of obesity in the general population in the European Union
 - 1.2. The West Midlands has one of the highest rates in the U.K. and Walsall one of the highest in the West Midlands!
 - 1.3. Looking at the morbidity and mortality rates in the Borough- people die at an earlier age and are more prone to life threatening medical conditions as compared to the general population of the U.K.
 - 1.4. There are significant differences in the health experiences of those living in the East and the West of the Borough.
 - 1.5. Causes of ill health and early death in Walsall are linked to poverty, life-style choices and poor air quality associated with the West Midlands motorway network.
 - 1.6. Despite a number of initiatives over the past two decades locally to improve health locally and to reduce health inequalities, outcomes continue to be very disappointing. Two recent reports have highlighted the disappointing outcomes of national initiatives on these issues which are merely replicated locally.
2. The Health Inequalities and Health Improvement Working Group for Walsall LINK has been scrutinising the rationale and application of the Walsall Health Inequalities Strategy over the past year, identifying where there are gaps in fulfilling the positive outcomes outlined in the strategy and approaching the appropriate parties to discuss remedy to the situation.
3. Dr Ramaiah, Head of Public Health in Walsall, has been approached to discuss the concerns. In particular, the LINK is concerned that Walsall Council has an implied commitment to improving morbidity rates and mortality rates, but has not yet attempted to challenge the lifestyles that prevent these improvements. The LINK is also concerned about the continued negative impact of pollution from the motorway network.
4. Subsequently a meeting was held with Paul Sheehan, Chief Executive of Walsall Council, and Clive Wright, Partnership Director for Walsall Borough Strategic Partnership. This was attended by Giovanni Mastrantone and Mike Ashburner on behalf of the LINK on 22nd March 2010. The LINK were disappointed to find that there was little commitment to cross boundary working by the Chief Executive or the Partnership Director with respect to tackling the issue of people dying earlier due to the pollution from the motorways.
Concerns were also expressed about the mixed messages sent out by the Council with its previous promotion of a night time economy, inappropriate school meals in the 1980s and 1990s which have contributed to an obesity 'timebomb' and the proliferation of fast-food outlets.
5. As a result of a decision taken by its Board on 17 June 2010, the LINK wishes to make a referral to Scrutiny in light of the report of the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee on Air Quality. The report

confirmed the impact of poor air quality on the nation's health in major urban conurbations, as well as highlighting the role of local authorities in tackling the issue. LINK proposes that Walsall Council assumes a leadership role in promoting cross (local authority) boundary initiatives in tackling air pollution associated with the motorway network in the County.

6. Further the LINK also wishes to see the Council take a lead on campaigning for the rights to refuse planning applications for fast food outlets on the grounds of health, though it is accepted this cannot be done at present.
7. Walsall LINK wishes Walsall Council to take a more proactive role in recognising these issues and recommends that from 01 September 2010, any Council report contains a section on 'Health Impacts'. LINK is anxious that all members and officers of the Council become more aware of health impacts of decisions that it takes.
8. The LINK would welcome the opportunity to discuss joint working with the Chair of the Health Scrutiny Panel on these issues going forwards.

References.

House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee Air Quality Fifth Report of Session 2009-10 (Published on 22 March 2010).

Walsall Health Inequality Strategy 2008-2011 (23 Dec 2008).

Tackling inequalities in life expectancy in areas with the worst health and deprivation (National Audit Office July 2010).

Professor M. Marmot 'Fair society, healthy lives – strategic review of health inequalities post-2010' (February 2010)