

Council – February 2023

Report of Councillor Flint, Portfolio Holder for Health and Wellbeing

1. Background

This report summarises some of our key achievements from the last year. It outlines some of our areas of success, and the work we are proud to have achieved during the challenges of the last 12 months. Over the next year, whilst challenges remain, we will continue work to support the borough through its recovery and continue to implement our Council Plan and in particular the work to reduce inequality. We are confident that Walsall will continue to grow as a place of opportunity and ambition for all.

2. Introduction

COVID-19 has shone a light on inequalities within our communities and has deeply changed our lives. This, combined with the cost-of-living crisis and the extraordinary demands on our health and care services, will have a major long-term impact on Council services, residents, and local businesses.

Over the years we have argued for the development of integrated care approaches focused on population health need. Many of our older residents are living longer with multiple, complex, long-term conditions and increasingly need long term support from many different services and professionals. The focus however cannot just be about older adults, prevention and delivering early intervention services for parents, children and families is as important in breaking the generational cycle of health inequalities to support children and young people in enjoying good health across their life course. We currently have an 8-year difference in life expectancy between men living in the most deprived areas of the borough, compared with the least deprived. For females, this rises to over 9 years.

Residents across the borough (old or young) too often receive disjointed care from services that are not effectively co-ordinated around their needs. This can lead to poorer health outcomes or create duplication and inefficiency. To deliver support that better meets needs of the population, different parts of the NHS, voluntary sector, schools, social care, and wider Council services need to work in a much more joined-up way.

This is a key principle of Integrated Care Systems (ICSs), which, have been formalised through the 2022 Health and Care Act. There is much to do to build on the good work of Walsall Together in which Public Health are playing a key part. This includes further work to work with local communities to achieve the best outcomes and at the right cost for the residents of Walsall.

The 2022 Health and Social Care Act brought notable changes to healthcare arrangements in England. The local Integrated Care System is still taking shape; however, it does offer opportunities, including those for public health. In collaboration with NHS partners and residents, public health will also seek to improve access to sexual, reproductive health and HIV services in the community and ensure seamless pathways of care. There is more that we need to do to increase testing for sexually transmitted infections, particularly among our

most vulnerable communities, and to continue to tackle our teenage pregnancy rates. It is essential that we continue to learn from our communities and ensure individuals can access inclusive sexual and reproductive health services that are responsive to their needs.

Walsall continues to benefit from water fluoridation, a safe and effective public health measure to reduce oral health inequalities and tooth decay rates. However, dental decay continues to be a public health concern and one of the most common chronic childhood diseases, even though almost entirely preventable. Over a quarter of 5-year-olds in Walsall have evidence of decay. NHS England have secured recurrent investment to develop an oral health promotion team for the borough and Black Country.

Our Health Protection team continued to work with national and local partners on outbreak management across a range of settings and supported the NHS vaccination campaign. Spring 2022 the national policy and direction has changed as we started to learn how to live with the virus. Just over the course of the last month, there have been 523 health protection cases/incidents logged by the team for Walsall. The team provides bespoke infection prevention control guidance, which is reported on the bespoke online reporting system developed in-house. This system, allows health protection nurses the ability to record all information, identify any trends and run reports across different settings to inform future work.

As we adjust to living with Covid, more recently the rise of Mpox has led the World Health Organisation to declare it a public health emergency of international concern. The pandemic has also created a larger pool of susceptible children to common childhood infections, leading to outbreaks such as norovirus, chickenpox, and scarlet fever. We have also seen this winter, the co-circulation of respiratory viruses, with the potential for circulation to be longer than usual. The pandemic highlighted gaps in Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) within social care, schools, workplaces, and other settings. We worked to support settings and embed enhanced IPC measures, but it is important to continue support, as good IPC helps prevent all infections. In Walsall, 79% of all our residents aged 12 or over have had at least one dose of the Covid-19 vaccination. In addition, around 75% of our most vulnerable residents, such as the elderly, have had their Flu vaccination this season.

Measures of poverty and socio-economic deprivation are well established tools, often used to inform research, service development and funding. There is now also an increased national and local policy focus on the most extreme forms of disadvantage, which are often experienced in conjunction with each other. Problems such as homelessness, domestic abuse, drug and alcohol misuse, poor mental health, and offending behaviours are often experienced to a large extent by the same people.

We are taking steps to address health inequalities through population level interventions using borough assets to promote healthy lives, identifying areas where we need to do more. Effective place-based action requires action based on civic, service and community interventions, along with system leadership and planning, indicating more can be done system wide through our new partnership arrangements. We have actively reviewed our Wellbeing/Lifestyle services and Sexual Health services, with a view to remodelling them to better meet the needs of our communities. Of just over 2000 adults starting our weight management programme, between 60 and 80% completed the programme with between 63 and 90% losing weight.

The team have been working with Walsall Together colleagues on supporting the process for allocation of NHS Inequalities funding. With other team members, we have also supported the development of a research bid, which will focus on the needs and experiences of the LGBTQIA+ community in Walsall. Expansion of our Drug and Alcohol core services has been made possible through the availability of national funding, with a focus on additional key areas of identified need – needle exchange and naloxone programmes, outreach for vulnerable groups, expansion of recovery work, criminal justice partnership work, as well as psychologist and consideration of sexual health support for the services. Our drug-related death rates remain lower than the national average, but there is more we need to do to address unmet need, particularly in relation to alcohol use in the Borough. An estimated 25% of people who need treatment, are currently receiving it in the Borough.

Over the next year we will continue to deliver on our “Together We Can” 10-yr mental wellbeing strategy, and linked suicide prevention work. We will effectively commission a range of services including our counselling therapy and bereavement services, suicide prevention/mental health awareness training and the Thrive Mobile Unit. Rethink Mental Illness are also just in the process of finalising a local directory of mental health support services, which will be shared widely with partners once finalised. Our Better Mental Health programme was a huge success with several projects delivered by voluntary and community sector partners, including our Thrive Mobile Wellbeing Unit and a number of services helping people to connect and talk about wellbeing. Five of these projects delivered benefit to over 1400 people over 8 months at a cost of just over £60pp, including achieving £502k of debt reductions/income maximisations for 300 residents

We continue to explore the opportunities to improve outcomes for children and families through the lens of the 0-19 Healthy Child programme and national initiatives. In particular, we will be supporting 4-year strategy focusing on fathers as parents, hoping to reach 15,000 men over this time. Work is also in place to support key elements of child health as partners in the Family Hub development work. Considering ‘what good looks like’ and how this can be developed to benefit residents through the new arrangements for the ICS and locality working. All partners and communities working together to collectively address and reduce health inequalities, will ensure a healthier, fairer, and more resilient population who will be better placed to fight the next major health challenge when it arises.

Not only will this deliver improved health outcomes for individuals and communities, over time a population level preventative approach will support the sustainability of the NHS and Social Care system. In time the health of the population will improve and by focusing greater resources into the areas where populations have the worst health outcomes, we will overtime improve the health of these groups the most, which will help reduce demand on the NHS and Social Care.

The Public Health team continues to work collaboratively to protect and support communities across Walsall. This report has highlighted the broad breath of work and number of projects the team lead upon to keep the residents of Walsall safe and healthy. They will continue in 2023 and beyond working together with others on this ambition.

Councillor Flint
Portfolio Holder for Health and Wellbeing