Report to:	**People Scrutiny Committee**
Date of meeting:	**11 March 2024**
By:	**Director of Adult Social Care and Health**
Title:	**Tackling loneliness and isolation in East Sussex**
Purpose:	**To inform the People Scrutiny Committee of the stewardship approach to tackling loneliness and isolation in the County and provide an update on the appointment to the stewardship facilitation role and plans for implementation.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

The People Scrutiny Committee is recommended to:

1. **note and comment on the plans for implementation of the stewardship approach to tackling loneliness and isolation.**

1.   Background

1.1   In April 2021, a public health funded COVID-19 recovery project was initiated in East Sussex, supported by Collaborate CIC. The overall aim of this 'Connected People and Places' project was to gain a better understanding of the nature and impact of loneliness on East Sussex residents, and identify future opportunities and approaches to mitigate the worst effects of loneliness. Loneliness had previously been identified as a topic area of interest for scoping and exploration by the People Scrutiny Committee. Therefore, rather than a full scrutiny review, a Loneliness and Resilience Reference Group was formed to provide valuable input to the project and its recommendations.

1.2   The resulting project activities and recommendations formed the basis of the 2022/23 annual Director of Public Health (DPH) report, 'Connecting People and Places - Bringing communities together in East Sussex', which focused on social connections and multi-agency work to tackle loneliness.

1.3   The Partnership Plus Executive Board[1] holds the responsibility for ensuring that progress is made with the recommendations to tackle loneliness as a system across East Sussex. The headline recommendations are to:

- establish a System Stewardship Group to build and maintain the required collaborative leadership across the system;
- create a 'connection test' to apply a loneliness perspective to the policy making process;
- develop an action plan for developing social infrastructure rooted in the principles of ABCD (asset-based community development) and harnessing the potential of community ownership and community businesses;
- 'connect the connectors' by creating learning communities that learn and test ideas together and model and incentivise ongoing learning; and
- mobilise and equip a movement of connectors stretching across all public facing roles, businesses and communities.

2.   Community engagement

2.1   Extensive, broad and targeted community engagement took place to underpin this programme as part of the Connected People and Places project. Further details are available in the DPH report (referenced above) which is available via the East Sussex Joint Strategic Needs Assessment website. Community engagement and the lived experience of individuals and

---

[1] Partnership Plus is partnership of senior leaders from local authorities, the NHS, the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VSCE) sector and others in East Sussex.

communities is also expected to form a crucial part of future implementation of the stewardship approach to tackling loneliness.

3.   System stewardship

3.1   System stewardship is a concept that draws from Human Learning Systems (HLS) theory. HLS is an alternative way of organising public service that acknowledges that people's lives are incredibly complex.[2] To be effective, our responses to social challenges need to work with these complex realities rather than seeking to control them. The approach recognises that *systems* as a whole create outcomes, not single organisations, services or projects. Key features of HLS include:
- making the process of creating change more 'human', putting decision-making into the hands of the people who know best — people and communities, and those who directly support them;
- changing the role of management to creating a learning culture, rather than exercising control; and
- supporting collaborative approaches across organisations and professions by nurturing a 'healthy system' based on trusting relationships, shared purpose and deep listening.

3.2   A systems steward can therefore be described as a person, organisation or group that takes responsibility for helping to create a 'healthy system' - a system that functions effectively and is more likely to produce positive outcomes. It involves building trust, relationships, and learning, whilst helping people work better together towards common goals.

Key features of the stewardship approach

- The system makes best use of available resources and decisions are made collectively, leading to responsibility for outcomes being jointly held.

- It is the job of all the partners to attend to the quality of relationships in the system and hold each other to account (this makes the partners joint stewards of the system).

- It requires partners to take on system leadership behaviours i.e. working beyond the boundaries of their organisation and formal role, moving away from authority and control to embrace an adaptive and collaborative leadership style and an explorative, learning mindset.

3.3   Some practical ways that the stewardship approach could manifest are included at Appendix 1. We will know how well the stewardship approach is working through an evaluation process that comprises 'learning cycles' and which seeks to find out:
- how well we understand the system (and its influence on connectedness/loneliness)
- the effectiveness of codesign activities (has meaningful involvement of all 'layers of the system' been achieved?)
- ways we have championed experimentation and exploration (have we tested different approaches and adapted as we learn?)
- how we embed the stewardship principles/behaviours and use our influence to achieve change

3.4   It will be the collective responsibility of the Stewardship Group - and ultimately Partnership Plus – to build and maintain the required leadership to ensure that the project recommendations are implemented effectively across the system. It will require combined and sustained efforts from all parts of the system to make progress.

4.   Plans into action

---

[2] Plimmer, D (2021) HLS and place: transforming local systems, in Human Learning Systems: Public Service for the Real World. Centre for Public Impact. Available at: https://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/assets/documents/hls-real-world.pdf

4.1   The Connected People and Places recommendations have been accepted by Partnership Plus and funding has been identified by Adult Social Care and Health DMT to take forward the first recommendation to establish a Stewardship Group through a new two year programme. To support the development of the stewardship approach, it was identified that a host/convenor would be required to facilitate multi-agency progress. Partner workshops held in Spring 2023 informed the development of requirements for the stewardship host organisation.

4.2   In collaboration with the East Sussex Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) Sector Alliance, the Council worked to ensure a fair and transparent process for the selection of the host organisation within the VCSE sector, in line with the Council's Corporate Funding Protocol and in the spirit of the stewardship approach.

4.3   The Council has subsequently entered into a grant agreement with the organisation selected to lead the stewardship facilitation function, Sussex Community Development Association (SCDA). As part of the arrangements, East Sussex Community Voice will be providing evaluation, data and monitoring capacity, and other VSCE organisations such as 3VA, Age UK East Sussex, Care for the Carers and Possability People, will help reach target communities and support identification of other East Sussex organisations to be involved as the project develops.

5.   Latest update

5.1   A Programme Facilitator has been recruited by SCDA and started in post in December 2023. The initial tasks during the first months of the programme will be to establish the membership of the Stewardship Group, agree with partners how to describe and communicate the work to partners and the public in language that resonates (i.e. the term 'stewardship' may not be easily understood), define what success looks like (determine the evaluation approach), and agree the vision. The Stewardship Group will consider how to build action on each of the 'Connected People and Places' project recommendations into the work programme.

5.2   A Reference Group, made up of the Chief Executive SCDA; Community Advice and Wellbeing Programme Manager SCDA; Programme Facilitator – Tackling Loneliness (Connecting People & Places); Chief Executive AgeUk East Sussex and Deputy Chair of VSCE Alliance; Chief Executive Sussex Community Voice; Public Health; and Collaborate CIC, has been established to guide the early development of the programme and establish the priorities for initiation of the Stewardship Group; its inception meeting is planned for April 2024. The Reference Group will ensure that the programme remains on track and adheres to the values and principles of the intended approach.

5.3   The ongoing participation of Collaborate CIC has been secured through limited involvement in the Stewardship Group/Reference Group. They will provide an independent 'critical friend' role with their detailed knowledge of the recommendations of the 'systems approach to loneliness' work, and as pioneers and advocates of the stewardship approach.

5.4   A five-step process for delivery of the programme is expected, as follows:

Step 1
- Establishing the Stewardship Group and agreeing the vision
- Identifying organisations/groups working with those most affected by loneliness and social isolation
- Reaching and engaging those with lived experience of loneliness and isolation; understanding their experiences and what community and connection looks like to them

Step 2
- Gaining knowledge and understanding through engagement with key groups (to include needs assessment, mapping, identification of gaps)
- Identifying key stakeholders that interact with identified community members across different levels of the system (champions)

- Generating interest and investment from key stakeholders through information and evidence on benefits to participation
- Co-designing a framework/toolkit for the approach

Step 3
- Piloting the framework/toolkit
- Learning, reflection, re-design, re-test
- Development of a learning programme

Step 4
- Monitoring and evaluation

Step 5
- Further roll-out of the framework/toolkit.

5.5   In the spirit of the stewardship approach, it is expected that all Partnership Plus member organisations, and other key partners, will further contribute to the programme through non-financial means, such as senior officer time, implementation support and brokering research and development opportunities. The membership of the Stewardship Group is likely to be drawn from organisations that have participated in the work to date (see Appendix 2), plus other interested parties who could helpfully be involved. In due course it is expected that the private sector could also contribute to the programme.

5.6   The Stewardship Group may start with a smaller group of committed people and demonstrate what is possible before attracting others. Early 'wins' and examples of the work achieved/are possible will be communicated. Everyone in the group should be committed to tackling loneliness and willing to do the work necessary to progress shared priorities over the two-year initial period. Examples of the implementation of these approaches in other areas have included representation of those with significant seniority (e.g. Chief Executives), anyone committed who has been empowered by their organisation to take part, as well as people with lived experience of the issues being tackled.

5.7   Quarterly highlight reports will be provided to Partnership Plus on each priority/workstream established by the Stewardship Group, along with details of stewardship facilitation activities, which may include: ways of working together; learning opportunities provided; communications activity delivered; 'check and challenge' or 'systems check' processes; and funding bid coordination and development.

5.8   The work to develop a systems approach to tackling loneliness is included in a number of East Sussex strategies and actions plans including: 'What Matters To You', the Adult Social Care Strategy and action plan. In addition, there are strong links with a range of other programmes, which will be developed further such as Making it Happen, Community Networks Support Programme, Family Hubs, the Creative Health programme, and the Sussex Social Prescribing Plan.

6.   Conclusion and recommendations

6.1   Following a collaborative process, the host organisation to support development of the stewardship approach has been appointed and a Programme Facilitator is in post who will coordinate the rapid development of the work. Cross Council support will be important in ensuring the appropriate membership of the Stewardship Group, along with the eventual implementation support that may be required by council departments and a wide range of multi-agency partnerships.

MARK STAINTON
Director of Adult Social Care and Health

Contact Officer: Ben Brown, Consultant in Public Health

Tel. No: 07923 240933 Email: ben.brown@eastsussex.gov.uk