

# Report to Communities Scrutiny Committee



# SCRUTINY

**Date of meeting: 26 September 2023**

**Portfolio:** Community & Wellbeing - Cllr Smruti Patel



**Subject:** Asset Based Community Development – Community Champions

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## Recommendations/Decisions Required:

That the Committee notes the Community & Wellbeing service area's adoption of an Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) approach and receives an associated presentation from local Community Champions on their achievements to date.

### 1. Report:

#### 1.1 Background

The Epping Forest Health & Wellbeing Strategy 2022-26 sets out a clear vision and key priorities in relation to tackling health inequalities and improving the health and wellbeing of residents in the district.

The Council works closely with a wide range of statutory and Third Sector partners to proactively deliver the objectives of the Health & Wellbeing Strategy, however, underpinning the success of this work is the direct involvement and input of communities themselves. For a number of years, the Council's Community Development & Wellbeing Team has adopted a methodology called Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) in support of this approach.

#### 1.2 What is Asset Based Community Development?

Asset Based Community Development is a localised and bottom-up way of strengthening communities through recognising, identifying, and harnessing existing 'assets' (i.e., things like skills, knowledge, capacity, resources, experience and enthusiasm) that individuals and communities have which can help to strengthen and improve things locally.

Instead of looking at what a community needs or lacks, the approach focuses on utilising the 'assets' that are already there. The approach facilitates the empowerment of individuals and communities by helping them to identify and share their strengths and then work together to create their own social innovations.

The Epping Forest Community Champions initiative is a tangible example of how an Asset Based Community Development approach has been successfully adopted and implemented by the Council to positive effect.

#### 1.3 Epping Forest Community Champions

Supported by Community Development staff, there are currently 20 active Community Champions across the district, with numbers growing all the time. Currently, Community Champions support communities in Abridge, Buckhurst Hill, Chigwell, Coopersale, Epping, Loughton, Nazeing, Ongar, Roydon, Sheering, Theydon Bois, Waltham Abbey and Willingale.

The vision is to ultimately have one or more Community Champion in all towns and villages in the district.

Community Champions are volunteers from the local community who want to make a positive difference in their area. They do this in a range of diverse ways, each being led by the needs in their specific neighbourhoods, but each having the skills, training and resources at their disposal to signpost those in need to key services, groups, projects or initiatives that will help them.

Community Champions are kind, empathetic and generous with their time. Using the knowledge and skills they have gain through, for example, undertaking Mental Health First Aid training or Dementia Friends Awareness training, Champions are able to confidentially begin conversations with those who may be struggling with their mental or physical health, or those who may be lonely or feeling isolated. Community Champions are a direct conduit between the Council's Community Development staff and the community itself, and their support and input is invaluable.

Champions attend an in-person evening meeting every month with Community Development staff and use a WhatsApp group for day-to-day communication and to provide peer support to each other. More experienced Champions frequently mentor new recruits and willing share their ideas and experiences, often helping each other out with local events outside of their own areas.

The opportunity to apply to become a Community Champion is promoted in a variety of ways including via posters and flyers, through social media channels and at the various events Community & Wellbeing staff organise. Partner agencies also readily promote the initiative on behalf of the Council. All applications are carefully considered, and the appointment process includes inviting comments from District, Town, and Parish Councillors to secure endorsement from the appropriate Ward Members.

#### 1.4 Funding secured by Community Champions

Community Champions actively fundraise. With support and guidance from Community Development Officers, ECC Locality Funding totalling £2,846 has been secured for projects in Nazeing, Roydon and Sheering which help to reduce loneliness and isolation and improve mental wellbeing. £1,700 has been secured from Essex County Council for the 'Let's Cook' project enabled a Chigwell Community Champion to provide an additional food education activity at the Limes Farm Youth Club.

Public Health Grant funding of £200 per setting supported the set-up of Warm Places/Social Spaces in Sheering, Nazeing and Chigwell, each of these being set up and run by Community Champions. The Limes Farm Colts Football Team, established by a second Chigwell Community Champion, secured £3,000 from the Grange Farm Trust to continue a football initiative for young people on the estate and also subsequently received match funding of £3,067 from the Community Safety Partnership and £4,500 of High Sheriff funding to sustain the project. Equans social value department contributed £800 towards the operation of a Limes Farm Community Café, a separate Bereavement Cafe and a local Food Pantry.

#### 1.5 Events and Projects supported by Community Champions

Key to the Community Champion role is supporting the Council's Community Development Officers and wider partners with events and health and wellbeing initiatives.

'Stay Safe & Well' days for older residents are regularly delivered across Epping Forest, and Champions support with the welfare of attendees on the day, with the preparation and serving of refreshments and the organisation of transport.

Champions have supported RideLondon, Memory Train events for people living with Dementia, a Ukrainian Information & Networking event, Recruitment & Skills Fairs, and the Ninefields Play Area launch. They have provided invaluable assistance with the Community Safety "Days of Action" on Ninefields estate as part of the Safer Streets Project, and similar on the Limes Farm estate. Champions have also led on numerous celebratory events to mark the Platinum Jubilee and Kings Coronation within their communities.

### 1.6 Community Champions support in emergency situations

Community Champions receive comprehensive training to support them in their roles. This can take the form of face-to-face sessions, such as Safeguarding training, and also virtual training via access that has been arranged to the Council's Litmos training portal.

Having undertaken Emergency Response training, Community Champions now form part of the Rest Centre Emergency Team which the Council stands up in the event of an incident. Most recently, Community Champions were called upon at short notice to support residents who had been evacuated from their properties in Epping on a Friday evening. They also willingly travelled to Stansted Airport to provide support to Sudanese evacuees, generously giving up their time over a Bank Holiday Weekend.

### 1.7 Further illustrations of an ABCD approach:

#### 1.7.1 Estate Ambassadors – Resident involvement in relation to Housing Tenants & Leaseholders

Another example of the ABCD methodology being implemented by the Council, and one which will carefully interface with Community & Wellbeing's Community Champions initiative, is Housing Service's refreshed Estate Ambassadors initiative. Whilst there are discrete differences between these roles, both involve developing a positive relationship with residents in order to improve the lives of local people.

Following the recent review and adoption of the Council's Resident Involvement Strategy, Tenant Participation staff within Housing Services will imminently embark on the recruitment of new \*Street/Block Ambassadors (\*the precise title of the role will be confirmed in due course following consultation) to work proactively with tenants and leaseholders in order to better understand their needs and how best to meet these.

Specifically, Estate Ambassadors will become involved in estate inspections alongside Housing Officers, help identify estate improvements, input into where and how funds are spent, be the conduit for information exchange, report issues of concern and generally feedback on services in order to help the Council and its partners to improve them. The full detail in terms of the criteria and recruitment process for the planned Ambassadors is currently being worked up, but this is an exciting opportunity which will not only benefit the Council and local communities, but also the individuals involved themselves in terms of personal development and training opportunities.

Further information regarding this area of work can be obtained from Sherryl Kontor, Interim Team Manager – Tenancy & Estates.

#### 1.7.2 Digital Champions

Prior to the COVID 19 pandemic the Council kick-started key work on a number of initiatives in support of the digital inclusion agenda. At this time, work commenced to actively recruit "Digital Champion" volunteers who were encouraged to use their own IT and digital skills and experience to support others who may feel less confident. This illustrates a further example of the Council positively harnessing community assets – the ABCD approach.

Unsurprisingly, COVID presented a number of challenges in terms of maintaining the early momentum of the Digital Champions volunteers initiative, however, this has been mitigated through partnership working with VAEF and West Essex Mind. Since August 2022, both organisations have contributed to the operation of digital skills coaching provision in the Civic Offices Community Hub.

Moving forwards, there are plans to ensure the recruitment of volunteers is central to any digital skills provision, harnessing the skills within the community to maximum effect and ensuring the long-term sustainability of this work.

Further information regarding this area of work can be obtained from Louis Walton, Lead Customer Services Officer.

**Reason for decision:** To note the benefits and impact of the Community Champions initiative through a presentation from volunteers themselves on their recent work and successes.

**Options considered and rejected:** N/A

**Consultation undertaken:** Community Champions regularly consult with their local communities as a key part of their work and remit.

**Resource implications:** Community Champions are supported by two Community Development Officers

**Legal and Governance Implications:** Community Champions adhere to an agreed Code of Conduct, have appropriate training and the support of Community Development Officers.

**Safer, Cleaner, Greener Implications:** None

**Background Papers:** None

**Risk Management:** Managed as part of service area arrangements

**Equality:** An Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out - no significant impact.