

Budget EqIA 7: Preventative Services

Budget Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA)

This is an Equality Impact Assessment of the Preventative Services saving in the budget. Under equality legislation, the Council has a legal duty to pay 'due regard' to the need to:

- eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation;
- advance equality of opportunity between different groups; and
- foster good relations between different groups.

The duty to pay 'due regard' is required to be demonstrated in the decision making and the implementation process. Assessing the potential equality impact of proposed savings that are part of the budget is the means by which we show 'due regard'.

1. The Decision

Remove MKC subsidy from a range of low-level services, including luncheon clubs, home visiting, reader service and conversation partnership scheme.

These services can be placed in two groups:

- Services that address isolation and loneliness in older people
- Services that relate to some form of disability

2. Key Issues

This assessment will review the main changes in the policy.

2.1 How likely is it to affect people with protected characteristics?

These services are of a preventative nature and seek to prevent older people experiencing isolation or provide additional support to people with a disability. It is likely that there will be some impact on a number of older people, especially those without family or local friends, and people with a disability who will not have the benefits of an additional service.

2.2 How might the Visitor Service change?

The Visitor Service relies on volunteers. Some voluntary relationships may possibly continue without the support of organisers. However, it is likely that in time without a system of organisation that the number of visits will decrease significantly meaning that some older people will be at risk of isolation.

2.2.1 What are the links between isolation, loneliness, and well-being?

That socialisation is a major factor in well-being and health has been established. There is a growing body of evidence that predicts mortality and morbidity based on

loneliness, including a whole number of cognitive and mental processes that are susceptible to the effect of loneliness (Hawkley et al 2010:218). These studies make a careful distinction between the isolation and loneliness, seeing these as linked but not mutually exclusive terms. While some people cope in isolation, loneliness was a cause of deterioration in health and well-being (Van Baarsen et al 2001:119).

2.2.2 What does major research tell us about interventions and combating loneliness?

Evaluation research into the interventions used to combat social isolation has found that there is very little evidence to show that they work (Findlay 2003). Further research by Cattan et al looked at outcomes of intervention services in more detail and found that the more effective interventions were group activities with an educational or support input and that ineffective interventions provided one-to-one social support, advice and information, or health-needs assessment. This research also suggested that educational and social activity group interventions that target specific groups could alleviate social isolation and loneliness among older people. However, it concluded, "The effectiveness of befriending services is unclear" (Cattan et al 2005:1).

Recently the University of Exeter conducted a review of the evidence and found "that common characteristics of effective interventions may include having a theoretical basis, and offering social activity and/or support within a group format. Interventions in which older people are active participants also appeared more likely to be effective" (Dickens 2011:647).

Local evaluation of the impact of visitor services has not produced a clear link between outcomes and interventions. Such evidence is hard to obtain and an open service may not be able to show clear preventative outcomes.

2.2.4 How is equality of opportunity advanced?

There are no easy routes to the advancement in equality of opportunity:

- A service is at risk that combats to some extent the risks associated with loneliness but whether this is effective or properly targeted is unclear
- How social isolation and loneliness is assessed should be considered as part of the Care Act work and Adult Social Care review
- In developing new opportunities, services and council must consider the strong evidence that participatory activity within a group format is more effective

2.3 How might lunch clubs change?

It is unclear if any lunch clubs will cease. If some do, there will be an impact on those who have used them and opportunities may be missed to advance older people's well-being.

2.3.1 Does the methodology used by lunch clubs combat the effects of loneliness?

Service users report that without the clubs they would “be isolated”. As has been discussed, isolation is not the key issue, however it does make people susceptible to the effect of loneliness

The clubs provide their services on a universal basis and there are many benefits to shared lunches, socialising, and group activities. They provide a type of social activity that might be able to combat loneliness, although the group activity and support is not their main function. This makes outcomes unclear with some of those who use the clubs not getting the full benefit of the social environment. It is also unclear how many of those who access the clubs have needs arising from loneliness and how many people who have these needs do not access the clubs.

Lunch clubs are part of the group of interventions for which researchers have found it difficult to evidence their effectiveness. Part of the reason for this is that they are not focused on particular needs, the evaluation of the clubs is difficult, and the effects of loneliness away from the club are not monitored.

2.3.2 Could a service adjustment by the council help to advance equality of opportunity?

There is a possibility that some people who use lunch clubs could have unidentified needs. It is therefore imperative that the needs of the older people who use lunch clubs are assessed, so that a further consideration of these needs takes place.

Generally, more research into the effect and levels of loneliness and isolation is required. An ongoing project led by the Open University is providing this research basis.

2.4 What might change regarding services related to people with a disability?

There are two services in this section.

The Reader Service it is argued is more than a friendly support service but provides specific help that ensures that people can stay independent. Therefore, the impact of the service might be to put people at risk of not maintaining their independence. The effectiveness of the service is unclear; however, there is a risk that some people with a disability would be adversely affected. Therefore it was recommended that members review this decision.

The Conversation Partnership Scheme is key feature is that it gets volunteers who have speech disabilities to support people who have similar difficulties. This is an initiative project; its loss might affect some of its users who have a low level of need. On this basis, it is hoped that it can attract community funding.

3. View of the “Social Isolation among older people in Milton Keynes” report

3.1 Effects of withdrawal of services:

Older people who are unable to socialise or are not mobile will become increasingly socially isolated, affecting their well-being and quality of life, for many bringing once again the sense of being ‘trapped’ in their homes that they say made them join the club. The pressure on local GP services and mental health services is bound to rise, as GP services will become the only contact points. Post-hospital support to enable independent living and to gain confidence will suffer, putting the pressure on local social services.

For a few, missing out on nutritious meals and not being regularly in contact with others may bring a risk of malnourishment. Physical and mental health issues being picked up by these support services may not be picked up in time for early interventions. Age UK MK and other local organisations will not so effectively receive the first-hand information about gaps in services or ways to improve the services for older people, and older people themselves will have a lower level of awareness of local services and activities. Local community capacity, the pool of experienced support workers, and volunteering capacity more generally will be adversely affected.

3.2 Alternative arrangements and services:

Current services that are working well should not be withdrawn until alternative financial support has been established, and/or alternative services have been successfully substituted. Alternatives being explored in other local authority areas include for example postcode-based mutual support networks (e.g. networks/clubs based in existing sheltered housing), and the loan of underused minibuses (e.g. school or residential minibuses) to community transport.

Milton Keynes has a strong local economy with many major businesses and organisations headquartered locally. Rather than risk the consequences of withdrawal of these services, one way forward for MK Council would be to capitalise on this commercial strength, the strength and experience of local services for older people, and the pool of experienced volunteers to broker new and imaginative support arrangements to maintain and expand these vital local services

4. Recommendation

Transitional funding would allow time for services to adapt to service changes.

It is likely that this decision will adversely affect some people who use these services. Loneliness can lead to deterioration in the health and well-being in older people. Effective interventions can alleviate the risks. There are no easy routes to promoting equality of opportunity, but consideration should be given to the evidence that effective interventions have a number of common elements including, offering

social activity and/or support within a group format. Further adjustments are being considered to provide wider assessments of needs for users of these services.

Implement decision with transitional funding despite having identified some potential for an adverse impact or a possible missed opportunity to promote equality.

5. Bibliography

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Van Baarsen, Berna, et al. "Lonely but not alone: Emotional isolation and social isolation as two distinct dimensions of loneliness in older people." *Educational and Psychological Measurement* 61.1 (2001): 119-135.

