

WELWYN HATFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 14 MARCH 2023

REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR (RESIDENT & NEIGHBOURHOOD)

Vaccine Champions project

1 Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Council were successful in bidding for £485,000 of funding from the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in December 2021. The funding was to support the uptake of the covid vaccine in hard-to-reach communities.
- 1.2 The project was successfully delivered to budget using targeted communications, community information champions to engage with hard-to-reach communities and funding of third sector organisation through a community innovation fund for wellbeing projects.

2 Recommendation(s)

- 2.1 That the Committee note the report.

3 Explanation

- 3.1 In December 2021; around the time of the emergence of the Omicron variant, and after the vaccine and booster vaccination programmes, the Government announced £22.5 million in funding for their 'Community Vaccine Champions' scheme to promote vaccine uptake amongst hard-to-reach communities in Local Authorities showing the lowest rates of COVID-19 vaccine uptake.
- 3.2 Funding was available in selected local authority areas to support a range of activities, including:
 - a) developing engagement strategies and outreach work into the most at-risk places and communities;
 - b) supporting and empowering communities through new and existing networks and grassroots organisations or 'champions' from impacted communities; and
 - c) working through voluntary and community groups and other national or local actors who specialise in working with communities to harness local expertise and increase vaccine equity by addressing local barriers to access.
- 3.3 The Government proposed to fund local authorities which had the lowest rates of vaccine uptake to:
 - a) Increase available outreach and engagement through one-to-one/focused contact to understand local barriers and needs, raise

awareness of local support and promote COVID-19 vaccine uptake, public health guidance and programmes for residents disproportionately impacted by barriers to COVID-19 vaccine uptake.

- a) Develop and deliver practical solutions, including, but not limited to, the recruitment and appointment of Community Champions networks, to promote vaccine uptake and community ownership of COVID-19 guidance, as well as provision of grant funding to local organisations, for example, through local grants schemes.
- b) Build on the existing infrastructure of Community Champions or develop new networks of champions where they do not already exist to promote COVID-19 vaccine take-up amongst communities disproportionately affected by barriers to accessing vaccines.

3.4 Due to the pandemic, Government asked recipient authorities to commit funding by the end of 2021/22 and conclude funding by July 2022.

3.5 The council submitted a bid for funding prioritising:

- a) Ethnicity (East European, South Asian, Chinese and Black African) especially those of working age
- b) Age (especially those of working age 18-30)
- c) Geography/socio-economic status (five wards of concern).

3.6 On 7 January 2022, under section 31 of the Local Government Act 2003 and the Community Vaccine Champions Determination (2022) [No. 31/5886], the Council was awarded £485,000 grant subject to the above timetable and a memorandum of understanding that included the following outcome expectations:

- a) Short-term:
 - Increased vaccine uptake rates in target communities
 - Increased visibility/activity of Community Vaccine Champions within local areas and on social media, with target groups
 - Increased awareness of Community Vaccine Champions within the local area
 - Increased interaction with Community Vaccine Champions or local authorities by disproportionately impacted groups
- b) Medium-term:
 - Increased reach of, and reported trust in, official public health messaging amongst target communities
 - Increased reported confidence in challenging misinformation around vaccine safety amongst target communities
 - Evidence of behaviour change, within the targeted groups, especially with regards to protective health behaviour such as

vaccine uptake and challenging misinformation around vaccine uptake

- c) Long-term:
- Reduced COVID-19 transmission in the long-term
 - Increased access to guidance and awareness of local services through outreach and practical tools which could lead to improved health and wellbeing of target cohorts and their families
 - Increased coordination and dialogue with public health providers by participating local authorities with the aim to create cohesive and trusted local messaging
 - Reduced inequality and disparity in health outcomes between different groups

3.7 The council's delivery plan initially proposed:

- a) Telephoning unvaccinated residents;
- b) targeted communications, including a social media campaign to counter anti-vaccination messages;
- c) on-the-day 'vicinity' encouragement for unused vaccinations at Welwyn Hatfield clinics;
- d) community champion engagement to target further education, minority groups and business sectors
- e) a community innovation fund.

3.8 The scale of the task should not be underestimated. The council were being asked to deliver £485,000 of service in 6 months to include set-up, for which there was no run-up preparation period.

3.9 All delivery plan workstreams were fully delivered:

- a) **Telephoning unvaccinated residents** – 30,000 residents for whom no vaccination records were available were telephoned, by a team of around 8 temporary staff, which included some repurposed COVID Marshalls and a couple of temporary staff who worked on a smaller scale telephone scheme funded by the county. For many residents, this required several calls before their phones were answered. The staff were able to answer questions and concerns about vaccinations, advise about nearby vaccination points, make appointments and arrange transport for those that needed it. Where residents had needle phobia, we were able to signpost to clinics specialising in vaccinating phobic patients. This workstream was fully delivered.
- b) **targeted communications** – involved commissioning insight and advice on effective communication channels and messaging for the unvaccinated populations; highly targeted delivery of social media and other digital campaigns; creation and promotion of a podcast series to engage young adults, including students, with a supporting website and

targeted campaign; out of home advertising in specific wards; and traditional print media and PR. Alongside this a chatbot was developed, and delivered via WhatsApp, building on local intelligence gathering to help counter the anti-vaccination narrative.

- c) **a community innovation fund.** An application-based scheme that provided funding of up to £5k to 3rd sector groups for schemes that provided support in connection with COVID and/or health and wellbeing during and after the pandemic. Organisations making successful community innovation fund bids were:

- Citizens Advice Welwyn Hatfield
- First Garden Cities Homes
- Hatfield Town Council
- Isabel Hospice
- Women of Grace UK
- Red Kite Rape and Sexual Abuse Support Services
- Walk The Walk Family Support Services CIC
- Mill Green Golf Club
- Forever Young People

A total of £45,162.50 of community innovation funding was made available for wellbeing & COVID adjacent initiatives.

- d) **Community champion engagement** – this meant recruiting individuals from within different communities to engage and spread the message using non-official channels (to overcome ‘expert’ or ‘authorities’ scepticism).

A tried and tested 3rd sector partner, Communities 1st was commissioned to deliver a proactive, targeted approach to recruit, train, and support demographically representative volunteers, in each locality within Welwyn Hatfield. The role of the volunteers was to influence, guide, and deliver targeted interactions with hard-to-reach groups to address vaccine hesitancy and to engage at micro level with communities and groups, providing support, transport and advice.

The volunteers: assisted with the pop-up surgeries, forums, answered hesitancy questions, establishing why community members had vaccination hesitancy, provided free transport to vaccination clinics, engaged with faith leaders.

This service was commissioned from 7 March – 31 October 2022, and subsequently extended to 31 January 2023.

Implications

4. Legal Implication(s)

- 4.1 The funding was provided in accordance under section 31 of the Local Government Act 2003 and the Community Vaccine Champions Determination (2022) [No. 31/5886], and subject to a memorandum of understanding.-

5. Financial Implications

5.1 The grant provided was £485,000.

5.2 As of 23 February 2023, £453k of expenditure had been committed and the remaining £32K of cost is being allocated to the project. The project has been delivered to the £485K funding.

6 Risk Management Implications

6.1 The project was delivered on budget and on time, with now unmitigated risks materialising.

7 Security and Terrorism Implication(s)

7.1 None.

8 Procurement Implication(s)

8.1 Communities 1st is a local voluntary sector organisation. They were procured from a Framework Agreement to provide more than 100 Community Information Champions to help support the uptake of the covid vaccine.

9 Climate Change Implication(s)

None.

10 Human Resources Implication(s)

10.1 Employment of temporary and fixed term staff for this project was undertaken in accordance with the Council's HR policies and procedures.

11 Health and Wellbeing Implication(s)

11.1 The delivery of this project positively impacted the reduction of the severity of COVID-related illness.

12 Communication and Engagement Implication(s)

12.1 The delivery of this project had positive community engagement-building outcomes.

13 Link to Corporate Priorities

13.1 The subject of this report is linked to the Council's Corporate Priority 'A sense of community where people feel safe', and specifically to the achievement of 'Create welcoming neighbourhoods and community spaces where people feel safe'.

14 Equality and Diversity

13.1 An EqIA was not completed because this report does not propose changes to existing service-related policies or the development of new service-related policies.

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Background papers to be listed (if applicable)

- Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities, Community Vaccine Champions prospectus, December 2021.
- Welwyn Hatfield Council, Communities, Community Vaccine Champions bid, December 2021
- Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities, Community Vaccine Champions grant determination, 7 January 2022.
- Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities, Community Vaccine Champions Memorandum of Understanding, 7 January 2022.
- Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities, Community Vaccine Champions Grant conditions, 7 January 2022.
- Welwyn Hatfield Council, Communities, Community Vaccine Champions Delivery Plan, January 2022