

CORPORATE AND COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL 19 JANUARY 2023

UPDATE ON WORCESTERSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL'S SUPPORT FOR VOLUNTEERS AND VOLUNTEERING THROUGH THE HERE2HELP SERVICE (INCLUDING A COST OF LIVING UPDATE)

Summary

1. The Panel has requested an update on Worcestershire County Council's (the Council) support for volunteers and volunteering through the Here2Help Service (Here2Help), following on from the previous report in September 2021.
2. The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Communities and the Assistant Director of Communities have been invited to the meeting to update the Panel on activity since the previous report and future plans in relation to volunteering.

Background

3. Here2Help was originally launched in March 2020 as a direct response to the needs of local people impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Service was created and developed to support local residents offering to help others who were having to shield and self-isolate. This included telephone advisors to support individuals with signposting services, online web resources, an internal volunteering dashboard and functions to co-ordinate volunteering activity and a community services directory launched in September 2021.
4. Volunteers have been supporting residents for well over two years in such areas as; food collection, food parcels, medication delivery and befriending, as well as support for a Covid clinics. A total of over 16,000 hours of volunteering have been delivered by a current network of around 1300 volunteers who are registered as being available to support roles across the county.
5. The Council is committed to supporting volunteering across the County, both from the perspective of the benefits from undertaking the activity itself on the local community, but also the positive outcomes to the individual volunteers.
6. Work is well underway to align the Council's internal volunteering activities and approaches, alongside the relationship building and working towards developing a joined up strategic volunteering approach across the key partner organisations. Since the summer of 2021 this has been progressed through the Council's investment in a Volunteering Development Officer, sitting alongside the Here2Help Team within the Communities and Partnership Service in the People Directorate.

7. Since the last update in September 2021, the landscape around the Covid response and volunteering activity has changed considerably, moving from a very operational logistical service of predominately volunteer co-ordination linked to Covid, to policy and strategic developments, whilst retaining the operational functions at a smaller scale with capacity to scale up if needed. There are many developments in progress which will enable a more co-ordinated approach to volunteering in the coming months and years, adding value and supporting the volunteering leads across the County and maximising the volunteering opportunities for residents.

Here2Help volunteers

8. Covid support formed the majority of the activity of the Council's Here2Help volunteers, from inception until mid-March 2022. From March onwards, support from the Council's volunteers was intermittent and ad-hoc in nature, including assistance for vaccination clinics in July and then again September through to the middle of November.
9. Volunteers register by entering their details on the Council's Here2Help section of the website, including their areas of interest. The range of areas that volunteers can become active in includes food and supplies, health and medication, supporting commitments, help with transport, mental health and wellbeing, Covid vaccination clinics and support for refugees. This then triggers the registration process which covers all relevant checks required and directs individuals to the Disclosure and Barring Scheme portal if appropriate. The online volunteering portal includes a range of functionality to facilitate effective management of large-scale volunteering activity such as calendar functions for volunteers to book to attend various activities such as Covid clinic sessions, updating volunteers on booking changes and clinic venue information.
10. Safeguarding the volunteers and people or activities they are supporting is paramount. Therefore, all volunteering activity is risk assessed in order to ensure the volunteer and the person they are supporting are safe following guidance and toolkits to ensure the highest safeguarding standards are maintained at all times.
11. The contribution of volunteers to support individuals and the vaccination activity has been considerable, the commitment and support provided has been invaluable to the Council and its wider statutory partners. Volunteers come forwards from all over the County to support their communities. Appendix 1 (attached) details a Volunteer Case Study from a Here2Help volunteer.
12. Those supporting Covid clinics were also surveyed to understand more about their experiences between September 2021 and March 2022. This covered key areas such as communication, how valued volunteers felt, whether they were likely to return and whether they felt like they were contributing. These results were analysed by venue so that the Council could identify issues early and work through these with the clinic co-ordinators. In summary an average of 80% of volunteers responding felt they had contributed, 77% were likely to return and 88% stated they felt valued. This will be replicated in the future at periodic intervals as relevant, including understanding and addressing those areas with lower levels of satisfaction.

13. The volunteers on the Council's Here2Help volunteering database receive a range of support which includes:
- Quarterly volunteer newsletter including information from local organisations about volunteering opportunities, news celebrating volunteering successes, and County wellbeing and health initiatives.
 - Regular volunteering partner opportunities and update communications on corporate or partner initiatives such as resistance bands, orange button scheme etc.
 - Volunteer week celebrations including community engagement sessions and volunteer week certificates length of service awards.
 - Virtual coffee mornings with other Here2Help volunteers to ensure volunteers feel valued and supported.
 - Direct access to one-to-one supervision and support for all Here2Help volunteering activity including application process, all Here2Help volunteering opportunities with local residents and guidance and support connecting to Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) partners.
14. The Here2Help Central Team within the People Directorate have the option to use the in-house volunteer database to match volunteers with residents requesting help through a simple triage process. This work is at its early stages and needs to be aligned with the developing relationship with the local volunteer infrastructure leads across the county.

Council wide activity

15. Over the last six months, an internal working group of representatives involved in volunteering across eight teams in the Council has been meeting to look at how volunteering recruitment and management practices can be streamlined and standardised across the organisation. Volunteers are crucial across a number of departments and a joined-up approach will ensure a consistent experience for all as well as providing an opportunity for collaboration and peer support for those staff managing volunteers as part of their role.
16. Volunteers are engaged in Council activity either directly or indirectly in the following: libraries, museums, countryside rights of way, countryside greenspace and road safety, resettlement, community transport, public health, Here2Help and emergency planning. The teams represented in these areas each engage and manage volunteers. The volunteers represented by these teams exceed 2,700 volunteers in total.
17. These volunteers contribute significantly to the operation of the Council and work is being undertaken to review the cost and benefit of the volunteers. This will enable the council to articulate the added value that their work brings, and the potential impact if those volunteers were not available.
18. The initial outcome of this activity will be shared policies and practices adopted during 2023 that will be embedded in day-to-day activity across the organisation. This will provide clarity and consistency for both the services and volunteers.
19. There are further plans beyond this point in relation to developing shared induction

and training packages, as well as online tools and resources for council volunteers.

20. As part of Council's staff wellbeing week, there was a presence by the VCS volunteering lead partners, with the two of the local WeCan VCS lead organisations in attendance running an information stall, with follow up plans to hold online sessions to promote volunteering, and also link into retirement planning for Council staff. There is also potential to utilise their expertise around volunteer management as experts in the field.
21. A number of other local authorities operate volunteering policies for staff, whereby one or two days per year can be taken to volunteer within the county, this promotes the well-being of staff and also gives local authorities to support their local communities. This is an area that will be researched in due course and progressed alongside the Council's Human Resources Team.

Strategic volunteering activity

22. Throughout the last year, as the focus has moved away from day-to-day operational activity, further time has been available to focus on developing strategic links across the statutory and voluntary sector partners.
23. The relationships with the Council's statutory partners have developed considerably over the last year. The Council has been able to support a number of recruitment exercises for its statutory partners. This included 38 Here2Help volunteers coming forwards for Herefordshire and Worcestershire Community Health NHS Trust roles including community engagement panel, youth board, recruitment and selection panel, patient led assessors, equality advisory group.
24. Here2Help volunteers also came forward to support HMP Hewell as well in recruiting a member of the Independent Monitoring Board as a lay observer. This position has now been filled through promotion activity.
25. The relationship with the voluntary sector lead organisations is crucial to the impact and value of volunteering on residents. The Council is developing its relationship with the WeCan (Worcestershire Community Action Network) group of six local infrastructure organisations for the VCS. Since the initial meeting in June 2022, there are now some key areas of discussion and agreed ways of working including;
 - The Council promoting the WeCan network on all communications in relation to volunteering.
 - Regular meetings of the network and Council staff.
 - All volunteering request from organisations to the Council are shared with WeCan first.
 - WeCan volunteering opportunities can be shared with Council volunteers.
 - Sharing information around developments and options for joint working.
 - Exploring the development of strategic links to wider partners.
 - Commitment to ongoing discussion and collaborative working.
26. As a result of these joint discussions, it was agreed that the development of a strategic volunteering forum would be helpful to explore with key countywide organisations. This is now in development and the first meeting took place in

December 2022. The Strategic partners invited included WeCan network members, Voluntary and Community Sector lead representing the VCS Alliance, West Mercia Police, Herefordshire and Worcestershire Fire and Rescue Service, Herefordshire and Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust, Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust. Membership will be reviewed at the first meeting and added to as relevant.

27. Whilst this group will set their agenda, it is likely that the discussions and areas of activity will focus on the following areas initially:
- Exploring improved ways of working together and providing a more joined up experience for volunteers.
 - Sharing best practice and peer support.
 - Exploring ideas around a One Worcestershire approach to volunteering.
28. Development and ongoing collaboration at the strategic level will maximise opportunities for people to engage in volunteering, and in turn that will have a positive impact on social connection and inclusion, skills, employability and opportunities. All of these will contribute to the wellbeing of local people living in Worcestershire.

Cost of Living update

29. The Council has been working to ensure resources are available and the frontline Here2Help central team are equipped to be able to respond as effectively as possible to any calls from residents requesting advice and support in relation to the cost of living. This work has included frontline training for staff, developing direct referral routes to partner organisations such as Worcestershire Advice Network and Trussell Trust foodbanks, Severn Trent Trust Fund, British Gas Energy Trust etc.
30. Across the Council, there are also other initiatives in operation such as the libraries operating as warm welcome spaces and being registered on the national warm welcome [website \(www.warmwelcome.uk\)](http://www.warmwelcome.uk). Libraries are also developing energy advice drop-in sessions in partnership with Act on Energy in the main libraries from the end of January.
31. Introductory training for frontline staff on fuel poverty will also be available in the early part of 2023, which is being delivered by a specialist energy charity, Act on Energy.
32. A dedicated [webpage](#) has been created to provide signposting advice to both national and local information, including the [community services directory](#), and frequently asked questions to support residents to navigate to where they need. There is also a wealth of additional knowledge on the site around money management, mental wellbeing, work, skills and learning, warm spaces etc.
33. The plan for the Household Support Fund phase three, which is an allocation of £3.95 million, is now [published](#), which includes;
- Provision of free school meal vouchers in holidays until the end of the Easter holiday period.
 - Energy support scheme through Act on Energy

- One off payment to pensioners on pension credit or low income, carers and those with a disability
 - One off winter payment to care leavers and shared lives carers
 - District councils have been allocated just under £900k which is funding localised activity such as food banks, voucher schemes, social welfare support schemes etc.
34. Four part time debt workers have been funded by the Council and hosted through the Worcestershire Advice Network for a period of 12 months to provide additional resource for those experiencing unmanageable debt and applying for support through Act on Energy.
35. Monthly meetings with District Council lead officers and key partners such as the Worcestershire Advice Network take place to discuss the Household Support Fund and wider cost of living activity. Council officers attend district council cost of living groups as capacity allows to ensure a joint up approach to supporting residents.

Purpose of the Meeting

The Panel is asked to:

- consider and comment on the contents of the report, and
- determine whether any further information or scrutiny on a particular topic is required.

Supporting Information

Appendix 1 – Here2Help volunteering case study

Contact Points

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Background Papers

In the opinion of the proper officer, in this case the Democratic Governance and Scrutiny Manager (Interim Monitoring Officer) there are no background papers relating to the subject matter of this report:

[All agendas and minutes are available on the Council's website here.](#)