

Walsall For All - Building social integration and cohesion conference

2nd March 2023

The Crossing at St Paul's, Darwall St, Walsall WS1 1DA

In March 2023, Walsall for All Board organised a successful mini conference - **Building Community Cohesion in Walsall**, which took place at The Crossing at St. Paul's and was attended by over 70 participants.

The conference was of particular interest to those aspiring to build Resilient Communities, cohesive and safe neighbourhoods and community organisations. There was also representation from campaigners of equality, diversity, and inclusion. A diverse range of speakers spoke about designing and testing exciting new ideas set in the regional and national context.



Attendees had the opportunity to hear from the Walsall for All Partnership, local providers, and regional and national colleagues about their journey since 2018 of working with local communities. The Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (then MHCLG) spoke about creating a socially integrated and cohesive borough.

The conference was also an opportunity to reflect on the strategic approach pre- and post-pandemic, as well as highlighting the strengths and challenges of the legacy.

The programme of the day consisted of a number of local, regional and national speakers who shared their experiences of working with local communities. The keynote speech from Jo Broadwood, CEO of Belong - The Cohesion and Integration Network focused on **Investing in Social Integration and Cohesion – lessons learned around UK**. Department of Levelling Up, Housing and

Communities (DLUHC) provided a summary of national evaluation of the Integration Area Programme. Local presentations included the Chair of Walsall for All Board, Walsall Housing Group (WHG), Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Black Country Innovate CIC. Walsall Council colleagues contributed with sharing new funding opportunities around mental health and community capital schemes.

The conference concluded with a series of facilitated workshops to develop actions to enable Walsall for All to continue the journey of social integration within Walsall. Discussions took place around focusing on refreshing the social integration priorities in the context of new challenges (i.e., the cost-of-living crisis, and other characteristics, including white deprived, LGBTQ+ and inter-sectional issues such as disability).

Participants of the conference had opportunity to participate in the following workshops:

- **Reducing Health Inequalities and improving Wellbeing**
- **Cost of Living for diverse communities**
- **Voices of Community**

An overview of the discussions from the workshops are provided below:

1. Reducing Health Inequalities and improving Wellbeing

The workshop included representatives from Public Health Walsall, Healthwatch Walsall, Walsall Together, Black Country Innovate CIC, Zebra Access, and other key partners.

Discussions were led around the impact of health inequalities on mental health and wellbeing within marginalised communities and socially disadvantaged groups, where there are significant barriers to access of services for those living furthest from service provision. Some of these barriers discussed also included underrepresentation of minority groups, childcare, language capability, stigma towards mental health, discrimination, and cost. This inevitably has led to further isolation and social inequalities.

The group explored a number of health inequalities under each of the 9 protected characteristics and looked for solutions, which sought to harness the strengths, capacity, and knowledge of those marginalised communities and groups. Whilst many organisations continue to provide effective services and support for vulnerable groups, there is a lack of public resources invested in reducing inequalities in income, employment, education, and living conditions. One suggestion made was for funding bodies to provide opportunities to commission smaller organisations or fund services where organisations could work collaboratively.

There is a need to consult with different communities and groups to better understand the ongoing challenges faced around health inequalities within the borough and to ensure they play an integral part in the development and delivery of

any decisions and strategies that impact them. Active steps need to be taken to ensure accessibility of information and creating an integrated network of services that build resilience and promote wellbeing to all.



2. Cost of Living for diverse communities

The impact of increasing energy, supply chain costs and food manufacturing has seen significant impacts on communities. The Citizens Advice research said 1 in 10 families (3.2 million are in crisis) with a further 320,000 have less than £50 spare at the end of each month after spending on essential items. Those claiming benefits are often an area of discussion, but increasing poverty is now occurring in low-income families who are just above benefit support thresholds. The diversity of these groups is a key challenge in terms of communications and using communication channels, which are effective.

More and more people are accessing food banks, using charity shops to get clothing, not having the heating on, and are missing meals, including children not having breakfast. This is having an impact in terms of mental health related directly to poverty based shame and anxiety. Numerous stakeholders raised their experience of dealing with residents expressing shame of the situation they find themselves in.

Charity shops which are a key lifeline for accessing affordable clothing, are now becoming too expensive and families in poverty are becoming more reliant on free donations. The cost of end of school proms, school trips, charitable donations and school uniforms are a source of anxiety for too many parents and more thinking needs to be done by schools to consider the impact of poverty on students.

Walsall has a £5.6M Housing Support Fund allocation (23/24) to support those who are in most need. It was clear that effective use was a key priority with effective payment monitoring to ensure those in most need received not only the payment, but support to apply.

While *pathways out of poverty* is a noble objective for too many, the reality of childcare costs was stopping people moving into employment or education and for too many, childcare costs were a significant barrier for people to remain in work where unemployment became a more viable option.

One of the key areas of discussion was information sharing and promotion of support, money saving ideas, taking the shame out of poverty while accepting that poverty should not be normalised. Through the many opportunities of engagement that both the statutory and voluntary sector have, each connection can be used to raise awareness and to signpost towards support options.

Considering the stigma of food clubs, it was suggested that pop up kindness shops and warm and cold hubs should be considered to maximise attendance by making sure that the support is marketed in a way which does not stigmatise. As part of that offer, household budgeting, cheap and healthy cooking classes, shared “savings” best practice, a clothing bank need to be considered on a locality basis and a drive for those who can afford to increase clothing and food bank donations.

What was clear is that monthly / bimonthly poverty related meetings between provision-based stakeholders is required to share best practice and learn from initiatives to better support residents. Places like schools who have access to parents and children can offer support or do targeted messaging in a private stigma reducing way.

Finally, a role for statutory organisations, elected members, and our local MPs is to lobby government for policies and tax incentives to reduce the profits of large corporate organisations (energy suppliers) which will help to reduce the burden on those who can least afford to reduce poverty in the UK.

3. Voices of Community

The participants of the workshop included the representatives from Afghan Community, One Walsall, The MindKind Projects CIC, Council colleagues, West Midlands Police, and faith representatives.

Participants recognised that listening to the voices of different communities in Walsall is very important because it helps to ensure that all needs are met, and everyone has a say in decisions and initiatives that affect them. It also helps to

promote understanding and respect between different groups of people, which can lead to a more cohesive and harmonious community.

It was recognised that there are already good practices which listen to the voices of different communities and learn about their unique perspectives and experiences, as well as building trust. Some of these practices include partnership working - existing community groups collaborating on different initiatives; positive and pro-active responses from the community; community events and ESOL provisions that have a very good attendance and integration outcome. The challenges identified were the need for mapping existing services and community leaders to ensure representation as well as sharing of data and collating it thematically. It was recognised that the mapping process would help to build on and expand existing community strengths, identify new resources and facilitate collaboration.



In the context of this workshop, participants suggested that identifying individuals and communities who are willing to actively engage as well as the use of common platforms (i.e., Walsall for All, One Walsall) to share the information of upcoming events and project initiatives in the community would hear and involve the voices of different communities.

Conclusion

The diverse nature of the attendance and energy on the day clearly evidenced that many groups are committed to, and are contributing to community integration.

Through the workshops many examples were shared which show that much work remains to be done for certain groups to feel they are treated equally. However many

working methodologies were shared which demonstrated people are listening and through action are travelling the journey or equality for all.

The challenge for all groups is to ensure a more robust self-evaluation of working practices in design and delivery, considering how to reach and empower disadvantaged groups to help themselves.

Recommendations

- That all stakeholders share the learning with peers and stakeholders to recognise that integration occurs when we listen, learn and commit to meeting the needs of those who are most disadvantaged.
- That the Walsall For All board create a medium term strategy and action plan which is co-designed by our residents and is evaluated through the strategic period through inclusive consultation in design and evaluation.
- That some of the excellent practices are shared and we commit to listening and reducing disadvantage to make Walsall For All not just a brand but a lived experience.
- That the Walsall For All Board and sub groups are inclusive in their membership to inform a co-design methodology.
- Accountability and impact are at the forefront of design and delivery in valuing the importance of community integration.

For further information, please contact:

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