

Elected Member Challenge Panel on Mental Health Issues

1. Background

Oxford City Council passed a motion in February 2014 setting out its support for mental health work and including a number of actions for it to take. One of these was for: “the City Executive Board to consider appointing a member of the Council to be a Champion of Mental Health Issues in much the same way as we have an Older People’s Champion”.

Interested members have since been involved in further developing this proposal, considering materials from the Mental Health Challenge supported by a number of national organisations (www.mentalhealthchallenge.org.uk). This partnership offers support to local authorities that take on the Challenge, including:

- Providing resources (for example published evidence, expert opinion and briefings) to help councils to take local action in support of the strategy
- Offering networking opportunities and peer support for mental health champions, including an annual meeting and through use of electronic media
- Recognising and acknowledging publicly the councils that sign up to the challenge and the ‘champions’ they appoint.

2. Proposed Challenge Panel

The proposal is for the City Council to help embed mental health and wellbeing by:

- Setting up a standing “Challenge panel of elected members on mental health and wellbeing” in the city (note: this is not a formal committee set up under the Council’s constitution, but an informal advisory group to the Executive Board Member for Health)
- Membership of between 3-6 named elected members from across parties, depending on interest, agreed by Council each year
- Different members to take on a particular area of work to focus on, according to specialism and interest, these areas may change over time
- The Panel identifying one member as its chair and to be its public lead, including being part of the national mental health champions network.

Members supported agreeing an outline role description for the challenge Panel and its members, without being overly prescriptive. This role is suggested to include:

- The Panel will not have any executive or budget responsibilities, but it will work closely with the Executive Board Member for Health and any other Board Member that might be relevant to the topic under discussion
- Panel members to take on specific areas of focus that may change over time if required (e.g. on Black and Ethnic Minority-specific concerns, autism, isolation or other groups at higher risk of low mental wellbeing)
- Tie in with the work of the City Council’s Older People’s Champion
- Keep an overview of local service provision and other work relating to mental health and wellbeing
- Act as advocates of mental health issues in the development and delivery of Council policies and strategies, and with partners

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- Link with mental health service users and voluntary groups locally to understand their needs and concerns
- Tackle myths and misperceptions about mental health within the Council, in the local community and with partners
- Support and exchange ideas with each other and other mental health elected member champions across the country.

3. Operational matters

It is suggested that at its first meeting the Panel discuss and agree how it will operate, e.g. by adopting a protocol. This could cover:

- Its role and how it will operate in practical terms, e.g. frequency of meetings or Panel communications, links to national networks
- Reporting arrangements, e.g. through the Stronger Communities Programme Board to director level and through the regular partnership reports to Council.

4. Resourcing

Actions based on the motion to Council are expected to be delivered within existing budgets. The Member Challenge Panel will have access to some freely available materials and guidance by participating in national and other networks, e.g. from the organisations leading on the Mental Health Challenge.

Limited support will be able to be given as part of the work plan of the Policy and Partnerships Team, e.g. to support the Panel to meet handful of times a year, to report back to Council or to adapt national materials for local use. Clearly the Panel may choose to meet informally as well.

If a higher level of support were to be required in future, additional resources would have to be found to make that possible and discussions to be had about where such support would best sit.

Val Johnson, Head of Policy and Partnerships
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11th August 2014