

## **Covid -19 and community vulnerability --- Summary of Councillor discussions**

### **1. Introduction**

- This document provides a summary of the information gathered during six online 'roundtable' discussion sessions held with Dorset Councillors during May/June 2020.
- All Members were invited to attend one session organised around localities: East Dorset, North Dorset, Purbeck, Mid Dorset, Weymouth & Portland and West Dorset.
- Prior to the session Members were sent a document prepared by officers containing information on vulnerable groups and their perception of how they have been supported during the period of lockdown and social distancing.
- The sessions were facilitated by Paul Iggulden (Consultant, Public Health Dorset) and Susan Ward-Rice (Diversity & Inclusion Officer, Dorset Council) with support from Rebecca Forester (Business Partner: Policy, Research & Performance), Hayley Caves (Member Development & Support Officer) and Rupert Lloyd (Project Coordinator, Public Health Dorset).

The objectives of the roundtable sessions were:

- To share with Members the work that had been done on identifying vulnerable people and how they have been supported during lockdown (Equality Impact Assessment)
- To invite Members to share their experiences of the impact of COVID-19 on their ward.

### **2. Themes**

The key themes that emerged from the sessions are set out below starting with general themes (that related to the whole population of Dorset for example) and moving on to more specific topics.

Issues relating to age (children & young people and older people) received the highest number of mentions by Members. Issues relating to disability, race, sex (including domestic abuse) and carers were mentioned less frequently and sexual orientation, gender reassignment, religion & belief, marriage & civil partnership mentioned least frequently or not at all.

#### **2.1 How communities and organisations have responded to support vulnerable people is seen as overwhelmingly positive and Members would like to explore how they and others can maintain some of the positive features of lockdown**

- The specifics of local responses have varied but typically with extensive involvement of Town & Parish Councils, Businesses (local shops & pubs), new community mutual aid groups, Age UK and Dorset Volunteer Centre.

- Concern and frustration were voiced over the interaction between Age UK, Dorset Volunteer Centre and a local community group delivering food by members in one ward, but with positive experiences identified in others
- Volunteers and many Members have been focussed on delivery of food, medicine and other services to date, but this 'need' will change as restrictions ease and the potential role of volunteers in befriending people who continue to self-isolate has highlighted.
- Nurturing of CVS and new mutual aid groups in particular; recognising Council role and learning needs around co-production
- Innovation and breadth of partnerships with examples of local groups partnership working with for example housing associations and credit unions

**2.2 There is widespread concern about the impact of lockdown on mental health and wellbeing of vulnerable people and people who have or will be affected financially.**

- Social isolation and loneliness of people who have been self-isolating or are too afraid to leave their homes was identified as a growing concern.
- For the future, the longer-term impacts of the pandemic (e.g. on people's finances) was expected to lead to an increase in anxiety and mental health issues in some wards.

**2.3 Lockdown was viewed as having had a significant negative impact on young people, in particular on their mental health**

- There was concern about the impact on young people transitioning between educational settings or from education to employment.
- Some members are concerned that children and young people may have been the victims of abuse which may become apparent as lockdown eases and more children return to school.
- Concern was expressed about the longer-term impact of lockdown and future measures on the economy and young people's lives.

**2.4 Many vulnerable people have been supported, but there is concern that some people who could benefit from help are reluctant to ask for help or 'admit' that they are in need**

- Older people were highlighted as a vulnerable group particularly likely to not actively seek support when in need
- Families reliant on self-employed/freelance people were noted as having to seek support from foodbanks.
- There was recognition that some people who did not ask for/accept help had reasons for doing so for example social contact with other people when buying food or collecting medicine.

**2.5 There has been significant emergent impact on individuals and families who are economically vulnerable and have been affected by loss or reduction in their income e.g. furlough, redundancy. It is anticipated that this impact will grow.**

- Crucial support has been provided by existing and newly set up foodbanks to a large number of people who did not access their services before. Some concerns were raised over the governance of some newly created groups.
- In some areas people living in rented accommodation are struggling to pay rent and have been put under pressure by landlords causing significant anxiety.
- Some local measures have been put in place e.g. Wyvern Savings and Loans supported access to money for people who are isolating, Sure Start supporting parents/carers.

**2.6 Many services and organisations have been effective in engaging and supporting people online, but there is concern that a significant number of people are excluded from accessing digital services.**

- Lack of equipment and skills present a barrier to accessing digital services, but there are a significant number of people who do not want to use digital services who should not be excluded, especially people who are lonely and need social interaction.
- In many locations local communication networks including letter/leaflet drops were a very effective ways of engaging with vulnerable people who needed support.

**2.7 There is concern about 'hidden' domestic abuse where victim have been at risk during long periods when they have been unable to leave their homes.**

- There was widespread concern that this would become more visible, particularly as children return to school.

**2.8 Recognising and celebrating good practice**

- There was widespread reference to an increase in community spirit and 'neighbourliness' with members noting that despite the need to maintain physical distancing many communities and neighbours had formed new connections and been drawn closer together by local efforts to support vulnerable people.
- There is an opportunity to learn from some of the local initiatives that communities have put in place to support vulnerable people both to respond over the past three months and are developing to increase resilience and support recovery. Case studies would be a helpful resource for sharing these between wards across Dorset Council area.