

Social Affairs Select – Report of a Meeting held on 27th March 2012

The committee continued its practice of examining different aspects of the Council's Community Plan in line with its terms of reference by examining services to young people with particular emphasis on careers advice and employment opportunities. There were presentations from Connexions and Voluntary Action Within Kent (VAWK). Other areas explored included Youth in Action, support for children with disabilities and young carers. There was also a report on a visit to the Swanley Youth and Community Centre to learn first hand about the activities provided to help improve the lives of disadvantaged youngsters.

Jan Fenning, Area Manager of Connexions, and Julia Ward, Team Leader for Sevenoaks and Dartford, explained that as from this September the way that the organization is to be funded will change. In the future, rather than receiving a grant from Kent County Council, it will be the schools themselves who will have the responsibility / duty to purchase independent, impartial careers guidance for their pupils in years 9 – 11. This requirement may be extended to include 16 – 18 year olds when the statutory school leaving age is raised in 2013, to offer them advice on further education training or apprenticeships. This service is particularly valuable in helping those not in education or employment – NEETS – to get a foot on the ladder by supporting them into real jobs. Currently there are about 50 youngsters in the Swanley area classified as NEETS, a significantly higher proportion than in other parts of the District.

However Connexions are concerned that schools will not purchase services to the current levels. Already it has been decided not to provide Anger Management in the future and other initiatives will be restricted to vulnerable groups as defined by K.C.C. The outreach programme will continue for the present but additional funding will have to be sought. This service is particularly important for those youngsters attending schools outside the District.

Carrying on the theme of employment opportunities, Mandy Wynne, Deputy Chief Executive of VAWK, together with the Business Manager, Jon Weller, talked about the graduate internship scheme Springboard to Success, apprenticeships and the valuable role that volunteering can have in providing a stepping stone into employment. Locally there are 24 firms from both the public and private sectors who have expressed an interest in the internship scheme and a further 76 are exploring opportunities to provide apprenticeships. The District Council has been a key driver in these initiatives with some promising results to date.

Across West Kent VAWK runs numerous clubs, working sessions and residential trips, including 15 clubs for children with disabilities, and monthly meetings, respite, 'drop in' services to schools and one to one support for young carers.. In all, over the last six months, young volunteers have given a staggering 6,721 hours to help support these activities.

Alison Cook
Chairman Social Affairs Select Committee