

EVALUATION OF THE WEST SUFFOLK FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES APPROACH BY FIRSTCARE CONSULTANTS

The Spec:

In order to provide some external testing and validation of the West Suffolk Families and Communities approach (the West Suffolk Way), West Suffolk Councils invited bids in November 2016 to carry out a peer review and to recommend evaluation methods. Firstcare consultancy were successful in bidding for the work. Firstcare consultancy have extensive experience in providing analytical support to the social care and community development fields, with a particular focus on children and families and social investment. The brief was to compare the West Suffolk Way to other councils' approaches and then providing options for measuring 'real world' impact.

Methodology:

Firstcare carried out their work through face-to-face meetings, telephone interviews and desk based research. They met with key West Suffolk officers and members in March 2017, including the Chief Executive, portfolio holders and the Families and Communities Team. A series of telephone interviews were held with West Suffolk community connectors and key personnel in Gloucester, Thurrock and Sheffield. A literature review was conducted after the interviews, and incorporated material provided by the interviewees. Firstcare's report was produced in tandem with the literature review over the latter half of April, and the beginning of May 2017.

Findings:

- Firstcare found that the West Suffolk Way was based on findings from research grounded in the real world, and while not a traditional service delivery model, was based on an extensive body of evidence
- Firstcare drew a parallel between the West Suffolk Way and Maslow's hierarchy of needs from the 1940s (which suggests a set of needs that need to be addressed in everybody in order to actualise their full potential). Firstcare also noted that it contained elements of the Asset Based Community Development approach originally developed in the US.
- They suggested the model could be better understood as a Theory of Motivation. They further noted that the model does not fit with traditional models for change.
- They concluded that the West Suffolk Way has a great deal of potential and does provide a theoretical framework that can help make decisions about community development.
- Firstcare compared West Suffolk's approach to the approaches being taken by Gloucester City Council, Thurrock Council and Sheffield City Council, but found that only Gloucester was similar.
- All three comparator councils struggle with evaluation. Gloucester, the most similar, has a minimalist approach, although its VCS partner, the

Barnwood Trust are considering more experimental techniques. Thurrock, the least comparable, uses case studies and national costs to identify savings.

- While West Suffolk requested a set of indicators to measure the impact of the Families and Communities work, Firstcare found that the flexibility of the West Suffolk approach meant a wider application across many different project types. This meant that Firstcare found that quantitative outcomes were difficult to propose consistently at this stage.
- Firstcare recommended that West Suffolk could use indicators that measured the progress of a project and to the work of the team and put forward a set of 13. However, these were more focused around activities than outcomes, so the subsequent work within the councils has focused on alternative indicators, developed in-house.
- Alternatively, Firstcare advocated the use of qualitative indicators, or in the longer term, indicators that measure savings through diversion of individuals away from high cost services.

The full Firstcare report is available in hard copy at the meeting.