



AWARD CATEGORY

BEST INITIATIVE BY A COUNCILLOR / COUNCILLOR GROUP

Sponsored by the National Association of Councillors [NAC]

FINALISTS

1. Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Councillors for 'Health and Happiness at the Heart of Borough Life' - Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council
2. Cllr Cheryl Johnston for 'Positive Mental Health in Mid and East Antrim' – Mid and East Antrim Borough Council
3. Cllr Martin Kearney, Cllr Ian Milne and Cllr Sean McPeake for 'Portglenone Angling and Blueway Project' - Mid Ulster District Council

WINNER

Cllr Cheryl Johnston for 'Positive Mental Health in Mid and East Antrim' – Mid and East Antrim Borough Council

DESCRIPTION OF THE INITIATIVE

Cheryl Johnston has been at the forefront of promoting positive mental health in Mid and East Antrim. Focusing on collaboration, investment and awareness she has implemented policy, improved access to training and created events for all ages in the Borough. Cheryl has been instrumental in ensuring that mental health awareness is improved, and suicide reduction is treated as a priority her local councils community plan. She has also worked in collaboration with Turning Point NI and the PCSP to install mental health awareness benches throughout the area, as well as working with youth children to create a little library to encourage reading outside and providing funding for local sports clubs to increase capacity. Improving the lives of all in the Borough through her innovative and community focused approach to wellbeing.

BACKGROUND

Cheryl Johnston's focus on mental health improvement has grown from her own difficult experiences. From having her daughter at 19 and a breakdown in a relationship, Cheryl turned her focus to sport, particularly boxing to improve her mood and focus. This had a dramatic effect of her, and allowed her to turn her life around, finishing university and ultimately running a successful election in 2014. From this point she has continued to lobby for improvements in mental health throughout all areas in local government and became a trained facilitator for AWARE in Belfast and then completing a number of training programmes such as 'Take 5' and Suicide first aid.

Cheryl then introduced one of the most emotional motions that has ever been brought before MEABC. She gave a very personal and emotive account to the chamber which resulted in a working relationship with the Public Health Agency, the first of its kind in local government. This collaboration showed a real need for awareness training for all those in local government. Training events were arranged for staff and councillors which provided them with contacts,



training and awareness events that could be promoted throughout the Borough for the benefits of all citizens. Cheryl's motion also asked that the reduction of deaths by suicide be "treated as a priority in Mid and East Antrim Borough Council", that the council's community plan address the underlying causes of suicide, and that the local authority's Health and Well-being Strategy integrate the Department of Health's forthcoming 'Protect Life 2' strategy at a local level and work to change the mindset of government to ensure suicide and mental health goes up the political agenda at all decision making areas. From this feedback it was clear to her that more training, conversations, advice and awareness was necessary and on this basis she continues to work to improve life for all.

After this she continued to work with local community groups to allow access to training, working with the local suicide prevention officer to provide 'take 5' events in the local townhall. On this occasion she engaged over 35 people, which is significantly higher than normal events. This event was arranged by her in response to a local man who has just taken his life and was arranged to help provide support and awareness to the local community. She continued to engage with all groups, providing a connection between access to training, events and advice which has grown continually.

From this she has also worked with Turning point NI and the PCSP to provide suicide awareness benches with a 24/7 counselling number. These benches are located in prime locations to increase access and awareness. This also allowed for Cheryl to develop this area further, she worked with a local summer scheme, children from the age of 5 to 9. She had light conversations around mental wellbeing and encouraged children to draw pictures of things that made them happy outside. These images were then placed onto a little library, that would contain information booklets, free to access in a local park. The opening of this also included storytelling, games and conversations to encourage children to improve mental health by getting outside.

With sport being key to her heart, she has worked with a range of clubs. Mainly the local football club, CRFC who she provided funding for a new workshop that will allow them to run mental wellbeing classes in a safe environment. This funding has totally over 20k, including the workshop, events, programmes all aimed at improving health of her community. This group engages over 500 children from 5 to 18, and an adult catchment of over 200.

IMPROVEMENTS ACHIEVED / IMPACT

This section should promote the achievements of the initiative, service or individual and provide supporting evidence - customer feedback, performance outcomes, internal/external benchmarks, management data – on how it has made a positive and lasting impact.

Cheryl's motion has been successfully implemented in all aspects of local government and now has been incorporated into all areas of decision making and will continue. This ensures that mental health and suicide reduction is a priority and is recognised. This has allowed access to funding, increasing events and awareness and promotion of training initiatives and has been very well received by all in the area. The support has been illustrated by engagement, awareness and increased events throughout the Borough. The PCSP on this basis, have established a direct contact number for MEA which provide a direct contact to local services in the area free of charge. They have also established a suicide working group that incorporates education facilities, community groups, youth groups and service providers in the local area – this has also allowed for conversation, strategy creation and funding direction based on local recommendations.



The above recognises Cheryl's contribution, by using her position as a councillor she has implemented local change to improve the mental wellbeing of those throughout MEA. From a local level, Cheryl's work will engage 1000's of children and adults from her funding in the local sports facilities to local training events and small community events. Showing how much her work has affected though from all backgrounds, ages, genders in Mid and East Antrim and contributions over 20k to the improvement of facilities and increase access for all.

FUTURE TARGETS & GOALS

This section should include aims/targets for the future, any proposed or considered changes impacting from change of circumstances on the service, team or individual and how they will develop in coming years.

Cheryl continues her focus on resilience training for young people as she is very concerned about the mental effect of the internet on this new generation and is now focusing on young people and local community groups to address this with awareness programmes and training. She has also met with different sports clubs and organisations voicing her concerns and advice for dealing with mental health in various community organisations. She has also provided training materials and advise for her Chief Executive that can be used to support and train staff in relation to wellbeing of staff in MEABC.

Her aim is to work with central government to improve funding and quality of service. She is keen to focus on the establishment of good mental health promotion, quicker access to counselling services, and free digital support and continue improving her knowledge and skills through continued personal training.

Further information and comments provided via the links below:

<https://www.carrickfergustimes.co.uk/news/health/council-backs-action-to-end-suicide-in-mid-and-east-antrim-1-7765545>

<https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/news/health/benches-suicide-helpline-numbers-placed-15138175>

<https://www.newtownabbeytoday.co.uk/news/white-collar-boxing-raises-knockout-sum-for-charity-1-8135155>

<https://www.carrickfergustimes.co.uk/news/10k-for-carrick-rangers-academy-educational-suite-1-8861395>



Carrick Rangers 10k funding for workshops



Take 5 events



Mental health benches



PHA collaboration event



Little Library creation