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Surrey health literacy warning

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Nearly one in three working-age Surrey residents is not adequately health literate, a council committee report has warned.

The report, which is due to be considered at a joint meeting of Surrey's Health and Wellbeing Board and Integrated Care Partnership next week, states that low levels of understanding of health information are a "significant barrier" to improving healthcare outcomes in the county.

It defines health literacy as "a person's ability to access, understand, evaluate, and use health information to make informed decisions about their health and wellbeing".

But the document noted around 30 per cent of adults aged 16 to 65 in Surrey fall below the threshold for health literacy, rising to 37 per cent in the worst-performing borough, Spelthorne.

The countywide number rises to 49 per cent in areas where numeracy is required.

"This means many adults in Surrey are reading at, or below, the level of an average nine-year-old," the report reads, "This is a significant concern and highlights the need for continued focus and action to address health literacy across Surrey."

People with poor health literacy will struggle to read or understand health-related information and know what action to take based on it, the document says.

"Low health literacy is also closely linked to educational disadvantage, deprivation, disability and poorer health outcomes," it reads, "Improving the accessibility of health information and services is therefore an important lever for reducing health inequalities."

People with bad health literacy are also more likely to go to hospital more and have depression, the report adds.

A health-literacy pilot programme called Clearer Care aims to combat this trend and help make health information and services clearer for Surrey residents.

It aims to achieve this through a mix of expert guidance and small grants to help Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) organisations deliver their own health literacy pilots.

The report says: "This is a small-scale pilot programme aimed at introducing and embedding health literacy across Surrey. While limited funding and a VCSE-led delivery model may constrain its immediate impact on wider system change, the programme provides an important opportunity to test approaches, generate learning and demonstrate impact.

"Findings will help inform future development, potential scaling and opportunities to embed health literacy more systematically across the system."

James Moules Local Democracy Reporter

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