

# Overview and Scrutiny Committee

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Thursday, 31st May, 2018

## MINUTES

### Present:

Councillor Joe Baker (Chair), and Councillors Michael Chalk, John Fisher, Andrew Fry, Julian Grubb, Gemma Monaco, Michael Rouse, Mark Shurmer and Yvonne Smith

### Officers:

Kevin Dicks and Rachel Dobson

### Democratic Services Officers:

J Bayley and L Morris

## 1. APOLOGIES AND NAMED SUBSTITUTES

As the agenda had been published prior to Labour Group Membership being finalised it was confirmed that Councillors Baker (Chair), D. Chance (Vice Chair), Fry, Hill and Wheeler were also Members of the Committee.

Apologies were received from Councillors Hill, D. Chance, Wheeler and Lovell. The following substitutes were in attendance for each of these Councillors in turn Councillors Shurmer, Fisher, Smith and Grubb.

Councillor Joe Baker, Chair, welcomed all to the first meeting of the new municipal year.

## 2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND OF PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest nor of any party whip.

## 3. MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON THE 5 MARCH 2018

**RESOLVED that**

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Chair

**the minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Monday 5 March 2018 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.**

#### **4. HOUSING BENEFITS PRESENTATION - TO FOLLOW**

The Assistant Financial Support Manager (Welfare Support), gave the presentation (affixed to the minutes), detailing the impact of changes to welfare support. The presentation made reference to; the Benefit Cap, the Spare Room Subsidy (better known as the Spare Bedroom Tax), Discretionary Housing Payments, Council Tax Support, the Hardship Scheme, Universal Credit, the Essential Living Fund and the work of the Financial Independence Team.

Following the presentation Members raised a number of points and the Assistant Financial Support Manager confirmed that;

- Although Universal Credit did not include Council Tax Support the team was working to ensure that Council Tax Support claims were paid.
- If people were not in receipt of Universal Credit they could still be means tested for Housing Benefit.
- Discretionary Housing Payments were available equally to whoever claimed, including private and Council or registered social landlord tenants. Cases were looked at on an individual basis.
- When considering the spare bedroom subsidy, each case was considered on an individual basis.
- Staff within the team were employed by the Council and not the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).
- Some people accessed the food bank on a regular basis but not as often as three to four times a week.
- Where people had been turned down for Employment and Support Allowance and Housing Benefit had stopped, this was not having a huge impact on arrears as the Council would look into the case and could make an assessment even when there was no income.
- The Statutory Housing Team was working closely with eighteen to twenty five year olds and the charities that could support them.
- Issues with the bedroom tax were often raised where parents had split up and the children spent time living separately with each parent during the week. In these cases Officers would base the decision on which parent received Child Benefit. The spare bedroom subsidy could not be divided. If there were two children in the household, Officers would however try to support

# Overview and Scrutiny Committee

---

Thursday, 31st May, 2018

the situation by considering each of the children as living permanently with each parent.

- The Hardship Scheme, Council Tax Support and the Essential Living Fund provided essential funding to the Council.
- A spare room was determined by a number of factors including its dimensions. Rooms had to be in permanent use.
- Those using services had been referred to in different ways over the years. The term 'customer' implied choice, however it also emphasised the need to treat people like customers rather than clients.

The Chief Executive, praised the work of the Welfare Support Team and highlighted the role of the Financial Independence Team which had been commended by the DWP. The Essential Living Fund provided crucial help to communities experiencing difficult times. A key element of the team's work was to help tenants to independently manage their own budgets.

Members were advised that the Homelessness Reduction Act had been implemented on the 1 April 2018 and this would create significant challenges for the Council. As such Members concluded that it would be appropriate to receive a presentation on this subject and the action taken to implement the recommendations made by the Homeless Task Group in September 2017.

## **RESOLVED that**

**the Private Sector Housing Team be invited to attend a future Committee meeting.**

## **5. OUTCOMES OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY TRAINING HELD ON TUESDAY 29 MAY 2018 (VERBAL UPDATE)**

It was confirmed that the training event had had to be cancelled as not enough Members could attend.

The Chair suggested a Work Programme Planning Event should take place and Members welcomed this suggestion.

## **RESOLVED that**

**a Work Programme Planning Event be scheduled to take place at the end of June.**

# Overview and Scrutiny Committee

---

Thursday, 31st May, 2018

## 6. MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE HELD ON THE 6 MARCH 2018 AND SCRUTINY OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE'S WORK PROGRAMME - SELECTING ITEMS FOR SCRUTINY

The Senior Democratic Services Manager clarified that the Executive Committee's minutes and Work Programme were included on the Committee's agenda to provide an opportunity for the Committee to identify any issues that they wished to scrutinise and to consider the Executive's response to any recommendations that the Committee may have put forward previously.

It was explained that the next Executive Committee meeting had been cancelled to give time for the new administration to consider the issues. A number of items on the Work Programme would be considered at a later date than anticipated. The next Executive Committee meeting would take place in July 2018.

A Member referred in the Executive Committee minutes to the reference to Abbeywood School and noted that this should read Abbeydale School.

It was suggested that the gas maintenance item should be considered by the Committee and the Chair noted that this may be a useful topic for the Committee to undertake a Short, Sharp Review on. There was general consensus that the appropriate approach to pre-scrutinising this item should be considered further during the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme Planning event.

**RESOLVED that;**

**the scrutiny of the gas maintenance contract be considered at the Work Programme Planning event.**

## 7. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Senior Democratic Services Officer confirmed that the Committee's Work Programme was considered and amended at every meeting of the Committee. Members had the opportunity to put forward suggestions for scrutiny and to remove items from the Work Programme.

It was confirmed that following the Housing Benefit item and with the Committee's agreement an item on the work of the Private Sector Housing Team would be added to the Work Programme.

# Overview and Scrutiny Committee

---

Thursday, 31st May, 2018

The Chairman suggested that the Herefordshire and Worcestershire Sustainability and Transformation Partnership should be invited to bring a final update to the Committee in September 2018.

## **RESOLVED that**

- 1) an item from the Private Sector Housing Team be included on the Committee Work Programme; and**
- 2) the Herefordshire and Worcestershire Sustainability and Transformation Partnership be invited to provide a final update to the Committee in September 2018.**

## **8. EXTERNAL SCRUTINY BODIES - UPDATE REPORTS**

- a) It was confirmed that Councillor Chalk would attend the West Midlands Combined Authority Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- b) It was confirmed that Councillor Rouse would attend the Worcestershire Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

It was confirmed that representatives had not yet attended any meetings to date and would provide updates at future Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings.

## **9. APPOINTMENTS TO THE SCRUTINY WORKING GROUPS AND TASK GROUPS**

### **A. Budget Scrutiny Working Group**

The Chair of this Group was nominated and confirmed as Councillor J. Wheeler. Councillor Fisher expressed an interest in sitting on the Group.

### **B. Care Leavers Scrutiny Task Group**

It was confirmed that Councillor P. Hill would Chair this Group and Nina Wood-Ford would be invited to be a co-opted member due to her previous involvement with this review. As this Group's work was likely to draw to a conclusion shortly it was agreed that Councillor Chalk sit on the Group also to provide some consistency.

# Overview and Scrutiny Committee

---

Thursday, 31st May, 2018

## C. Performance Scrutiny Working Group

The Chair of this Group was nominated and confirmed as Councillor J. Wheeler.

### **RESOLVED**

**that nominations for membership of these groups be sent to the Group Leaders for consideration and confirmation.**

The Meeting commenced at 7.00 pm  
and closed at 7.55 pm