



# 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**

.....  
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

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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.**

**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.

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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.

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## 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

Rachael Dobson  
Assistant Financial Support Manager

## IMPACT OF CHANGES TO WELFARE SUPPORT

### Impact of changes to Welfare Support

- Background
  - Changes to welfare support since April 2013
    - Introduction of Benefit cap
    - Introduction of Social Sector Room restrictions
    - Removal of Council Tax Benefits and introduction of Local Council Tax Support Schemes
    - Ongoing Migration from the 6 Legacy Benefits Job Seekers Allowance (JB), Employment Support Allowance (IR), Income Support, Housing Benefit, Working Tax Credits and Child Tax Credits to Universal Credit
    - Disability Living Allowance replacement by Personal Independence Payment
    - Abolishment of Social Fund (and responsibility for emergency welfare support to LA with only 2 years funding)
    - Housing Benefit back date changed from 6 months to 1 month
    - Family Premium removal for new cases
    - Child Tax Credit restrictions for more than 2 children-includes restriction to HB/UC/IS/JSA
    - Working Age benefits frozen since 2016

## Benefit Cap

- The cap applies to the total amount that the people in a household get from the following benefits: Bereavement Allowance, Carer's Allowance, Child Benefit, Child Tax Credit, Employment and Support Allowance, Guardian's Allowance, Housing Benefit, Incapacity Benefit, Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance, Maternity Allowance, Severe Disablement Allowance, Universal Credit, Widowed Parent's Allowance (or Widowed Mother's Allowance or Widows Pension if received before 9 April 2001)
- The current level of the cap is:
  - £384.62 a week for couples (with or without children living with them)
  - £384/62 a week for single parents whose children live with them
  - £257.69 a week for single adults who don't have children, or whose children don't live with them
  - The cap is applied via Housing Benefits or Universal Credit

## Benefit Cap

- Current live cases 49
- Impact relatively low
  - Most families have stayed in their homes and found ways of meeting the financial gap



## Spare Room Subsidy

- From April 2013 Housing Benefit is based on the number of people in the household and the size of the accommodation.
- This applies to all working-age tenants renting from a local authority, housing association or other registered social landlord (RSLs).
- Brings the Housing Benefits payable to tenants of social housing in line with private tenants.

## Spare Room Subsidy

- This means those tenants whose accommodation is larger than they need may lose part of their Housing Benefit. Those with one spare bedroom lose 14% of their eligible rent and those with 2 or more spare bedrooms lose 25%.
- BDC Room Restriction current live cases
  - 14% = 297
  - 25% = 51

## Discretionary Housing Payments

- Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP's)
  - introduced in July 2001
  - used to provide financial assistance to claimants in receipt of Housing Benefit and Universal Credit rent costs where it is considered that additional help with housing costs are required.
  
- Housing costs are generally defined as
  - a rental liability
  - rent deposits
  - rent in advance
  - other lump sum costs (e.g. removal costs).
  
- DHP's may be awarded as a one-off payment or periodically for an appropriate period.

## Discretionary Housing Payments

- Officers work with applicants to identify other support that may be appropriate.
- DHP awards are not conditional and any decision will be based on a fair assessment of need.
- The wider housing issue will be considered, where appropriate.
- Consideration will be given to:-
  - what an award of DHP will achieve;
  - Would the tenancy be sustainable if DHP was paid
  - the consequences of not making the award; and
  - whether any alternative support can be provided.

## Discretionary Housing Payments

- 174 Cases DHP totalling £101,120.91 was used in 2017/2018
- 33 to help with Rent deposits
- 29 to help with returning to employment
- 1 to remain in adapted properties
- Remaining to help with general short term costs
- These reasons are recorded using DWP set outcomes

## Council Tax Support

- Council Tax Benefit ended March 2013
- LA required to introduce local Council Tax Support Scheme
- Pensioners protected as scheme provided by government
- 10% cut in the funding as well as reductions in administration grant
- Default scheme in 2013/14 and 2014/15
- 80% support introduced in April 2015
- All working age claimants pay a minimum of 20% towards their Council Tax Liability
- Scheme still mostly mirrors existing HB requirements

## Hardship Scheme

- £25k per annum
- Transitional relief for those facing hardship as a result of changes to Council Tax Support
- Applications and officer identified
- Personal assessment
- Full financial review
- Transitional relief and long term solutions

## Hardship Scheme

- Support provided in 2016/17
  - 188 customers
  - £25,084.20
- Support provided in 2017/18
  - 166 Customers
  - £27,822.78

## Universal Credit

- Introduced in Redditch in February 2015
- Single, job seekers making a new claim.
- Delivery Partnership Agreement in Place with RBC
- Support – online claims, personal budgeting, manual council tax support claims
- District went full service in October 2017

## Essential Living Fund

- Previously operated by DWP (Crisis Support)
- Responsibility passed to WCC and funded by government
- RBC lobbied for local delegation to ensure could best meet local needs and WCC passed on funding,
- RBC administered local, flexible discretionary scheme
- All applications must be made in person via face to face interview.
- No cash
- Full assessment of needs carried out.
- Approach has significantly reduced 'frequent flyers'.

## Essential Living Fund

- Scheme provides assistance in the form of goods, food parcels referrals and vouchers to help individuals and families facing exceptionally difficult circumstances.
- Work closely with The Trussell Trust Foodbank
- Flexible approach to meeting demand. Tailor support appropriately for each individual, and also to try to help with the root cause of the problem, rather than just the presenting demands.

## Essential Living Fund

- £16785.13 spent in 2016/17
- £11416.87 spent in 2017/18
- Now fully funded by RBC - £30k per annum
- £5k per annum used to support high level financial advice (Signs of Hope), in partnership with RBC Housing, and BDHT

## Financial Independence Team

- Team formalised through service review this year and officers appointed to new roles in Oct 17.
- Officers work across BDC and RBC to provide concentrated financial support to people with complex needs by
  - Meeting individually with customers
  - Hold group sessions in the Job centre in Redditch to raise awareness of our services.
- Officers work closely with Housing Locality, Housing Options, RSL's, CAB, CCP and any other agency that might be able to help.

## Financial Independence Team

- To help support people to prepare their own budgets, understand their priority debts and develop their skills so that they can become financially independent.
- Maximisation of Benefits, DHP, Hardship, ELF
- Discuss debts
- APA, Advance payments, Emergency Help (ELF)
- Referrals for other support, Housing Team, CAB, Signs of Hope

## Financial Independence Team

Period October 2017 to March 2018

- 103 Customer helped with PBS
- 42 Customers referred direct from UC for PBS
- Customer confidence in how to deal with their finances has shown improvements from the start to the end of their time with the team

