

**COMMUNITY, HOUSING AND HEALTH
(OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY) COMMITTEE**

18th MARCH 2013

PRESENT:

Councillors Tittley (Chairman), Warfield (Vice Chairman), Mrs Woodward (Vice-Chairman, Mrs. Bacon, Mrs Evans, Isaacs, Leytham, Ms. Perkins and Salter.

There were no apologies for absence.

(In accordance with Council Procedure No. 17 Councillors Greatorex, Pritchard and Wilcox also attended the meeting.)

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillors Tittley, Mrs Evans and Isaacs declared personal interests in Item 5, Health Scrutiny – Unemployment Trends and Getting People Back in to Work, because reference was made to the Citizens Advice Bureau.

MINUTES

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 29th January 2013 were taken as read, and subject to it being clarified how homeless households are provided with temporary accommodation.

RESOLVED: That subject to amendments, the Minutes of the Meetings held on 24th September 2012 be approved as a correct record

LOCAL IMPACT OF WELFARE REFORMS – DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENT POLICY

Members received a report on the local impact of the government's Welfare reforms and were asked to consider a draft policy to determine the circumstances in which Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) should be awarded to housing benefit claimants.

It was reported that approximately 532 claimants in the District would be affected by the reforms by way of reduced levels of housing benefit as they would be deemed as working age and under occupying their homes. In addition to this, it was reported that there would also be an impact on claimants who were in receipt of council tax support.

The Committee went through the draft policy for DHP in detail. It was reported that there would be a pre application process where claimants would be required to show they had considered alternative solutions, including seeking alternative accommodation, taking lodgers and increasing hours of work, before applying for a DHP payment. Some Members felt the alternative solutions asked for were unreasonable and demeaning as it would be difficult to ask an employer for extra work as businesses were struggling too. They also felt people may regard taking a lodger as losing the sanctity of their home and it may be impossible if their rental agreement states no sub-letting.

The Committee noted that the DHP was not a large or infinite pot of money and that if eligibility criteria were not applied, it would only last 15 weeks before the grant was all gone.

The Committee requested that the language used in the application process be sympathetic and specifically that the words 'must take active steps' be changed to 'encouraged to take active steps' and the words 'intentionally homeless' be deleted. It was noted that the wording in the draft policy would not be the same as in the application pack to claimants.

Overall the Committee agreed with the need for a pre application process.

The Committee then considered the eligibility process and the points system of applicants' priority and circumstance. It was noted that it had not yet been decided at what point score a DHP payment would be made.

The Committee asked why ex prisoners were considered a higher priority than elderly and it was reported that ex prisoners come under the list for vulnerable people which also included people with mental health problems and young people leaving care. It was also noted that the priority list had been created from government guidance. Some Members of the Committee felt the District Council should approach those it knew would need the help instead of requiring the claimant to apply to the District Council.

The Committee asked if points awarded would be on a cumulative basis if claimants fitted into more than one priority and circumstance and it was reported that it would be complicated and it was planned to just take the maximum points awarded. The Committee believed a cumulative system would be better and so recommended this to Officers and the Cabinet Members.

The Committee considered the Award Process of the policy and definition of a priority debt. It was reported that there would be a financial assessment made and it was asked if other financial assistance received by claimants would be considered and it was reported that it would.

Members asked if there were enough resources at the District Council to deal with the administration of the DHP and it was reported that there would not be more staff to deliver the grant.

The Committee considered the Method of Payment section of the policy. Members asked what would happen if there were rent arrears and it was reported that the Landlord would be paid directly. The Committee expressed that they understood the difficult position the Officers and Cabinet were in trying to make a small grant help as many people as possible.

COUNCILLOR MRS WOODWARD DECLARED A PERSONAL INTEREST AS SHE IS A MEMBER OF THE SOUTH STAFFS WATER CHARITABLE TRUST.

RESOLVED: That the draft Discretionary Housing Payment Policy be noted and it be recommended to Cabinet for approval subject to the wording of the pre-application and application reflect encouragement to seek alternative solutions and the points awarded for priority and circumstance be cumulative.

HEALTH SCRUTINY – UNEMPLOYMENT TRENDS AND GETTING PEOPLE BACK IN TO WORK

The Committee received a report on the role of the District Council in reducing unemployment and helping people be ready for and find work. It was reported that unemployment was considered as a key contributory factor to many social issues including poor health and crime.

It was reported that the percentage of unemployment benefit claimants in the District was lower than the county average although some wards were relatively high. It was also reported that the percentage of 16-19 year olds not in employment, education or training was higher than the county average.

It was reported that the District Council, in partnership with other agencies, ran Work Clubs in areas of higher unemployment within the district, under the supervision of the Lichfield District In To Work Group. It was reported that help was also given to unemployed people with mental health problems by working with groups such as GrowWell.

The Committee had some concern that there was an assumption that unemployment led to anti social behaviour when there was little evidence to show this.

Members asked what types of jobs were gained by people and if they were minimum wage, permanent or temporary contracts. It was reported that information received on type and contract of jobs were gained anecdotally and was difficult to track once people stopped attending the Work Clubs. The Committee felt that this data needed to be recorded more formally to be able to monitor performance effectively.

Members asked if the opening times of the Work Clubs were when they could be most used by people and it was reported that the clubs were run by volunteers and some clubs had more volunteers than others and opening times were dependant on those people's availability. It was noted that more volunteers were being sought but suggestions on how to get more would be welcomed.

Members asked if it was thought that the service provided value for money and it was reported that as it was run in conjunction with other agencies, it was felt it was.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

OLDER PEOPLE'S SERVICES

The Committee received a report on the demographic changes within the District and the predicted increase in older residents. It was reported that the Housing and Ageing Alliance had published a Manifesto for Older People's Housing which invited Council's to pledge to five principles and after the Council gave support to this Manifesto, the Cabinet Member for Housing, Health and Environmental Protection, Councillor Pritchard, was made the Member Champion for Older People. Councillor Pritchard reported that he would consider all views received on how to help older people in the District.

The Committee felt that it should be promoted that older people still contributed a great deal to society.

The Committee expressed their disappointment at the cessation of the County Council's Handyperson service as the elderly trusted the people providing the service. It was reported that the service was stopped because the County Council was dissatisfied with the outcomes achieved. However it was noted that District Council officers were trying to influence the County Council to re-commission the service and officers would pass the Committee's views onto the County Council.

The Committee felt that the County Council's Purple Pages system to access care was not user friendly and it was noted that views would be passed to the County Council.

The Committee asked about potential conflicting priorities within the leisure centres when activities for older and younger users are provided concurrently (e.g. in the sports halls during school holidays). It was noted that this concern would be highlighted to the Cabinet Member for Leisure Service and Communications. It was also reported that Access to Leisure was still a priority.

COUNCILLOR MRS WOODWARD DECLARED A PERSONAL INTEREST AS HER SPOUSE WORKS FOR AGE UK

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

WORK PROGRAMME AND FORWARD PLAN

The Work Programme and Forward Plan were considered. It was requested that any suggestions for the forthcoming Municipal Year's work programme be passed to the Overview & Scrutiny Officer.

RESOLVED: That the Work Programme be amended as agreed and Forward Plan be noted.

EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

RESOLVED: "That as publicity would be prejudicial to the public interest by reason of the confidential nature of the business to be transacted, the public and press be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business, which would involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972"

IN PRIVATE

MINUTES

The confidential Minutes of the Meeting held 29th January 2013 were taken as read, approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

RESOLVED: That the confidential Minutes of the Meeting held on 29th January 2013 be approved as a correct record

(The Meeting Closed at 8.50pm)

CHAIRMAN