

Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee - 24 February 2015

Non-confidential minutes of the meeting of the Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee held at on 24 February 2015 at 7.30 pm.

Present: **Councillors:** Gallagher (Chair), O'Sullivan, Comer-Schwartz,
O'Halloran, Russell, Court, Gill and Kay
Also Present: **Councillors:** Jeapes, Poyser, Ismail

Councillor Troy Gallagher in the Chair

- 82 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item 1)**
 Councillors Klute and Doolan
- 83 **DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item 2)**
 None
- 84 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (Item 3)**
 None
- 85 **TO APPROVE MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING (Item 4)**
 RESOLVED:
 That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 22 January 2015 be confirmed and the Chair be authorised to sign them
- 86 **MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES (Item 5)**
 None
- 87 **PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item 6)**
 The Chair outlined the procedure for dealing with Public questions and filming and recording of meetings
- 88 **CHAIR'S REPORT (Item 7)**
 The Chair informed Members that the report back on progress on the recommendations of the scrutiny review on Blacklisting would be coming to the May meeting of the Committee, and he was pleased to report that the recommendations were being implemented or in the process of being implemented.
- The Chair stated that Councillors Ismail and Poyser would be elected as new Members of the Committee at the Council meeting on Thursday, and Councillor O'Halloran would be appointed as Vice Chair of the Committee.
- 89 **WELFARE REFORMS UPDATE (Item 9)**
 Ian Adams, Director of Financial Services and Customer Operations was present and outlined the report.

During consideration of the report the following main points were raised –

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- As a result of the Local Housing Allowance, the number of private sector residents claiming housing benefit in the borough has significantly reduced. There are currently 2670 private tenant LHA claims, compared to 3207 in February 2014
- The number of residents affected by the Bedroom Tax has been significantly mitigated through the Council's efforts to work with households to find the best option for them. Many under occupiers have been supported to move, and Discretionary Housing Payment has been used to subsidise rent payments to support those families most at risk of falling into arrears, whilst efforts to find an alternative property/employment takes place
- The Council policy is not to evict anyone who is actively engaged with the support on offer
- The Council is continuing to support tenants affected by the Bedroom Tax to downsize into properties which meet their needs. This has resulted in 339 moves to more affordable properties
- The Benefit cap, introduced in April 2013, limited the amount of benefits a family or household can receive. Any money deducted from housing benefit places a family at risk of falling into rent arrears resulting in homelessness or eviction. The Council is using Discretionary Housing Payments to cover shortfalls in rent for those families most affected, whilst working with them to find a sustainable solution. Where work is a viable option the person is referred to iWork to move towards employment. The condition of receiving DHP is that the person must continue to engage with the support offered
- Of the 247 benefit cap cases, 43 are currently receiving DHP and 136 are not and the remainder are being assessed
- Islington is one of 11 pilot sites trialling how Universal Support Delivered Locally could work in practice and each area is piloting a different model for engaging with clients, assessing needs and delivering support. The aims of the pilot are to provide estimated costs per person of providing USDL support and sharing best practice of what works. This will inform decisions on the amount of funding made available by DWP to local areas once Universal Credit is rolled out
- Islington are providing 3 bands of support –employment support, digital support and personal budgeting support . Staff at the contact centre at 222 Upper Street offered personalised support and since October 2014 over 400 residents had been assisted to appropriate services
- It was noted that DHP would be reducing by £900,000 in the next 2 years and that this may cause problems in future
- Members were informed that the recent successful judicial review, led by Islington in relation to the Government's intention to reduce Local Welfare provision had resulted in £560,000 now being available, albeit that this had reduced from £1.44m
- There were still ongoing difficulties with sharing of data by DWP
- In response to a question as to what provision was being made to assist residents in financial planning for the introduction of Universal Credit it was stated that the Council provided significant advice support and the welfare support team was the largest in London. The Council had provided a significant amount of work in getting residents into employment and in personal budgeting however there were problems with residents not being willing to engage with the service
- It was stated that once Universal Credit was fully introduced there was a need to continue to fund support and the pilot identified the different methods of engaging and the things that worked well
- Work was being carried out with the Credit Union to try to minimise the impact on residents of being overdrawn if they had difficulties budgeting, given Universal Credit was paid in a lump sum. More substantial difficulties were envisaged when the bulk of claimants received Universal Credit in 2018. Whilst Universal Credit was being

introduced for JSA claimants later this year other claimants would not go onto Universal Credits until 2018

- In response to a question it was stated that of the 70,000 housing benefit claimants only 4,000 were on 'in work' benefits and work was being carried out to try to get them into more sustainable employment through the iWork team
- Reference was made to paragraph 4.4 of the report and that the Council had seen a reduction of almost 50% in the number of properties the Council are able to procure in the borough from private landlords for much needed accommodation for homeless households. It was stated that because of the strength of the housing market in the borough landlords were able to command high rents for their properties above the LHA levels
- Concern was expressed at the possibility of safeguarding issues, especially in the area of Domestic Violence, in relation to the payment of Universal Credit and it was stated that this was an area that needed further consideration and that he would respond to the Committee at a later date
- In response to a question as to paragraph 8.10 of the report in relation to New River Green it was stated that this had got off to a slow start and it had been difficult to get residents to engage. However progress is now being made and information had been obtained from Job Centre Plus to enable the process to start in contacting residents and the Director of Financial Services and Operations stated that he would keep Members updated on this
- It was stated that a fee was no longer charged in relation to Council Tax summons for non payment of Council Tax for those in receipt of Council Tax benefit
- In response to a question it was stated that in regard to refugees these were dealt with under no recourse to public funds and there measures in place to assist them
- It was noted that pensioners were exempt from Universal Credit proposals
- Reference was made to the fact that there were 12,600 residents on sickness/disability/ESA benefits and changes would be coming in in October which would affect these residents
- Members noted that if there was a Labour Government from May that the Bedroom Tax legislation would be repealed
- In response to a question it was stated that the delay in the new arrangements for processing housing benefit may lead to difficulties for residents and may affect their ability to pay rent. The view was expressed that it would be a significant cost to offer short term bridging loans to residents

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted and that the Director of Financial Operations and Customer Operations report back to a future meeting in relation to safeguarding issues regarding the payment of Universal Credit and progress of engagement of residents on New River Green estate

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VCS ANNUAL REPORT (Item 8)

Lela Kogbara , Assistant Chief Executive, was present and outlined the report.

During consideration of the report the following main points were made –

- In 2014/15 the Council will spend just over £41m on services delivered by the voluntary sector. The voluntary sector is a key partner but will need to adapt to a harsher financial climate and the Council and VCS will have to work more closely with less money in new and creative ways to meet the challenges that lie ahead
- Members noted the funding awarded under the VCS Grants Fund and Advice, Discretionary Rate Relief, Local Initiatives Fund, Islington Community Chest,

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Community Festivals Fund and the free hire of the Islington Assembly Hall and also the Council's contribution to the London Boroughs Grants Committee

- Members were informed that there were processes that had been set up where discussions were taking place with the voluntary sector with the Leader to establish a basis for the future. There was a need to use resources more efficiently such as co-locating organisations or moving to cheaper premises could reduce costs, looking at the use of Section 106 monies to create hubs and in addition supporting organisations to bid for external funding to make them less dependent on Council funding. IT support, and support in the creation of a Business Plan could also be given and a monitoring role could be played by Islington Giving
- In response to a question as to the funding of Cripplegate that a large proportion of the funding went on advice work it was stated that for the forthcoming year Cripplegate would be using the same criteria however they would be adding additional criteria. There was the need to have a balanced review of how advice was defined and whether there should be a core model that should be adopted
- In response to a question as to whether there was a list of voluntary organisations and premises in the borough it was stated that there were over 2400 voluntary organisations in the borough and whilst there was not a comprehensive list of all these organisations however there was a list of organisations that the Council funded or who occupied Council premises. Members requested that they be sent the list referred to and the one being prepared by Finance and Property Services
- In response to a question it was stated that Cripplegate would be advising voluntary organisations how to build capacity in local voluntary organisations and Cripplegate were better in some areas than the Council in identifying and meeting the needs of organisations, however a more joined up approach was needed
- It was stated that there was the need for a more co-ordinated approach across departments as to funding to ensure funding was not duplicated to voluntary organisations for the same services. A Member expressed the view that this showed poor management practice if funding was not co-ordinated and appropriate action needed to be taken to remedy this
- The Chair expressed the view that this was an area that should be kept under review and scrutinised to ensure funding was being co-ordinated effectively, however it was noted that it would not be cost effective if a large amount of resources were being employed to monitor a relatively low funding spend
- Members were informed that a meeting would be held in March following approval of the Council budget with agencies to discuss the implications of the introduction of Universal Credit which may result in changing needs of tenants in order to cope with all benefits being paid together. It was added that there would be a need to provide a level of support in order to support residents in coping with the new bureaucratic procedures of Universal Credit and the fact that the system was IT based
- The Chair stated that it was necessary to ensure services were in place in the appropriate timescale and a safety net was in place to ensure that residents could pay their rent and other bills and not fall into arrears
- A Member referred to the fact that voluntary organisations could benefit from accessing Council corporate contracts such as purchasing of photocopiers, paper etc. and that this should be looked at to save costs
- In response to a question it was stated that at present the Council did assess the annual reports of charities however there was a need in future to move away from this and ensure that appropriate capacity building was in place
- A Member referred to the LIF funding and that the sharing of resources could result in savings and it was stated that this was being investigated
- Reference was made to the fact that many local voluntary organisations could not afford to employ professional fundraisers and the view was expressed that it might be difficult to get organisations to move or share premises for a number of reasons

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- There was a need to build capacity and make voluntary organisations aware that they could not be dependent on Council funding in future given the financial restraints imposed on them by the Government
- It was stated that there needed to be a clearer assessment of the value that an organisation offered when considering funding and whether the organisation had assisted residents in becoming more independent

RESOLVED:

- (a) That details of the list of voluntary organisations, as referred to above, be circulated to Members of the Committee
- (b) That consideration be given as to whether voluntary organisations could affect cost savings by using the Council's corporate contracts to get a more advantageous purchasing price
- (c) That the report be noted

The Chair thanked Lela Kogbara for attending

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REPORTS OF REVIEW CHAIRS (Item) **Report of Chair of Housing Scrutiny Committee**

The Chair of the Housing Scrutiny Committee, Councillor Mick O'Sullivan, verbally outlined the work of the Committee for the current municipal year to date

During consideration of the report the following main points were made –

- Circle Anglia would be coming to be interviewed by the Committee at the next meeting
- The Scaffolding scrutiny review was in progress and it was hoped the draft recommendations would be prepared for the May/June meeting. A site visit had taken place to a number of scaffolding sites in the borough which would inform the recommendations
- The Estate Services scrutiny review is progressing and the next meeting would be taking evidence from GMB
- The Committee had considered a report on the implementation on the 'in house' repairs service and that this would be kept under review by the Committee

Report of Children's Services Scrutiny Committee

The Chair of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee, Councillor Kaya Come Schwartz, verbally outlined the work of the Committee for the current municipal year to date.

During consideration of the report the following main points were made –

- The Committee were carrying out a Scrutiny Review into Early Help for vulnerable families and that witness evidence would be taken from the Health Service, Voluntary sector and from families as to the measures that could be taken to assist them the most
- The Committee had decided not to proceed in the current municipal year not to proceed with the Scrutiny Review on SEN, as the implementation of the now procedures had only just taken place and there was a need to address the effect of these before the scrutiny commenced

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- The Committee would be receiving a report from the Executive Member Children and Families at a future meeting of the Committee and in relation to educational attainment measures
- The Committee had also set up a working group to look at child sexual exploitation

Report of Environment and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee

The Chair of the Environment and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee, Councillor James Court, was present and verbally outlined the work of the Committee for the current municipal year to date.

During consideration of the report the following main points were made –

- The Committee had received a 12 month report back on the progress of recommendations on the Planning Committee structure scrutiny review and were conducting a Scrutiny Review into Fuel Poverty
- In addition the Committee were looking into Community Energy and how to become an energy retailer and whether there was anything else the Council could do in terms of installation of smart meters etc.
- The Committee were also considering communal heating systems and whether these worked effectively for residents and the costs involved
- The Committee had also received a report back on the 20mph speed zone implementation and that there had been some enforcement. In addition a report back would be coming to the Committee on the scrutiny review on Air Quality and there would be reports from the Executive Members for Environment and Transport and Housing and Development at a future meeting of the Committee

The meeting ended at 9.35 P.M.

CHAIR