

At a meeting of the SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATING COMMITTEE held in COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CITY HALL, SUNDERLAND on THURSDAY, 9th NOVEMBER, 2023 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor Mason-Gage in the Chair.

Councillors Burrell, Curtis, Dodds, Guy, Jones, Leonard, Morrissey, P. Smith, Thornton, Usher and Walton.

Also in attendance:-

Alison Aisbitt, Adult Services Development Manager, Strategic Advice Services
Nigel Cummings, Scrutiny Officer, Law and Governance, Smart Cities and Enabling Services Directorate

Richard Elliott, Business Development Manager, Community Resilience, Health, Housing and Communities

Helen Peverley, Area Arrangements Strategic Manager, Community Resilience, Health, Housing and Communities

Gillian Robinson, Scrutiny, Mayoral and Members Support Co-ordinator, Law and Governance, Smart Cities and Enabling Directorate

Graham Scanlon, Assistant Director of Housing Services, Strategic Plans and Housing

Joanne Stewart, Principal Democratic Services Officer, Law and Governance, Smart Cities and Enabling Services Directorate

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and invited introductions.

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Hartnack and Mullen.

Minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 12th October 2023

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 12th October, 2023 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest.

Cost of Living Crisis

The Assistant Director of Housing Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided the Committee with an overview of the action taken across the city to support resident financial wellbeing during the cost-of-living crisis.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Ms. Peverley and colleagues took Members through the report and attached presentation which covered a number of issues including:-

- Financial Wellbeing - the story so far;
- Current Actions and Focus;
- Understanding Lived Experience;
- Case Studies;
- Household Support Fund;
- Links for life; and
- Cost of Living – Ongoing Activities.

(For copy presentation – see original minutes.)

Members were informed that households in the UK had experienced a significant fall in living standards since late 2021; largely attributable to increased food, electricity and fuel costs. Members were taken through the presentation which provided an overview of the situation in Sunderland and outlined a number of current actions and activities taking place to support residents of the city during this difficult time.

The Chairman thanked Officers for the detailed and informative presentation and invited questions from the Committee.

Councillor Morrissey referred to the £5.35 million of Household Support Fund 4 and queried how much of this had been spent to date. Mr. Elliott advised that to the end of quarter two the Council had spent approximately £1.8 million; with the majority of the funding to be spent in the final two quarters of the financial year.

Councillor Curtis asked if there was criteria to meet for the allocation of funding as he had noticed that some foodbanks in the Washington area got less proportionate help than others. Mr. Elliott advised that at the start of the pandemic they were making offers which were fairly standard across the board but from earlier this year they had targeted the more dedicated foodbanks such as the Community Food Project or Mickey's Place who had received a larger amount of grant funding. They also provided fresh food deliveries to a range of organisations which helped meet some of the public health outcomes. The service were looking to provide targeted funding that would help address food poverty and insecurity around the city as there were a lot more residents using community pantries and stores that did not report to the Council.

In a follow up question, Councillor Curtis asked why the Warm and Welcome Spaces scheme was only starting in January, 2024 when the cold weather was already hitting and was informed by Ms. Peverley that they had only found out that they had secured the funding to continue the scheme in June, 2023. Following that news they had developed a call for projects which had been circulated to groups and organisations with a closing date for submissions at the end of September. They had been seriously oversubscribed, with sixty-seven applications having been received for just over £2 million of funding, and a lot of work had been undertaken to assess each application; with offer letters to those that were successful having been sent out this week. Officers would be meeting with providers on 23rd November, 2023 and if any were able to start offering the provision before Christmas then they could.

Councillor Smith referred to the anxiety that community groups were experiencing about support continuing for their buildings and spaces and Ms. Peverley advised that the voluntary and community sector, VCS, continued to be under extreme pressure and some of the buildings they used required repairs and/or had rising utility bills, which groups were struggling with. They were working with groups to help them access external funding streams where possible and to look to make buildings as low carbon as possible to help support them by looking at alternatives such as solar panels or new heating systems.

In response to a further question from Councillor Smith regarding the ongoing crisis in relation to the cost of living and the upcoming winter months and the capacity to support residents in the future, Ms. Aisbitt advised that there had been 7,000 people offered first tier advice in the first six months, which was about 1,500 more than the same period last year. The migration of residents from Tax Credits to Universal Credit would see some people better off financially and others not and she could see that this could be an issue in the increase of the amount of advice being sought as the migration in January, 2024 approached.

Mr. Elliott commented that foodbank usage figures over the last 3-4 months had been relevantly static but they were expecting demand to go up this year triggered by the ongoing cost of living pressures which was why they were looking at data sharing between foodbanks and advice providers to ensure people were getting support. They were now seeing a wider variety of people as rent and mortgages continued to increase and residents who had never needed the services in the past were now struggling.

Councillor Smith referred to the statement in the presentation which stated that people had a negative experience with authority and asked for an example and Ms. Patterson explained that many residents were anxious to reach out for support as it may have a detrimental effect on other household income they received. With some residents there was a fear of authority and it was important to break down that barrier by having conversations with them about their life and repairing that relationship.

Ms. Aisbitt added that as a matter of course people did not tend to challenge the DWP around particular benefits and sanctions so this was to be the basis for their next campaign. Again, there was a fear that it may take too long to complete the process or that it may have an effect on other benefits when there was little chance of success from a challenge but this was wrong and residents needed to be made more aware.

In response to a query from Councillor Usher on the Council's policy on eviction, Mr. Scanlon advised that each landlord in the city would have their own policies and arrangements for dealing with tenant rent arrears and evictions but that through the strategic registered providers housing association network meetings they had asked that they engage with the Council as early as possible in cases where they were intending to take action so that together they could work pro-actively to avoid eviction where possible. He was aware that the number of evictions of Gento tenants had reduced significantly this year and that they had introduced more support mechanisms to try and underpin the reasons as to why some tenants may be struggling with rent payments and support them.

Mr. Scanlon went on to advise that there was concern in relation to the private sector where residents could not afford increasing mortgage payments or were facing increasing rent rises, as they were not subject to the 7% increase in interest percentage cap that social housing landlords were. He went on to advise that they would normally see approximately 2,800 people move on from renting to buying their own home but this year they were not even expecting 2,000 as the ability for people to move on affordably was not there. There was a huge number of people requiring accommodation and the supply was coming through but just not at the rate that was needed. When the interest rates come down in the future, the rent would not reduce in line with that, and some landlords may be looking at issuing Section 21 notices, which the Council had limited control over, but they would try to mitigate and prevent evictions where possible.

In response to a comment from Councillor Walton regarding residents having access to face to face money advice support, Ms. Aisbitt advised that the largest provider in the city was the Citizen's Advice Sunderland, which were funded by the Money Advice and Pensions Services, but they were reporting that the contract of over £3 million was not enough. The Council may need to look at specifically funding some advice going forward but they had tried to widen access through the Money Advice Network (MAN) but this was a virtual service via telephone and MS Teams. They were trying to get as many who could access the service in that way to do so and save the face to face provision for particularly vulnerable people who needed it.

In a follow up question regarding advocates dealing with issues on behalf of others, Ms. Aisbitt commented that it was not as easy as it may have been before and they had residents who lacked capacity that they wanted to refer into MAN with the financial safeguarding team to speak on their behalf but this had not been thought of so needed investigating further by them to allow it.

Mr. Scanlon commented that the consequences and impact on health of a lot of the issues raised at the meeting were that they had seen increases in suicide rates and domestic abuse and a whole range of factors contributing to a lot of the crisis residents were facing who had never been in this position before that they needed to be conscious of.

Councillor Thornton raised concerns over the hard to reach residents who did not access any of the warm spaces or voluntary organisations and asked what assurances could be given that they were contacted and given advice on the offers that were available to them. Mr. Scanlon commented that there would never be a perfect solution but advised that the Council could provide all of the data sets and information but sometimes it comes back to the community who could be the unlocking of that and helping to work with the Council to share details of where support was available from.

When asked if posters were sent out to the VCS, sharing information of the services they provided, Ms. Aisbitt advised that they did and they chose to commission with the VCS advice providers because of their reach and they were able to access other funding sources to offer bespoke advice and publicity materials for particular client groups and benefits.

Councillor Dodds asked if the migration to Universal Credit would see residents without benefits and struggling and Ms. Aisbitt advised that Mr. Elliott was working with colleagues in housing benefits to see if they could identify numbers of people it

may affect and based on historic figures they did not think there would be more than a couple of thousand residents. Mr. Elliott commented that the migration was expected January through March and those affected would receive a letter inviting them to claim within a certain timescale and they were looking to provide some specific, bespoke client chasing and awareness raising around the issue to help them navigate the change as smoothly as possible.

There being no further questions, the Chair thanked Officers for their attendance and it was:-

2. RESOLVED that the report and presentation be received and noted.

Annual Scrutiny Work Programme 2023/24

The Scrutiny, Mayoral and Member Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) attaching, for Members' information, the thematic Scrutiny Committee work programmes for 2023/24 and which provided an opportunity to review the Committee's own work programme for 2023/24.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Mr Nigel Cummings having presented the report, updating Members on the current position regarding the Work Programmes of the Scrutiny Committees, it was :-

3. RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Committees' work programmes for 2023/24 and the variations to these work programmes be noted, together with the current scrutiny budget position.

Notice of Key Decisions

The Scrutiny, Mayoral and Member Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated), providing Members with an opportunity to consider those items on the Executive's Notice of Key Decisions for the 28-day period from 11th October, 2023.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Consideration was given to the report and it was:-

4. RESOLVED that the Notice of Key Decisions be received and noted.

The Chairman then closed the meeting, having thanked everyone for their attendance.

(Signed) K. MASON-GAGE,
Chairman.