

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

MINUTES OF SCRUTINY PANEL 1 - FOOD POVERTY

Wednesday, 25 September 2019

COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillor Graham Walker (Chair) , Councillors Alan Bottwood, Emma Roberts and Zoe Smith

APOLOGIES Councillor Cathrine Russell

CO-OPTED MEMBER: Paul Foster

Witnesses

Councillor Stephen Hibbert, Cabinet Member – Housing and Wellbeing
Councillor Anna King, Cabinet Member – Community Engagement and Safety
Phil Harris, Cabinet Member for Housing and Wellbeing
Vicki Rockall, Community Engagement and Safety Manager
Robin Bates, Head of Revenues and Benefits, LGSS

Officers

Geraldine Mahney, Customer Services Manager
Tracy Tiff, Democratic and Member Services Manager

Councillor Jane Birch - Observing

1 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Bottwood declared an interest as a Board Member of NPH. This declaration was for the life of this Scrutiny Review.

2 DEPUTATIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESSES

There were none.

3 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 17 July 2019 were signed by the Chair as a true and accurate record.

4 WITNESS EVIDENCE

Councillor Hibbert, Cabinet Member for Housing and Wellbeing, and Phil Harris, Head of Housing and Wellbeing provided a verbal response to the core questions of the Scrutiny Panel:

Key points:

- Hunger in young people can be seen as malnutrition and also slower development. Hunger in schools has an impact on education and concentration.
- There is a stigma around poverty
- Poor quality food is also poor value for money
- Zero hours contract often have an impact on poverty and food poverty
- There is a good referral system into food banks
- Help is available regarding budgeting from organisations such as CAB, Housing and Money Advice and Community Law
- A key role is to raise awareness and understanding around the causes and impact of poverty and food poverty. Phil Harris advised that the Night Shelter is a good example of the positive impact good quality food can have on people's health and esteem
- Initiatives are in place as schools for those children that come in hungry such as free breakfast clubs. They are therefore provided with both a free breakfast and a free lunch during school days.
- NPH runs a food bank and also makes referrals. It is a food bank for Council tenants.

Phil Harris confirmed that he would provide a comprehensive written response to the core questions

The Scrutiny Panel made comment, asked questions and heard:

- There is a need to maximise people's income
- It was noted that Northamptonshire Food Poverty had commented that there are just under 12,000 children living in poverty
- There is a need to de-stigmatise food poverty and provide assistance to the community
- In response to a query, Phil Harris confirmed that the Child Poverty Action Group had identified that 1:4 children are living in poverty
- Councillor Roberts confirmed that she would provide details of the research that NTI undertook regarding poverty statistics
- It was confirmed that the Chief Executive of NPH would be invited to attend a future meeting of the Scrutiny Panel and provide a response to the core questions
- Paul Foster, Co Optee, provided details of the Holiday Club that he co-runs with Growing Together. It is held at Blackthorn Community Centre and provided activities and lunch over the summer holidays. This club is very well received by the Community.
- In answer to a question, Phil Harris advised that many homeless people are not receiving any benefits and a lot are suffering from extreme malnutrition

- Phil Harris confirmed that bed and breakfast accommodation has not been used very much for homeless families over the last 18 months. 35 hours of outreach work is provided on the streets each week.
- In response to a query, Phil Harris confirmed that should a family present as homeless at the One Stop Shop they would be provided with food free of charge and officers would then assess their needs.
- The Scrutiny Panel referred to the “Pop Up” food bank that staff in the One Stop Shop and Customer Services provide by donating food each month. It was queried whether this could become a Statutory provision. The Chair suggested that this could be considered as a potential recommendation of the final report such as “that it is investigated the element of food that is provided by staff at the One Stop Shop.”
- It was confirmed that individuals are referred to food banks around the borough and the One Stop Shop “food supply” is only emergency supply
- In the run up to Unitary there is a need to consider joint responsibility of Agencies regarding homelessness, poverty and food poverty.
- The Chair advised the Scrutiny Panel to contact the Head of Housing and Wellbeing should they want to visit the Night Shelter

Councillor Hibbert, Cabinet Member for Housing and Wellbeing, and Phil Harris, Head of Housing and Wellbeing were thanked for their informative address;

AGREED: That the information provided informs the evidence base of this Scrutiny Review

That the Chief Executive, NPH, is invited to attend a future meeting of this Scrutiny Panel to provide a response to the core questions

Robin Bates, Head of Revenues and Benefits, LGSS, addressed the Scrutiny Panel. Key points:

- Revenues and Benefits does not have a direct statutory responsibility for food poverty; it administers the benefit system and collects Council Tax. The benefits system changed in 2009 and Robin Bates commented on the contributory factor this has in relation to poverty.
- There will be full migration to Universal Credit from December 2019.
- As of 16 September 2019 there were 11,350 claims for housing benefit, in May 2019 it had been 14,000.
- There is a five week waiting period for Universal Credit that has been causing issues and problems. Money management support is important for example pay bills such as rent first.
- Childcare costs are paid four weeks in arrears.
- Since 2009 there have been other Welfare Reforms such as a freeze on the indexation for rents. There is also the bedroom tax, and a cap to Benefits.
- There is £9 million outstanding in Housing Benefit.
- 1,192 discretionary housing payments were made last year
- A Council Tax Reduction Scheme is in place; everyone now has to pay at least 35% of the Council Tax bill for their property but some Groups are protected.

- A Vulnerable Persons Policy is in place and an Income Assessment is undertaken.

The Scrutiny Panel asked questions, made comment and heard:

- There are around 14,500 court summons each year.
- Since 2015, The Authority collects itself or uses debt collectors.
- Revenues and Benefits do signpost individuals to the relevant Agencies and Groups.
- Northamptonshire County Council (NCC) receives localised funds, in 2013 it was capped and it is now often used for white goods, furniture etc.
- The Crisis Loan System is administered by NCC
- In response to a query regarding simplifying Council Tax forms, the Scrutiny Panel heard that this has been looked at and help is provided over the phone to customers.
- £400,000 has been given out in discretionary housing payments this year.
- The Scrutiny Panel suggested a potential recommendation of its final report that an information gathering session for all Councillors on the benefits system, in particular on Universal Credit (UC), is offered.
- NPH recognises that there is a 5 week wait from customers applying for UC to them receiving it. Officers in the One Stop Shop can identify who has applied for UC and will put a stop on reminder letters during this period. Customer Services deal with arrears up to £300; however, due to the wait in respect of UK this has been increased to £600. Rent Income Officers do not get involved until there are arrears of £600 in this respect.

The Scrutiny Panel recommended that the Chief Executive of NPH and the Chief Executive of CAAN is invited to attend a future meeting and provide a response to the core questions of the Scrutiny Panel.

Robin Bates, Head of Revenues and Benefits, LGSS, was thanked for his informative address.

AGREED: That the information provided informs the evidence base of this Scrutiny Review.

Councillor Anna King, Cabinet Member for Community Engagement and Safety and Vicki Rockall, Community Engagement and Safety Manager presented their written response to the core questions, highlighting the salient points.

The Scrutiny Panel asked questions, made comment and heard:

- £900,000 has been awarded in grant funding in respect of food aid.
- The Cabinet Member confirmed that she would be meeting with the Director of RESTORE imminently regarding joint working

- The Co-Optee highlighted that there is a need to address child poverty separately from holiday hunger. It was realised that breakfast clubs and free school meals address child food poverty in the week but it is not addressed at weekends.
- The work undertaken by Loughborough University on child poverty was highlighted.
- A potential recommendation of the final report was suggested that child poverty needs are included in any Strategy in relation to poverty.
- In response to a question regarding holiday hunger and its impact, the Scrutiny Panel heard a Working Group would be undertaking a mapping exercise. The Working Group would include which schools provide breakfast clubs. It was emphasised that NCC should hold this information and they would be asked to provide details to a future meeting.

Councillor Anna King, Cabinet Member for Community Engagement and Safety and Vicki Rockall, Community Engagement and Safety Manager were thanked for their informative responses.

AGREED: That the information provided informs the evidence base of this Scrutiny Review

5 SITE VISITS

The Chair presented the briefing note detailing the findings from the recent site visits highlighting the salient points.

In discussing the findings the Scrutiny Panel commented that around 30% of Council tenants are in receipt of Universal Credit and that is important that the Chief Executive of NPH attends a future meeting of this Scrutiny Panel.

AGREED: That the conclusions and recommendations detailed in briefing note were accepted for inclusion in the final report. In addition it was agreed that a further recommendation would be considered for inclusion in the final report “ that the best use of fresh food donations is investigated.”

The meeting concluded at 8:10 pm