

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

MINUTES OF SCRUTINY PANEL 1 - FOOD POVERTY

Monday, 25 November 2019

COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillor Meredith (Chair), Councillors Bottwood, Roberts and Russell (Deputy Chair)

CO-OPTED MEMBERS: Paul Foster Emmanuel Church
Clive Irston Northamptonshire Food Poverty Network

Witnesses Julie Silver, CEO, Community Law
Sarah Hayle, Manager, Community Law
Anya Willis, Director, RESTORE
Mary Clarke, CEO,
Northamptonshire CAB

Officers

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

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

2. DEPUTATIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESSES

There were none.

3. WITNESS EVIDENCE

Sarah Hayle, Community Law Manager and Julie Silver, Chief Executive, Community Law, presented the salient points of their written report. Julie Silver circulated a further report on statistics, a copy of which is attached to the minutes. Julie Silver and Sarah Hayle highlighted the following:

- Within the last 12 months we have supplied 42 clients with Foodbank vouchers. The organisation will only refer someone to a food bank if they are engaging with Community Law
- Community Law attends Emmanuel Church fortnightly which is very successful as they have provided a case work service for 52 people

- There is a range of reasons why people visit food banks. CLS Provision methods include; maximising Benefits, managing priority debts and applying grants to clear Energy debts, all of which help prevent food poverty.
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- Investment in advice is very positive in addressing food poverty; there is a massive need for advice around debt management
- The introduction of Universal Credit has in many cases led to people having very little money to live on
- The representatives from Community Law commented that the reduction in grants to Community Law has impacted on its service. A two hour drop in session with Community Law costs £150. The Panel requested details of costings to be forwarded to the Chair. A discussion ensued regarding the rent that Community Law and CAB pay for the space in the One Stop Shop at the Guildhall.

The Scrutiny Panel made comments, asked questions and heard:

- Universal Credit was being rolled out nationally and was replacing all working age means tested benefits; it is a monthly benefit for the claimant, partner and children
- There have been various elements of Universal Credit that were amended by DWP if they were unable to work
- Claimants are notified 7 days before they are paid of the amount that will be paid to them
- Deductions can take a large part of their payment and often claimants are not aware of this
- Often, people have difficulties budgeting for an entire month
- Universal Credit has impacted on housing arrears
- The “Bedroom Tax” has impacted people too
- Statistics can be reviewed however a broad range of debt can be seen i.e. 6% for age 17-24, 34% for age 35-49 and 27% for age 50-65
- More women come to Community Law for advice than men
Sarah Hayle confirmed that Community Law would provide case studies also and the impact of the advice provided to the Scrutiny Panel
- Universal Credit can change month by month for some people as it works on a monthly assessment basis however people are not notified of deductions in advance; An example was provided: a single man, who is a homeowner, receiving Universal Credit since March 2019 and should have been getting help with the mortgage; but due to admin error this didn't happen, he was now at risk of repossession as Universal Credit took the maximum 40% for a fine and Council Tax arrears which left him with £180 per month. Universal Credit works on a calendar month basis so is affected by any income in that calendar month which makes budgeting difficult
- The Scrutiny Panel requested that the costs were broken down and provided to them
- Community Law and NPH have a good working relationship and they will contact tenants when permission is granted by the tenant for their details to be shared
- The Scrutiny Panel commented that it would ask further questions in relation to Universal Credit of the representative of Department of Work and Pensions that is attending the January 2020 meeting.

Sarah Hayle, Community Law Manager and Julie Silver, Chief Executive, Community Law were thanked for their informative address.

Mary Clarke, CEO of Northamptonshire Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), provided a general overview of the service provided by CAB and circulated a written response. The salient points were referred to:

- CAB uses a case book system that tracks key issues and the statistics can be narrowed down by Borough, Ward etc.
- An example of case work was provided: a woman needed food for her 7 year old as well as nappies and milk for her 4 month old, she wouldn't go to a food bank but wasn't able to budget properly and had not receive the correct advice. She had presented at CAB for advice and support
- Mary Clarke undertook to provide statistics on food poverty for the January 2020 meeting of the Scrutiny Panel
- Mary Clarke further suggested Goodwill Solutions and Northampton Domestic Abuse Service should be invited to provide a response to the core questions as she felt their evidence would be useful to this Scrutiny Review
- Mary Clarke advised that there is often a shortfall in the housing benefit and what landlords charge for rent
- Mary Clarke provided details of the rent that CAB pay for its space in the One Stop at the Guildhall and that further grants would be of assistance
- CAB supported the Council Tax reduction scheme of 34% but would support 100% for the most vulnerable
- She added that Council Tax is not proportionate to peoples incomes. 50-70 Local Authorities in England and Wales provides 100% reduction in Council Tax to the most vulnerable
- CAB has found that 55% of people that claim Universal Credit have gone without essentials compared to 37% of those on legacy benefits
- People are now coming in to CAB for advice regarding day to day debt
- The Chair suggested that should Mary Clarke want to provide additional information that she attends the next meeting in January 2020 and addresses the Scrutiny Panel under public addresses

The Scrutiny Panel made comments, asked questions and heard:

The Scrutiny Panel commented that it would be keen to receive further information regarding the historical budget decision around the rent charged to CAB and Community Law for the space it uses in the One Stop Shop at the Guildhall.

Mary Clarke, CAB, was thanked for her informative address.

Anya Willis, Director of Restore, presented her written report highlighting the key points:

- She highlighted that one cannot separate food poverty from poverty

- Many people that Restore sees have complex issues, especially mental health
- In Anya Willis' opinion, the cuts to local services has impacted on food poverty
- Charities and community services are seeing lots of people with complex needs
- Anya Willis advised that she does not think food banks are the answer to food poverty, but the statistics show that 5,000 people are of in desperate need within the Borough of Northampton
- Restore offer other initiatives such as the NEST Grow Baby that families can access without the stigma of a food banks. These are very well attended
- Advice and support is key to reducing food poverty and helping people to become self-sufficient
- A lot of clients to Restore are returning clients; core examples include some parents going up to a week without eating so that they can feed their children
- If people are on a constant low wage they may not be able to access a food bank
- Charities provide excellent value for money
- CAB comes in to Restore and provide advice. CAB charge Restore for this facility. Anya Will confirmed that charities work together. CAB is part of Northamptonshire Food Poverty Network which keeps them providing advice on site

The Scrutiny Panel made comments, asked questions and heard:

- The Panel was concerned about parents not eating food for a week; Anya Willis advised that often they have wanted to access food banks, she provided an example: one being a pregnant woman with two small children who was referred by her midwife. Restore helped her access other support services in the town
- Zero hour contracts are a contributing factor as in some circumstances individuals often turn up to work to be told there is no work that day and they have to go home.
- Housing can be a problem as some landlords charge around £750 which is often more than the housing benefit
- Restore has distribution points in certain parts of the town
- The Scrutiny Panel commented on the need to promote that t advice and support available and ensure that the prevention advice and support services are also promoted

Anya Willis, Director of Restore, was thanked for her informative address

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

4. RELEVANT LEGISLATION

The briefing note detailing the summary of the Child Poverty Act 2010 as reported in the House of Commons Library was noted.

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

The meeting concluded at 19:41 hours

