

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

MINUTES OF SCRUTINY PANEL 1 - FOOD POVERTY

Tuesday, 14 January 2020

COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillor Meredith (Chair) (until 7:45pm) Councillor Russell (Deputy Chair, in the Chair from 7:45pm), Councillors Roberts and Smith

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

Witnesses Sarah Holton and Julie Pritchard, Department of Work and Pensions
Robin Burgess, CEO, Hope Centre
Rachel McGrath, Deputy CEO, , Northamptonshire Community Foundation and facilitator of Northamptonshire Food Poverty Network
Phil Harris, Director of Housing and Wellbeing, NBC

Councillor Danielle Stone

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

Press James Averill, Democracy Reporter

1. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Bottwood.

The Chair left the meeting at 19:45 hours and the Deputy Chair took the chair for this meeting from 19:45 hours.

2. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 20 and 25 November 2019 were signed by the Chair as a true and accurate record.

3. DEPUTATIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESSES

Councillor Danielle Stone circulated her written response and addressed the Scrutiny Panel and commented that Food poverty sits within wider poverty. Councillor Stone added that poverty within Northampton has increased from 16,000 to 18,000 children. There is a lot of concern and misery for the families throughout the area. Schools and health visitors know about this issue. There is a need to ensure that no children throughout Northampton are seen to be hungry. Holiday hunger is also an issue and something needs to be done about this. Councillor Stone explained how living in poverty is worked out she then went on the state the next stage of the Living Wage Foundation needs implementing. Often children in poverty come from a working family. Often people living in poverty have no electricity, saucepans or a cooker and obtain food from a food bank but do not have the facilities to cook it. There is a need for both NCC and NBC to have Anti- Poverty Strategies.

Councillor Stone was thanked for her address.

The Scrutiny Panel asked questions, made comment and heard:

- People living in poverty often give up hope. Poverty does people damage, sucks the time and energy out of people.

4. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

5. WITNESS EVIDENCE

(A) PARTNERSHIP MANAGER, DEPARTMENT OF WORK AND PENSIONS

The Scrutiny Panel received evidence from a variety of expert advisors:

Sarah Holton and Julie Pritchard, Department of Work and Pensions

In response to a request, Sarah Holton confirmed that she would provide a written response to the core questions and would attend the next meeting of the Panel.

Sarah Holton then gave the Panel an overview of her work:

- Unemployment rate is 3.7% and is the lowest since the 1970s. More people have moved into work. Sarah Holton advised that she was not aware that poverty had increased across Northampton.
- The Department of Work and Pensions works closely with many organisations to support deprived areas and has outreach workers.

- “Entitled to calculation” can be undertaken and Officers can then look at the individual’s circumstances. Individuals would never be asked to move from a Legacy Benefit to Universal Credit unless this was financially better for them. Officers help individuals make best use of the income that they have.

The Scrutiny Panel made comment, asked questions and heard:

- The Chair reminded the Panel of the expected outcomes of this Review and commented that previous evidence had provided details of the impact Universal Credit had on people’s lives and the difficulties people have accessing help from Benefits’ Officers.
- In response to a query regarding 3.7% unemployment and the types of work people are currently in, Sarah Holton advised Universal Credit pays more the less an individual earns. It is based on earnings. If an individual is on a zero hours contract and does not work at all this then remains consistent; a taper for Universal Credit is detailed on the website of the Department of Work and Pensions.
- The employer must notify HMRC of the earnings of each employee.
- In response to a query regarding sanctions, Sarah Holton confirmed that there is huge process that takes place before sanctions are implemented. Sanctions are the last thing that HMRC wants to introduce. The aim is to get the individual’s money right and ready from the first assessment.
- In response to a query regarding the potential causes of individuals having to use food banks, Sarah Holton commented that she had read a previous response from Citizens Advice (CA) and would agree with the comment that often this can be mismanagement of money. HMRC can do entitlement assessments.
- HMRC works collaboratively with partner organisations to help people. It has a claim commitment but it needs individuals to tell officers about their circumstances. Individuals can contact HMRC for assistance.
- In response to a comment that individuals often don’t have anything left for food after housing and other bills have been paid; they often go into food banks at the weekend, unable to feed their children; Sarah Holton responded that she goes to Corby and Towcester food banks and works with them to see what their income is and assist them. Sarah Holton confirmed that she was very happy to attend a food bank in Northampton and work with new and/or repeat users.
- Housing is always going to be an issue as rents can often be very high; HMRC cannot influence the rents. Costs of housing is often higher than housing benefit of the housing element of Universal Credit.
- The Chair commented that zero hours contracts can often contribute to poverty. A lot of vulnerable people cannot read and write. Sarah Holton confirmed that HMRC has partner organisations that can assist people with claims.
- DWP has a visiting team.
- The Universal Credit app is easy to use. The Scrutiny Panel suggested it could be a potential recommendation of its final report that this app is widely promoted.
- In response to a question about zero hours contracts, the Panel was advised that under a Legacy contract, should individuals work more than 16 hours a week their benefit would be reduced and their claim closed. With Universal Credit, if an individual’s earnings fluctuated – e.g. more earnings, less credit the account would

only close if they earned more than Universal Credit. If the job comes to an end they can notify change of circumstances and a re-assessment is done.

- The Panel commented that there are a number of people in work, receiving benefits and still not having enough to live on and it was further commented that sanctions are quickly and abruptly implemented.
- Sarah Holton advised that money mismanagement was a key factor and was asked to provide anonymised case studies to the effect.
- Sarah Holton confirmed that she works closely with Corby and Towcester and should she be invited to any groups, organisations or Food Banks in Northampton she would attend.
- In response to a question, Sarah Holton confirmed that there is a programme of training in place that comprises 39 vulnerabilities. Mental health training includes suicide and ex-offenders. She highlighted that her Office is not a trainer to give support regarding mental health but they can and do signpost.
- It was realised that some individuals are fearful to go to the Job Centre. There are lots of posters in the Job Centre regarding partner agencies.
- Sarah Holton confirmed that a lot of outreach takes place through schools and advice can be given.
- The Customer Services Manager advised that Sarah Holton regularly visits NBC and is part of the Welfare Reform meetings; that comprise a number of partners. Improvements come from these meetings.

The Panel requested that Sarah Holton submits a written response to the core questions and a written brief on all the comments raised at this meeting. The Democratic and Member Services Manager undertook to contact Sarah Holton. Timescales and criteria regarding sanctions would also be useful.

Sarah Holton was thanked for her informative address, the contents of which were noted.

AGREED; That Sarah Holton is asked to submit a written response to the core questions and a written brief on all the comments raised at this meeting. The Democratic and Member Services Manager would make contact with Sarah Holton. Timescales and criteria regarding sanctions would also be useful.

(B) CHIEF EXECUTIVE, HOPE CENTRE

Robin Burgess, Chief Executive, Hope Centre, provided a comprehensive written response to the core questions and elaborated on the salient points. He highlighted that the cause of poverty, in his opinion, is low or no income.

The Scrutiny Panel asked questions, made comment and heard:

- In response to a query regarding what the answer was to combat poverty, Robin Burgess suggested proper wages – a living wage which would be a positive step forward. Work is often temporary and zero hours. He was also concerned regarding the level of benefits and the way it is processed; he felt that until benefits and wages increased poverty would increase.

- The Panel commended Robin Burgess's comprehensive responses.
- There is a need to do more to co-ordinate between food providers. Hope has worked with Northamptonshire Poverty Network but more needs to be done and co-ordinated.
- Robin Burgess suggested a summer festival to "unlock" food.
- A potential recommendation of the final report was suggested that NBC look to working with partners in generating more events such as a summer festival.
- A further potential recommendation was suggested that promotion of food poverty is highlighted to allotment holders and shops regarding giving away excess produce.
- It was highlighted that warehouse space is vital and needed.
- It was expected that the food banking system would continue to grow.
- NPH has to identify areas where they can build houses and is attempting to deliver a higher number of social housing. Concern was raised regarding the planning process whereby often a developer will reduce social housing percentage by the time it is presented as an application.
- In response to a question whether students access food at the Hope Centre, Robin Burgess confirmed that he was not aware of any. People aged 18-80 do access the Hope Centre facilities.

Robin Burgess was thanked for his informative address.

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

(C) COMMUNITY AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR

Rachel McGrath, Deputy CEO, Northamptonshire Community Foundation and facilitator of Northamptonshire Food Poverty Network provided a verbal update to the core questions; following the meeting she provided a comprehensive written response which was then added to the agenda.

The Scrutiny Panel made comment, asked questions and heard:

- In noted that free meals are provided in nurseries in Scotland, the Scrutiny Panel suggested a potential recommendation of its final report that the Health Start Voucher Scheme is promoted.
- There is a need to stop marketing junk food.
- A lot of working families, live in poverty.
- Concerns were raised regarding individuals being unable to plan for the future if they are living in poverty.
- The absence of Sure Start Centres has become obvious as has the reduced library services.
- It was highlighted that the Voluntary Sector is not a safety net and should not be relied on.
- Individuals often go to services for help as a last resort.
- Poverty is about the lack of cash, food banks are not a lifestyle choice.
- The Panel heard of the recent campaign win is the commitment of the measurement of food insecurity by the Government. The first statistics are due for release in April 2020: <https://www.endhungeruk.org/2019/02/27/campaign-win-uk-governmentagrees-to-measure-household-food-insecurity/>

It was suggested that the report that the Food Poverty Network [Children's Future Food Inquiry](#), is sent to the Democratic and Member Services Manager for the next meeting. Rachel McGrath was also asked to submit testimonies for the Panel's information. A further potential recommendation was suggested - that it is recommended to the new Unitary Authority that Northampton is promoted and becomes a living wage and sustainable food town.

A further potential recommendation was also suggested – that the new Unitary Authority is asked to lobby for national campaigns and challenge national Policy on food poverty. It was further suggested that a copy of the final report of this Scrutiny Panel is provided to the MPs

Rachel McGrath was thanked for her informative address.

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

6. STATUTORY AND SOCIAL OVERCROWDING

Phil Harris, Director of Housing and Wellbeing, circulated a written report detailing Statutory and Social Overcrowding and the definition of Statutory Overcrowding (as set out in Part 10 of the Housing Act 1985) and an understanding of what is meant by 'Social Overcrowding'. He ran over the briefing note in detail, highlighting the key points.

The Scrutiny Panel suggested that it would ask the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee if it could undertake pre decision Scrutiny of the new Policy regarding overcrowding.

Councillor Roberts advised that Shelter has produced a report on Space Standards and it was suggested this is considered by the Scrutiny Panel at its next meeting.

It was suggested that this report is considered by the Scrutiny Panel at its March 2020 meeting.

Phil Harris was thanked for his informative address.

AGREED: 1) That the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked if it could undertake pre decision Scrutiny of the new Policy regarding overcrowding.

2) That the report produced by Shelter on overcrowding is considered by the Scrutiny Panel at its March 2020 meeting.

3) That the briefing note on Statutory and Social Overcrowding is considered at the March 2020 meeting of this Scrutiny Panel.

The meeting concluded at 8:03 pm