

NOTTINGHAM CITY COUNCIL

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held at LB31-32 - Loxley House, Station Street, Nottingham, NG2 3NG on 9 April 2014 from 2pm – 3:35pm

- Councillor Brian Parbutt (Chair)
- ✓ Councillor Glyn Jenkins (Vice Chair)
- ✓ Councillor Azad Choudhry
- ✓ Councillor Georgina Culley
- ✓ Councillor Mohammed Ibrahim
- ✓ Councillor Gul Nawaz Khan
- ✓ Councillor Neghat Nawaz Khan
- ✓ Councillor Ginny Klein
- Councillor Thulani Molife
- Councillor Toby Neal
- ✓ Councillor Anne Peach
- Councillor Mohammed Saghir
- ✓ Councillor Roger Steel
- Councillor Marcia Watson
- ✓ Beverley Denby (Third Sector Advocate)

✓ indicates present at meeting

Colleagues, partners and others in attendance:

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| Lisa Black | - Head of Revenues, Benefits and Welfare Advice |
| Trish Eaton | - Chief Officer of Nottingham Citizens Advice Bureaux and representative of Advice Nottingham |
| Jane Garrard | - Overview and Scrutiny Co-ordinator |

56 CHAIR

In the absence of the Chair, Councillor Brian Parbutt, the Vice-Chair, Councillor Glyn Jenkins chaired the meeting.

57 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

- Councillor Thulani Molife – Other Council Business
- Councillor Brian Parbutt – unwell
- Councillor Marcia Watson

58 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

None.

59 MINUTES

The Committee confirmed the minutes of the meeting held on 5 March 2014 as a correct record and they were signed by the Chair.

60 WELFARE ADVICE IN NOTTINGHAM

The Committee received a presentation from Lisa Black, Head of Revenues, Benefits and Welfare Advice, and Trish Eaton, Chief Officer of Nottingham Citizens Advice Bureaux and representative of Advice Nottingham, about welfare rights advice in Nottingham. The following information was highlighted in the presentation:

- a) There has been significant change in welfare reform affecting Nottingham citizens. An example of this is that over 4000 households have been affected by the introduction of Social Size Criteria in social housing. 46% of Nottingham City Homes (NCH) tenants have paid full rent resulting from under-occupancy and only 1% have paid no rent resulting from under-occupancy. Remaining households have made partial payments, but the majority of households have had to make changes in order to be able to afford the increased rent. 892 Notices Seeking Possession have been issued for under occupation arrears cases in NCH tenants. This is the first stage of enforcement action. NCH has a robust eviction protocol in place, which was developed with the advice sector. Councillor Liversidge, Portfolio Holder for Commissioning and Voluntary Sector, meets weekly to discuss cases of non-payment of rent as a result of Social Size Criteria to look at alternative options to eviction. This can be particularly challenging when households refuse to engage with agencies until the late stages of enforcement. To date there have been no evictions as a result of Social Size Criteria.
- b) Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) are available to help residents deal with the impact of welfare reform. Last year there was over £1 million available. DHP is meant to be a stop gap and not a permanent solution, but it does provide time to identify alternative solutions.
- c) Relatively few households have been affected by the Benefits Cap but for those households affected the impact has often been significant.
- d) In Nottingham welfare rights advice is provided by Nottingham City Council's in-house Welfare Rights team (costing approx £600,000 per year) and the Advice Nottingham Consortium. Advice Nottingham is commissioned to provide welfare advice over 3 years (worth £850,000 per year). The Consortium is led by the Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB) working with several other smaller agencies such as the Nottingham Law Society. In addition specialist advice is provided by organisations such as Nottingham Deaf Society and Nottingham Refugee Forum. In total approx £1.5 million is spent per annum on provision of welfare rights advice in Nottingham and the Portfolio Holder for Commissioning and Voluntary Sector has been clear about the importance of sustaining this level of support.
- e) Welfare rights advice services provided include welfare benefit and debt law; housing issues; employment issues; debt management; and general advice and support.
- f) There are challenges in waiting times for non-urgent matters and clients typically wait for around 4 weeks.

- g) In 2013/14 over 3000 advice sessions were offered, helping 12,549 citizens. As a result £8.8 million has gone into households, by resolving issues such as backdated benefits.
- h) Debt management advice has reduced as a proportion of the total volume of welfare rights advice work, and work relating to benefit claims and welfare changes is increasing as a proportion. This is partly due to the increasing complexity of welfare benefits and partly due to lower household incomes which mean that more people are affected by welfare changes.
- i) Factors driving demand largely relate to welfare reform, for example the introduction of Social Size Criteria and the tightening of benefit sanctions. Much of the understanding about drivers of demand is based on anecdotal evidence and the sector is aiming to gather more robust insight.
- j) The sector is trying to build capacity and ensure that it is responding appropriately to the needs of citizens. This includes work to build knowledge amongst volunteers; strengthen partnerships with the Credit Union as an alternative to high cost/ high interest loans; optimising DHP; and engaging with food banks.
- k) Engaging with food banks does present some challenges. Welfare rights advisors refer people to food banks but many food banks do not want a formal contractual relationship, so alternatives are being looked at as to how food banks can be 'repaid' for the support they provide to referrals. The sector is also working with food banks to better understand the issues facing people who use food banks so that they can be supported in the medium-long term.
- l) Welfare reform changes are continuing, for example the move from Disability Living Allowance to Personal Independent Payments. This is not a straight switch and all relevant households will need to apply for the new Payments over a phased period.
- m) The contract with Advice Nottingham to provide welfare rights advice is in its final year. Future need will be evaluated to inform re-commissioning work. It is likely that there will be a focus on developing financial resilience.
- n) There are currently no timescales for the national rollout of Universal Credit. It is understood that the earliest date is likely to be 2016.

Following questions, Lisa Black and Trish Eaton provided the following additional information:

- o) Government does not require local authorities to provide welfare rights advice. Each local authority has to decide if/ how to provide welfare rights advice. One of the priorities in the Nottingham Plan is to raise people out of poverty and the provision of welfare rights advice fits with delivery of this objective. The preference is for individuals to engage with the relevant agency about their welfare problems but issues are often complex with many different agencies

involved and there is a need for separate advice and guidance. There is also a range of national advice services that citizens can access.

- p) 'Financial resilience' means people being better able to balance their finances in the future; having a sustainable income (often through employment); and access to financial services. Financial resilience is difficult for people who will never be able to access employment.
- q) Waiting times for non-urgent appointments is a big challenge for the sector and may result in people using alternatives such as short term high cost/ high interest loans. The Council rings those people on the waiting list every week to check that their circumstances haven't changed. Demand often peaks in January – March when annual statements are produced.
- r) Interpreters can be booked to help people for whom English is not their first language. However this does have a financial cost.
- s) Support on immigration issues is a very low proportion of welfare rights work and the agencies involved are not licensed to do more. Some work is carried out by the Nottingham Refugee Forum.
- t) Most of the advice provided through the Advice Nottingham Consortium is provided by paid advisors. The exception to this is the CAB which has frontline volunteers, supported by a paid staff.
- u) Prior to the contract with Advice Nottingham the approach was to provide grant funding to advice organisations. The Council wanted to introduce more contractual arrangements and therefore a procurement exercise was carried out. Advice Nottingham was successful in winning the contract.
- v) Advice Nottingham receives money from sources other than Nottingham City Council. This enables it to carry out additional work, some of which is focused on specific projects.

Based on the information provided, the Committee was reassured about current work to provide welfare rights advice in the City and plans to manage this into the future. The Committee felt that it had a better understanding of the issues and challenges facing welfare rights provision but that all councillors would benefit from additional briefings on food banks in the City; and the changes from Disability Living Allowance to Personal Independent Payments.

RESOLVED to recommend that briefings be provided to all councillors on food banks in Nottingham; and the changes from Disability Living Allowance to Personal Independent Payments.

61 PROGRAMME FOR SCRUTINY

The Committee considered the Head of Democratic Services' report about the programme for scrutiny during 2014/15. Jane Garrard, Overview and Scrutiny Co-ordinator advised that, due to availability of contributors, consideration of probation

reforms would need to be postponed until October 2014 and that performance of the Crime and Drugs Partnership could be brought forward to the June 2014 meeting.

Councillors discussed the content of the briefing note about allotments in Nottingham and decided to proceed with a scrutiny review of allotment utilisation. An issue with clearing fly-tipping from allotments and the possible impact that this has on allotment holders was raised as a possible line of questioning for the review.

How the Council and its partners are responding to the Children and Families Act and readiness for its implementation, with a particular focus on how it will impact on the Children and Young People's Plan was suggested as a future topic for review.

RESOLVED

- (1) To postpone consideration of Probation Reforms until October 2014 and bring forward scrutiny of the Crime and Drugs Partnership's performance to June 2014;**
- (2) To commission a scrutiny review looking at allotment utilisation; and**
- (3) To include consideration of how the Council and its partners are responding to the Children and Families Act and readiness for its implementation, with a particular focus on how it will impact on the Children and Young People's Plan in the programme for scrutiny.**

62 DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

RESOLVED to note that future meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee are proposed to take place on the following Wednesday's at 2.00 pm:

2014	2015
12 May	7 January
4 June	4 February
9 July	4 March
3 September	8 April
8 October	
5 November	
3 December	