

Coventry City Council
Minutes of the Meeting of Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee held at 10.00 am on
Wednesday, 4 February 2015

Present:

Members: Councillor T Skipper (Chair)
Councillor J Blundell
Councillor J Clifford (Deputy Chair)
Councillor G Duggins
Councillor R Sandy
Councillor B Singh
Councillor K Taylor
Councillor S Thomas

Other Members: Councillors R Bailey, D Skinner and P Townshend

Other Representatives: Simon Brooke, Working Together on Welfare Reform Group
Janet Gurney, Coventry Law Centre

Employees (by Directorate):

A Burton, Resources Directorate
C Dear, Chief Executive's Directorate
C Hickin, People Directorate
G Holmes, Resources Directorate
L Knight, Resources Directorate
S Nagra, Chief Executive's Directorate
T Savill, Resources Directorate
J Venn, Chief Executive's Directorate
A Walster, Place Directorate
A West, Resources Directorate

Apologies: Councillors C Fletcher and J Innes
Sue Bent, Coventry Law Centre
Representatives from the Department for Works and Pensions

Public Business

41. Declarations of Interest

There were no disclosable pecuniary interests declared.

42. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 10th December, 2014 were signed as a true record.

With reference to Minute 36 headed 'Child Sexual Exploitation' the Committee noted that all the recommendations were now in hand and recommendation 4 which requested the Education and Children's Scrutiny Board (2) to ensure that patterns of school absences were investigated to see if these are an indicator of

child sexual exploitation, was considered by the Scrutiny Board at their meeting on 8th January, 2015.

43. Call-In Stage 2 - Public Space Protection Order (Coventry Dog Control)

The Chair, Councillor Skipper reported that at their meeting on 6th January, 2015 Cabinet approved proposals about the creation of a City-wide Public Space Protection Order for the control of dogs. This decision was subsequently called-in by Councillors Taylor, Bailey and Skinner. Councillor Skipper informed that having considered the appropriateness of the call-in, he had accepted the part of the call-in relating to puppy walkers, assistance dogs and dogs in training and rejected the other parts of the call-in. Councillors Bailey and Skinner attended the meeting for the consideration of this item, Councillor Taylor was already present, being a member of the Committee, and they reported on the call-in. Councillor Townshend also attended in his capacity as Cabinet Member for Policing and Equalities and he addressed the Committee.

The Committee considered the decisions made by Cabinet on 6th January; the reasons for the call-in; and the determination. The Committee also considered a briefing note of the Executive Director for Place which detailed material facts relating to the specific reasons for the call-in.

There were two parts to the valid call-in, that there was inadequate clarification in relation to 'puppy walkers' and whilst there were exceptions for the blind/disabled owners, there was no reference to assistance dogs or dogs- in-training. The Committee were informed that there was no reference to puppy walkers in the Order. The training of puppy or an older dog, with a view to being an 'assistance dog', was not exempt from the Order whilst in training. Consequently, if a dog was being trained the person performing the training would be responsible for ensuring that the Order wasn't breached. The 'Order' only gave exemptions to individuals who were specified in the General Point 1.

The officer explained that there did not appear to be a legal definition of the term 'assistance dog'. Although in a Government document, which related to proposed amendments to the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, 'assistance dogs' were referred to as 'a dog which has been accredited to assist a disabled person by a prescribed charity or organisation'.

It was considered that the paragraphs under the General Point 1 (b), together with point 1(a) which referred to persons with sight conditions, adequately covered all possible types of 'assistance dogs'. Paragraph 1(c) (i-iv) covered the existing 'prescribed charities' and paragraph 1(c)(iv) covered the creation of further new and relevant 'prescribed charities' in the future.

Members questioned the Councillors responsible for the call-in, the Cabinet Member and the officer and responses were provided, matters raised included:

- The proposals for future engagement with interested members of the public including friends of parks groups and dog owners
- The potential to include additional areas in the Order
- The reasoning behind the introduction of the Order
- Clarification about which dogs the call-in was intended to refer to

- Clarification about the numbers of dogs on leads being walked by an individual
- The suggestion that implementation of the Order should be deferred until the Cabinet Consultative Committee had met.

The Committee were reminded that, in response to a significant response from members of the public, Cabinet had made changes to the recommendations.

RESOLVED that the Committee concur with the decisions of Cabinet, rejecting the valid part of the Call-in.

44. **Welfare Reform**

Further to Minute 20/14, the Committee considered briefing notes of the Scrutiny Co-ordinator, the Chair of the Working Together on Welfare Reform Group and Coventry Law Centre which provided an update on progress following the publication of the Impact of Benefit Sanctions on People in Coventry, previously considered by the Committee on 8th October, 2014. Simon Brooke, Chair of the Working Together on Welfare Reform Group and Janet Gurney, Coventry Law Centre attended the meeting for the consideration of this item. Councillor Townshend, Cabinet Member for Policing and Equalities also attended. Representatives from the Department for Works and Pension (DWP) had been invited but were unable to attend. They provided some background information for the Committee.

Following publication of the report, the Law Centre and DWP had met to discuss and develop actions identified in the Sanctions report. In November, observations of initial interviews at the DWP's offices at Cofa Court to review what happened at the initial point of contact and how this initial stage identified people with vulnerabilities. Feedback was presented to the Working Together Group. In January 2015, service leaders from the partner organisations attended a Customer Journey event at which DWP went through paperwork and the process for benefit claimants with a view to identifying where organisations could help at particular key points in the process.

The briefing note from the Chair of the Working Together Group informed of the recent activity of the Group and partners reporting on the Partnership meetings; under-occupation; Discretionary Housing Payments; Sanctions; In work benefits; customer journey mapping; universal credit and communications.

The briefing note from the Law Centre detailed the progress made between the partner organisations on welfare reform and in particular sanctions. It included information about the DWP response to the Oakey report into sanctions which recommended a range of improvements to the administrative processes underpinning sanctions decision making. An update was provided on 21 issues, 8 of which were outstanding and were mainly national issues, 9 were currently being addressed and 4 had been resolved.

Councillor Townshend, informed the Committee of the additional funding provided by the City Council to support the work of the Coventry Law Centre to deal with the significant backlog of benefit tribunals. In 2014 over 1300 tribunals were supported by the Centre and the success rate continued to exceed 80%. This resulted in an

additional £5m being paid to Coventry claimants in the past twelve months. He reported on the leading role played by the Law Centre in response to Welfare Reform and provided several examples of case studies.

Members questioned the representatives and officer on a number of issues and responses were provided, matters raised included:

- What the Committee could do to help publicise the national issues that had yet to be resolved
- Where poor decisions had been made, were individuals held to account
- How tax credits and work benefits were publicised to encourage take up
- The role of the Job Shop which should not be about sanctions
- The numbers of residents in receipt of discretionary housing payments and the implications arising from next year's reduced budget
- Feedback from the Rugby pilot scheme for Universal Credit
- The potential for problems to arise when Universal Credit is introduced in Coventry, with particular reference to national issues
- Concerns that representatives from the DWP were unable to attend the meeting and the lack of local accountability of the organisation
- What the Committee could do to support the work of the Coventry Law Centre
- The levels of local discretion and the problems caused locally by the unresolved national issues
- What was the DWP doing about raising issues at a national level
- Clarification about the impending closure of the Independent Living Fund and what future support would be available for claimants
- The potential for the Law Centre to be able to support additional Coventry residents and how their service is publicised

RESOLVED that:

(1) The Committee supports the membership and work of the Working Together on Welfare Reform Group.

(2) The Committee supports the decision of the Cabinet Member for Policing and Equalities to provide additional financial support to the Coventry Law Centre.

(3) The Chair, Councillor Skipper, on behalf of the Committee, to write to the City's three MPs:

(i) Informing of the issues which have arisen as a result of the benefit sanctions on Coventry residents and require national solutions asking that these unresolved matters be raised in Parliament

(ii) Requesting that they ask for consideration to be given to making the Department for Works and Pensions accountable locally for the issues that have arisen in relation to benefit sanctions, in the same way that Health and Overview Scrutiny Boards have specific powers ensuring that local health service organisations are held to account.

(4) Officers be requested to investigate the legal and equality implications of the closure of the Independent Living Fund and the proposed action by the Council.

(5) The Cabinet Member for Health and Adult Services and the Health and Social Care Scrutiny Board (5) be requested to consider how to enforce the Marmot link between social care and welfare reform.

(6) The Executive Director for People ensure that employees in the People Directorate are fully briefed and trained on Welfare Benefits prior to making relevant decisions.

(7) The Chair, Councillor Skipper to write to the Department for Works and Pensions expressing the Committee's disappointment that they were unable to send any representatives to the meeting.

45. Council Plan - Half Year Performance Report 2014/15

The Committee considered a report of the Chief Executive detailing the half year performance of the Council Plan for 2014/2015. The report had been approved by Cabinet at their meeting on 2nd December, 2014. The Board also received a presentation from the Assistant Director, Policy, Partnership and Performance which also referred to the half year progress report on the Council's Equality Strategy, minute 49 below refers.

The Council Plan, setting out the strategic direction and priorities for the next ten years, was approved by Council in January 2014. Through its plans, the Council wanted the city to grow and become more prosperous and for this prosperity to benefit all residents. Economic growth would create jobs for local people, opportunities to develop skills and qualifications, and a wider range of housing. The Council would use its resources to encourage growth and would work with local communities to improve the quality of life for Coventry people and especially for the city's most vulnerable residents.

This report summarised progress during the first six months of 2014/15 in relation to the plan priorities and a set of key headline indicators. Where applicable contextual information had been included to describe what was happening in Coventry and how this compared with elsewhere.

The Council's equality objectives had also been revised to reflect the priorities of the new Council Plan.

The presentation referred to the headline indicators and highlighted the progress being made in the following areas: business growth and jobs; housing and homelessness; crime; education; health and social care and delivering the priorities for the Council's workforce.

The Committee questioned officers on a number of issues and responses were provided, matters raised included:

- Clarification about the figures relating to people in support of Job Seekers Allowance

- Further details about the employment and unemployment rates for the city
- The reasons behind the increase in the gender pay gap
- Whether cultural differences and population changes had an impact on peoples' perception of feeling safe during the day and after dark
- The monitoring of GCSE results to see if the additional funding to improve pupils premium results was having an impact

RESOLVED that:

(1) The report be welcomed and supported.

(2) The Cabinet Member for Strategic Finance and Resources be requested to organise an annual seminar on the Council Plan for all members of the Council.

46. Equality Strategy - Half Year Progress Report 2014/15

The Committee considered a report of the Chief Executive which provided information on the half year progress of the Equality Strategy 2014/15. The report had been considered by the Cabinet Member (Policing and Equalities) at his meeting on 22nd January, 2015. The presentation from the Assistant Director, Policy, Partnership and Performance detailed in Minute 48 above on the performance with the Council Plan also referred to the progress with the Equality Strategy.

The current Equality Strategy was approved in March 2013 and outlined how the Council complied with the Equality Act 2010. It also set out the Council's equality objectives which were linked to the priorities of the Council Plan 2011-2014. These equality objectives had been revised to reflect the new priorities contained in the new Council Plan.

This report looked at progress made in the first six months of 2014/15 in relation to the equality of objectives. It also provided a high level of summary and gave an overview including where applicable, contextual information to describe what was happening in Coventry and how this compared nationally or regionally depending on the data available. The report also provided an overview of some of the work being done to promote equality for the different groups protected by the Equality Act.

RESOLVED that the report be welcomed and supported.

47. Outstanding Issues

The Committee noted that all outstanding issues had been included in the Work Programme for the current year, Minute 48 below refers.

48. Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee Work Programme 2014/2015

The Committee noted the Work Programme for the remainder of the year.

49. Any Other Items of Public Business

There were no other items of public business.

(Meeting closed at 12.35 pm)