

Coventry City Council
Minutes of the Meeting of Communities and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Board (4)
held at 10.00 am on Thursday, 23 January 2020

Present:

Members: Councillor Abbott (Chair)

Councillor M Ali
Councillor R Ali
Councillor A Andrews (substitute for Councillor R Bailey)
Councillor R Thay
Councillor C Thomas (substitute for Councillor C Miks)
Councillor S Walsh

Employees (by Directorate):

People D Ashmore, J Crawshaw
Place S Elliot, G Holmes, M Rose

Apologies: Councillors N Akhtar ,R Bailey, L Kelly, C Miks, and T Mayer

Public Business

29. Appointment of Chair

Cllr Abbott was appointed by the Board as Chair for the meeting (in accordance with Part 2 D 9.2 of the Constitution).

30. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

31. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 19th December, 2019 were agreed and signed as a true record.

Further to minute 25/19 'Recycling Performance in Coventry' and 26/19 'Update on Recycled Road Surface Materials in Coventry' the recommendations made by the Scrutiny Board had been sent to the Cabinet Member for City Services.

32. Outcome of Christmas Waste Collection 2019

The Scrutiny Board considered a presentation of the Deputy Chief Executive (Place) which they had requested, to provide an update on the outcome of the Christmas waste collection 2019 (minute 25/18 refers).

The presentation covered:

- Background information including the different bank holidays and closure days each year
- Waste collected this year and costs
- complaints
- challenges including delivering calendars and bags and staffing during non-contracted hours
- communication
- 2020 considerations

The Scrutiny Board questioned officers on aspects of the presentation including: -

- Formal and Informal complaints received via Councillors and directly to officers
- Staff volunteering
- Agency staff
- Essential waste services staff working hours
- Benchmarking with neighbouring authorities
- Costs including reputational damage
- Closure week in waste different to other council closure days
- Communication
- Managing expectations of residents
- Options to consider for Christmas 2020

Members were reassured that all staff including agency staff were trained and issued with equipment and worked hard to catch up with the 14 rounds that were short on the Monday 30th December, 2019.

The Board thanked staff for their responsive and proactive communication and for working hard to catch up with the collection of waste following the Christmas closure.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Board recommends

- 1) **The Cabinet Member for City Services identify a new process to understand the full extent of the complaints/compliments about waste collections which would include contacts from residents to councillors and officers not just the formal complaint process through customer services. This should be an all year-round process and not just for complaints over the Christmas period.**
- 2) **Consider a wide range of options in preparation for Christmas 2020 including:**
 - a. **no refuse collection for that week and providing extra bags,**
 - b. **using agency staff entirely to deliver the service over that week,**
 - c. **a review of contractual requirements for staff over the closure week**

33. **Temporary Accommodation Charging Policy**

The Scrutiny Board considered a briefing note of the Deputy Chief Executive (People) which detailed progress made with the Temporary Accommodation Charging Policy Consultation. Appended to the briefing note were the Temporary Accommodation Charging Policy pre-consultation draft, key changes, Equality and Consultation Analysis and the Consultation Survey.

On 5th January 2020 there were a total of 689 households living in Temporary Accommodation (TA) provided by Coventry City Council: 390 were families with dependent children (lone and two parent families) and 285 were single people or childless couples. Temporary Accommodation used by the Council includes: Bed and Breakfast and hotels, hostels, private rented homes and Housing Association homes.

The majority of households placed into TA do not currently contribute towards the rental and Council Tax costs or the utilities (gas, water and electricity) they use. The Council also meets the full cost of storage of personal belongings. The Housing and Homelessness service reported an overspend of £3 million in 2018/19, despite an additional £2.7 Million of resource. This overspend was set to increase unless the Council undertakes a range of activities to both reduce spend and increase income.

The Council were currently consulting upon the introduction of a 'Temporary Accommodation Charging Policy'. The proposed policy contained the following elements:

- Utilities and Council Tax: Making households in Temporary Accommodation responsible for the Council Tax and the utilities they used.
- Storage: Households in temporary accommodation would pay to store their belongings.
- Licence Fee: Households who were not entitled to full housing benefit because they work and/or have 'excess income' would be asked to make an affordable contribution towards the rent, through a licence fee.

If the policy, as it currently stands, was approved it was projected that the Council would save £400,000 per year through households paying for the utilities they use; £163,000 per year through households paying for their own storage and between £200,000 and £220,000 through the introduction of a licence fee (this was dependent on the preferred licence fee charge – a question in the consultation survey).

In addition to the economic case for change, a key policy outcome was that single people and families were tenancy ready by the time they move out of Temporary Accommodation and into Permanent Accommodation. To do this the Council would look to:

- Focus on independent living – single people and families would be able to manage their money effectively by the time they leave Temporary Accommodation
- Provide Appropriate Support - Where single people and families experienced financial budgeting difficulties support would be provided through the recommissioned homeless support service
- Only charge proportionately - charging would be based upon what people could pay; the Council would not charge indiscriminately.

The main reason for homelessness for households owed a duty in Coventry was “Family no longer willing or able to accommodate” (18%), “Ending of an Assured Shorthold Tenancy by a private landlord” (15%) and “domestic abuse” (11%). Rent arrears as a contributory factor to homelessness was not recorded in every case; it was only recorded as a sub-category in some reason for homelessness categories (e.g. end of Private Rented Tenancy). In these circumstances and where the field had been completed 17% had disclosed rent arrears.

Given the lack of reliable data around rent arrears as a contributory factor to homelessness, and any financial difficulties faced by households more widely, the full extent to which the introduction of a Temporary Accommodation Charging Policy may impact those in financial hardship cannot be easily identified using data sets, alone. An initial equalities impact assessment had been carried out which explored the potential financial hardship that some individuals or groups may experience in detail and was contained in the appendix.

Pre-consultation listening sessions took place in November 2019 with a wide range of third sector service providers who worked with homeless households to help understand any potential impact but also to help in the development of the draft policy and the consultation approach. The consultation had been designed to provide the Council with a richer picture around the impact and benefits the policy may have, which included how it could exacerbate the financial difficulties some households may be experiencing. The feedback received would be considered throughout analysis and solutions explored, such as the use of Discretionary Housing Payments and advice services.

The consultation started on 13th December 2019 with the publication of an online survey on the Let’s Talk engagement platform, a copy of the survey was appended to the report, the consultation would end on 7th February 2020.

Households in Temporary Accommodation were informed of the consultation on this date through letter and email (in cases where email addresses had been disclosed). Households in TA were given the option to have their say via an online survey on the ‘Let’s Talk’ website and/or through a focus group. On 7th January 2020 there were total of 75 responses to the online survey, the majority came from Coventry Residents (44%) and Coventry City Council Employees (36%). People living in Temporary Accommodation made up 13.3% of respondents which was only 1.45% of all households living in Temporary Accommodation. In addition, no one living in Temporary Accommodation had expressed an interest in attending a focus Group. In order to increase the number of responses, the following activities were planned:

- Visiting Officers working with homeless people would take out flyers and surveys with them to spread awareness of the consultation and respond to any queries.
- Many of the families who work with an ‘excess income’ (and therefore most likely to be impacted) were being temporarily accommodated in Caradoc Hall. Flyers were being placed in Caradoc Hall and Officers would discuss the consultation with all new residents at the point of letting.
- A focus group was being organised with survivors of domestic abuse, in partnership with Coventry Haven, to enable survivors to ask questions and have their say in a safe environment.

The Scrutiny Board discussed with the officers present the following:

- Affordability
- Ratio of accommodation used
- Reducing barriers to responding to the consultation
- Reviewing the Policy following implementation
- Financial pressure and other ways to reduce costs
- Supporting people to leave temporary accommodation
- Utility charges and pre-payment meters

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Board support the proposals and recommends that

- 1) consideration be given to options other than pre-payment meters for utilities payments**
- 2) a report back be considered later next year following the consultation and implementation at an appropriate time**

34. Communities and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Board (4) Work Programme and Outstanding Issues

The Scrutiny Board received and noted their Work Programme for 2019/20. Members requested that the update on speed enforcement cameras remain on the agenda for consideration this municipal year.

35. Any Other Items of Public Business

There were no other items of urgent public business.

(Meeting closed at 12.00 pm)