

BARNSELY METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL
OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
1st SEPTEMBER 2015

7. **Present:** Councillors Ennis (Chair), D. Birkinshaw, P. Birkinshaw, G. Carr, Cave, Clarke, Clements, Davies, Frost, Hand – Davis, Hayward, Johnson, Makinson, Morgan, Sheard, Tattersall, Unsworth, Wilson, together with co-opted member John Winter.

Apologies for absence were received from Ms Kate Morritt in accordance with Regulation 7 (6) of the Parent Governor Representatives (England) Regulations 2001.

8. **Declarations of pecuniary and non pecuniary interest**

There were no declarations of pecuniary and non-pecuniary interest.

9. **Previous minutes**

With reference to item 4 (v) clarification was sought with regards to the minute regarding bullying and harassment. It was confirmed that incidences of bullying are recorded however as is noted in the previous minutes there is no evidence of widespread bullying, the information of which is gathered from the employee survey.

In respect of the Action Points the group were advised the checks made by HR in relation to the volunteering form for the 'Friends of Cannon Hall' are necessary to comply with the Council's insurance policy. Also a reply to all the Action Points has been distributed by email.

10. **Draft Anti Poverty Action Plan 2015 - 18**

The Chair welcomed the witness to the meeting, which included:

- Wendy Lowder, Service Director, Stronger, Safer & Healthier Communities, BMBC
- Jayne Hellowell, Head of Locality Commissioning and Healthier Communities, BMBC
- Andrea Hoyland, Strategy Lead Early Intervention and Prevention, Communities Directorate, BMBC
- Michelle Kaye, Service Manager, Housing and Welfare, Communities Directorate, BMBC
- Councillor Jenny Platts, Cabinet Spokesperson for the Communities Directorate
- Murdo Macleod, Chief Executive of South Yorkshire Credit Union
- Jo Clark, Interim Chief Executive, Citizens Advice Barnsley (CAB)

The committee were advised that the draft Anti Poverty Action Plan 2015-18, was being looked at in draft form, prior to it being agreed by Cabinet; therefore any recommendations made by the committee would be able to be considered prior to its final approval.

Currently, the action plan is going through the formal process with the Anti Poverty Board, which involves various forums, workshops and consultations being held.

There are key actions that need to be considered in relation to the Anti Poverty Strategy, one of which was to commission the local Poverty Needs Assessment Evidence Base, to provide up to date, local data about the impact of living in poverty and low income in Barnsley because data available is mainly published in arrears on a national basis.

It is necessary to know the present levels of poverty within the Barnsley area, including how these affect the welfare of children, the long term health implications for the wider population, including life expectancy.

Following the work already undertaken by the Anti Poverty Board, five areas have been identified within which to challenge the long term success of the plan. All these challenges are interlinked; meaning the outcome of one will have an effect on the success of another. The first three challenges all have financial implications; in particular how to increase the incomes of households within the borough, and then assisting with the budgeting needs of families, including how to make healthier life choices.

The group was advised that this plan is intended to work in conjunction with other strategies and plans, ensuring that when early interventions are made these can work together to combat poverty.

Members proceeded to ask the following questions:

- i) Challenge 1, reference 3 - is currently showing under the 'RAG' rating as being 'Red', could this be reviewed as there are currently voluntary services within the different wards that are providing independent debt advice, including the Romero Project?

The members of the committee were advised that progress has been made in some areas; however work still needs to be undertaken in others. As the action plan is covering a three year period work will be ongoing and the action plan will need updating accordingly.

- ii) As well as the use of a 'RAG' rating it would also be useful if the individual objectives could be measured as to how they are progressing?

The group were advised due to the nature of the plan, it will allow for it to be updated as it is both a 'live document' and a rolling programme. The group acknowledged with regards to performance monitoring further work needs to be done to establish appropriate milestones.

- iii) With regards to challenge 1, reference 1, how can we look to improve both the welfare advice and financial guidance that is provided to the residents of Barnsley when £250K is being removed from the budget?

It was explained to members that this will be a challenge, considering the £250k saving that has to be made from the Welfare budget, which provides funding for the Welfare Rights Service and also contributes to the Citizens Advice Bureau. When the Anti Poverty Board looked at the different advisory services, they discovered

there is always the opportunity to do things better by utilising resources across different agencies, thereby doing more with less funding. The welfare review is currently being undertaken and we are working with a number of agencies.

It was highlighted that there are alternative methods of funding that we need to access, including from the National Lottery and welfare funds. Also, it was noted that for example the North East Area Council have commissioned work from CAB and DIAL Barnsley (Disability Information Advice Line).

- iv) The action plan is a useful document which pulls together and highlights work that needs to be undertaken, however it does not seem to recognise the needs of the elderly, disabled or housebound members of the community who would need additional assistance, such as a home visits?

The group were advised that as part of the Welfare Review, the service will consider provision of an outreach service which will deliver one to one support in people's homes if required.

- v) With regards to challenge 1, how do we know what percentage of children are living in poverty but whose parents are working?

The committee was advised that HMRC (Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs) publish various data which can be accessed with regards to this. These include children in workless households and children in households accessing various benefits, but no definitive measure of the numbers of children in households where parents / carers work.

- vi) Regarding challenge 1, reference 4, what is the Council's Finance Department doing to provide financial advice and support to the residents of Barnsley?

It was explained to the committee the Council has a debt management policy to help residents from incurring any unnecessary debt, although it was recognised that sometimes we can do more. The service advised that they would speak to the Finance Department regarding this including referring people to both CAB and the Credit Union.

- vii) As well as Berneslai Homes, what are other private sector landlords, including Housing Associations doing to assist their tenants who are experiencing financial hardship?

The group were advised that a piece of work needs to be done with regards to this to connect other Housing Associations, Housing Providers and Homelessness Support Services and Berneslai Homes so that good practice can be shared and linked up.

- viii) Challenge 3, reference 1 has a lack of measureable outcomes to improve income levels. For example is there any reason we can't impose our suppliers to adopt the living wage?

The service advised that this was a good point and advised that the Trade Unions have also raised this. We have an ethical charter with regards to contractors which includes the working conditions of employees and levels of pay. The Council has

adopted the living wage; however our smaller suppliers have fed back that they would not be able to operate if they paid the living wage. Our finance department are currently doing an assessment with regards to this and we'll talk to our current contractors. We can't change current contracts but where we can we'll encourage our suppliers to adopt the living wage.

- ix) Can we ensure the accredited landlord scheme targets a wider audience, particularly as some housing associations have been obstructive with regards to providing information in relation to safeguarding and to the police?

The service acknowledged that conversations will need to take place with providers to ensure they are being responsible with regards to helping tenants, such as accessing housing benefit resources. Pressure needs to be put on housing related providers to do this and not just always referring to CAB. We also need to ensure that conversations take place with key partners to target front line workers so they are able to support tenants in difficult financial circumstances.

- x) With reference to item 5.2 on the cover report are loan parents living on half the national average monthly income due to the other parent not making their appropriate contribution?

The group were advised that these figures are calculated nationally and are just based on the income of the one adult. It is concerning as we're hearing nationally that employment is up, wages are up and income is up, however the gap between the better and worse off is widening. It is also noted that those who are the least well off are the most vulnerable and live in poorer housing.

- xi) Do we know the uptake of free school meals, for example do we know that those who are applicable are actually accessing them?

The service advised that they will obtain this information from the school meals team and will report this back to the committee.

- xii) As an authority do we promote the facilities provided by the Credit Union enough as they provide a good service, handling people with care and providing support regarding handling money, not just lending it out as loan companies advertised on the TV do?

The service advised that they had been in contact with the Credit Union and recognise the need to promote this service better. They advised that referrals to the Credit Union need to increase and hope to encourage this amongst partners by bringing them together at a workshop so they better understand the organisation and the services available.

The Credit Union themselves have identified the extra costs incurred by people who are struggling financially. On average they are having to pay an extra 6% on the goods that they are purchasing due to the very high rates of interest being charged by the retailers they are having to use. The Credit Union have further identified that their customers were paying four times more for the price of white goods. To assist their customers, several outlets have been opened in different locations including Scarborough and York and to enable the purchase of these goods at a more competitive price.

- xiii) Do we need to challenge the utility companies that supply gas and electricity as people in financial hardship are having to pay more as their supply is through meters that require regular cash payments and this disadvantages them from the discounts that are available to people who pay by direct debit?

The group were advised unfortunately the Credit Union are restricted by banks, therefore are unable to arrange payments by direct debit. The Credit Union are currently working with the Co-op Bank to try and resolve this.

- xiv) On the draft Anti Poverty Action Plan, Challenge 3 is to improve the employment prospects for the people of Barnsley, but the increase in the National Minimum Wage to £7.20 per hour from next April will result in people losing their entitlement to Universal Credit. It is good that we are considering encouraging our contractors to pay the living wage; however have we had any conversations with organised labour organisations such as the Trades Council and employers regarding how we can bring more and better jobs into the Borough? Also, what resources do we have to drill down problems with regards to transport across the Borough as links across neighbouring Wards are not available without coming into the Town Centre first?

The service advised that the work and delivery of the anti-poverty action plan is not about taking on the world, it is a small group who need to focus on delivering priority actions as a result of undertaking the poverty needs assessment. The anti-poverty group will focus on what challenge it needs to put to other groups and their strategies. The service also advised that they would be interested to hear more about the Trades Council and how they may be able to link up with this group.

- xv) With regards to health and wellbeing and helping families to choose how to spend their money, what is being done to help parents to beat their addictions?

The group were advised there are schemes available to address the health problems that do exist such as Be Well Barnsley, the Health Trainer Service as well as Substance Misuse Services. We need to make sure that people are aware of these services. The service advised that they would seek information from Members with regards to the targets on the Be Well Barnsley specification and substance misuse.

- xvi) People who are experiencing financial difficulties will often resort to desperate measures, including applying for loans from Finance Companies who advertise on television, to try to alleviate their financial circumstances; as a Council could we look to advertise on both Council Tax bills and on the website the financial advice that is available to residents of the borough?

The group were advised that this is an area that can be looked at and considered.

- xvii) How many Welfare Rights Advisors are there; as an authority do we promote the services provided by DIAL. Also, is there any financial assistance provided by the Council to help to fund these services?

The group were advised there are four Welfare Rights Advisors, as well as small Macmillan team who will provide help to people with cancer. Funding is provided to both CAB and a small amount is made to DIAL.

- xviii) Can a summary be provided as to what developments are made following the discussion of the topics that are looked at in Scrutiny?

The service agreed that they would feed back to the committee on the recommendations made in today's meeting and will incorporate suggestions into their work as appropriate. The service acknowledged the importance of Challenge 5 regarding demonstrating the impact and measuring the work undertaken and advised they had more work to do with regards to this and make sure local success stories are shared.

The service also acknowledged the large amount of existing positive work which is taking place in our communities and recognise that we need to make sure this is promoted to communities so they are aware of available services.

- xix) Are we able to educate children in schools from an early age into how to deal with their financial affairs?

The group were advised of savings clubs and the work done by CAB in schools. It was also explained that financial education is part of the National Curriculum however schools are autonomous in their delivery of this.

- xx) Regarding challenge 2, reference 1, as a result of the reconfiguration of children's centres, how will we ensure that we will still be able to access those in poverty?

The service advised that they want to review how advice and guidance is delivered in all localities including what's available and where. The commitment of the anti-poverty work is to ensure this is mobilised across our communities.

The Chair brought the item to a close and highlighted that we are still fortunate that there is a culture in Barnsley of extended family helping other family members who are not as well off which is invaluable.

11. Task and Finish Group (TFG) Update

The committee were advised that the three topics for the Task and Finish Groups have now been confirmed; Work Readiness (Adults) which is being led by Councillor Hand-Davis; Fly Tipping which is being led by Councillor Gill Carr and the Customer Service Strategy being led by Councillor Ralph Sixsmith.

Members were requested to contact Cllr Ennis, Anna Morley or Mark Wilks with their preferences regarding joining a TFG by mid-September.

The Chair thanked all attendees for their contribution and declared the meeting closed.

Action Points

- 1) Service to ensure appropriate performance milestones are included within the action plan.

- 2) Service to consider provision of an outreach service delivered in people's homes for those who are not able to access them elsewhere, such as the elderly, disabled.
- 3) Service to speak to the Council's Finance Department with regards to how we refer Council customers to debt advice such as CAB and the Credit Union.
- 4) Service to facilitate a forum for local housing service providers to be connected to share good practice in particular with regards to debt advice and support including signposting to other services.
- 5) Service to continue to encourage Council contractors to adopt the living wage and consider including this within the anti-poverty action plan.
- 6) Service to promote uptake of the accredited landlord scheme by housing providers, ensuring support is being provided to tenants in financial difficulty and that key messages are communicated to front line staff.
- 7) Service to advise the committee of the take-up with regards to children who are entitled to free school meals accessing them.
- 8) Promotion of the Credit Union and other services to take place, particularly amongst other organisations so that they better understand available services provided and can refer people to them, also utilising e.g. The Chronicle, Dearne FM, Radio Sheffield, Council Magazines etc.
- 9) Service to incorporate challenge of utility suppliers into the anti-poverty action plan as customers using tokens rather than paying by direct debit are paying 3-4 times more.
- 10) Service to meet with Cllr Clements to seek more information on the Trades Council and how they can link with this and other groups.
- 11) Service to provide information to the committee on the targets with regards to substance misuse detailed in the Be Well Barnsley service specification.
- 12) Service to incorporate recommendations from today's meeting into their work and feed back to the Overview and Scrutiny committee on the impact of this.
- 13) Members to contact CllrJeffEnnis@barnsley.gov.uk, AnnaMorley@barnsley.gov.uk or MarkWilks@barnsley.gov.uk regarding their TFG preference by 11th September 2015.