

BATH AND NORTH EAST SOMERSET

RESOURCES POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND SCRUTINY PANEL

Monday, 30th September, 2013

Present:- Councillors John Bull (Chair), Roger Symonds (Vice-Chair), Paul Myers, Charles Gerrish, Barry Macrae and Nigel Roberts

26 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

27 EMERGENCY EVACUATION PROCEDURE

The Chairman drew attention to the emergency evacuation procedure.

28 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS

Councillor Barrett sent his apologies that he could not attend the meeting.

29 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

30 TO ANNOUNCE ANY URGENT BUSINESS AGREED BY THE CHAIRMAN

There was none.

31 ITEMS FROM THE PUBLIC OR COUNCILLORS - TO RECEIVE DEPUTATIONS, STATEMENTS, PETITIONS OR QUESTIONS RELATING TO THE BUSINESS OF THIS MEETING

1. A member of the public, Pat Ryan (Bath against Cuts) made a statement to the Panel on the subject of 'Impact of Council Tax Support Scheme and Bedroom Tax' (A copy of the statement can be found on the Panel's Minute Book and attached to these minutes).

In response to a question from Councillor Symonds, Ms Ryan explained that, at the Citizens Advice Bureau where she works, cases regarding benefits and debt advice were rising.

Councillor Bull asked Ms Ryan if she knew that a majority of Councillors had asked the Cabinet to consider alleviating the Council Tax Benefit cut.

The Strategic Director for Resources – Andrew Pate advised the Panel that they may like to consider the comments in the statement during Item 10 ‘Welfare Reform’ when the comments can be put into context.

Councillor Bellotti – Cabinet Member for Community Resources explained that Mrs Ryan had spoken at the Council meeting. He further explained that the Council had taken the decision not to increase council tax over the last two years. He explained that there is a social fund which provides food, clothing and help with gas and electric. He added that money had also been allocated to the connecting families’ agenda. Councillor Bull stated that he felt it would be better if people had the benefits that they need rather than relying on the social fund.

Councillor Cherry Beath explained that she is Vice-Chair of the Wellbeing Policy and Development Panel. She stated that she welcomed the statement by Pat Ryan and explained that the Wellbeing Panel would be monitoring how the changes regarding Welfare Reform will affect people.

The Chairman announced that the Panel noted the statement and would take the points into consideration, especially in the context of Item 10 on Welfare Reform. The Panel agreed to forward the following point to the Housing and Major Projects Panel:

“We call on the council to work in conjunction with housing associations in Bath&NES to establish a ‘no eviction’ policy for residents in arrears for either council tax or the bedroom tax and to identify ways of ameliorating the impact of this measure on the people affected by it...”

2. A member of the public, Anne Robbins registered to ask the Panel three questions on the subject of ‘Grand Parade and Undercroft’ (A copy of the questions can be found on the Panel’s Minute Book and attached to these minutes). Mrs Robbins was unable to attend the meeting. The Chair referred to the questions and asked the officers to provide an answer within 5 clear days of the meeting.

32 MINUTES - 15TH JULY 2013

The Panel confirmed the minutes of the previous meeting as a true record and they were duly signed by the Chairman.

33 WORKPLACES - OFFICE ACCOMMODATION BRIEFING

Dave Thompson Programme Director: Organisational Development gave a presentation to the Panel (a copy of the presentation is on the minute book for the Panel and also on the website). The presentation covered the following:

- ‘One Council’ Organisational Development Programme – three workstreams
- Workplaces: Changing how we work

- Five Buildings
- Three workstyles
- 1.500 staff: 1,000 desks
- Changing how we work
- One Council – What it feels like for Services, Teams and Staff
- One Council OD Programme.

The Panel raised the following points and asked the following questions:

Councillor Macrae asked about staff that did not work in offices such as drivers and also customers. The Programme Director explained that manual workers are outside the scope of this project. The Strategic Director for Resources added that there may be an opportunity to extend the programme, he stated that the point is taken regarding non office workers but that this programme tackles the fact that a lot of office staff will be changing their environment. In terms of customers, the Strategic Director explained that there is a programme for improving services to customers. William Harding, Head of Human Resources added that the '10 in 100' project was open to all staff, not just office staff and that there is a 'back to the shop floor' where the Chief Executive meets workers. Councillor Macrae stated that he was heartened in part but felt that an opportunity could be missed with the workers out on the road as they are often closest to the residents.

Councillor Myers asked if the staff survey results showed that people believed in 'One Council'. The Head of Human Resources explained that the staff survey results had been used to inform the presentation, he also explained that the results are 18 months old. Councillor Myers stated that it was worrying that the surveys are not annual. The officer explained that smaller service based surveys are also carried out. Ian Savigar – Divisional Director for Customer Services explained that he would be working across all services on issues such as phone manner etc. He also explained that small surveys are done with customers that come in and he pointed to the fact that the new customer feedback programme would be coming in soon.

Councillor Gerrish stated that a lot of work is going on that is not yet filtering through to the public. He stated that the effort is certainly paying off in terms of the One Stop Shop. He stated that sometimes it is hard to get across to the public that in some circumstances, the Council cannot act on something due to legislation.

Councillor Macrae stated that he was concerned over the priority given to training and working from home but the priority should be answering the phone and delivery of services. The Head of Human Resources stated that much of the training referred to here is behavioural such as phone answering. Councillor Pritchard stated that there is a danger of isolation in working at home. The Strategic Director explained that the ratio of 1000 desks: 1500 people is achievable without pushing home working.

Following a concern raised by Councillor Symonds, The Programme Director explained that office moves should be minimized as much as possible.

The Chair thanked the officers.

34 STAFF RESOURCES - ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND STAFF SUPPORT

William Harding – Head of Human Resources gave a presentation to the Panel (a copy of the presentation is on the minute book for the Panel and also on the website). The presentation covered the following:

- Supporting staff through change – Training through Corporate Training Programme
- On line/e learning resources
- Outplacement Services to those formally at risk
- Employee Assistance Programme

The Panel raised the following points and asked the following questions:

Councillor Macrae stated that he felt there was sensible and serious provision for those at risk, he stated that there should also be some focus on those staff that are staying. The Head of Human Resources stated that he would circulate a briefing note to Panel members on the work that is done on this. Councillor Nigel Roberts stated that the presentation shows members that the organisation is thinking and caring.

Councillor Myers asked about tracking people who are leaving. The officer explained that leavers are tracked and that a brutal measure is that there have been no tribunal cases in the last 12 months. He also explained that a 'leaver's survey' is being brought in. He reported that, in the main, the majority view is that the Council has behaved well in the circumstances.

Councillor Gerrish stated that he was interested to know the outcome of the work of 'Workshop Solutions' – The officer will circulate information to Panel members.

The Chair thanked the officers.

35 WELFARE REFORM

Ian Savigar – Divisional Director Customer Services introduced the report to the Panel. He pointed out that there had been an amendment to page 11 of the report.

The Panel raised the following points and asked the following questions:

Councillor Macrae stated that he was heartened to hear the work being done. He asked about the relationship with Curo and housing providers. The officer explained that it was difficult to answer for them but reported that they did have a welfare support team.

Councillor Gerrish asked about the availability of 1/2 bedroom houses. He stated that if people are willing to move (due to the 'bedroom tax') and 'down house' then appropriate houses should be available so they are not penalised. The officer reported that it did not take long to re house people so this was not an issue at the moment.

Councillor Gerrish asked if the government are listening to our feedback. The officer reported that the main area of learning is around digital access, there will be a rising demand for PC's and some people will need support to complete their claim online. He stated that this had been fed back to the government. Councillor Gerrish stated that there should be a strong message to the government that isolated communities in rural areas cannot always access PC's.

Councillor Symonds asked if there had been an increase in people going to CAB (Citizen's Advice Bureau) on the issues of benefits. The officer reported that 60% of the workload for CAB and SWAN (South West Advisory Network) was working with people on benefit claims. Pat Ryan (CAB) added that both benefits and debt advice is on the increase. She also reported that there are delays involved in the disability living allowance and people are approaching the CAB about this.

Councillor Macrae asked if there could be some feedback to the development control department about the need for more 1/2 bedroomed houses. The officer stated that he would feed this back.

It was agreed that an update on Welfare Reform be added to the future workplan for March 2014.

36 REVIEW OF COUNCIL LETTINGS FOR USE OF ROOMS

Stephen Bird – Head of Heritage Services introduced the report. He explained that a previous event had acted as a catalyst to tightening the terms and conditions. He explained that now, a simple assessment is carried out with every application and staff are more cautious. Councillor Bull explained that the Cabinet Member is the ultimate longstop but that the Cabinet member would be advised by Stephen Bird.

The Chair thanked the officer for the information.

37 PROPERTY - BUDGET SAVINGS REVIEW

Derek Quilter – Divisional Director Project Management introduced the report.

The Panel raised the following points and asked the following questions:

Councillor Gerrish raised a concern that the savings proposed in the budget are not coming through – he asked if the savings would be achieved in the timescale. Andrew Pate, Strategic Director for Resources explained that there were tough targets for the department and that only one dimension of this had been staffing. He explained that there had been a lot of restructuring and cutting out duplication. He stated that he was confident that the targets would be achieved but the question was the timescale. He assured members that it would not be a recurring problem.

Councillor Bellotti – Cabinet Member for Community Resources stated that the savings are not all made up from staff cuts. He made the following points: that the budget will have over and underspends but would come in roughly on target; there had been a substantial and unexpected increase in the income for the Roman Baths; a lot of duplication has been cut out in the Property department and there are now 10 academies so there is not such a call on Council services.

38 CABINET MEMBER UPDATE

Councillor David Bellotti – Cabinet Member for Community Resources updated the Panel on the following:

- Procurement Fair on 15th October 2013 engaging with local businesses on ‘Think Local’;
- Four Budget Fairs in November to consult the community;
- Keynsham regeneration is on time and on budget;
- Workplaces – 200-250 posts will go over a 2-3 year timescale but the number of compulsory redundancies will be small.

39 PANEL WORKPLAN

With the following additions and amendments, the Panel noted the workplan:

- Impact on Customers of Budget Cuts/Savings (Councillor Macrae suggestion for November 2013). *To include the next customer satisfaction survey result.*
- Grand Parade and Undercroft to move to March 2014.
- Councillor Myers asked that the Panel look at customer satisfaction data and geographical differences in feedback.

The meeting ended at 8.00 pm

Chair(person)

Date Confirmed and Signed

Prepared by Democratic Services

PRESENTATION TO BATH & NORTH EAST SOMERSET COUNCIL WELFARE PDS PANEL BY THE BATH AGAINST CUTS CAMPAIGN, 30 SEPTEMBER 2013

FOCUS : IMPACT OF COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME AND BEDROOM TAX

Presentation is on behalf of Bath Against Cuts, a non-aligned group which is critical of central government austerity policies, and particularly cuts in welfare benefits and services.

Focus on the disastrous impact on people's lives of the reduction of council tax benefit and the introduction of the bedroom tax. Most people on low income who were exempt from council tax now have to pay 22% of this tax under the new Council Tax Support scheme introduced by Bath & North East Somerset Council in April this year.

Nearly 6 million people nationally are now paying council tax they cannot afford. These are amongst the poorest and most vulnerable groups in society – disabled people, single parents with young children, people struggling to live on very low wages. Many of the people affected by the changes in council tax have also been hit by the introduction of the bedroom tax which has involved losses of between 14% and 25% of housing benefit for people on low income. Two thirds of the people affected by the bedroom tax are disabled.

Impact of these policies - there is much evidence to show that these measures are making it increasingly difficult for people to afford essentials such as food and fuel bills and are pushing people into long-term debt. The council's own research indicated a jump of 220% in the number of food vouchers issued in Bath&NES in the last year. The National Housing Federation have reported that more than half of families hit by the bedroom tax are now in rent arrears. Bath CAB has found that people in Bath alone have accumulated debts of over £9 million in just 18 months. Many of these will be people who have been caught up in changes in welfare benefits, particularly the payment of council tax and the bedroom tax, both of which were introduced in April 2013. It is not surprising that pay day loan companies such as Wonga have increased their profits by over a third this year, profits gained on the backs of the poorest people in Britain.

The payment of council tax and bedroom tax by those least able to afford it will plunge people into greater poverty and debt, will contribute to high levels of homelessness and will criminalise people because they are poor. Arrears in council tax and rent can result in people facing county court summons, fines – which are added to the arrears people already can't pay – the use of bailiffs, possible eviction and even prison. Raquel Rolnik, the UN investigator on housing, has described the bedroom tax, in particular, as undermining people's human right to housing.

Housing policies represented by the withdrawal of council tax benefit and the introduction of the bedroom tax are profoundly unjust. The poorest members of society – those with least resources – are having to pay for the cost of a financial crisis they did not cause. At the same time, the government has cut the income tax for people earning £150,000 or more from 50p to 45p in the pound. Thirteen thousand of the richest people in Britain will receive a tax cut of £100,000 each this year while there are increasing numbers of people struggling to survive through pay day loans and food banks.

Focusing on the reduction of council tax benefit in particular, we want to highlight the fact that local authorities have some discretion on whether or not to implement this policy. Bristol City Council, for example, found a way to avoid placing this extra charge on people who are amongst the poorest in the community. Bristol Council has also agreed a 'no evictions' policy for people in arrears due to the bedroom tax.

We call on the council to :-

- 1) restore council tax benefit to all those who previously benefited from the scheme. If Bath, for example, can afford the Discovery Card which is most likely to benefit the more affluent members of the population, why can't we afford to maintain council tax benefit?
- 2) work in conjunction with housing associations in Bath&NES to establish a 'no eviction' policy for residents in arrears for either council tax or the bedroom tax and to identify ways of ameliorating the impact of this measure on the people affected by it;
- 3) establish a working group to include representatives of relevant community organisations to examine the social impact and financial costs of these policies. Central government appears to be completely out of touch with the lives of ordinary people, with a cabinet largely made up of millionaires. It is essential that local councils such as Bath&NES provide the evidence and arguments to challenge these government assaults on the poorest and most vulnerable members of our community.

Resources PDS Panel – 30th September. Questions from Anne Robbins (with answers provided after the meeting).

1. What are the key reasons for the slippage, and do the currently published dates apply to both Phase 1 and Phase 2; if not what are the dates for each, including the date or dates for the promised public exhibition?

The project team have now developed a detailed implementation programme following initial design work and consultation with stakeholders. This programme is now agreed and is in place. The initial indicative programme has therefore been superseded. A newsletter is being prepared for issue to stakeholders.

2. A new survey of the robustness of the road in Grand Parade was to be included in the project, given the problems identified in a survey some years ago. Has this taken place and, if so, what are the key findings?

The survey of the road construction has been completed. All areas that require attention now form part of the project scope and will be undertaken during the construction period for the project.

3. What are the key points raised to date by the Environment Agency relating to flood risk, and measures required to address potential issues.

The Project team have had a number of meetings with the Environment Agency to discuss the proposed development. They have agreed that restaurant use of the Vaults and Undercroft should be considered as low flood vulnerability. Technical issues suggested by the EA will be incorporated into the final designs.

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