

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MEETING : Monday, 25th March 2019

PRESENT : Cllrs. Coole (Chair), Ryall (Vice-Chair), Hawthorne (Spokesperson),
Dee, Haigh, Hilton, Morgan, Pullen, Stephens, Taylor, Toleman,
Walford and Wilson

Others in Attendance

Head of Policy and Resources
Intelligent Client Officer
Democratic and Electoral Services Team Leader
Democratic and Electoral Services Officer

APOLOGIES : Cllrs. Hampson and Lewis

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

1.1 There were no Declarations of Interest.

2. DECLARATION OF PARTY WHIPPING

2.1 There were no declarations of party whipping.

3. MINUTES

3.1 **RESOLVED that:-** The minutes of the meeting held on 25th February 2019 were approved and signed as a correct record by the Chair.

4. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME (15 MINUTES)

4.1 There were no public questions.

5. PETITIONS AND DEPUTATIONS (15 MINUTES)

5.1 There were no petitions or deputations.

6. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME AND COUNCIL FORWARD PLAN

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- 6.1 The Committee considered the Work Programme and Forward Plan. Councillor Hilton suggested that, as Cabinet was considering the Annual Report on the Grant Funding provided to the Voluntary Community Sector in June, the Committee should consider it at its June meeting.
- 6.2 Councillor Haigh noted that the Council's Climate Change Strategy was outdated, and in need of review. Furthermore, she submitted that a date should be set for a briefing on the proposed development plans of Gloucester Railway Station.
- 6.3 RESOLVED that:-** (1) The review of the implementation of Universal Credit to take place at the meeting of 29th April; (2) The Overview and Scrutiny committee would consider the Annual Report on the Grant Funding provided to the Voluntary Community Sector at its June meeting. ; (3) The Climate Change Strategy Report to be reviewed; (4) A date should be set for the briefing on the proposed design plans of Gloucester Railway Station and; 5)The Overview and Scrutiny Committee **NOTE** the Work Programme.

7. DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENTS

- 7.1 The Head of Policy and Resources, introduced the report and highlighted key aspects. He outlined that the purpose of the policy was to formalise the Discretionary and Housing Payment scheme, thus bringing it in line with both the Department of Work and Pensions guidance, and the Council 's key objectives. He reiterated that new policy would be effective from the 1st of April 2019.
- 7.2 Councillor Haigh queried why the scheme will ordinarily only support claimants for 13 weeks. She submitted that 13 weeks could be onerous for some individuals who would rather benefit from having the assistance for a longer period. In response to this, Intelligent Client Officer, expressed that by nature of being a discretionary scheme, some flexibility could be made to extend this period for those individuals who continue to demonstrate the need for support.
- 7.3 Councillor Haigh further stated her concern that there could be a potential burden for claimants in situations whereby they still required support beyond the 13 weeks, and thus would have to reapply again for the scheme. She opined that this could lead to claimants requiring repeat awards.
- 7.4 The Intelligent Client Officer, reemphasised that applications are looked at on an individual case by case basis, considering the claimants' particular circumstances. She further noted that, although the scheme was not designed for repeat awards as such, they could still be granted in exceptional circumstances.
- 7.5 In relation to the Intelligent Client Officer's comments, Councillor Haigh asserted that perhaps the policy needed redrafting, as it did not, in her view, reflect the reality.

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- 7.6 Councillor Haigh queried why only certain elements of War Pensions were disregarded for the purposes of calculating income. The Intelligent Client Officer advised that the policy had been aligned to Housing Benefit and that numerous other Councils did not disregard any elements of War Pensions for the purposes of income.
- 7.7 Noting that the DHP process would be administered by the City Council's contractors, Civica, Councillor Haigh stated that further clarification was needed on the process of applying for a DHP. She stated that this was not clear enough in the City Council 's policy as it stood.
- 7.8 Councillor Pullen highlighted that the Discretionary Housing Payments' fund had traditionally been underspent. In light of this, he felt it was pertinent to consider how the new policy was going to be made more visible.
- 7.9 In reference to Councillor Pullen's comments, The Intelligent Client Officer explained that the Council had attempted to ensure the budget was being fully utilised. Additionally, she made Members aware of some of the steps the Council had taken to ensure greater visibility for the new DHP policy. This included meeting with the target audience, meeting with partner agencies, input from partner agencies on policies, and a customer reception at Green Square where members of the Public could be assisted with their applications.
- 7.10 Councillor Pullen queried what measures , if any, were in place to help people complete their applications. The Intelligent Client Officer stated that Green Square assisted residents with their applications where necessary.
- 7.11 Councillor Wilson questioned the officers whether the Council had been too cautious in the way it has traditionally spent the Discretionary Housing Payments fund.
- 7.12 The Head of Policy and Resources advised that there was approximately £6k left in the current fund, and this would be used towards the number of applications still pending, if they were successful. He reiterated that the Council was taking steps to ensure greater visibility and awareness of the scheme for the general public. Furthermore, he advised that it was also necessary to consider that the budget could be overspent.
- 7.13 Councillor Hilton asked the total amount which had been allocated for this year 's budget. The Intelligent Client Officer responded that it was £220k.
- 7.14 Councillor Hilton repeated the Committee's concerns that Council was perhaps being too cautious in the way it spent the Discretionary and Housing Payments fund. He suggested that it could perhaps be spending more, which could mean that the City Council would be allocated a larger fund by Central Government. He proposed that this could have the added benefit of

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increasing the funds available to help local residents in need of additional support, for example those facing hardships.

- 7.15 The Intelligent Client Officer advised that Gloucester City Council was within budget for the current year and this could stand the Council in good stead for the future.
- 7.16 Councillor Hilton queried whether there had been an analysis and comparison regarding how much other Local Authorities are allocated for the Discretionary Housing and Payments fund. The Intelligent Client Office advised that each Local Authority was different and the figure allocated would vary accordingly.
- 7.17 Councillor Hilton further questioned what would happen to Discretionary Housing Payments in case of recession. In response, the Head of Policy and Resources noted that this would be managed accordingly as with other budgets.
- 7.18 Councillor Toleman asked what would happen to individuals with ineligible service charges. The Intelligent Client Office responded that whilst the Discretionary Housing Payments was intended to prevent homelessness, this could only be done within the parameters of the law.
- 7.19 Councillor Stephens and Councillor Hampson proposed the following recommendation:
- Cabinet considers that war pensions are disregarded in their entirety for the purposes of calculating income for House Benefit;
- 7.22 Councillor Haigh proposed the following recommendation:
- If on first application it is apparent that the individual's circumstances are not likely to change within the 13 week period, a period of 26 weeks should be awarded.
- 7.23 Responding to Councillor Haigh 's recommendation, Councillor Hawthorne expressed the view that whilst the 26 week extension could potentially provide additional security for claimants and less administrative work for the Council, overall, the 26 weeks would be too prescriptive.
- 7.24 In light of Councillor Hawthorne 's comments. Councillor Haigh felt that 26 weeks was an adequate extension from her experiences. However, she agreed that the wording could be changed so as to avoid being too prescriptive.
- 7.25 Councillor Toleman queried whether a recommendation could be put to Cabinet on the subject of what could be done to assist people with ineligible service charges. It was his view that claimants with ineligible service charges were vulnerable and at risk of eviction. Consequently, it was incumbent on Council to assist and advise them. In response, the Intelligent Client Officer reiterated that ineligible service charges could not be

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considered in Discretionary Housing Payments applications. Furthermore, Councillor Hawthorne added that this should be happening already, and he felt that this was not relevant to the issue at hand.

RESOLVED that: - The Overview and Scrutiny Committee **RECOMMEND** that (1) Para 2.2 be amended to have the policy operative from 4th April 2019; (2) War Pensions to be disregarded in their entirety for the purposes of calculating income for DHPs; (3) Cabinet be requested to consider disregarding War Pensions in their entirety for the purposes of calculating income for House Benefit;(4) To clarify the appeals process in the policy; (5) If on first application it is apparent that the individual's circumstances are not likely to change within the 13 week period, a longer period will be awarded subject to an annual review; (6)Where residents have ineligible services charges that cannot be covered by the scheme and which may make residents at risk of eviction, the Council assist them in accessing services to manage their finances.

8. INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY OUTSOURCING (ITO) CONTRACT

- 8.1 The Head of Policy and Resources outlined the recommendation to extend the Civica UK Limited ITO Contract for a period of 11 months to the 31st of March 2021. He further highlighted the reasoning behind bringing forward this recommendation as set out in the Proposed Extension to Civica ITO Contract report.
- 8.2 Councillor Hilton submitted that some flexibility was required in terms of extending the current contract with Civica , and potentially entering into a joint procurement with Gloucestershire County Council after the 31st of March 2021 as proposed. In particular, he highlighted the fact that, the City Council 's rent in the current premises ends in 2022, and this could be subject to change thereafter. The Head of Policy and Resources advised that any extension of the current contract would allow for some flexibility.
- 8.3 Councillor Haigh queried whether the proposed joint procurement with Gloucestershire County Council would still be compatible with City Council's particular needs. The Head of Policy and Resources advised that both the City and County Council's had invested in IT infrastructure and the contract with Civica was for external support.
- 8.4 **RESOLVED that:** - The Overview and Scrutiny Committee **NOTE** the report.

9. PERFORMANCE MONITORING QUARTER 3

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- 9.1 The Head of Policy and Resources outlined the report, and welcomed questions from the Committee.
- 9.2 Councillor Hilton queried why the proportion of waste that was recycled had decreased from a peak of 50% in May 2018 to 42% in December 2018 in CIE3. The Head of Policy and Resources advised that the relevant Officer would be contacted to provide information.
- 9.3 In considering the number of sickness days as shown in HR2, Councillor Hilton questioned why this had significantly increased in this quarter when compared to the equivalent quarter in 2017/18. Councillor Haigh suggested that this spike could be attributed to the flu, and the fact that not all individuals would have received the flu vaccine. Moreover, she noted that other organisations had experienced the same issue around this same period.
- 9.4 In reference to graph CIE3, Councillor Ryall expressed that she disagreed with the interpretation of the graph (in which both short and long term recycling trends were seen to be improving). She therefore sought further clarification on this. The Head of Policy and Resources advised that the relevant Officer would be contacted to provide information.
- 9.5 In reference to graph RB1, Councillor Haigh asked if it would be possible for comparative data on council tax collection from previous years to also be provided. Furthermore, she requested that further information be provided regarding the collection rate, such that it would be easier to see whether all council tax for that particular period was collected. The Head of Policy and Resources advised that the relevant Officer would be contacted to provide information.
- 9.6 Councillor Pullen noted that whilst it is positive to see that the number of complaints is reducing in CST3, it would be helpful if information could be provided as to how many of those complaints are actually resolved. The Head of Policy and Resources advised that the relevant Officer would be contacted to provide information.
- 9.6 Councillor Toleman queried how the trends in H2 and H4 could be interpreted as improving. He was of the opinion that the data did not corroborate this. The Head of Policy and Resources advised that the relevant Officer would be contacted to provide information.
- 9.7 **RESOLVED that:-** The Overview and Scrutiny Committee **NOTE** the report.

10. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

- 10.1 29th of April 2019 at 6.30pm in the Civic Suite, North Warehouse.

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Time of commencement: 6.30 pm hours

Time of conclusion: 7.30 pm hours

Chair