

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Meeting held in the Committee Room, Council Offices, Urban Road, Kirkby-in-Ashfield,

on Thursday, 12th January, 2017 at 6.30 pm

Present: Councillor Amanda Brown in the Chair;

Councillors Ben Bradley, David Griffiths
(substituting for Lee Anderson) John Knight,
Cathy Mason and Glenys Maxwell (substituting
for Joanne Donnelly)

Apologies for Absence: Councillors Lee Anderson, Christian Chapman
and Joanne Donnelly

Officers Present: Jenni French, Mike Joy, Alan Maher

In Attendance: Councillor Jim Aspinall

OS.12 Appointment of Chair

RESOLVED

That in the absence of Cllr Lee Anderson it was agreed that Cllr Amanda Brown should chair the meeting.

OS.13 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary and Non Disclosable Pecuniary/Other Interests.

There were no Declarations of Interest.

OS.14 To receive and approve as a correct record the minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, held on 11 October 2016

The minutes of the meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee held on 11 October 2016 were approved as a true record.

OS.15 An Introduction to Fuel Poverty and Affordable Warmth

The Scrutiny Manager introduced the new topic of Fuel Poverty and Affordable Warmth to the Committee. The report set out information on the problem of residents being unable to afford to keep their homes warm. It also looked at the ways in which Fuel Poverty can be replaced by Affordable Warmth, energy saving improvements that can be introduced to reduce heating costs and maximise efficiency.

Members were reminded that this was added to the 2016/17 Scrutiny workplan following concerns about fuel poverty and the far reaching effects that this can have to all aspects of life including health, employment and education. Members were interested in considering the impact of Fuel Poverty on the District and whether existing policies and strategies had helped to alleviate it. They also wanted to find out if there were opportunities for the Council to work in partnership to tackle the problem?

The Committee were informed that Ashfield has higher than average levels of Fuel Poverty in some wards in the District and that it is especially prevalent in older private rented housing, which often lack insulation or efficient heating systems. Many of those who live in the least energy efficient properties also have low incomes and often have to buy energy at high costs. This was seen as a specific problem for those who have to use prepaid meter cards, which can prove to be very expensive for them.

It was explained that the Council's own housing stock had been maintained to the 'Decent Homes' standard, which meant that nearly all of the properties were properly insulated and energy efficient. The Committee welcomed this.

Members were told about the action which the Council had taken to help reduce Fuel Poverty in the District. This consisted of measures to bring down the amount of energy used, through better insulation, installing more fuel efficient boilers etc. It also consisted of support to help people switch to cheaper gas and electricity tariffs.

Members were anxious that vulnerable groups such as the elderly, should have access to Affordable Warmth, in line with the Council's Corporate Plan objectives around Health & Wellbeing. The Committee heard that warm homes can help older people to remain healthier and more active. This in turn reduces the need to provide expensive social and health care support, such as longer stays in hospital or having to move into care homes.

The Committee discussed the report with the Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Health & Wellbeing, Cllr Jim Aspinall, and the Business Continuity and Sustainability Manager, Jenni French. What became apparent from this discussion was that although a lot had been done to help address Fuel Poverty a substantial number of improvements were still required to bring all homes in the District up to the appropriate levels of energy efficiency and to ensure that everyone had access to Affordable Warmth.

The Committee recognised that the Council had very limited resources with which to tackle Fuel Poverty and was likely to have even fewer resources in the future. As a consequence, it could not solve the problem of Fuel Poverty alone. Improved partnership working was considered to be the most appropriate way to address this issue.

Members were told that the Council had already worked in partnership and was trying to make sure that others contribute to tackling the problem. They also heard that other initiatives were planned to help do this.

Specific mention was made in this context of the Selective Landlord Licensing

Scheme. This scheme will be introduced in two pilot areas of the District, where there are many rented properties and where many tenants suffer from Fuel Poverty. Among other things, it requires landlords to improve their properties to make them more energy efficient for their tenants. If the scheme proves successful then a similar approach could be applied in other parts of the District. Members welcomed this.

The Committee discussed the scope for encouraging landlords to work directly with energy providers to help bring down energy costs for their tenants. Mention was made of schemes where people can receive lower price electricity in return for allowing companies to install solar panels on their roofs. It was explained that changes to the energy market meant that few, if any, such deals are now on offer. And that in any event there was no guarantee that any savings would be passed on by landlords to their tenants.

The Committee felt that one of the easiest ways of making sure people have access to Affordable Warmth is by helping them to switch energy suppliers, so that they pay the lowest possible tariffs. Members were told that the Council has put a lot of effort into helping residents to do this, and especially elderly people who may be worried about changing from suppliers who they may have been with for years. But given that there was only one part time officer available to carry out this work, capacity was restricted.

Nevertheless, Members felt that it would be helpful if more could be done to highlight the support which is available from a variety of sources to improve energy efficiency and about how to change their energy suppliers in order to get the lowest tariffs. This was seen as a practical way of tackling Fuel Poverty and promoting Affordable Warmth, which would require few if any extra resources to implement.

During their discussion Members expressed concern about how the energy supply market operates and especially how difficult it can be for ordinary people to find out what tariffs they are currently paying, so they can compare these to other suppliers and change to them if they are able to offer a lower price.

The Committee was told about the national introduction of 'Smart Meters', which measure exactly how much energy people use and how much they are paying for each unit of energy. Members were disappointed to hear that the Government had changed its policy on them. Instead of requiring that every home should have a Smart Meter installed by 2020, it only now requires that energy companies offer householders one.

Members felt that this would greatly reduce the take-up, including the take-up by people in Fuel Poverty, who might benefit greatly by having a Smart Meter. The Committee felt that Ministers should be urged to once again make the installation of Smart Meters for all customers a mandatory requirement on energy supply companies.

The Committee discussed the work that had been carried out by Nottingham City Council through their 'Robin Hood Energy' scheme to provide low tariffs. The scheme had been successful and as a consequence had helped to bring down the prices of other suppliers locally.

Members noted that discussions between the Cabinet and Robin Hood Energy were scheduled to take place. Members expressed an interest in receiving an update on these discussion.

At the conclusion of the discussion the Committee thanked Councillor Jim Aspinall and Jenni French for attending the meeting and for their contributions to the discussion.

There was a consensus that the Committee review this issue again in six months' time and that specific action be taken to help raise awareness of the options for tackling Fuel Poverty and to promote the widespread installation and use of Smart Meters.

RESOLVED

- a) That the members of the Council's Sustainability Team be thanked for their successful efforts to reduce Fuel Poverty and promote Affordable Warmth in the District;
- b) That Fuel Poverty continues to be recognised as a priority within the Health and Well-being agenda as a major determinate of health and duly considered as part of ongoing Health and Well-being priorities;
- c) That the Council formally writes to Ministers recommending that it once again should be a mandatory requirement on energy suppliers to provide smart meters for all of their customers and not just "offer them";
- d) That Corporate Communications be asked to prepare an appropriate media release explaining the Committee's concerns;
- e) That improved information be provided on the Councils web site and social media explaining what people can do to become more energy efficient;
- f) That the Committee receives an update following the discussions between Cabinet and Robin Hood Energy;
- g) That the Committee reviews the issue in six months' time.

Reasons

To consider the information provided and help identify any further details necessary to review the topic appropriately.

OS16 Scrutiny Work Plan 2016-17

The Committee next considered a report which set out the latest position on the remaining topics from the 2016/17 Workplan and the consultation arrangements with both Members and Officers to identify possible topics for the 2017-18 Scrutiny Workplan. As in previous years, all suggestions would be considered by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee so that it can determine the topics to be included in the Plan. Members of the Committee welcomed this.

RESOLVED

- a) That the Committee notes the ongoing topics on the 2016-17 Workplan;
- b) That the Committee and other Members consider and identify future topics for the 2017/18 Workplan that may benefit from scrutiny involvement.

Reasons

Consulting, reviewing and agreeing items for the Scrutiny Workplan 2017/18 provides guidance and direction for the work undertaken by Scrutiny in the coming year.

The meeting closed at 7.50 pm

Chairman.