

CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
THURSDAY 29 July 2021

Minutes of the remote attendance meeting of the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held on Thursday, 29 July 2021.

PRESENT: Councillor Clive Carver (Chairman)

Councillors: Haydn Bateman, Sean Bibby, Geoff Collett, Mared Eastwood, Patrick Heesom, Richard Jones, Richard Lloyd, Kevin Rush, Paul Shotton, Andy Williams and Arnold Woolley

APOLOGY: Councillor Sean Bibby (had a clash of meetings but joined later)

CONTRIBUTORS:

Councillor Ian Roberts, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Education, Councillor Billy Mullin, Deputy Leader (Governance) and Cabinet Member for Corporate Management and Assets, Councillor Paul Jonson, Cabinet Member for Finance, Social Value & Procurement, Chief Executive, Chief Officer (Education & Youth) Chief Officer (Housing & Assets), and Benefits Manger

IN ATTENDANCE: Head of Democratic Services, Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator and Democratic Services Support Officer

23. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

No Declarations were received

24. **POVERTY PRIORITY UPDATE REPORT**

The Chief Executive thanked Members for attending the special meeting to consider the Council Plan Poverty theme priorities. This had been remitted to this committee.

The Benefits Manager introduced the Poverty Priority Update Report. During and following the pandemic, tackling poverty and vulnerability in Flintshire had been critical and significant areas of work. She provided detailed information on how these were covered under the five key themes, which were:

- Income Poverty - which included information on the Benefits process, Discretionary Housing Payments Scheme (DHP), Clearing Rent Arrears, Tenancy Hardship Grant, Welfare Reform Team and Self Isolation payment.
- Child Poverty – which included information on Free School Meals, Uniform Grant Scheme and Direct Payments Process
- Food Poverty – which included information on Well-Fed Food Store, Well-Fed Mobile Shop and Holiday Hunger
- Fuel Poverty
- Digital Poverty – which included information on Digital Champion Scheme and Digital Exclusion

The Chair invited Members to ask questions. Councillor Paul Shotton referred to the £20 reduction in Universal Credit payments by the UK Government and asked if the impact on Flintshire families was known.

The Benefits Manager responded on the work her team had carried out and that Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) were being used to support these families. Unfortunately, there would be an impact for those families where housing costs were not included in their Universal Credit as they would lose £20 per week. It was difficult to quantify the impacts as the Council did not administer Universal Credit payments but the Authority's support services were publicised as widely as possible to highlight the assistance available for these families.

Councillor Shotton then asked where the Well-Fed Mobile Store was based. It was confirmed that the Well-Fed Mobile Shop was based at Shotton Kitchen with the Well-Fed Food Store based at Woodside Community Centre.

Councillor Shotton then referred to School Uniforms costs and said the schools that he was involved with had a scheme to re-use uniforms donated by parents and asked if this scheme was rolled out across all Flintshire schools.

The Chief Officer (Education & Youth) reassured members that the Council encouraged schools to follow the Welsh Government guidance that uniforms should be accessible and affordable. Schools promoted the School Uniform Grant Scheme, which also assisted in the provision of sports kits, and of brownie, cubs and scouts uniforms. She commented that the mapping of school uniform supplies across all schools had been delayed because of the pandemic but would be discussed at the Head Teachers Federation meeting in early September. Once this information was available, a map of supplies and gaps in provision could be established and then work undertaken to develop a better model and highlight the schemes which were available for families.

The Chair referred point 1.06 of the report on the grant available for Year 7 pupils of £200. He sought clarification on the amount of grant for looked after children. The Chief Officer confirmed that through the regional consortium, the Local Authority received £125 for each looked after child in every year of compulsory education. There was an agreed regional approach to how this funding was used to support all looked after pupils.

Councillor Richard Jones asked how many families were in poverty in Flintshire and how many was the Council assisting. The Benefits Manager said that this was very difficult to calculate as all of the data was not held by Flintshire and that there were numerous elements to it. There was information on the number of people claiming Council Tax Reduction, Housing Benefit but no information was available on how many people claimed Universal Credit.

Following the reduction in Universal Grant with the Discretionary Housing Payments used to plug the shortfall, Councillor Jones asked what happened to unused grant. The Benefits Manager confirmed the DWP grant was paid to the Authority throughout the year with any unused grant being returned but that generally there was an overspend. With regard to the WG support, the Authority incurred the expenditure and claimed that back.

Councillor Jones sought clarification on how referrals were made to the Well-Fed Store and Emergency Food Support. The Benefits Manager explained that referrals were made via the internal supporting people gateway, Welfare Reform Team and Social Services but that as this was rolled out more widely more agencies would become involved. Any time lag point could be impacted by a range of reasons. This was why the council provided a subsidy for a short period, to enable engagement with support services.

With regard to energy efficiency at home, Councillor Jones asked how many residents had benefited so far. The Benefits Manager did not have that information to hand but agreed to circulate it to members.

On page 10 at point 1.09 Councillor Jones commented that the definition for Digital Poverty was different from the Council Plan which he felt was more appropriate.

Councillor Jones referred to the top of page 8 and asked for an update on the work with free access to books, ICT networks and devices. In response the Chief Officer (Education & Youth) referred to a report which had been presented to the Education Youth & Culture Overview & Scrutiny Committee earlier in the year and gave information on the National Strategy and the survey of devices in schools. When the pandemic started, these devices were circulated quickly to schools who were able to loan them to pupils who did not have their own devices at home. Licences for Mifi devices were purchased so parents without Wifi at home could use these and also re-purposed council laptops were used. The Council's own work, supplemented by the Neumark Foundation and local business donations ensured every child in every school had access to devices to support their learning.

On the Digital Champion Scheme Councillor Jones asked what this role entailed and who would benefit from it. The Benefits Manager confirmed that this be would going live in September/ October with the aim to encourage everyone to support neighbours and people in the community to feel confident using digital platforms.

On Apprenticeships, the Benefits Manager reported that the Corporate Training Officer was looking to develop and encourage them to become Digital Champions within the community. The aim was to inspire other local businesses to access the webpage which contained ample information and resources. Councillor Jones had not realised that it was the Authority's apprentices that would be involved and said the Digital Champion Scheme did not describe in a clear way that this was more community based. The Benefits Manager confirmed when the Scheme launched all information would be placed on the website and that this was a community approach for reaching and supporting as many people as possible.

The Leader commended officers of the Council involved in this strategy and said that during the pilot for Universal Credit, and the difficult times during the pandemic, this work had been at the forefront. He also thanked the officers' involved supporting homelessness. He referred to the 'roll out' of strategy for schools and the national funding which was held in school budgets to assist children with their missed education or identified deficits. The Leader thanked all officers reacting to the situation during the pandemic and praised the community support provided, supplementing and enhancing the work of the Council. At the start of the pandemic, volunteers had collected prescriptions, shopping and supplies for neighbours who

were shielding. He also commented said that the food parcels operation at County Hall had been impressive sight to see.

Responding to Councillor Richard Jones on the scale of poverty, the Chief Executive explained that there was not one single measure to identify this and that the national figures on the levels of children living below the poverty line were based on family income. However, there were many supporting and specific indices of poverty. This report addressed aspects of poverty over which the Council had some influence and where it could act with the support of partners such as DWP, FLVC and Citizen's Advice. It was not possible to take a universal responsibility for poverty. He referred to other services provided such as (SPOA) Single point of access, Social Isolation and Digital Poverty, acknowledging that this was a really complicated field. Bringing together the work streams from the Benefits Manager's role with areas such as Housing, Benefits and Food Poverty and Chief Officer's portfolio for education and schools was key to making an impact.

Councillor Haydn Bateman asked what the difference was between Well-Fed Mobile Shop and the Well-Fed Food Store. The Benefits Manager confirmed the mobile shop was not a free service but that with engagement with rural communities this would enable a variety of fresh food to be delivered at competitive prices to a wider network. This was a new initiative.

Councillor Jones then asked the Chair if timelines could be attached to this which would enable a better understanding and allow questions to be asked. The Benefits Manager clarified that this was not a performance report and that in September / October more detail on the work streams would follow for Quarter 1, including detailed information on progress against the timeline and targets that had been set. This report was provided to update the committee on the Poverty theme and enable Members to ask questions

Councillor Richard Lloyd asked where the mobile shop would visit, how it would be publicised and whether ward members would be able to provide recommendations. The Benefits Manager responded that some rural areas had already been identified but confirmed that all suggestions would be considered. The Holway, Holywell was being considered because it was isolated from mainstream supermarkets. She was happy to receive any suggestions from Members. Councillor Lloyd suggested Saltney Ferry Mold Junction because of the distance from both shops and bus stops to access shops.

Councillor Paul Johnson referred to Social Value, and the impact the Council's work was making.

The Chief Executive responded to Councillor Jones and suggested that the Council Plan quarterly reports could include a separate report or appendix on the Poverty theme, to enable members to see the impact made. The Chair agreed that this would be very useful

The Chief Officer (Housing & Assets) suggested that anonymised real life stories be included as these would provide powerful evidence of the positive interventions that were being delivering through the poverty work stream and highlight how these had changed people's lives in a positive way. He said putting some of these stories in future reports it would bring them to life

Councillor Jones referred to the recommendation saying that he was interested in the numbers; even statistics from other organisations would provide an estimate of what the poverty level was in Flintshire. This would enable the Authority to see how it was performing and that together with the real life stories provide reassurances that all the people in need were being reached.

The Chief Executive reported on national data which could be used and the Regional Well Being Self-Assessment as contributors to research on the scale of poverty.

At the end of the discussion, the Head of Democratic Services suggested that the recommendation be amended to better reflect the Committee's deliberations and appreciation. The amended recommendation was accepted and moved and seconded by Councillors Paul Shotton and Richard Lloyd

RESOLVED:

That the Committee expresses its appreciation of the work undertaken in each of the poverty priority areas and thanked all of those involved.

25. **MEMBERS OF THE PRESS IN ATTENDANCE**

There were no members of the press in attendance.

(The meeting started at 10am and ended at 11.00 am)

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Chairman