



MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE HEALTH AND WELLBEING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 4th MARCH 2024

PRESENT: Councillor C Bain (Chair), Councillors M Bailey, R Claymore, S Daniels, C Dean, S Doyle and D Maycock

CABINET Councillor Samuel Smith

The following officers were present: Leanne Costello (Senior Scrutiny and Democratic Services Officer), Paul Weston (Assistant Director Assets) and Lee Birch (Head of Neighbourhood Services)

77 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor D Cook.

Apologies were received from Councillor S Doyle and M Bailey as they could not stay for the whole meeting and left at 19:38.

78 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 23rd January 2024 were approved as a correct record.

(Moved by Councillor R Claymore and seconded by Councillor D Maycock)

79 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

80 UPDATE FROM THE CHAIR

There was none.

81 RESPONSES TO REPORTS OF THE HEALTH & WELLBEING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

There were none.

82 CONSIDERATION OF MATTERS REFERRED TO THE HEALTH & WELLBEING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FROM CABINET OR COUNCIL

There were none.

83 UPDATE ON HEALTH RELATED MATTERS CONSIDERED BY STAFFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

There was no update.

84 UPDATE ON HOUSING ASSISTANCE POLICY

The Chair introduced the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Planning, Council Smith and the Assistant Director, Assets, Paul Weston who were returning to Committee with an update Housing Assistance Policy following on from the 24th January 2024 when the Committee received the report of the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Planning to review and consider the proposed draft Housing Assistance Policy (for the delivery of Mandatory and Discretionary Disabled Facilities Grants) prior to submission to Cabinet for full approval and adoption the Committee asked for the item to return with more information.

The Portfolio Holder thanked the Committee for their constructive input at the previous meeting and acknowledged that it was evident that further discussion was required around the number of residents on the waiting list and performance. They asked that the Committee to recognise and move the proposed policy forward as it allowed a provision for applicants to be recognised as 'Urgent' or 'Standard' and highlighted what the criteria for an 'urgent' case was (Policy pages 19/20), whilst recognising that a deeper delve needed to be done into prioritisation and to refine the policy. They also highlighted the additional benefits introduced via the policy for discretionary grants (policy pg 52) were net positives to the current mandatory approach.

The Committee made the following comments/observations and asked the following questions:

1. Who can apply and how many applicants do they currently have.
The Officer confirmed that the scheme is for anyone other than Council tenants. The Council took the service in-house from April 2023. There were 150 transfer cases and to the end of January 2024 they have received 115 referrals.
The Officer highlighted that further to a question at the last meeting that they have no data yet around why cases may not progress however there are a number of reasons for this including; ineligibility once means testing applied; decision to self-fund to avoid wait times; refusal of landlord

consent (private rented); current cap on grants meaning funding would not cover works and applying to the wrong area.

2. What happens where landlord consent is refused? Do the team provide any alternatives options?

The Officer confirmed that the DFG team's role is to assess the applications and they do not provide other options, however there may be other options through the Council where their property is unsuitable.

3. How is the means testing calculated and is there an example? Can everyone access the application as there are concerns that residents may slip through the net, and do the Council have any discretion to look at applications that may be refused but fall close to the criteria?

The Officer confirmed that this is a standard process, but that it is a complex calculation and included looking at assets, passport benefits, and what can be paid back. It was noted that children's applications are not means tested. Whilst people can apply yourself themselves the teams will work with residents to support them with making their application. There are online calculators available to view calculations. If the Council were to consider a policy that said that would not look at means testing that all the implications of this would need to be considered.

4. Concerns over the current process of working through applications within date order and since the service was taken on how many applications have been completed?

The Officer confirmed that as they inherited the service, they are currently working with the data they have. There have been 69 cases closed, 75 allocated to a case worker, 2 are awaiting approval, 4 at the planning stage and 4 where work is ongoing on site. Any referrals received up to quarter two, aimed to be triaged by April 2024. It was explained that letters were going out to residents to explain where they are in the process.

The Portfolio Holder acknowledged that previously there was no policy, and they were only working within mandatory requirements and whilst more works needs to be done the policy is an improvement.

5. Clarification around the budget including average costs of works.

The Officer highlighted that the figures were estimates but that there is currently a budget of approximately £1.92 million, £1.2 million which came back from Millbrook and the £700k budget allocation for 2023/2024. It is expected that they would receive an average of 135 referrals a year worth £940k with a budget of £700k so there would always be cases that could not be reached. The 700k is based on approximate allocation of £600k from the Better Care fund and £100k from the Council budget.

Of the £1.9 million approximately £1.6 million would go on works and £300k on other costs. (Staffing, OT etc). Of the £700k per year approximately £500k would go on works.

Average cost of works is between £6-7k however works cost vary massively from a stairlift, to a level access shower to an extension.

6. Concerns were raised over the current staffing and capacity to clear the backlog of cases and it was asked how long it would take to triage a case and with no back log?

It was confirmed there is currently a senior caseworker and an assistant, the assistant has recently left but will be replaced with a caseworker and then there are technical Officers. Once the back log is cleared the aim is to

triage within 6 weeks however it is difficult to put a timeline on the applications process as this is reliant on applicants providing information, landlords consent etc. Whilst it will be possible to clear the backlog of applications there will always be a backlog of delivery of works due to funding. There was no final date for clearing the backlog.

7. Concerns around the decision not to prioritise ex-service personnel within the policy having signed up to the armed forces covenant.
It was confirmed that advice had been sought from Foundations, on this matter and the policy is about having regards for people with disabilities, by prioritising ex-service personnel then applicants may not end up being prioritised upon disability.
The Portfolio Holder acknowledged that whilst veterans should be prioritised that in these circumstances that can create difficulties when comparing an application. A recommendation was put forward to asked for those who have been 'medically discharged' to be prioritised.
8. The Committee highlighted that they did not feel that they could endorse the policy as fit for purpose whilst the backlog of cases was there and a recommendation was moved to for Cabinet to look at coming up with a plan to provide a resource to clear the backlog.

Resolved that the Committee

1. reviewed and considered the proposed assistance provided by the Council under the draft Housing Assistance Policy (Appendix A).
2. Commented on the inclusion of various 'Discretionary Schemes' proposed.

(Recommendations 1 and 2 were moved by Councillor R Claymore and seconded by Councillor D Maycock)

The Committee made the following additional recommendations to Cabinet:

3. to look at a proposal for providing extra resource to assist the Assistant Director with the backlog and a review of the process

(Moved by Councillor M Bailey and seconded by Council S Doyle)

4. That page 7 includes a priority of those that have been medically discharged from the armed forces.

(Moved by Councillor D Maycock and seconded by Councillor S Doyle)

Formally recommended the Policy to Cabinet for approval and adoption in March`

(This recommendation was not moved)

85 FORWARD PLAN

There were no items identified from the Forward plan.

86 WORKING GROUP UPDATES

The Chair highlighted that an email had been circulated proposing a working group be created to look to Review of the Implementation or the Service to bring Disabled Adaptations In-House and a scoping document was sent out to Committee asking for volunteers to be on the working Group. Councillors Maycock and Dean had volunteered to be part of the working group.

87 HEALTH & WELLBEING SCRUTINY WORK PLAN

The Chair noted that the next meeting was on March 26th 2024 and the Committee were expecting the safeguarding update.

88 EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

Resolved by the Committee:

That in accordance with the provisions of the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Meeting and Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012, and Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting during the consideration of the following business on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraphs 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Act and the public interest in withholding the information outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information to the public

(Moved by Councillor R Claymore and seconded by Councillor C Dean)

89 RE-PROCUREMENT OF THE COUNCIL'S 24-HOUR COMMUNITY ALARM SERVICE

Presentation from the Head of Housing Management and Neighbourhood Resilience, Lee Birch the re procurement of the Council's 24 hour Community alarm service.

The Committee moved a recommendation to endorse the approach to the re-procurement of the service.

(Moved by Councillor C Dean and seconded by Councillor D Maycock)

Chair