

Agenda Item: 4

PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES POLICY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the People and Communities Policy Committee of South Norfolk District Council held on Thursday 21 April 2022 at 10.00am.

Committee Members Present: Councillors: D Bills (Chairman), S Blundell, M Dewsbury
T Holden, N Legg and S Nuri Nixon

Apologies for Absence: Councillors: J Easter and J Wilby

Substitutes: Councillors: F Ellis (for J Wilby)

Officers in Attendance: The Director of People and Communities (J Sutterby), the Assistant Director Individuals and Families (M Pursehouse), the Housing and Benefits Manager (L Sayer), Domestic Abuse Support Specialist (G Bloomfield) and the Democratic Services Officer (L Arthurton)

42 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Easter and J Wilby.

43 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interests were made.

44 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the People and Communities Policy Committee held on 31 March 2022 were confirmed as a correct record.

45 ENERGY REBATE SCHEME

The Housing and Benefits Manager introduced the report which outlined details of the £150 Energy Rebate Scheme which was to be administered by Council tax billing authorities. The report also sought approval for the Discretionary Payment Scheme policy.

Members noted that the Government guidance termed the scheme as the 'Council Tax Rebate Scheme 2022-2023' however as this was independent of any other Council Tax rebates, Officers had decided to amend the name to 'Energy Rebate scheme'.

Officers explained that the Council was working in collaboration with an external company to deliver the scheme, which would allow for timely payments to residents, whilst mitigating the administrative burden on the Council Tax and Benefits Teams. The Councils would also provide further support through the Hardship and Discretionary Schemes for residences in need. Members noted that the recommendation listed in the report allowed officers to efficiently engage with any future schemes which might come forward.

In response to a question regarding whether the delegated authority was placed with the individual or with the post, officers confirmed that the post had the authority, but this could always be reviewed by Councillors.

Officers confirmed to members that the increase in staff would see two extra positions in both the Council Tax and Benefit teams. Members noted that each area would have the ability to offer full support to those who needed it and would be funded by the New Burdens Fund.

Conversation turned to the external company that would help administer the payment to residents. Members noted that the company would provide support and the best efficiency when processing the payments. A follow-up question was asked regarding the cost and security of using a private company. The Assistant Director for Individuals and Families confirmed that the £15,000 charge to the Council from the external company was the most efficient way forward when factoring systems and admin costs. He also confirmed that the company had the right security and data protection procedures in place. It was confirmed to members that an external company would only manage the admin and payments with all decisions on funding made by officers at the Council.

The Chairman thanked officers for their report, and it was

RESOLVED

TO RECOMMEND THAT CABINET delegates permission for future discretionary schemes to be determined by the appropriate Assistant Director and the Section 151 officer in collaboration with the Portfolio Holder

The Domestic Abuse Support Specialist introduced the report which provided members with an overview of the Council's work in tackling domestic abuse. The Committee heard that the Domestic Abuse Act became law in 2021, and that there was two key areas of statutory responsibility for tier two local authorities:

- Under Part IV of the act, tier 1 local authorities must provide support within safe accommodation, such as refuge to victims of domestic abuse. Tier 2 authorities must support and cooperate with tier 1 authorities to achieve this. And;
- All eligible homeless victims of domestic abuse automatically have 'priority need' for homelessness assistance

Following this a requirement for two new trained members staff was needed to provide help and support with accommodation matters. Members noted that the New Burdens Funding would help achieve this for the Council. The Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance Accreditation linked with the two posts would enhance the One Team's approach to domestic abuse by strengthening procedures and policies. This would also enable the Council to provide a high quality of service to customers and staff.

Members noted that the structures in place would ensure that contact and help could be easily accessed by all. The Chairman thanked the officers for their report and invited debate from members.

In response to a question, officers explained that staff approached every case professionally and had adopted a victim lead approach. Members also noted that there had been a push in providing training for officers in the Council to provide further support.

One member raised a query regarding the quality of the accommodation, and the Assistant Director explained that the Council provided bespoke accommodation for domestic abuse cases. He also confirmed that the right security measures were in place for the properties. The Council currently had three furnished properties and two self-contained unfurnished properties for family use. The Council did not use unfit properties and would always ensure that people were in suitable accommodation.

In response to a query on the aftercare the Council offered domestic abuse victims, officers confirmed that a support worker would work with individuals for six weeks. Following this, the Community Connectors would continue to work with individuals and offer support. A further question was raised on the out of hours support available, and it was confirmed that the properties would be managed nine to five Monday to Friday and national helplines would be the

point of contact after hours. Support workers provided welcome packs to individuals which included telephone numbers and points of contact.

Discussion turned to how the Council could prevent victims from returning to their abusers, officers explained that wider resources were available and wrap around care would be offered to help prevent this. A further question was raised over how the cases which involved children would be managed and members noted that the Council worked closely with Children's Services at Norfolk County Council in such cases.

Reference was made by a member to the range of victims of domestic abuse and the importance that support was provided for both men and women. Officers confirmed that a recent review of policy had led to the definition and boundaries being widened to become more inclusive.

One member noted that cases of domestic abuse had risen over the pandemic and asked officers if numbers would start to decrease as the country moved out of the pandemic. The Domestic Abuse Support Specialist explained that the Council did see a rise in the number of cases reported over the lockdowns but did not believe that numbers would drop. He further explained that an increase in publicity and access to help would allow victims to come forward for support.

One member suggested that working with the younger generation would help to educate and prevent cases from arising in the future. Officers noted the importance of delivering the message as early as possible and added that this was currently being discussed with wider partners of the Council.

The Chairman thanked officers for their report and it was;

RESOLVED:

To note the report.

(The meeting concluded at 11.42 am)

Chairman