

SOUTH NORFOLK SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the South Norfolk Scrutiny Committee of South Norfolk Council, held on Thursday, 29 February 2024 at 10.00 am.

Committee Members Present: Councillors: J Rowe (Chairman), T Laidlaw (Vice-Chair), B Bernard, J Cork, K Cross, J Overton and D Thompson

Apologies for Absence: Councillors: T Graham and S Ridley

Substitute: Councillors: K Murphy (In place of T Graham)

Cabinet Member in Attendance: Councillor: R Elliott and G Minshull

Officers in Attendance: M Pursehouse (Assistant Director of Individuals and Families), K Gallagher (Help Hub and Communities Senior Manager), S Carey (Strategic Advisor and Deputy Monitoring Officer) and J Hammond (Democratic Services Officer)

1369. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr T Graham, with Cllr K Murphy substituting and from Cllr S Ridley.

1370. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were received.

1371. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 1 February 2024 were confirmed as a correct record.

1372. COST OF LIVING REVIEW

Cllr G Minshull, the Portfolio Holder for Supporting People, introduced the report of the Health & Wellbeing Senior Manager, which presented the recent audit of the cost-of-living programme to the Committee for review.

The audit focussed on the Council's cost-of-living response during the winter and spring of 2022/23 at a time when the Council was administering several large

grants from central Government. These grants were implemented and rolled out quickly to support families who were struggling with household bills.

The increase in household bills were caused by a range of factors such as interest rate increases and post-covid issues. The Assistant Director of Individuals and Families highlighted the recent statistics which estimated that households needed to earn:

- £28,000 to be able to afford to live,
- £32,000 to be able to afford to live in private rented accommodation,
- £38,000 to be able to afford to live in private rented accommodation whilst saving for a mortgage deposit.

One member raised concern that in order to qualify for Universal Credit you had to have a household income of less than £16,000, which they felt to be significantly lower than the household income needed to live on.

With regard to the Internal Audit review, the Assistant Director of Individuals and Families explained that the team had reviewed the audit and commented on the key findings and management action plan. The audit recommendations would form part of the health inequalities work. He added that the team had pushed back on some areas of the audit's recommendations, where there was a concern that implementing the recommendations would hamper the team's ability to support people in urgent need.

Members highlighted a key finding from the audit, which had identified cases where claimants' financial situation had not been reviewed prior to support being given, and other cases where there was no evidence of approval being retained by the budget manager. The Assistant Director of Individuals and Families explained that a large number of Help Hub cases required the officers to make on the spot decisions on how to support urgent cases. The Health & Wellbeing Senior Manager added that the team's first priority was to ensure the person was comfortable in the short-term whilst longer-term support could be arranged.

Discussion turned to the IT limitations which arose from using three different platforms within the service. The Health & Wellbeing Senior Manager informed the Committee that detailed records were kept on all cases, however they could not always be updated seamlessly across the three systems. Members queried whether a better system could be used for the record keeping. The Assistant Director of Individuals and Families stressed the importance of utilising the teams limited budget to maintain staffing and resource levels, but noted that improvements to the systems were needed. He agreed to work with the IT team to look into ways to develop the IT systems used.

The Committee commended the team on the vital work they were doing.

It was then,

RESOLVED

To

1. Receive the contents of the report.

2. Recommend that officers explore and develop better use of IT systems within the help hub to address the findings in the Internal Audit report.

1373. SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME, TRACKER AND CABINET FORWARD PLAN

The Committee noted the Work Programme, Tracker and Cabinet Forward Plan.

(The meeting concluded at 10.51 am)

Chairman