

RESOURCES & DELIVERING VALUE SCRUTINY BOARD - 7 November 2022

MINUTES

Present Councillors: M Parker (Chairman), R Holt, J Tildesley, D Gibbin, Y Clements, M Allen, N Moses, A Adeyemo, A Hodgson

Guests Councillor S Caudwell

Officers Paul Johnson: Director of Resources and Deputy Chief Executive
Sam Gilbert: Assistant Director, Finance & Property Services
Alison McGrory: Assistant Director, Communities & Partnerships
Sarah Barnes: Head of Business Intelligence & Improvement
K Millard: Customer Relations Manager
A Pretty: Strategic Lead – Customer Services
Paul Rogers: Democratic Services

In Attendance Councillor I Courts: Leader of the Council & Lead Member for the Economy
Councillor K Grinsell: Deputy Leader of the Council & Lead Member for Partnerships and Wellbeing
Councillor D Howell: Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Communities & Leisure

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies for absence were received.

2. DECLARATIONS OF PECUNIARY OR CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were received.

3. QUESTIONS AND DEPUTATIONS

No questions or deputations were received.

4. MINUTES

The Resources and Delivering Value Scrutiny Board:

RESOLVED:

- (i) To agree the Minutes arising from the Resources and Delivering Value Scrutiny Board meeting held on 3rd October 2022 to be an accurate record.

5. COUNCIL MEETING 11 OCTOBER 2022: MOTION FROM COUNCILLOR S CAUDWELL

At the Council Meeting held on 3rd October 2022, the following Motion was proposed by Councillor Caudwell and seconded by Councillor M McLoughlin, which was subsequently referred to the Resources and Delivering Value Scrutiny Board for further discussion and consideration:

“The Council acknowledges the challenges many residents may face with rising energy bills. We do not accept that fuel poverty should endanger any lives of Solihull residents. The Council stands ready to support, within our means, any residents struggling to stay warm this winter. In supporting residents, we will account for the safety and dignity of those impacted, and any employees supporting these efforts. Whilst we recognise the pressures on Local Government finances, we accept that we have a responsibility to coordinate and deliver additional support to those in greatest need.

This Council:

- a. Agrees that no resident of our Borough should be unable to stay warm this winter.*
- b. Notes the well-documented relationship between fuel poverty and adverse health outcomes; and*
- c. Acknowledges the steps taken by similar Councils throughout the country to make public buildings and partner facilities available to their residents, to provide safe shelter this winter.*

This Council therefore resolves to:

- d. Direct the Chief Executive to provide officer and infrastructure support as necessary to ensure the warmth and safety of our residents this winter; and*
- e. Provide updates on progress through the Stronger Communities and Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Board and the Cabinet.”*

The Chairman read in full the Council Motion for the benefit of the Members of the Resources and Delivering Value Scrutiny Board and then invited Councillor Caudwell to address the Scrutiny Board.

Councillor Caudwell stated that since the Council Motion had been submitted matters had progressed regarding the cost-of-living pressures issue. The original purpose of the Council Motion was to address significant challenges

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regarding the growing cost of living pressures that residents are facing, which includes energy and inflationary pressures outstripping wage growth. Furthermore, the Council Motion was intended to highlight and clarify what actions were being taken by the Council to address the cost-of-living pressures, as well as identifying good practice being implemented nationally to do so.

Councillor Caudwell had comments around the 'Warm Spaces' initiatives being implemented elsewhere, as referenced in the Council Motion and was pleased to see that the initiative was addressed in the Cost-of-Living Pressures report at Item 6 of the agenda.

A further concern highlighted by Councillor Caudwell related to those people who were living marginally above the recognised poverty line that could not claim any significant support due to means testing thresholds, which had led to an increase in people seeking assistance.

The Resources and Delivering Value Scrutiny Board:

RESOLVED:

- i) To note Councillor Caudwell's Council Motion from 11th October 2022 and to discuss the matters raised within it in further detail under Agenda Item 6 'Solihull's Response to the Cost-of-Living Pressure'.

6. SOLIHULL'S RESPONSE TO THE COST OF LIVING PRESSURE

The report before the Scrutiny Board provided Members with an update on Solihull's response to the cost-of-living pressures. This follows a motion to Full Council on 11th October 2022. Full Council resolved to refer the motion to the Resources and Delivering Value Scrutiny Board for consideration.

The report was introduced by the Assistant Director, Communities & Partnerships. Members were informed that the Council had established a Lead Officer and Partnership Group, which was dynamic in responding to the current cost of living situation. The group convened fortnightly to meet with the voluntary and community sector to liaise and discuss appropriate initiatives. An Action Plan was in place as detailed in the report to the Scrutiny Board, which was updated weekly. Member's comments were sought on any apparent gaps in the Action Plan.

Officers were commencing monitoring the plan dashboard and impacts arising as from November 2022. It had been noted that the voluntary and community sector was requesting early sight of information pertaining to debt advice. There had been a noted increased source of anxiety in the local community arising from debt advice, hence the request for early notification of such cases. It was noted that the voluntary and community sector were often the first points of contact for the public in times of need and stress. The report before the

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Scrutiny Board detailed all of the Council's current initiatives and further suggestions from Members were welcomed.

The Assistant Director, Communities & Partnerships confirmed that the Council's libraries were to be badged as 'Warm Welcome' centres, with the offer in terms of opening hours, being raised as circumstances dictated. Council Officers were watching other local authority's initiatives and were also exploring further how the Council could work with the voluntary and community sector and faith groups in the delivery of their initiatives and the roll out of the warm spaces concept.

The Assistant Director, Communities & Partnerships noted that the response to the Cost-of-Living pressures was a Solihull, rather than Council only, response. Key points that had been recognised to date included making access to advice services as easy as possible and to have in place clear pathways to access financial and debt advice. The Council and its partners continued to be open and responsive to any further suggestions as to what initiatives could be put in place to assist Solihull residents.

Having received the introduction to the report from the Assistant Director, Communities & Partnerships, Members of the Scrutiny Board raised several related questions to the report, which in summary included the following matters:

Councillor Parker noted that all Councillors had a role to play in keeping residents informed regarding Council services and initiatives that could be of support to them, which included information dissemination via social media platforms.

Councillor Allen referenced warm hubs and queried how those vulnerable people / groups not currently in receipt of Council services would be recognised and how would vulnerable people be able to access the warm hubs.

Members were advised that the Council was in the process of producing a booklet detailing Council services. This was earmarked for residents aged over 75, which entailed 12,500 homes across the borough. Furthermore, a Community Champions Group was also in place, comprising of 150 people throughout the borough that could be used to disseminate appropriate messages relating to Council services and community support for those residents who did not have any access to social media platforms. GP surgeries were also texting patients highlighting the Here2Help website. The Council was also working very closely with several Commissioning Groups via the Community Development Team.

Councillor Adeyemo expressed concern that Food Banks were reported to be struggling with the level of demand for their services and sought further detail as to how they were being supported and what scope existed for the Council to

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use food banks to deliver other support services directly to residents. Members were advised that residents were also supported via the Food Network, with the Council having apportioned some reserves funding specifically for voluntary groups to apply and bid for. The Council was also seeking to identify how it could directly support the Food Network with donations and supplies and to attract more volunteers to support the Food Network across the borough.

Councillor Holt noted the success of the food voucher scheme which was texted directly to parents to help support their children and noted that the range of support services made available to support children over the summer period was comprehensive. Councillor Holt also noted that the warm spaces initiative could be used to draw several support services together at one location for easy access.

The Assistant Director, Communities & Partnerships advised that there was not as much children's outdoor activities provision in the winter period as was the case over the summer. However, Members were advised that the warm spaces initiatives planned for the borough's libraries may support those children who did not currently qualify for placements on holiday schemes or Food Network support i.e. for those families who were only just above the threshold qualifying for assistance.

Councillor Holt noted the potential that the warm spaces initiative had to offer in engaging positively with children and young people towards supporting their wider development.

Councillor Allen sought clarification as to whether the Holiday Supermarket Voucher Scheme was government or Council funded. Members were advised that funding was received by the Council from central government. The Council then had the discretion as to how to use the funding received. In respect of the Holiday Supermarket Voucher Scheme, the amount of money placed on the voucher was determined directly by the number of people the Council could support.

Councillor Moses made direct reference to the report, specifically to the potential increase in claims from those whose incomes were just above the thresholds qualifying for assistance and asked what actions the Council was taking to support these residents. The Assistant Director, Communities & Partnerships advised the Scrutiny Board that the Council was working with its partners and the Department for Works and Pensions (DWP) in an effort to identify such residents, who generally were considered to be the hardest group to reach. The Council was seeking to offer financial support advice and to provide clear signposting to support services for these residents.

Councillor Moses referenced the Action Plan Dashboard Metrics and queried whether it was possible to capture locality target to target support. Members were informed that the Council sought to identify problems and pressures

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residents faced before they grew in scale generally, which would in turn influence how resources were targeted.

In relation to partnership working, Councillor Parker noted that he could not find any reference to the Here2Help initiative on the Solihull Community Housing (SCH) website and queried whether SCH tenants in Solihull were aware of it. The Assistant Director, Communities & Partnerships advised that this would be followed up and advised that SCH was represented on the Lead Officer Group and that SCH were targeting their tenants with cost-of-living initiatives.

Councillor Parker noted that in relation to partnership working arrangements there appeared to be little reference made to the role of the business sector/private enterprise. Councillor Parker further observed that there appeared to be potential for the Council to offer more support to local employers in addressing the current cost of living challenges.

The Scrutiny Board was advised that there was a Business Development Group in place, which worked to support small businesses and local employers and which in turn received feedback from small businesses located in the borough as to how the Council could offer them support moving forward. Members were also informed that JLR had approached the Council proactively to support the local voluntary/community sector in the borough, specifically regarding encouraging volunteering.

Councillor Tildesley noted the Government's financial assistance provided nationally to OAPs to offset cost of living pressures, which amounted to a significant investment. With reference to The Core, Councillor Tildesley reported that he had personally observed an increase in the number of activities taking place and a corresponding increase in the number of people visiting The Core to access Council support services.

Councillor Moses referenced the *Cost-of-Living Pressures Action Plan, Financial Inclusion Group that coordinates access to support and guidance* section, seeking further information on the approach taken to debt recovery and what outcomes were desired. The Assistant Director, Communities & Partnerships confirmed that the Financial Inclusion Group (FIG) comprised of the Council, DWP and several debt charities located in Solihull. Members were informed that the Council's Debt Recovery Team and SCH managed their respective debt plans in different ways when taking account of household income. Consequently, the Council and SCH were seeking to establish a universal approach to be applied across all FIG members in this respect. In respect of recovery actions relating to Council Tax/rent arrears, the Council response taken was a balanced approach which took account of a resident's specific circumstances and profile.

Councillor Caudwell questioned how Primary, Secondary Schools and Academies in the borough were being used to help identify families needing

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support and what steps the Council was taking to survey its own employees. Members were informed that the Council had a Lead Officer in place providing a link to education services. The Schools Newsletter was also used to convey messaging around support services available in the borough for families to access. Internally, the Council offered cost of living support to all of its employees, with several services available to employees on-line, 'Lunch and Learn' sessions and the Council Core Brief sign posting Here2Help services, all of which raise awareness of available support services for Council employees.

Councillor Grinsell highlighted that regarding SCH, Here2Help services were available on-line and that SCH support services would feature in the next Newsletter being issued to all SCH tenants. Furthermore, software had been introduced to trial which helped to predict which tenants may be beginning to experience financial difficulties, particularly in respect of rent arrears.

Councillor Howell noted that the Council was working to support Solihull residents in many ways, which included the use of the borough's library network, signposting services, Council web site pages and the Connect services, releasing Council reserves to support the voluntary and community sector and distribution of £1.4M from the Household Support Funding Scheme.

Councillor Parker noted that there was much work in progress and being implemented by the Council and its partners to counter the current cost of living pressures. *The Cost-of-Living Pressures* Action Plan would continue to be kept under review and the Scrutiny Board updated accordingly. Councillor Parker noted that all Councillors had a role to play in supporting the signposting of those Council services which would assist residents in alleviating the everyday cost of living pressures.

Councillor Parker concluded that he was satisfied the Council was delivering all initiatives, resources and support it could at the present time in the interests of the borough's residents but would like to see further bridges built with the borough's business sector.

Having considered and discussed the 'Solihull's Response to the Cost-of-Living Pressure' report in detail, the Resources and Delivering Value Scrutiny Board:

RESOLVED:

- (i) To note and support the approach the Council was taking to support residents through the winter period in 2022.

7. ANNUAL COMPLAINTS REPORTS - 2021/2022

The report before the Scrutiny Board provided Members with an overview of both Corporate and Statutory complaints and compliments activity for 2021/22. The Customer Relations Manager introduced the report.

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Members were informed that the report addressed Children's Services and Adult Social Care statutory complaints procedures and Corporate Complaints procedures. The number of Childrens and Adult Social Care complaints had decreased slightly compared to the previous year, as had those pertaining to residential care homes.

Although the number of Corporate Complaints had slightly decreased there had been a rise in those going forward to formal complaint stages. Complaints progressing to the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) remained relatively low.

Members of the Scrutiny Board raised several related questions to the report, which in summary included the following matters.

Councillor Gibbin queried how Council staff were supported when managing vexatious complaints. The Customer Relations Manager informed the Scrutiny Board that a Council policy was in place addressing vexatious complaints. In the case of vexatious complaints, the complainant would be contacted and provided with a specific telephone number/e-mail address to contain the complainant from reaching wider staff groups.

The Council's Complaints Team liaise with relevant senior managers regarding vexatious complaints and offer support daily to those staff members addressing the complaint. The Complaints Team also has the means to act as a first line of contact for on-going communications for such complaints, as well as liaising with the Human Resources department as part of the staff support protocols as needed.

Having received the introduction to the report, Members of the Scrutiny Board raised several related questions to the report, which in summary included the following matters:

Councillor Allen highlighted the table within the report which detailed categories of issues raised within complaints received and noted that there appeared to be a definite trend in relation to the categories of *Attitude or Behaviour of Staff* and *Unsatisfactory Communication*. Councillor Allen noted that both categories were fundamental as to how Children's Services should be delivered and queried what actions were being taken to address these issues.

The Customer Relations Manager informed Members that the relevant line or team manager completes a learning form according to the nature of the complaint received. The Complaints Team follow up through the established complaints learning processes in place, which requires the service area involved in the complaint to confirm to the Complaints Team that all related learning arising through the complaint had been implemented in the business area. Furthermore, the Corporate Leadership Team received complaints data on a quarterly basis for review and Directorate Leadership Teams also received complaints reports data.

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Councillor Allen stated that the learning processes in place did not appear to be addressing apparent difficulties with client communications and sought further detail as to how learning was evaluated. The Customer Relations Manager advised the Scrutiny Board that all highlighted learning was collated and that officers from the Complaints Team attended the respective services team meetings to discuss the nature of the complaint and what further actions could be implemented to potentially reduce the number of future complaints to a minimum.

Councillor Parker observed that to prevent a repetition of the same type of complaints from arising, the root cause of the complaints had to be first identified, which may involve changing existing practices and/or staff training. Regarding the complaint feedback forms issued to line managers and senior managers, Councillor Parker queried how much of the Complaints Team time was taken with reviewing the feedback forms.

The Customer Relations Manger confirmed that all feedback forms issued were returned completed to the Complaints Team, with the majority having been returned with responses from relevant social workers when requested.

Councillor Moses highlighted learning issues about the lack of communication, specifically those highlighted in the report which detailed:

- *Ensure that social workers understand the impact of how they present information to families*
- *Continue to remind social workers of their duty to respond to a request in a timely way*
- *Undertake reflection about how the complainant perceived use of language and tone*

Councillor Moses questioned whether the necessary learning was not in fact being undertaken due to factors such as time constraints and availability of resources.

The Customer Relations Manager advised that the complaints Learning Forms did take account of factors such as required resources to successfully implement the learning arising from the review of the complaint. Furthermore, the Learning Forms did require the relevant manager to state how the learning from the complaint would be achieved, how it would be delivered and by whom.

Councillor Moses stated that a proactive approach should be taken by service areas when addressing complaints and he was concerned that the trend analysis available appeared to show that some staff attitudes were an issue as a source for complaints arising. In respect of taking learning from complaints received, Councillor Moses observed that equal learning could be taken by service areas from compliments received and questioned whether compliments received were fed back to the teams/officers concerned.

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The Customer Relations Manager confirmed that learning from compliments received was managed in a similar way as for identifying any best practice by a social worker to share and highlight with others.

Councillor Tildesley sought clarification as to whether all compliments received were recorded and noted that the report had not addressed what happened to those employees who were dismissed / resigned, or who had received final written warnings and how were such cases dealt with.

The Customer Relations Manager confirmed that a pro-active approach was taken in respect of all compliments received, with staff being reminded to raise instances of compliments having been received, as learning and best practice was taken where possible from compliments. Regarding employee disciplinary procedures, the Council's Human Resources (HR) service managed any such cases. Such confidential information could only be shared in a relatively limited way, especially as any disciplinary cases pertained to the responsible manager and the H.R. service.

Councillor Tildesley clarified that he was only seeking clarification as to the numbers, not identity, of those employees who had been dismissed or received a written, final warning, as such information was vital to establish how the Council was dealing with such employees.

The Director of Resources and Deputy Chief Executive informed the Scrutiny Board that disciplinary statistics for Council employees and the related issues as raised by the Scrutiny Board would be brought forward to the Scrutiny Board as part of a wider encompassing HR report scheduled as part of the Scrutiny Board's 2022/23 work programme for the latter half of the municipal year.

Councillor Adeyemo queried how repeat complaints were managed, specifically whether they were classed under one heading or if the constituent components of the complaint, if applicable, were recorded separately. The Customer Relations Manager advised that complaints were recorded separately by individual. If a repeat complaint is received that had been managed through to the end of the formal complaints process, the person concerned would be advised that they had the option of approaching the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) to pursue their complaint further as a final recourse. The complaint would not be logged repeatedly thereafter.

Councillor Adeyemo noted that it was not made clear how many complaints were put on hold, for example due to on-going related Police investigations. Members were informed that this would not be relevant to the Council's complaints process, as people would be re-directed to the appropriate organisation if the complaint was not relevant to the Council. If the originator of a complaint was in the process of taking legal action against the Council, the matter would not be dealt with through the Council's complaints procedures.

In respect of Children's Services, Councillor Adeyemo sought clarification as to what redress was available to a complainant in instances of undue stress having been caused them through the fault of the service. Members were

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informed that in any such cases, the LGO offers advice as to remedies that could be offered to the complainant in settlement. Factors to be considered in reaching a settlement would include time, trouble and distress caused to the complainant and typically would range from £100 to £500. A formal apology would also be issued from the Council to the complainant.

The Director of Resources and Deputy Chief Executive clarified further that it was not a case of any fiscal recompense being 'claimed' as such, but rather it was the Council making a payment proposal if deemed an appropriate response.

Councillor Clements queried how many officers formed the Complaints Team, whether complaints received by telephone were recorded and whether e-mail/telephone complaint transcripts were used as part of staff training and development.

The Customer Relations Manager advised that 4 officers comprised the Complaints Team for Childrens Services and Adult Social Care, whilst 2 officers formed the Corporate Complaints Team. The Complaints Team administered the complaints process. The Complaints Team would have a conversation directly with the complainant once an e-mail complaint had been recorded. A desired outcome arising from the complaint would be identified with the complainant before the complaint was passed on to the appropriate manager in the service area for a formal response. All available information pertaining to the complaint would be reviewed and relevant staff spoken with as part of the complaint investigation process.

Any learning arising from the complaint's investigation process would be identified and discussed at relevant management meetings (in terms of generic learning) and / or applied specifically to an individual officer's learning and development needs.

The Strategic Lead (Customer Services) advised Members that not all telephone calls were recorded, although a live report for a call would be available. Each telephone call would be evaluated immediately if in response to a complaint. Broader service complaints were reported to Directorate Leadership Teams on a quarterly basis. Any complaint trends/ spikes identified by the Corporate Complaints Team would be pro-actively raised and discussed immediately with the relevant service area.

Councillor Allen noted Table 8 'Complaints by Ward' and requested a breakdown of complaints relevant to her ward to be made available directly.

Having considered the Annual Complaints and Compliments Reports – 2021/22, Members of the Resources and Delivering Value Scrutiny Board:

RESOLVED:

- i) To note and endorse the content of the Annual Complaints and Compliments Reports 2021/22.

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The Resources and Delivering Value Scrutiny Board meeting
Closed at 7:44 p.m.