

# Minutes

## Combined Scrutiny Committee

5<sup>th</sup> September 2022



### Present

Councillors	Present	Councillors	Present
Councillor J Abbott	Yes	Councillor W Korsinah	Apologies
Councillor J Baugh	Yes	Councillor T McArdle	Yes
Councillor G Courtauld	Apologies	Councillor Mrs J Pell	Apologies
Councillor M Cunningham	Yes	Councillor Mrs J Sandum	Yes
Councillor Mrs C Dervish	Apologies	Councillor Mrs L Walters	Yes
Councillor Mrs D Garrod	Yes	Councillor Miss M Weeks	Apologies
Councillor A Hensman	Yes	Councillor Mrs S Wilson	Yes
Councillor Mrs A Kilmartin	Yes	Councillor B Wright	Yes

### **The following officers were present:-**

Ms Suzanne Bennett, Corporate Director (Finance); Miss Jessica Mann, Governance and Members Officer; Mrs Tracey Parry, Community Services Manager; and Mrs Cherie Root, Corporate Director (Operational).

Ms Rachel Fahie, Chief Officer at the Braintree, Witham and Halstead Citizens Advice, was also present.

### 6 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

**INFORMATION:** There were no Interests declared.

### 7 **MINUTES**

**INFORMATION:** The Minutes of the meeting of the Combined Scrutiny Committee which took place on 8<sup>th</sup> August 2022 were approved as a correct record.

### 8 **PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

**INFORMATION:** There were no statements made, or questions asked.

### 9 **SCRUTINY REVIEW INTO COST OF LIVING CRISIS**

**INFORMATION:** Prior to the item, Members were reminded that the meeting marked the Committee's second and final evidence gathering session for the Scrutiny Review into the Cost of Living Crisis. The Chairman then welcomed Rachel Fahie, Chief Officer at the Braintree, Witham and Halstead Citizens Advice (CA), to the meeting. Rachel was in attendance in order to provide further information for the Committee on poverty at local

levels in the District. It was added that a link to the 'Cost of Living Data Dashboard' had already been circulated by Rachel to Members in advance of the meeting.

In her address to the Committee, Rachel commented on the difficulties in finding individual solutions for residents across the District in light of the current crisis. It was highlighted that additional payments were to be made by the Government to those who were on disability benefits, means tested benefits, etc in order to help mitigate some of the financial impacts. It was also known that the Government were undertaking a piece of work around data matching of those on means tested benefits against property characteristics (supplied by the Valuation Office); however, large sections of the Braintree District remained 'off' the gas grid, which would need to be factored into any such work locally. Linked with this, it was suggested that a question could possibly be submitted to the Government by the Council's Sustainability team around the issue of gas grids and how this would be addressed.

The Chairman then raised a number of questions with Rachel, further to which the following information was provided:-

- In terms of the impacts on customers at the CA (especially when compared with the previous year), Members were advised that it was expected that the CA would see an increase in customers in need of help who they did not traditionally see (e.g. those who previously had financial security). Saving was becoming more difficult for residents throughout the District, especially in light of increasing energy bills. As part of the CA's 'Warm Homes' project, one of the key pieces of work had been around energy comparisons in order to help clients find more economical deals regarding their energy payments. However, this work had all but ceased in May/June 2022 due to changes in the deals being offered by energy companies. The work of the 'Warm Homes' project had therefore been refocused towards the promotion of energy saving tips and advice for the general public, along with increased advocacy work for clients with their energy suppliers.
- In terms of the funding provided by the District Council for CA, it was explained that this went into the organisation's core service, also known as the general advice service and the first point of contact for members of the public. Issues raised with the CA at this stage would either be addressed by the core service or, if further advice was required, the issue would be referred on for a resolution to be found with the client via a more specialist or 'project' route (e.g. through the 'Warm Homes' project).
- The CA was seeing an increasing number of customers who were in need of food bank vouchers, including those who had not traditionally been in need of this service. It was added that at the beginning of the year, the CA was provided with an allocation of Household Support funds by the Government which was used by the CA to support approximately 100 people in the District with one-off payments that were primarily focused around supermarket vouchers and fuel vouchers. The funding allocation was spent within three months.
- A suggestion from Rachel as to how to assist local communities through the impacts of rising costs was to 'develop' communities further; for example, encouraging the formation of 'friendship groups' that could include the sharing of costs (e.g. fuel and transport costs, supermarket shops, etc) by meeting up as a group in one place, or cooking for the group in one house on alternate days. As well as energy and food costs, this type of community development would also help address issues such as social isolation.

- Educating local residents as to the help and advice that was available to them (either through CA, Community360 and other local organisations) was essential. The CA, alongside Members of the District Council, was in a beneficial position in this respect as they were able to communicate which support streams were available to those residents in need of support. The ethos of the CA was to ensure that the public were aware of their rights as consumers and giving them the confidence to seek those rights. The CA could also assist vulnerable customers with the completion of forms used to access benefits (e.g. disability benefits), which could be long and complex.
- In terms of partnership arrangements, the CA worked with the food bank which had been established over the last nine months. A fully trained advisor would attend the Braintree and Halstead food banks on a regular basis in order to meet with those residents collecting food vouchers in order to give them the opportunity to seek free advice alongside this, which could also help with identifying any underlying issues that might be contributing to a customer's financial issues.
- Donations of pet food to food banks were incredibly useful for those residents who were struggling to feed their pets. It was recognised that generally, owners regarded their pets as members of their own families. Some pets also acted as guide dogs or sensory animals for those with underlying health conditions, and were of utmost importance to their owner's quality of life. A potential suggestion was that the food banks undertook some publicity around the need for pet food donations.

Members of the Committee were then invited to ask their questions of Rachel. In response to the questions that were raised, the following information was provided:-

- Reference was made to the 'heat fund,' which was managed by the fuel bank foundation. The remit of the 'heat fund' was to provide funding for households in order to assist them with oil and solid fuel. As part of a trial, the CA had submitted two separate applications from two clients to the fuel bank for this type of funding and was currently awaiting the outcome.
- Members were reminded that the Committee needed to explore what the Council could do more of locally in order to support residents through the current crisis. Alongside this, the Council could also explore the option of writing to the Government with potential suggestions that could form part of national policy (e.g. how energy companies were dealt with and responded to).
- On the subject of accessibility to CA in light of increasing demands, Members were advised that the first point of contact for the CA was via the phone, and that an appointment would be made for this. Following the phone call, a face-to-face appointment would be made if it was felt this was necessary. Increasing demands were a concern, but the CA would continue to ensure it helped its customers as much as possible.

At the end of the session, the Chairman expressed her sincere gratitude on behalf of the Committee to Rachel Fahie for her contributions to the meeting. Rachel was then invited to leave the meeting if she so wished. Before leaving the meeting, Rachel requested that Members retained the link to the 'Cost of Living Data Dashboard' which was circulated in advance of the meeting. It was intended that the 'Dashboard' would be updated on a monthly basis; an updated link would be circulated to Members of the Committee at a later stage.

The focus of Members' discussion then switched towards consideration of the Committee's draft report for the Scrutiny Review into the Cost of Living Crisis. The report was due to be presented at the meeting of Full Council on 10<sup>th</sup> October 2022 for response and as such, the timescale for producing the report was very limited. Given this, the Chairman explained that she had been working on assembling a draft report based on the information that the Committee had received far, which included a number of draft recommendations.

For the benefit of Members, the Chairman agreed to read aloud the draft recommendations that she had identified following the Committee's first meeting.

Members had the opportunity to offer any feedback as to the individual recommendations as they were read by the Chairman. The comments below were subsequently made in respect of the following recommendations:-

#### Recommendation 12

- It was highlighted by Councillor Baugh that an effective way of reducing energy usage was to ensure that radiators were functioning correctly. It was suggested by the Chairman that the Council's handyman could perhaps include some tips/instructions on how residents could increase their energy efficiency on the Council's website. It was added by another Member that the website currently stated that the handyman service was "for over 65s" only, whereas the actual need for this service likely encompassed a much wider demographic (e.g. single parents).

#### Recommendation 14

- On the subject of candle usage during power cuts and the dangers associated with this, Councillor Mrs Wilson suggested that battery operated candles would be a safer alternative option. The Chairman agreed with this but highlighted the need to increase awareness of this option amongst older groups of residents.

After the recommendations had been read, the Chairman welcomed any further comments from Members or additional recommendations they wished to suggest. The following suggestions were subsequently made:-

- In response to a comment made by Councillor Abbott about the issue of non-standard energy sources, it was highlighted that there were a number of recommendations within the 'Child, Fuel and Poverty' report (produced by the Cost of Living Partnership Group) that revolved around this, with a particular focus on the more rural areas of the District and those residents who were 'off-gas.' Members were encouraged to read through the recommendations within the report and make suggestions if they felt these could be strengthened.
- Councillor Abbott underlined the need to reduce energy usage across the District, especially in preparation for Winter. It was added that more work needed to be undertaken by the Council in order to achieve this (e.g. a reduction in the amount of street lighting used during the Summer months) and to educate residents about the actions that they could take. Councillor Abbott agreed to provide the Chairman with some wording around this as part of a potential recommendation for inclusion within the draft report.

- Councillor Mrs Kilmartin spoke about the possibility of having 'warm rooms' set aside in care homes for residents who were in need during the Winter months. In response, Mrs T Parry, Community Services Manager, drew attention to the safeguarding issues that would be associated with such an action due to the presence of vulnerable adults. It was added by Mrs C Root, Corporate Director that Members of the Scrutiny Committee were entitled to make any recommendations they liked on the understanding that these would need to be assessed and responded to by the Council before they could be implemented.
- Councillor Wright suggested that the Council looked at 'buying' pages from local parish magazines which could then be used to include vital information to local residents, such as how to obtain a foodbank voucher, in a short, succinct and easily read style. The only caveat was that village and/or parish magazines tended to be released less regularly than other information serials.
- Councillor Mrs Cunningham stated that she would like to see the 'Live Well for Less' document circulated to the public in other formats as well as via online channels; for example, as a paper handout at foodbanks or supermarkets. Copies of this could be printed cheaply or even photocopied from the original document, as long as the relevant information was retained.
- Councillor Mrs Cunningham also queried whether the Fire Service, through the Community Safety Partnership, had or could produce any documents around candle safety, as older, more vulnerable residents were a concern. Mrs T Parry agreed that this was a question that could be posed to the Fire Service.
- A potential recommendation from Councillor Mrs Cunningham was around the possibility of the Combined Scrutiny Committee meeting on a future occasion in order to monitor the situation around the Cost of Living, particularly throughout the Winter months, and to see if anything more could be done by the Council to support its residents further.
- A possible recommendation from Councillor Mrs Wilson was for the Council to ask whether the supermarkets could circulate information alongside those residents who arranged for home shopping deliveries. The Chairman added that there would need to be a clear explanation as to the benefits of such a recommendation. It was suggested that Councillor Mrs Wilson submitted her comments in writing outside of the meeting.
- During the discussions, Mrs C Root drew Members' attention to the Council's Contact Magazine which was distributed to every household within the District. Within the latest magazine (yet to be issued) a double page spread had been inserted entitled "Go Green to Make Ends Meet" which provided useful tips, advice and links as to how to reduce wastage, such as food waste, and other costs by using tools such as a meal plan, slow cookers, batch cooking, community fridges, etc. Advice had also been included around how to reduce the amount of energy used to insulate homes, as well as how to reduce fuel costs by using alternative means of transport for shorter journeys. Useful contacts had also been included within the magazine spread (e.g. to step change, Citizens Advice, National Debt Line, Samaritans, Community 360, etc).
- In response to a query raised by Councillor Abbott about the impacts of potential power cuts on the Council's services, such as its Committee meetings, Members were informed that the Council possessed a back-up generator. The Council also had in place a number of business continuity arrangements in respect of both the building

and the Council's services. In terms of emergency planning, Members were advised that the Council was classed as a category one responder under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, which stipulated that the Authority had a duty to act in times of emergency.

- Finally, Councillor Hensman highlighted the need for the Council to ensure that its public facing documents, such as the 'Live Well for Less' document, were adequately proof-checked before being widely distributed (e.g. to remove outdated contact numbers).

The meeting commenced at 7.15pm and closed at 8.39pm.

Councillor Mrs D Garrod  
(Chairman)