

Minutes

Combined Scrutiny Committee

8th August 2022



Present

Councillors	Present	Councillors	Present
Councillor J Abbott	Yes	Councillor W Korsinah	No
Councillor J Baugh	Yes	Councillor T McArdle	Apologies
Councillor G Courtauld	Apologies	Councillor Mrs J Pell	Yes
Councillor M Cunningham	Yes	Councillor Mrs J Sandum	Apologies
Councillor Mrs C Dervish	Yes	Councillor Mrs L Walters	Yes
Councillor Mrs D Garrod	Yes	Councillor Miss M Weeks	Apologies
Councillor A Hensman	No	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); Mrs Kim Cole, Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer; Ms Caroline Elias-Stephenson, Head of Housing and Communities; Ms Josie Falco, Head of Environment; Miss Jessica Mann, Governance and Members Officer; Mrs Tracey Parry, Community Services Manager; Mrs Cherie Root, Corporate Director (Operational); and Mr Mark Wilson, Sustainability Manager.

Mr Tom Walker, Executive Director at Essex County Council, joined the meeting remotely.

1 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

INFORMATION: There were no Interests declared.

2 **PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

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

3 **APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRMAN**

INFORMATION: Prior to the appointment of a Chairman, Mrs K Cole, Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer at the Council, introduced the meeting and explained that the Combined Scrutiny Committee had been established in response to a Motion that was submitted by Councillor Mrs J Beavis on the Cost of Living Crisis, which had been approved at the meeting of Full Council on 20th June 2022. Accordingly, Members would examine the topic under the guise of a short-term scrutiny review over two meetings, further to which the Committee would compile its recommendations and produce a 'scrutiny' report for submission to Full Council.

Members were then invited to submit their nominations for Chairman of the Combined Scrutiny Committee, and two nominations were subsequently received. The first nomination was for Councillor Mrs D Garrod (proposed by Councillor Mrs M Cunningham and seconded by Councillor Mrs L Walters), and the second nomination was for Councillor J Abbott (proposed by Councillor B Wright and seconded by Councillor Mrs J Pell).

As more than one nomination was received, a ballot was conducted via a show of hands. The results of the ballot were as follows:-

In favour of Councillor Mrs D Garrod as Chairman (x 6 Members).

In favour of Councillor J Abbott as Chairman (x 2 Members).

There were no abstentions.

DECISION: That Councillor Mrs D Garrod be appointed as Chairman of the Combined Scrutiny Committee.

4 **TERMS OF REFERENCE AND WORK PROGRAMME**

INFORMATION: The Chairman invited Mrs K Cole, Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer, to introduce the report.

Members were advised that the Terms of Reference (TOR) for the Combined Scrutiny Committee had been devised in line with the Motion that was submitted by Councillor Mrs J Beavis and approved at the meeting of Full Council on 20th June 2022. For the purposes of clarity, the Motion was read aloud as follows:-

“This Council recognises the Cost of Living Crisis and the impact it is having on many residents in the Braintree District.

Council also recognises that the Government has introduced a range of support measures including relief through council tax bills and new grant support, with additional specific grants to assist pensioners, people with disabilities and the poorest households.

However the Government has stated it cannot cover all impacts and therefore, given the scale of the Cost of Living Crisis, Council requires the Chairmen of the Community Development and the Partnership Development Scrutiny Committees to establish a combined committee consisting of all the Members of the respective two Scrutiny Committees. The remit of the combined committee will be to review the measures that the Council and its partners in Essex are already offering, and to recommend any further assistance that can be delivered this financial year for the residents of Braintree District.

The combined committee is to report back to the meeting of the Council to be held on Monday 10th October 2022, and to facilitate this timetable there shall be no more than two meetings of the combined committee.”

As per the Motion, Members were informed that the Combined Scrutiny Committee would meet on two separate occasions; the first meeting (8th August 2022) would commence with the evidence gathering for the scrutiny review, and the second meeting (5th September 2022) would be used to collate any final information and give consideration to the Committee’s draft scrutiny report.

DECISION: Members noted the Terms of Reference and Work Programme for the Scrutiny Review into the Cost of Living Crisis.

REASON FOR DECISION: To outline the Terms of Reference for the Combined Scrutiny Committee that were agreed as part of the Motion by Councillor Mrs J Beavis which was agreed at the meeting of Full Council on 20th June 2022.

5 **SCRUTINY REVIEW INTO THE COST OF LIVING CRISIS – FIRST EVIDENCE GATHERING SESSION**

INFORMATION: The Chairman explained that as part of the Committee’s first evidence gathering session for the Scrutiny Review into the ‘Cost of Living Crisis,’ Members were to receive two separate presentations from the officers in attendance. Accordingly, the Chairman welcomed Mr T Walker, Executive Director at Essex Council (ECC) to the meeting and invited him to commence with the first presentation. The presentation regarded issues around the cost of living crisis and the ‘levelling up’ agenda for Essex.

The full presentation may be viewed via the Council’s YouTube Channel:-

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n8ug52yJ-Mg>

Further to the presentation, Members were invited to ask their questions of Mr Walker. Given the limited timescale available for the scrutiny review, Members were requested to keep their line of questioning succinct and in line with the TOR.

In response to the questions raised, the following information was provided:-

- It was acknowledged that there was a broader role for all sectors, including Parish Councils, to support local residents through the cost of living crisis as much as possible. On the subject of any energy prices projections that could be supplied, Members were advised that the figures provided recently by ‘MITIE’ (ECC’s Facilities Management provider) indicated that ECC’s corporate energy prices would continue to escalate during Winter 2022. Although this escalation would likely be less in upcoming years, due to the impacts of ongoing crises such as the war in Ukraine, energy figures were still not expected to reach ‘normal’ levels for a long period of time.
- It was clarified that the acronym ‘FSM’ referred to ‘Free School Meals.’
- In regard to fuel poverty, Members were advised that ECC stored some data from sources such as ONS and the Joseph Rowntree foundation. It was suggested that a witness from Citizens Advice (CA) be invited to attend the next meeting of the Committee as they were likely to have access to data regarding localised poverty. It was added that during the next presentation, District Council officers would share a report with the Committee which related specifically to food, child and fuel poverty across the District.
- In terms of ‘moving out’ of the current crisis, Members were advised that the ‘Levelling Up’ agenda was intended to bring national reform in the long term (e.g. through job creation and a broader economic distribution of wealth).

Alongside the information that was provided, the following actions were agreed:-

- Mr T Walker, Executive Director at ECC, would make enquiries as to whether the market intelligence provided by MITIE (ECC's Facilities Management provider) could be shared with the Committee.
- It was agreed that the presentation slides would be circulated to Members following the meeting.
- In response to a question which regarded the action being taken by ECC to reduce crime in rural areas, Mr Walker agreed to conduct some research and report back to the Committee.
- Mr Walker was happy to share data held by ECC in relation to fuel poverty with the Committee if this would assist them with gathering a wider picture of the impacts of the cost of living crisis.

On behalf of the Committee, the Chairman thanked Mr Walker for his presentation and the information that was provided to Members. Mr Walker then left the meeting.

The Chairman then invited Council Officers to commence with the second presentation for the evening, which regarded the cost of living and the work being undertaken by the Council and its various partners to help mitigate the impacts for residents. The presentation was provided jointly by Ms C Ellias-Stephenson (Head of Housing and Communities), Ms T Parry (Community Services Manager), Ms J Rigby (Revenue and Benefits Manager), Ms J Falco (Head of Environment) and Mr M Wilson (Sustainability Manager).

The full presentation may be viewed via the Council's YouTube Channel:-

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n8uq52yJ-Mq>

The presentation was divided into five sections; the first section was delivered by Ms Elias-Stephenson and related to the research undertaken by officers in the Housing and Communities Team on child, food and fuel poverty throughout the District, and the report which was subsequently produced (the report would be shared with the Committee Members at a later date). In response to the actions and recommendations within the report, an internal Fuel Poverty working group was set up in order to map Council services and support, consider how best it could work with partners, and establish an initial awareness campaign entitled 'Don't Wait for Winter.'

The second section was delivered by Mrs Parry and regarded the support and campaigns that were already in place at the Council to support residents, which included holiday and regular activities for children, partnership support (e.g. through Citizens Advice), food banks and the 'Don't Wait for Winter' campaign, which helped to broadcast the available support streams and information more widely for employees and residents.

The third section was delivered by Ms Rigby and referred to the various housing and Council Tax support streams offered to residents, as well as Discretionary Housing Payments, Exceptional Hardship Support and Energy Rebates. Reference was also made to the Household Support Fund which had been awarded by ECC to provide a one-off payment of £80 to all Pension Age residents who were in receipt of either Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax support. Mention was also made of the initiatives over the Summer and Autumn from the Department of Work and Pensions, which included a Pensioner Cost of Living payment, Disability Cost of Living payments and a Cost of Living payment.

At this point, the presentation was paused to allow Members the opportunity to ask any initial questions they had based on the information provided thus far by officers. In response to the questions raised, the following information was provided:-

- It was suggested that an alternative form of communication, such as a poster or leaflet through the door, would help to ensure as many residents as possible were aware of the help available to them. In response, it was agreed that the issue could be considered as part of a potential recommendation of the Scrutiny Review.
- Members were informed that energy companies possessed a hardship fund that would be offered to those customers who were struggling to pay their bills. It was recommended that customers paid their bills where possible, and that they should communicate with their energy supplier if they were unable to do so.
- Members were reminded that the Council had recently submitted its Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) Investment Plan. The proposed focus in respect of year one was around the cost of the living, and other projects related to how the Council could support community and voluntary sector organisations to help local residents.
- On the subject of 'warm rooms' and other means of support, it was explained that although the Council was exploring such options, it did not expect to receive the SPF allocation until October 2022. It was added that there were discussions underway with many of the Council's partners, and in particular faith forums, around offering residents warm spaces for residents in need (e.g. churches).
- As a Local Authority, Braintree District Council was fortunate to have many positive working relationships with its partners (e.g. CA, Community 360, First Stop, etc), and part its role during the Cost of Living crisis was to gain more contextual information about the impacts on residents at the frontline. It was added that the District's community and voluntary sector was extremely active and offered support to those in need, and that there was much that individuals and local hubs (e.g. Ward Councillors, Parish/Town Councils, etc) could also do in order to recognise those that might need help and signpost them to the available support services.
- On the subject of value for money, Members were advised that a 'Slow Cooker' scheme had been undertaken recently by the Council with Community 360. Furthermore, the Essex Children and Family Wellbeing Service, along with local schools through the Livewell Child programme, offered a number of cooking courses for both parents and children.

In response to the questions raised, the following actions were agreed by officers:-

- The 'Food, Child and Fuel Poverty' report would be circulated to Members following the meeting, which provided Members with a more detailed picture of poverty rates across different areas of the District. However, due to the rapidly escalating nature of the situation around poverty, it was highlighted that there would be a lag between the most recent data collected on the frontline and what the statistics already configured showed.
- Data from the CA for Braintree, Halstead and Witham was available in respect of quarter one for 2022. Once the comparisons had been drawn in respect of 2021/22, this data would be circulated to Members for their reference.

- Data in relation to the number of cases referred to enforcement agencies over 2021/22 would be circulated to Members for their information in advance of the next meeting of the Committee.

The next section of the presentation was provided by Mr Wilson and related to fuel poverty and energy. The slides detailed some of the schemes that were being delivered to residents by the Sustainability Team with its partners (e.g. Green Homes Grant, Handyman Scheme for energy efficiency, etc) and the support schemes that were now available from the Government, such as energy bills support and Council Tax rebates. It was highlighted that due to the impacts of cold weather during the Winter months, health issues were likely to increase due to the colder conditions, as well as financial pressure due to factors such switches to pre-payment meters.

Mr Wilson also remarked upon a meeting he had attended with Toppesfield Parish Council regarding 10 acres of land that it was hoping could be used for the purpose of a solar panel array. Should the scheme go ahead, it would likely offer the local community reduced energy prices and greater 'energy independence.' In light of this and other similar proposed schemes, the District Council was giving consideration as to what its role might be in terms of supporting local communities to achieve greater energy independence.

The following information was then provided in response to the questions raised by Members:-

- There were a number of different grant pots which were available to support residents and local businesses to make energy savings, such as LoCASE, which offered SMEs up to £25,000 to make energy efficient measures, and schemes offered by ECC.
- 'G' or 'H' rated boilers tended to be much older and as such consumed vaster amounts of energy. Linked with this, it was added that not all grants for boilers were means tested.
- In regard to solar panels, these were able to be applied vertically rather than across the roof of a property, although their efficiency would likely be compromised.
- The Council used a 'handyman' who was able to undertake services such as loft clearances, replacement lightbulbs, jackets on hot water cylinders, etc. The waiting list for these services was approximately one week.
- The Braintree District had a large number of older and listed buildings, particularly in the rural north of the District, which were not built to the higher standards of energy efficiency that more modern properties tended to have. Measures that could be taken to help increase the energy efficiency of those properties included external wall insulations and the promotion of local oil clubs.
- Those residents who resided in listed buildings were given advice as to what measures could be installed at their properties upon them contacting the Council. It was added that the Planning team was working on pulling information together for this purpose as well, and that there was also detailed information available on the Historic England website as to what owners could do whilst maintaining the aesthetics of the building.

- Members were advised that there was no mandatory requirement for developers to build zero carbon homes, although there were a number of developers who were keen to implement these measures. It was likely that the demand for energy efficient homes would rise in the near future.
- Members were advised that there were options available for purchasers to have solar panels at new build properties.

Further to the questions raised by Members, the following actions were agreed by officers:-

- Mr Wilson agreed to speak with Hastoe Housing Association about the possibility of showcasing some of their sustainable properties within the District on the Council's website.

The final aspect of the presentation was delivered by Ms Elias-Stephenson and regarded some of the options that were available for residents going forward in light of the Cost of Living Crisis. For example, the purpose of the Cost of Living Partnership (the Partnership) was to collectively address the themes of finance (by maximising income, reducing living costs, etc), food and essentials and energy and food. It was also mentioned that the Council had requested members of the Partnership to provide any data, information and intelligence that they had in relation to the impacts on residents on the ground, and continue to monitor emerging trends.

Further to the questions raised by Members, the following information was provided:-

- On the subject of Government rebates, Members were advised that there were very few residents left that the Council had been unable to make payments to in respect of the first energy rebate.

The following actions were agreed in response to the questions that were raised by Members:-

- Mrs Parry agreed to explore whether the Council worked with any charities that supplied curtains which could help reduce the loss of heat from properties.

The meeting commenced at 7.15pm and closed at 9.15pm.

Councillor Mrs D Garrod
(Chairman)