

PEOPLE SELECT COMMITTEE

A meeting of People Select Committee was held on Monday 2 October 2023.

Present: Cllr Marilyn Surtees (Chair), Cllr Paul Weston (Vice-Chair), Cllr Michelle Bendelow, Cllr Ian Dalgarno, Cllr Shakeel Hussain (sub for Cllr Hugo Stratton), Cllr Sufi Mubeen (sub for Cllr Niall Innes), Cllr David Reynard and Cllr Barry Woodhouse.

Officers: Haleem Ghafoor, Sophie Haste, Margie Stewart-Piercy (AH&W), Neil Mitchell (CS, E&C), Luke McGurn and Rebecca Saunders-Thompson (DoCS).

Also in attendance: Clare Branson (Catalyst), Tracey Herrington (Thrive Teesside) and Vicky Nightscales (BMBF)

Apologies: Cllr John Gardner, Cllr Niall Innes and Cllr Hugo Stratton.

PEO/11/23 Evacuation Procedure

The Committee noted the evacuation and housekeeping procedure.

PEO/12/23 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

PEO/13/23 Minutes

AGREED the minutes of the meeting held on 4 September 2023 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

PEO/14/23 Scrutiny Review of Cost of Living Response

An update was provided by the link officer for the Scrutiny Review of Cost of Living Response on requested actions from the previous meeting. It was confirmed that there would be an extension of the Tees Active discounted soft play sessions. 'The Bread and Butter Thing' initiative had been launched and site visits had been arranged as part of the review. Members were also informed that officers from the Economic Development Team would present evidence at the November Committee meeting. The Cost of Living quarterly newsletter had also been circulated to Members.

The Select Committee received a presentation regarding the Council's 'Warm Homes Healthy People' (WHHP) scheme, from the Head of Environment, Leisure and Green Infrastructure, which included:

- An overview of the WHHP scheme
- Information and data on fuel poverty
- Regional rates of fuel poverty
- What had already been delivered through WHHP
- An update on the WHHP scheme for 2023

The main issues highlighted from the presentation and discussed were as follows:

- WHHP leaflets had been produced for those who did not have access to the internet. Information on the WHHP scheme was also included in Stockton News, and leaflets were distributed to a wide range of community spaces.
- Those who used the WHHP scheme were mainly homeowners, however the Council was committed to assisting anyone in need. The Committee was also informed that Cleveland Fire Brigade provided emergency heating services, including electric heaters and blankets.
- The Council dealt with every request directly through the WHHP scheme and Heating Ventilation Electrical Building Services (HVE Services) colleagues assisted with the installation of replacement boilers, if necessary.
- Responses to requests were dealt with as soon as possible, and usually within twenty-four or forty-eight hours. Replacement boilers were usually installed within a week of a request. The Council ensured that residents were not left in a vulnerable position and Housing Support Officers also carried warm packs on house visits.

The Committee requested the following further information:

- If a breakdown of fuel poverty figures for each ward within the Borough was available.
- If there was any evidence of Stockton residents who had had standing charges waived on their energy bills.
- If private landlords were obliged to service boilers annually, and if information could be provided on the reporting procedure for private tenants with boiler issues. The Select Committee received evidence from a Council Community Engagement Officer and Bright Minds Big Futures' (BMBF) Head of Community Safety, which included:
 - The work of BMBF in response to the ongoing issues associated with the cost of living. This included work with Tees Credit Union to develop a money management training programme for young people. The programme was available for schools, and youth groups. An online resource was also available. The programme was tailored for different age groups. Two schools have already utilised the programme.
 - The Borough's Member of Youth Parliament had been involved in the campaign for free school meals.
 - The Council's Community Engagement Team and BMBF have worked with three local primary schools to establish community pantries. This involved working with children for 6 weeks and activities included meal planning and soup making. The pantries were set up as a fundraising initiative for the school to remove the stigma of families accessing it as a food bank. Families were able to purchase 5 items for £1. Leaflets including information on further support available across the borough were included in each food pack.
 - The 'pay as you feel' teddy bear stall at the Stockton Sparkles event was highlighted. Donations of teddy bears were received, and young people were able to purchase a bear for a price they could afford or name a bear if they were unable to purchase a bear.
 - BMBF tried to be as inclusive as possible, and the group supported its young volunteers by providing food at group meetings and events and paid for travel expenses.

The main issues discussed were as follows:

- The 'pay as you prom' saving scheme was discussed as an option to assist parents and carers with planning for end of school proms.
- The money management programme, and the possibility of using it in primary schools, was discussed.
- A discussion on the intake and retainment of BMBF members was held. BMBF was open to young people aged 11-19 (or up to the age of 25 for those with disabilities). Several previous BMBF members had continued to support the group once they had reached adulthood, for example during university summer breaks.
- The Chair thanked BMBF for their work.

The Select Committee received evidence from the Manager of Thrive, Teesside, a local organisation, which included:

- The 'grassroots anti-poverty charity' was established in 2007, and was originally based in Newtown, Stockton and was now based in Norton.
- The charity worked with people on a one-to-one basis and focussed on the importance of lived experience.
- Thriving Women, a project which was designed to give local women a voice through poetry was highlighted. A collection of poetry and essays was published as part of this project.
- National anti-poverty work included involvement in the APLE Collective (founding member) and Poverty 2 Solutions.
- Thrive worked to give a voice to people who felt silenced in local and national debates.
- It was reported that the ongoing cost of living situation had exacerbated existing poverty issues. There had been an increase in mortality and long-term illnesses for those living in disadvantaged communities.
- It was also reported that within the past twelve months, Thrive had experienced an increase in people asking for advice about debt, deductions in benefits, rent arrears, and problems with school costs, such as school uniform and school trips. Mothers had increasingly commented that they felt inadequate as parents because they could not provide for their children.
- Some parents and carers could no longer afford to fund paid activities for children which they had previously struggled to afford.
- Thrive had also experienced an increase in requests concerning mortgage difficulties. Staff were not trained to provide targeted mortgage support but assisted with referrals and signposting.
- It was commented that the cost of living situation was also linked with an increase in issues with mental health.
- A lack of access to online platforms increased some people's difficulties with accessing services and support.
- Persistent cuts to local authority budgets across the country was raised as an issue of concern.

The main issues discussed were as follows:

- Members questioned if there was anything that the Council could do to improve its cost of living support. The importance of retaining printed leaflets and promoting information in print and in person as well as online was highlighted. It was also noted that ward councillors were in a unique position to engage with residents and ask what specific support they needed.

- The addition of toiletries was suggested as an improvement for the 'The Bread and Butter Thing' initiative.
- Council officers confirmed that Thrive Teesside would be involved in the Council's anti-poverty strategy to ensure that the importance of lived experience was included.
- A discussion on proms, and the cost of end of secondary school celebrations, was held.
- Discussions on the cost of school uniforms and the issues of branded uniforms which had to be purchased from specified suppliers were held.
- Previous scrutiny reviews on the cost of school uniform and child poverty, undertaken by the Children and Young People Select Committee, were discussed.
- Members expressed concerns about the cost of school uniform from their own experiences or problems reported by residents.
- The issue of fining parents for children being absent from school was raised.
- Members praised the work of the Thriving Women poetry group.
- The annual International Day for the Eradication of Poverty on 17 October 2023 was highlighted.

The Committee requested the following further information:

- If the Council could invest in its own uniform shop to sell uniform to parents and carers at a lower price than current suppliers. Officers explained that the Council worked with schools and supported second hand uniform schemes. Officers agreed to investigate this suggestion and provide a response to Members.

AGREED that:

- 1) the information be noted.
- 2) the further information be provided as requested.

PEO/15/23 Work Programme and Chair's Update

Consideration was given to the Work Programme.

The next meeting would be held on Monday 6 November 2023.

AGREED that the Work Programme be noted.