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NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

CABINET PANEL ON COMMUNITY AND ENTERPRISE

MEETING HELD IN THE REMOTE MEETING ON MONDAY, 17TH OCTOBER, 2022 AT 7.30 PM

MINUTES

Present: *Councillors: Keith Hoskins (Co-Chair), Judi Billing (Co-Chair), Chris Lucas, Tom Plater, Mandi Tandi, Claire Strong and Ralph Muncer*

In Attendance: *James Lovegrove (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer), Claire Morgan (Community Engagement Team Leader), Anne Banner (Benefits Manager), Becca Edwards (Grants Administration Apprentice), Aimee Flack (Assistant Community Engagement Officer), Danny Pearson (Assistant Community Engagement Officer), Anna Cotton (Communications Officer) and Angela Armstrong (Senior Benefits Officer)*

Also Present: *At the commencement of the meeting approximately 7 members of the public, including registered speakers and invited attendees.*

9 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio recording – 4 minutes 51 seconds

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Simon Bloxham and Ian Albert.

Councillor Morgan Derbyshire was expected as a substitute for Councillor Bloxham, however it was advised that he may join later.

10 MINUTES - 31 JANUARY 2022

Audio recording – 5 minutes 15 seconds

Councillor Keith Hoskins proposed and Councillor Judi Billing seconded and it was:

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting held on the 31 January 2022 be approved as a true record of proceedings.

11 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio recording – 5 minutes 45 seconds

(1) The Chair advised that, in accordance with Council Policy, the meeting would be audio recorded as well as filmed. The audio recording would be available on the NHDC website and the film recording via the NHDC YouTube channel.

(2) The Chair drew attention to the item on the agenda front pages regarding Declarations of Interest and reminded Members that, in line with the Code of Conduct, any Declarations of Interest needed to be declared immediately prior to the item in question.

12 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

Audio Recording – 6 minutes 10 seconds

There was no other business notified.

13 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Audio recording – 6 minutes 13 seconds

The Chair advised that there were four people in attendance to give presentations this evening, and following each of these there would be a chance for Members, Officers and public attendees to ask questions.

The Chair invited Rosie Waters, Chief Executive Officer of North Herts Citizens Advice, to provide their presentation.

Ms Waters thanked the Chair for the opportunity and gave a presentation, supported by slides, and advised of the following:

- Nationally Citizens Advice were tracking five issues to demonstrate the effects of the cost of living on clients. These were Personal Independence Payment, energy, Council Tax arrears, charitable support at a Foodbank and energy debts.
- In the first two quarters of this year, the number of people contacting Citizens Advice in financial crisis was up 44% compared with the same period last year.
- Contact was coming from areas with highest deprivation, but there had been an increase in people in work seeking advice and people making contact for the first time.
- Some of the challenges faced included a reduction in number of volunteers available, rising costs of energy and IT equipment, increase in referrals from other organisations who do not have the capacity, financial pressures with more competition for funding and increased stress on staff and volunteers.
- The reduction in people available as volunteers had been compounded as previous volunteers move to paid, or better paid, roles at housing associations and local authorities.
- As part of dealing with these challenges, Citizens Advice had adopted a strategy to provide preventative information, increase access to services through new access points while maintaining digital access and collaboration with other organisations.
- Available funds were being explored to cover the core costs and increased overheads, but there had been a need to explore how they could reduce non-salary costs without affecting staff. As part of this there has been a review of non-salary aspects of employment, including offering better wellbeing support to staff.
- Some of the support offered with cost of living issues included checking that clients were in receipt of benefits to which they are entitled, advise clients on budgeting and money management, debt management advice, energy saving advice and support with disputes and support with charitable grants where applicable.
- There was also a need to support with related issues including housing problems and relationship breakdowns.
- Citizens Advice had distributed £49,500 in supermarket vouchers and £18,000 in fuel grants. In addition food vouchers were distributed on a daily basis, top up fuel cards provided to those on pre-payments metres and have recently procured pre-paid sim cards for clients in need.
- Whilst these were positive actions to support people with hardship, they were not sustainable in the long term.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Keith Hoskins
- Councillor Judi Billing
- Councillor Chris Lucas
- Councillor Mandi Tandi

In response to questions, Ms Waters advised:

- Citizens Advice have some contact with energy companies, but this has slowed as more people contact the companies directly with concerns or issues.
- Following the closure of the Hitchin Citizens Advice office they had begun attending the Foodbank on a weekly basis.
- Outreach in the rural community had moved away from being in one place all day waiting for people to attend and a project had taken place to explore the best way to reach those in need in rural areas, which has included liaising with local groups.
- The Royston office had been getting busier, with people travelling from a reasonable distance to attend.
- Most advice was available online or via phone, but this was not always suitable for people, especially those most in need.
- They had been in touch with Parish Councils to see how they could support rural outreach.
- Increases in contact since Covid restrictions relaxed have been down to the reopening of face to face contact, as well as the end of debt moratoriums in place through the Covid lockdowns.
- The Hitchin office building needed work and there was an adoption of a more flexible approach, with no reduction in client interaction.
- The most help that the Council could provide would support to fund frontline advisors, as there was a lack of volunteers available who had previously done these roles.
- Citizens Advice had two advisors in the Job Centre every week to offer support and there had been an employability scheme developed with partners.

The Chair thanked Ms Waters for her presentation and invited Andy Sage, Community Resilience Strategic Lead at settle, to provide their presentation.

Mr Sage thanked the Chair for the opportunity and gave a presentation, supported by slides, and advised of the following:

- In the last 6 months, there had been a close look at how the cost of living had been affecting the business, customers and colleagues and a lot of the impact had so far been hidden.
- Although lots of customers were getting into debt, this was only recently coming to settle, where previously people had contacted other organisations, such as Citizens Advice.
- Rent arrears were still on target, but those in arrears were presenting more complex issues which were having to be dealt with using reduced resources, including staff.
- Historically housing associations had not held certain information, such as income, due to its complexity and issues with keeping information up to date, but there was now an attempt to better understand the impact on customers through additional data to develop case studies.
- There was a need to identify, and support, those people most in need.
- The response from settle had included advocating for smart partnerships, which would allow organisations to share actions and regular check in with partners.
- Established a corporate Working Group, which had developed a draft 8 point framework to address the issues faced.

The following Members and participants asked questions:

- Councillor Keith Hoskins
- Councillor Judi Billing
- Councillor Ralph Muncer
- Councillor Claire Strong
- Alistair Stewart

In response to questions, Mr Sage advised:

- They were in the process of finalising a new sustainability strategy, which would include measures to bring homes up to EPCC rating.
- It was also important to take into account those people in fuel poverty and bringing works on their homes forward, to help alleviate some of the strain on energy costs.
- Joint visits were taking place between the Income and Asset Management teams to explore what can be done to the homes and if there was any further financial support available.
- Smart Partnerships were to bring together organisations in roundtable discussions, including HCC, NHDC, Citizens Advice, Foodbank and Credit Union.
- This stemmed from a desire to not duplicate work where another organisation was already offering support.
- One of the examples of this was for a Social Supermarket, which settle would be unable to scale up on their own, but with support from other organisations there was a possibility of this being done.
- There were government targets which settle had to meeting and some of the existing homes were in the lower bands and would require action to bring to EPCC standards. The sustainability strategy, once approved, will details how targets will be met.
- In the short term there were actions being taken to identify those most in need.
- Where there is a repair required to decrease energy use there will be a higher priority placed on these compared to previous.
- The challenge across the social housing sector to bring all homes up to EPCC standards was a big one and discussions on rent caps would have an impact on the ability to do this work.
- There is a need to do this work by 2030, but this is irrelevant to someone suffering fuel poverty today.
- When the plan was formalised it could be shared with Members.
- It has become apparent that things can change quickly, especially with changes in central government, but it would be useful to have a single place to collate all information and support available, which further emphasises the need for the Smart Partnerships.

The Chair thanked Mr Sage for his presentation and invited Hannah Morgan-Gray, Chief Executive Officer of North Herts Centre for Voluntary Services (CVS), to provide their presentation.

Ms Morgan-Gray thanked the Chair for the opportunity and gave a presentation, supported by slides, and advised of the following:

- Organisations had been seeing increasing in running costs, energy bills and fuel and have experienced a decrease in donations as households tighten budgets.
- Inflation costs often have not been factored into funding contracts, as the levels have increased expectation.
- Many referral organisations are already at capacity.
- There was a need for volunteers across the sector, as more people were returning to work following furlough and charities were unable to offer paid employment or competitive salaries.
- People are a lot more time poor, with older people returning to work and some people taking on second jobs.
- Exploration of benefits and support that can be offered to staff and volunteers in place of competitive salary levels.
- North Herts CVS were part of HCCs Warm Spaces Sub Group are were hoping to receive funding for this, and were working on collating a list of spaces which were being set up as warm hubs.
- The CVS were offering infrastructure support to organisations, including information and guidance, funding advice and volunteer recruitment.

- There was an ongoing survey entitled 'All About Us' which was exploring the views of charities or voluntary groups across North Herts to identify their requirements so actions can be tailored to best fit.

The following Members and participants asked questions:

- Councillor Keith Hoskins
- Danny Pearson

In response to questions, Ms Morgan-Gray advised:

- Libraries in North Herts had been contacted as warm hub spaces.
- Details collated by the Community Engagement Team could be shared with CVS to see what support could be provided.

Councillor Judi Billing noted that there was a County Council meeting the following day, at which she would request an update on warm hubs.

The Chair thanked Ms Morgan-Gray for her presentation and invited Ben Negus, Senior Development Manager in HCCs Community and People Wellbeing Team, to provide their presentation.

Mr Negus thanked the Chair for the opportunity and gave a presentation, supported by slides, and advised of the following:

- There is lots of support available, but the ongoing question is whether this is enough to support the most vulnerable, especially given the high inflation rates and the impact this will have on those in the 'just about managing' category.
- There was a three tier approach to those facing financial issues. The first tier was Herts Help which offered crisis support for all, with referrals available for longer terms support. The second tier was to refer onto Citizens Advice which offered financial advice for the general public and some may be passed onto the third tier which was the Money Advice Unit which offered advice to people with more complex needs.
- In 2021/22, Herts Help had 121,000 contacts, Citizens Advice supported 57,000 residents and the Money Advice Unit supported 4,391 households.
- There had been 467 unique users of the Crisis Intervention support up to August 2022, which was more than the whole of 2021. Most of those using the service were in the most deprived areas.
- The NHS had provided over £1m to funding to Herts Help, Citizens Advice and the Money Advice Unit to support ongoing work.
- Using the Household Support Fund from central government, 1,829 letters were sent to residents on pension credits in North Herts and those people would be able to cash in £150. 1,328 had been redeemed to 14 October 2022, with two months left to claim, and this represented 73%.
- Small grants would be provided through Herts Community Foundation to organisations setting up a warm hub. Applications were due to go out at the end of October, with funding awarded mid-November, to be fully operational by end of November.
- Provided details of the support provided from government in 2022 so far.

Councillor Judi Billing noted that there was ongoing preventative work ongoing and it was important to recognise this in amongst all the crisis management actions being taken.

The following Members and participants asked questions:

- Councillor Ralph Muncer
- Councillor Mandi Tandi

- Alistair Stewart

In response to questions, Mr Negus advised:

- There was a comms activity ongoing to encourage those who had not yet cashed their pension credit support payment to do so.
- There was also issues with regard to data available in identifying those who had not cashed their payment.
- If the scheme was run again in the future, it would be possible to increase the payment available to those who did not cash the first payment.
- Hertfordshire Community Foundation are the main place for dealing with grant applications and it would be best for Councillors to direct residents there to see what support is available.
- It would be good to explore where those not cashing the payments are located, as it may be a certain area where a local community group could support increasing uptake of the offer.

14 INFORMATION NOTE - COST OF LIVING CRISIS

Audio recording – 76 minutes 30 seconds

The Chair presented the Information Note entitled 'Cost of Living Crisis'.

15 MEMBER'S DISCUSSION

Audio recording - 76 minutes 36 seconds

The Chair led a discussion amongst Members and representatives present as to how the Council can facilitate schemes and support communications.

Anna Cotton, North Herts Communication Officer, noted that they were currently running an 'Easing the Squeeze' campaign, which was primarily online and provided a one-stop-shop for information from various organisations. This meeting had demonstrated that other information and support was available and it would be useful to include that on the NHDC page.

Claire Morgan, North Herts Community Engagement Team Leader, noted that the North Herts webpage was really helpful and there was a link to the County page which offered further support. Funding was also advertised by the Community Engagement Team on the Engage North Herts Facebook group and local groups should be encouraged to join this for up to date information.

Mark Hanna, Chief Executive of Age UK, advised that the highest proportion of contact to Age UK in Herts is from North Herts, and there had been an 850% increase in contacts from concerned older people. These people were generally on state pension or pension credits, they were not able to work anymore. They had been involved with food voucher distribution, wellbeing support to older people and working with partners to improve energy efficiency of clients homes.

Councillor Ralph Muncer thanked those presented this evening for their presentations and their advice would support him as a Councillor to pass the message onto his constituents. It was important to continue to communicate with organisations and individuals, which will help understanding of support available, and that this should take place through various channels, both online and offline.

Andy Sage noted that this crisis could last a long time and there was a need to ensure that schemes were sustainable and durable, and that help was geared towards longer term outcomes.

Ben Negus advised that County were regularly meeting with Districts and it was expected that a dashboard would be put together to provide details of the support available and this information could then be provided to Members with identification of areas where support is lacking.

16 ACTIONS ARISING, WORK PROGRAMME & FUTURE DISCUSSION TOPICS

Audio recording – 87 minutes 08 seconds

The Chair advised that this theme would be continued at the next Cabinet Panel meeting, but would instead look at small businesses and organisations, with a view to look at their performance over the Christmas period.

The Chair noted that it would be useful to have updates on the topics discussed with those present at this meeting at a future meeting of the Cabinet Panel.

The meeting closed at 9.01 pm

Chair

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