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Economy, Residents and Communities Scrutiny Committee – 23-06-2022

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE ECONOMY, RESIDENTS AND COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD AT BY TEAMS ON THURSDAY, 23 JUNE 2022

PRESENT: County Councillor A Davies (Chair)
County Councillors D Bebb, A Cartwright, T Colbert, B Davies, I Harrison, A Jones, E A Jones, K Lewis, G Mitchell, J Thorp and S L Williams

Cabinet Portfolio Holders In Attendance: County Councillors J Berriman (Cabinet Member for a Connected Powys), J Charlton (Cabinet Member for a Greener Powys), R Church (Cabinet Member for a Safer Powys), M J Dorrance (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for a Fairer Powys), J Gibson-Watt (Leader) and D A Thomas (Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Transformation)

Officers: Matt Perry (Head of Highways, Transport and Recycling), Nigel Brinn (Executive Director - Economy and Environment), Gwilym Davies Head of Property, Planning and Public Protection), Clive Pinney (Head of Legal and Democratic Services), Jane Thomas (Head of Finance), Wyn Richards (Scrutiny Manager and Head of Democratic Services) and David Morris (Income and Awards Senior Manager)

1. ELECTION OF VICE-CHAIR

RESOLVED that County Councillor Karl Lewis be elected Vice-Chair for the ensuing year.

2. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was received from County Councillor C Walsh.

3. DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST

The Committee received the following disclose of interests by Members relating to items to be considered at the meeting:

£150 Cost of Living Support Scheme payment to all households:
County Councillors D Bebb, T Colbert, A Davies, I Harrison, B Davies, G Mitchell, S Williams and A Jones. (Personal Interest only)

£150 grant to residents who live in homes that have an off-grid fuel supply:
County Councillor A Davies. (Personal and Prejudicial Interest). Councillor Davies left the room for the discussion on this matter.

Other grants:

County Councillors G Mitchell, D Bebb and B Davies indicated a potential interest in relation to other grants. However, there was no discussion in relation to the grants in which these Councillors has indicated that they might have an interest and therefore they did not need to disclose a personal and prejudicial interest and remained in the meeting.

4. DECLARATION OF PARTY WHIPS

The Committee did not receive any disclosures of prohibited party whips which a Member has been given in relation to the meeting in accordance with Section 78(3) of the Local Government Measure 2011.

5.	DISCRETIONARY COST OF LIVING SUPPORT SCHEME
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Documents Considered:

- Discretionary Cost of Living Support Scheme – joint report of the Cabinet Member for Fairer Powys and the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Transformation.

Issues Discussed:

- Questions:

Question	Response
How was the decision made about the additional discretionary awards – who the vulnerable groups were to receive the grants	It was considered that an arbitrary basis would not work for Powys due to the nature of the Council tax base. Therefore, vulnerabilities were considered such as circumstance, income or disabilities as it was felt to be the better approach and would show a need. Consultation was also undertaken with services to identify vulnerable groups.
What does Off-grid mean and how were the numbers of potential recipients calculated.	Off-grid fuel supply relates to properties without a direct gas supply to the house e.g. LPG or a non standard gas supply. The Council would be seeking to develop a scheme for those who use oil or LPG heating as costs for these types of utilities are higher than for standard utilities. The estimate of 1000 properties came following a discussion with the Housing Service.
If someone qualifies for this grant they should not be disqualified from the main scheme.	The Cabinet member indicated that the 1000 property estimate was likely to be an underestimate. There is also a caveat in the scheme that it will be a panel decision as to whether someone will receive this grant if they have not received a grant under the main scheme. The Panel will decide if we can allow a payment under the main scheme and also make a discretionary payment as well.
The 1000 properties is probably an underestimate. Has there been any	We are sharing information about the different schemes and approaches in

<p>sharing of ideas of best practice between Councils. Do we know what other Councils are doing.</p>	<p>an all Wales group. Rhondda Cynon Taf Council started their scheme earlier than others, which is up and running. Other Councils are the same as us now looking at their processes. Most authorities are looking at the occupied exemptions as the basis for their schemes. Some are looking at other property bands. After that they are looking at vulnerable groups so very similar approaches including supporting foodbanks. Powys is different in looking at developing energy efficiency responses as well and supporting those with mortgage difficulties through the housing side.</p> <p>The Cabinet Member indicated that it is important to look at what rest of Wales is doing and also have a flexible approach to build a Powys solution and the cost of living crisis. Discussions with groups such as foodbanks have been undertaken to see what they need other than blanket grants and that has been important in shaping this scheme. A home loss prevention scheme was also developed following discussions on the ground. This discretionary system has provided the flexibility for the Powys response.</p>
<p>Agree there is a need to reconsider the figures for off-grid. Foodbanks – general concern about putting money into reactive solutions rather than proactive measures, not maintaining the status quo and move people away from the need for foodbanks and provide support schemes for prevention. Where do we draw the line between foodbanks and food surplus projects as most communities in Powys has either of these. How can we consider food surplus projects within the figures. It would also be useful to evaluate the grants spent and their impact.</p>	<p>The 11 projects in the report are in relation to specific foodbanks. There are many food surplus groups / projects around the County. The difficulty is where you draw the line with the funding available. This can be considered after the main scheme has been implemented as there may be funding available from the main fund or the discretionary scheme which could be used in the second phase.</p>
<p>Communication – the offer is quite difficult to understand so there will be a need for clear communications to</p>	<p>There is much variety in the scheme to support vulnerabilities which does create complexity. Some of this will</p>

<p>residents and community groups. What is the capacity in the Communications team as there is much to be done.</p>	<p>be direct communication to individuals as we know their circumstances e.g. means tested data. For others we will need to let them know that these grants are available but it will not be the full range of items in the scheme.</p> <p>The Cabinet Member indicated that concern about communications had been picked up in the impact assessment and mitigation included but the mitigation involved full communication through partners and Council services.</p>
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County Councillor A Davies disclosed an interest and withdrew from the meeting. The Vice-Chair took the Chair.

<p>Energy efficiency scheme and the installation of photo-voltaic panels. Will this work for systems upgrades or is this purely for new systems – what does this cover.</p>	<p>We have not looked at the details of whether we are looking at upgrades or not as yet. Housing will have worked with home owners so we know the homes and the vulnerabilities. What is then planned is if we have done some insulation work and this does not reduce costs then we can look at these alternative solutions to supplement these reductions. The Council is limited in terms of funding. The Income and Awards Senior Manager can raise this with the Housing Team but the emphasis is looking at vulnerable residents first.</p>
<p>With regard to the Off-grid grants will all property bands be eligible or only those in main scheme.</p>	<p>Originally the proposal was that if you received a grant from main scheme, those residents would not be eligible for this grant as well. However, if they could not receive a payment under the main scheme they could receive a payment under the off-grid scheme. The Council would then look at the wider circumstances and see whether if someone qualified under the main scheme an additional grant could be made. As there is limited funding it was the intention to consider those not eligible for funding under the main scheme initially. It will be a decision for the Panel whether the grant is opened to everyone or focus only to</p>

	<p>those who have not had grant in first round.</p>
<p>How much thought has gone into the process for delivery. The Welsh Government indicated that payments had to be made by September which does not leave much time for spotting duplicates, how onerous will the application process will be, and how we will deliver this by September.</p>	<p>The main scheme has to be delivered by September. Once the main scheme ends we will know how much funding is left to go into the discretionary scheme. Welsh Government has moved the discretionary scheme end date but has not specified a date which allows more flexibility as we will not know how much money is left until end of September, which is helpful.</p> <p>The process itself is quite well structured. A comprehensive infrastructure is in place now. Work has been done to prepare and the scheme can be put in place fairly quickly. It is intended that the application process is as straightforward as possible as there is likely to be a high throughput to be dealt with.</p>
<p>Section 2.3 refers to supporting a fuel and transport initiative for rural communities. How would you determine a figure for this as fuel costs rarely comes down.</p>	<p>This is an indicative suggestion from Welsh Government as guidance as to what we might want to consider for inclusion in our discretionary scheme. Powys does not have a transport initiative or fuel scheme specifically in the discretionary scheme as there is only limited funding. This is something we could do rather than a requirement of the scheme. There is flexibility in the system such as the funding provided to services so if they identified a vulnerability for an individual needing support for example to travel to hospital then this could be supported from that funding.</p> <p>The Head of Finance commented that in relation to the end date Welsh Treasurers had lobbied to move the end date to 31st March which has been agreed by Welsh Government. Assurance was also provided that there was a robust process in place to reduce the risk of fraud.s</p>
<p>If there is a vulnerable person who does not have family support, could someone else nominate them for a</p>	<p>A person's eligibility is based on their entitlement to the grant so for example if there is a person in a</p>

<p>grant such as a county councillor.</p>	<p>councillor's area who is eligible and has not applied they should be encouraged to do so.</p> <p>With regard to eligibility under the discretionary scheme, the Council will be contacting those that we can directly.</p> <p>However if there is a resident who has not had a payment under any of the schemes Councillors can encourage them to apply.</p>
<p>If an individual could not apply themselves, could a councillor make the application for them or get someone from the Council to help them</p>	<p>There is a team of officers who deal with grants and can do this for individuals over the phone or by email. Individuals can also use customer services points in libraries. Individuals need to be provided with the phone number for the support team.</p>
<p>Stakeholders – have you spoken to community support groups who are very localised and are in close touch with older generations.</p>	<p>We did engage with PAVO who represents the third sector, and with statutory services and voluntary organisations. It will also be important for local members to feed information into the process about voluntary organisations in their area as well.</p>
<p>The report mentions that individuals in HMOs can apply as individuals. However, this is not mentioned in the Powys report. Do we not have many HMOs in Powys.</p>	<p>No we do not have many, but they were not included in the scheme following a conversation with the housing service to see if anything specific was required for HMOs. Housing felt that because they have regular contact with HMOs through the private sector team the funding to the service could support those that are vulnerable.</p>

Comments:

- The Cabinet Member asked the Committee whether the balance of funding in the report was appropriate, whether it was targeted appropriately and there were proper controls in place to make sure that it was successful.
- In a number of Members' areas there were a high percentage of properties which were off-grid. There is also a need to move away from fossil fuels and move to ground source and air source heating as well as photo-voltaic systems.
- Great deal of consideration in the report into areas of vulnerability and to split the funding between vulnerabilities.
- Need to take account that if people do not come forward for the grants that a substantial amount could be remaining which will need serious decisions as

to where that is utilised. Some individuals have had renewable systems installed which have had to be replaced.

- The delivery of the scheme will be monitored on an ongoing basis and funding adjusted between the various elements.
- It was suggested that the Cabinet consider ground source heat pumps as an alternative as although they are more expensive to install than air source heat pumps they last longer.
- There should be the latitude to move funding between pots rather than having to seek further approval.
- The underspend on the main scheme would be considered by the Panel, which will be established following Cabinet approval of the scheme.

Outcomes:

Scrutiny made the following observations:

<p>1. The Committee commented that the report was balanced in relation to the funding proposals;</p>
<p>2. The Committee suggested:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">(a) that in relation to the grant to residents who live in homes that have off-grid fuel supplies:<ul style="list-style-type: none">• that the estimate for the number of properties for this element was probably significantly underestimated as there were a large number of people in Powys who relied on off-grid fuel supplies.• that the Panel should consider not excluding those who are eligible for the grant from the main scheme as well.• that although a fuel and transport support was not included in the current proposal, that in further phases of the scheme consideration be given to assisting with the rural fuel crisis.(b) that food surplus projects could be considered for funding and welcomed the view that these might be considered in the second phase of the scheme.(c) that other sources of heating such as ground source heating be considered as part of the energy efficiency element of the scheme.(d) that for future consultations the Council should engage with local community support groups as well as representative bodies such as PAVO, and local Councillors.
<p>3. The Committee expressed concern regarding the emphasis on funding reactive services such as foodbanks as opposed to into more preventative services such as food surplus projects which could provide support to individuals by different means.</p>
<p>4. The Committee was assured:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• that in relation to communications of the scheme there would be direct communication with individuals who the Council was aware would fall into the eligibility categories.• that Welsh Government had moved the end date for the delivery of the scheme to allow more flexibility for authorities;• that it was intended that the application process would be straightforward, and that support was available by means of the grants team or at customer service points at libraries, to assist individuals who had difficulty in applying;

5. In relation to energy efficiency schemes, the Committee noted that clarification would be sought with Housing Services in relation to photo-voltaic panels and whether these would work with either existing systems or with new systems only.

Scrutiny's Recommendation to Cabinet:

1. that for future phases of the schemes that consideration be given to providing support to food surplus projects and the rural fuel crisis
2. that the Panel be asked to consider not excluding those eligible for the off-grid fuel supply grid from the main scheme.
3. That other sources of heating such as ground source heating be considered within the energy efficient element of the scheme.
4. that for future engagement exercises that local Councillors and local community support groups be included.

6. WORKING GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS

Documents Considered:

- Recommendations of the Buying Homes Working Group held on 22-03-2022.

Issues Discussed:

- None

Outcomes:

- **The Committee accepted the recommendations of the Working Group for consideration by the Cabinet.**

7. SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

Documents Considered:

- Draft Forward Work Programme.

Issues Discussed:

- Work Programming sessions for the Committee to be established on a twice yearly basis.
- The pre-meeting on 21st July will need to be re-arranged.
- Shared Prosperity Funds – a paper will come to the Committee on 25th July.

Outcomes:

- **Noted.**

County Councillor A Davies (Chair)