

COMMUNITIES AND WELLBEING OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 4th September, 2019

Present: Councillor Glen Harrison (in the Chair),
Councillors Bernadette Parkinson (Vice Chair), Judith Addison,
June Harrison, Patrick McGinley and Kate Walsh

Apologies: Co-optees: Bernard Dawson and Doug Hayes

97 Apologies for Absence and Substitutions

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Bernard Dawson and Doug Hayes.

98 Declarations of Interest and Dispensations

There were no declarations of interest or dispensations.

99 Minutes of Last Meeting 11th July 2019

The Minutes of the meeting of the Communities and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday, 11th July 2019 were submitted for approval as a correct record.

Resolved - That the Minutes be received and approved as a correct record.

100 Council Tax Collection and Recovery

The Customer Contact Manager submitted a report on Council Tax Collection and Recovery to provide the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with an overview of the Council Tax and NNDR Collection and Recovery Policy and methods used by the Council in the collection and recovery of Council Tax arrears. To discuss the report the Customer Contact Centre Manager, Rachael Walker, the Revenues Manager, Lee Middlehurst and Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Resources, Councillor Joyce Plummer were all in attendance at the meeting.

The Contact Centre Manager referred to Member concerns that residents were being subject to unfair processes in relation to the collection of council tax arrears and the comparisons that had been made between Rossendale and Hyndburn Borough Councils. She pointed out that there were some subtle differences in how the two Councils conducted business but explained that Hyndburn Council had more ways of offering support and provided examples of this. She informed the Committee that Hyndburn Borough Council had acted fairly in carrying out its business and that Rossendale Borough Council had referred more cases to the Bailiff/Enforcement Agents, and that this had been confirmed by the Manager of the Citizens Advice Bureau for Rossendale and Hyndburn.

Councillor Plummer, Cabinet Portfolio for Resources, informed the Committee, for clarity, that Rossendale Bailiffs were used by the Council as an enforcement agency rather than Rossendale Borough Council.

Members had submitted questions, in advance, to the Officers concerned in respect of the following:

- Councillor concerns regarding the wording used in letters sent to residents.
- There should be more contact with residents who are in arrears by person rather than by letter.
- Letters should be available in different languages.
- What percentage of those summoned receive Universal Credit?
- Daily reminder letters seemed excessive.
- Is the lower limit for summons too low?
- Is there provision for affordability assessments when recovering debts?
- When are external agencies sent to recover debts?
- What criteria was used to set fees in comparison to other agencies?
- How many cases actually get to the bailiff stage?
- How many people in debt were referred to other agencies?
- How many of the Agencies used were regulated?
- What was the policy for refunding overpayments?
- Which areas of the Borough are more likely to miss Council Tax payments?
- What action is being taken to increase the rates of direct debit payment?
- How often is the Collection and Recover Policy reviewed?
- A request for further information on the trial scheme to support the debt management work done at CARH?

Councillor Plummer, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Resources, provided responses to the above advanced questions. On the request of the Chair, she circulated copies of two sample letters sent to residents to recover council tax arrears. She informed the meeting that there was not currently an option of providing letters in other languages as this would be too expensive to implement. She pointed out that Officers who responded to residents questions and requests were all fully trained in negotiation of payments and that legislation directed much of what the Council did and that they worked within these guidelines. She reported that 11% of people who were in debt were in receipt of Universal Credit. She informed Members that external Enforcement Agents were only used as a last resort after attempts had been made to recover monies in instalments. She explained that the collection of fees had been agreed by the County Clerk and that they annually tested the local market in respect of the agencies used by the Council. She gave details of the number of orders obtained and those referred to Enforcement Agents. To refund any overpayments she informed the Committee that taxpayers were written to for bank details so that this could happen. The number of reminder notices issued were provided and she explained that the Council Tax and NNDR Collection and Recovery Policy was reviewed annually and that the trial scheme to support the debt management work done at CARH was still in its infancy so she was unable to provide any further information on this at the present time.

Councillor Walsh proposed that larger font size was used in letters and the timeline for repayments should be reviewed to make it more transparent in relation to when costs are implemented. She also suggested that, in respect of the recovery of overpayments, people should be asked if they would like to be refunded instead of using this to cover a two month payment.

Councillor McGinley proposed extending the amount of days to pay outstanding debts from the current 7 days to provide more time for residents to be able to put plans in place for repayment.

Councillor Addison suggested that a clearer font was used in letters.

- Resolved**
- (1) That clear font, size and wording are used in reminder letters/notices sent to resident;**
 - (2) That the annual review of the Council Tax and NNDR Collection and Recovery Policy gives consideration to making it more transparent about the implementation of costs for outstanding debt and allowing more time for people to make arrangements for clearing outstanding debts; and**
 - (3) To ensure that people are offered a refund for overpayments rather than payment being used for the following month.**

101 Universal Credit

The Chair explained that a report had been requested from the Department of Works and Pensions on the impact of the roll out of Universal Credit to residents in Hyndburn. He informed the meeting that they had received a report and although the Department of Works and Pensions had not sent a representative to the meeting they had agreed to meet with Councillors outside of the meeting.

- Resolved** - **That the report be noted.**

Signed:.....

Date:

Chair of the meeting
At which the minutes were confirmed

This page is intentionally left blank