

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE COMMUNITY & OLDER PEOPLE
POLICY AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD AT COUNTY HALL,
CHELMSFORD AT 10.00 AM ON 8 MARCH 2012**

Membership

| | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| * W J C Dick (Chairman) | S Hillier |
| * L Barton | * R A Pearson |
| * R Chambers | * Mrs J Reeves (Vice-Chairman) |
| P Channer | * C Riley |
| J Dornan | Mrs E Webster |
| * M Garnett | * Mrs M J Webster |
| * C Griffiths | * Mrs J H Whitehouse (Vice-Chairman) |
| * E Hart | * B Wood |
| * T Higgins | |
| * Present | |

The following also were in attendance:

Also in attendance were Councillors A Naylor (Cabinet Member), A Brown (Deputy Cabinet Member) and M Montgomery of the Essex Older People's Planning Group.

19. Attendance, Apologies and Substitute Notices

The Committee Officer reported apologies had been received from County Councillors P Channer, S Hillier, and Mrs E Webster, and P Coleing from the Essex Older People's Planning Group

20. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Higgins declared a personal interest for Item 12 as she was a member of the Colchester Borough Council Planning Committee and Councillor Riley declared an interest during consideration of Item 23 on the Disabled Facilities Grants at Rochford District Council as he was a Councillor at that authority. No other interests were declared.

21. Minutes of last meeting

The Minutes of the Committee held on 9 February 2012 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman of the meeting.

22. Jenny Owen, Deputy Chief Executive

In advance of her forthcoming retirement, the Deputy Chief Executive was invited to comment upon her time at Essex County Council and forthcoming challenges.

Ms Owen outlined her low and high points from her time at ECC and suggested that , to overcome the challenges ahead, ECC should continue to

invest in staff, continue constructive challenge, be realistic about timescales, implement long-term rather than short term fixes and to always keep close to the customer. Thereafter, best wishes for her retirement were extended to her by the Committee.

23. Disabled Facilities Grants (DFG)

The Committee received a report (COP/05/12) from John Mackinnon, ECC Commissioning & Delivery Director, providing an interim report on a DFG pilot project undertaken within Basildon Borough Council (BBC). John Mackinnon and Caroline Sharp, Operational Service Manager were both in attendance to introduce and supplement the report and to answer questions.

(a) Pilot at Basildon Borough Council

An occupational therapist (OT) had been co-located with the DFG Team at BBC to facilitate quicker and direct referrals to BBC, provide just the one customer contact and improve overall response times. The pilot was looking to identify opportunities for efficiencies and joint working to improve the DFG process so that DFG budgets were committed at borough and district level in a timely manner. The pilot covered people in privately owned or rented accommodation. Those living in BBC property were not included as they had access to separate funding for adaptations for their own housing stock.

The average length of time for an OT assessment for cases already in the system when the pilot started, and which were now closed, had been measured at 21.5 working days with the longest timescale at 54 days. These timings had improved significantly in an analysis of current cases where the assessments had been completed on average within 19.9 working days with the longest timescale being 47 working days. Members still felt that these were considerable periods of time and questioned whether there were specific timescales that were considered acceptable and that should be targeted.

98 cases in total had been dealt with by the OT in the 23 weeks that they had been based at BBC. Whilst this would appear to suggest that the OT was conducting only four visits a week, it was stressed that often the OT assessment process could not be completed in one visit and would require follow-up visits which were not reflected in the figures.

Central government had released further funding to local authorities at the end of 2011 for DFG applications as part of supporting local winter pressures. Members questioned whether faster approval and installation processes could lead to budgets being spent quicker. It was highlighted that often a bigger issue for BBC would be the size of grants being administered which could reduce the number of cases that could be funded (see similar evidence from Castle Point and Rochford District Councils in Minute 23(b)(iv) below) and further details on this would be provided to Members.

It was stressed that it was important that some estimate of timelines for cases awaiting assessment by an OT was given to the borough and districts, so as to

provide them with an 'even-flow' of referrals to enable better budget and resource planning (see similar evidence from Castle Point and Rochford District Councils in Minute 23(b)(i) below). As part of the New Ways of Working Project ECC would be reviewing the existing referral timelines to boroughs and districts, and would look to increase the number of referrals made direct to boroughs and districts from Social Care Direct.

The OT placed in BBC had still continued to use ECC's OSCARS system which tracked each DFG application. However, initially there had been issues with the OT being able to access the system from the BBC premises and they had had to travel to the nearby Ely House offices to be able to access the system. This issue had subsequently been resolved.

A further update would be provided at the April meeting. Thereafter the ECC witnesses left the meeting and the following witnesses joined the meeting:

Steve Neville, Rochford District Council
Steve Pembroke, Castle Point Borough Council
Tim Quinn, Castle Point Borough Council

(b) Castle Point Borough and Rochford District Council

(i) Process and budgetary delays

Both Castle Point Borough Council (CPBC) and Rochford District Council (RDC) highlighted that they had difficulty with planning for DFG installations when it was not known when and what applications would be submitted during the budget period.

Members were keen to identify if there were process or budgetary delays in the DFG process at a local level which would negate the effect of streamlining the DFG assessment at the front end. Accordingly, they requested a further breakdown of information outlining referrals received and approved, the numbers ongoing and awaiting completion and an indication of the financial year in which they were likely to be completed.

Rochford had changed their Home Improvements Agency approved provider (now Papworth) and new ideas to improve timelines had been suggested as part of that new relationship. These ideas were now being implemented.

(ii) Case loads

It was stressed that the statistics for DFG applications could be misleading as the grant approval and project completion often could cross over two different financial years.

CPBC stressed that two years ago the timescales for their DFG installations had been up to 2 years and that this was now reduced to less than 12 months and they expected to further reduce the timescale to six months during the next year.

It was noted that, irrespective of the length of delay for a DFG installation, applicants would receive social care assistance (such as the provision of carers) until the installation was completed.

It was considered that delays in OT referrals were not, in itself, a cause of significant delay to CP. The CPBC DFG budget for the 2011/12 financial year was now fully committed with 29 cases currently completed (48 cases had been completed in the previous financial year). CPBC were working on approximately 60 referrals which would be accrued for spend in 2012/13.

RDC felt that they were not in the same situation as CPBC and stated that they had received 41 referrals in the current financial year compared to 57 the previous year.

(iii) Government funding

The extra funding for winter pressures and DFG applications announced by Central Government at the end of 2011 had been received too late in the financial year to be allocated and spent. The level of central Government funding for DFG applications for 2012/13 was not yet known. CPBC and RDC suggested that year on year the central government funding for DFG seemed to be consistent albeit with only minor increases.

(iv) Size and scale of adaptations

It was stressed that every application, irrespective of the scale of adaptation, followed the same due process although, clearly a concentration of larger scale adaptations would use a budget quicker than smaller scale adaptations. At CPBC the average cost of an installation had risen from £5,500 in the previous financial year to £8,500 in the current year and that this had been due to an increased number of larger and more expensive grant applications, particularly for children. Whilst it was acknowledged that larger and more expensive grant applications might be a future trend it was difficult to be able to predict this with any certainty.

It was noted that DFG applications for children were not means tested and were treated as priority applications. In addition, people on certain means tested benefits were automatically eligible for DFG. RDC were committed to 31 grants at a total cost of £237,000 in the current year averaging at just over £7,000 per case compared to a spend of £270,000 for 41 grants last year. Members requested that they be provided with further information on the size and scale of DFG applications and to indicate those that were for children.

It was stressed to the Committee not to underestimate the significant affect on borough and district councils of recent changes to eligibility for DFG grants, particularly in relation to applications for children, and the increased pressure on resources from returning injured services personnel also needing adaptations.

(v) Reclaiming part of a DFG

Changes to the legislation governing DFGs had been made in 2008 which permitted Councils to reclaim back part of a large DFG grant for up to 10 years after an installation, where the property had been sold during that time or was no longer the main residence of the disabled person. CPBC had started to recover some money from this change. It was also acknowledged that there were instances where the installation of adaptations could increase the value of a property.

The Governance Officer confirmed that further information had been promised from the three other district councils who had attended as witnesses at an earlier meeting. A Task and Finish Group to review DFG and hospital discharges would reconvene in June and a seminar with Home Improvement Agencies and other stakeholders was planned for the summer.

The witnesses were thanked for their attendance and evidence and they then left the meeting.

24. Families Safeguarding Sub-Committee

Councillor Madden introduced himself to the Committee advising that he had been appointed as the Chairman of the Safeguarding Families Sub Committee. The Sub Committee had drawn its membership from both Children and Young People PSC and this Committee to encourage closer working on safeguarding in future between the two committees.

25. Blue Badges

The Committee received a report (COP/06/12) on the reforms to the administration of the issue of Blue Badges. Sue Hawkins, Commissioning & Delivery Director – ESCD & Safeguarding Essex, and Helen Whitting, Business Manager Customer Service, joined the meeting to introduce and supplement the report and to answer questions.

(a) Introduction

Under the reforms, Blue Badges would be issued through a centralised system for the whole of the UK, although the applications would initially be processed and reviewed locally. The measures outlined by central government were particularly designed to tackle badge fraud and misuse and to make the scheme fairer and more sustainable in the long term for those that needed it.

The new measures permitted local councils to charge up to £10 towards the cost of administering the new scheme although it was highlighted that there was no profit at that level of fee. A community consultation exercise had indicated that respondents thought that such a charge for the issue of a Blue Badge for a three year period was reasonable.

(b) Independent Mobility Assessments

As part of the Blue Badge reforms coming into place on 1 April 2012, local authorities would be required to organise independent mobility assessments, rather than use GP assessments, to determine eligibility for Blue Badges in discretionary cases. It was noted that previously GPs had charged around £30 for these assessments which, up to April 2011 had been paid by the local Primary Care Trust and since then had been paid by the local authority. People on certain benefits such as high rate mobility allowance, war pensions and those with low life expectancy, qualified automatically for a Blue Badge without the need for an independent assessment. Existing users would have to reapply under the new process when the Blue Badge expired.

ECC felt that the independent OT assessment afforded the opportunity for other health and social care advice on general mobility and care issues to be given at the same time.

(c) Essex Cares Pilot

Contact Essex would co-ordinate the overall administration of the Blue Badge Scheme. Essex Cares would provide independent mobility assessments for discretionary applications at clinics hosted throughout Essex as part of a 12 month pilot service. The assessments would be undertaken by a professional occupational therapist. The assessments also could be undertaken as part of a home visit if necessary. ECCs Blue Badge Team would be advised of, and fully involved in, the outcomes of the assessment.

(d) Processing time

The Contact Essex call centre had reduced the processing times for applications to 2-3 days since taking over responsibility for the issue of Blue Badges in 2010. The Deputy Cabinet Member questioned whether these performance levels would be maintained under the new centralised system for the whole of the UK. It was expected that the new turnaround time would be five working days although there could be a 24 hour turnaround for an extra charge although ECC were not expecting to pass that extra charge onto the customer at this time. Often much of the delay for discretionary applications were due to applicants not being clear as to what information they needed to provide at the time of the application. ECC were looking to improve processes so that application packs could be sent out quicker to applicants. The internet link for these application packs would be sent to Members.

(e) Appeals and misuse

More evidence would need to be provided at the time of the application to meet the national criteria for the issue of such badges. As a result, it was anticipated that the number of appeals would reduce as more information would have been obtained up front from the applicant thereby reducing the possible grounds for appeal. Through closer links with Essex Police, traffic wardens and borough and district councils, ECC were looking to improve the

monitoring of incorrect use of issued badges. Misuse of a Blue Badge could be reported to the Blue Badge Team for further investigation.

(f) Communication

Members emphasised the importance of sensitive communication of the changes to the general public, stressing that the badge was issued to the person not to the vehicle and that there was still a responsibility to use the Blue Badge considerably. ECC had already written to GPs and received a number of enquiries from them which they were in the process of answering.

26. Personal Budgets Task and Finish Group

The Committee received and noted a report (COP/07/12) from the Governance Officer providing an interim report and recommendations of the Personal Budgets (Direct Payments) Task and Finish Group. A revised page 17 of the report had been circulated. The launch of Payment Cards had been deferred for two weeks so as to enable officers to double-check any impact from the 'know your customer' legislation recently enacted.

27. Carers Strategy Task and Finish Group

The Committee received and noted a report (COP/08/12) outlining the outcomes from the first two meetings of the Carers Strategy Task and Finish Group. Members suggested that the final report should make it clear that it related to unpaid carers. Visits to carer groups had been arranged. Councillor Madden agreed to attend a meeting with Chelmsford Young Carers.

28. Forward Look

The Committee received and **noted** a report (COP/09/12) from the Governance Officer outlining the Forward Look for the Committee and the items currently scheduled for meetings through to July 2012 and other issues that had arisen which might require scrutiny in the future. Consideration of the Libraries Target Operating Model and Work with the Voluntary Sector would be deferred to the May meeting. It was suggested that representatives from the 'Reach Out' project run in Tendring by North Essex Primary Care Trust should be invited to also attend the item on Village Agents.

29. Date of next meeting.

It was noted that the next meeting would be held at 10am on Thursday 12 April 2012 in Committee Room 1.

The meeting closed at 12.13 pm

Chairman

12 April 2012