

COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Communities Scrutiny Committee held on Wednesday 12 March 2025 at 6.00 pm in Council Chamber, Third Floor, Southwater One, Telford, TF3 4JG

Present: Councillors E Davies (Chair), E Aston, S Handley,
P J Scott and G Thomas

In Attendance: R Phillips (Registrars, Public Protection, Legal &
Democracy Service Delivery Manager), Phull (Housing
Strategy & Regeneration Service Delivery Manager) and
P Starkey (Senior Democracy Officer (Scrutiny))

COMSC19 Declarations of Interest

None.

COMSC20 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

**RESOLVED – that the minutes of the meeting held on 22 January 2025
be agreed and signed by the Chair.**

COMSC21 Affordable Warmth

The Service Delivery Manager: Strategic Housing & Regeneration presented an update to the Committee on the Council's Affordable Warmth Strategy for 2021 – 2026.

Adopted in April 2021, the Affordable Warmth Strategy covers the current period up until 2026 and aims to reduce fuel poverty through identifying and supporting households that struggle to afford adequate heating, improve the health and wellbeing of vulnerable residents by ensuring homes are energy efficient and reducing the number of fuel-poor households.

As part of the Strategy, an action plan was developed focusing on three key areas which include:-

- Raising energy awareness & support by educating residents about energy efficiency and providing support through initiatives such as the Telford Energy Advice (TEA) hotline.
- Improving energy efficiency & raising standards by attracting grants to retrofit homes to ensure properties meet the minimum energy performance standards and promoting green construction practices.
- Maximising household income & benefitting from the local economy by providing financial assistance through schemes such as the Household Support Fund and supporting local business owners through retrofit contracts.

Members heard that Central Government had changed the definition of fuel poverty which had led to an increase in the number of households classified as fuel-poor, thus posing a greater challenge since the strategy was first adopted by the Council. Additionally, the cost of living crisis and energy price hikes had exacerbated the situation in recent years.

The Council had worked with the Marches Energy Agency to provide a full-time 'one stop shop' hotline through match funding, known as the Telford Energy Advice (TEA) service. Since the initial set-up of the hotline, support was provided to 7,000 fuel-poor households in Telford and Wrekin, including 347 home visits. The hotline provided residents with various types of energy efficiency advice and also provided for a number of small measures such as heated throws to offer immediate support for elderly or vulnerable residents who had limited mobility. The service had also provided flyers to households, offering money-saving tips, an energy calculator app and assistance with switching energy tariffs and price caps. For some households, TEA had advocated with suppliers to secure better tariffs and helped register for priority services. An expression of interest form had recently been introduced to make it easier for residents to access support when needed.

As part of the Strategy, the Council had attracted a surplus of grant funding from various streams, including a £4m grant to retrofit homes, improving 400 households with insulation, heating, and solar panels. Other Council grants, such as the Emergency Boiler Fund had assisted 14 households in making habit changes to heat properties more efficiently and cost-effectively. The Council's Warm and Well Telford scheme had targeted low-income households, addressing the gap in the market for households with combined incomes of up to £50,000 who were still defined as 'fuel-poor'. Climate Change funding was used to upgrade temporary accommodation properties and supply thousands of energy-saving lightbulbs, ensuring vulnerable residents had adequate ratings. The Private Sector Housing service ensured legal compliance with minimum EPC ratings, whilst Nuplace raised standards through green construction. Examples included the installation of smart-controlled radiator bots to maintain heat levels and avoid dampness and condensation.

Members heard that in line with the emerging Future Homes legislation, the Station Quarter housing development due to be delivered by 2026 would include a range of Nuplace Homes which would be fully electric with no gas supply. Heating for these homes would be provided through a mixture of electric panel heaters and storage heaters with heat loss minimised through a fabric first approach to build and the use of PV solar panels to minimise energy costs for residents.

The TEA service had worked with key services such as Citizens Advice and the Wrekin Housing Group to support residents struggling with energy debt and the Better Homes for All scheme provided loans in collaboration with the local credit union to residents who did not qualify for grants. Since 2021, approximately £3.1m had been allocated per year to the Household Support Fund, a scheme which would continue until March 2026. Additionally, an

annual Emergency Welfare Assistance (Crisis Assistance) Fund of £111,000 had been allocated and had increased to £182,000 for the 2024/25 financial period. The Strategy had emphasised the efforts that had been made to keep spending local to support businesses and suppliers as well as how the Council had continued to tender capital works contracts to maximize social impact for vulnerable clients. The Retrofit Homes Project had been carried out in partnership with the Marches Energy Agency and Dodd Group to demonstrate the benefits of retrofitting a home to improve energy by using a property supplied by the Wrekin Housing Group as a show home and to set an example for developers and landlords alike to follow. The project had also provided apprenticeships through the Retrofit Academy for college students to help bridge the skills gap in the local workforce.

The next steps for the Affordable Warmth Strategy include the launch of the Warm Homes Local Grant programme, which would look to cater to both on and off gas properties in consortium with Shropshire and Herefordshire. Additionally, the Future Ready Homes Programme would be launched and would look to assist residents in navigating the complex retrofit market. The Council would also be continuing its work to reach digitally excluded individuals and overcome language barriers through targeted outreach at places of worship and community hubs to ensure that all residents have access to the support and resources needed to improve their home's energy efficiency and reduce fuel poverty.

Following the presentation, Members posed several questions:-

What was the Council doing to proactively help people who had been struggling, specifically residents who had reached pension age and had lived in the same houses for several years? There have been community groups delivered at Admaston House, and Wrockwardine Village Hall to help residents who needed to keep warm.

The Service Delivery Manager: Strategic Housing & Regeneration advised that the Council was actively working on how to further support residents who had reached pension age. The first series of communication campaigns was designed to reach people who were able to contact the Council, however the Council's focus would now be on reaching those residents who couldn't. The TEA service had also undertaken a lot of community work such as setting up stands and visiting schools.

How confident were you that you were reaching the right people who needed to hear these messages, especially poorer individuals and residents of pension age who might not have known about the scheme? What messages were you using?

The Service Delivery Manager: Strategic Housing & Regeneration advised that the Council had been confident in terms of numbers received TEA referrals and being able to reach out to residents who were in need. However, there had been general concern about whether some residents knew about the scheme and support available and if the service had reached those

residents who were generally in need. Another huge challenge for the Council was the private rented sector and ensuring the scheme reached tenants, with some fearing retribution from their landlords. Data sources provided information on household income, income deprivation, and types of households likely to be fuel-poor.

How did you get those messages out?

The Service Delivery Manager: Strategic Housing & Regeneration advised that a variety of methods had been used to reach residents, especially those may not be active on social media. This included physical leaflet drops and setting up stands at local community centres. The service had also visited GPs and supermarkets. Ongoing work was being undertaken with the Telford & Wrekin Interfaith Council to identify places of worship. The Council had also engaged with partner agencies such as Telford Crisis Support and Age UK as it was recognised that there may be vulnerable individuals who may not be aware of the offer.

How can we address the challenges faced by families who have moved in from out of the area and are living in poorly maintained hotels, especially considering the fear of retribution from landlords and the involvement of health professionals?

The Director: Housing, Employment & Infrastructure commented that private rented housing continued to be a challenge for the Council and the Private Sector Housing Team had continued to be proactive in undertaking checks and addressing issues reported back to the service as well as enforcing energy efficiency standards. The Council had however recognised that some landlords may face costs which would prevent them from maintaining properties but could access support through credit union loans.

What about social housing landlords? They had their own programs but might not have been up to standard. How did that work with the council?

The Director: Housing, Employment & Infrastructure confirmed that when referrals are received, they are handled in the same way as referrals for the Private Housing Sector. The Council utilised nation funding programmes such as the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund. Issues that had been raised with social housing had been lower and landlords had been generally receptive. In addition, the Social Housing Ombudsman, which had been established in the last 12 months, had been instrumental in overseeing matters.

Regarding rented accommodation, what percentage of people who owned homes fell into this category compared to renters?

The Service Delivery Manager: Strategic Housing & Regeneration advised that approximately 95% of properties were owner-occupied. Whilst the offer was open to private renters, landlords would be required to pay a contribution.

Have you spoken to any schools in the area?

The Service Delivery Manager: Strategic Housing & Regeneration advised that at a recent Safer Stronger Board meeting, a presentation had been delivered by school heads regarding various areas of concern in relation to pupils home life. One of the key issues highlighted was in relation to excess cold which affected 30-50% of rented properties. A request had since been made for the Team to speak to school heads about concerns around repeated absenteeism and to provide support around the resources available for families who are struggling such as the TEA service and private sector housing support.

Were we trying to capture and prevent people on the cusp of falling into fuel poverty and are there any strategies available to support them?

The Service Delivery Manager: Strategic Housing & Regeneration commented that the Telford Warm & Well initiative had raised its income threshold to ensure that people who fall out of central funding were still eligible to receive support. The TEA service was a service which was open to all residents, not just those who were vulnerable and could also assist with residents who were on the cusp of being classed as fuel-poor.

Was there anything else we as Councillors could have done to support you in getting the message out?

The Service Delivery Manager: Strategic Housing & Regeneration advised that as elected Members regularly speak to residents and conduct wards of the ward, they would be in the best position to help identify specific neighbourhoods or areas that would benefit from the offer. An example was provided of a Councillor who had recently identified a household which appeared to need assistance and the Team were able to support by undertaking a door knocking activity in the ward area.

COMSC22 Work Programme Review

The Service Delivery Manager: Registrars, Public Protection, Legal & Democracy presented the updated work programme to the Committee. Members were advised that there were no further meetings scheduled to take place for the 2024/25 municipal year and any remaining items on the work programme would be carried forward into the next year.

Members discussed items for the 2025/26 work programme and it was suggested that an item on the process surrounding Traffic Regulation Orders could be put forward.

COMSC23 Chair's Update

The Chair thanked Members for their contributions over the municipal year and for their involvement in the elections review and fly-tipping workshops.

The meeting ended at 6.52 pm

Chairman: _____

Date: Tuesday 8 July 2025