

# Good Scrutiny Awards 2013

## Submission Form



*accountability, transparency, involvement*

**Closing date: 28 March 2013**

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<b>Organisation name: Telford &amp; Wrekin Council</b>
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### Title of entry: Scrutiny of Welfare Benefit Reforms

Please select the award category in which you would like your entry to be considered. You can only choose one category per form; the same piece of work will not be considered for more than one category.

<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Innovation</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Transforming Services</b>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Involving Communities</b>	X <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Working Together</b>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Raising the Profile</b>		

### Supporting video

All entrants should be prepared to submit a short (2 minute) video about their entry which will be shown at the CfPS 2013 conference if you are shortlisted for an award. This video should be uploaded onto YouTube so that we can embed a link to it from our website. We will provide separate guidance on the video requirements to all shortlisted candidates. You may submit your video after your award entry but in the event that you are shortlisted, your video must be submitted to us by 4 June 2013.

### Award Key Dates

28 March 2013	Deadline for entries
14 May 2013	Shortlist announced
4 June 2013	2 minute video submitted
11 June 2013	Winners announced at the CfPS annual conference

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## Submission form

Entrants should submit their application using the headings below. In total your entry should not exceed 1,500 words. No supplementary documents or attachments will be considered.

### 1. Summary of entry (headings provided as a guide only)

Scrutiny of the Welfare Benefit Reforms:

- Council Tax Support Scheme and transitional grant
- Discretionary Housing Payment Policy & Council Tax Support Hardship Award
- Local Crisis Assistance & Local Resettlement Assistance Policy (replacement Social Fund).

#### Background to the topic (political and social context):

The Welfare Benefit Reforms and the transfer of responsibility for Localised Council Tax Support and the design and administration of the replacement Social Fund to local authorities.

#### Problem or issue being addressed:

28% of households in the borough are in receipt of Council Tax or Housing benefit (42% of pension age and protected) meaning over 12,000 households are affected by the changes. The Council estimated that £5.5m of benefits coming into the borough would be cut on 1<sup>st</sup> April. The issue was how to best manage and minimize the impact of the changes on benefit customers affected and in a way that is affordable and manageable for the Council.

An additional challenge for scrutiny was the extreme pressure of workload of the benefits team which meant that from a practical point of view officer resources for scrutiny were limited and had to be used very efficiently.

#### Principal objectives (reasons for selecting the topic):

To ensure the policies developed are as fair as possible for benefit customers and manageable within the resources available to the authority.

#### Timescale (when did the work take place):

October 2012 and January-March 2013. Work was scheduled to fit into the policy development and decision making cycle for the policies under scrutiny.

### 2. Please list the outcomes from this piece of work: how do you know it made a difference? (e.g. savings identified, executive agreed alternative course of action, social value added):

This is a good example of scrutiny working alongside officers to have a direct impact on policy development.

#### DIRECT OUTCOMES

1. **Local Council Tax Support Scheme** – scrutiny was pro-actively engaged as consultee on LSCT proposals and also looked in detail at the option of the Transitional Grant in advance of it being considered by Cabinet. Scrutiny considered the proposed scheme, modeling of alternative options, other authorities' proposals where known and CTS Transitional Grant option. Outcomes were:
  - a) Recommendation fed into Policy Review (a pre-decision Cabinet meeting) not to apply for the Transitional Grant with the reasons and this was agreed. The recommendation subsequently went to Full Council with the scrutiny recommendation included as part of the report.
  - b) Recommendation to Policy Review supporting the proposed LCTS scheme but with further recommendations about awareness raising with the public and the application of Council Tax on

empty properties.

Impacts: identified most financially beneficial LCTS option for the Council that is as fair as possible to benefit customers.

2. **Discretionary Housing Payment and Council Tax Support Hardship Payment Policy.** Officers pro-actively involved scrutiny in the development of the Policy prior to decision by Cabinet. As a consequence of scrutiny's work the Policy was amended in several ways improve clarity for the public or improve the internal systems, namely:
- a) Strengthening the process for monitoring of the fund
  - b) Clarity on whether applicants would be met by a decision maker
  - c) Clarity for customer on what "pension age" means to qualify for protection from the benefit changes and clarity on the age of working age customers eligible to apply for awards
  - d) Clarity for customers on the length of time for decisions to be made and for payments to be made to a customer
  - e) Clarity on publicity
  - f) Scrutiny also raised a number of other issues which were looked at and responded to but did not directly impact on the Policy itself.

The scrutiny work was included in the final report which went to Cabinet and recognized by the Cabinet member in his presentation of the report to Cabinet.

Impacts: strengthened Policy for customers, monitoring issues looked at to ensure applicants are not disadvantaged by when they apply and the funds are distributed fairly.

3. **Local Crisis Assistance & Local Resettlement Assistance Policy (replacement Social Fund)** Officers pro-actively involved scrutiny in the development of the Policy. The positive impacts were:
- a) Suggestions about staff training, member briefing, non-duplication of funding streams, exploring an agreement with a retailers for clothing assistance, verification of "appointees" to acting on behalf of the applicant and linking into credit unions were taken on board and have informed further work.
  - b) Changes to the policy included removing the exclusion of prisoners on bail from eligibility and inclusion of the requirement for people in temporary accommodation to take good provided with them when they move into more permanent accommodation. Scrutiny's concerns about the inclusion of payment of rent in advance as an essential expenditure was reflected as a recommendation in the Cabinet report to explore widening the use of the Council's Bond scheme as an alternative to funding rent in advance through the Assistance Policy.
- Impacts: identified ideas to safeguard the Council's budget and minimize the risk of fraud, ensure customers assistance are linked to relevant support organizations.

**INDIRECT IMPACTS – Demonstrating to the Executive and officers how working with scrutiny can add value**

See Section 4

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### 3. Tell us about your approach to gathering evidence for this work

Witnesses (e.g. people who use services and the public, frontline staff, voluntary and civil society organizations, local businesses, independent experts):

Other information (e.g. benchmarking, site visits, performance data, mystery shopping):

Witnesses included:

- Officers
- Cabinet members at Policy Review
- CEO of a local RSL

Evidence included:

- The relevant draft policies
- Statistical information about the numbers of people in the borough affected by each benefit change
- Relevant financial information and modeling of alternative options to demonstrate impacts on particular groups
- The consultation strategy and feedback
- Information about other authorities' schemes
- Detailed reports and briefings on the changes and communication of the changes to the public
- Issues raised by residents with members about the changes
- Issues raised by partner organizations with members

### 4. Please show how the entry meets the criteria for the specific category you are entering

(addressing the 'judging criteria' and 'category definitions'):

- **Groups of non-Executive working together.** The welfare reforms have an impact on the community and on the Council's budget. Two Scrutiny Committees joined up in this work – the Co-operative & Communities and the Budget & Finance Scrutiny Committees – to consider the policies from both social and financial perspectives to reach a balanced view. This model will continue for on-going scrutiny.
- **Non-executives taking responsibility for their own work.** The pressure on the service area meant that resource to support for scrutiny was limited. Members took the initiative and held their own (member-only) informal meeting to carry out some of the work to minimize demands on officer time. A key issue for scrutiny was how the Council was working with partners to support people affected through the benefit changes. The Scrutiny Chair arranged a meeting with the largest local Registered Social Landlord to find out how this was working and the excellent feedback was circulated to the scrutiny committee and service area. This provided assurance to the committee whilst using member resources efficiently.
- **Outstanding work with the service area.** This is an outstanding example of joint working and co-operation between scrutiny and officers in the service area. The service area valued the input of non-Executive members in policy development and pro-actively engaged scrutiny in the formulation of policies and their ideas for further work. A close working relationship was developed which clearly demonstrated the value scrutiny can add in providing challenge and fresh ideas to policy development. This was carried over to the Executive and scrutiny reports and recommendations were incorporated into Cabinet reports and recognized by Cabinet members at Cabinet and Council.
- The approach was integrated so that in addition to dedicated scrutiny meetings, scrutiny was able to feed into other work. For example:
  - The service area held a number of Benefit Training sessions for members, partners and stakeholders. The Scrutiny Committee promoted these to other members and scrutiny members were given an opportunity to submit questions in advance and the answers were incorporated into the sessions to provide information to a wider audience.
  - A number of Member e-briefings were produced by the service area which provided time-critical

information about the communication of changes to members of the public to enable members to understand what was happening and to respond to residents' problems. Members of the scrutiny committee, one from each political group, volunteered to raise awareness of the briefings within their own groups to help the benefits team improve awareness.

- **Non-executives working quickly and flexibly.** The pace of change was fast and scrutiny showed it could respond flexibly and be nimble on its feet. Work was planned to fit into the timetable for developing the policies and some meetings had to be held at very short notice - members were flexible and co-operative so they could respond in a timely way.
- **Building an on-going relationship.** This work is on-going and it has been agreed that scrutiny will be involved in reviewing policies post-implementation to help shape improvements for the future.

**5. External endorsements.** Please cut and paste here a paragraph from **at least one and no more than three** external endorsers stating how this entry meets the criteria for this award as set out above. 'External' means anyone being held to account through the work or someone from outside the organisation who was a partner in the entry.

**1. As the Cabinet member responsible for Revenues and Benefits I was involved with Officers in the process to develop the Council's policies for:-**

- **Council Tax Support Scheme**
- **Discretionary Housing Payment Policy & Council Tax Support Hardship Award**
- **Local Crisis Assistance & Local Resettlement Assistance Policy (replacing the Social Fund)**

**The impact of these changes, the number of residents affected and the need to have effective schemes in place for April 2013 meant that the working group had a lot of work to do in a short time. This work was new ground for the Council; it required many facts, the involvement of numerous partners and feedback.**

**The working group has been able to develop its policies for the above areas on time and was greatly helped by Scrutiny which was doing its work in parallel. Scrutiny's work was done while the Working Group was developing its policies and the Scrutiny feedback was put into the final policies before going through the Cabinet and Full Council approval processes hence shortening the timescale to achieve the final policies. The Working Group was thankful for Scrutiny checking its assumptions, identifying gaps and for the knowledge within the Scrutiny Committee which added to the skill base for the policy developments.**

**This way of involving the Scrutiny Committee in forward policy making is important to eliminate shortfalls in policies.**

**Cllr. Bill McClements, Cabinet Member Resources & Service Delivery**

**2. As the manger responsible for implementing the Welfare Benefit Reforms across the Authority, I have this year had a number of key local policies that I have had to develop and present for approval to either the Full Council or the cabinet over the last year.**

**These have been challenging policies to develop, as they are new to all colleagues in Local Government and therefore there has not been a simple precedent or blue-print to follow as to how these policies should be developed to ensure that they met the needs of local citizens adequately.**

**For this reason, I was keen to gain a wide as possible set of views and ideas on the proposed policies that fell within my responsibility. Specifically:**

- **Local Council Tax Support scheme**
- **Discretionary Housing Payments and Local Council Tax Support Hardship Policy**
- **Local Crisis Assistance and Local Resettlement Assistance Policy**

**I therefore welcomed the opportunity of the joint scrutiny committee's reviewing these policies in detail before they were presented to Cabinet. I found their questioning to be very insightful and the recommendations that they made in relation to the policies genuinely helped shape our thinking and the design of the final drafts.**

**Presenting the concepts to scrutiny early in the process and opening them up for robust examination enabled the workability and practicality of the proposals to be tested thoroughly at the design stage.**

**Throughout the process I found members of the joint scrutiny committee's to be very supportive of officers and keen to have a genuine input into ensuring that the final policies were fit for purpose to provide support to the most financially vulnerable citizens of the borough.**

**I am in no doubt that the schemes in operation are significantly improved as a direct result of scrutiny's input.**

**Lee Higgins, Benefit Service Delivery Manager**

**Please send this form to [cfpsconference2013@cfps.org.uk](mailto:cfpsconference2013@cfps.org.uk).**

**If you have any problems please call CfPS on 020 7187 7363.**

### **Competition Rules**

1. A summary of no more than 1500 words should be submitted describing how the entry relates to the criteria set out. 2. Each entry must be returned with a completed application form to be considered. 3. Entries will only be accepted electronically. 4. Entrants may enter more than one category per organisation. However, the same piece of work will not be accepted for more than one category. 5. Entrants cannot submit additional material but you may include a link to publicly-available information about the work on your own website. 6. Closing date for submissions is 5:00pm 28 March 2013. 7. Shortlisted entries must submit a 2 minute video which supports their application. The video should be posted to [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com) with a link to the video sent to CfPS. Guidance on producing the video can be found on our website. 8. Shortlisted entries will be invited to attend the CfPS annual conference and their supporting videos will be shown during the conference programme. 9. By entering the competition all applicants agree that the submitted material can be used by CfPS to promote the role and impact of accountability and scrutiny. 10. The judges' decisions are final.
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