

Resources Scrutiny Commission Supplementary Information



Date: Monday, 1 November 2021
Time: 4.00 pm
Venue: City Hall

6. Public Forum

(Pages 2 - 5)

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Resources

Scrutiny Commission

1st November 2021

Public Forum



Questions

Ref	Name	Topic	Page
Q1 – Q2	Suzanne Audrey	Agenda Item 13: Q1 Performance Report	
Q3 – Q7	Clive Stevens	Agenda Item 8: Council Tax Reduction Scheme 22/23	

Statements:

No statements were received.



Public Forum Questions

Questions 1 & 2: Suzanne Audrey:

I would like to submit the following questions to the Resources Scrutiny Committee, Monday 1 November.

Background

With regard to the Quarterly Performance Progress Report, the performance rate for the number of Freedom of Information requests responded to within 20 days is 68%, and the target was 70%. The management notes indicate that the target for 2021/22 was revised down from 90% to 70% based on advice from the Information Commissioner's Office on setting realistic targets.

The most up-to-date information on the council website is for 2018 and states: Bristol City Council received 555 new Freedom of Information requests between 1 January 2018 and 31 March 2018. The council answered 427 requests within the required timescale of 20 working days, which is approximately 77%. Of the 555 requests received the council answered 517. Information was withheld in 38 cases. Out of 555 requests received, 3 cases were escalated to the internal review stage.

[<https://www.bristol.gov.uk/data-protection-foi/freedom-of-information-foi-published-information>]

So, the performance target has been reduced from 90% to 70% (considerably lower than the 77% achieved in 2018). Furthermore, the amount of information published about this performance target seems to be very limited compared with 2018.

Question 1

I do understand that it is dispiriting to repeatedly have to report a failure to meet a target, especially if that target seems unrealistic. But is the resources scrutiny committee satisfied that such a large reduction in the target is necessary and beneficial?

Officer Response

The target has been reduced based on advice from the Information Commissioner's Office. This is a more realistic target against which the Council can measure progress. The target will be kept under review.

Question 2

Is there anything that can be done to improve the reporting of FOI requests on the Council website to show the number received: the number responded to within 20 working days; the number of cases where information was withheld, and; the number escalated to an internal review (as is shown on the Council website for 2018)?

Officer Response

This matter has been raised with the Director for Legal and Democratic Services who will consider with the service area how we provide greater transparency relating to data about information requests.

Questions 3 - 7: Clive Stevens

I am supportive of keeping a fully funded council tax reduction scheme for working age claimants. I think this is fair on people on low incomes who presumably rely on Universal Credit to top up any wages as well. This is an expensive city to live in and average wages are relatively low. It is also fair on the tax payer because those people on low incomes would struggle to pay even £5 a week extra Council Tax so it would increase indebtedness and homelessness both of which would cost the tax payer more.

I do have some questions for officers though:

Q1: Have you factored in the impact of the £20 drop in Universal Credit? (Presumably this would trigger higher CTR benefits?)

Officer Response

The drop in the temporary additional £20 in Universal Credit (UC) has been included into the impact analysis and Bristol's scheme costs. This is because its scheme has been designed so that any uplift to the maximum Universal Credit awards, including the £20, will have a nil effect on anyone's CTR award. This is because the maximum award and UC award are increased (or decreased) by the same amount. This means that no one will be disadvantaged by changes in UC maximum awards.

Q2: The recent announcement in the minimum wage increase should improve the situation. I am assuming you haven't been able to factor that in but would you say it could improve the situation perhaps by an order of £1m per annum?

Officer Response

The assumption regarding recent changes in the increase in minimum wage increases not being considered for Council Tax Reduction (CTR) modelling of costs are correct. This change though would almost exclusively affect only working age households plus those who are not already receiving full CTR and working. The current high-level estimate is around £700k but also affected by other factors, such as any increases in 'applicable amounts' (benefit minimum cost of living formulas) used by central Government and included in Bristol's working age CTR scheme.

Q3: You have shown a strong correlation in areas of deprivation, Council Tax debt and reliance on CTR but I note Central ward has the highest number of people in debt to the Council yet a below average uptake of CTR? How do you explain this?

Officer Response

There could be a variety of reasons why the correlation between Council Tax debt and Council Tax Reduction isn't as strong in central wards as it is in others and would need further and more detailed investigation. One reason could be purely due to the number of dwellings in Central ward (10,106) compared with average 5,893 across all wards meaning there would by very nature be a higher number of households in debt.

Q4: I recall back in 2017 you suggested some ideas to improve the administrative efficiency of CTRS. One idea then was to have a minimum £1 a week charge, so if the Council Tax due calculated to be 80p for example it would be waived. Have you any ideas that would improve administrative efficiency?

Officer Response

Since 2013 there has been a variety of options explored around cost and administrative savings, however unless a material change is going to be made to the scheme the administrative benefits are either minimal and/or disproportionate in terms of implementation versus impact on citizens and/or the council.

Q5: Final question is about CTR taper. Benefits tapers (clawbacks) are also known as benefits traps. At certain income levels the cumulative impact of income tax, National Insurance which will be 13.25% in 21/22, Universal Credit taper at 63% (Budget announcement: reducing to 55% from Dec 1st) added to CTR taper at 20% would mean a recipient could work longer hours in a week to earn say an extra £100 gross, take home £66.75 and find their benefits reduced by £55.40 leaving them with just £11.35 which would be about a net income increase of £1 an hour. Most people would decide that's not worth doing. This means they are trapped in a benefits culture due to a badly designed system.

The Government appear to have realised the corrosive impact of high additive tapers so perhaps BCC should chip in too. Could officers do a rough and ready analysis of the extra cost to the Council of reducing the CTR taper from 20% to 15% (So those already on 100% CTR still get 100%, those on 80% CTR would then get 85% etc)?

(I appreciate you won't have a detailed answer to Q5 ready for Scrutiny or Cabinet but the question needs to be asked perhaps for use next year).

Officer Response

The estimated cost and generosity of reducing the Council Tax Reduction (CTR) taper from 20% to 15% is around £1.3m but does not consider potential changes described in the response to Q2 and impacts on household income because of changes in earnings and benefits, that would also affect the amount income considered by a change in taper.

However, based on the £1.3m estimate, the average household would receive an additional award of around £74 per year. Note that this would only affect working age claimants and those who are not already receiving maximum CTR.