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Late Item for West (Outer) Area Committee, 20th January 2012

Agenda Item 15 - Area Chairs Forum Minutes

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Agenda Item 15

**Area Chairs Forum
Monday 11th November 2011
Committee Room 4, Civic Hall**

Attendance:

Councillors: P. Gruen (Chair), G. Hyde, G. Hussain, G. Wilkinson, K. Parker, A. Gabriel, J. Akhtar, G. Latty, D. Blackburn

Officers: J. Rogers, R. Barke, S. Mahmood, J. Maxwell, B. Logan

Minutes: S. Warbis

Officers attending for specific items: J. Wildman, S. Carey, J. Harwood, M. Lund, C. Dickinson, J. Lane, A. McMaster

Item	Description	Action
1.0	Apologies	
1.1	Cllr. T Hanley	
2.0	Minutes and Matters Arising	
2.1	The minutes of the previous Area Chairs Forum meeting on 5 th September 2011 were agreed as an accurate record.	
2.2	<u>2.5 of previous minutes – Land Ownership Issues and Responsibilities</u> Various discussions have taken place between ALMOs, Environmental Services, Area Teams and other agencies and work is progressing to tackle outstanding issues.	
3.0	Implications of the Welfare Reform Bill	
3.1.1	Steve Carey, Chief Officer Revenues and Benefits, attended to present a report on welfare reforms.	
3.1.2	Some changes to the housing benefit scheme have already been implemented but there will also be a raft of changes to the benefits system over the next 3 years and officers are currently preparing for these changes.	
3.1.3	Changes to housing benefit introduced in April 2011 affect the private rented sector and include the loss of excess benefit where actual rents are cheaper than the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) Rate, capping of LHA at 4 bedroom house rate and reductions to LHA rates. Existing cases are protected until January 2012 when an estimated 9,500 families in Leeds will see their housing benefit reduced.	
3.1.4	Work is being done with private landlords to address this issue. One suggestion is for landlords to agree to reduce their rents in return for receiving direct payments of housing benefit. Whilst some landlords may see the advantage of this, it may be less viable for the larger properties.	
3.1.5	A Shared Accommodation Rate (SAR) is currently applied to single claimants up to the age of 25 limiting the amount of housing benefit that can be claimed to around £61 per week. From January 2012 this will apply to single claimants up to the age of 35 meaning over 1,500 tenants in Leeds between the age of 25 and 35 will see their housing benefit reduced from £99.92 to around £61.50.	
3.1.6	The implications of changes to housing benefit will mean a large number of people having to move out of 1 bedroom properties into bed-sits or shared accommodation, and also families in 5 bedroom properties having to move into	

	4 bedroom properties. The benefit service is already handling cases for concerned customers and is receiving referrals from councillors and MPs and this caseload is likely to increase dramatically in January.	
3.1.7	There may be some funding from central government to address benefit reductions but this will inevitably be targeted and will not cover all cases.	
3.1.8	In April 2013 council tax benefit will end and will be replaced by localised schemes to be operated by councils. Funding for these schemes has been reduced by 10% and councils will have to fund any overspend. There is likely to be protection in place for pensioners and other vulnerable groups to address any reduction in support.	
3.1.9	Universal credit is to be introduced to simplify the benefits system and is intended to make sure that people are always better off in work than on benefits. Policies relating to this are still being designed however aspects will be introduced in October 2013 with the full transition being completed in 2017.	
3.1.10	It is intended that claims will be made electronically, payments will be made monthly in arrears and will be made directly to the claimant.	
3.1.11	A cap on housing benefits will be applied to tenants living in properties deemed too large for their needs and is likely to affect around 7,000 tenants in Leeds. Although work is taking place to encourage tenants to relocate to appropriate sized properties it will not be possible to resolve all cases by April 2013 when changes will be implemented.	
3.1.12	The Disability Living Allowance (DLA) will be replaced by Personal Independence Payments for claimants between 16 and 64 which the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) estimates will lead to a reduced benefit expenditure of £2.1bn.	
3.1.13	LHA rates are currently determined using evidence from landlords in the private sector. From April 2013 the consumer price index will be used instead which may mean that there will be a gap between actual rents and benefit levels leading to a reduction in the affordable housing stock.	
3.1.14	A report is being taken to Executive Board outlining the potential implications of welfare reform. Officers are developing strategies to mitigate the effects of changes to the welfare system but there will be an impact for a significant number of people in Leeds.	
3.2	Jill Wildman, Director of Housing Services East North East Homes Leeds, attended to present a report on the effects of welfare reform for the Leeds ALMOs and BITMO.	
3.2.1	22,300 tenants will be affected by changes to benefits which will come into effect between 2013 and 2017. Currently £60 million in Housing Benefit is paid directly to ALMO and BITMO rent accounts.	
3.2.2	Benefits will be paid directly to the tenant, and customers will be responsible for managing their own benefits. Not all claimants currently have bank accounts and there may be issues for customers who are financially excluded and do not have sound financial literacy skills. There is a move towards a paperless system which will impact on customers who don't have computers or computer skills.	
3.2.3	There will be a substantial increase in the amount of income that will need to be collected by the ALMOs / BITMO. Benefits will be paid to claimants in arrears on a monthly basis which will impact on the performance in rent collection.	
3.2.4	The DWP is considering allowing 5-10% of vulnerable customers to have housing benefit paid directly to ALMOs / BITMO although there is currently no definition of vulnerable. There are concerns that certain customers may not	

	view paying their rent as a priority which will have an impact on income collection, arrears, collection costs, legal costs and evictions.	
3.2.5	A lot of support will be needed to manage these changes for customers which may mean an increased staff resource is required and training will be required to re-skill staff regarding new legislation and processes.	
3.2.6	It is estimated that 7,500 ALMO / BITMO tenants will be affected by changes to benefits due to occupying accommodation that is deemed too large for their needs. Demand will be high for tenants wishing to downsize and there are concerns over the volume of requests and also the availability of suitable properties, particularly 1 bedroom properties.	
3.2.7	An ALMO / BITMO welfare reforms action plan has been developed and was appended to the report. Work is ongoing to gather impact data for customers and housing stock at a more local level to gauge the likely impact on different neighbourhoods.	
3.3	The reports were welcomed by the forum and it was agreed that it would be appropriate for them to be taken to future Area Committee meetings as well as arranging briefings for the various party groups.	SC JW
3.3.1	Area Chairs confirmed that they were getting increasing numbers of calls from concerned and confused tenants and expressed concerns over the ability of the welfare rights teams to cope with the increased level of queries and likely appeals. It was stressed that relevant officers needed to be preparing to provide the relevant advice that would be needed.	
3.3.2	Concerns were raised over the logistics of dealing with over 7,000 people who would no longer be able to afford the rents on properties of the size they occupied. It was mentioned that the DWP are carrying out work to gauge the implications on the ground and that LCC officers are in contact with the DWP during this process. It was mentioned that the bill was still progressing through parliament and that there may be caveats added to cover issues such as adapted properties. Options were also being considered to alleviate the impact of the reforms such as phasing in some of the changes.	
3.3.3	The ALMOs are expecting a big impact on residents, and prospective residents, of the maisonette and multi-storey flat stock. Data is being collected to assess where the impact is likely to be the greatest. It was mentioned that some of the 7,000 plus tenants affected would find a way to pay increased costs and therefore the overall impact for the ALMOs is uncertain.	
3.3.4	It was raised that the impact of these changes may be increased in future years if house prices and rent increases are not matched by increases to benefit payments.	
3.3.5	The question was raised as to how these changes would impact on the choice based lettings system. Area Chairs were assured that work was ongoing between the ALMOs and the Environment and Neighbourhoods department to deal with issues affecting lettings.	
3.3.6	Concerns were raised over the increased demand that would be placed on services at a time where staffing numbers and resources are decreasing.	
4.0	Draft Area Committee Report on the Localism Bill	
4.1	Jane Harwood, Corporate Policy and Performance Officer, attended to present a report on the Localism Bill seeking comments on the report and approval for a report to be taken to the 10 Area Committees. A further report will be taken to the corporate Leadership Team taking account of comments from members.	

4.2	There have been significant amendments to the Localism Bill as it has progressed through parliament and officers have been keeping a close watch on changes and guidance as it has been issued.	
4.3	A series of papers are being drafted relating to specific aspects of the bill such as Neighbourhood Planning, Community Right to Challenge and Assets of Community Value.	
4.4	Questions were raised as to which bodies could develop Neighbourhood Plans or bid for community assets. Although there are definitions as to what constitutes a representative group, in theory any group could be involved if correctly constituted. Any group can bid for an asset of community value.	
4.5	It was mentioned that it would be challenging to secure funds for Neighbourhood Plans in order to put them in place quickly.	
4.6	It was also mentioned that there was still a duty of best value to be applied and that social value versus value for money would still be a consideration in assessing bids for assets and services. The bill will give people the right to challenge how services and assets are run, and the local authority will be able to accept or reject these challenges.	
4.7	It was agreed that the paper should be taken to the Area Committees with officers in locality teams to make amendments to cover local issues.	JH / Area Leaders
5.0	Community Engagement Strategic Approach	
5.1	Matt Lund, Corporate Consultation Manager, attended to present a report on the Community Engagement Framework and request that a report be taken to the 10 Area Committees.	
5.2	A lot of community engagement work has been carried out in the past but this has not always been done in a consistent and coordinated way. The council could be open to legal challenges if engagement has not been carried out effectively when making key decisions.	
5.3	The Strategic Planning and Policy Board (SPPB) agreed in the summer of 2011 that a new framework was required to guide community engagement and take into account the current financial pressures, the evolving locality working and partnership arrangements and to meet the council value of "working with communities".	
5.4	There is a need to build officer skills, improve the culture of co-ordinating engagement and improve governance methods so that appropriate monitoring can be implemented.	
5.5	It was agreed that a report should be taken to the February round of Area Committee meetings.	ML / Area Leaders
6.0	Citizens' Panel Update	
6.1	Chris Dickinson, Area Management Officer, attended to present a report outlining progress on the development of the Leeds Citizens' Panel.	
6.2	The Citizen's Panel will be an efficiency tool for carrying out consultation in Leeds. Recruitment is taking place which will ensure that panel members will be representative of the population at Area Committee level as well as at city level and it will be possible to interpret results from consultation at an Area Committee level.	
6.3	Recruitment to the panel has been promoted through various means and good progress is being made in populating the panel.	

6.4	The panel will not be used to replace local consultation, but will be able to provide benchmark setting and may be helpful in setting priorities in areas, developing the Area Committee business plans, and helping to focus the targeting of wellbeing priorities.	
6.5	It was suggested that the panel could be used to identify the "what" in an area, but that more local and focused consultation could be used to draw out the "why".	
6.6	By consulting on a city wide basis and drilling down information gathered to Area Committee level, we will have the ability to compare views within areas from a consistent perspective.	
6.7	It is the intention to set up a calendar of consultation for the panel to ensure that the process does not become overburdening. Feedback to panel members will also be built in to encourage people to remain involved.	
6.8	Comments were made that the panel would only be effective if it was truly representative. Efforts need to be made to make sure that the panel is not made up of only active citizens who are involved in local consultation anyway. It was hoped that efforts would be made to involve ordinary, less prominent people, particularly those who are less articulate locally.	
6.9	Area Chairs were informed that efforts were being made to avoid contacting established groups when recruiting to the panel. Representation is being monitored as the panel is growing and action will be taken to target specific groups if they appear to be underrepresented.	
6.10	Comments were made as to how representative the panel could be when it only included approximately 1% of the population.	
6.11	It was stressed that the development of the panel would not mean that previous good practice, learning and models of engagement would be lost.	
6.12	It was agreed that a report be taken to the 10 Area Committees in the December cycle of meetings, with a further report to accompany the Community Engagement Strategy report to Area Committees in February.	CD
7.0	Luncheon Clubs Mapping / Budget Update and Findings from User Group Consultations	
7.1	Jason Lane, Assistant Commissioning Manager, attended to present a report outlining feedback on the 2011-12 grant application process and report on progress on involving Area Management teams in future grant management.	
7.2	Research has been carried out with users and coordinators on the makeup of the luncheon club members and the way that the clubs are run and their experience of the application process.	
7.3	The main impact of the luncheon clubs on it's members relates to social experiences rather than relating to food or nutritional issues.	
7.4	Attempts are being made to link up the various luncheon clubs to enable them to provide support to each other and share good practice.	
7.5	Although conclusions have been drawn in the report that grant funding would benefit from being locally administered, in order to avoid disruption to the service it has been recommended that the grant process for 2012-13 be administered within Adult Social Care. The grant application deadline has been moved forward to allow Area Staff to observe the process.	

7.6	Meetings will be taking place with the Area Leaders at the end of the month with a view to assess the feasibility of administering the process locally for 2013-14.	
8.0	Community First Programme	
8.1	Anne McMaster, Leeds Initiative Partnerships, attended to present a report on the government Community First Programme.	
8.2	The Community First Programme aims to provide small amounts of funding to small groups in targeted areas. To access funds each targeted ward would need to set up a community first panel to administer the funding.	
8.3	Wards have been identified by central government with specific amounts of funding being made available to each ward. This is new money from the government, but there is a stipulation that funding is matched.	
8.4	Comments were raised as to how the specific wards had been earmarked for funding as some areas that seem appropriate have been missed out. It was restated that the wards had been identified by central government and it was agreed that the rationale provided by the Community Development Foundation be circulated to Area Chairs.	AM / SW
8.5	It was commented that this funding would be hard to spend due to the time required to set up community first panels. It was also noted that the funding was spread over 4 years.	
9.0	Land Ownership Issues	
9.1	This item was dealt with in matters arising from the previous meeting.	
10.0	Any Other Business	
10.1	<u>Area Teams</u> Appointments have been made to posts within the Area Teams and the structures will be stabilising over the coming weeks.	
10.2	<u>Environmental Delegation</u> Comments were asked of Area Chairs as to how the Environmental Delegation was working in their area. Favourable comments were received on the performance so far including "happy with progress", "moving in the right direction", "no complaints at the moment".	
10.3	Some comments were made about the ability to influence changes not being fully in place at the moment, and that links with the Environmental sub-groups could be strengthened.	
10.4	<u>Review of Community Facilities</u> Cllr Gabriel informed the forum that she had attended one meeting of the programme board and that work is being undertaken to assess usage and costs associated with each community centre. This information will be shared with Area Chairs when available for their comments.	
10.5	<u>Area Chairs Forum Papers</u> It was agreed that hard copies of papers for future meetings will be provided to Area Chairs.	SW
10.6	<u>Capital Receipts Incentive Scheme</u> James Rogers informed the forum that a paper would be going to Area Committee meetings in December outlining the proposed scheme.	
11.0	Date of Next Meeting	
8.1	13 th January 2012, 10am, Committee Room 4, Civic Hall.	