

SCRUTINY BOARD (CITIZENS AND COMMUNITIES)

MONDAY, 25TH JULY, 2016

PRESENT: Councillor B Anderson in the Chair

Councillors C Campbell, R Grahame,
G Hyde, J Illingworth, K Maqsood,
K Renshaw, R. Stephenson, K Wakefield,
N Walshaw and G Wilkinson

18 Late Items

The following late and supplementary information was submitted to the Board:

- Agenda item 8 – Draft terms of reference in relation to the Scrutiny Board's forthcoming Inquiry into the development of a revised Council Tax Support scheme.

The above information was not available at the time of agenda despatch, but was subsequently made available on the Council's website.

19 Declaration of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests

There were no disclosable pecuniary interests declared to the meeting.

20 Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitutes

Apologies for absence were submitted by Councillors M Harland and M Robinson. Notification had been received that Councillor K Renshaw was to substitute for Councillor M Harland and Councillor G Wilkinson for Councillor M Robinson.

21 Minutes - 27th June and 6th July 2016

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meetings held on 27th June and 6th July 2016 be approved as a correct record.

22 Universal Credit Scrutiny recommendations - formal response and progress.

The report of the Assistant Chief Executive (Citizens and Communities) presented a formal response and update on the progress made in implementing the recommendations arising from the recent Scrutiny Inquiry into Universal Credit.

The following were in attendance for this item:

- Councillor Debra Coupar, Executive Member for Communities
- Steve Carey, Chief Officer Welfare and Benefits

Minutes approved as a correct record
at the meeting held on Monday, 12th September, 2016

- Jane McManus, Project Manager, Council Tax Support
- Simon Swift, Service Manager, Environment and Housing
- Alison France, Employer and Partnerships Manager (Leeds), Jobcentre Plus
- Simon Betts – Partnership Manager (Leeds), Jobcentre Plus

The key issues raised were as follows:

- Members discussed the sanctions process linked to Universal Credit and the need for individuals to be given accurate and timely advice regarding support mechanisms such as the hardship scheme.
- Members identified the importance of hearing directly from individuals impacted by Universal Credit sanctions as part of the ongoing evaluation of the Universal Credit programme and requested that this be raised directly with the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, Frank Field MP.
- Members sought clarification regarding the timelines for backdating benefit claims.
- Members acknowledged the recent announcement that the national schedule for the Universal Credit scheme had been extended by a further 12 months, with a new completion deadline of 2022.
- It was noted that the Chief Officer (Welfare and Benefits) would be analysing the potential implications of this delay to Leeds families and would also report back on the findings of the national Public Accounts Committee in relation to costs associated with the roll out of Universal Credit.
- The Board was pleased to note that the Council continues to maintain a positive relationship with Jobcentre Plus and other key partners, such as the Citizens Advice Bureau, in managing the administration of Universal Credit in Leeds.

RESOLVED –

- (a) That the report be noted and the above requests for further information/clarification be reported back to the Board as soon as possible.
- (b) That the Board continues to track the Scrutiny recommendations, with a further update scheduled within the next 6 months.

23 Council Tax Support Scheme

The report of the Head of Scrutiny Support presented draft terms of reference relating to the Board's forthcoming inquiry into the development of a revised Council Tax Support scheme. In accordance with this, the Board received a presentation from the Chief Officer (Welfare and Benefits) on the main issues surrounding the Council Tax Support scheme and the development of an alternative scheme that utilises the Universal Credit needs assessment. The Board also discussed the processes linked to the formal public consultation surrounding proposed changes to the scheme.

The following were in attendance for this item:

- Councillor Debra Coupar, Executive Member for Communities
- Steve Carey, Chief Officer Welfare and Benefits
- Jane McManus, Project Manager, Council Tax Support
- Alison France, Employer and Partnerships Manager (Leeds), Jobcentre Plus
- Simon Betts – Partnership Manager (Leeds), Jobcentre Plus

The following key areas were discussed by the Board:

- The potential implications and costs associated with not reforming the current Council Tax Support scheme.
- The potential benefits of simplifying the current scheme that utilises the Universal Credit needs assessment.
- An overview of what people pay now and what they would pay under the new scheme.
- The general characteristics of those that would gain and lose out under the new scheme.
- An overview of existing protections currently in place and associated costs for maintaining these protections. It was also acknowledged that the number of protected claimants has continued to increase since first introduced in 2013 (from 13,286 to 21,793).
- The potential for reviewing existing protections and introducing a discretionary hardship scheme. It was noted that this would be considered in more detail as part of the Board's inquiry.
- The Board requested further clarification surrounding the transitional options available and also the potential impact of the Government's announcement to delay completion of the Universal Credit roll out.
- The need for greater clarity and publicity to help increase take up of Pension Credit. Clarification was also sought surrounding plans to move Housing Benefit claims into Pension Credit.
- The potential implications surrounding plans for devolved business rates.
- Reference was made to the Devolution arrangements with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, which includes additional funding and powers to assist people back into work. Linked to this, the Board sought clarification of current initiatives aimed at improving the integration of local services that will assist more people into work.
- It was noted that the public consultation exercise relating to the revised Council Tax Support scheme would be undertaken over the next 2-3 months. This was being targeted at those likely to be affected by the changes and would also involve all Elected Members and the relevant advice agencies.
- Members recognised the importance of ensuring that the messages are kept simple as part of the consultation exercise and that the main focus is around gauging opinion about simplifying the scheme and the potential for revising the current scheme of protections.

RESOLVED –

- (a) That the report and presentation be noted.
- (b) That the terms of reference for the Board's Inquiry into the development of a revised Council Tax Support scheme be approved.
- (c) That the Principal Scrutiny Adviser, in liaison with the Chair, identifies and communicates details of future evidence gathering sessions linked to this inquiry.

(Councillor N Walshaw left the meeting at 11.05 am during the consideration of this item)

(Councillor K Wakefield left the meeting at 11.10 am during the consideration of this item)

24 work schedule

The report of the Head of Scrutiny Support invited Members to consider the Board's work schedule for the municipal year.

The Chief Officer Welfare and Benefits reminded the Board that consideration was currently being given to future changes to the Leeds Advice Consortium. It was agreed that the Board would receive a briefing on this at its September meeting.

RESOLVED –

- (a) That the work schedule be noted.
- (b) That the Board receives a briefing on the future changes to the Leeds Advice Consortium at its September 2016 meeting.

25 Date and Time of Next Meeting

Monday, 12th September 2016 at 10 am (Pre-meeting for all Board Members at 9.30 am)

(The meeting concluded at 11.30 am)