

Area Chairs Forum
Wednesday 9th January 2013
Committee Room 4, Civic Hall

Attendance:

Councillors: P. Gruen (Chair), G. Hyde, G. Wilkinson, A McKenna, K. Bruce, J. Akhtar, P. Wadsworth, J. McKenna, J. Jarosz

Officers: J. Rogers, K. Kudelnitzky, S. Mahmood, J. Maxwell

Minutes: S. Warbis

Attending for specific items: S. Kelly, H. Pinches, D. Marshall

Item	Description	Action
1.0	Apologies	
1.1	Cllr A. Gabriel, R. Barke	
2.0	Minutes and Matters Arising	
2.1	The minutes of the previous Area Chairs Forum meeting on 2 nd November 2012 were agreed as an accurate record.	
2.2	<u>3.5 of previous minutes – Review of Youth Services</u> The question was raised as to when the change to appointing members to Cluster Boards through Area Committees would be taking place. The intention is to introduce the changes at the next Full Council AGM in May.	
2.3	<u>4.19 of previous minutes – Neighbourhood Planning</u> It was requested that the meeting should be arranged as soon as possible to discuss the role of Area Committees in the Neighbourhood Planning process, involving Cllr Angela Gabriel, Cllr J McKenna, Cllr Ghulam Hussain, Kathy Kudelnitzky and Ian Mackay.	
3.0	Welfare Reform	
3.1	Shaun Kelly, Finance Manager – Welfare Benefits, attended to provide an update on the impact of welfare reforms in Leeds.	
3.2	The April changes are known and are in hand and there has been good cooperation with the ALMOs and registered social landlords in dealing with the housing benefit changes.	
3.3	Under-occupation cases have been contacted by Leeds Benefits Service and the more vulnerable cases, including foster carers and properties with substantial adaptations have been identified. The discretionary housing payment settlement for 2013/14 has been settled and is an increase of almost £900k from the previous year.	
3.4	Implementation of the Housing Benefit cap has now been deferred nationally until June 2013 and those already identified as being affected will have the cap applied from September 2013 at the latest.	
3.5	Claimants on current council tax benefit who will now have to contribute to council tax will be informed how much they will have to pay. A scrutiny board working group is looking at issues regarding council tax and under-occupation.	
3.6	In terms of Local Welfare Provision, the settlement to Leeds following the abolition of community care grants and crisis loans has been confirmed for 2013/14 as around £2.8m. The draft policy for local welfare provision will go to Executive Board in February 2013.	

- 3.7 It is now unlikely that there will be any impact in Leeds until March 2014 and it is likely that Leeds Benefits Service will continue to be dealing with housing benefit claims long after that. Pathfinders for introducing universal credit will take place in Greater Manchester and Cheshire from April 2013 and these will initially only be applied to the least complicated cases.
- 3.8 Post 2015 focus pilots will be taking place to look at the longer term role for local authorities in supporting universal credit claimants. Leeds is not a pilot area. This suggests that there will be an increasing role in this area for local authorities in the future.
- 3.9 A program of road-shows for local people, along side awareness sessions for frontline staff have been taking place in preparation for the changes ahead.
- 3.10 It was pointed out that under-occupancy will cause problems even for those residents who want to move to smaller properties as there is a lack of one bedroom accommodation in the city. It was mentioned that in the past there had been a drive to remove one-bedroom flats and bedsit council accommodation in Leeds, and that there needed to be co-ordination with other housing providers to deal with future problems. Discussions are already taking place through the Housing Forum.
- 3.11 It was also stressed that the city needed to guard against creating large areas of one bedroom and bedsit accommodation and that there was a need for balanced communities with a range of housing provision catering for families and single people.
- 3.12 There will be an increased challenge in providing support for people who will need to find new employment or increased hours, and work is taking place to identify people where this is an issue and to provide targeted support.
- 3.13 Area Chairs requested a briefing note based on information provided at this meeting, and pointed out that the issue of welfare reform was more and more prevalent at member's surgeries and members needed up to date information.
- 3.14 It was also requested that a report needed to be taken to Area Committees before the end of March to provide an update on welfare reforms, details of support that is available and that this should also include information relating to Jobs and Skills and the worklessness agenda. It was stressed that this needed to include the impact in each Area Committee area and should also include action being taken by ALMOs and other partners.
- 3.15 It was stressed that the council needed to establish it's own attitude towards tenants who would have problems in meeting rent payments. It was suggested that this should be explored through discussions at Area Committee meetings.
- 3.16 The issue of payday loans was raised and the mounting problem of debt. Work is going on with the Credit Union to publicise it's services. Leeds Credit union now has access to funds through a Community Development Finance Institution (CDFI) which allows it to agree loans with higher risk customers at interest rates significantly lower than payday loan companies and illegal loan sharks, who are becoming more of a problem.
- 3.17 It was suggested that there should be a campaign to cap the interest rates that financial institutions can apply. It was mentioned that some legislation could be introduced in 2014 but there was no detail at present.
- 3.18 It was also pointed out that Crisis Loans from the Social Fund will no longer be available from 1st April 2014.

**Shaun
Kelly**

**Steve
Carey**

- 3.19 It was pointed out that there will inevitably be a reduction in income in Leeds due to welfare reform and that there needed to be a co-ordinated strategy to tackle issues across services and across partners.
- 3.20 It was suggested that the issues of welfare reform and worklessness should be focused on by the three Leadership Teams and that this may be one of the ways to maintain cross partner co-ordination of efforts. **Area Leaders**
- 3.21 Shaun Kelly agreed to take comments from this meeting to the Welfare Reform Board and will discuss how best to update Area Committees in current and future changes. **Shaun Kelly**
- 3.22 It was also requested that Dave Roberts should be invited to the next Area Chairs forum meeting to discuss approaches to financial inclusion. **Sarn Warbis**

4.0 Area Review – Executive Board Paper and Implementation Planning

- 4.1 Heather Pinches, Executive Officer – Performance Management, attended and brought a draft Review of Area Working Implementation Plan for discussion.
- 4.2 Heather pointed out that this had been a broad review and the implementation plan would focus down onto delivery of the various recommendations. Priority needed to be established through this forum and more specific debates would take place with Area Committees on various issues.
- 4.3 Heather ran through the recommendations and suggested actions:
- 4.3.1 Embedding locality working – annual report on progress and remaining challenges to Executive Board. Initial report in the Autumn of 2013.
- 4.3.2 The development of more locally responsive and accountable services:
 - Youth Services – review in progress with paper to Executive Board in February
 - Neighbourhood Planning – Area Committee role being developed and due to come back to the next Area Chairs Forum meeting
 - Employment and Skills – building on work in the South and developing initial options for discussion
 - Parks and Green Space – discuss programme and plans already underway and link to the review
 - Local Highway Maintenance – better liaison and influence of annual maintenance plan. Explore influence over strategic issues.
 - Community Centre Review – ensure links made with Review of Area Working and Asset Review. Delegation amended as required.
 - CCTV – review delegation and impact on wellbeing funding. Link to wider community safety work.
Procurement and commissioning arrangements to include member involvement / influence and less bureaucracy.
Consider capacity and systems for Area Committees to deal with new areas of influence.
- 4.3.3 Developing the Area Lead role – role description, support and development needs, constitution issues.
- 4.3.4 Partnership arrangements – mapping of structures, establishing links and influence of Area Committees, communication of arrangements.
- 4.3.5 Clinical Commissioning Groups – Area Committees contribution of local input, role around Adult Social Care.
- 4.3.6 Children’s Services Clusters – member appointments, links with Area Committees.

- 4.3.7 Locality Based Funding – existing resource allocations, delegating more funding to local decision making.
- 4.3.8 Area Committee Boundaries – maintain current areas, explore cross boundary arrangements, develop potential role of co-optees.
- 4.3.9 Area Committee Meetings – control of agendas, localised reports, structures of meetings, administration issues.
- 4.3.10 Consultation and Engagement – Role of Area Committees, local co-ordination including partners, links to city wide and citizen’s panel activities.
- 4.4 Heather invited comments on the content of the draft implementation plan, and indications of where priorities should be placed and what involvement Area Chairs and Area Committees could have in the implementation stages.
- 4.5 There was general agreement that members felt Area Committee meetings were paper heavy and not enough local focus was provided in reports. It was pointed out that Area Chairs could already exert their influence over agendas but that services needed to be more focused around the needs of each Area Committee.
- 4.6 There was a suggestion that Highways Maintenance could be further up the priority list due to it’s links with the existing environmental delegation, particularly regarding street cleaning and gully maintenance.
- 4.7 Concerns were raised over how much work would be placed on each sub group, and that this issue needed to be considered as processes were being developed. It was suggested that responsibility needed to be shared between all Area Committee members and that there would be opportunities for influence and responsibility to be shared wider in the future.
- 4.8 It was welcomed that discussions around links with Adult Social Care were taking place and it was suggested that the issue of luncheon clubs should be reconsidered as these were particularly of importance to the outer areas. It was pointed out that this issue had been discussed previously at the Area Chairs Forum but it was agreed that discussions would take place to establish if there were any options to progress this further.
- 4.9 It was stressed that Area Committees did not want to be given responsibility for services that had intrinsic problems including financial pressures. It was agreed that there needed to be clarity and openness, particularly around budgets, as delegations were being proposed. The view was expressed that although budget reductions in services were inevitable, there were still opportunities for local members to take control of implementation and to make sure that local needs and priorities were being addressed.
- 4.10 It was mentioned that when looking at Parks and Green Space it was important that city wide resources such as golf courses and other leisure facilities were not included in any proposed delegations.
- 4.11 It was raised that there had been inequities in the past over the provision of youth services and that there needed to be a fairer distribution of resources that would take into account areas of particular need.
- 4.12 It was suggested that in the current climate it was necessary to get more out of the budgets that we have and that value for money was key. It was also suggested that there needed to be local member support for asset disposals and that income created should be retained in the local area.

- 4.13 The question was raised as to how much flexibility would be given to Area Committees regarding delegated budgets to target priorities, and how much would be ring-fenced to specific services. It was suggested that there was a move to more local control and influence but that there would have to be notice periods established if major changes were being suggested. It was also pointed out that for some services there were statutory duties that had to be performed and any flexibility in service provision would have to take this into account.
- 4.14 The subject of Youth Service provision was raised and it was agreed that Area Committees should have an influence over the deployment of services. It was also suggested that there were links with Extended Schools Budgets and that a co-ordinated approach was needed to maximise resources. It was also suggested that where youth work is organised through school clusters there is a danger that the whole community is not considered. It was pointed out that there were concerns from within procurement as to the value of local commissioning, but there were clearly pros and cons and this was still worthy of debate.
- 4.15 It was suggested that the Area Chairs should consider their structures and their ability to cope with the new areas of influence that were suggested in the review report. There needed to be a demonstration of the will and capacity of Area Committees to cope with the proposed changes for the review to be successful.
- 4.16 It was also pointed out that the Area Support Teams were already stretched and that for any new delegated service or increased locality influence there would need to be the staff allocated to support it's function in the localities.

5.0 Wellbeing Budgets

- 5.1 Dean Marshall, Finance Manager, attended with a wellbeing fund summary position statement as at period 8. It was mentioned that this was underpinned by detailed statements for each Area Committee and that this information would be provided to individual Area Committees.
- 5.2 It was pointed out that there had been a large carry forward from the previous financial year and that this meant that there was a considerable amount available this year. It was stressed that any spend needed to be focussed on making a difference for local communities.
- 5.3 A systematic process was now in place to better track approvals, allocations, commitments and actual spend and that officers now had confidence in the figures that were supplied and the processes for tracking progress.
- 5.4 There had been issues previously in reconciling commitments made by Area Committees and orders raised on the council's budgetary systems, leading to an inaccurate picture of outstanding balances. The process implemented now made it easier to gauge how much money was still to be spent in each area.
- 5.5 There is currently approximately £700k across all ten area committees which has yet to be allocated to projects. Since 31st August an additional £600k has been paid and an additional £460k worth of orders raised and authorised. Great efforts have been made by Area Committees, Area Chairs and Area Support Team staff to get approved projects and payments through the system.
- 5.6 It was pointed out that the figures showed a snap shot of the budget position and that additional commitments were being made on a weekly basis. It was also pointed out that there were still three months left in this financial year.
- 5.7 Although it was stated that outstanding budgets would not be removed at the end of this year, it was pointed out that in the current climate all

underspending was being closely monitored and that in the future this could have an impact on decisions about further budget allocations.

**Dean
Marshall**

- 5.8 It was pointed out that in some areas money was being built up over a number of years to fund major projects and that there should be a process for highlighting these funds as being earmarked or committed. It was agreed that this would be looked into.
- 5.9 It was also suggested that as the council was moving to budget setting over a four year period, this should also apply to wellbeing funding. This would make commissioning of longer term projects easier and would make budget management more accurate.
- 5.10 A suggestion was made that Area Committees with budget carry forwards could use funds to support Areas that are not able to fund all potential projects in their area each year.
- 5.11 It was mentioned that each Area Committee needed to ensure that any spend was good spend, and that efforts should be made to lever in additional funding whenever possible.
- 5.12 It was pointed out that in some inner areas there was active promotion of applications for wellbeing funding which made it easier to allocate funding at the beginning of the financial year.
- 5.13 It was mentioned that as pressures on services budgets increase, there will be a greater onus on Areas to define their priorities and to add to the minimum offer from a service if there is a particular local need.
- 5.14 It was pointed out that a lot of progress has been made in rationalising the wellbeing budgets. Area Chairs will be provided with regular updates from Area Support Teams as the picture develops over the next three months.

6.0 Any Other Business

- 6.1 Cllr Gruen thanked the Area Chairs, Area Leaders and Area Support teams for the efforts made this year and said that he felt good progress had been made and that Area Committees were in a better place now than they had been.

7.0 Date of Next Meeting

- 7.1 Friday 1st March 2013, 09:00 – 11:00, Committee Room 1 - Civic Hall