

SCRUTINY BOARD (ENVIRONMENT, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES)

MONDAY, 17TH OCTOBER, 2022

PRESENT: Councillor B Anderson in the Chair

Councillors J Akhtar, K Brooks, E Carlisle,
L Cunningham, P Grahame, A Khan,
S Lay, A Maloney, T Smith, J Tudor,
P Wadsworth and N Walshaw

24 Appeals Against Refusal of Inspection of Documents

There were no appeals.

25 Exempt Information - Possible Exclusion of the Press and Public

There were no exempt items.

26 Late Items

There were no formal late items.

27 Declaration of Interests

Board Members did not raise any interests at the meeting.

28 Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitutes

Apologies were received on behalf of Councillor R Finnigan.

Apologies were also received from Cllrs Coupar and Harland who were unable to attend as Executive members.

29 Minutes - 21 July 2022

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held 21st July 2022 be approved as an accurate record.

Matters Arising

Minute No.20 and Minute No.21 – it was noted that information provided on behalf of the Head of Policing and Crime was circulated to Panel Members on 5 October 22, along with further information about Community Payback Schemes.

Additionally, a visit to the Leeds Watch control room was facilitated on Friday, 30th September 22. A summary of the key issues raised during the visit was shared with Board Members.

30 Reducing Poverty and Improving Financial Inclusion

The report of the Chief Officer Customer Access and Welfare provided an update on the approach to reduce poverty and improve financial inclusion in the city, with consideration as to the emerging cost of the living crisis.

Appended to the report included a copy of the 'understanding and addressing the cost-of-living' Executive Board report from the meeting held on 27th July 22.

The following were in attendance for this item:

- James Rogers, Director of Communities, Housing and Environment
- Lee Hemsworth, Chief Officer Community Hubs, Welfare and Business Support
- Nick Hart, Deputy Head of Customer Contact (LCC)
- Rebecca Owen, Advanced Customer Support Senior Leader (DWP)
- Chris Joyce, Operational Leader (DWP)
- Dianne Lyons, Citizens Advice

The Chief Officer Community Hubs, Welfare and Business introduced the report and provided a brief update on the service in terms of the impact on the cost of living. The report provided details on what is happening locally, as well as several changes in terms of the cost-of-living crisis and unprecedented rise in energy costs. It was noted that national research suggests that the impact on changes has adversely impacted lower income families and national changes to the energy cap have been introduced. Issues were highlighted in terms of:

- Household support fund
- Warm places in public buildings
- Information available to the public on financial and money debt matters
- A cost of living and welfare breakthrough group has been established
- The cost-of-living operational group are meeting fortnightly
- Together Leeds Campaign and the work on-going to create materials to use in public buildings to ensure information is accessible to all

The Advanced Customer Support Senior Leader (DWP) provided an update on Universal Credit and the role of jobcentres to help people back into employment, as well as the Leeds Social Justice Team supporting vulnerable residents in the community. It was also noted that youth employability coaches are focusing on young people in Leeds and trying to overcome barriers with stakeholders regarding the cost-of-living issues. Next steps for the service will focus on building existing relationships with external partners and focusing on mental health, substance misuse and signposting where appropriate.

In response to questions from Board Members, the following was confirmed:

- Job centres are managing resources and whilst it is a challenging environment for staff, the service adapt to find different ways to work with stakeholders. It was also confirmed that several work coaches were employed during the pandemic and were made permanent. Work

coaches can be deployed across Leeds to where resources are needed.

- Eastgate Jobcentre is due to close in March 2023 and colleagues will be moved across to Leeds Park Place Jobcentre to help support residents in the areas affected. However, it was confirmed there will be no significant change in service delivery. The social justice team will work with vulnerable people out in the community.
- The kickstart scheme and youth employability coaches work with young people to help them into employment. The kickstart scheme works with employers to ensure residents who are less disadvantaged are provided with an equal opportunity. There is also a flexible support fund for people of all ages to help bridge any skills that are missing. Members raised particular concern regarding disparities between inner city wards and outer city wards in terms of equal opportunities being provided to young residents of Leeds. Officers confirmed that comments raised will be discussed with employment and skills colleagues, as well as picking issues up in community hubs and job shops. It was noted that relevant partners also have a role to play.
- Warm spaces in community hubs and libraries will offer hot drinks and provide extra activities, with some third sector organisations offering food. Hats and scarves donations will be linked with warm spaces and the warm spaces map will include information on what is available locally.
- It was recognised that food parcels do not meet the needs of all residents, and services are looking at introducing different food offers to tackle food insecurity such as food pantries and community shops. A pilot Cash grant scheme has been carried out and supermarket vouchers can be made available. A fuel voucher can be made available to residents to enable them to cook foods.
- Further to a suggestion that work coaches are based in schools, it was confirmed that advisors are already placed in schools to guide people at a young age.
- People will be directed to their nearest job centre, and there are several options for appointments in terms of face-to-face and online meetings. There is a flexible support fund to assist covering transport fares. There are also 8 colleagues in the social justice team who cover the whole of Leeds and will help the most vulnerable people.
- Officers will have conversations with Money Buddies regarding support for new migrant communities and look at the suggestion that information on budgeting is cascaded in places of worship and community spaces. It was noted that the Executive Board report on migration will be shared with members of the Board.
- A conversation will be had with colleagues regarding mutualism and council officers are keen to do this in warm places in liaison with third sector organisations.

The Citizens Advice representative provided a service update and explained that service arrangements have returned to pre-pandemic levels. She highlighted high levels of demand and the challenge of providing the capacity to meet that demand. There has been a particular issue with the debt advice

service in Leeds with a number of advisors leaving the service, and recruitment on-going in the short term for short term contracts. Funding has been extended until March 2024 and a procurement exercise will be undertaken next year. It was also noted that the 'help to claim' service has been extended for another year and staff are doing what they can to work with partners to extend resources.

Responding to questions from Board Members, it was confirmed that:

- Face-to-face sessions to help support residents are available in 20 venues across the city in GP surgeries, mental health centres and community centres. Evidence shows that several people prefer webchat/telephone support. Assurances cannot be provided that face-to-face services can be made available in every ward. Further to this, members requested that details on the 20 venues be made available.
- Members shared a general concern that it is difficult to contact the service, and there is not a direct point of contact available for members. It was requested that a point of contact be made available to all ward members.
- Due to the way in which the service is funded, the debt advice provided on behalf of Citizens Advice runs Monday – Friday 9am until 5pm and does not offer a weekend / evening service. However, the Council's community hubs are open on the weekend and offers face-to-face support. Some partners such as Money Buddies will be present in community hubs on weekends.
- Leeds is 1 of 60 in the country to deliver a service for Universal Credit claimants seeking support on how to claim and ensuring they receive payment. The 5-week period between applying for universal credit and receiving payment remains. Representatives from DWP confirmed there is still an option of an advanced payment.
- Further to concerns regarding digital inclusion, it was confirmed that all materials published online will be made available in community hubs and across venues. The warm places map will also be made available in a physical form. The money information centre webpage will be shared with members of the Board.

A member requested that the relevant Chair of the Scrutiny Board (Infrastructure, Investment, and Inclusive Growth) be made aware of the Board's concerns regarding equal employment and skills opportunities for young people in the city, and persistent inequality of opportunity across the wards.

The Chair thanked those in attendance and referred to the cost-of-living paper that will be considered at the Executive Board meeting scheduled to take place on Wednesday, 19th October 2022.

RESOLVED – To note the contents of the report, in addition to the Cost-of-Living Crisis Executive Board report and updates provided during the meeting.

31 Local Welfare Support Scheme Review Update

The report of the Director of Communities, Housing and Environment provided details on the review of the Leeds City Council Local Welfare Support Scheme (LWSS), setting out the progress since the last update to Scrutiny and proposing a revised policy document and next steps.

A copy of the proposed revised policy document was appended to the report.

The following were in attendance for this item:

- James Rogers, Director of Communities, Housing and Environment
- Lee Hemsworth, Chief Officer Community Hubs, Welfare and Business Support
- Nick Hart, Deputy Head of Customer Contact

The Deputy Head of Customer Contact introduced the report and provided the Board with highlights from the report on the improvements that can be made to the scheme for residents suffering financial hardship. Several improvements are required to be made, and areas to progress on are as follows:

- Procurement exercise for white goods.
- The development of an online form for agencies and customers in addition to the option to telephone for the referral process.
- Partnership working to re-establish a relationship with the Furniture Reuse Network, to reduce waste and buy more goods for more customers.
- A Cash Grant Pilot in partnership with Trussell Trust. LCC will seek to adopt a cash grant offer as part of the LWSS review and additional methods for the customer to collect a cash reward will also be considered.
- To increase fuel awards.
- Revised eligibility criteria.
- Introduction of a digital offer is being considered, to tackle digital exclusion.
- Removal of the £10,000 low-income threshold and introduction of variable low-income threshold.
- Introduction of an intensive support programme to focus on debt management and budget support.
- The introduction of new payment methods such as cash and bank transfers.

In responding to the update, Board Members made the following comments:

- The cash grant pilot is welcomed but it was noted that bank transfers to people using their overdrafts can result in money being used for fees.
- Concern was expressed about residents not having access to appropriate ID and there being a need to provide help to those residents to access birth certificates etc. Officers confirmed that whilst work has been done to reduce the requirement to produce ID, where this is still required, efforts will be made to cater in a more diverse way.
- To be mindful of disability and language barriers on the accessibility of information.

- To consider how the partnership with the Furniture Refuse Network can be promoted.

The Chair thanked those in attendance.

RESOLVED – To:

- a) note the contents of the report, including updates provided during the meeting.
- b) agree on the contents of the revised policy document, subject to the document being easily accessible and interpreted by all.

32 Work Schedule

The report of the Head of Democratic Services presented the Scrutiny Board's work schedule for the 2022/23 municipal year. Appended to the report also included copies of the minutes from the Executive Board meetings held on 27 July 22 and 21 September 22.

Members were informed that there is an additional Board meeting on Thursday, 1st December 22 and a remote working group scheduled to take place on Friday, 4th November 22.

RESOLVED – To note the contents of the report and work schedule.

33 Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting is scheduled to take place Thursday, 10th November 2022 at 10.30 a.m. (there will be a pre-meeting for Board Members at 10.00 a.m.)

The meeting concluded at 11:47 a.m.