

SCRUTINY BOARD (ENVIRONMENT, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES)

THURSDAY, 14TH JANUARY, 2021

PRESENT: Councillor B Anderson in the Chair

Councillors J Akhtar, J Bentley,
A Blackburn, D Collins, A Gabriel,
P Grahame, A Khan, P Gruen, M Harland,
N Sharpe, K Brooks and T Smith

70 Appeals Against Refusal of Inspection of Documents

There were no appeals.

71 Exempt Information - Possible Exclusion of the Press and Public

There was no exempt information.

72 Late Items

There were no late items.

73 Declaration of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests

There were no declarations of disclosable pecuniary interests.

74 Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitutes

Apologies of absence were submitted on behalf of Councillor M Dobson.

75 Minutes - 12 November 2020 and 2 December 2020

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meetings held 12th November 2020 and 2nd December 2020, be confirmed as an accurate record.

76 Reducing Poverty and Improving Financial Inclusion

The report of the Chief Officer Customer Access and Welfare, provided the Board with an update on work undertaken by Leeds City Council and partners to reduce poverty and improve financial inclusion, with the particular focus on the implementation and impact of Universal Credit.

The following were in attendance for this item:

- Councillor Coupar, Executive Member for Communities
- James Rogers, Director Communities and Environment
- Lee Hemsworth, Chief Officer Customer Access and Welfare
- Jo Rowlands, Financial Inclusion Manager
- Kevin Bruce, Service Manager
- Nick Hart, Deputy Head Customer Contact

- Simon Betts, DWP
- Rebecca Owens, DWP
- Dianne Lyons & Marilyn Bannister, Leeds CAB
- Nick Morgan, Chapeltown CAB
- Saleem Shafi & Sylvia Simpson, Money Buddies
- Chris Smyth, Leeds Credit Union

The Chief Officer (Customer Access & Welfare) introduced the report and delivered a PowerPoint presentation alongside the Partnership Manager (DWP), Service Manager (LCC), and the Chief Executive (Leeds CAB) which provided an overview of:

- Key statistics relating to poverty in Leeds prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, and since March 2020, with initial increase in inequalities across communities;
- COVID-19 Response including the establishment of partnerships and a snapshot of key activities including the Covid-19 Helpline, LWSS Food and Warehouse, Council Tax Hardship Payments, Leeds Credit Union Branch accessibility and Leeds Money Information Centre website;
- DWP national and local update and key changes to the service during the pandemic;
- Housing Leeds update including key statistics relating to Leeds Housing tenants moving into UC full service, the co-location arrangements with DWP to establish strong relationships, the 3 tier service Housing Leeds use to provide support to tenants during the early stages of a UC claim and an overview of the DWP Landlord portal;
- Citizens Advice Partner update including the impact of Covid-19 and the additional pressures on low income households, key data in relation to the types of enquiries with an initial rise in enquiries related to Welfare Benefits and UC. Issues in terms of financial hardship, digital exclusion, unemployment and the impact of temporary interventions coming to an end;
- Key issues that still remain in terms of the capacity to access benefits, the 5 week wait for UC payment, the need for wider support, claimants having fluctuating financial circumstances as a result of the pandemic and claimants being wrongly advised to claim for UC rather than legacy benefits.

Representatives from Money Buddies provided Members with an insight into the experience of UC claimants, particularly those impacted by Covid-19. Members heard there had been no barriers with partnership working across the city, and Money Buddies are now providing emergency debt advice. Concerns were raised in relation to mental health, the demand on services and the level of debt for clients has increased by 20% in comparison to 2019.

A representative from the Leeds Credit Union informed the Board that 4 branches across Leeds had remained open and services continued, noting a large increase in emergency welfare payments. It was noted that an online banking application had been introduced without the need for people to visit the branches.

Members' discussed a number of matters, including:

- New claimants waiting 5 weeks for their first UC payment. Members identified issues relating to long term finances and mental health challenges. In responding, the Partnership Manager (DWP) explained that there were no proposals to reduce the waiting time. Although, payment options were in place in terms of advanced lending and 2 weekly payments instead of 4;
- Covid-19 helpline. In response to a query, Members were advised that the LWSS do not operate on weekends and although this had been trialled in November 2020, this was not a requirement. It was noted that a number of Volunteer Care Hubs remain open to operate on weekends;
- Clarity on the role of Work Coaches. Members were informed that frontline support is provided to customers upon making their claim to benefit and every customer will be allocated a work coach for the duration of their claim. Additional support is provided to individuals to explore training opportunities and to sustain support during employment;
- Covid-19 recovery. Members were informed of the support available to communities including the services provided on behalf of Money Buddies to help people form positive financial habits and the support provided with the uptake of UC;
- Clarity on UC sanctions. Members heard that temporary suspension on overpayment and deductions had now resumed, although it was confirmed that sanctions are applied in a small number of cases. Members were informed that a strict process is in place when considering referrals, and that a sanction had not been referred throughout the pandemic. Additionally, Safeguarding Senior Leaders had been appointed across the Country.

External Partners from the CAB highlighted their positive experience of partnerships across the city, whilst acknowledging the importance of lobbying Government on the changes with the £20/week uplift in UC payment ending in April 2021. Their concerns with Covid-19 recovery and the impact on health and wellbeing in the city had also been outlined.

The Executive Member for Communities, summarised by praising the partnership work in the city, and with the Local Authority. Key issues highlighted included the £20 UC payment being frozen, the 5 week wait for UC payments and long term debt issues in relation to high street lending and early re-payments. The importance of continued lobbying to Government on these changes had been reiterated.

The Chair thanked all for their attendance.

RESOLVED:

- a) To note the contents of the report and verbal updates received during the meeting;

- b) To note the work being undertaken to address financial inclusion and the impact of Universal Credit;
- c) To continue monitoring activity in relation to this agenda.

77 Best Council Plan Performance Report Quarter 2 2020/21

The report of the Director of Resources and Housing and the Director of Communities and Environment, provided the Board with a summary of 2020/21 Quarter 2 performance data and provides an update on progress in delivering the relevant priorities in the Best Council Plan 2020 to 2025. The report provides the Board with an overview of the relevant Environment, Housing and Communities performance relating to the Best Council Plan, enabling the Board to consider and challenge the council's performance.

Appended to the report included a summary of:

- o Quarter 2 performance data relating to Housing priorities (Appendix 1)
- o Indicators relating to Community Safety (Appendix 2)
- o Indicators relating to Waste and Environmental priorities (Appendix 3)

The following were in attendance for this item:

- o Councillor Coupar, Executive Member for Communities
- o Councillor Rafique, Executive Member for Environment and Active Lifestyles
- o James Rogers, Director of Communities and Environment
- o Neil Evans, Director of Resources and Housing
- o Gerard Tinsdale, Chief Officer Housing

The Board discussed the exploration of free parking in the city centre, discounted private parking, and public transport services; considerations around encouraging footfall and revenue into the city centre. The Director of Communities and Environment confirmed that parking was constantly under review and explained that free parking was initially introduced to support NHS and Social Care staff to undertake their duties effectively. It was confirmed that a permit scheme for those workers had now been implemented, and there would be a number of factors to take into account if we were to consider free parking for everybody, the key challenges being congestion in the city centre, and budgetary implications.

RESOLVED – To note the contents of the report, as well as Appendices 1 – 3

78 Initial Budget Proposals & Financial Health Monitoring

The report of the Head of Democratic Services provided the Scrutiny Board (Environment, Housing and Communities) with the Executive Board's initial budget proposals for 2021/22 for consideration, review and comment on matters and proposals relating to service areas that fall within the Scrutiny Board's remit.

The Executive Board's initial budget proposals report for 2021/22, considered at its meeting on 16 December 2020, had been appended to the report for

consideration. The report set out the initial budget proposals for 2021/22, within the context of the Medium Term Financial Strategy, the Spending Review 2020, and proposed budget savings reports. The report details a further 5.2m of potential savings that were approved at Executive Board in December, and subsequently submitted for wider consultation with stakeholders.

The following were in attendance for this item:

- Councillor Coupar, Executive Member for Communities
- James Roger, Director of Communities and Environment
- Neil Evans, Director of Resources and Housing
- Michal Everitt, Head of Finance
- Kevin Mulvaney, Head of Finance

The Board discussed the following matters:

- Activities such as bowls being recognised by Get Set Leeds – a Member recognised bowls as a competitive sport, and engaged elderly people as well as other age groups. It was noted that consultation 'phase 2' was ongoing and comments in relation to this sport had been noted and would be fed into the consultation;
- Concerns around the design and wording of the consultation document – it was noted that people are provided with the opportunity to put forward their broader comments and opinions, and these would be considered.

The Director of Resources and Housing explained that a settlement from Government had been received prior to Christmas, and had reduced the gap by 27 million. Of that 27 million, 9.9 million related to the ability to raise an Adult Social Care precept through Council Tax, thus increasing the amount of local funding used to fund Adult Social Care. Additionally, a series of asset sales would be considered. A shortfall of a few million in the previous budget had been presented to tackle before the February budget.

The Chair thanked officers for their contributions and also acknowledged the ongoing work to agree various budget proposals.

RESOLVED – To note the contents of the report and relevant information contained within the appended Executive Board report.

79 Work Schedule

The report of the Head of Democratic Services submitted a report that invited Members to consider the Board's Work Schedule for the remainder of the current municipal year. Copies of the Board's draft work schedule were appended to the report, the remote minutes of the Executive Board meetings held on 18 November, 24 November and 16 December 2020.

The Principle Scrutiny Adviser introduced the report and highlighted the possibility of an additional meeting in April 2021.

Members discussed the items on the upcoming work schedule, including:

- To include an update on high-rise buildings when considering the item on Fuel Poverty / Energy Efficiency in Council Housing Stock / Carbon reduction in the Private Rented Sector;
- An upcoming working group which will further explore the anti-social use of fireworks locally and regionally.

RESOLVED – That the work schedule for the remainder of the municipal year be noted.

80 Date and Time of Next Meeting

To note the date and time of the next meeting as 25 February 2021 at 10.30 am.

(The meeting concluded at 12:35 pm.)