

Coventry City Council
Minutes of the Meeting of Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee held at 10.00 am on
Wednesday, 11 January 2017

Present:

Members: Councillor R Lancaster (Chair)
Councillor N Akhtar
Councillor J Blundell
Councillor G Crookes
Councillor D Gannon
Councillor L Kelly
Councillor M Mutton
Councillor R Singh (Deputy Chair)

Other Members: Councillors L Bigham and G Duggins

Other Representatives: Janet Gurney, Coventry Law Centre
Alan Markey, Coventry Independent Advice Service

Employees: M Andrews, Place Directorate
A Baker, People Directorate
V Castree, Resources Directorate
G Cowley, Resources Directorate
B Hastie, Resources Directorate
L Knight, Resources Directorate
S Lam, People Directorate
J Moore, People Directorate

Apologies: Councillor J McNicholas

Public Business

38. Declarations of Interest

Further to Minute 40 below, Councillor Lancaster informed of her position as a Director of Coventry Independent Advice Service. She remained in the meeting for the consideration of this item.

39. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 9th November, 2016 were signed as a true record. There were no matters arising.

40. Impact of Welfare Reform Changes

The Committee considered a Briefing Note of the Executive Director of Resources which provided an update on Welfare Reform changes to the Department for Works and Pensions (DWP) benefits and, in particular, the impact for Coventry residents. Janet Gurney, Coventry Law Centre and Alan Markey, Coventry Independent Advice Service, both representatives on the city's Welfare Reform

Working Together Group, attended the meeting for the consideration of this item. Councillor Bigham, Cabinet Member for Community Development also attended.

The Briefing Note included the following appendices:

- 1 – Briefing note highlighting recent changes to Universal Credit, the Benefit Cap, the effects on Coventry and use of Discretionary Housing Payments and Community Support Grants;
- 2 – Distribution of potential impacts Benefit Cap changes;
- 3 – Summary of benefit changes made in 2016 and timetable of future changes 2017/18
- 4 – Coventry Working Together on Welfare Reform Action Plan.
- 5 – Communications Plan for changes to benefit cap.
- 6 – Benefits Cap Case Studies

An additional paper from Janet Gurney and Alan Markey, setting out suggested actions which could be considered as ways to address issues arising as a consequence of the welfare reforms planned during 2017-2018, was tabled at the meeting.

The Briefing Note at Appendix 1 indicated that Universal Credit (UC) was a single payment of benefit, including housing costs, for working age people administered by the DWP. It was introduced in Coventry in December 2015 for single working age people. A partnership agreement with the DWP allowed the Council to receive and exchange information in relation to UC so housing benefit could be cancelled if a claim for UC was made. Since this introduction a total of 211 claims had been cancelled. The Committee were informed that the agreement also required the Council to provide budgeting support for those who needed help with managing their finances and to date 195 people had been referred for budgeting support.

The Government had introduced changes to the benefit cap which reduced the maximum amounts households could receive in benefit to £385 a week for couples and families with children (£20,000 per year) and £259 for single people with no children (£13,400 per year). Details about exemptions to the cap were outlined. These new levels for current 'capped' households took effect from 7th November, 2016 and there were currently 91 households subject of this new cap.

The Committee noted that this cap was to be applied to new households on 23rd January, 2017. An analysis of data received from DWP indicated that there would be an estimated 761 new capped households which included 348 households with 4 or more children who would lose on average £104 of weekly benefit. It was anticipated that the total number of children expected to be affected would be 2,711. Also, approximately 50 troubled families known to the Council were likely to be affected.

The Committee were informed that a Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) grant was given to each Council by DWP to help households struggling to meet their housing costs. For 2016/17 Coventry was awarded £788,669. To date, there had been an increase in applications this year compared to the previous year. DHP could be awarded to provide short term financial help to those affected by the cap,

however, due to a limited budget the council could only offer assistance for the first six weeks.

The Council also administered a discretionary Community Support Grant (CSG) for people who needed financial help. The budget was £375,000 and from April to November, 2016 £240,146 had been awarded compared to £136,750 at the same point the previous year. The Committee noted that there had been an increase in applications.

Further information was provided on the support and advice provided by the DWP, the Benefit Service and the Welfare Reform Working Together Group.

The Committee were informed that although representatives from the DWP were unable to accept an invitation to attend this meeting, Claire Hindson, the new District Manager had responded by outlining her priorities and offering to meet with the Committee to discuss ways of working together.

Members questioned the officers and representatives present on a number of issues and responses were provided, matters raised included:

- Further information about what was being done to target those in greatest need to ensure that they claimed all they were entitled to
- Clarification about what could be covered by the Community Support Grant
- Information about what assistance was available following the expiry of the six week DHP period
- Further information about the impact of the introduction of the minimum contribution to Council Tax introduced the previous year and the associated level of collection rate
- Concerns about the lack of availability of affordable housing for large families to move to when attempting to reduce their housing costs
- How far the DWP took into account 'human opinion' when considering whether to sanction individual cases
- What representations were being made to Government about the partner concerns relating to the imposition of sanctions
- Significant concerns about the introduction of the benefit cap which would impact on the troubled families in the city who already had many other problems to contend with
- What would happen if the grant allocations was spent before the end of the financial year.
- The reasons why people's applications for funding were being rejected and the guidance given if an application was unsuccessful
- Concerns about only being able to make applications on-line
- The impact of welfare reform on the Advice Agencies
- Significant concerns about the numbers of children would who be affected by the benefit cap.

RESOLVED that:

(1) The content of the briefing be noted.

(2) The recommendations in the 'Suggested Actions Needed to Address Welfare Reform' document be forwarded to Councillor Bigham, Cabinet Member for Community Development for her consideration.

(3) Members of the Committee to take up the invitation to meet with Claire Hindson, the new District Manager at DWP to discuss ways of working together.

41. Progress of the Council's Draft Local Plan

The Committee considered a briefing note of the Executive Director of Place which provided an update on how the Council's draft Local Plan was progressing through examination. Councillor Bigham, Cabinet Member for Community Development attended the meeting for the consideration of this item.

The briefing note indicated that the draft Local Plan was submitted to the Planning Inspectorate on 1st April, 2016 following a period of statutory public consultation. All responses to the consultation had been presented to the Business, Economy and Enterprise Scrutiny Board (3) at their meeting on 16th March, 2016 before being formally submitted to the Secretary of State for public examination. Rebecca Phillips had been appointed as the Independent Inspector.

The hearing sessions had been held from 12th to 29th July and 11th October to 2nd November, 2016. Two further hearing sessions were planned for 17th and 18th January, 2017 to consider the detailed transport modelling and the monitoring and implementation of the Plan. Following these sessions the next step was the receipt of the Inspector's initial recommendations.

The Committee noted that the Council expected to have to consult on a round of main modifications. These would be a set of focused changes to the Plan required as a result of the examination. Any changes would be subject to a statutory six week consultation. The consultation would require both Cabinet and Council approval. Members were informed of the intention to hold an additional meeting of the Committee to consider the responses to this consultation exercise.

The proposed changes and the responses to the consultation would then be referred back to the Inspector for her consideration. As long as there were no significant issues requiring further examination, the Inspector would then issue her final report, potentially in June. Assuming the final report confirmed the Plan as sound and legally compliant, the Council could then move to adopt the Plan through Cabinet and Council.

Members asked for an update regarding progress with the Plans for neighbouring authorities and whether there was a co-ordinated approach for plans being adopted at the same time. Members also asked for the opportunity to see modifications before the consultation commenced.

RESOLVED that:

(1) The progress to date on how the Council's draft Local Plan is progressing be noted.

(2) A further report on the Local Plan including any modifications be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee prior to the consultation.

42. Council Plan 2016/17 Half Year Performance Report

The Committee considered a report of the Chief Executive, which set out the Council's progress against the Council Plan for the first half of 2016/17. A copy of the performance report was attached as an appendix to the report. The report had already been considered by Cabinet at their meeting on 3rd January 2017. Councillor Duggins, Cabinet Member for Policy and Leadership, attended the meeting for the consideration of this item and indicated that he had requested that future Council Plan performance reports be considered by Scrutiny before Cabinet, in order for the Committee's comments to be taken into account.

The Council Plan set out the Council's strategic direction and priorities for the next ten years. The current plan was last reviewed in July 2016 and set out the Council's vision for Coventry to be a top ten city where everybody, including the city's most vulnerable residents, could share in the benefits of growth.

The performance report provided a high-level summary of the progress made towards the Council Plan from April 2016 to September 2016. It set out the Council's performance across all areas and used indicators, along with contextual and comparative information to describe and explain how the Council and the city's performance compared to previous years. Where possible, the report compared progress with previous years and it was noted that where previous data was unavailable, the data would form a baseline against which to measure future progress.

In summary, at the half year point, performance was reported on 49 of the 67 indicators in the Council Plan. Of these, progress was made or maintained in 34 indicators (69%) and 11 indicators had got worse (23%). There were also 4 indicators where it wasn't possible to record whether progress had been made or not. It was acknowledged that there were 18 indicators where progress was unable to be recorded because they were annual indicators.

The Committee noted that the Council had continued to make progress despite continued and sustained reduction in overall resources available. This year the Council had received £887 in government grant funding per household compared to £1,642 per household in 2010/11, a reduction of £755 even though the number of households in the city had increased.

The Committee questioned the Cabinet Member and officers present on a number of issues and responses were provided, matters raised included:

- In connection with creating an attractive, cleaner and greener city, additional information about the Council's plans for further improving air quality in the city
- Regarding making communities safer, a request that Councillor Duggins raise the issue of increased cases of domestic violence when he attends the next Police Crime and Safety meeting
- Concerning helping local people into jobs, a request for further information relating to the number of apprentices in the city, in particular the age range of

apprentices, the number of LAC in apprenticeships, and the employers who provide apprenticeships

- The intention to hold a Skills Summit to address the issues surrounding apprenticeships
- Regarding reducing health inequalities, additional information about life expectancy in the city being lower than average, the reasons for the inequality gap remaining and the issue of improving healthy life expectancies
- Additional information about the work being done to tackle the issue of Coventry having the highest rate of HIV infection in the region
- An observation that the Friargate building when operational would help the Council save £800,000 a year on buildings, which was also the cost of refurbishing the new Committee Rooms
- A suggestion that the Friargate building be named after the first female leader of the City Council
- Information about the new app developed by Coventry University which provided reminders to members of the public about their bin collection day
- A request for information about the recording of footfall in the city centre
- A request for information about fly-tipping and enforcement
- The importance of having a co-ordinated plan for developing the whole of the city centre.

RESOLVED that:

(1) Having considered the half year performance report, the progress made towards the Council Plan from April to September, 2016 be noted.

(2) A briefing note be circulated to Members detailing additional information relating to the number of apprenticeships in the city including the age of apprentices, the number of Looked After Children in apprenticeships and the employers in the city who provide apprenticeships.

(3) Future Council Plan performance reports to include the No 10 bus route scenario providing information on life expectancies in different areas of the city including healthy life expectancies.

(4) A briefing note to be sent to members providing information on the work relating to HIV in the city.

43. Outstanding Issues

The Committee received and noted a report of the Scrutiny Co-ordinator which outlined the approach to be taken on progress, outcomes and responses to recommendations and actions made by the Committee.

44. Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee Work Programme 2016/2017

The Committee considered their Work Programme for the current municipal year.

RESOLVED that:

(1) The Work Programme be noted included the additional meeting scheduled for 18th January, 2017 to consider the Education Service Redesign.

(2) The Combined Authority to be considered at a future meeting of the Committee prior to the Combined Authority Mayoral Election.

45. Any Other Items of Public Business

There were no additional items of public business.

(Meeting closed at 11.40 am)