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**Cabinet Member (Strategic Finance and Resources)**

**20 January 2014**

**Name of Scrutiny Chair:**

Councillor Fletcher - Chair of Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee

**Director Approving Submission of the report:**

Executive Director, Resources

**Ward(s) affected:**

N/A

**Title:**

Welfare Reform: Recommendations from Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee 11<sup>th</sup> December 2013

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**Is this a key decision?**

No

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**Executive Summary:**

The Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee meeting dedicated the whole of its meeting on 11<sup>th</sup> December to considering issues relating to the government's Welfare Reform agenda. The purpose of the meeting was to review:

- the latest information on the implications of the Welfare Reform changes on local people, communities and the city;
- the way services and support to local people are being co-ordinated in the city; and
- the impact on the City Council and how the authority is discharging its responsibilities.

In addition to agreeing a number of areas which it wanted to pursue further at future meetings, the Committee also made two recommendations for the Cabinet Member (Strategic Finance and Resources) which are set out below.

**Recommendations:**

Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee recommends that the Cabinet Member (Strategic Finance and Resources) seeks to:

1. Continue to pursue a joined up approach in relation to Welfare Reform and that voluntary organisations are involved as appropriate in the developing work on a single point of access.
2. Protect funding to those organisations providing advice and dealing with transitional processes in relation to Welfare Reform.

**List of Appendices included:**

None

**Other useful background papers:**

Papers considered by Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee at its meeting of 11<sup>th</sup> December 2013:

Welfare Reform Briefing Note:

<http://democraticservices.coventry.gov.uk/documents/s14228/documents/s14228/Welfare%20Reform.pdf>

Appendix 1: The Impact of Welfare Reform on Coventry - September 2013

<http://democraticservices.coventry.gov.uk/documents/s14229/documents/s14229/Welfare%20Reform%20-%20Appendix.pdf>

Appendix 2: Welfare Reform presentation

<http://democraticservices.coventry.gov.uk/documents/s14230/Welfare%20Reform%20Presentation%20PDF.pdf>

**Has it been or will it be considered by Scrutiny?**

Yes - Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee – Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> December 2013

**Has it been or will it be considered by any other Council Committee, Advisory Panel or other body?**

No

**Will this report go to Council?**

No

**Report title:**

Welfare Reform: Recommendations from Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee 11<sup>th</sup> December 2013

**1. Context (or background)**

- 1.1 The Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee meeting dedicated the whole of its meeting on 11<sup>th</sup> December to considering issues relating to the government's Welfare Reform agenda. The purpose of the meeting was to review:
- the latest information on the implications of the Welfare Reform changes on local people, communities and the city;
  - the way services and support to local people are being co-ordinated in the city; and
  - the impact on the City Council and how the authority is discharging its responsibilities.
- 1.2 In addition to identifying a number of issues that it wanted to review further, the Committee also made recommendations to the Cabinet Member (Strategic Finance and Resources) supporting the work being carried out to join up approaches across the authority and to involve the third sector in work on a single point of access as well as seeking to protect funding to those organisations providing advice and dealing with transitional processes in relation to Welfare Reform.

**2. Options considered and recommended proposal**

- 2.1 The Committee gave detailed consideration to a range of issues relating to the implementation and impacts of the Welfare Reform agenda and in addition to contributions from council officers also heard from:
- Simon Brooke: Head of Income Management, West Midlands Housing Group and Chair of the Coventry Partnership's Working Together on Welfare Reform Group
- Charley Gibbons: Chief Executive of Coventry Citizens' Advice Bureau and Chair of Coventry Partnership
- Sue Bent: Director Coventry Law Centre
- Martin Buxcey: District Operations Manager, Coventry & Warwickshire Department for Work and Pensions
- 2.2 The Committee reviewed the detailed analysis prepared on behalf of local partners by the Council's Corporate Research Team of the impacts of the Welfare Reform changes on individuals, communities and the City and recognised the importance of this in supporting decision-making.
- 2.3 The Committee heard from partners about the joint work being done through the Coventry Partnership's Working Together on Welfare Reform Group discussing common issues, sharing knowledge and working together to tackle emerging problems. They welcomed the positive approach being taken in the city and the range of initiatives and interventions being taken.
- 2.4 The Committee also reviewed the City Council's position, particularly how the Benefits Service is dealing with a number of additional pressures through the Government's significant programme of Welfare Reforms. They welcomed the work being undertaken by a number of council services to provide support to people to help meet long, medium and short term needs, as well as help people in emergency situations and the Committee supported the development of approaches that would ensure that these were as joined up as possible, particularly at the point of access.

- 2.5 The Committee questioned officers and the partner representatives on a number of issues, including:-
- The extent to which the non-financial impacts of Welfare Reform, such as the effects on public health, are understood
  - The impact of benefits sanctions and the number of appeals lodged and won against the imposition of those sanctions. In relation to this issue, the Committee welcomed the work being undertaken by the Coventry Law Centre to understand local impacts and the fact that the Department for Work and Pensions indicated that they would be commissioning work to review data on appeals
  - Severe Disablement Benefits and the Independent Living Fund and the extent to which the impacts of reforms on disabled people are clearly understood
  - The Council's performance in relation to processing new claims for Housing Benefit/ Council Tax support and spend against the Discretionary Housing Payment fund
  - The joined up working between the partners and the benefits this had achieved
  - Payments being made to households rather than individuals and the impact on those people at risk of financial abuse that may be exacerbated by this change
- 2.6 The Committee identified two areas where it wished to make recommendations to the Cabinet Member (Strategic Finance and Resources) which are the subject of this report.
- 2.7 Recommendation 1 acknowledges the positive work being undertaken within the authority to take a joined up approach across several parts of the organisation with responsibilities for elements of the welfare reform agenda and/or services that can provide support to those affected. The Committee recognised that clear access arrangements can have a significant impact on vulnerable people as well as ensuring the council is using its resources as effectively as possible. The Committee wished to support this approach and would like to see the third sector involved as appropriate in extending work on single point of access.
- 2.8 Recommendation 2 recognised the support being provided to vulnerable people affected by Welfare Reform and the pressures this is placing on those organisations providing advice and dealing with transitional processes. While recognising that the council itself is facing significant financial pressures, the Committee wished to recommend that the Cabinet Member seek to protect funding to these organisations in the Council's budget setting decisions.
- 2.9 The Committee also identified further areas relating to the Welfare Reform agenda that it wished to review in the future. These will be built into the Committee's work programme and include:
- Reviewing future work undertaken on the impact of Welfare Reform, focusing on non-financial aspects such as public health, and that the Committee will consider, at an appropriate time, the work being commissioned by the Marmot Steering Group on the wider impact of Welfare Reform.
  - Receiving a further report in due course on the impact on those people at risk of financial abuse that may be exacerbated by payments being made to households rather than individuals.
  - Supporting the in depth analysis currently being undertaken into the impact of Welfare Reform and requests that this work be extended to include the impact on disabled people.

### **3. Results of consultation undertaken**

- 3.1 Not applicable

#### **4. Timetable for implementing this decision**

4.1 Not applicable

#### **5. Comments from Executive Director, Resources**

##### **5.1 Financial implications**

The report contains no specific financial implications. In relation to recommendation 2 the Council's standard practice is to consider decisions on funding external organisations as part of its Budget Setting process, including for those organisations providing advice in relation to Welfare Reform. Any decisions will therefore be made by Cabinet and full Council and this recommendation can be considered as part of the contribution to the budget consultation. The revised Discretionary Rate Relief policy included within the Pre-Budget Report includes specific protections for organisations that provide advice to the most vulnerable residents.

##### **5.2 Legal implications**

There are no specific legal implications in relation to this report, as it forms part of the Council's constitutional process whereby the Council's Scrutiny Boards can make recommendations to Cabinet (including a Cabinet Member exercising decision making functions under section 3.2.6. of the Constitution), but such recommendations are not binding. In particular, the second recommendation relates to matters which are linked to the Council's Budget, a matter which is reserved to full Council for decision making.

#### **6. Other implications**

None

##### **6.1 How will this contribute to achievement of the Council's key objectives / corporate priorities (corporate plan/scorecard) / organisational blueprint / Local Area Agreement (or Coventry Sustainable Community Strategy)?**

The Council's work on welfare reform supports the Council's vision and objectives for jobs and growth, supporting young people and protecting vulnerable residents.

##### **6.2 How is risk being managed?**

Not applicable

##### **6.3 What is the impact on the organisation?**

Not applicable

##### **6.4 Equalities / EIA**

No Equality and Consultation Analysis has been carried out as the recommendations do not constitute a change in service or policy. Equality analysis formed a part of the work reviewed by the Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee at its meeting.

##### **6.5 Implications for (or impact on) the environment**

None

## 6.6 Implications for partner organisations?

Partner organisations affected by welfare reform and addressing its impacts made a significant contribution to the reports, presentations and discussion at the Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee meeting.

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Finance: Paul Jennings	Finance Manager (Corporate Finance)	Resources	8 January 2014	8 January 2014
Legal: Christine Goodwin	Senior Lawyer	Resources	9 January 2014	9 January 2014
Director: Chris West	Executive Director Resources	Resources	8 January 2014	9 January 2014
Members: Cllr Fletcher	Chair, Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee		3 January 2014	9 January 2014
Cllr Clifford	Deputy Chair, Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee		3 January 2014	10 January 2014

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