

**Minutes of the Meeting of Scrutiny Co-ordination
Committee held at 10.00 a.m. on 11th December 2013**

Present:

Committee Members: Councillor Clifford (Deputy Chair)

Councillor Blundell
Councillor Sandy
Councillor Skipper
Councillor Taylor
Councillor Thomas

Other Members: Councillor Mrs Lucas (Cabinet Member (Policy and Leadership))

Employees (by Directorate):

Chief Executive's: H. Shankster

People: S. Brake, C. Storey

Resources: S. Bennett, T. Savill, A. West

Apologies: Councillors Abbott, Mrs Fletcher

Others present: S. Bent (Coventry Law Centre)
S. Brooke (Chair of Working Together on Welfare Reform Group)
M. Buxcey (District Operations Manager, Department of Work and Pensions)
J. Cooper (Universal Credit Implementation Lead, Department of Work and Pensions)
C. Gibbons (Chief Executive, Citizens Advice Bureau and Chair of Coventry Partnership)

Public Business

48. Chair

In the absence of Councillor Mrs Fletcher, Councillor Clifford chaired the meeting.

49. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

50. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 6th November, 2013 were signed as a true record.

Further to Minute 41 headed 'Strategic Built Environment Group', the Committee noted that work was underway in relation to the actions resulting from consideration of this item.

Further to Minute 42 headed “Commissioning of Domestic Violence and Abuse Services”, the Committee noted and welcomed that Cabinet had approved the recommendation from the Committee in relation to Domestic Violence and Abuse (their Minute 82/13 refers)

51. **Welfare Reform**

The Committee considered a Briefing Note of the Scrutiny Co-ordinator, together with comprehensive presentations on issues relating to the Government’s Welfare Reform agenda, which had introduced an unprecedented level of change in welfare reform to which the City Council and partners were responding. The Committee reviewed:-

- 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
- The impact on the City Council and how the authority is discharging its responsibilities

Background information to support the presentations, questions and discussions at the meeting was appended to the Briefing Note. In addition, working with local partners, the Council’s Corporate Research Team had produced a detailed analysis of the impacts of the Welfare Reform changes on individuals, communities and the City, which was also appended to the Briefing Note, and which detailed the issues and challenges emerging from this analysis to date which were being considered by partners.

The Committee welcomed the fact that, through the Coventry Partnership, the Working Together on Welfare Reform Group had brought together partners including Advice Services Coventry, the Citizen’s Advice Bureau, Coventry City Council, Coventry Law Centre, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Midland Heart and Whitefriars Housing. Monthly meetings were being held to discuss common issues, share knowledge and work together to tackle emerging problems. This had led to a range of initiatives and interventions and the Chair of the Group, Simon Brooke, together with representatives of some of the partner organisations, attended the meeting and contributed to the discussions.

The Briefing Note also detailed the City Council’s position and indicated that a number of council services provided support to people to help meet long, medium and short term needs, as well as help people in emergency situations. The Council was working to ensure that these were as joined up as possible, particularly at the point of access. The Council’s Benefits Service had dealt with a number of additional pressures through the Governments significant programme of Welfare Reforms and which included:-

- The introduction of Council Tax Support (replacing Council Tax Benefit)
- The size restriction in socially rented properties (also referred to as the “bedroom tax” or spare room subsidy)
- A new Community Support Grant Scheme (replacing Crisis Loans and Community Care)

- Grants – previously administered by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)
- Administering the National Benefit Cap from July 2013
- Additional funding to support people impacted by the changes through the Discretionary Housing Payment Fund

In addition, the Briefing Note outlined progress on Discretionary Housing Payments and the new Community Support Grant scheme.

The Committee questioned officers and the partner representatives on a number of issues, including:-

- The non-financial impacts of Welfare reform, such as the effects on public Health
- Details relating to the case studies provided in the analysis documentation
- 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 fact that the DWP indicated that they would be commissioning work to review data on appeals and that the Coventry Law Centre are co-ordinating monitoring work on the application and input of sanctions.
- Severe Disablement Benefits and the Independent Living Fund
- 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

RESOLVED:-

- 1. That the Cabinet Member (Strategic Finance and Resources) be requested to seek to 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. That the Cabinet Member (Strategic Finance and Resources) be requested to seek to protect funding to those organisations providing advice and dealing with transitional processes in relation to Welfare Reform.**

3. That the Committee supports future work undertaken on the impact of Welfare Reform, focusing on non-financial aspects, such as public health, and that the Committee consider, at an appropriate time, the work being commissioned by the Marmot Steering Group on the wider impact of Welfare Reform.
4. That the Committee receive 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.
5. That the Committee supports 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.

52. Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee Work Programme 2013/14

The Committee considered the Work Programme for 2013-2014 and noted that, following consideration by the City Council on 3rd December, 2013, the issue of Female Genital Mutilation would be included in the Committee's Work Programme.

53. Outstanding Issues

The Committee noted that all outstanding issues had been included in the Work Programme for the current year.

54. Any Other Items of Public Business

There were no additional items of public business.

(Meeting closed: 12.30 p.m.)