



To Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee

Date 4th February 2015

Subject: Welfare Reform

1 Purpose of the Note

- 1.1 To inform the Committee of progress since their consideration of the impact of benefit sanctions in October 2014.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 To note progress made since the last meeting and identify any recommendations for the City Council and partners to progress issues raised at the meeting.

3 Information/Background

- 3.1 The Government has introduced wide scale changes to the welfare system. Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee has dedicated several meetings to the subject and the aim of their consideration of the Welfare Reform agenda has particularly been to explore:
- What are the combined implications of changes on individuals and communities that decision-makers need to understand?
 - What can be predicted about future impacts that need to be planned for now?
 - How do we make sure that actions being taken now are providing long term sustainable solutions for people, not short term fixes?
 - How is the city's approach to services and support being co-ordinated to avoid either duplication or gaps?
 - Is the Council doing everything required to discharge its responsibilities for elements of the welfare reform agenda?
- 3.2 Coventry Partnership's Working Together on Welfare Reform Group was established to bring together partners including Advice Services Coventry, Citizen's Advice Bureau, Coventry City Council, Coventry Law Centre, Department for Work and Pensions, Midland Heart and Whitefriars Housing to address common issues, share knowledge and work together to tackle emerging problems.

- 3.3 At its meeting of 8th October 2014, the Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee considered the impact of benefits sanctions on people in Coventry. The Board considered a report produced by Coventry Law Centre, Coventry Citizen's Advice Bureau, Coventry Women's Voices and the Centre for Human Rights in Practice at the University of Warwick. The papers and minutes of this meeting are available on the Council's website at: <http://democraticservices.coventry.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=151&MId=10380&Ver=4>. Partners on the Working Together Group committed to following up the issues raised by the report and to report back at this meeting.
- 3.4 This report drew on a short survey of people who had experienced sanctions and in depth interviews of people who had been sanctioned. It followed Partnership events in July and September where local organisations who support service users affected by benefits sanctions could better understand the sanctions process and work together to help prevent people being sanctioned in the first place and support them more effectively if they were.
- 3.5 Following publication of the report, Law Centre and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) met to discuss and develop actions identified in the Sanctions Report.
- 3.6 In November, some of the local organisations that deal with people affected by sanctions, including vulnerable people, observed initial interviews at the DWP's offices at Cofa Court. The purpose of the observations was to observe what happened at the initial point of contact and how this initial stage identifies people with vulnerabilities. Feedback from this exercise was presented to the Coventry Partnership's Welfare Reform Working Together Group.
- 3.7 In January 2015, service leaders from partner organisations attended a Customer Journey event at which DWP went through paperwork and process for benefit claimants with a view to identifying where organisations could help at particular key points in the process.
- 3.8 The Chair and representatives of the Working Together Group have been invited to attend the meeting.
- 3.9 Updates from the Chair of the Working Together Group and Coventry Law Centre are attached.

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