

# Briefing note

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To: Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee

Date: 4<sup>th</sup> February 2015

Subject: Welfare Reform – Follow up on the report on the Impact of Sanctions in Coventry

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## 1 Purpose of the Note

- 1.1 To inform the Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee of the activity of the Working Together Group and partners since the last meeting in October

## 2 Information/Background

- 2.1 **Partnership meetings.** We meet as partners bi monthly to discuss issues around Welfare Reform. Regular attendees include: Coventry City Council, Whitefriars, Midland Heart, Citizens Advice Bureau, Coventry Law Centre, Department of Works and Pensions and representatives from Coventry Churches. Meetings are a forum for sharing news, problem resolution and decision making on joint actions.
- 2.2 **Underoccupation.** In the City, we still have 2,209 affected by underoccupation charges (the Bedroom tax). This has reduced from 2,415 in April 2014 and 3,180 in April 13.
- 2.3 Housing Associations are in the process of recontacting those affected to reoffer options advice to all those affected. This work involves the SORTED project so that advice is independent and can quickly pick up other support to those struggling with payments.
- 2.4 **Discretionary Housing Payments.** Partners have worked together to make the most of DHP payments. Last year the full allocation of budget was utilised and this year to date we have spent £532,000 of the £811,000 budget. Last year at the same point we had spent £300,000 and still spent the whole allocation, and this year we expect to have spent the full budget by year end. Coventry's allocation for next year has just been announced and has been reduced by almost 24% to £619,000.
- 2.5 **Sanctions.** Partners have worked hard on sanctions. The increasing use of sanctions has led to thousands of claimants being affected and hence this remains a continuing interest to the partners. A separate report is on the agenda about this work.
- 2.6 **In work benefits.** Reports to the partnership about a large proportion of people who are not claiming in work benefits, for example Working Tax Credits, has led to a renewed focus on partners pushing awareness of eligibility to client groups and across the City.
- 2.7 **Customer journey mapping.** On the 14 January, DWP and the Housing Benefit & Revenues Team delivered a walkthrough of the journey a claimant makes when they apply for Job Seekers Allowance/Employment Support Allowance/Universal Credit and Income Support. Lots of good learning and opportunities to identify issues and ask questions around support and access to employment.

- 2.8 **Universal Credit.** The first tranche of the national roll out of Universal Credit has been announced, this did not include Coventry. The roll out for single applicants is expected to be complete by spring 2016. The partners are all very interested to learn about the roll out of Universal Credit. At our last meeting in November we heard from the DWP responsible for the Rugby pilot. Lots of information was shared and discussed about what is happening on the ground.
- 2.9 **Communications.** In the past all partners have agreed joint communications around welfare reform. Posters and leaflets have been designed and distributed. Common messages have been valued by all. We are now refreshing the materials we have, with the Council's communications team taking the lead in coordinating the messages on a new leaflet with key messages.
- 2.10 **Impacts.** The Council's insight team have updated the impacts of Welfare Reform on a regular basis. This research has fed into our work and more generally to partners.

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