

Report to Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Agenda
Item:

A.3

Meeting Date: 10th January 2019
Portfolio: Economy, Enterprise & Housing
Key Decision: No
Within Policy and Budget Framework YES
Public / Private Public

Title: RESPONSE TO WELFARE REFORM
Report of: Corporate Director of Governance and Regulatory Services
Report Number: GD.02/19

Purpose / Summary:

The purpose of this report is to provide members of the Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Panel with an overview of the ongoing local partnership work developed in response to the Governments welfare reform agenda, Welfare Reform Act 2012, and the Welfare Reform and Work Bill 2015/16.

Recommendations:

It is recommended that members of the Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Panel receive this report, review the contents, and note the progress of the partnership.

Tracking

Executive:	
Overview and Scrutiny:	
Council:	

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1** Established in 2012, Carlisle Welfare Reform Board is a multi-agency partnership group which meets on a quarterly basis to provide strategic direction and an effective coordinated partnership response to welfare reform across Carlisle and district.
- 1.2** To achieve this, the group explores and monitors local impacts (and anticipates potential impacts) of the implementation of welfare changes; shares information updates; explores best practice; challenges, supports and assists each other to ensure the best outcomes for clients.
- 1.3** The group continues to have a focus on the following:
- Ensuring good communication between partners on the implemented welfare changes and forthcoming revisions to benefits, support and local service delivery
 - Sharing timely information, data and intelligence on the impact of changes in the local population
 - Sharing and coordinating the development of our local response to welfare changes
- 1.4** The composition and governance of the group has remained intentionally fluid; this deliberate approach is considered appropriate given the breadth and depth of the reforms planned. Core members of the group to date are representative of:
- Carlisle City Council (Portfolio Holder, Deputy CE, Housing, Welfare, Policy, Customer Contact and Benefits)
 - Housing Associations (Riverside, Impact, Castles & Coast)
 - Department for Work and Pensions
 - Cumbria Law Centre
 - Food Bank / Churches Together
 - Citizens Advice Bureau
 - Clinical Commissioning group

2. GROUP OBJECTIVES AND AGENDA

- 2.1** The group consistently monitors local data from all key partners and Cumbria Observatory, alongside key national trends and local case studies. This sharing of non-personalised information has proved very effective at identifying pressure points in the assessment and payments systems across the partnership which has led to a more joined up and consistent understanding of the processes.
- 2.2** The group is committed to ensuring there is an appropriate and effective local service response through:
- Sharing individual organisations good practice strategic and operational approaches to support people affected by welfare reforms
 - Working together to improve local service delivery to meet needs; support fair employment; professional practice and data sharing; sharing learning; training and shaping the future delivery of services
 - Researching best practice nationally and adopt good practice locally
 - Improving data sharing through the provision of local stats / data
- 2.4** In addition to the information exchange and data review, current standard agenda items for update and discussion include:
- Case studies outlining customer journeys for review
 - Any welfare reform timetable updates and emerging issues
 - Discretionary Housing Payments
 - Benefit Cap
 - Under Occupancy
 - Universal Credit
- 2.5** Further to this work, since 2012 the group has delivered joint training, workshops, and public events; and is currently closely monitoring the roll out to Universal Credit full service.

3. MEMBER FEEDBACK

3.1 DEPARTMENT OF WORK AND PENSIONS

As a DWP Manager the Carlisle Welfare Reform Board is an essential communication meeting that allows the DWP the opportunity to feedback Welfare

Reform to key strategic partners. Universal Credit replaced six benefits in Carlisle in July and the agility of this system means updates occur on a fortnightly basis. The sharing of information and the opportunity to forge closer working links has fundamentally meant people can be supported through partnership working. Universal Credit migration is in its infancy and the policy will develop in 2019 and it is essential that reform is understood, managed through partnership and individuals supported in Carlisle. Furthermore, informing partners on what policy updates mean has been essential as the media coverage of UC has been worrying for many as significant change is landing.

Heritage benefits are also subject to change including Pension reform as well as the existing legacy benefits that include Income Support, Jobseekers Allowance, Personal Independence Payments, Employment Support Allowance, Child Tax Credit & Working Tax Credits. Informing partners of policy changes in these areas is also essential.

3.2 WELFARE ADVICE SERVICE

The meetings are extremely useful about updates on Welfare reform, also networking with other agencies who for example who have shared tools and knowledge to help assist us manage the introduction of Universal Credit and also as an arena to raise concerns. For example, we have raised the difficulties experienced by advisers assisting vulnerable clients under Universal Credit and I understand our concerns are passed to Policy Makers by the DWP Liaison Officer. On the 21st Nov 2018 Justin Tomlinson - Family, Child Maintenance and Housing Minister told MPs that the introduction of implicit consent under universal Credit is 'a real priority' for the DWP so our small voice may help to make a difference to vulnerable clients.

3.3 CARLISLE LAW CENTRE

The Forum continues to be a vital tool for communication between the key organisations touched by welfare reforms and changes. I am in regular contact with other Law Centre managers from across the country and we frequently compare and contrast our working approaches and the challenges we face. I think that the situation in Carlisle compares very favourably with most other localities. The open communication between local government, DWP, housing providers and advice agencies goes a long way towards finding all solutions to the problems posed by welfare reform – or at least opportunities to work together to mitigate some of the potential negative effects. For that reason, organisations like the Law Centre are able to target our resources on the cases where real challenge is necessary. A good working relationship with partners means that many problems of an

administrative nature can be fixed quickly without legal process. This really means that we can use our very limited resources helping those for whom complex and expert casework is necessary. I have little doubt that in the coming year, we will see the demand on all of our services rise for many and complicated reasons including the funding of other support services, the freezing of some benefits despite inflation and the inescapable issues of the move to Universal Credit. The forum means that agencies from across civic society can work together to do out very best of the most vulnerable and make best use of public funding.

4. CONTRIBUTION TO THE CARLISLE PLAN PRIORITIES

- 4.1** The work of this Welfare Reform Board contributes to a range of our priorities but particularly relates to the focus on improving resident's quality of life.

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Appendices
attached to report:

Note: in compliance with section 100d of the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 the report has been prepared in part from the following papers:

- **None**