

COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

THURSDAY 18 FEBRUARY 2016 AT 10.00AM

PRESENT: Councillor Burns (Chairman), Councillors Bloxham (as substitute for Councillor Mrs Vasey), Caig (as substitute for Councillor Ms Williams), Ellis, Ms Franklin, Mrs McKerrell (until 11.40am) and Osgood.

ALSO

PRESENT: Councillor Mrs Riddle – Communities, Health and Wellbeing Portfolio Holder
Councillor Mrs Bradley – Economy and Enterprise Portfolio Holder
Councillor Glover - Leader

OFFICERS: Deputy Chief Executive
Homelessness Prevention and Accommodation Manager
Customer Services Manager
Shared RBS Partnership Manager
Policy and Performance Officer x2
Overview and Scrutiny Officer

COSP.09/16 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillor Mrs Vasey, Councillor Ms Williams and Councillor Ms Quilter, Culture, Leisure and Young People Portfolio Holder.

COSP.10/16 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest affecting the business to be transacted at the meeting.

COSP.11/16 PUBLIC AND PRESS

It was agreed that the items of business in Part A be dealt with in public.

COSP.12/16 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meetings held on 14 January 2016 be noted.

COSP.13/16 CALL-IN OF DECISIONS

There were no items which had been the subject of call-in.

COSP.14/16 OVERVIEW REPORT AND WORK PROGRAMME

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer presented report OS.04/16 which provided an overview of matters relating to the work of the Community Overview and Scrutiny Panel and included the latest version of the work programme and Key Decisions of the Executive which related to the Panel.

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer reported that the Notice of Key Executive Decisions, published on 5 February 2016, included the followings item which fell within the remit of this Panel. Both items would be considered by the Executive on 7 March 2016:

KD.01/16 Updated Private Sector Housing Enforcement Policy – The Executive would be asked to confirm the changes to the updated policy.

KD.02/16 Housing Repair Grant (repayable) – The Executive would be asked to approve the use of the Capital pot in Homelife's budget for a repayable grant product (secured on property) to older and vulnerable householders who needed essential repairs to their home but had difficulty in accessing commercial or other loan products.

Members did not raise any questions or comments on the items contained within the Notice of Key Decisions.

The Panel's Work Programme had been attached to the report and Members were asked note and/or amend the Panel's Work Programmes and in particular consider the framework for the next meeting.

The following items had been scheduled for the next meeting on 31 March 2016:

- Scrutiny Annual Report
- Customer Services
- Youth Council

The Scrutiny Chairs Group on 4 February had resolved that each Panel would have a standing Flood Update report added to their agenda to receive updates on issues within the remit of that Panel.

The Chairman asked that update on the Leisure Contract be brought to the next meeting of the Panel if any progress had been made.

RESOLVED –1) That the Overview Report (OS.04/16) incorporating the Work Programme and Notice of Executive Decisions items relevant to this Panel be noted.

2) That the following items be included on the agenda for the next meeting of the Community Overview and Scrutiny Panel:

- Scrutiny Annual Report
- Customer Services
- Youth Council
- Flood Update Report
- Leisure Contract Update

COSP.15/16 RESPONSE TO WELFARE REFORM

The Deputy Chief Executive submitted report SD.02/16 which provided an overview of the partnership work which had been developed in response to the Government's welfare reform agenda, Welfare reform Act 2012 and the Welfare Reform and Work Bill 2015/16.

The Deputy Chief Executive reminded the Panel of the key elements of the Welfare Reform Act and reported that the implementation of the Act had had a major impact on the work and practice of all those associated with directly delivering benefits; those who operated in the 'benefits chain'; organisations supporting benefit claimants and the claimants themselves.

In response to the implementation of the Act many local authorities had formed partnerships to explore the impact of the changes and to assist each other as the new arrangements took shape. At a County wide level the County Council formed a Welfare Reform Board and tasked Cumbria Observatory with monitoring the impact by gathering and analysing data from

our local areas. At the District level a number of District Councils had taken the decision to form Welfare Reform groups or boards. The Carlisle Welfare Reform Board took shape in late 2012.

The Carlisle Welfare Reform Board originally convened to focus on the key immediate changes that would affect residents in the district, more recently the Board had considered the potential impact of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill 2015-16 which led the Board to reconsider its purpose, membership and terms of reference. The key changes to the work of the Board were:

- a move towards identifying key gaps in local services that required joint work to ensure a better service delivery
- a targeted approach to delivering projects and actions that could assist residents to seek and obtain permanent work that was safe, fair and productive.
- align the work of the Board with other key Carlisle Partnership group such as the Carlisle Economic Partnership and Healthy City Partnership.

A copy of the draft Carlisle Welfare reform Board Terms of reference 2015 had been attached to the report for the Panel's consideration.

The Deputy Chief Executive took the Panel through the timeline for Welfare Reform and local response drawing attention to the introduction of local authority led Universal Credit, Local Housing Allowances changes, localised support for Council Tax, Benefit Cap and the removal of the spare room subsidy. The Board considered the changes as they were introduced and the impact they had on the local area.

Appendix 2 of the report provided a summary of data and headline analysis about the potential impact of welfare reform in Carlisle and the area of most concern was the 6,812 households in Carlisle that had an annual income of less than £10,000, which was above the national level.

The Communities Health and Wellbeing Portfolio Holder reiterated the need for sharing information and the barriers organisations faced when trying to share information. The Board was useful as a sounding board and to gather information and showed that the Council could not deal with Welfare Reform alone.

In considering the report and presentation from the Deputy Chief Executive Members raised the following comments and questions:

- Was there a compulsion to have a Welfare Reform Board and did the Council take prominence within the Board as the Local Authority?

The Deputy Chief Executive explained that there was no requirement for the Council to have a Welfare reform Board. The City Council had established the Board to have local input on the impact of the Welfare Reform as well as encourage partners to improve services.

The Homelessness Prevention and Accommodation Manager commented that the Board enabled preventative measures to be put in place before long term issues arose. The Board allowed for an open discussion to take place on cases and attendees had found the ability to challenge in an open forum incredibly useful.

The Customer Services Manager added that the Board had changed the relationship between the City Council and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) from a process driven, restricted relationship to a customer based relationship which put the customer journey first.

- The data in the report had not included any information with regard to people over the age of 65.

The Communities, Health and Wellbeing Portfolio Holder responded that information regarding people over the age of 65 had been included in the Health and Wellbeing Board.

- Would it be possible for the Panel to see a case study to understand the customer journey and processes involved?

The Communities, Health and Wellbeing Portfolio Holder agreed that case studies could be circulated to Members and that they would show clearly how effective the work of the Board had been.

- Was the impact of the Welfare Reform in Carlisle known?

The Deputy Chief Executive confirmed that data was collected but it did not reflect the impact on individual families or households. Case studies showed the customer journey and the impact on those customers. There was concern regarding the number of households with an income of under £10,000 and consideration of how the Board could relate to local employers the need for good terms and conditions, contracts and transport to improve the chances of keeping people in work. Carlisle had a lot of people who were on the hard line of poverty and there was a problem with debt and retaining long standing work.

The Homelessness Prevention and Accommodation Manager added that the group's agenda had been amended to include a standard item for customer journeys and representatives from the Troubled Family Programme would be attending the meetings.

- Recent press articles had discussed the possibility of the removal of free school meals, how did the Board encompass all of the issues that were arising?

The Communities, Health and Wellbeing Portfolio Holder explained that the Board received regular information from the Food Bank and there had been evidence of an increase in the usage of the food bank during school holidays when children did not have access to a school meal. This was an issue Board members would monitor.

- A Member suggested that officer names be removed from the Terms of Reference and replaced with job titles.
- Would the action plans that were referred to in the Terms of Reference be made available for scrutiny and how would the effectiveness of actions be measured?

The Deputy Chief Executive advised the Panel that they had the ability to scrutinise partners and agencies and it was within their remit to review the progress of the Board. He explained that the Board would focus on 3-4 projects areas which would have clear targets for monitoring purposes. The projects progress would be available for scrutiny.

- Did the Board address the loss of services from partners and were potential changes to services discussed?

The Deputy Chief Executive responded that the purpose of the Board was not to deal with individual agency budgetary issues but it would discuss the impact of the reduction or removal of services

- Homelessness had been reducing did the local figures for homelessness match the national trend?

The Homelessness Prevention and Accommodation Manager explained that the focus of the Council had been the prevention of homelessness. The Council saw the same number of people who required support annually but how they were being assisted with had changed. The number households where the City council had accepted statutory homeless duty had reduced but the prevention figures had increased.

A Member commented that it was not known if the reduction in homelessness was a result of local preventative measures or the impact of Welfare Reform.

The Homelessness Prevention and Accommodation Manager added that how the Council assisted households was different and focused on early intervention and preventative initiatives to assist so that the household did not reach the crisis levels in relation to homelessness.

- A Member commented that at the start of the Welfare Reform the Council had been informed that there would be an increase in homelessness but it had not been the case. He felt that the view of Welfare Reform had been negative and the Panel should consider the positives that had been a result of Welfare Reform and the Reform should be viewed as an opportunity not a challenge.

The Deputy Chief Executive responded that there had been an 18% increase in the presentation of people who required housing advice and assistance and it was an issue for the authority. Prevention was the key and with the wider trend of low income for families it had to be the focus of the Board. He accepted that the figures for homelessness had reduced but the Panel had to understand the reason why.

- The impact of the benefit cap had been low, had there been any problems?

The Deputy Chief Executive explained that the issue of benefits cap raised a lot of anxiety along with under occupancy but the data collected showed that the number of actual issues was much lower than the level of anxiety.

- How had the Revenues and Benefits section dealt with the changes to benefits and was fraud prevention being better managed?

The Shared RBS Partnership Manager explained that the extent of the changes had yet to be seen, the impact of the introduction of Universal Credit had been very slow and the implementation and migration of data would take a long time. He added that the City Council would provide the housing benefit service for several more years. In relation to the fraud section, City Council officers had been TUPEd over to DWP but they remained in the building, although their work was slightly different they had the same focus, skill set and intent as the City Council fraud section.

- A Member raised concerns that people would think that Riverside Carlisle was the only housing provider in Carlisle. All the housing providers in Carlisle collected data that could be shared with the Board and partners.

The Deputy Chief Executive explained that all housing providers within the district were invited to the Board and all had attended, participated and provided data. Riverside did tend to be talked about more as they were the biggest housing provider in the district.

- Had all the legislative changes had an impact on the Benefits Advice Service (BAS)?

The Homelessness Prevention and Accommodation Manager responded that there had been few cases related to Universal Credit, however, the BAS had seen an increase in cases where people claiming sickness benefit or with mental health issues had been without money for an extended period of time. This had previously been an uncommon occurrence but it, unfortunately had become much more common.

- Why had Social Services not been included in the Board membership?

The Deputy Chief Executive explained that it had been very difficult to gain the right representative from Cumbria County Council and this had been an ongoing issue for a number of the districts.

- Would the shared platforms/collective source of software packages be jointly funded?

The Deputy Chief Executive stated that the goal was to try and get to a stage where all the partners were using the same technology which enabled them to share information without any additional costs.

RESOLVED – 1) That report SD.02/16 Response to Welfare Reform be welcomed:

2) That the Terms of Reference for the Welfare Reform Board be amended to include job titles instead of officer names;

3) That Board members from different organisations be invited to attend the Panel when the next Welfare Reform Update report was considered.

COSP.16/16 EQUALITY POLICY AND EQUALITY OBJECTIVES

The Policy and Performance Officer submitted report PC.02/16 which set out the draft Equality Policy and equality objectives.

The Policy and Performance Officer reminded the Panel of the Council's duty under the Equality Act 2010. Attached to the report, for the Panel's consideration, was the Annual Equality Report 2014/15 which provided an overview of equality work, the Equality Policy which set out the revised approach to equality including new objectives for 2016-19 and the Equality Action Plan 2016/17 which set out action on how the Council would continue to work towards achieving objectives.

The Policy and Performance Officer added that the Council must provide information about how equality was considered in decision making, policy development and engagement. The information would be published within the annual equality report and reported to Senior Management Team, the Executive and Overview and Scrutiny.

At the request of the Panel the Policy and Performance Officer highlighted the differences between the new Policy and the previous Policy. She explained that the new Policy brought all aspects of equality into one document which was shorter and clearer about the

responsibilities of the Council. The previous Policy had not included objectives or a requirement to publish an annual progress report.

The Communities, Health and Wellbeing Portfolio Holder informed the Panel that the Policy had been out to consultation and only one response had been received so far. North Cumbria University Hospitals NHS Trust had provided a very positive response to the Policy.

In considering the Policy Members raised the following comments and questions:

- What had the change been to the policy on local knowledge tests for taxi drivers?

The Policy and Performance Officer explained that the licensing section had received complaints that some drivers had been unable to communicate with passengers due to language barriers. The licensing section had investigated other Councils and found that many required drivers to pass a language test; as a result the City Council had introduced a language test to the local knowledge test for new drivers and improve the service for customers.

- The objective 'Improve health, wellbeing and economic prosperity in Carlisle' was very broad, was there a way to narrow it down to areas the City Council could contribute to?

The Policy and Performance Officer responded that it would be difficult to measure the Council's contribution exactly as there were many determinants of health and economic prosperity. Consideration had been given to the Carlisle Plan and the vision of the Council when establishing the objectives, and it was felt that the objective could support the Plan in reducing inequalities

- Did the Council keep information on hard to reach groups and what measures were taken to engage with them?

The Policy and Performance Officer confirmed that information was held across the authority on hard to reach groups as some Directorates worked with those groups on a daily basis, in addition the Council held events in the City Centre which encouraged communities to come together.

The Communities, Health and Wellbeing Portfolio Holder commented that it was the Council's responsibility to make all information and services available to as many people as possible. If the Council thought that a group was not accessing services then work would be undertaken to find out why and what could be done to encourage them to access the services.

RESOLVED –That report PC.02/16 Equality Policy and Equality Objectives be noted.

COSP.17/16 3RD QUARTER PERFORMANCE REPORT 2015/16

The Policy Officer presented report PC.04/16 updating the Panel on the Council's service standards that helped measure performance. The report also included an update on key actions contained within the Carlisle Plan 2013-16.

RESOLVED – That report PC.04/16 be welcomed.

(Meeting ended at 12.08pm)