

Report to Community Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Agenda
Item:
A.4

Meeting Date: 16th February 2017
 Portfolio: Finance, Governance and Resources
 Key Decision: No
 Within Policy and Budget Framework YES
 Public / Private Public

Title: RESPONSE TO WELFARE REFORM
 Report of: Homelessness, Prevention and Accommodation Services Manager
 Report Number: GD.12/17

Purpose / Summary:

The purpose of this report is to provide members of the Community 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 Community Overview and Scrutiny Panel receive this report, review the contents, and note the progress of the partnership.

Tracking

Executive:	
Overview and Scrutiny:	16th February 2017
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 and Two Castles)
 - Department for Work and Pensions
 - Cumbria Law Centre
 - Food Bank / Churches Together
 - Citizens Advice Bureau
 - Clinical Commissioning group

The group is currently chaired by the Economy, Enterprise and Housing Portfolio Holder.

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 working on producing a shared information leaflet containing useful contacts to be given out with donations from the food bank, and a variety of community bases.
- 2.6** The group will continue to respond to changes as a new national welfare reform programme systems become fully operational over the coming years.

3. MEMBER FEEDBACK

3.1 Department for Work and Pensions

DWP works in partnership with many organisations in the Carlisle area that support our customers to access DWP services and benefits. These partnerships play a vital role ensuring that people who are in vulnerable circumstances get the help they need when they need it. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Carlisle Welfare Reform Group at our regular meetings, ensuring that we give partners the most up to date information concerning Welfare Reforms and local Job Centre activities. This sharing of information enables our partners to be aware of changes and milestones in the Welfare Reform journey so they are fully prepared when supporting their clients with welfare, benefit and employment queries. DWP is keen to learn about partner and customer experiences resulting from welfare changes and to examine ways in which we can work together locally to better support those who may be struggling. For example where organisations have limited resources and are unable to help clients complete benefit applications, we have opened up the DWP Visiting services and will take referrals and provide assistance by visiting clients in their own homes. The group enables DWP to explain the digitalisation of services, look at the provision of IT and support services in the Carlisle area to ensure as far as possible demand will be met. Welfare Reforms will continue for the foreseeable future we see great value in working in partnership through the Carlisle Welfare Reform Group to ensure those living and working in the Carlisle area get the right level of support to help them navigate and manage the changes to come.

3.2 Carlisle Food bank

There are many advantages of having the Carlisle Food bank represented on the Welfare Reform Board. The provision of statistical information from the recent use of the Food bank offers a barometer in terms of the challenges facing people in our City. We are able to give indication of the number of parcels handed out in every month and how many referrals we are receiving. We too have some information about the reasons that are offered in respect of the need for a parcel which allows the Board to hear about the number of individuals facing difficult times due to benefit changes. The Food bank is increasingly working with partner organisations in the town and the Welfare Reform Board allows for the exchange of ideas and the

consideration of areas of possible cooperation. It is hoped that supportive agencies in the City will increasingly be able to offer advice clinics in the Food bank premises.

3.3 Welfare Advice Service

The Welfare Reform Board meetings have proved an invaluable arena in which to discuss the detail, potential implications and concerns regarding welfare benefit changes. It also provides a forum to share knowledge, raise issues and concerns, the latter has provided an important mechanism that allows regional issues regarding welfare reform to be incorporated into the national experience rather than remaining the individual level; with the intention that issues can be addressed and resolved at an early opportunity.

3.4 Cumbria Law Centre

Of all boards on which the Law Centre is represented, I can genuinely say that few have ever proven to be of such practical value as the welfare reform board. The group has been a forum in which agencies from all parts of the community can come to engage with the challenges presented by the reform programme. We have charted and sought to understand the impacts of each aspect of the reform programme in terms of its human and economic impact locally. Since each agency brings a different perspective, we have been able to think in quite complex ways about the likely implications of, say, the benefit cap. A number of agencies represented have a mandate to challenge policy and practice in order that the more vulnerable of our service users are not unfairly affected, either through intended or unintended consequences. There has been a considerable willingness on the part of housing providers, Department for Work and Pensions and Carlisle City Council to listen to and take on board these concerns and, from time to time, these criticisms of practice or policy. The welfare reform board promotes a collegiate and positive collaboration between advice agencies, support organisations, those providing legal support, such as ourselves, and the public bodies. It is apparent that agencies are very focussed on mitigating the worst effects of reform on local (and especially vulnerable) people. Information from Department for Work and Pensions and the City Council often helps us to understand some of the systemic problems that occur, such as complications with the rollout of Universal Credit. We are able to understand which issues are national and which are local, which we can affect as a

group and which are likely to be beyond our collective powers. This allows us to formulate joint and individual approaches to find, engage and support those people who are likely to struggle. The welfare reform board has become such an important source of information for our Centre that it is hard to imagine things in its absence. Sometimes, the outcomes of our collaboration are subtle, such as an informal partnership or improved referrals. But, these small things mount up to result in a far more effective safety net for local people. The welfare reform board has always been very well chaired and well organised and benefits frequently from input directly from senior officers. It is my opinion that, in fact, the most severe social difficulties in relation to welfare reform are yet to come. Having the group in place as an ongoing resource allows us to predict some of these difficulties and pre-empt some of them, rather than simply reacting.

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.

Contact Officer:	Tammie Rhodes	Ext: 7217
	Reg Bascombe	7102

**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

CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS/RISKS:

Corporate Support and Resources–

Economic Development –

Governance and Regulatory Services –

Community Services –