

Report to: Council

Agenda
Item
12(i)(b)

Meeting Date: 5 November 2013

Public/Private*: Public

Title: **Community Overview and Scrutiny Panel - Chairman's Report –
Councillor Mrs Luckley**

The first report on Carlisle's Play Provision was received at the Panel's October meeting. This included an assessment of all the Council's 69 play areas and their existing play equipment, the majority of which were found to be in either good, average or excellent condition. However, there were a large number of play areas where the usage was estimated to be low and play areas where there was some equipment either poorly located or obsolete. The next step in the review is to establish a set of criteria or principles whereby the Council can achieve high quality play facilities in their play areas accessible to all children.

Discussion centered around the challenge for the Council in achieving this aim with no capital budget having been set and only a limited revenue budget for replacing obsolete equipment. There were questions and ideas regarding community support for the play areas, which included the use of funding from Section 106's; local support groups seeking external funding, the 500m Local Play area being extended and that views and suggestions from the Ward Councillors and community representatives be welcomed. Also, a recommendation was agreed to request the Executive to consider a capital budget for the replacement of obsolete but required equipment.

The Panel examined an updated report on the effect of the changes in Welfare Benefits that have been dealt with by the Revenues and Benefits Services. The requests for discretionary assistance had substantially increased and there had been a 10% increase in successful applications in contrast to the same period last year. Questions concerning the service were in regard to the judgement that Assessment Officers could use, the assistance or advice given when an applicant wasn't eligible for discretionary payments and further information was requested on the performance of the service. That report will come to the Panel at the end of the next quarter.

The changes brought about by Welfare Reform has increased the demand for advice and the Panel were able to scrutinize the work of the Council's Benefit and Welfare Advice Service following the presenting of a report on the first quarter outcomes.

For a total annual cost to the Council of £163,000 the service deals with the increasing number of requests for advice which in the first quarter of the financial year resulted in the drawing down of over £560,000 in total for applicants. Questions were asked about the times the Council service was available and on the partnerships that have been formed with other agencies giving this service and the effect this has for people requesting advice. The Panel were satisfied that the service, although under increasing pressure, had performed well in the first quarter of the year.

The final item for scrutiny was the Transformation Update. The Panel were informed that the savings required this year had been achieved, except for a shortfall of £42,000 which it was planned to be taken corporately in the next financial year. The Panel accepted the reasons given.

Cllr Olwyn Luckley
Chairman