

Reference from Performance and Finance Scrutiny Committee – Review of the Impact of Benefits Reforms on Surrey Heath Borough Council and Borough Residents

Summary

At its meeting on 12 July 2017, the Performance and Finance Scrutiny considered a report from a Task and Finish Group looking at the impact of welfare/benefits reforms on the Council and Borough residents. A further report, revising a number of the recommendations, was considered by the Committee at its meeting on 6 December 2017.

The Committee agreed to advise the Executive to take a number of actions which could potentially mitigate the impact of these changes.

Chairman of Performance and Finance Scrutiny Committee
Date Signed Off: 12 January 2018

Wards Affected – All

Recommendation

The Executive is advised to RESOLVE that

- (i) the Department of Works and Pension (DWP) be urged to work more closely with the Council**
 - (a) to mitigate the impact of the benefit reforms on the residents of the Borough;**
 - (b) to ensure that there is adequate provision of computer facilities internet access and advisors across the Borough to support the wider introduction of Universal Credit and other changes to the welfare system;**
- (ii) in relation to computer facilities, internet access, and advisor support, that**
 - (a) the list of sites will be refreshed, and widely publicised to the relevant audience;**
 - (b) this exercise be repeated on a six monthly basis;**
 - (c) in the event that this exercise indicates a shortage of available sites and/or personnel, alternative options, including the involvement and closer collaboration with local charities in the relevant sectors to be considered.**
- (iii) the work done by the Surrey Credit Union in supporting residents in the Borough be noted and supported;**

- (iv) the closer working relationship and joint working initiatives between the Camberley Job Centre and the Council be noted and supported;
- (v) the Local Plan Working Group be asked to take full account of the indicated increased need for one bedroom properties, when developing the Plan.

The Executive is asked to note that the External Partnership Select Committee be requested to include Boom and DWP on its future work programme.

1. Key Issues

1.1 In consideration of the impact of benefit reforms on the Council and Borough residents, the Performance and Finance Committee considered that the following changes had impacted on the Council and those in or potentially in receipt of benefits:

- (i) Council Tax replaced by Local Council Tax Support Schemes – April 2013;
- (ii) Social Sector Size Criteria – April 2013;
- (iii) Benefit Cap – July 2013
- (iv) Universal Credit – February 2016;
- (v) Housing Benefit/Council Tax Reduction backdating – April 2016;
- (vi) Withdrawal of Family Premium – May 2016;
- (vii) Changes to Temporary Absence Rules – July 2016;
- (viii) Reduction in benefit cap levels – November 2016; and
- (ix) Further changes to qualifying criteria – April 2017.

1.2 It was noted that the following benefits had not been affected by the Benefits Cap:

- Armed Forces Compensation Scheme
- Armed Forces Independence Payment
- Attendance Allowance
- Carer's Allowance
- Disability Living Allowance (DLA)
- Employment and Support Allowance (if support component in payment)
- Guardian's Allowance

- 1.3 The Committee noted that the Task and Finish Group had considered resources that had been made available to mitigate the impact of the various changes and noted areas where the mitigation could not be applied.
- 1.4 Focussing on local impacts, Members had identified the following key local needs:
- (i) An increase in the number PCs available to welfare benefit applicants, and the number of local locations where access would be possible;
 - (ii) An increase in the number of PC and benefit competent advisors who could help applicants complete claim forms;
 - (iii) An increase in the number of advisors (must be qualified) who could help with debt counselling;
 - (iv) Better local access to short term loans to those left without support between date of claim and date of approval and receipt of grant; and
 - (v) An increase in the number of one bedroom properties available for social rent.
- 1.5 The Committee supported the Task and Finish Group proposal that the best way to meet the identified needs and address what was an increasing problem, was to facilitate a stronger working relationship with and provide an increased level of financial support to specialist local charities, particularly given the expertise which existed in the community, which could assist in this complex area of work.

2. Resource Implications

- 2.1 There are no direct resource implications arising from the recommendations in this report.

3. Options

- 3.1 The Executive can decide to note the Committee reference and/or to agree all, some or none of the proposed measures

Annexes	None
Background Papers	Performance and Finance Scrutiny Committee minutes for the Meeting held on 12 July 2017 and 6 December 2017; and Task and Finish Group report to Performance and Finance Scrutiny Committee

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