

## Review of the Impact of Benefits Reforms on Surrey Heath Borough Council and Borough Residents - Reference to the Executive

### Summary

At its meeting on 12 July 2017, the Performance and Finance Scrutiny Committee considered a report from a Task and Finish Group looking at the impact of welfare/benefits reforms on the Council and Borough residents together with suggested recommendations to Executive. This report provides further information and context on the original recommendations to enable Members to consider them further prior to submission to the Executive.

### Chairman of Performance and Finance Scrutiny Committee

Date Signed Off: 9 October 2017

#### Wards Affected

All

### Recommendation

It is **RECOMMENDED** to Executive that:

- i. The Council is urged to work more closely with the DWP and the third sector to ensure that there is an adequate provision of computer and internet facilities across the borough to support the wider introduction of Universal Credit*
- ii. Notes and supports that work done by the Surrey Credit Union in supporting residents of the borough*
- iii. Notes and supports the closer working relationship between Camberley Job Centre and Surrey Heath and the joint working initiatives*
- iv. The DWP be urged to work more closely with Councils to mitigate the impact of the benefit reforms.*

## 1. Key Issues

- 1.1 The Scrutiny committee appointed a Task and Finish Group to look at the impact of welfare and benefits reforms on the borough's residents. This reported back its findings to this committee on the 12<sup>th</sup> July 2017 and made a number of recommendations based on the information available at that time.
- 1.2 Whilst the Council is keen to support residents where it can it needs to be remembered that it does not have a statutory responsibility in respect of benefit reform – this rests with the Government – however officers are working closely with the DWP to try and make the transition as easy as possible for claimants. The Executive is only able to

consider recommendations for which it has a responsibility and the resources to do so.

- 1.3 The recommendations as originally made by the task and finish group are reproduced below in turn followed by accompanying background information and then a revised recommendation to Executive.

#### **Original Recommendation (i)**

- 1.4 **Increase the number of locations in the Borough where it would be possible for claimants to complete a claim form and get basic advice, and fulfil their obligations regarding making job applications, through:**
  - a. **An appeal for “spare” PCs be made to local organisations.**
  - b. **An appeal for volunteers who are prepared to assist, are able to drive a PC and are willing to undergo basic training re completing Benefit claim forms.**
  - c. **An appeal be made for venues that could host advisory sessions throughout the Borough on a free of charge basis, e.g. Pubs in the morning, community centres, churches etc.**
  - d. **Facilitation of the production of YouTube based training modules designed to help applicants understand and complete benefit application forms. (Could possibly be sold to other Authorities.)**
  - e. **A relatively small budget would be required to fund the promotion of the schemes and training and the production of the “How to Complete the XXX benefit claim form or complete a CV” etc.**

#### **Additional Information**

- 1.5 The Government has mandated that Universal Credit must be applied for and managed for on line by claimants – however there is not expected to be a significant transfer to self-service until at least August 2018. It is the responsibility of DWP to ensure that claimants are supported through this process to enable them to self serve. The Council already provides a PC in the contact centre for claimants. Camberley Job Centre Plus (JCP) also have 5 Web Access Devices (WADS) for claimants to use to access their UC claims, personal emails and job opportunities. Further facilities are available at public libraries across the borough and the job centre.
- 1.6 SHBC facilities are working with Camberley JCP to look to co-locate the WADS and public access PC’s to improve access and the ability to provide support to claimants who may require digital support.

- 1.7 Whilst local organisations may be willing to assist claimants it is difficult for the Council to lead this initiative given it has no responsibility for Universal Credit. There are also issues around coordination of volunteers, training, and maintenance of equipment, data protection and access to the internet that would all need to be practically managed and resourced. The Council already provides a community grant to the Camberley Job club which provides support to residents seeking employment and the job centre amongst others provides equipment and advice for making on line job applications.
- 1.8 The Government has already provided videos on You Tube to assist claimants in making benefit applications and these are provided free on the internet.

#### **Revised recommendation (i)**

- 1.9 ***The Executive urges the Council to work more closely with the DWP and the third sector to ensure that there is an adequate provision of computer and internet facilities across the borough to support the wider introduction of Universal Credit.***

#### **Original Recommendation (ii)**

- 1.10 **Increase the number of locally based qualified advisors:**
- a. **CAB believes that to meet current demand, that would require a full time Welfare Benefits Specialist (FCA qualified) and part time paid Debt caseworker, supported by the many volunteer advisors at the centre. Total cost circa £38,000pa – CAB have indicated that they could part fund this.**
  - b. **Frontline do not currently receive any assistance from SHBC – they are financed by donations from local Churches. They could also cope with more cases if they had extra funds. A grant of £4k` was recommended**
  - c. **Facilitate extra training for existing SHBC staff. Cost to be clarified.**

#### **Additional Information**

- 1.11 The Council has no statutory responsibility in respect of advising residents on their benefits or debt management and so it would be for the Executive to decide whether this was a priority in the light of other spending pressures on the Council.
- 1.12 The Council has received a grant from the DWP for training staff to give advice to claimants in Personal Budgeting Support (PBS), which is a key part of the transfer to Universal Credit, for claimants who need help

to cope with personal budgeting once their UC is paid on a monthly basis.

- 1.13 PBS training is to be provided to Revenues and Benefits staff by David Reed, from Frontline Debt Advice.
- 1.14 The Council already provides £80,000 grant funding to the CAB in addition to free accommodation and parking. Frontline does not receive any grant. Both the CAB and Frontline should be encouraged by the Task and Finish Group to come forward with more detailed applications for funding as part of the next grant funding round.

**Revised recommendation (ii)**

- 1.15 ***No recommendation required at this time***

**Original Recommendation (iii)**

- 1.16 **Establish a much stronger working relationship with Surrey Credit Union (now called Boom as the Surrey Credit Union merged with the West Sussex Credit Union) and other similar, which are able to offer a much more cost effective short term loan service than commercial operators such as pay day schemes.**

Additional Information

The Council' benefits team is already successfully working with "Boom" and the CAB to give residents and claimants access to cheaper loans.

**Revised recommendation (iii)**

- 1.17 ***The Executive notes and supports that work done by the Surrey Credit Union in supporting residents of the borough.***

**Original Recommendation (iv)**

- 1.18 **Lobby National, Universal Credit and SCC representatives to ensure that they understand the impact of the new changes and hear this Council's suggestions as to how matters could be improved; and**

Additional Information

The Council has met with the DWP around the implementation of Universal Credit and has fed back concerns around its implementation and consequences. That said this is a Government Policy over which Surrey Heath has no influence or direct responsibility.

**Revised recommendation (iv)**

- 1.19 ***The Executive urges the DWP work more closely with Councils to mitigate the impact of the benefit reforms.***

## **Original Recommendation (v)**

- 1.20 **Include, in the Local Plan, a planned increase in the number of one bedroom social housing units.**

### Additional Information

The number of social housing units does not fall under the remit of the Executive and is something that will be considered by the Local Plan working Group and Full Council in due course

## **Revised recommendation (iv)**

- 1.21 ***No recommendation required***

## **2. Resource Implications**

- 2.1 The original Performance and Finance Committee proposals as originally costs would require funding of at least £42,000 which has not been included within the budget. This would have to be found from savings in other areas.

## **3. Proposals**

**It is PROPOSED THAT Executive be RECOMMENDED that:**

- i. The DWP is urged to work more closely with Councils and the third sector to ensure that there is an adequate provision of computer and internet facilities across the borough to support the wider introduction of Universal Credit ;***
- ii. Notes and supports that work done by the Surrey Credit Union in supporting residents of the borough.***
- iii. The DWP be urged to work more closely with Councils to mitigate the impact of the benefit reforms***

## **4. Options**

- 4.1 The Committee can decide to accept, amend or reject any of the proposed recommendations

<b>Annexes</b>	<b>None</b>
<b>Background Papers</b>	<b>None</b>
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