

- Present:** Councillor Bob Bushell (*in the Chair*)
- Councillors:** Alan Briggs, Kathleen Brothwell, Gary Hewson, Helena Mair, Lucinda Preston, Hilton Spratt and Naomi Twedde
- Also in Attendance:** None.
- Apologies for Absence:** Councillor Sue Burke, Councillor Chris Burke, Councillor Gill Clayton-Hewson and Councillor Christopher Reid

1. **Confirmation of Minutes - 3 April 2018**

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 3 April 2018 be confirmed.

2. **Declarations of Interest**

No declarations of interest were received.

3. **Terms of Reference**

The Terms of Reference for the Community Leadership Scrutiny Committee were noted.

Councillor Bob Bushell, Chair of the Community Leadership Scrutiny Committee, took this opportunity to welcome Councillors Alan Briggs and Hilton Spratt to their first meeting of the Committee since their election to the Council in May 2018.

4. **Feedback from Executive**

Councillor Bob Bushell, as Chair of the Community Leadership Scrutiny Committee, had presented the Committee's findings and recommendations to the Executive at its meeting on 29 May 2018 following the scrutiny review into Inclusive Growth.

The Executive supported the outcomes and recommendations of the review and commended the work undertaken by the Community Leadership Scrutiny Committee on the issue of Inclusive Growth.

5. **An Introduction from the Chair**

Councillor Bob Bushell, Chair of the Community Leadership Scrutiny Committee, set out the local community impact of welfare reform as a proposed topic for consideration as a scrutiny review. This was something that had been highlighted as part of the previous review into Inclusive Growth in terms of how welfare reform impacted the community and whether there was anything the Council could do to mitigate that impact.

This meeting would consider whether the topic of welfare reform and the impact on the local community should be investigated further as part of a formal scrutiny review by the Community Leadership Scrutiny Committee.

6. Local Community Impact of Welfare Reform - Overview

James Wilkinson, Strategic Development Project Manager, provided the Community Leadership Scrutiny Committee with some background information regarding key changes to welfare provision, including the benefit cap, the spare room subsidy and the roll out of Universal Credit, together with possible areas for the Committee to consider reviewing further as part of its scrutiny review.

With the introduction of Universal Credit to Lincoln in March 2018, the wider impact of welfare reform and the high demand for affordable housing in the city, it was accepted that the topic of welfare reform was broad ranging. Two particular strands, however, had emerged which provided opportunities for review:

Universal Credit

Areas for review could include:

- background to Universal Credit;
- the role of key support teams and agencies in responding to Universal Credit;
- how Universal Credit had impacted these key teams and agencies, as well as any broader welfare reform;
- the impact of Universal Credit and welfare reform on communities;
- how teams and agencies worked together to meet demand, fill gaps and avoid duplication.

Housing

- background on housing and its affordability, including its link to Universal Credit and welfare reform;
- demand for affordable housing in the city;
- the Council's role as landlord and as an enabler of affordable housing;
- how affordable housing was encouraged in the city and what impact this was having;
- the role of planning policies in delivering affordable housing.

Background information relating to Universal Credit and general indicators of financial affordability were also included in the report.

Daren Turner, Assistant Director, Strategic Development, outlined that other organisations helping to deliver key aspects of welfare reform were critical partners to the Council, such as the Department for Work and Pensions and the Citizen's Advice. It was agreed that representatives of these organisations should be invited to future meetings of the Committee in order that their contributions could be taken into account as part of the scrutiny review.

The Council's Welfare Advice Team was also an important part of delivering welfare reform, particularly Universal Credit. The impact of welfare reform and Universal Credit on that team's work on a day to day basis would also be of interest to the Committee. In addition it was agreed that representatives of that team should be brought before the Committee in due course in order that members could better understand their experiences.

The Committee was supportive of the proposed approach to a scrutiny review on welfare reform and the impact on the community, particularly in relation to the two strands and key witnesses that had already been identified.

7. Intelligence from Key Witnesses

It was noted that Graham Metcalfe, Partnership Manager for the Department for Work and Pensions at the Lincoln Jobcentre, and Laurence Waylett, Quality and Service Manager of Citizens' Advice, had been unable to attend this meeting but would be invited to attend a future meeting of the Community Leadership Scrutiny Committee.

Martin Walmsley, Head of Shared Revenues and Benefits, provided the Committee with a presentation which included information on the following aspects of welfare reform:

- summary of key welfare reforms, including:
 - the introduction of the Welfare Reform Act 2012;
 - Government targets implemented to reduce the benefits bill;
 - the introduction of a benefit cap for working age people;
 - removal of the Spare Room Subsidy;
 - the introduction of Localised Council Tax Support Schemes;
 - the introduction of a benefits 'freeze'.
- key statistics for Lincoln in relation to:
 - the benefit cap;
 - the Spare Room Subsidy;
 - Council Tax Support caseload;
 - Discretionary Housing Payments expenditure.
- a timeframe for Lincoln in respect of the introduction and implementation of Universal Credit;
- local statistical information between April 2018 and June 2018 for Universal Credit, including:
 - average time spent with customers;
 - average age of customers;
 - number of cases requiring Assisted Digital Support;
 - number of cases requiring Personal Budgeting Support;
 - number of cases requiring both Assisted Digital Support and Personal Budgeting Support;
 - total number of cases;
 - number of cases whereby the person was a Council tenant;
 - a breakdown of arrears in respect of the number of cases and respective amounts;
- Universal Credit sanctions in Lincoln;
- Initial comments from the Local Department for Work and Pensions office in respect of arrears and Universal Credit;
- a link to the National Audit Office report on Universal Credit dated 15 June 2018 acknowledging that local authorities were not being supported enough in respect of funding for necessary support, with little evidence demonstrated of value for money or boosting employment as a consequence.

Members were taken through a case study from the Council's Universal Support Team, reflecting a real anonymised case, which highlighted the amount of time the team had spent with the customer through the entirety of their case. This also identified the complexity of the advice that officers were required to provide to customers, together with the amount of time spent with a single customer, the number of times they made contact with the team to resolve their case and the number of different issues that the team resolved for the customer in a holistic manner.

The following questions were asked by members and responses provided throughout the presentation:

Question

Were Discretionary Housing Payments likely to continue given that they were intended to be transitional and would the payments continue to be administered by local authorities?

Response

The future of Discretionary Housing Payments and who would administer them was unclear at this stage, with further clarity around this issue awaited from Government.

Question

When would the current allocation run out for Discretionary Housing Payments?

Response

The current funding allocation was over a five year period, with the final allocation being in March 2021. However, a Discretionary Housing Payments scheme had been in place since 2001.

Question

The Universal Credit Support Team was very good. Was this shared between the City of Lincoln Council and North Kesteven District Council and did the support provided to customers depend on which boundary they lived within? How was the team paid for?

Response

The team was shared between the City of Lincoln Council and North Kesteven District Council as part of the Shared Revenues and Benefits Service, with the money for the team placed within the Shared Service's budget. The team would support any customers that contacted it, with 30% of postcodes in West Lindsey District Council and a proportion of postcodes from East Lindsey District Council regularly using the service. Additional funding would be allocated to the Shared Service on a case by case basis for any case the team dealt with from a postcode outside of the City of Lincoln or North Kesteven local authority boundary.

Comment

People did not always apply for Universal Credit straightaway and expected payments to be backdated, which did not always happen. This had been experienced numerous times through the Council's Housing Appeals Panel. Approximately 600 cases would shortly transfer from 'live' Universal Credit to 'full' Universal Credit and it would be interesting to see how many actually transferred within the timeframe.

Response

357 of the people concerned had been contacted directly by the Shared Service, which had resulted in interviews being scheduled for 65 people so far. These statistics were based on the previous week, with updated figures being available in due course. There was a four week period for this transition to take place within and the Shared Service had been proactive in contacting people through a City of Lincoln social media post to highlight this. A reminder would be sent out after 14 days with their Universal Credit potentially being cancelled within 32 days if they did not respond, meaning that they would be required to reapply and go through the process from the beginning. Universal Credit did mean that information was collated in 'real time' with changes in circumstances being reassessed more quickly and people able to update their information using their own computers, tablets or phones rather than physically visiting the office or making a telephone call.

Question

Why were letters being sent out to people? Universal Credit was promoting online transactions and online activity so why was this not sent out via email?

Response

It was the Department for Work and Pensions that sent the initial letter out as it was their benefit which they administered. The Shared Service's proactive work was in addition to that letter to ensure that people knew what was happening with their particular cases. The Shared Service was doing everything it could in order to help people.

Question

The Universal Credit Support Team currently consisted of a Team Leader, two officers and an apprentice. Was this sufficient?

Response

The establishment of a small team was a deliberate decision, with people having been seconded into the team from existing teams within the Shared Service. This provided the team and management with flexibility, maintaining a balance within existing resources, which worked very well. The team would grow in due course and an additional team member already supported the team as required.

Comment

Taking into account the case study that was shared as part of the presentation, issues needed to be identified and addressed early. There were numerous examples through the Council's Housing Appeals Panel where early interventions would have made a huge difference to a person's circumstances.

Response

There was a good level of understanding with all stakeholders in respect of Universal Credit and welfare reform, but people did rely on agencies and organisations referring people into the system.

Comment

The case study highlighted how many steps and stages a person had to go through in order to reach a resolution. This must be quite a dizzying and intimidating experience.

Response

It was reassuring that the person was able to contact the team on more than one occasion, ensuring that they were taken through the process, provided with necessary advice and support and that a resolution was reached.

Comment

Were private landlords as understanding of the situation as the Council was through its Housing Appeals Panel process, particularly with regard to delays in people receiving their Universal Credit?

Response

A private sector landlord forum was held earlier in the year but, essentially, it would be up to the individual landlord as to how they managed their tenants cases.

Question

Was the statement that people received for their Universal Credit clear in respect of what they were receiving it for and how it was broken down?

Response

The statement was as clear as it could be, but there was a lot of statutory information that had to be included. This was also the case for housing benefit notifications.

Comment

Food banks had been very proactive in their support for people. A representative of Lincoln's foodbanks or the community larder should be invited to meet with the Committee.

Question

Private landlords were still required to issue statutory notices in respect of evictions. Were people contacting Citizens' Advice upon eviction to ensure that due process had been followed?

Response

Tenancy laws applied to private landlords and people did report issues to Citizens' Advice which was the correct organisation to contact in such circumstances.

Question

Would a case be referred to the Council's private landlord team if an unlawful eviction had occurred?

Response

Yes such cases would be referred to and investigated by the private landlord team. There had been a change in the city over the last few years in that a significant amount of student accommodation had been built. This impacted the private sector rental market in the city with students no longer requiring as many privately rented houses due to the availability of purpose built student accommodation.

Question

Were there any statistics available regarding single working parents.

Response

Although no statistics were available for this meeting, this issue had been tested locally and some single working parents would be worse off under Universal Credit.

Comment

The Government's thinking behind Universal Credit was to encourage people to get back into work. People were not being encouraged but, in some instances, forced to get back into work.

Question

What could the Council and its partners do to ensure that people got onto Universal Credit as soon as possible?

Response

Over 90% of employers now provided information directly to the Department for Work and Pensions, which helped significantly. Partnership working was essential, with strong links already in place between the Shared Service and the Department for Work and Pensions and Citizens' Advice. The dedicated Universal Credit Support Team was also a vital resource for the Shared Service.

Comment

The case study was very interesting and it would be useful for the Committee to receive other anonymised case studies to better understand the type of cases the Universal Credit Support Team was considering and the advice and support that were providing.

Response

This could be done for Universal Credit cases but the information would not be available for facilitating case studies in respect of Personal Independence Payments. It may be that Citizens' Advice could provide some anonymised case studies as to how rewards were made or not made in respect of Personal Independence Payments.

Comment

The Personal Independence Payments process was very stressful for some people, especially in relation to those people who were in poor health. Some health professionals had highlighted that people were struggling through the system. It may therefore be worthwhile for the Committee to meet with health professionals as part of the scrutiny review.

Comment

A person in private rented accommodation on Universal Credit whose housing element of the benefit did not cover the remainder of their rent may be in a position where they had to make a choice between paying the rest of their rent and feeding their family.

Question

In terms of the purpose built student accommodation effectively bringing the private rental housing market down, was there any information available in relation to supply and demand to substantiate this?

Response

Unfortunately the Shared Service would not hold this information in terms of the shortfall of housing supply as a result of increased levels of purpose built student accommodation.

In closing, it was noted that the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service had been shortlisted as finalists for the Institute of Revenues Rating and Valuation Awards 2018 in the following categories:

- Benefits and Welfare Reform Team of the Year;
- Most Improved Team of the Year;
- Excellence in Partnership Working.

RESOLVED that the Community Leadership Scrutiny Committee undertakes a formal scrutiny review into the local community impact of welfare reform.

8. Next Steps

It was agreed that the Chair and Vice-Chair would work with officers to arrange a programme of meetings to accommodate internal and external key witnesses as part of the scrutiny review into the local community impact of welfare reform.

9. Work Programme 2018/19

RESOLVED that the work programme be approved, subject to the inclusion of the following items for consideration at future meetings of the Community Leadership Scrutiny Committee:

- city centre environment;
- social mobility;
- education standards.