

- Present:** Councillor Bob Bushell (*in the Chair*)
- Councillors:** Alan Briggs, Chris Burke, Sue Burke, Gill Clayton-Hewson, Helena Mair, Lucinda Preston and Hilton Spratt
- Also in Attendance:** Helen Oliver (Citizens Advice Bureau)
- Apologies for Absence:** Councillor Naomi Tweddle, Councillor Kathleen Brothwell, Councillor Christopher Reid, Angela Andrews, Turner and Martin Walmsley

10. Confirmation of Minutes - 3 July 2018

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

11. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were received.

12. Terms of Reference

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

13. Impact of Welfare Reform Overview - Jay Wilkinson

Jay Wilkinson, Strategic Development Project Manager:

a) presented a brief overview of the local impact of welfare reform which covered the following topics:

- Commonly cited challenges of Universal Credit.
- The scale of Universal Credit in Lincoln.
- Findings from the National Audit Centre.
- Impact of Universal Credit on council tenants.
- Feedback from the DWP (Department of Works and Pensions) on Universal Credit payments.
- Evidence from the Council's Universal Credit Support Team, Welfare Advice Team and Revenues and Benefits Team.

b) invited members questions and comments

Members raised the following questions:

Question: Was the rise in Housing Benefits claims only a temporary measure?

Response: The City of Lincoln Council were working with the DWP to try and quicken up the process.

Question: If other benefits were being claimed, would the individual still receive them until their application for Universal Credit has been processed?

Response: No they wouldn't.

Question: When the old system was in place, was dealing with people who were unable to read and write common then?

Response: Not necessarily. More applications had been received this time which increased demand. The new application form had to be filled in online and the information required was more complex.

Question: Were people worse off financially since Universal credit had been introduced? Had people been waiting longer for their benefits on the new system?

Response: Yes, there was a longer waiting period and in that time arrears built up so it was hard to identify which proportion were down to Universal Credit.

Question: Could there be a change in policy to improve the situation with Universal Credit?

Response: It was a national issue so it would be difficult for the City of Lincoln Council to change anything at present. Collaboration with Revenues and Benefits and the Housing team could be improved.

Question: How did Universal Credit help people get back into work?

Response: It supported people working different types of hours.

Question: How would people manage their finances from one month to the next?

Response: Officers were working with the Credit Union to manage payments, support individuals with budgeting issues.

Question: Who made the decision on whether somebody was vulnerable or not?

Response: Direct debits were encouraged through managed payments in partnership with DWP and the Housing Officer. A trusted partner could find alternatives around payment because of vulnerability.

Question: How many people in Lincoln would eventually be put on Universal Credit?

Response: It was calculated that 10% were currently on workless benefits.

Question: As a council tenant, could you transfer your claim over to Universal Credit or would a new application need to be applied for?

Response: Anything such as a name change or change of address would require a new application to be made.

Question: Where were the additional funds coming from to help with capacity? Who was paying for it?

Response: A small amount of funding was supplied by the DWP and the City of Lincoln Council were subsidising the rest as there wasn't enough money to cover the cost.

Question: How much in additional costs would it be to roll out Universal Credit?

Response: Angela Andrews had commissioned a piece of work as part of the Vision Group to look into the costs.

Question: Members referred to errors within the process of Universal Credit and asked if the additional housing costs be explained?

Response: Due to the complexity of it being down to the individual to fill out the application form, support, advice and guidance was key to ensure that it was completed correctly. This resulted in a total of 42 minutes that was being spent with each individual to fill out an application form.

Question: How could the information be made clearer to individuals?

Response: A quarter of applicants were council tenants. Officers were looking into the matter, however there would need to be further engagement with tenants to look at what could be improved.

RESOLVED that the content of the report be noted.

14. Intelligence from Key Witnesses

Helen Oliver, Chief Officer at the DWP (Department of Works and Pensions):

- a) provided members with a brief introduction of herself and her role within the DWP
- b) explained that as an organisation they dealt with a number of different issues which included the following:
 - Welfare and Debt.
 - Eligibility and entitlement – 30% of customers they dealt with had mental health issues.
 - Volunteers and frontline staff struggled supporting people making advanced payments due to them being vulnerable.
 - Rent Arrears and advanced payments – a lot of tenants were in rent arrears before their application for Universal Credit was made which resulted in them spiralling into more debt.
 - Tenants weren't always paid at the time they should have been and were placed in the wrong group, this resulted in repeat arrears and potential sanctions being issued.
 - The more complex issues and challenges that the DWP were faced with included language barriers, mental health and homelessness. These issues were difficult to resource due to a reduction in staff and services.
- c) Invited members questions and comments.

Members asked the following questions:

Question: Vulnerability and management of payments seemed to have progressively got worse since Universal Credit was introduced, why was this?

Response: Groups were struggling to present themselves which led to issues being surfaced. Due to resources diminishing there were less support workers available so individuals were expected to manage themselves.

Question: What did people who were vulnerable or had mental health issues do if they were sanctioned?

Response: There were the options of crisis payments, food banks and vouchers. The Citizens Advice Bureau tried to help as much as possible with providing support and appeal decisions if deemed unfair.

Question: What was the process with regards to using the Foodbanks?

Response: An individual would obtain a voucher and have an assessment. They would engage in an advice process to establish why they were applying for a food voucher and to ensure they did not keep coming back for them. A referral was then made to the Foodbank.

Question: What had been the impact from PIP (Personal Independence Payments) being cut?

Response: The demand remained the same. The grant for Lincolnshire County Council for income maximisation funding was cut which meant that home visits were no longer provided and tribunals and appeals weren't escalated to the same level as before.

Question: With regards to the people that used the Foodbanks, were they in genuine poverty? Were the payments being assessed?

Response: Officers went through the individual's income and expenditure and advised them to cut back on things where necessary to save costs. The majority of people that required support from the CAB were in absolute poverty.

Question: How much funding had the CAB lost?

Response: The CAB had lost £40,000 in funding and £300,000 had been cut across the County.

Question: Were people who visited the CAB all Lincoln residents?

Response: The CAB had an Open Door Policy so would accept any individual in any situation.

RESOLVED that the verbal report be noted.

15. Work Programme 2018/19

Jess Cullen, Democratic Services Officer:

- a. presented the draft work programme for 2018/19 as detailed at Appendix A of her report
- b. advised that the work programme for the Community Leadership Committee was put forward annually for approval by Council; the work programme was then regularly updated throughout the year in consultation with the Community Leadership Committee and its Chair

- c. reported that items had been scheduled in accordance with the existing work programme and officers' guidance regarding the meetings at which the most up-to-date information could be reported to the committee; the work programme also included the list of portfolio holders under scrutiny
- d. requested any relevant comments or changes to the proposed work programme for 2018/19.

RESOLVED that the work programme 2018/19 as detailed at Appendix A to the report be noted, subject to the following additional topic:

- City Centre Environment