



Welfare Reform Sub-Committee

Minutes of a meeting held on Tuesday 26 February 2013 at 2.00pm, CHG2, East Northamptonshire House, Thrapston

Present:

Councillors: Andy Mercer (Chairman)
 Glenvil Greenwood-Smith
 Richard Lewis
 Steven North
 Jeremy Taylor

Officers: Lisa Hyde (LJH)
 Kelly Watson (KW)
 Lucy Hogston (LH)
 David Pope (DP)

1.0 MINUTES

1.1 The minutes of the meeting held on 11 December 2012 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

2.0 APOLOGIES

2.1 Councillor John Farrar gave his apologies.

3.0 DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST

3.1 There were no disclosures of interest.

4.0 COUNCIL TAX – CHANGES TO EMPTY PROPERTY DISCOUNTS AND EXEMPTIONS

4.1 Members considered an information report which sought to inform them of the full range of Council Tax discounts and exemptions, as requested at the last meeting of the sub-committee in December 2012.

4.2 The report outlined the current position relating to Council Tax discounts and exemptions, as well as highlighting changes that would come into force from 1 April 2013.

4.3 Members were advised that exemption Classes A and C would cease to exist from 1 April 2013. However, it was noted that legislation surrounding exemption Class L had yet to come into force and this was not anticipated to happen until after 1 April 2013, and so would not be effective for the new financial year.

5.0 DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENTS POLICY AND PROCEDURE

- 5.1 Members received a report from the Benefits manager which sought to update them on the 2013/14 Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) allocation from the Department of Work and Pensions, alongside changes to the DHP Policy and Procedure due to be reported to the Policy and Resources Committee on 11 March 2013.
- 5.2 Members were advised that for 2013/14, ENC would receive an increased allocation of DHP funding from the DWP, from £30,317 in 2011/12 to £85,490. This increase was designed to mitigate the impact on the authority from a greater number of new and existing claimants facing shortfalls in their rent as a result of welfare reforms. Additionally, local authorities could spend more than the DWP grant, to an upper limit of 2.5 times the DWP grant, however this additional expenditure would be need to be financed from an authority's general fund.
- 5.3 Members heard that Council Tax Benefit would be abolished in April 2013 and that as the replacement Council Tax Support system was not a DWP benefit, council tax assistance would no longer be available from the DHP fund. Assistance could be requested for housing or associated costs such as removal fees in the event of down-sizing. With regard to under-occupancy, DHP would predominantly be used to assist claimants with disabled adapted properties, where it would be unreasonable to expect the occupants to move.
- 5.4 The DHP policy, last approved in April 2011, had been reviewed and amended accordingly to remove any reference to Council Tax Benefit and to make clear reference to other changes such as the benefit cap and LHA rates annual uplift.
- 5.5 Members noted that DHP resources would come under greater pressure with the introduction of Universal Credit. LJH advised the sub-committee that if ENC awarded more than £50k of the £85k grant in the financial year, a further paper would be taken to the Policy and Resources Committee to determine how to progress from that point. Monitoring of award totals would also be undertaken by officers.
- 5.6 Members questioned the circumstances that would lead ENC to make an award of DHP to a claimant. LH advised that an income and expenditure form would require completion and certain financial provisos would be requested of applicants before payments would be approved. Members were advised that DHP should be viewed as a source of last resort for applicants and would be a finite payment, with the exception of claimants living in disabled adapted properties affected by under-occupancy regulations.

6.0 COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT

- 6.1 Members received a verbal update from LJH regarding the current position of Council Tax support.
- 6.2 It was noted that since Council approved the Council Tax Support Scheme on 7 January 2013, a letter had been written to every resident in the district affected by the changes. These letters were being dispatched in batches of 300, with over 3,000 to be sent in total. As of the date of the meeting, 1,500 letters had been sent so far.
- 6.3 There had been a small response to the letters issued so far, with two emails, ten face-to-face appointments and twenty-five telephone calls received from members of

the public. When members of the public had contacted ENC, the emphasis by Customer Service was to encourage Direct Debit take up, and to signpost to assistance provided by money management and debt advice organisations in the district. A peak in contact received from the public was anticipated shortly after billing from March 2013 and through April, with an additional peak expected once reminder letters were issued.

7.0 QUESTIONS BY MEMBERS UNDER COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE 10.3

7.1 No questions had been received from members.