

Welfare Reform Sub-Committee

Minutes of a meeting held on Thursday 8 August 2013 at 2.00pm, The Kasen Room, East Northamptonshire House, Thrapston

Present:

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

Officers: Lisa Hyde – Head of Customer and Community Services
 Richard Hadden – Revenue Manager
 Lucy Hogston – Benefit Manager
 Kelly Watson – Finance Manager

1.0 APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED:

That Councillor Andy Mercer be appointed Chairman of the Sub-Committee for the year 2013-14.

2.0 APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED:

That Councillor Glenvil Greenwood-Smith be appointed Vice-Chairman of the Sub-Committee for the year 2013-14.

3.0 MINUTES

3.1 The minutes of the meeting held on 26 February 2013 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

4.0 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

4.1 No apologies for absence were submitted.

5.0 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

5.1 The following declaration of interest was made:

Councillor	Item	Nature of Interest	DPI	Other Interest
Andy Mercer	Council Tax Support – First Quarter Performance	Director of Company providing software for recovery of Council Tax, but not to ENC		Yes

6.0 QUESTIONS BY MEMBERS UNDER COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE 10.3

6.1 No questions had been received.

7.0 IMPACT OF WELFARE REFORM CHANGES

7.1 The Benefits Manager presented a report outlining the changes contained within the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and the impact on residents of the East Northamptonshire District. This covered the Benefit Cap, Local Welfare Provision, Emergency Help and Support, Sustaining Independent Living, Housing Benefit, Discretionary Housing Payments and Personal Independent Payments.

7.2 Two families had been subject to benefit caps and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) had liaised with these families, but it was not known whether any verbal contact had been made or whether all communication had been written. ENC officers were requested to ask the DWP to supply copies of correspondence in future, both as a matter of courtesy and to enable ENC to properly defend any legal action taken against it.

7.3 The Housing Forum Group had met on 24 July 2013 and two social landlords in the District had attended. The impact of the welfare reforms on their tenants had been relatively small during the first quarter of 2013/14, although it was anticipated that the impact would be better measured in the second quarter.

7.4 The Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) allocation to ENC for 2013/14 was £85,490, of which £35,800 had been spent for the year. It had previously been agreed that a report would be submitted to the Policy and Resources Committee as this expenditure approached £50,000. Approximately eight new applications for DHP were being received each week, although applications by those with a stronger case had tended to be received earlier in the year and it was not expected that the allocation would all be spent by the year end.

7.5 The workload created by the number of applications being received had caused some difficulties within the Benefits team and the staffing position and measures taken to manage the workload were outlined to Members. The Sub-Committee requested that data on the number of applications being received be included in future reports to the Sub-Committee.

7.6 In response to an enquiry from Members, the Benefits Manger confirmed that discretionary payments were being paid to married couples who could not share a bedroom due to disability issues.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

8.0 COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT – FIRST QUARTER PERFORMANCE

- 8.1 The Revenues Manager presented a report on the effects of implementing the Council Tax Support (CTS) Scheme and Council Tax technical reforms on workloads, collection performance and associated matters, including customer feedback and financial implications.
- 8.2 The Chairman expressed concern at the number of cases which had led to a Summons being issued and suggested that a third reminder should be issued before a Summons. There were indications that a third reminder might be more effective if prepared in a style and with an attribution to give the appearance that it may not have been issued directly by the Local Authority.
- 8.3 Where a tenant moved to smaller accommodation as a result of the “under-occupancy” rules, an overlap of tenancies could result and the tenant could be liable for an additional Council Tax bill for an amount greater than the annual Council Tax bill for their main home as the tenant would be unable to claim Council Tax Benefit for an unoccupied property. This issue would be considered when determining the CTS Scheme for 2014/15.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

9.0 THANKS TO OFFICERS

- 9.1 Members recognised that officers had not fully known what the implications of the welfare reform changes would be when preparing the policies for their introduction. The adoption of appropriate policies had enabled ENC to achieve a smooth and well managed introduction of the reforms and Members thanked officers for their effective contingency planning. The Head of Customer and Community Services referred to the extensive consultations and publicity carried out by ENC prior to the introduction of the reforms which had enabled customer contact to be minimised after the reforms had been introduced.

10.0 NEXT MEETING OF THE SUB-COMMITTEE

- 10.1 Members requested that enhanced data be provided to the next meeting of the Sub-Committee for the second quarter performance for 2013/14 which would be required to enable the Schemes for 2014/15 to be determined.
- 10.2 The next meeting of the Sub-Committee would be held on 26 September 2013 commencing at 5.30pm.

Chairman