



Welfare Reform Sub-Committee

Minutes of a meeting held on Thursday 19 October 2017 at 10am, in the Council Chamber, East Northamptonshire House, Thrapston

Present:

- Councillors: Andy Mercer (Chairman)
 Steven North (Leader of the Council)
 Val Carter
 Helen Harrison
 Richard Lewis
 Sarah Peacock
- Officers: Lucy Hogston – Benefit Manager
 Julia Smith – Head of Customer and Community Services
 Michelle Drewery – Finance Manager
- Also Present: Bharat Keshwala (DWP)
 Barry McGuinness (DWP)
 Sonia Rea (DWP)

1.0 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

1.1 There were no apologies for absence.

2.0 MINUTES

2.1 The minutes of the meeting held on 29 June 2017 were approved as a correct record.

3.0 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

3.1

Councillor	Item	Nature of Interest	DPI	Other Interest
Richard Lewis	Council Tax Support Scheme 2018/19	Is of pensionable age.		Yes
Andy Mercer	Council Tax Support Scheme 2018/19	Is of pensionable age.		Yes

4.0 QUESTIONS UNDER PROCEDURE RULE 10.3

4.1 No questions had been submitted under Procedure Rule 10.3.

5.0 UNIVERSAL CREDIT UPDATE

5.1 The Chairman welcomed Bharat Keshwala, Barry McGuinness and Sonia Rea from the DWP to the meeting.

- 5.2 Mr Keshwala confirmed that Universal Credit would be rolled out to Rushden Job Centre in February 2018. Plans were currently being put in place to support customers including holding workshops for budgeting, upskilling clients in IT skills and verification of identification. The DWP had held a number of meetings with ENC, as well as with a number of landlords in the district to improve communications and interactions. Information packs were also being developed for customers and there would also be a dedicated service centre, where customers would be allocated to a fixed agent. Customers were also being given hints and tips now about what information and evidence they would need for February.
- 5.3 It was noted that last night there was a vote in the House of Commons on Universal Credit, which sought to pause its rollout. Mr Keshwala confirmed that at this time, the Government had no intentions to pause the rollout, however there was a built in natural break in January to review progress to date.
- 5.4 Ms Rea explained that new claimants had to wait six weeks before they received their first payment but those customers who had transferred over to Universal Credit had a five week wait. This was because new claimants had seven working days when they would not be entitled to the benefit. However, from day one of an application, claimants were able to request an advanced payment of 50% of their entitlement, which would be repayable over six months. The availability of the advance payment was fully highlighted and around 50% of claimants were asking for advanced payments.
- 5.5 As at July 2017, 81% of new claimants were receiving their full payment at first assessment, 9% were receiving part payment and 10% were receiving no payment. This was due to a number of factors including DWP error, missing evidence and agreements not being signed.
- 5.6 In response to questions from Members, it was confirmed that direct payment to landlords was already available if a customer was two months in rent arrears, when either they or their landlord could request direct payment. However, it was now being considered whether this could be a universal offer to all claimants. Ms Rea agreed to provide an answer outside of the meeting as to whether a tenant who had two months rent arrears with one landlord and then moved to another, would be classed as having two months arrears or whether the time period started again.
- 5.7 Members asked what was able to be done for those customers who did not have photo identification such as a passport or driving licence. It was confirmed that the DWP would look at secondary identification such as bills and bank statements, but their advice was to bring any identification.
- 5.8 Members were pleased to note the Government's announcement yesterday that all Universal Credit telephone helplines would be free of charge and this would happen over the next month.
- 5.9 It was highlighted that Northamptonshire County Council had begun a consultation on the future provision of libraries and Members enquired how customers would be supported if they used libraries as a means of accessing online services. Ms Rea advised that there were some PCs in the job centre and there were also a number of local providers who had PCs available. They were very conscious that a small number of people would not be able to cope with the new system but they would be supported.
- 5.10 The Chairman thanked the DWP for attending.
- 5.11 The Benefits Manager advised that she had raised with the other councils in the county whether they provided any type of grant funding to support customers during the initial six week period. Both Daventry and Corby confirmed that they did not have such a fund due to

the advances available from DWP and the other authorities were also not planning to introduce such a fund. It was confirmed that ENC would ring all Universal Credit customers to advise them of the support available and staff would also be available to support customers if they came in to use the PCs which were available in council buildings. Also, Council Tax payments were put on hold for six weeks so customers did not receive reminders or other enforcement during that period. Some landlords were also offering tenants the opportunity to pay a little bit more on top of their rent to build a cushion for them during transition.

- 5.12 It was suggested that officers provide a Members Briefing for all councillors on the issues and where to signpost any constituents who approached them with any problems.

RESOLVED

That the update be noted.

6.0 DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENTS

- 6.1 Further to the last meeting, where it was agreed officers would look at whether the discretionary housing payments policy needed to be revised to take into account those families with children in care, the Benefits Manager provided a verbal update.
- 6.2 The policy had been looked at and it was clear that those cases where children were in care were already covered in other elements of the policy. There had been no further cases since the last meeting.
- 6.3 It was proposed to wait until after the rollout of Universal Credit in Rushden and then look at what the impact was before reviewing the policy.

RESOLVED

That the update be noted.

7.0 COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME 2018/19

- 7.1 The Benefits Manager presented a report which asked the Sub-Committee to consider the options for a local Council Tax Support Scheme (CTS) for 2018/19.
- 7.2 The number of Council Tax Support claimants was reducing, with 4,643 to date in 2017/18, compared to 5,550 in 2013/14.
- 7.3 The overall grant funding used to calculate the CTS was:

	2012/13 £	2013/14 £	2014/15 £	2015/16 £	2016/17 £	2017/18 £	2018/19 £	2019/20 £
RSG	N/A*	3,164,518	2,438,130	1,709,463	1,201,968	705,377	413,931	88,394
Business Rates Baseline	N/A*	2,675,419	2,146,279	2,187,291	2,205,518	2,250,546	2,322,952	2,405,580
Total	4,831,611	5,839,937	4,584,409	3,896,754	3,407,486	2,955,923	2,736,883	2,493,974
Change £	N/A	1,008,326	(1,255,528)	(687,655)	(489,268)	(451,563)	(219,040)	(242,909)
Change %	N/A	21%	(21%)	(15%)	(13%)	(13%)	(8%)	(9%)

*Total figure is shown as grant funding was not split until 2013/14

- 7.4 It was noted that RSG would be removed in the medium term and we would need to be realistic in the future about how CTS would be funded.
- 7.5 As discussed earlier in the meeting, Universal Credit was being rolled out for Rushden Job Centre in February 2018, but the impacts at present were unknown but it was likely that the caseload would reduce with more people being supported into work.
- 7.6 Two options had now been put forward for Members' consideration:
- Option 1 – Maintain the current scheme, with working age people being required to pay at least 20% of their Council Tax liability. This would present an estimated overall funding gap in 2018/19 of around £146K, of which £12K related to ENC.
 - Option 2 – Increase the percentage reduction in the current CTS scheme so that it broke even. This would require working age people being required to pay at least 27% of their Council Tax liability.
- 7.7 If Members proposed to change the scheme then public consultation would be required and would cost around £3K.
- 7.8 Whilst the Sub-Committee supported the current minimum payment of 20%, some members believed that there needed to be a full review of the Scheme going forward.

RESOLVED TO RECOMMEND TO POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

That it be recommended to Full Council that the Council Tax Support Scheme 2018/19 for East Northamptonshire adopts the existing Council Tax Support Scheme with no amendments.

RESOLVED

To review the Scheme during 2018/19 to ensure that it is fit for purpose for 2019/20.

(Reason: To deliver a Council Tax Support Scheme for 2018/19 that meets all the statutory requirements.)

Chairman