



Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee
2 April 2014

**Report of the Welfare Reform Task Group:
The impacts of Welfare Reform in Surrey**

Purpose of the report: Policy Development and Review

This report contains the findings and final recommendations of the Welfare Reform Task Group, which was commissioned by the Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee (COSC) to investigate the impacts of welfare reform and key issues for Surrey County Council and its partners.

COSC is asked to endorse the recommendations of the Task Group, which seek to monitor and mitigate the impact of the reforms on Surrey residents, the County Council, and its partners.

Introduction:

1. The Welfare Reform Task Group was established in September 2013 to investigate and gather evidence from a range of stakeholders on the local impacts of welfare reform and key issues for Surrey County Council and its partners. The Task Group was chaired by David Harmer and its Members are Fiona White, Stephen Cooksey and Bob Gardener.
2. The Task Group circulated its scoping document to COSC on 10 October 2013. The objectives of the Task Group as detailed in the scope were to:
 - (i) Understand from partners:
 - a. what the impacts of welfare reform in Surrey have been so far;
 - b. what future impacts do they expect; and
 - c. what more would they like Surrey County Council to do, to help mitigate the impacts.
 - (ii) Understand from Surrey County Council services:
 - a. what the impacts of welfare reform in Surrey have been so far;
 - b. what future impacts do they expect;
 - c. what more would they like partners to do, to help mitigate the impacts; and
 - d. their response to partner suggestions for mitigation.
3. The Task Group began its work by receiving evidence from key partners, followed by relevant County Council services. A list of the witnesses the Task Group has met with is attached at **Annex 1**.
4. The Task Group has also requested and reviewed documentary evidence from witnesses, and considered relevant reports including: data overview of the impacts of welfare reform in Surrey compiled by Surrey's Policy and

Performance team, and the Universal Credit Local Support Services Update and Trialling Plan.

5. A verbal update on the Task Group's findings was informally presented to COSC by the Chairman of the Task Group on 4 December 2013.
6. An interim report was presented to COSC on 30 January 2014, to update and inform COSC of the work of the Task Group, highlight key issues emerging from witness sessions with Council services and partners, and identify areas requiring further investigation to inform final recommendations. The following interim recommendation was accepted by COSC at this meeting and submitted to the Cabinet: *Any Local Assistance Scheme funding left unallocated at the end of 2013/14 is rolled over into 2014/15 and continues to be committed to supporting severely affected residents to manage the impact of welfare reform changes. The Task Group will present proposals for allocating this funding in their final report in April 2014, but would recommend that a proportion of it is targeted towards early intervention support, particularly aimed at improving money management skills and general financial awareness.* COSC has been informed by the Leader of the Council that any decisions regarding the rolling over of unallocated funds will be made by the Cabinet at the end of this financial year.
7. The Task Group then proceeded to gather further evidence by re-visiting some witnesses and meeting with a number of new ones, including claimants affected by the reforms, to clarify their understanding of some of the key issues identified in the interim report.
8. By way of background, a reminder of the key changes under welfare reform is attached at **Annex 2**.

Groups of residents being or likely to be significantly affected by the reforms

9. The Policy and Performance report to COSC in September 2013 highlighted that the following three groups were likely to be significantly affected by the reforms. The testimony from witnesses continues to supports this.
 - 9.1 Some **low-income working families** have lost a significant proportion of their income from reductions in working and child tax credits, the removal of the Spare Room Subsidy and reductions in Council Tax Support among other changes. These families tend not to have regular/any contact with support services and are therefore a challenge to reach and support.
 - 9.2 Some **large families not in employment** will see similar reductions as above but are also at risk of losing a large proportion of their income under the benefits cap, and will face challenges to employment due to the high cost of childcare.
 - 9.3 Some **disabled people and those with mental health issues** are a vulnerable group who are having to understand and respond to a major shake-up of their support system. This includes the introduction of a work capability assessment as part of the Employment Support and Allowance (ESA) which results in the loss of all or some benefits if the ESA decision is reconsidered or appealed.
10. The Task Group have also heard from witnesses that **young single unemployed** people are being or likely to be significantly affected by changes to housing benefit, new stricter conditions of the Job Seekers Allowance (JSA), and finding a job with lack of work experience. **People in their 50s** may be

affected by the pension credit age for women being increased and 'bedroom tax' if children have moved out of home. They are also struggling to re-enter employment if they have been out of work for a significant period of time.

11. **Care leavers** and **carers** have been highlighted by Council services and partners as two groups adversely impacted by the reforms. The Task Group have been informed of the widespread lack of one-bedroom flats in Surrey for care leavers and concerns from partners about their ability to manage money as required under Universal Credit. The Task Group has also seen evidence of carers taking on significant responsibility for supporting those they care for to cope with the reforms. Unfortunately, the Task Group has not had the time to explore these issues in detail but feels it is important to carefully monitor the impacts on these two groups. The Task Group would therefore like further exploration of the impacts on care leavers and carers to form part of an update report to COSC in September 2014 (see recommendation 1 below).

Impact of the welfare reforms on Council services and partners, and action being taken to address the impact

Surrey County Council services

12. The Surrey County Council directorates and services of **Children Schools and Families (CSF), Adult Social Care (ASC) , Libraries and Public Health** are the council services most likely to be directly helping residents to deal with the effects of the reforms and be affected themselves. There is no current evidence of material and direct service or budgetary impact from the welfare reforms. However, any such impacts are expected to become more apparent over the next 12 months, as the initial major reforms have embedded. It is important to bear in mind that even then, the most significant change, Universal Credit, will not be implemented in Surrey until at least 2016.
13. Given the uncertainty about the form and extent of the impacts, the **collection of data** around all the key reforms remains vital to the County Council's efforts to help mitigate the impacts. The Task Group were pleased to note that an improvement in the Contact Centre's recording methods now enables officers to log calls as 'financial difficulty' for CSF. The Adults contact centre team can already log calls as 'Benefit Check/Advice'. From April 2014, there will also be a process in place enabling the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) and Early Help teams in the CSF Directorate to record where people's living circumstances change as a result of welfare reform. The Task Group feels that such monitoring practices are to be encouraged.
14. The **Surrey Welfare Reform Co-ordination Group (WRCG)** has been working to ensure a co-ordinated response to the reforms across the County. The group comprises officers from across the County, District and Borough councils, as well as representatives from Surrey Citizens Advice Bureaux, the Department of Work and Pensions and the voluntary sector amongst others. The WRCG has been collecting data on the impact of the changes on residents which is crucial to understanding the cumulative impacts of the reforms. This data is used throughout this report. The Task Group is pleased to note the proactive nature of the WRCG and the increase in information sharing as a result of bringing partners together. The Task Group considers it is important for the WRCG to continue its work with a particular focus on information and good practice sharing between partners in the group, identifying gaps in service provision, and preparing for the introduction of Universal Credit (UC).

Recommendation 1: ASC, CSF, Libraries, Public Health and Finance teams to continue to monitor impacts of the welfare reforms on service users and services, and provide a joint update through the Welfare Reform Co-ordination Group to the Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting in September 2014. ASC to include a summary of the impact of the welfare reforms on carers and CSF to include a summary of the impact of the welfare reforms on care leavers in their updates.

Recommendation 2: The Welfare Reform Co-ordination Group be encouraged to continue to collate data on the impact of the reforms on residents and the cumulative impact of the reforms, and to share information and good practice within the group, and to report on progress to the Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee as part of the update report in September 2014.

15. County Council officers have been receiving **training on the reforms**. However, witnesses have highlighted the need for more comprehensive and joint training across County Council services and for external partners mentioned in this report, to improve joint working and ensure that information cascades down effectively within all these organisations. The Task Group feels that there is a need for a systematic analysis of training needs on welfare reform and how information is being disseminated within each service.

Recommendation 3: Surrey County Council's Organisational Development Team to analyse training needs on welfare reform in the Council and explore how such training can be disseminated throughout affected council services and ensure consistency with training being delivered by partner organisations.

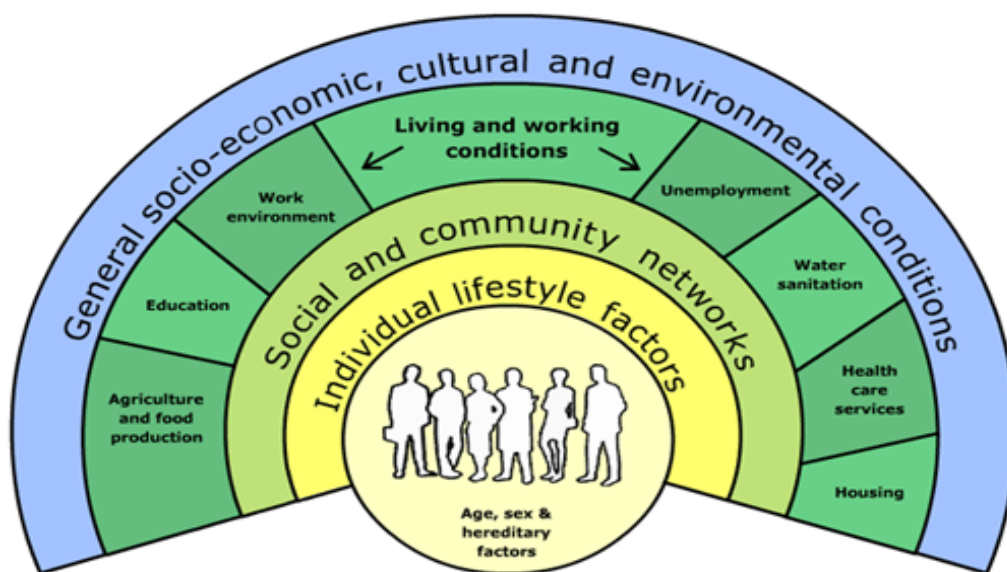
16. Witnesses have suggested that many families adversely affected by the welfare reforms need holistic support such as that provided by the successful **Surrey Family Support Programme (FSP)**, Surrey's approach to the Government's troubled families programme. The FSP sees all relevant agencies working as a 'Team Around the Family,' to make a change in the quality and volume of multi-agency working with vulnerable families and children, introducing a single family assessment and plan and a sustainable model of partnership working. However, the Task Group believes that the criteria for receiving help from the FSP is too restrictive for many of the families affected by the welfare reforms. The FSP is being extended through the Public Services Transformation Network and a number of witnesses have suggested exploring the potential of expanding the FSP criteria.

Recommendation 4: Surrey's Welfare Reform Co-ordination Group to work with the Head of Family Services to explore the potential for the Supporting Families Programme (which is being extended through the Public Services Transformation Network) to provide early help/intervention to some of those families who are most severely impacted by the welfare reforms.

17. **Surrey's Library service** has reported an increase in people coming to them for help with benefit queries. As library staff cannot provide benefits advice, their role has been one of sign-posting and offering information. It is therefore important that libraries staff have the relevant information and know where to refer residents to receive specialist advice and support. Library officers have suggested that a 'referral map' would be a useful tool for signposting. The WRCG have started mapping local services, as have DWP. WRCG should work with DWP and District and Borough Councils to produce these maps to ensure they are comprehensive and that there is consistent and accurate signposting by organisations across the County.

- 18. Libraries are developing a closer working relationship with partners like JCP and CAB, by making space and facilities available within some libraries for them to assist residents with benefit claims. For example, Sunbury library currently co-locates with a CAB office and there is a trial project underway with Weybridge JCP around Welfare to Work. Current demand on IT resources in libraries is high and is likely to increase as a result of the government’s push towards digital by default. This should be taken into consideration when planning for the local roll-out of Universal Credit support services, considered at paragraphs 44 – 50 of this report.
- 19. The Task Group have received evidence from the County Council’s **Public Health** team on the main determinants of health. General socio-economic conditions such as housing and unemployment are key determinants.

The Main Determinants of Health



- 20. Despite this correlation between health and socio-economic factors, it is difficult to trace any direct impact of the welfare reforms on the health of residents in Surrey, as a wide range of other factors impact on health. However, the Public Health team are in a good position to contribute to the Council’s efforts to mitigate the impact of Welfare Reform in Surrey. The team already have a close working relationship with Surrey’s Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) and District and Borough Councils which can be used to share information on emerging impacts and methods of mitigation. Public Health can also influence Surrey GPs (via the CCGs), who may see people in crisis before anyone else, to refer these residents to appropriate advice and support services. This could include signposting to CAB for debt management advice, Healthy Start for those requiring ‘healthy eating on a budget’ advice, and getWiSE for benefit queries (see Recommendation 9 below).
- 21. The Public Health team are currently updating their Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) data on homelessness and inequalities, together with CCGs and Districts and Boroughs, which may be of interest to the Welfare Reform Co-ordination Group. This work is due to be completed by April 2014, following which action plans for implementation can be developed. Public Health is encouraged to continue sharing relevant information with the WRCG.

22. Council Tax Benefit has been replaced by the localised **Council Tax Support Schemes**. The schemes adopted vary considerably, so residents in some areas are having to pay a significant portion of their council tax for the first time. In evidence submitted to the Task Group in November 2013, the finance team highlighted the following financial implications:
- 22.1 There has been a net reduction in Surrey County Council's tax base of £2m, due to the cessation of the Central Government council tax subsidy. It is only partially compensated by the new government grant for council tax support and an increase in council tax yield from changes to discounts and exemptions. The future level of central government grant funding is uncertain.
- 22.2 The cost of local support schemes will be subject to council tax rises and changes in the number of claimants. A reduction in council tax collection rates would have an adverse impact on the County Council's budget. Witnesses have highlighted that Council Tax recovery rates are remaining higher than expected at present. However, little is known about the impact of the different schemes on newly affected groups, or at what other cost the recovery rates are remaining high.
- 22.3 For the financial year 2013/14, the County Council provided £500,000 to Districts and Boroughs to help minimise the amount of Council Tax they collect from their most financially vulnerable residents. The money also part-funded the establishment of new hardship schemes in every District and Borough to provide additional discretionary support to people struggling to pay their Council Tax. However, so far very little of this 'hardship' money has been distributed. It is unclear whether this is due to harsh eligibility criteria, lack of awareness or other factors. The intention of this funding was to allow District and Boroughs to adopt minimal change schemes in the first year and learn lessons on collection rates with a view to informing future years' schemes. This funding offer is not being repeated for 2014/15.
- 22.4 The Task Group have been informed that the finance team has been requesting data on the localised council tax support scheme from Districts and Boroughs in order to monitor for signs of adverse impacts on overall collection rates and the extent to which collection rates among the 'newly liable' give cause for concern. Response rates have been disappointing. For those councils who have reported, there has been a small net overall deficit of £0.4m and an average reduction in collection rate forecast to year end of - 0.4%. However, this data is only indicative given the absence of complete figures.
23. As part of reforming the welfare system, Central Government moved responsibility for administering the discretionary Social Fund (including crisis loans and community care grants) from DWP to top-tier unitary Councils from April 2013. Surrey County Council's policy for administering this new local provision is known as the **Local Assistance Scheme (LAS)**. The money is intended to provide support in cases of emergency by awarding small scale 'crisis' grants directly to individuals. The Task Group expressed concern in their interim report over evidence from a number of witnesses about the under spend of this fund, lack of publicity, and difficulties faced by residents in some areas of Surrey in accessing the scheme.
24. The Task Group has since met with the Council's Shared Services team, who administer LAS, to discuss these issues. From this conversation, the Task Group were pleased to note the following.

- 24.1 Many aspects of the LAS are an improvement on the Social Fund. This includes a quicker administrative process whereby a resident visits their nearest participating CAB office to make an application with the assistance of a CAB advisor. Staff in Shared Services can then immediately give a 'yes' or 'no' to the application over the phone, and the resident can walk away from the CAB office with a pre-paid VISA card containing the money awarded. This is compared to 3-4 days to receive money through the old Social Fund.
- 24.2 The LAS aims to minimise the potential for misuse of the scheme by placing restrictions on where the pre-paid card can be used. For example, it cannot be used in betting shops or off-licences. In addition, if residents were in need of household goods, they are provided these goods from the Surrey Re-use Network rather than being given money to make the purchase. Shared Services also carry out routine checks on pre-paid spend and have the ability to rescind grants where money isn't being used for the purpose it was granted for.
- 24.3 Shared Services are looking to improve access to the LAS by broadening the number of organisations that can help residents to apply (e.g. social care teams and District and Borough officers) through the introduction of an online application form.
- 24.4 According to Shared Services, the average time spent by CAB with LAS applicants was 90 minutes, much of which was spent providing applicants with money management advice and signposting to relevant support.
25. The Task Group were informed that the County Council received £1.2m from Central Government for the scheme, of which approximately £315,000 was spent setting up the scheme including Surrey staffing costs and awards to CAB and the Surrey Re-use Network to act as intermediaries. Of the remaining £900,000 available to issue grants to residents, the service estimated that £400,000 worth of grants would have been made by the end of the financial year 2013/14. This under spend has been mirrored in many other local authorities. As at the end of January 2014, approximately £180,778.40 had been awarded through the Re-Use Network and £97,462.28 had been awarded through pre-paid cards. A map of the geographical spread of applications to the scheme, provided by Shared Services, is attached at **Annex 3**. There has been a significant rise in demand since the New Year. The service informed the Task Group that as the new scheme was now fully embedded and was being developed further, they felt confident that LAS would be more fully utilised in 2014/15.
26. Having spoken with Shared Services, the Task Group can see the importance of this scheme in helping Surrey residents in crisis, not only as a result of the welfare reforms but also those fleeing domestic abuse or affected by the recent widespread flooding. The Task Group is supportive of Shared Services work to improve access to the scheme to ensure it is more fully utilised. The Task Group would therefore like to see any LAS funding left unallocated at the end of 2013/14 ring-fenced and rolled over into 2014/15, to be used for the LAS. However, the Task Group recommends that the future administration of LAS and take-up of the fund be carefully monitored to ensure it meets its potential.
27. The Task Group is pleased to note that the Leader of the Council is fully supportive of the LAS and has written to Central Government urging them to re-think their proposal to withdraw funding for this scheme from April 2015. The Task Group supports continued lobbying on this issue.

Recommendation 5: Any LAS funding left unallocated at the end of 2013/14 is ring-fenced and rolled over into 2014/15 and continues to be committed to supporting residents in crisis through the LAS.

Recommendation 6: Shared services to provide an update on improvements to the LAS scheme and take up of the fund, as part of the update report to the Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee in September 2014.

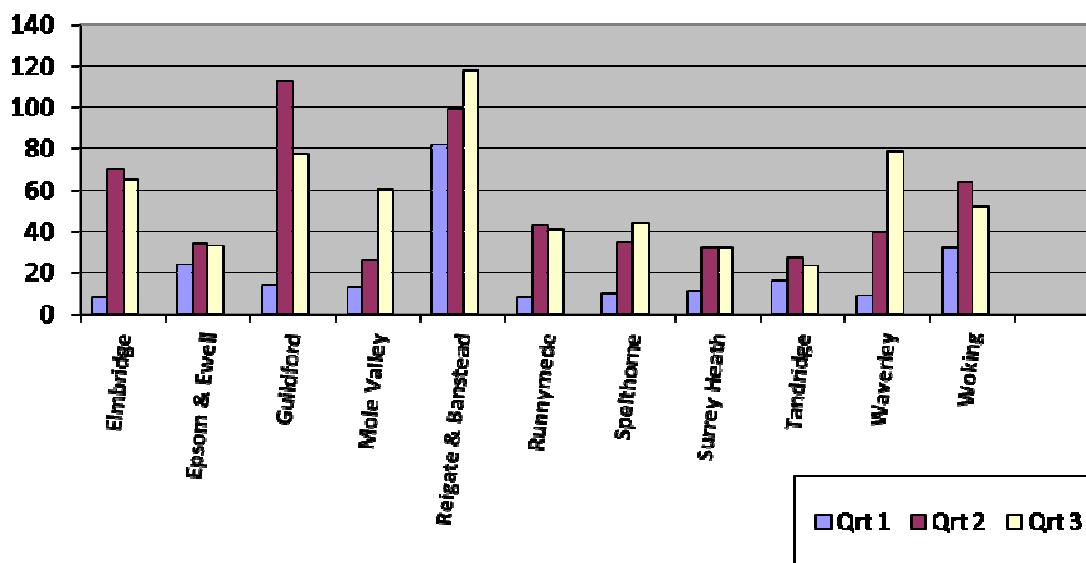
Recommendation 7: Surrey County Council to continue lobbying central government to provide funding for emergency crisis support for residents (known as the Local Assistance Scheme in Surrey) beyond 2015.

getWiSE - Welfare benefits information, advice and support service

28. The County Council commissioned a new service in April 2013 to provide welfare benefits advice, information and support to residents of Surrey affected by the government's welfare reform programme in order to help them adjust to and manage the changes. This new service was intended to provide full holistic advice and support on issues ranging from employment to housing, as well as advocacy. Co-design of this service was carried out by Council services, users and providers of existing welfare benefits advice, to inform what would be expected from this service. Expectations included: one point of referral, efficient timescales for referrals, well trained advisors, service to be delivered in venue of choice including the resident's home, and a free service not dependant on eligibility criteria. After a competitive bidding process, a one year grant agreement for the provision of this service was awarded to a consortium of partners called getWiSE. The consortium is led by Surrey Disabled People's Partnership (SDPP), who along with Age UK Surrey, The Youth Consortium (TYC), Surrey Association for Vision Impairment (SAVI) and Deaf Positives constitutes the consortium partnership. The agreement included the option of extending for a further two years, which the Cabinet recently approved in February 2014.
29. All referrals to getWiSE go to SDPP who complete a referral form and pass onto the most relevant partner. Applicants receive confirmation of the referral within one working day and are contacted by an advisor from the appropriate partner within three working days to arrange the start of the support process. ASC commissioners and getWiSE have informed the Task Group that the partnership is fully resourced, there is no one on waiting lists, and a contingency is in place for a surge in demand.
30. In its interim report, the Task Group expressed concern over the low level of awareness amongst residents and County Council Members of the getWiSE services. Also, given the Task Group had primarily heard evidence about getWiSE's work to support residents through appeals and tribunals related to disability benefit changes, they wished to find out how the service planned to extend its support to other groups affected by the reforms, such as low-income families. The Task Group have met with getWiSE again and are pleased to note that they have brought a new partner into the consortium – Guildford Action for Families (GAF), who are an experienced provider of support and advice to families with children, county wide. It is too early to tell what impact GAF will have on the reach of the service. It is also apparent that getWiSE are working to improve awareness of their service by promoting it to GP practices and community groups in areas where referral rates have been low. This together

with the establishment of new information hubs, which hold drop-in welfare benefits advice clinics¹, has improved the geographical spread of referral rates.

Referrals by Geographic Distribution to Quarter 3²



- The service acknowledges that although geographical spread has improved, demand for the service has not dramatically increased. However, now being a more established service, getWiSE is confident in its resources and so able to carry out more promotional activity in order to reach more residents. The Council holds quarterly performance meetings with the consortium. According to recent data, from 1 April 2013 the providers have seen 1,448 people and helped them claim £940,416 of benefits they were entitled to. Although the Task Group recognises that progress is being made in improving the reach and promotion of the service, it is still an issue which requires close monitoring.

Recommendation 8: The Adult Social Care Committee to closely monitor the delivery of this service by getWiSE and report back to the Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee as appropriate.

Recommendation 9: Surrey County Council's Adult Social Care Commissioners to work with Surrey's Welfare Reform Co-ordination Group, Public Health and getWiSE to:

- promote the getWiSE advice and support service to all Surrey GPs through Surrey's 6 Clinical Commissioning Groups; and*
- continue to raise awareness of this service among key partners including District and Borough Housing and Benefits Officers and social housing providers; to ensure Surrey residents receive early help in dealing with the welfare reforms.*

District and Borough Councils

- The Task Group have heard from District and Borough Housing teams about an increase in homelessness and use of temporary accommodation due to the lack of appropriate housing (for those councils with and without their own housing stock). This is illustrated in the table below:

¹ <https://getwisesurrey.org.uk/events-drop-ins/> (7 March 2014)

² From Report to Surrey County Council's Cabinet of 25 February 2014 titled Extension of Grant Agreement for Welfare Benefits Advice Information and Support.

Households in Temporary Accommodation at the end of Quarter 1 2013

Local authority	Q1 2010	Q1 2011	Q1 2012	Q1 2013	Annual change 2012-13	Change from 2010-2013
Elmbridge	18	22	23	36	+57%	+100%
Epsom & Ewell	16	32	37	91	+146%	+469%
Guildford	7	9	27	29	+7%	+314%
Mole Valley	12	18	18	26	+44%	+117%
Reigate & Bans.	16	24	65	101	+55%	+531%
Runnymede	23	23	68	42	-38%	+83%
Spelthorne	2	7	24	33	+38%	+1550%
Surrey Heath	47	50	48	67	+40%	+43%
Tandridge	16	16	15	22	+47%	+38%
Waverley	7	2	2	-	-	-
Woking	23	28	30	32	+7%	+39%
Surrey total	187	231	357	479	+34%	+156%

Data provided by Surrey Chief Housing Officers Group

33. It is still too early to tell whether the recent increase is directly attributable to the impact of welfare reform. However, housing teams expect this trend to continue due to:
- 33.1 the opportunities for families to downsize to mitigate the impacts of the 'bedroom tax' diminishing because of the lack of availability of smaller accommodation. Where the shortfall is not covered by Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)³, this will lead to a loss in income;
 - 33.2 the lack of availability of appropriately sized and affordable social housing (e.g. one bedroom flats for care leavers). There is a growing disparity between average rental market rates⁴ and the average housing allowance which now has to also fall within the benefits cap. This is a particular problem in Surrey where rents are significantly higher than the national average, leaving many with no option but to apply for housing benefits;
 - 33.3 tougher conditions for receiving Job Seekers Allowance (JSA). If JSA is lost due to sanctions being applied, this will often also result in a loss of other benefits including housing benefit; and
 - 33.4 the accumulation of household debts over time due to loss of household income, affecting residents' ability to pay their rent and which could lead to summons and evictions⁵.
34. The Task Group wished to highlight that the District and Borough Councils are working proactively to help residents affected by the reforms find suitable and affordable accommodation. The Task Group have also heard about the proactive work of some Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) in mitigating the impacts of the reforms through providing advice to their residents about dealing

³ DHP funding from central government to district and boroughs in Surrey has increased from £684,723 in 2012/13 to £1,671,873 in 2013/14 (Quarter 2 data from WRCG).

⁴ There has been a recent categorisation of "affordable rent" for new social housing as 80% of market rent. This is likely to increase social housing rents further.

⁵ The Task Group were informed that there had been an approximate 50% increase in summons in Spelthorne in comparison to this time last year

with the changes. The Task Group considers it important that the WRGC closely monitor the situation to assess the impact of the reforms on housing and homelessness.

35. The Task Group have also received evidence from a number of District & Borough Benefits teams on their change in focus from simply processing benefit claims to taking a far more proactive and holistic role in supporting residents through the reforms. This includes providing a 'triage service,' by signposting residents to appropriate services if they require additional support, as benefit teams in local authorities are often residents' first port of call.
36. It is clear that there will be an increase in demand on the services provided by both housing and benefit teams in District and Borough Councils. Officers highlighted the need for local strategies for mitigating the impacts of welfare reform in the years to come, with the possibility of districts and boroughs grouping together to deliver these strategies. The Task Group recognises that tailored local support will need to be developed, particularly to help people manage the introduction of Universal Credit (UC), which will require additional resources from central government (see UC section below at paragraph 44). For the time being, District and Borough Councils should be further encouraged to refer residents to the getWiSE service, for welfare and benefits advice.

Department for Work and Pensions and Job Centre Plus

37. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is the ministerial department responsible for employment and welfare in the UK. Jobcentre Plus (JCP) is part of DWP, servicing those looking for employment or issuing benefits to those who cannot work. As a result of the reforms, the Task Group have been informed that regional DWP are now working more closely with the County Council and Districts and Boroughs to understand local need and to prepare for the roll out of Universal Credit. DWP have also stated that they are undergoing an organisational cultural change in how they deal with claimants, centred on the understanding that 'one size does not fit all'. However, some witnesses who have given evidence to the Task Group feel that although this culture change appears to be happening at the top of the organisation, it was yet to cascade down to front line delivery in JCPs.
38. All JCPs in Surrey have rolled out a new approach to working with claimants, with jobseekers now having to account more clearly for their efforts to find work in order to receive their benefit, which includes up to 35 hours a week of positive job-seeking activity (known as the Claimant Commitment). JCPs are working with partners such as the National Career Service to support this change and running job clubs in community locations.
39. DWP expect an increased demand on their services, with a growing new customer base from ESA and from UC when this takes effect. DWP confirmed to the Task Group that they were confident in their current resources to cope with demand, but will be continually assessing this. However, the Task Group notes with concern the findings of the Work and Pensions Committee report on the role of Jobcentre Plus in the reformed welfare system,⁶ which states that DWP is required under the 2013 Spending Round to further reduce its running costs, while at the same time JCPs are being required to implement changes that could substantially increase their workload.

⁶ 28 January 2014
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Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB)

40. CAB have seen an 11% rise in welfare related enquiries since the same period last year. Housing benefit enquiries rose by 8% and Jobseeker's Allowance by 13% since last year. Rent and council tax arrears queries rose by 28% and 16% respectively, while consumer debt queries have fallen. Employment Support Allowance cases also rose significantly since the same period last year. The Task Group recognises the holistic approach taken by CAB, in routinely checking that those accessing their service are receiving all the support and advice they are entitled to. CAB has reported an increasing demand on their service, particularly new clients, since the welfare reforms were introduced. The Task Group was informed that CAB is looking for new solutions to deal with the demand including a Surrey wide telephone helpline.

Change in number and type of enquires received by CAB

Type of Enquiry	Q1 2013/14	Q2 2013/14	Q3 2013/14	Total up to Q3 2013/14	Total up to Q3 2012/3	Annual change %
Total Benefit Enquiries	13,989	13,583	12,387	39,959	35,843	+11%
Employment Support Allowance	2,508	2,084	1,896	6,488	5,226	+24%
Housing Benefit	1,884	1,858	1,568	5,310	4,910	+8%
Working and Child Tax Benefits	1,186	1,276	1,072	3,534	3,676	-4%
Jobseekers Allowance	1,102	1,116	830	3,048	2,691	+13%
Localised Social Welfare (Local Assistance)	1,038	1,328	1,423	3,789	N/A	N/A
Localised support for Council Tax	799	713	609	2,121	N/A	N/A
Benefit Cap	27	35	22	84	N/A	N/A
PIP (Personal Independence Payments)	159	541	709	1,409	N/A	N/A
Total Debt Enquiries	7,030	6,173	6,664	19,867	21,398	-7%
Credit and Store Cards Debts	1,037	868	987	2,892	3,375	-14%
Rent Arrears by:				Total: 1,982	Total: 1,553	+28%
Local Authorities;	218;	174;	204;	596;	428;	+39%
Housing Association;	354;	307;	345;	1006;	818;	+23%
Private Landlords	125	158	97	380	307	+24%
Unsecured Personal Loan Debts	593	548	607	1,748	2,193	-20%
Council Tax Arrears	551	558	641	1,750	1,507	+16%

Total Housing Enquiries	4,122	4,272	3,707	12,101	11,876	+2%
Threatened Homelessness	643	651	551	1,845	1,695	+9%
Actual Homelessness	233	255	249	737	751	-2%

Data provided by Citizens Advice Surrey

41. Surrey CAB are keen to grow their financial capability advice offer (to help residents affected by the reforms with money management and budgeting) and focus their delivery in Surrey's Children's Centres for families affected by the reforms. CAB have already delivered financial capability workshops in Woking, Dorking and Waverley and developed a 'Managing Money' resource tool for families. The Task Group agrees that Children's Centres are a good location for providing outreach advice to vulnerable families. The Task Group therefore feels it is important to consider this capability within Surrey CAB when developing and resourcing the Universal Credit Local Support Framework (see paragraph 44 onwards below).

Foodbanks

42. Surrey's foodbanks are a valuable service to those in need. Care professionals such as doctors, health visitors, social workers, and CAB and the police identify people in crisis and issue them with a foodbank voucher. Foodbank clients will then bring this voucher to their local foodbank centre where it can be redeemed for emergency food. Data provided by the Trussell Trust Food Banks (the largest operator of food banks nationally and in Surrey) to the WRCG suggest a surge in demand for food banks from 2012 to 2013, which reflects the national trend. Increased demand is being created by a combination of welfare reform changes and a general rise in the cost of living. However, according to the Trussell Trust, a slightly higher proportion of demand in Surrey is being driven by the high cost of living rather than welfare changes. Surrey has thus far seen a slower growth of food banks than in other areas in the country. It should be noted that foodbanks are also being set up by other organisations in Surrey including voluntary groups, community groups and the faith sector. Therefore the data below is only part of the picture.

Number of people fed by Trussell Trust food banks in Surrey

	Quarter 2 2012	Quarter 1 2013	Quarter 2 2013	Change on quarter (Q1-Q2 2013)	Change on year (Q1 2012- Q1 2013)
Adults	184	784	724	-8%	+393%
Dependent children	109	508	566	+11%	+519%
Total	293	1292	1290	-1%	+440%

Data provided by the Trussell Trust

43. The County Council's Public Health team are currently carrying out a Food Access Needs Assessment in Surrey. The aim is to carry out an assessment of food aid initiatives, such as food banks, and their role in supporting people on low incomes in Surrey to obtain sufficient food and support their wider health and care needs. The project will map local existing initiatives across Surrey,

explore the reasons as to why individuals and families are accessing the various forms of food aid and how / who is referring them. The project will also explore the different operating systems of the food aid services and what information is given out by those working / volunteering there. The needs assessment will then consider what additional services may be of benefit to both those using the food aid services and those administering the food aid, and then make recommendations for supporting individuals and families on low incomes to eat well. The Task Group feels it would be beneficial for COSC to review the outcome of this assessment.

Recommendation 10: The Public Health team to report to the Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee with findings from their food access needs assessment, to inform the Committee's work around reviewing the impacts of welfare reform in Surrey.

Universal Credit

44. Surrey is unlikely to see the direct impacts of Universal Credit (UC) for a couple of years as the roll out of UC for new claimants has been delayed until at least April 2016. However, councils are being encouraged by the DWP to use the interim period to prepare for the introduction of UC in their local area by:
- 44.1 creating effective working partnerships with DWP and agencies who will be providing support and/or signposting claimants;
 - 44.2 establishing the type and level of support claimants may require and mapping existing support available; and
 - 44.3 piloting support to residents to help identify how these services can be delivered most efficiently and effectively.⁷
45. The Task Group is supportive of this early planning and encourages the application of lessons learned in responding to the reforms which have already taken effect, to the roll out of UC. The Task Group feels the closer partnership working that has developed between the County Council, District and Borough Councils, DWP, Housing Providers and the VCFS sector in responding to the recent changes will provide a strong foundation on which to build the local support services framework.
46. UC is being piloted in a number of locations across the UK, most recently in Bath and Harrogate. It is important for the WRCCG, District & Borough Councils and the regional DWP office to closely monitor the outcomes from these pilots and apply good practice to developing the local framework for Surrey.

Financial inclusion

47. UC will bring about key changes to the administration of benefits. There will be a move from weekly benefit payments and direct payment of housing benefit to housing providers to one monthly payment made directly to the claimant which will include housing benefit. From this, claimants will be expected to manage their household budgets in order to pay rent and livings costs throughout a four week period. Witnesses have highlighted a number of issues around these changes:
- 47.1 Claimants are likely to require support in managing their finances, and those without bank accounts will need to set this up. There will be an

⁷ Pg 6 Universal Credit Local Support Services Update and Trialling Plan.

increased demand on organisations such as housing associations which currently provide such support. This demand will need to be resourced and managed in a more cohesive manner.

- 47.2 Outreach of advice services needs to be improved in order to support those residents who may not admit to needing financial management advice.
 - 47.3 Many housing providers would prefer housing payments to continue being paid directly to them, but will only be able to apply for this in exceptional cases. Housing officers have also advised that the switch to direct payments may exacerbate the reluctance of private landlords to rent to benefit claimants.
48. The Task Group remains concerned about financial inclusion under UC. Appropriate advice and support on money management will need to be sourced under the local support framework. When developing this framework, work needs to be done to understand local needs, gaps in service provision, and identify the type and quantity of additional resource required.

Digital inclusion

49. UC will be digital by default. UC online forms must be completed in one sitting as they cannot be saved and it is estimated that the application would take on average over two hours to complete. This is considerably longer than the time restrictions placed on the use of public computers in libraries. Witnesses have raised serious concerns over the potential impacts of this digital arrangement on both claimants and services which will be providing support. Claimants will require access to computers and may require literacy training, IT training and/or advice on and support with completing the forms. Witnesses have highlighted numerous concerns:
- 49.1 The concern that Central Government funding under the UC local support services framework may not be enough to pay for the support required. A study carried out by three London Councils using DWP data found they would each need to spend £6m over a two-year period to support vulnerable claimants get online, help open bank accounts and manage monthly budgets⁸. Funding arrangements are unlikely to be outlined until October 2014.
 - 49.2 Although the Task Group was pleased to note the installation of Wi-Fi in all Surrey libraries which would enable residents and advisors to access UC forms with their own devices, the Task Group remain concerned about the expected increase in demand on libraries' computers and staff time, and the impact this will have on other library users. To mitigate, libraries could potentially identify quieter periods when computers could be booked out specifically for benefit sessions.
 - 49.3 There is an ongoing requirement for claimants to log into their account to keep their work and personal details up to date. This places considerable ongoing demands on claimants (e.g. those on zero hours contracts), the DWP IT systems and Surrey's support services.
 - 49.4 Concern over the ability to and costs of protecting the confidentiality of personal information in UC forms which are submitted on public

⁸ The Guardian, Thursday 21 November 2013 14.40: 'Training people to use universal credit 'could cost hundreds of millions.'

computers. This could be a particular issue in community partnered (volunteer run) libraries where it may not be appropriate for volunteers to offer this level of support to members of their own community, both from the volunteer and the claimant point of view.

- 6
50. The Task Group acknowledges that JCPs will be increasing the number of computers available in their centres and block booking them specifically for UC sessions. However, given the expected increase in demand, the County Council, District and Borough Councils and DWP are encouraged to explore additional IT access options in council owned buildings such as children's centres and schools. The Task Group have been informed of various options to ensure confidentiality on public computers including special screens and individual soundproof pods, but costs of these solutions need to be considered and this mitigation may not be appropriate for all public access points.

Recommendation 11: Surrey County Council to work closely with the DWP, District and Borough Councils, housing providers and the VCFS sector to prepare for the introduction of Universal Credit, taking into consideration the concerns and recommendations highlighted in this report, and report back to the Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee on progress. This preparation should include:

- (a) researching and understanding the need for digital access and support across Surrey;*
(b) the County Council better understanding the potential demand on IT resources as a result of the introduction of Universal Credit to enable Surrey to properly prepare for this, including reviewing budget provision;
(c) reviewing the demand for money management advice and assessing existing service provision, in order to make evidence-based recommendations for sourcing the necessary support; and
(d) lobbying central government to ensure that support to access Universal Credit is adequately funded.

Employment and Support Allowance

51. For those who are ill or disabled, the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) from DWP offers financial support to those unable to work and personalised help to those who can do some form of work. As part of the welfare reforms, those people claiming Income Support or Incapacity Benefit are being transferred to ESA. In its interim report, the Task Group expressed concern over numerous aspects of the ESA assessment process described by witnesses and set out to better understand the process. Having now gathered detailed evidence from two Surrey ESA claimants, getWiSE who support claimants through the ESA process, and DWP (including a JCP Disability Employment Advisor), the Task Group remain concerned. There is a clear difference in perception of the process by claimants and DWP. A diagram of the ESA process provided by DWP to the Task Group is attached at **Annex 4**. A description of the process provided to the Task Group by the family member of an ESA claimant who had their decision successfully overturned at appeal is attached at **Annex 5**. The Task Group is particularly concerned about four aspects of the process described in further detail below.

Work capability assessments (WCA)

52. Those claiming ESA undergo a Work Capability Assessment (WCA) which looks at the claimant's capability for work. WCA assesses physical as well as mental, intellectual and cognitive functions. ATOS Healthcare was contracted by DWP to carry out the WCAs. DWP state that ATOS assessors are registered medical professionals (e.g. doctors, nurses and physiotherapists) who are fully

trained in disability assessment. In July 2013, DWP instructed ATOS to enact a quality improvement plan. In February 2014, ATOS confirmed that it was seeking an early end to its contract to carry out the WCAs, due to expire in August 2015.

53. For the WCA, unless a claimant is terminally ill, they are required to complete an ESA50 questionnaire. This is a 20 page booklet intended to get the claimants views on how their illness or disability affects their ability to work. Claimants spoken to explained they received little or no support with completing this form. ATOS review the claimant's paperwork and unless they clearly meet the criteria for the Support Group (i.e. not fit to work), they are invited to a face to face assessment with an ATOS healthcare professional. Claimants are assessed against prescribed criteria using a points-based system, and ATOS produce a report for DWP. ESA decision makers at DWP (who are not medically trained), use the ATOS report and other relevant evidence, for example information provided by the claimant's GP or medical professionals, to make its decision.
54. Both claimants giving evidence to the Task Group had a negative experience with their ATOS Healthcare assessor. They felt they were not treated with respect, that their assessor drew conclusions from circumstantial evidence such as appearance, and lacked the necessary expertise to make an assessment particularly where the claimant suffered from multiple and/or rare and complex conditions. GetWiSE confirmed that this was the common experience of individuals who approached their service but acknowledged that this was primarily based on the views of claimants appealing their ESA decision. In addition, GetWiSE have suggested that the ESA50 form and ATOS work capability assessments are not asking claimants the right questions in order to understand an individual's ability to work. For example, claimants are being asked a 'yes/'no/'it varies' question to whether they can pick and move a one pint carton of liquid. They are not being asked whether they can do such activities safely, repeatedly and in a timely manner.

Bureaucracy and delays

55. DWP were unable to provide the Task Group with specific timescales for different stages of the ESA claims process, stating that it varied depending on the claim. The claimants giving evidence described a slow and lengthy process, with appeals of the ESA decision taking approximately between 6 and 15 months to be heard⁹. During this period, the claimant would be entitled to the lower ESA rate if they could routinely provide medical certificates of their condition. Claimants reported unnecessary bureaucracy in this process, being repeatedly informed by DWP that their medical certificates had not been received and only accepting original certificates sent by post, resulting in multiple visits to the GP. GetWiSE confirmed that this issue was commonplace among the claimants they assisted.
56. Claimants were also frustrated that their post-assessment health was inadmissible evidence when appealing their ESA decision, particularly where their condition had deteriorated. The Task Group views this as a particular injustice given the delays in hearing appeals at tribunal. Claimants do have the option to withdrawn their appeal and make a fresh claim for ESA which will take their change in condition into account. However, by doing so the claimant loses the opportunity to receive back-dated ESA at the higher rate if successful at appeal.

⁹ Both claimants went through the ESA claims process before the introduction of mandatory re-consideration in October 2013.

57. Mandatory re-consideration was introduced by DWP in October 2013 to improve the ESA process by DWP formally re-considering their decision in order to resolve the dispute, before an appeal can be lodged. However, claimants are faced with the withdrawal of ESA payments during the mandatory re-consideration period. Claimants may be able to claim other benefits during this period, such as JSA (but they will need to comply with the JSA criteria in order to receive this benefit). Witnesses have informed the Task Group that the mandatory re-consideration process, in their experience, usually takes between eight to ten weeks. The impact on residents of withdrawing payments during this re-consideration period is a particular concern to the Task Group.

Appeals of ESA decisions

58. The Task Group were also concerned to hear about the large number of ESA decisions in Surrey being overturned on appeal – those supported through the process by County Council commissioned getWiSE experienced an approximate 92% success rate. Regional DWP were unable to provide the Task Group with data on the number of ESA applicants appealing in Surrey or nationally and the outcome of these tribunals. National data from a DWP publication of December 2013¹⁰ states that for 2012/13, HMCTS received 507,131 appeals against DWP decisions. DWP estimates that around 38% of appeals result in DWP's decision being overturned. However, it is not clear whether this data relates to all DWP benefit decisions or just ESA decisions. Regardless of this, the high number of overturned DWP decisions indicates a number of issues, most notably the additional use of public money to review decisions, conduct tribunals and provide advice and support to claimants going through the process.

Early help for claimants

59. Early help and support for individuals going through the DWP claims process is crucial to ensure they get the best out of it. DWP informed the Task Group that decision makers at DWP telephone claimants to inform them of their ESA decision and to explain the next stage of the process, before their decision letter is sent by post. This contrasts with the experience of the claimants who spoke to the Task Group, who were informed of DWP's decision and right to appeal by a letter with limited explanation. This discrepancy may be down to the timing of the claimant's claims. Following Professor Harrington's review of the Work Capability Assessment (WCA) to improve DWP standards of decision making, DWP states that it has changed its operating model to introduce more contact with customers so that Decision Makers can explain decisions, listen to any additional evidence and reach the right decision at the earliest opportunity.¹¹
60. Both claimants spoken to had their benefits stopped shortly after receiving their decision letter, resulting in rent arrears. Both claimants only found external support and representation after submitting their appeal form, through a referral from their GP and via their local authority. The Task Group believes that there needs to be early signposting to support residents from the outset of the benefit claims processes to ensure claimants are fully informed and supported when making their claim. This does not currently appear to be happening.

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/appeals-process-changes-for-dwp-benefits-and-child-maintenance> (3 March 2014), Appeals Reform Questions and Answers.

¹¹ Ibid

Applying lessons learnt from ESA in the roll out of the Personal Independence Payments

61. A recent report from the National Audit Office has suggested delays in processing the Government's new Personal Independence Payments (PIP) has led to claimants facing distress and financial difficulties¹². The Task Group is disappointed to note that the recently introduced PIP (which replaces the Disability Living Allowance) is experiencing similar issues to ESA. New claims for DLA were no longer being taken for the majority of residents in Surrey from June 2013, with new claimants being asked to claim for PIP instead. From October 2015 all remaining DLA claimants will be asked to make a claim for PIP and by October 2017 all claimants will have been asked to switch (except in a few limited cases). The Task Group considers it vital that lessons learnt from ESA are applied to PIP by DWP.

Recommendation 12: The Leader of the Council to write to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions explaining the Task Group's concerns over the Employment and Support Allowance process and including the following recommendations:

- (a) That firms carrying out the medical work capability assessments (WCA) for benefit claimants, on behalf of DWP:*
- (i) treat benefit claimants like customers; and*
 - (ii) ensure appropriately qualified persons carry out these medical assessments.*
- (b) Bureaucracy within the ESA claims and appeals process be reduced. In particular:*
- (i) DWP to provide information on the number of medical certificates posted by claimants but not received by DWP and the reasons for this,*
 - (ii) DWP to accept claimant medical certificates for longer periods while claimants await mandatory re-consideration and tribunal decisions. This will save GP and claimant time and expense in having these certificates frequently renewed or re-requested where certificates have been sent by post but not received by DWP.*
- (c) DWP's benefit claim forms and decision letters to signpost claimants to advice and support services to enable claimants to seek early help, preferably locally based organisations, such as local authorities, housing providers and Citizens Advice Bureaus.*
- (d) DWP to build a closer working relationship with partners in the Welfare Reform Co-ordination Group, to bring about pro-active information sharing and signposting particularly where claimants have been sanctioned by DWP decisions and therefore lost their passported benefits, such as housing benefit.*
- (e) DWP to use lessons learned from the ESA process and apply this to the roll-out of the Personal Independence Payments.*

Conclusions:

62. In order to understand the impacts of the welfare reforms on services and residents in Surrey, the Welfare Reform Task Group has spoken to County Council services, partner organisations including District and Borough Councils, DWP, and CAB, as well as benefit claimants. The Task Group has also

¹² Personal Independence Payment: early progress HC 1070 SESSION 2013-14 27 FEBRUARY 2014

reviewed a range of documentary evidence including statistical data on the services and benefits affected.

63. The Task Group concludes that given the changes to welfare benefits introduced in Surrey from April 2013, are being rolled-out in stages there is still no evidence of significant budgetary impacts on the County Council. However, impacts on residents are becoming more apparent, and this will inevitably build pressure on demand for front line advice and support services (some of this increased demand is being seen already). As the impact on residents and consequent demand on services are likely to build over time, and are likely to significantly grow with the introduction of Universal Credit (UC) from 2016, it is important for the County Council and its partners (who in Surrey collectively form the Welfare Reform Co-ordination Group (WRCG)) to carefully monitor impacts on residents and services, learn lessons from existing service provision, and apply these to preparing for UC. The County Council (through the WRCG) has a crucial strategic role to play in understanding the impact of the reforms and working with partners to deliver an effective response. This includes ensuring adequate training and information for those dealing with residents affected by the reforms, ensuring advice and support is reaching those most in need, facilitating better information sharing between partners on resident need and resources, and identifying gaps in service provision and using this evidence to source support. Many aspects of the reforms, such as ESA, are outside the direct control of the Council. However, the Council still has a role to play here in lobbying central government for positive change. The Task Group therefore makes twelve recommendations, outlined below.

Recommendations:

64. The recommendations from the Task Group are included in context throughout this report and are listed below for ease of reference. The Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to endorse the recommendations of the Task Group.

Recommendation 1: *ASC, CSF, Libraries, Public Health and Finance teams to continue to monitor impacts of the welfare reforms on service users and services, and provide a joint update through the Welfare Reform Co-ordination Group to the Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting in September 2014. ASC to include a summary of the impact of the welfare reforms on carers and CSF to include a summary of the impact of the welfare reforms on care leavers in their updates.*

Recommendation 2: *The Welfare Reform Co-ordination Group be encouraged to continue to collate data on the impact of the reforms on residents and the cumulative impact of the reforms, and to share information and good practice within the group, and to report on progress to the Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee as part of the update report in September 2014.*

Recommendation 3: *Surrey County Council's Organisational Development Team analyse training needs on welfare reform in the Council and explore how such training can be disseminated throughout affected council services and ensure consistency with training being delivered by partner organisations.*

Recommendation 4: *Surrey's Welfare Reform Co-ordination Group to work with the Head of Family Services to explore the potential for the Supporting Families Programme (which is being extended through the Public Services Transformation Network) to provide early help/intervention to some of those families who are most severely impacted by the welfare reforms.*

Recommendation 5: Any LAS funding left unallocated at the end of 2013/14 is ring-fenced and rolled over into 2014/15 and continues to be committed to supporting residents in crisis through the LAS.

Recommendation 6: Shared services to provide an update on improvements to the LAS scheme and take up of the fund, as part of the update report to the Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee in September 2014.

Recommendation 7: Surrey County Council to continue lobbying central government to provide funding for emergency crisis support for residents (known as the Local Assistance Scheme in Surrey) beyond 2015.

Recommendation 8: The Adult Social Care Committee to closely monitor the delivery of this service by getWiSE and report back to the Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee as appropriate.

Recommendation 9: Surrey County Council's Adult Social Care Commissioners, to work with Surrey's Welfare Reform Co-ordination Group, Public Health and getWiSE to:

(a) promote the GetWiSE advice and support service to all Surrey GPs through Surrey's 6 Clinical Commissioning Groups; and

(b) continue to raise awareness of this service among key partners including District and Borough Housing and Benefits Officers and social housing providers; to ensure Surrey residents receive early help in dealing with the welfare reforms.

Recommendation 10: The Public Health team to report to the Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee with findings from their food access needs assessment, to inform the Committee's work around reviewing the impacts of welfare reform in Surrey.

Recommendation 11: Surrey County Council to work closely with the DWP, District and Borough Councils, housing providers and the VCFS sector to prepare for the introduction of Universal Credit, taking into consideration the concerns and recommendations highlighted in this report, and report back to the Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee on progress. This preparation should include:

(a) researching and understanding the need for digital access and support across Surrey;

(b) the County Council better understanding the potential demand on IT resources as a result of the introduction of Universal Credit to enable Surrey to properly prepare for this, including reviewing budget provision;

(c) reviewing the demand for money management advice and assessing existing service provision, in order to make evidence-based recommendations for sourcing the necessary support; and

(d) lobbying central government to ensure that support to access Universal Credit is adequately funded.

Recommendation 12: The Leader of the Council to write to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions explaining the Task Group's concerns over the Employment and Support Allowance process and including the following recommendations:

(a) That firms carrying out the medical work capability assessments (WCA) for benefit claimants, on behalf of DWP:

(i) treat benefit claimants like customers; and

(ii) ensure appropriately qualified persons carry out these medical assessments.

(b) Bureaucracy within the ESA claims and appeals process be reduced. In particular:

- (i) DWP to provide information on the number of medical certificates posted by claimants but not received by DWP and the reasons for this,*
- (ii) DWP to accept claimant medical certificates for longer periods while claimants await mandatory re-consideration and tribunal decisions. This will save GP and claimant time and expense in having these certificates frequently renewed or re-requested where certificates have been sent by post but not received by DWP.*

(c) DWP's benefit claim forms and decision letters to signpost claimants to advice and support services to enable claimants to seek early help, preferably locally based organisation, such as local authorities, housing providers and Citizens Advice Bureaus.

(d) DWP to build a closer working relation with partners in the Welfare Reform Co-ordination Group, to bring about pro-active information sharing and signposting particularly where claimants have been sanctioned by DWP decisions and therefore lost their passported benefits, such as housing benefit.

(e) DWP to use lessons learned from the ESA process and apply this to the roll-out of the Personal Independence Payments.

Next steps:

- The Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee to schedule the update report on Welfare Reform for its forward work plan for September 2014.
- The Task Group recommendations to be sent to the relevant services, Leader of the Council, Cabinet Members, and Select Committees for a response and action.

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Sources/background papers:

Policy and Performance Report on the Impacts of Welfare Reform in Surrey, 12 September 2013

Interim Report of the Welfare Reform Task Group: Impacts of Welfare Reform in Surrey, 30 January 2014

Universal Credit Local Support Services Update and Trialling Plan
Q2 Data Overview, Welfare Reform Co-ordination Group