

CABINET RESPONSE TO COUNCIL OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY SELECT COMMITTEE

Welfare Reform Task Group Report

I welcome this report of the Welfare Reform Task Group. Welfare Reform cuts across a number of different council services and partners. For that reason, responding to the impact of Welfare Reform could all too easily fall through the cracks. That is why I am glad that the Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee (COSC) commissioned this important task group. I strongly believe that it is cross-cutting areas such as this where scrutiny task groups can add most value.

I will now outline my response to the specific recommendations:

Recommendation 1: *Adult Social Care, Children Schools and Families, 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. Adult Social Care to include a summary of the impact of the welfare reforms on carers and Children Schools and Families 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.*

Although it is obviously for the COSC to determine its own work programme, I endorse these recommendations. As the report acknowledges, the impacts of welfare reform are expected to become more apparent over the next 12 months, as the initial reforms have embedded. Therefore it is sensible that the COSC continue to scrutinise this area, highlighting any issues or concerns with myself and the Cabinet as appropriate.

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.*

Human Resources & Organisational Development officers have been analysing the training requirements of the welfare reform changes for SCC staff, particularly related to the forthcoming Care Bill, and have already put in place the following learning and development offer:

- e-learning package on Welfare and Benefits
- Introduction to Welfare Benefits and Reform
- Personal Independent Payments
- Adult Social Care Eligibility Training (which includes some aspects of the welfare reform and the benefits system)

I fully support the Task Group's recommendation that the Organisational Development Team take this opportunity to work with wider SCC officers and external partners, particularly

through the Welfare Reform Coordination Group, to ensure that this training offer is sufficiently comprehensive and reaching all staff that would benefit.

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.*

I welcome this recommendation. I believe that it is both sensible and proper that the Family Support Programme, which seeks to target the most vulnerable families, works with the Welfare Reform Co-ordination Group - particularly as we enter phase 2 of the programme.

Recommendation 5: *Any Local Assistance Scheme (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.*

I welcome the task group's support of the Local Assistance Scheme. When the Government disbanded the social fund, they stated that they felt the money could be better administered at a local level. We have proved that in Surrey. Rather than merely replicating the social fund we have developed a truly local scheme where applicants receive advice and support through the CAB, or furniture through a re-use scheme, rather than just a one-off payment.

I recognise the Government's concerns about councils not yet using their full welfare assistance allocation, but I know that here in Surrey this is because we are making better use of the funding by adopting this early intervention approach. By seeking to tackle the root of the problem and signposting to other more appropriate forms of support, we have demonstrated that we can reduce demand on our own services and other agencies.

That is why I have recently written to Brandon Lewis to invite him to a roundtable discussion looking at how to build an effective and sustainable welfare assistance support service from 2015 onwards (attached to this response as appendix 1). I hope this assures the committee that I will continue to lobby government to fund emergency crisis support as per **recommendation 7**.

In order to be in a strong position to lobby government, I believe that it is important that we ensure our scheme is operating as effectively as possible and that we can clearly demonstrate how it is helping residents in crisis. As the task group recognises, there is scope to improve access to and awareness of the scheme. Therefore, I endorse **recommendation 6** as a way of scrutinising the effectiveness of the scheme and ensuring it meets its full potential.

Rather than carryover the unspent LAS funding from 2013/14 to 2014/15 (**recommendation**

5), I would like to place this money in an earmarked reserve. This would mean that should the government choose not to fund the scheme from 2015/16 onwards, there is still a provision for providing emergency support to residents within the council's budget for 2016/17.

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.*

As the report acknowledges, getWiSE are working to improve awareness of their service - particularly in areas where referral rates have been low. However, it is important to continue this good work to ensure that all the residents who would benefit from this support know how to access it. I have discussed these recommendations with the Cabinet Member and Associate for Adult Social Care who are of the same view - therefore I support these recommendations.

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.*

The report highlights data which indicates that there has been a sharp rise in the number of people who are using food banks in Surrey. It is therefore timely that the Public Health team are carrying out a Food Access Needs Assessment to understand more about why people are accessing various forms of food aid. It seems sensible that COSC should review the outcomes of this work as part of their wider review into welfare reform.

Recommendation 11: *Surrey County Council to work closely with the Department for Work and Pensions, District and Borough Councils, housing providers and the voluntary, community and faith 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.

I firmly support the key aims underpinning Universal Credit of simplifying the benefits system and making work pay. I also welcome the recognition from the Department of Work and Pensions that local authorities should be an equal and lead partner with DWP in developing the support for people that will struggle to adapt to the new system. Universal Credit will not be introduced in Surrey until at least 2016, but I fully endorse the Task Group's recommendation that officers work closely with local partners to use the intervening period to understand the nature and demand for this support in Surrey, and plan how best to deliver it in order for all residents to be able to make the transition. I will ensure Surrey County Council continues to make the case for sufficient central government funding to be able to provide this locally tailored support.

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 (ESA) process 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 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.*

I would like to thank the task group for their detailed and thorough investigation into this area. They have clearly uncovered some concerning issues with the way that the Employment and Support Allowance is being administered. I have already had a helpful discussion with the task group Chairman regarding these issues and will be writing to the

Secretary of State of Work and Pensions to follow them up.

Recommendation 13: *The Leader of the Council to write to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on simplifying the Universal Credit application process and exploring options for a common assessment for claimants across welfare benefits and support.*

As above, I have already discussed these concerns with the task group Chairman and will be writing to the Secretary of State as recommended.

To conclude:

On behalf of the Cabinet, I would like to thank the Welfare Reform Task Group again for their detailed work in this area. As detailed above, I am supportive of the recommendations. As the report acknowledges, the impacts of welfare reform are expected to become more apparent over the next 12 months, as the initial reforms have embedded. Therefore, I welcome the continued scrutiny of this area by COSC and look forward to receiving updates from the committee as and when appropriate.

David Hodge
Leader of the Council
22 April 2014

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