

CABINET RESPONSE TO COUNCIL OVERVIEW BOARD

**WELFARE REFORM TASK GROUP
(considered by Council Overview Board on 3 June 2015)**

COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION:

For the Cabinet to endorse the recommendations made by the Council Overview Board regarding Welfare reform as listed below:

1. The case for continuing funding for the Local Assistance Scheme in Surrey is reconfirmed as part of the budget and service planning cycle, having due regard to usage, need, benefits and cost of delivery.
2. That the getWiS£ or a similar service, be extended for a further 3 years, with a built-in review of usage and need on an annual basis.
3. That careful consideration be given to the role of Libraries as a 'gateway to County services' when developing a vision for the future of the Surrey Library Service and that the Resident Experience Board (previously Communities Select Committee) continues to monitor the progress.
4. A Member representative of the Welfare Reform Task Group be invited to be briefed on the Universal Credit pilot in Elmbridge, and agree a protocol for keeping the Task Group informed.
5. That a structured project plan for the Universal Credit roll Pilot in Elmbridge be shared with Members of the Task Group.
6. A robust monitoring scheme needs to be introduced to measure uptake of staff accessing training but also measuring the numbers starting the programme and the number of staff completing the training.
7. The Task Group to explore further the length of time it can take claimants to reach tribunal when they have launched an appeal against a benefits decision and request further information about how the assessment process has improved since moving to the Maximus contract.
8. Surrey's District & Boroughs and Housing Associations ensure that all options are explored for alternative payment arrangements for vulnerable claimants.
9. The Welfare Reform Coordination Group continues to work with partners to ensure that the reforms, including the introduction of Universal Credit, are communicated widely with residents and services across the County.

10. The Surrey County Council Contact Centre is adequately trained to deal with, and signpost, callers to the correct services, particularly during the initial period of Universal Credit.
11. The Welfare Reform Task Group should continue for a further year, meeting quarterly to monitor the impact of the reforms. The Chairman of the Task Group to engage with the Resident Experience Board to carry out future work.
12. The Welfare Reform Task Group to investigate the disparity between hardship fund spending in different districts and boroughs in Surrey.

RESPONSE:

I am pleased that the Task Group is satisfied that the Council is prepared for the welfare reforms and I am happy to endorse the Task Group's recommendations.

Some of the recommendations and issues raised by the Task Group relate to national policy - in particular, the ongoing issue of delays in benefit appeals reaching tribunals. I endorse the continued work of the Task Group in monitoring this issue and should the Chairman of the Board wish to write to the Secretary of State to raise any concerns, I would be happy to endorse the letter.

A number of the Task Group's recommendations refer to Universal Credit. Officers are working very closely with Elmbridge Borough Council to support the introduction of Universal Credit and how this affects our residents and services. As part of this, the Council will be organising an information sharing session in the autumn and I have asked that Officers ensure the Task Group is kept informed.

The Task Group also makes recommendations regarding the future of the getWIS£ and Local Assistance Scheme. Officers are currently evaluating the existing arrangements before developing a business case to see how best to deliver these schemes in the future. Again, I have asked Officers to ensure that the Task Group is kept up to date with this work.

Finally, I would like to thank the Task Group for its continued hard work in scrutinising the impact of welfare reform on Surrey residents. This is a complex and ever changing issue, which makes the careful and considered scrutiny that the Task Group offers even more important.

David Hodge
Leader of the Council
29 July 2015