

CABINET

2 SEPTEMBER 2014

WELFARE REFORM TASK GROUP SUPPLEMENTARY REPORT

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Alan Jarrett, Finance and Deputy Leader
Report from: Mick Hayward, Chief Finance Officer
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Summary

The Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the Task Group report and recommendations on 26 August 2014. This supplementary report sets out the detail of that discussion.

1. Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee

- 1.1 The Chairman of the Welfare Reform Task Group introduced the Task Group report, which had considered the impact of the Government's Welfare Reforms.
- 1.2 The Committee was referred to the work the Council was already undertaking to inform and assist residents, which had been positively highlighted by partner organisations during the evidence sessions. The Committee was also advised that, whilst a smaller number of Medway residents than originally anticipated had been impacted, those households affected had seen a significant reduction in their household incomes. Such households would need to be supported. The importance of the Officer Welfare Reform Group as the principal co-ordinating vehicle was stressed, as were regular reports to the Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee to enable the impact to be monitored carefully and remedial action taken.
- 1.3 The Committee discussed the contents of the Task Group Report, which included:
 - Food banks, in particular a new food bank in Rochester East Ward, and the framework for distributing food bank vouchers; especially to families during the school holidays, when schools (who distribute vouchers) are closed.

It was noted that the Task Group had spoken with Medway Food Bank, which operated as part of the Trussell Trust's national network and was supported by a network of churches and other front-line organisations who assessed need and issued up to a maximum of three food bank vouchers. It was requested that officers consider the impact of school closures and distribution of vouchers further.

- Universal Credit and the requirement for claimants (in most cases) to make and maintain their claim online.

It was noted that nationally, further lessons would be learnt from the Department for Work and Pensions pilot projects. The Task Group had also recommended that the Welfare Reform Officers Working Group reflect on digital access, use and support across Medway and play a role in the developing digital inclusion workstreams.

- The Council's changing role with the end of Housing Benefit assessment and payments made by local authority staff under Universal Credit.

Members were advised that the Council would still need to maintain the Council Tax Reduction (CTR) Scheme and Universal Credit would only be applied to working age claimants in the first instance.

- Personal Independence Payment and Employment and Support Allowance and the delays and growing backlog of claims by the external provider (ATOS), which are impacting negatively on claimants.

It was noted that representations would be made to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government concerning this.

- The cessation of Government funding for the Local Welfare Provision Scheme

It was noted that the Task Group had recommended that a letter be sent requesting that the Government continue to provide an identifiable local welfare provision grant to local government from 2015/2016 onwards.

- The recommended Stakeholder event explaining the Welfare Reforms and the schemes in operation in Medway, and the opportunity this provided to gain further feedback on the Council's response to the Welfare Reforms.
- The need for claimants to open bank accounts, which would be considered further by the Welfare Reform Officers Working Group.

- 1.4 The Committee commended the Task Group and the supporting Council officers on the development of Task Group report.

1.5 The Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed that the Welfare Reform review document is referred to Cabinet on 2 September 2014 for consideration, together with the recommendations as set out within section 9 of the Cabinet report subject to recommendation 9.1.1 being amended to read:

9.1.1 That the Welfare Reform Officers Working Group continues to lead the Medway response to Welfare Reform and to work to develop communication between the Council and other agencies, with the objective of providing the customer with the single journey through a coordinated response. This should include:

- (a) a Stakeholder event explaining the Welfare Reforms and the schemes in operation in Medway. This event should enable organisations to showcase their response to the reforms;
- (b) the development of a booklet (in print and online) for all **affected** residents, signposting the various organisations providing support.
- (c) **A briefing for all Members on the Welfare Reforms.**

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