

People Select Committee

A meeting of People Select Committee was held on Monday, 19th October, 2015.

Present: Cllr Mrs Jean O'Donnell(Chairman), Cllr Eileen Johnson(Vice-Chairman), Cllr Lisa Grainge, Cllr Stefan Houghton, Cllr Barbara Inman, Cllr Mrs Sylvia Walmsley

Officers: Elaine Connolly (Department for Work and Pensions), Billy Park (Welfare Rights), Julie Higgins, Julie Nixon (Housing and Community Protection), Reuben Kench (Head of Culture and Leisure), Peter Mennear (Scrutiny Officer), Jenna McDonald (Governance Officer), Debbie Hurwood (Resources)

Also in attendance: Councillor Wilburn (Cabinet Member for Arts, Leisure and Culture)

Apologies: Cllr Kevin Faulks, Cllr Di Hewitt

1 Evacuation Procedure

The evacuation procedure was noted.

2 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3 Minutes for Signature - 29 June 2015

The minutes of the meeting held on 29 June 2015 were signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

AGREED that the minutes were signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

4 Minutes for Signature - 13 July 2015

The minutes of the meeting held on 13 July 2015 were signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

AGREED that the minutes were signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

5 Draft Minutes - 14 September 2015.

Consideration was given to the draft minutes of the meeting held on 14 September 2015

AGREED that the minutes be approved.

6 Welfare Reform

The Committee received a presentation on Universal Credit (UC). Key points were highlighted as follows:

- UC replaced six benefits with one payment and was paid on a monthly basis to the household

- In order to qualify for UC claimants were required to hold at least one bank

account for the payment to be sent directly, it was highlighted that in exceptional circumstances, other payment options could be considered

- UC included housing costs which were paid directly to the claimant who would then pay their landlord. Safety nets were in place for those landlords with tenants unable to manage their finances
- Unlike Job Seekers Allowance (JSA), UC was paid monthly. It was heard that initial alternative time scales for payments could be negotiated and adjusted in exceptional circumstances
- PAYE Real Time information was sought from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs in order to take into account the claimants other earnings. It was noted that an individual could earn up to £111 per month before benefits were impacted. 2.8% of Claimants in the North East reported their own earnings
- The likelihood of UC claimants moving into work was 4% higher than the likelihood of those claiming JSA
- 78% of UC claimants felt confident about their ability to budget with monthly payments
- While claiming UC, an individual was expected to commit to a minimum 35 hours worksearch per week, however commitments were tailored depending on circumstances; according to the latest information JSA claimants average 13.5 hours per worksearch per week and UC claimants average 27.5 hours worksearch per week.
- Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) worked with Local Authority colleagues in order to complete implementation activities across a range of services such as; Revenues and Benefits, Customer Service and Welfare Rights
- The Committee heard that a penalty of £50 could be issued to any individual failing to report any change in circumstances

Members raised the following points/questions:

- Was UC only available to single individuals? It was heard that while UC was available to couples and families in the North West, UC in the North East was currently only available to single people
- How quickly could officers cope with change? Members noted that when a claim was processed, the claimant entered an assessment period of 6 weeks and received payment at the end of the 6 week period.
- Members raised concerns around individuals losing their jobs and turning to Pay Day Loans due to the 6 week period which applied to UC. Members were informed that an advanced payment could be made when necessary in addition to budgeting support if required.
- The Committee asked whether an individual was required to apply for an advanced payment or was the payment automatic. In response, it was noted

that inquiries were made during interviews and posters were displayed in job centres relating to advanced payments

- Members asked which route would be taken if an individual did not hold a personal bank account, in response, it was highlighted that post office accounts could also be used for UC payments

- it was noted that it was not yet clear how the proposed changes to Working Tax Credits would apply to Universal Credit

- it was noted that there would need to be a cultural change for both claimants and employers. Universal credit would make zero hours more attractive for claimants as they would be topped up, employers would also need to make jobs more attractive as claimants would have the 'safety net' of UC and could work out which employment was best for them.

- Members were keen to understand the opinions of landlords with connections to UC Claimants. It was highlighted that Registered Social Landlords were involved in a Trusted Partner Status trial which could be used for requests such as direct payment transfers

The Committee received an update on Welfare rights, key points were highlighted as follows:

- The Welfare Rights Team was placed into Development and Neighbourhood Services (DNS) in 2015

- The team focussed on working with vulnerable people and to maximise benefit take-up, and also represented individuals at tribunals, 55 of which were successful to date. Campaigns were also undertaken for example the number of over 85s not claiming attendance allowance.

- A monthly newsletter was circulated which highlighted the changes and emerging issues around Welfare Rights

- Welfare Rights Officers expressed concerns relating to UC restricting claimants voluntary hours

- the Team had a relationship with the DWP whereby they were able to flag up issues of concern and unintended consequences of policies to the DWP.

The Committee commended the monthly Welfare Rights newsletter.

In relation to Universal Credit, it was noted that the Council expected a gradual increase in support activity over time as the scope of Universal Credit expanded.

AGREED that:

1. The information be noted.

2. DWP be invited to attend the Committee in 2016 following the rollout of Universal Credit in Stockton Borough

7 Overview of Culture and Leisure Services

The Committee was provided with a presentation on the performance of Culture and Leisure Services.

Members raised the following points/questions:

- the possibility of future developments at Egglecliffe library was queried. It was noted that the venue was relatively small which restricted development opportunities but there was good links with local schools for example. The library would be included in the forthcoming library review with all others.
- The Committee commended the mobile library service, it was noted that the service was valuable to those individuals who did not travel and had difficulties leaving their home
- The Cabinet Member noted that close consideration would be given to services which focus on improving the lifestyles of vulnerable individuals
- Members raised concerns regarding the lack of lighting in the car park of Preston Park. It was noted that further work at Preston Park was being investigated, and the Heritage Lottery Fund Parks for People fund would be explored.
- The Committee was keen for the River Tees to be included within the key priorities for further work. Reference was made to the previous scrutiny work that looked at opportunities for leisure uses of the River Tees and how this had made a major contribution to raising the profile of one of the Borough's major assets. It was noted that the River continued to be a major part of activities that took place including the River Tees Park project, Preston Park, and events. The Council worked with the Canals and Rivers Trust, although this had greatly reduced capacity, and the local River Users Group was still in existence.
- The Cabinet Member noted that Stockton should be proud of its cultural and leisure offer and that services had been sustained to a good level to date. However the increasing financial pressures meant that all services would be under review. The importance of culture needed to be recognised when marketing the Borough and sub-region to encourage business investment.
- Expressions of disappointment were made in relation to the Match Stick which was replaced by another piece of art work, it was heard that this was due to the commissioners request for the art work to be changed every 2 years and there would be a variety of works to suit all tastes. It was noted that the Council did not commission this particular artwork.
- Members requested information on the progress of The Globe Theatre, in response, it was heard that although SBC continuously contributed effort to the development of The Globe, developments must take place in partnership with the owner

- The Committee were keen to understand the future plans for the old Post Office on Stockton High Street. It was noted that no official plans were finalised to date but the site had significant potential

AGREED that the information be noted.

8 Work Programme

The Committee gave consideration to the Work Programme 2015-16

AGREED that the Work Programme be noted.