

People Select Committee

A meeting of People Select Committee was held on Monday, 21st March, 2016.

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

Officers: Julie Nixon (Transformation Team), Peter Acheson, Gemma Mann (Public Health) Peter Mennear (Scrutiny Officer), Jenna McDonald (Governance Officer)

Also in attendance:

Apologies: Cllr Kevin Faulks, Cllr Mrs Sylvia Walmsley

1 Evacuation Procedure

The evacuation procedure was noted.

2 Declarations of Interest

Councillor Di Hewitt declared a personal interest as a trustee of the Stockton Information and Advice Service.

AGREED that the declaration be noted.

3 Minutes for signature - 18 January 2016

The minutes of the meeting held on 18 January 2016 were signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

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

4 Draft Minutes - 22 February 2016

Consideration was given to the draft minutes of the meeting held on 22 February 2016.

AGREED that the minutes be approved.

5 Welfare Reform Update (to follow)

The Committee received an update on Welfare Reform.

Key points and emerging issues were highlighted together as follows:

- The report on Welfare Reform was due to be considered at Cabinet on Wednesday 23 March 2016

- Significant issues existed around supported accommodation. It was noted that the Government had taken the decision to reduce rents in the social sector by 1% for the next four years to bring rents back in line with the private rented sector. A supported housing review was being conducted which was expected to start delivering findings in the spring of 2016. The Government announced a year long exception for all supported accommodation to allow time to study the

evidence of the review.

- Members heard that the Government had also announced that the social sector and private sector would be aligned by introducing Local Housing Allowance limits to social sector tenants in receipt of Housing Benefit of the Housing Element of Universal Credit.

- It was confirmed that while working towards the implementation, the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) would work closely with the sector to ensure that those in supported housing were protected. North Star, a local provider in Stockton was one provider involved in the national group of fifty Registered Providers that were being consulted.

- Local Authorities had not been invited to take part however Housing Services were carrying out an exercise to map local people in Stockton who would be affected by the implementation. It was heard that findings from the mapping exercise would be presented to the Leader of SBC.

- Further consultation and announcements on the continued roll out of Universal Credit were expected towards the end of 2016. The DWP advised that the intention was to complete the final stage by 2021, this would involve converting the stock of existing Housing Benefit claims onto UC.

- The Committee was informed that with regard to the Local Council Tax Support Scheme, the Local Government Finance Act imposed a duty upon local councils to adopt a local council tax support scheme, to replace council tax benefit from April 2013. It was noted that the existing scheme which was designed to safeguard the financial position of the council and groups of residents would remain in place for the financial year 2016/17. A Government consultation paper was released in December 2015 seeking views on the national scheme. Stockton Council would be responding that a local scheme would be appropriate but that additional flexibility would be welcome.

- With regard to the Benefit Cap, it was heard that the DWP would provide a list to the Local Authority of those people affected by the Benefit Cap.

- In relation to bedroom restrictions, it was heard that The Court of Appeal had recently ruled that the removal of the spare room subsidy unlawfully discriminates against victims of domestic violence and disabled children. Members noted that Ministers were planning to appeal the decision in the Supreme Court, however from a local perspective, until details from the DWP were received bedroom restrictions would still apply.

- Members heard that a review would take place on the Social Fund in order to confirm whether the fund was administered in a fair and appropriate way.

- With regard to Food Banks, it was noted that Public Health part funded a local project which focussed on the usage of food banks in the Borough. It was heard that most food bank users were aged 25-44 and over half of food bank clients were single.

- It was noted that through the Stockton Advice and Information Service,

volunteers offered service to those visiting food banks, it was heard that the individual would be paired with an advocate for support and guidance

- The Council in house Welfare Rights Team worked closely with social workers to ensure that the needs of individuals were met.

- At the end of Q3 2015-16, the Welfare Rights Team had raised confirmed benefit awards of over £858,000. During this time period, the team were also successful in supporting claimants in 81 separate benefit appeal tribunals.

Members raised the following points/questions:

- With regard to the changes being made to social housing, it was asked how the Local Authority would be affected. In response, Members heard that the largest impact on the Local Authority was likely to be the potential increase of people moving into residential accommodation and out of supported housing schemes.

- It was asked whether research looked at reasons for visits to a food bank and not only the numbers. It was heard that reasons for visits to food banks were assessed and many people visited food banks as a result of a change in circumstances, relationship breakdowns, sanctions and unemployment. There was a need to provide help to those repeatedly visiting food banks and who had complex issue that needed focussed support.

- It was important to identify and understand the personal circumstances of those visiting food banks on multiple occasions.

- Members commended the advocate service available to local people via Welfare Rights Service.

- The Committee asked which areas were likely to be affected by the changes being implemented by the DWP. It was highlighted that the area's most likely to be affected by change were;

- Disability proposals
- Supported Accommodation
- Thirteen Housing Group and other Registered Providers

It was noted that managing change was a challenge across the board.

AGREED that the contents of the report be noted and the Committee's thanks be forwarded to the Welfare Rights Team.

6 Scrutiny Review of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)

The Committee gave consideration to the summary of evidence for the Scrutiny Review of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).

AGREED that:

1. The content of the report be noted.
2. The draft recommendations be supported and the draft final report be considered at the next meeting.

7 Work Programme 2015-16

Members gave consideration to the Work Programme 2015-16.

It was highlighted that the following reviews would be considered at future meetings:

- Pupil Premium
- Mental Health and Wellbeing including prevention of suicide and self harm

Members suggested that Cabinet Members attended future meetings where appropriate to provide evidence.

AGREED that the work programme be noted.

8 Chair's Update

The Chair provided no update.