

THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL
WELFARE REFORM WORKING GROUP
NOTE OF MEETING

Note of Meeting of the Welfare Reform Working Group held in Committee Room 5, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Tuesday 18 June 2013 at 2.00 pm.

PRESENT

Mr A Christie

Mr D Fallows

Officials in attendance:-

Mr D Lamont, Head of Exchequer, Finance Service
Ms M Kinsella, District Manager, Health and Social Care, Health and Social Care Service
Mr B Mackinnon, Employability Team Leader, Planning and Development Service
Mrs S McKandie, Exchequer Manager (Policy and Development), Finance Service
Ms G Ward, Policy Officer, Housing and Property Service
Ms A Macrae, Committee Administrator, Chief Executive's Service

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr D Hendry, Mrs D Mackay, Mr T Prag, and Mrs C Wilson, all on other Council business.

It was reported that notification had been received from Mrs M Davidson that she had been delayed in attending the meeting.

Note:- The Chair confirmed that in the absence of a quorum the meeting would proceed on an informal basis, in the form of a briefing. He also requested that a note of the briefing meeting be submitted to the next meeting of the Finance, Housing and Resources Committee.

2. Declarations of Interest

Mr A Christie declared a non-financial interest in each of the items listed below as General Manager and Company Secretary of Inverness CAB but, having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct, concluded that his interest did not preclude him from taking part in the discussion.

3. Personal Independence Payments

There had been circulated briefing note by the Director of Finance which advised that the current Disability Living Allowance (DLA) would be replaced by Personal Independence Payments (PIP) for people aged 16 to 64 with claims in the Highland Council area commencing from Monday 10 June 2013. It was confirmed that whilst most existing Disability Living Allowance claimants would not be affected until 2015, from 7 October 2013 existing DLA claimants who reported a change in their care or mobility needs; claimants with existing fixed term DLA awards due to expire after the end of February 2014; and, young people in receipt of a DLA and who were turning 16 years old, would be asked to claim a Personal Independence Payment. The briefing note also provided details of the number of people in the Highlands in receipt of a DLA as at November 2012.

The Group was further advised that between October 2015 and 2018 all the remaining eligible claimants in receipt of a DLA award would be invited to make a claim for Personal Independence Payments, and that the Department for Work and Pensions aimed to contact all affected persons by 2018 to provide advice on the application process.

In discussion the Chairman suggested that to provide benchmark information it would be helpful if future reports on Personal Independent Payments contained statistics for Highland and other comparable authorities in Scotland. He also suggested that there was a need to track and record information in regard to the impacts associated with the migration of people to PIP on both in house services and the external advice agencies, and the outcomes for those people affected by the changes.

In regard to awareness raising it was noted that the welfare reform road shows had included information on PIPs, and the Exchequer Manager undertook to investigate opportunities for further awareness raising activities.

4. Local Support Service for Universal Credit

There had been circulated briefing note by the Director of Finance which outlined the suggested Council position in regard to its involvement in a local support service for Universal Credit, which was understood to be consistent with the current COSLA negotiating position.

In regard to the suggested Council position it was reported that:-

- there was an acceptance that mitigation was necessary to help vulnerable families in Highland and therefore that a local support service was essential. However there was a reluctance to be seen to play an active role in the delivery of Universal Credit, noting that it was also understood that in the provision of any local support the Council would have no greater access to the application process than the claimant, and that staff would play no part in the adjudication process;
- that the Council had been involved in drawing up the UK support framework document which set out the potential role of local authorities; and
- the Council was prepared to partner the Department of Work and Pensions in a local support service, but only on the basis that adequate funding was provided. In this regard it was confirmed that the Council was represented on an advisory group of officials investigating with COSLA and the Scottish Government the issue of funding.

It was also reported that the Council was participating in COSLA's consultancy study by Rocket Science Ltd, funded by the Scottish Government, investigating what a local support service would mean for Highland and how this could be extrapolated more widely. The local District Manager of the Department of Work and Pensions had also recently written to the Chairman seeking a meeting to explore future collaboration with the Council, although the intention was that any such meeting would be postponed until negotiations at a national level had been concluded.

In discussion the Group acknowledged the need to be involved in a local support service to meet the needs of claimants in the Highlands. However the view was expressed that the Council should not be seen to be involved in the delivery of Universal Credit, given its limited role in the application and adjudication process. In this regard it was suggested that there should be no joint branding in regard to any local support service. However it would be appropriate to have regular meetings with the DWP to share concerns and ensure the correct outcomes were being delivered.

Thereafter, Members expressed their support for the proposed stance on a local support service for Universal Credit as set out in the briefing note, and agreed that this be taken forward as a recommendation to the Finance, Housing and Resources Committee. Members also requested that a further update on progress be provided to the next meeting of the Group, with a view to a definitive position being provided to the DWP in due course.

5. Free School Meals

There had been circulated briefing note by the Director of Finance which advised that the introduction of Universal Credit in October 2013 would bring a new single system of means-tested support for working age people in and out of work and that as a result eligibility for passported benefits such as free school meals would be reconsidered. Accordingly the Scottish Government were considering action to protect access to free school lunches following the introduction of Universal Credit on the basis that it was clear about the educational, health and social benefits of providing children and young people living in low income households with a nutritious meal at school.

The Chair noted that a separate Council working group was considering how the uptake of free school meals could be increased, and suggested that officers should input into that Group. It was noted that the take up of free school meals was low compared to the entitlement, and it was suggested that the position continue to be monitored to consider whether people were losing out or whether uptake was increasing due to the impacts of welfare reform.

6. Spare Room Subsidy (Bedroom Tax) – Update

The Group was provided with a verbal update and presentation on the experience so far in regard to the spare room subsidy. During the briefing it was reported that there were currently 2,857 tenants in Highland affected by the spare room subsidy, of whom 1,847 (65%) were Highland Council tenants and 1,010 (35%) were housing association tenants. In total 2,336 tenants had been subject to a 14% reduction in housing benefit and 521 subject to a 25% reduction. It was further reported that of the 1,047 tenants who had responded to the Council's exercise to contact tenants affected by the welfare reform changes, 597 (57%) had been aware of Universal Credit, 680 (60%) had internet access and 340 (30%) of tenants felt confident that they could make online applications.

In addition to the above, the Policy Officer reported that over the period 31 March to 18 May 2013 the number of tenants showing arrears had increased from 724 to 1144 tenants, and that the position would continue to be closely monitored.

In regard to transfer applications she reported that 417 tenants had received additional transfer points in response to the spare room subsidy. From 1 April 2013 there had been an increase of 173 in relation to transfer applications, although she cautioned that it could not be confirmed at this stage whether this was entirely due to the spare room subsidy, and she advised that the position would continue to be monitored.

The Policy Officer also referred to the impacts associated with the introduction of the Benefit Cap from 15 July 2013 which, prior to the introduction of Universal Credit, would result in reductions of Housing Benefit for some tenants. She confirmed that 10 households across Highland were set to lose between £100 to £300 per week. She further reported that consideration would be given to the support that could be provided to those tenants affected on a case by case basis.

Discussion then followed on the mechanisms by which the Council could assist people affected by the Benefit Cap, for example through employment opportunities, and it was agreed that a briefing note be prepared for the Group in this regard. A point was also raised

in regard to the information detailed above on the number tenants who felt confident that they could make online applications. It was suggested that this demonstrated there was a skills gap which required to be addressed.

7. Use of Discretionary Housing Payments since April 2013

The Head of Exchequer provided an update on the spend in regard to Discretionary Housing Payments since 1 April 2013. He advised that to date there had been 518 applications to the Fund of which 370 applications had been approved, and 148 applications rejected. The year to date spend was £66,547 and projected spend for 2013/14 was £399,282. On that basis it was anticipated that the Fund would be exhausted by mid October 2013.

In discussion it was noted that while the total funding available to the Council had been confirmed as being £216,000 for the current financial year, it was anticipated the final level of funding would be reduced due to the Government's amendment of the rules for the spare room subsidy in respect of the armed forces and foster carers.

During discussion the Chair requested that the Group be provided with more detailed information on the main reasons for applications being rejected.

It was also suggested that different decisions may have been applied to similar applications to the Fund, and reference was made to the importance of sharing practice across the various teams and staff. The Exchequer Manager confirmed that she would investigate specific cases in conjunction with the Chair.

8. Scottish Welfare Fund

The Head of Exchequer provided an update on the spend in regard to the Scottish Welfare Fund both in regard to crisis and community care grants together with details of the categories of spend. He explained that to date the pay out of grants was relatively low, and he suggested that a period of three months be allowed to analyse the pattern of spend and to consider whether to alter priorities after that period. He reported that this may include recommending to the Scottish Government that medium priority cases should qualify for grants. In conclusion he advised that based on the current spend to date it appeared that the funding allocated for the Scottish Welfare Fund would be adequate.

The Group noted the update on the Scottish Welfare Fund.

9. Meeting with MPs

The Chair requested that arrangements be made to meet with John Thurso MP, and if possible the other local MPs, as soon as practicable following the Council recess.

The meeting ended at 2.40 pm.
