

WELFARE REFORM TASK AND FINISH GROUP

TUESDAY 23RD JUNE 2015 AT 5.30PM – WELLINGTON ROOM

Notes

Present: Councillors Evans, Ferrier & Roberts
Ian Harrison, Corporate Director (IH)
Amanda Fahey, Head of Finance (AF)
Dawn Menzies-Kelly, Head of Revenues & Benefits (DMK)
Adrian Long, Customer Services Support Officer

Apologies: Cllr Jackman

IH opened the meeting by advising the group about the change in roles for IH, AF and DMK, but explained the purpose of the group remains the same.

Political Landscape

IH advised the group that following the General Election, National Government has stated its intent to continue with Welfare Reform including the introduction of a new welfare bill. IH went through some area of national spending:- housing benefit, tax credits, child benefit and PIPs. It is considered unlikely that the cut could come from only one area and related the potential planned cuts of £12bn to the current values of each of these welfares.

Queen's Speech

IH explained the various elements of the "Full Employment & Welfare Benefits" bill and the potential implications to RBC residents particularly the lowering of the benefit cap. IH also posed the question that if the majority of working age benefits are to be frozen, what would happen to Council Tax Support, as this has mirrored the increases in state benefits?

8th July Budget

IH mentioned the "emergency" budget on 8th which follows on from the Autumn Statement 2014, the Budget 2015 and will be followed by Autumn spending review, Autumn statement 2015 and the Budget 2016. Hopefully, the decisions the group will be faced with, will become clearer after 8th July 2015.

National and Local Data

→ Benefit Caseload & JSA figures

IH explained that the benefit caseload continues to decrease overall, although there is an increase in the number of Housing Benefit only claims. JSA numbers also continue to decrease, both Nationally and Locally. The percentage of population in Rushmoor in receipt of JSA is 0.2% lower than the figure for the South East.

→ Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)

IH showed the group for the first time the figure for the number of people on ESA. Although there was a steady increase since 2008 (when ESA was introduced), the overall number of claimants has remained steady. Claimants have been moving from IB and SDA to ESA.

→ CTS

IH reminded the group of the current situation, how they reached the decision on setting the level of CTS and the positive feedback from Cabinet. IH also stated that the group may need to decide on the way forward for 2016-17. Overall, the amount of CTS paid has decreased in line with the Benefit caseload.

Cllr Evans asked why there was an increase in the claims from Working Age – Vulnerable group. DMK explained that this group has longer-term issues than the other groups.

RBC has maintained its collection rate in face of difficult circumstances whereas the National picture has seen a decline

CTS nationally varies from area to area and the trend is for CTS minimum payments to be increased, although some council still have no change from the old CTB system. The known changes for 2015/16 were shown and again the trend affects CTS negatively.

→ CTS – the way forward.

IH asked the group for their thoughts about where RBC might go. He suggested that any consultation period in the event of a suggested scheme change would be around 6 – 9 weeks but would need to be completed by late autumn. A meeting for the 11th August 2015 was agreed upon.

Cllr Evans wondered whether if any lowering of CTS would have a negative effect on future collection rates.

Cllr Roberts hoped that the Full Employment bill would give a roadmap for progress rather than just a steer.

AF said that the scheme should be looked at to see if changes are needed or wanted – the issue might be identifying the element of the grant related to CTS.

There was then a general discussion around possible changes to Tax Credits, taxation levels and the living wage.

Other Welfare Reform Areas

→ **Social Sector Size Criteria (SSSC)**

IH informed the group that the number of cases has plateaued.

→ **Benefit Cap**

DMK advised the group that the figure is remaining static but the promising thing is that the residents are engaging with RBC and working towards changing the way they budget.

→ **Discretionary Housing Payment and Exceptional Hardship Fund (DHP and EHF)**

IH explained that the DHP fund is to be reduced this year and stated that the majority of payments are for SSSC cases. The EHF payments appear to be following the same pattern as last year.

→ **Universal Credit (UC)**

IH explained to the group that nationally the number of UC cases is gradually increasing, and that Aldershot and Farnborough jobcentres fall into the final tranche, with a go live date of around February 2016.

Final Considerations

IH advised that he has been requested for a report to Community Panel in either November or January. He suggested wider Member engagement along the lines of a Member Seminar and this was agreed by the group. The date will be confirmed at the meeting on 11th August.

Cllr Roberts requested that a copy of the presentation be sent to Members of the group.

Date of the next meeting – 11th August 2015 – 5:30pm – Vulcan Room