

<b>Subject:</b>	Cabinet Response to the Findings of the Welfare Reforms Task and Finish Group Report	<b>Status:</b>	For Publication
<b>Report to:</b>	Partner Scrutiny Committee	<b>Date:</b>	3rd March 2014
<b>Report of:</b>	Service Assurance Manager	<b>Portfolio Holder:</b>	Customers, Legal and Licensing
<b>Key Decision:</b>	Forward Plan	General Exception	Special Urgency
<b>Equality Impact Assessment:</b>	Required:	No	Attached: /No
<b>Biodiversity Impact Assessment</b>	Required:	No	Attached: No
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1.	<b>RECOMMENDATION(S)</b>
1.1	That the Partner Scrutiny Committee note the Cabinet's response to the recommendations within the Welfare Reforms Task and Finish Group Report

## 2. PURPOSE OF REPORT

2.1 That the Partner Scrutiny Committee consider the Cabinet's response to the recommendations from both Phase 1 and Phase 2 as set out below.

## 3. CORPORATE PRIORITIES

3.1 The matters discussed in this report impact directly on the following corporate priorities:

- **Responsive Value for Money Services:** This priority is about the Council working collaboratively, being a provider, procurer and a commissioner of services that are efficient and that meet the needs of local people.

## 4. RISK ASSESSMENT IMPLICATIONS

4.1 There are no specific risk issues for members to consider arising from this report.

## 5. BACKGROUND AND OPTIONS

5.1 Whilst developing its work programme for 2013/14, Overview and Scrutiny agreed to establish a Task and Finish Group to look at the impact on local services following the biggest changes to the welfare system in 60 years.

5.2 The Task and Finish Group work was undertaken in two Phases and met between December 2012 and January 2014.

5.3 The report of Phase 1 of the Task and Finish Group was submitted to Cabinet in June 2013 when they agreed, in principal, to the recommendations.

5.4 This response covers both Phase 1 and Phase 2 reports.

## **Response to recommendations of the Phase 1 report.**

### **Recommendation 1:**

**That more is done to promote the use of the Borough's Credit Unions as a mechanism to encourage people to use as an alternative to payday loans and loan sharks.**

Cabinet support this recommendation and the following action has been implemented:-

- This action is now a priority within the Rossendale Action Partnership.

### **Recommendation 2:**

**That Green Vale Homes and the Council's Strategic Housing Team develop a rent arrears protocol for Vulnerable Householders in order to bring in early intervention measures. Also, explore the possible of using the protocol with all Registered Providers and private landlords within the Borough.**

Cabinet support this recommendation and the following actions have been implemented:-

- Officers have met with colleagues from Green Vale Homes to agree a process whereby the Council's Housing Options Team are notified of proposed repossession actions at an early stage. This will be developed into a formal rent arrears protocol.
- The group has identified vulnerable tenants for specific support action.

### **Recommendation 3:**

**That the Housing Options Team, in consultation with Green Vale Homes, investigate potential schemes to meet the current shortage of suitable rented property within the Borough to include:**

- a) A scheme to encourage homeowners with large properties to rent out a spare room or portion of their property**
- b) Identifying other schemes that will increase the number of affordable rented properties within the borough**

Cabinet support this recommendation and it is proposed that the following actions will be explored during 2014:-

- This will be considered by the officer group with Green Vale Homes and the impact this initiative might have on Welfare Benefits.
- Cabinet also noted that the successful Linked Up empty homes scheme was bringing a number of long term vacant properties back into use as affordable housing units.

### **Recommendation 4:**

**That the provision of support within Rossendale for non-priority needs homelessness is reviewed to identify what additional support or resource is required to meet this demand.**

Cabinet support this recommendation and the following action will be implemented:-

- A full review and re-write of the current Homelessness Strategy will be undertaken and reported through Overview and Scrutiny and Cabinet during 2014/2015.

**Recommendation 5:**

**To ensure that even if a family forced to move or is placed in bed and breakfast accommodation, children should wherever possible remain in the same school.**

Cabinet support this recommendation and the following action is in place.

- Council officers already work with families to try to ensure that disruption to children's school arrangements is minimised wherever possible.

**Recommendation 6:**

**To work across Council departments and other partners and continue to build on the good work currently being undertaken by the Rossendale Action Partnership to support our residents through the Welfare Reforms.**

Cabinet support this recommendation and the following action is in place.

- The Rossendale Action Partnership includes representatives from statutory and voluntary agencies across a wide spectrum. The RAP has now agreed its priorities to promote and support the work of the Credit Unions and the delivery of financial management projects with young people. RAP's priorities for 13/14 were to increase membership of and loans by Rossendale Credit Unions and to improve financial literacy in young people. These priorities will be reviewed by RAP in March 2014 when priorities for 14/15 will be agreed.

**Recommendation 7:**

**The Task and Finish Group ask that Lancashire County Council consider a review in six months on the impact the withdrawal of the customer service advisors may have on customers – County Councillors may want to discuss this at County level.**

*The report will be sent to Lancashire County Council for their comments on this recommendation.*

**Recommendation 8:**

**That the Task and Finish Group applaud the dedication and commitment of the Housing Options Team for their work, especially with vulnerable people.**

Cabinet support this recommendation and the Head of Health, Housing & Regeneration has been asked to formally commend the team on its commitment.

**Response to recommendations of Phase 2 report.**

**Recommendation 1:**

**The Task and Finish Group could continue its work to monitor the prolonged effect of welfare reform on the Council and its Rossendale residents. However, Members agreed that this should be passed to the Rossendale Action Partnership (RAP) to fulfil its terms of reference, including working alongside other relevant stakeholders, to work to achieve the best possible outcomes for people of Rossendale in this connection.**

Cabinet support this recommendation:-

- The Rossendale Action Partnership recognises the impact of welfare reforms on Rossendale's communities and is in the process of developing a prioritised multi agency action plan to ensure that relevant partners are able to take a joined up approach to achieving the best outcomes for Rossendale's residents.

### **Recommendation 2:**

**That Lancashire County Council keep the Council updated on its future plans for the administering of the Care and Urgent Needs Support Scheme (CaUNSS) once funding ceases in April 2015.**

*The report will be sent to Lancashire County Council for their comments on this recommendation.*

### **Recommendation 3:**

That the Council continue with its sensitive approach, as more customers would get into difficulties when the 20% cut to the council tax support in 2015.

Cabinet support this recommendation and the following action is in place:

- Our aim is to continuously promote this service through a strategic marketing campaign, to be approved by the Rossendale Action Partnership, and by working with other partner organisations. We will identify customers facing the threat of financial difficulty when they attend the One Stop Shop and to publicise the service by including information with correspondence issued by the Housing Benefit Department and Council Tax Department, for example when a Council Tax reminder or Housing Benefit overpayment letter is issued. Take up and profiling of the customers utilising the service will be regularly reviewed.
- Customers can also visit our mobile advice unit STAN (Service to A Neighbourhood) to ascertain if they are entitled to any welfare benefits/ or are receiving all they are entitled to.
- Flexible payment arrangements will be considered for customers who experience difficulties.

Where enforcement action is necessary, hardship & vulnerability issues will be taken into account when determining the appropriate course for debt recovery.

### **Recommendation 4:**

**That the Council continue to provide whatever assistance possible to financial support organisations in the Borough to ensure they can continue to help those experiencing financial hardship.**

Cabinet support this recommendation and the following action has been implemented:-

- Whilst the overall community grants budget has been reduced as a result of the Governments reduction in public expenditure, the Council has prioritised the remaining allocation to support local organisations working in partnership and providing financial inclusion services to the people of Rossendale, with an emphasis on organisations working in partnership.

#### **Recommendation 5:**

**That the Council continue to actively encourage claimants to make applications for Discretionary Housing Payments and receive support from the Money Advice Officer in the One Stop Shop.**

Cabinet support this recommendation and the following action is in place:

- The Housing Benefit department will continue to closely monitor DHP claims and maximise expenditure from this fund to customers experiencing financial difficulty.
- All customers that have been affected by the implementation of the Benefit Cap and the rent restrictions in the social rented sector will be targeted to receive additional DHP information.
- The Housing Benefit Department will continue to produce DHP promotional material and perform target campaigns to customers that have a shortfall in Housing Benefit
- We will continue to publicise the availability of the Money Management Service and DHP's.
- Guidance and support will be provided by the Customer Service Officers in the Councils One Stop Shop

#### **COMMENTS FROM STATUTORY OFFICERS:**

##### **6. SECTION 151 OFFICER**

6.1 Any financial implications arising will be contained within existing budgets.

##### **7. MONITORING OFFICER**

7.1 No comments

##### **8. POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND CONSULTATION CARRIED OUT**

8.1 No HR implications.

Consultation has been carried out by Members of the Task and Finish Group, Members of the Public and various Officers from Rossendale Borough Council.

##### **9. CONCLUSION**

9.1 The Cabinet supports the recommendations of the Welfare Reforms Task and Finish Group and has started to implement the majority of the relevant actions. The Cabinet values this

important review undertaken by the Task and Finish Group.

Background Papers	
Document	Place of Inspection
Phase 1 Report of the Welfare Reforms Task and Finish Group	Democratic Services Room 213, Futures Park