

**COMMUNITY, CUSTOMER AND ORGANISATIONAL SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE**

Thursday, 30th January, 2020

Present:-

Councillor P Innes (Chair)

Councillors Borrell
L Collins

Councillors Kellman

Councillor J Innes, Cabinet Member for Business Transformation +
Councillor A Serjeant, Deputy Leader +++

Mick Blythe, Client Manager +
Clare Fowkes, Operational Benefits Manager +
Donna Reddish, Assistant Director – Policy and Communications ++
Carolyn Szadura, Head of Revenues +
Brian Offiler, Democratic and Scrutiny Officer

+ Attended for Minute No. 32

++ Attended for Minute Nos. 36 - 37

+++ Attended for Minute No. 37

**29 DECLARATIONS OF MEMBERS' AND OFFICERS' INTERESTS
RELATING TO ITEMS ON THE AGENDA.**

No declarations of interest were received.

30 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Dyke.

31 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Community, Customer and Organisational Scrutiny Committee held on 28 November, 2019 were presented.

RESOLVED –

That the Minutes be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

**32 CABINET MEMBER FOR BUSINESS TRANSFORMATION -
IMPLEMENTATION OF UNIVERSAL CREDIT**

The Cabinet Member for Business Transformation, the Client Manager, the Head of Revenues and the Operational Benefits Manager presented a progress report on the implementation of Universal Credit (UC) in Chesterfield since the previous report to the Committee in March, 2019.

The report referred to the continuing work by the benefits team with partners and stakeholders to ensure the best possible outcomes for claimants and the Council, including the following issues:

- The assisted claiming and budgeting support in most cases having been provided by the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) since April, 2019, although data on its use was not currently available. It was unclear whether CAB nationally would continue to provide this support in 2020/21.
- The managed migration of existing claimants from legacy benefits to UC which had been scheduled to start in January, 2020, had been delayed, and a further report on this to parliament was not expected until Autumn, 2020.
- The Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) had been managed within the reduced budget for 2019/20, although this had necessitated payments to claimants being lower in order to maintain the numbers of claimants supported. The DHP budget for 2020/21 had not yet been announced.
- A higher proportion of UC claimants had been subject to sanctions (reducing or stopping payment of benefit) than claimants of other benefits, mostly for failure to attend work focused interviews.
- Availability of IT in various locations for claimants to access their records was currently adequate, although this may need to be reviewed when managed migration was implemented in the future.

The report included the latest statistical and financial information in respect of UC claims, including:

- Average rent arrears of Council tenants affected by UC was £459 in January, 2020 (having taken account of managed payments received by the Council direct from DWP), which was significantly higher than the average arrears of other Council tenants on Housing Benefit;
- Approximately 75% of tenants claiming UC were in rent arrears, and the number of such tenants had risen from 840 in February, 2019 to 1,330 in January, 2020;
- The total level of rent arrears was expected to rise as the number of tenants claiming UC increased in the future;
- The impact of UC payments being based on 52 weeks despite 2019-20 being a 53 week rent year was being monitored, although it was expected this would increase the level of rent arrears.

It was noted that the Benefits Team continued to support individual claimants and liaise with DWP including in respect of issues of underpayment of the Severe Disability Premium, the Carer element not being included in UC awards, sole occupiers with others named on a tenancy who were no longer resident, tenants whose housing costs were still being calculated on a 48 week rent year.

The report referred to the Citizens Advice (CAB) / Local Government Association Council tax protocol, although officers' advice was that this would not currently add significant value to the Council's operation of UC.

Members expressed concerns regarding:

- The lack of current data from CAB on the use of the assisted claiming and budgeting support;
- The 5 weeks waiting period leading to increased use of foodbanks and increased levels of child poverty;
- The application of sanctions, some of which had been successfully appealed;
- Vulnerable people having been defrauded by others persuading them to claim advances, there having been a few cases locally;

- Whether there would need to be additional IT capacity and support when managed migration was implemented;
- The difficulty for the Council to manage budgets given the impact of UC on rent and Council Tax arrears.

Members expressed their appreciation of the work being undertaken in supporting claimants, and the Chair thanked the Cabinet Member for Business Transformation, the Client Manager, the Head of Revenues and the Operational Benefits Manager for their contribution to the meeting.

RESOLVED -

- (1) That the ongoing work on the implementation of Universal Credit be supported.
- (2) That progress of the implementation of Universal Credit be reported to the Committee in the summer / autumn of 2020, subject to the issue being included on the Committee's work programme as part of the annual scrutiny work programming for 2020/21.

33 SCRUTINY MONITORING

The Committee considered the Scrutiny recommendations implementation monitoring schedule.

RESOLVED –

That the Scrutiny monitoring schedule be noted.

34 FORWARD PLAN

The Committee considered the Forward Plan for the period 1 February – 31 May, 2020.

RESOLVED –

That the Forward Plan be noted.

35 **WORK PROGRAMME FOR THE COMMUNITY, CUSTOMER AND ORGANISATIONAL SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

The Committee considered the list of items included on its work programme for 2019/20.

It was noted that the annual scrutiny work programming dates for the 2020/21 work programme had been scheduled for March 24 and April 21, 2020.

RESOLVED -

That the work programme be approved and updated to include the decisions of the current meeting.

36 **CABINET MEMBER FOR GOVERNANCE - ELECTED MEMBERS PARENTAL LEAVE POLICY**

The Assistant Director – Policy and Communications presented a report on the proposed policy for parental leave for elected members.

The report outlined the objective of the proposed policy as being to enable elected members to take appropriate leave at the time of birth or adoption and to ensure that reasonable arrangements were in place to provide cover for Cabinet Members and others in receipt of Special Responsibility Allowances during periods of leave. The proposed policy, based on the Local Government Association's Women's Taskforce Parental Leave Policy, was attached as an appendix to the report.

Arising from Members' questions it was explained that the proposed policy did not relate to cases of fostering, as separate arrangements could apply in such cases.

It was noted that the proposed policy was due to be considered by Cabinet and full Council in February, 2020, and the Committee stated its support for the voluntary implementation of the policy.

The Chair thanked the Assistant Director – Policy and Communications for her contribution to the meeting.

RESOLVED –

That the voluntary implementation of the proposed policy for parental leave for elected members be supported.

37 DEPUTY LEADER - IMPLEMENTATION OF COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

The Deputy Leader and the Assistant Director – Policy and Communications presented a progress report on the implementation of the Communications and Engagement Strategy following its approval by Council in July, 2018.

The report outlined progress against the objectives of the strategy, including:

- Four editions of the combined Your Chesterfield and Our Homes publication had been produced including use of infographics. Responses from the 'Are you being served' survey identified that the publication was seen by 72% of residents.
- The bringing together of all live and concluded consultation information on a consultations page on the Council's website.
- The continued use of face to face consultation, including on changes to the allocations policy, repairs and maintenance, anti-social behaviour, Gypsy and Traveller consultation, the Local Plan and leisure services, with further activity being developed in respect of the HS2 masterplan project.
- Increased use of infographics, videos, graphic design and social media to present information in a more accessible and understandable format. The Digital Communications Report for October and November, 2019 was attached as an appendix to the report.
- Improved communication with staff, including the staff in bloom garden and recycled Christmas decorations competitions.

It was noted that resourcing this increased communications, marketing and engagement activity proved challenging at peak times. The agency model approach which had been piloted with Housing Services had

worked well and the potential for using this approach would be discussed with other teams.

Members welcomed the progress and developments in the activity and approaches detailed in the report. The Chair thanked the Deputy Leader and the Assistant Director – Policy and Communications for their contribution to the meeting.

RESOLVED –

- (1) That the work outlined in the progress report be supported.
- (2) That further progress be reported to the Committee in the next Council year, subject to the outcome of the annual scrutiny work programming for 2020/21.

38 SCRUTINY PROJECT GROUPS PROGRESS UPDATES

It was reported that the Scrutiny Project Group on Community Safety and Providing for Young People had been continuing to gather information on current provision for young people and the related community safety concerns, with a view to developing guidance for Members to enhance their understanding of services available and to support their case work relating to young people.

RESOLVED –

That the report from the Scrutiny Project Group be noted.