

SCRUTINY PROGRAMME BOARD

Tuesday, 19 February 2013

Present:

Councillor	A Hodson (Chair)	
Councillors	A Sykes	P Glasman
	W Smith	J Stapleton
	S Kelly	S Whittingham
	C Blakeley	KJ Williams

18 MEMBERS' CODE OF CONDUCT - DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST/PARTY WHIP

Members were asked to declare any disclosable pecuniary and non pecuniary interests in connection with any items on the agenda and, if so, to declare them and state what they were.

Members were reminded that they should also declare, pursuant to paragraph 18 of the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules, whether they were subject to a party whip in connection with any items to be considered and, if so, to declare it and state the nature of the whipping arrangement.

Councillor S Whittingham declared a personal interest in agenda item 4 - Welfare Reform - Update (see minute 22 post) by virtue of being a Director of Wirral Partnership Homes.

Councillor P Glasman declared a personal interest in agenda item 4 - Welfare Reform - Update (see minute 22 post) by virtue of being Chair of the Pensions Committee.

19 MINUTES

Resolved - That the minutes of the meeting held on 12 December 2012 be approved.

20 WORK PROGRAMMES OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEES

The Acting Director of Law, HR and Asset Management presented the work programmes of each of the themed Overview and Scrutiny Committees for the Boards' information and consideration.

Councillor Glasman commented that a report regarding Domestic Violence was yet to be brought to the Health and Well Being Overview and Scrutiny Committee and believed that the issue of Domestic Homicide within the work programme of Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee should also be included in the Health and Well Being work programme and advised that the Community Safety Partnership provided a co-ordinating role.

Resolved - That the Scrutiny Work Programmes be noted.

21 **WELFARE REFORM - UPDATE**

The Interim Director of Finance provided an updated report on the progress of the Welfare Reform programme; its impacts on Benefit processing services provided by the Local Authority together with those accessing the services and detail of the corresponding technical and operational service level response.

Mr M Flanagan, Head of Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services attended the meeting to outline the report and responded to questions from Members.

Mr Flanagan clarified that the Department for Work and Pensions had indicated that Universal Credit would be in place from October 2013 and that in the event of any delay, the current housing benefit system would remain in place.

Members were also advised that no one who was currently claiming benefit would be worse off under Universal Credit at the point of transfer to the new benefit despite the possibility of reductions prior to the day of transfer.

It was reported that the earliest date the incorporation into Pension Credit new claims would begin was currently set as October 2014 (twelve months later than Universal Credit would be implemented) however this would be trialled six months earlier with certain path finders prior to the programme being rolled out and that the current pensioner housing benefit caseload would continue to be administered by Local Authorities.

Mr Flanagan responded to queries from Members regarding circumstances where a claimant was deemed to be occupying accommodation larger than they would reasonably require. He advised that the changes to Housing Benefit would be introduced from April 2013 and that details were being investigated as to how this would be assessed and who would qualify. He advised that there would be specific reasons for people not to include a room as being separate, for example, people with disabilities.

Members were informed that with regard to Discretionary Housing Payment, landlords and tenants were being encouraged to negotiate and that 'rent alignment' was an incentive for landlords who could agree to accept a lower rate of rent and in exchange payment of Housing Benefit/Local Housing Allowance would be made to the landlord directly and that the Department for Work and Pensions had already looked at direct payment projects that were currently in operation.

Resolved -

- (1) That the Interim Director of Finance be thanked for his report.**
- (2) That the report be noted.**

22 **REVIEW OF SCRUTINY PROGRAMME BOARD WORK PROGRAMME**

Councillors S Whittingham and P Glasman declared a personal interest in this matter (minute 18 refers).

The Acting Director of Law, HR and Asset Management reported that the Scrutiny Programme Board was requested to consider whether any matters should be added to its Work Programme for the remainder of the municipal year, having regard to its terms of reference and available timescales.

Michelle Duerden, Programme Manager, Policy, Performance & Public Health Improvement, attended the meeting and advised Members that different models of practice for scrutiny were being explored and that any comments/feedback from Members would be welcome.

Members discussed the role of the Committee and suggested that an officer be made point of contact to enable Members to report any cross-cutting issues and that a recommendation be put to Council that this Committee be abolished in the ensuing municipal year.

RECOMMENDED - That this Committee be abolished in the ensuing municipal year.

23 FORWARD PLAN

The Acting Director of Law, HR and Asset Management reported that the Forward Plan for the period February to May 2013 had been published on the Council's intranet/website and Members were invited to review the Plan in order to consider whether scrutiny should take place of any items contained within it.

Resolved - That the Forward Plan for the period February to May 2013 be noted.