

ECONOMY AND REGENERATION OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 22 APRIL 2013

58 UNDER-OCCUPATION SCRUTINY REVIEW

Further to minute 34 (14 November 2012), the Chair presented a report of the Under-Occupation Scrutiny Task and Finish Group, which introduced the Final Report of the Scrutiny Review 'The Implications of Benefit Reforms on Under Occupation'. The Panel had consisted of Councillors Mark Johnston (Chair), Denise Realey, Jean Stapleton, Mike Sullivan and Janette Williamson and the Chair indicated that the Scope Document agreed by the Committee had identified the following key issues to be focused upon –

- The impact of the introduction of the Housing Benefit Cap;
- The impact of changes to the Local Housing Allowance, with special reference to the Shared Accommodation Rate for under-35s;
- The allocation process for Discretionary Housing Benefit;
- The impacts of the reforms relating to Under-occupation and how this affects households and communities;
- The impact of the reforms on the Social Housing sector.

The report outlined the methodology for evidence gathering during the course of the review and the Chair highlighted the 18 recommendations contained within the document, separated in terms of their implications for tenants; social housing providers; the private housing sector; the Council and its Services; and other partner organisations and their clients.

Members noted that recommendation 14 of the review proposed that a follow-up review of the impact of the reforms should be held in the future, that "an Evaluation Impact Assessment regarding the effect of the reforms on under-occupation would be conducted by the Economy and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee (or successor Committee) during spring 2014 to assess the practical impact of the reforms". The report indicated that in order for any follow-up review to be most beneficial, it would be helpful if statistical measures were put in place to evaluate the impact of the reforms on individuals, organisations and communities. Members were requested to give consideration now, to the type of data that would be required for the Impact Assessment, as early identification of the statistical measures would enable the Council and partner organisations to be aware in advance of the requirement to capture the data.

Members thanked the Scrutiny Panel for the excellent work they had undertaken and expressed support for the recommendations contained within the Scrutiny Review. In response to comments in relation to the criteria for the allocation of Discretionary Housing Payment, the Chair indicated that further clarity was required and that the Strategic Director: Transformation and Resources would be requested to ensure that all front-line staff had access to an online toolkit to enable them to sign-post clients accordingly. Members requested that, on its completion, the online toolkit be made available to partner voluntary, community and faith organisations.

Resolved –

- (1) That, subject to the amendment of Recommendation 11, to enable the online toolkit to be made available to voluntary, community and faith organisations, the Under-Occupation Scrutiny Report be approved.**
- (2) That the Under-Occupation Scrutiny Report be referred to the next appropriate meeting of the Cabinet.**
- (3) That further reports be presented to the Economy and Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Committee (or successor Committee) to update Members regarding the progress being made towards the implementation of the recommendations.**
- (4) That the following statistical measures be available prior to the proposed Follow-up Review in Spring 2014 –**
 - Criteria for the fair allocation of Discretionary Housing Payments**
 - The effect/impact of Benefit Reforms on landlords**
 - Statistics in relation to arrears/evictions**
 - Impact on homelessness referrals**
 - The number of legal challenges**
 - The impact of Benefit Reform on crime levels and the activities of loan sharks**
 - Any other issues notified by Members to Alan Veitch**
- (5) That the thanks of the Committee be accorded to the Scrutiny Panel, to residents, partners and officers, who contributed to the Scrutiny Review, in particular to Alan Veitch, Scrutiny Support Officer.**