

CABINET PORTFOLIO SUMMARY REPORT

REPORT OF	Councillor Adrian Jones
CABINET PORTFOLIO FOR	Central and Support Services
CO-ORDINATING CHIEF OFFICER	Strategic Director – Transformation and Resources

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is an update from the Cabinet Portfolio Holder to Members of the Council on matters relevant to his portfolio.

1. IMPACTS OF WELFARE REFORM

The Authority continues to implement the Government Welfare Reform programme and overall we are seeing no slowing down in the increased level of contacts. The number of front of house (Call Centre, One Stop Shop and web) and back office (Revenues and Benefits direct contact including mail) contacts continue at nearly 25% higher than last year. The current weekly total is over 12,000 contacts per week – last year it was about approximately 9,600 per week.

Impacts of the welfare reforms continue to be met by staff in all Customer Services areas. In October 2013, 321 food bank vouchers were issued 82 more than the previous month and a significant increase to October 2012 when just 11 vouchers were issued. We are looking to see how we can most appropriately work with customers to help them address their debt issues. The libraries and One Stop Shops have collected 584kg of donations from April to October 2013 and passed to the Food Bank.

The Under Occupancy Regulations

This weekly deduction of benefit of either 14% or 25% is now 3,579 down from 4,200 homes. This has been due to staff identifying carers, disabled persons and other eligible categories that allow a bedroom to be exempt and this work continues. Wirral Council continues to encourage any who qualify to apply for this.

Local Welfare Assistance Scheme

Set up by Wirral Council, this replacement for the previous national Community Care Grant and Social Fund has now given help of nearly £300,000 to over 2,750 since it started in April giving emergency support for food, fuel, white goods and helping people get re-established in the Community. This scheme is applied for on line and can be accessed at our computers and kiosks at libraries and one stop shops and applications are increasing as more people access it.

Discretionary Housing Payment

£440,000 has been paid out with a further £100,000 already committed to year end which sees over 1200 people having received help from the Government grant of £980,000. Council officers are currently undertaking a scheduled review of spend, awards and needs trends which will see a further escalation in take-up activity.

Council Tax Discretionary Hardship Support

In October the Council set aside a sum of £50,000 to help the most extreme circumstances where people are unable to pay their Council Tax. Applications are now being received and being considered. The sum available through these schemes does not match the total shortfall our residents face. By being considered together, our officers are able to see which support may be best applied and if there is more that can be done for each applicant. It also ensures that Council focuses limited resources in the greatest areas of need.

2. BUDGET MANAGEMENT AND MONITORING PROCESSES

We have made improvements to our budget management and monitoring processes by engaging and training budget holders, setting up a budget steering group, introducing an officer strategic budget group and robust monthly reporting and monitoring to highlight key issues, reinforce accountability and improve the budget management processes.

3. INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY (ICT) UPDATE

In ICT the main focus is on improving the stability of the main Council ICT services and refreshing the ICT equipment and roll out of Windows version 7. There are capacity issues to address to ensure that we are able to provide the right level of support to services to maximise the use of technology to support business improvement and smooth delivery.

4. HUMAN RESOURCES AND ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT UPDATE

The Council has completed the management of the people implications of the budget 2013/14, reducing its workforce by nearly 25% in the past year. In total 410 posts have been deleted and 276 staff have left the Council, 33 of whom were made compulsorily redundant. The Council was able to redeploy 36 members of staff into alternative positions.

We continue our statutory collective consultation with the trades unions regarding the potential impact of the 2014/15 budget. The Council's leadership development programme has launched as part of the strengthening of capacity across the Council.