

Overview and Scrutiny Performance Panel

Thursday, 3 December 2015

Present: Councillor John Walker (Chair), Councillor Hasina Khan (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Paul Clark, June Molyneaux and Alistair Morwood

Also in attendance

Councillors: Councillor Graham Dunn, Executive Member (Customer and Advice Services)

Officer: Lesley-Ann Fenton (Director of Customer and Advice Services), Victoria Willett (Performance and Partnerships Manager), Fiona Daniels (Housing Options and Support Manager) and Dianne Scambler (Democratic and Member Services Officer)

15.OSP.9 MINUTES

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Panel meeting held on 24 September 2015 be confirmed as a correct record for signing by the Chair

15.OSP.10 DECLARATIONS OF ANY INTERESTS

No declarations of any interest were declared.

15.OSP.11 PERFORMANCE FOCUS: WELFARE REFORMS

The Chair welcomed Councillor Dunn, Executive Member (Customer and Advice Services) and Fiona Daniels (Housing Options and Support Manager) to the meeting who were attending to answer questions in relation to the Welfare Reform report.

Councillor Dunn reported that the Council was in a good place for dealing with the continuing changes that Welfare reform brought about and said that this was largely due to the steer of colleagues, especially the Leader of the Council and the dedication, hard work and diligence of officers in the housing services team.

What the authority is currently doing goes beyond any statutory requirements and has incurred some additional costs that the Council are committed to providing to ensure that the work being carried out is cost effective. It is expected that around 330 people will be affected by further welfare reform changes with average losses of £2,576 per annum. These cuts will affect families that are already on a low income and who may end up presenting themselves to the Council in the future for support.

It was acknowledged that the Government has agreed to an increase in the minimum hourly wage but it is considered that any rise would be wiped out by a rise in inflation. This is also wholly dependent on how employers react to paying more per hour and there is a worry that employee's hours will be reduced to offset any increase.

The Member Learning Session on welfare reform that was recently held is to be repeated for those Members who could not attend and it is expected that further training and guidance will be rolled out over the years to keep members fully updated with the changes and how the Council is progressing in effectively supporting its residents who are affected. The Welfare Reform agenda aims to reform the welfare and pensions system to ensure that it pays to work while protecting the most vulnerable members of society.

A Welfare Reform Partnership has been created which included representatives from local Registered Providers, DWP and third sector organisations along with officers from the Council. This partnership is responsible for contributing to the delivery of the Welfare Reform action plan developed to mitigate the impact of the initial welfare reform changes. In addition, the Council has signed up to a Delivery Partnership Agreement that was negotiated with the DWP to support the introduction of Universal Credit in Chorley for new claimants and mitigate any potentially negative impact for residents. The Council has supported Universal Credit claimants to apply on line and handled a significant number of referrals for personal budgeting support. Welfare reform is evolving, so the Council has been seeking all avenues to create awareness of the programme including the involvement of the private sector and third sector organisations such as the food bank.

The action plan identified four areas for focus as the main challenges identified for the authority and Councillor Dunn gave an appraisal of the work being undertaken and key challenges being addressed by the authority.

Tackling Worklessness and removing Barriers to Employment:

The target is to get as many people as is possible back into work and the Council has worked closely with the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) to develop a seamless partnership to do this.

The Council was successful in a bid to the DWP in obtaining £30,000 to support this work and the monies were used to recruit a fixed term, Employability Officer to provide an Employability Service since February 2014. The Employability Officer has been successful in supporting a range of unemployed residents to search for work including piloting a successful drop-in one half day per week.

There has been a total of 648 referrals to the service to date, with 479 (74%) of people attending at least one appointment. A total of 192 (40%) people who have engaged with the service are now back in work which includes 32 people who were offered paid contracts on the back of Chorley Works placements. Members asked if there were any people who didn't attend the appointments when they were referred and were informed that some chasing up does apply and that DWP can apply sanctions for non-compliance.

The Employability Service offers employability advice and support in a variety of different forms. It will support individuals with employment skills including C.V. and cover letter writing, job applications, interview techniques, searching for job vacancies/opportunities. The officer signposts to partner organisations which provide functional skills training in Maths, English and IT as well as more advanced or bespoke training where appropriate. There is also a chance to signpost to other sources of support, as necessary. e.g.: drugs & alcohol services, mental health support, financial advice if these issues were causing a barrier to gaining employment.

The Employability Officer also manages and delivers the Chorley Works placement programme and other related projects, which aim to provide meaningful work experience for state benefit claimants who are looking to enhance their skills, gain confidence and improve their C.V. with a view to returning to paid work.

Many people are in either low paid or part time work although statistically unemployment is relatively low in Chorley compared to the national picture. Ages 25-45 are the group that have little or no support so the authority targeted this group as being the most challenging.

Given the on-going welfare reforms measures the Council are looking to extend the post as part of the budget decisions for 2016/17.

Promoting Social and Financial inclusion:

A temporary Welfare Reform Officer was also recruited in February 2014 partly funded by Chorley Community Housing and has been instrumental in preventing evictions and re-possession by landlords and mortgage providers and has supported many residents with personal budgeting who have seen a reduction in income.

The biggest challenge at the start of the Welfare Reform agenda was the removal of the spare room subsidy (widely known as the bedroom tax) which as affected 769 households in Chorley.

The authority were extremely pro-active in ensuring residents were made aware of the Discretionary Housing Payment pot (DHP), which has been increased from £32,000.00 in 13/14 to £126,000.00 in 14/15 and then £132,000.00 15/16.

Since the introduction of the under-occupancy regulation there has been 1690 awards for a DHP. In all cases households have been supported to manage their finances both in the short and longer term, until they find more affordable accommodation. Any monies not used are return to the government as in previous years. However, some of the policy used for allocation of the funding has been adjusted to lessen the rigidity of the criteria that must be met and it is forecasted that this year all the money will be used effectively. The Council also feels that they now have the right balance and a degree of confidence that the funding will continue to be provided in future years, although they are expecting demand to be greater.

Since February 2014, 613 welfare reform cases have been handled providing advice and prevention and up to October 2015 through intervention and attendance at court, possession action has been averted in 182 cases. Since the go live of Universal Credit in November 2014 to date, the authority has received 82 referrals from the DWP asking for Personal Budgeting support, which have subsequently been accepted.

The Welfare Reform officer has also developed a positive relationship with Living Waters Food Bank and provided support to residents attending for food parcels to offer support and repeat visits. Given the success of the temporary Welfare Reform Officer post, the re-structure of the Strategic Housing service in March 2015 included a permanent post of Court and Welfare Officer with virtually the same remit, which will continue to support residents affected by the on-going implementation of welfare reform, and will support residents at court who are at risk of losing their homes.

Promoting Digital Inclusion:

The Corporate Digital Inclusion and Access project is aimed at supporting people to access services online. The Council offered a series of supported basic online training sessions to residents held in the Council's community centres and were arranged during the week, Monday to Saturday, including evenings. The Council also undertook a mapping exercise to identify the location of all digital access points which are currently or could be accessed by public across the Borough. Following the success of the pilot project, the Council intend on delivering similar events throughout next year, concentrating on our community centres and the rural areas.

Members asked if this need was reducing with schooling and education in information technology subjects. It was explained that a common myth is that those residents who struggle to access services online are elderly, when in reality there are a wide range of differing circumstances around why residents are digitally isolated that include financial or disability constraints and this can be across all age ranges.

Creating and Sustaining Affordable Homes:

The Council still maintains positive relationships with the Registered Providers in Chorley. An early intervention protocol instigated by the Council has enabled officer to intervene and work with tenants to address arrears and issues before it reaches crisis point or they are evicted.

In February 2014, the Select Move policy was amended to assist applications who were affected by the Welfare Reform changes, mainly under-occupation. These applications were offered extra preference in D band, in order to support them to move into more affordable accommodation. Work was also undertaken with the Registered Providers to create awareness of the mutual exchange facility on Select Move. The Council has ensures that future housing supply will take account of both need and demand, demonstrated by the housing register. With one bedroom being of the highest need and two bedrooms the highest demand.

Affordable housing delivery remains strong for the authority with 165 units being delivered for 2014/15, an increase the previous year's performance of 129. This is by far the best in Lancashire and the North West.

The first major changes to the welfare benefit system were introduced in April 2013 and received a great deal of media coverage and protests. The impact of the removal of the spare room subsidy was a significant focus, but due to media attention which was sometime conflicting, took this focus away from the actual work and support to residents. Some Partners also spent unnecessary time in debating the changes as they believed the room subsidy regulation was going to be released.

One big challenge for the Council was engaging with some of the people affected by Welfare Reform who repeatedly ignored offers of support, and would delay taking action or seeking advice until the last minute or at crisis point.

In response to questions, Councillor Dunn outlined the authority's approach to measuring performance and managing the Welfare Reform that included identifying new or existing households affected by the changes and continuing to provide services that mitigate their impact. It is important that the Council works with partners to understand their forecast and analysis of the impact of these measures, particularly around allocations and the opportunity to charge market rent.

The Council plans to build on existing services in terms of Employability, Affordability/Personal Budgeting, and Digital Inclusion with a focus on early intervention and prevention working with our partners. Due to the Government's drive towards digitalisation, in particular in terms of benefit applications, the need to continue to ensure that internet related training is available to all, in particular the possible digitally excluded groups and cohorts, to ensure that everyone has the potential to become digitally included.

The Government is proposing to provide £800 million pounds of funding for Discretionary Housing Payments over the next 5 years, so work to promote this fund must continue in order to support individuals subject to monetary reductions and the Council will also continue to press for social rent as part of the S106 obligation.

RESOLVED – That the information be noted and Members encouraged to keep abreast of any forthcoming changes through the delivery of regular Welfare Reform member learning sessions.

15.OSP.12 CHORLEY COUNCIL PERFORMANCE MONITORING - SECOND QUARTER 2015/16

The Chief Executive submitted a report that set out performance against the delivery of the Corporate Strategy, and key performance indicators during the second quarter of 2015/16, 1 July to 30 September 2015. The report also provided a summary of the results of the 2015 Residents Survey and the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IOMD) 2015.

Overall performance of 2014/15 was good with 89% of projects on track or complete. Only two projects were rated as amber, 'develop and agree plans for delivery of the Friday Street Health Centre' and deliver improvements to 'Market Street' and it was explained that these ratings were due to issue relating to funding and scope, but in each case actions to address these issues had been identified and were being progressed.

Overall performance on the Corporate Strategy indicators and key service delivery measures was excellent, with 95% of the Corporate Strategy indicators and 90% of key service measures performing above target or within the 5% tolerance. The only Corporate Strategy measure performing below target was the percentage of people who regularly participate in volunteering which was reported against the resident's survey indicator. An action plan has been developed and was included within the report to outline to Members what action would be taken to improve performance.

One key service delivery measure performing below target is the average working days per employee per year lost through sickness absence. Again a plan was included that outlined the actions being taken to improve performance and although the still relatively low, this figure did appear to be increasing and the Panel discussed the possibility of looking into this in more detail.

Overall performance of the indicators in the Resident's survey 2015 was excellent with 89% of the indicators performing above target or within the 5% tolerance. Similarly the Indices of Multiple Deprivation results were positive and showed Chorley to be less deprived with only 8 areas now in the bottom 20% compared with 10 in 2010.

Members were pleased with the Council's continuing good performance of delivering the Corporate Strategy and were confident that the action plans put into place for those areas that were slightly underperforming would improve performance.

RESOLVED

- 1. That the report be noted.**
- 2. That a mini review of Employee Sickness Absence be undertaken in 2016 and the Work Programme updated accordingly.**

Chair