

Lancashire County Council

External Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the Meeting held on Tuesday 11 January, 2022 at 10.30 am in Teams Virtual Meeting

Present:

County Councillor Peter Britcliffe (Chair)

County Councillors

R Swarbrick	N Hennessy
A Ali OBE	K Iddon
N Aziz	M Salter
L Beavers	J R Singleton JP
A Cheetham	M Tomlinson
S Clarke	

County Councillors Alan Schofield and Ged Mirfin attended the meeting under Standing Order D13(1).

1. Apologies

There were no apologies for absence.

2. Disclosure of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

No interests were declared.

3. Minutes of the Meeting held on 29 November 2021

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on Monday 29 November 2021 be confirmed as an accurate record.

4. Universal Credit

a. Universal Credit in Lancashire - Department for Work and Pensions

The Chair welcomed Shane Byrne, Partnership Manager and Tracey Ellmore, Senior Partnership Manager (East Lancashire) from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to present to the committee on following topics:

- Lancashire Youth Hubs
- Plan for Jobs
- The Restart Scheme
- The Kickstart Scheme

Since January 2020, the External Scrutiny Committee had embarked on a themed review of Universal Credit in Lancashire with a specific focus to identify the key issues faced by the Department for Work and Pensions in the roll out of Universal Credit and helping the people of Lancashire.

Comments and questions from the committee after the presentation were as follows:

- It was clarified that clients could attend the nearest youth hub for them if there was not one in their immediate local area.
- The DWP were working closely with rural based hospitality employers to fill job vacancies. One example provided was an event which invited both employers and DWP customers. This was cancelled due to current Coronavirus complications. There was a dedicated employment advisor who supported hospitality employers to fulfil these roles supported by the Kickstart scheme.
- A new youth hub was due to open in Fleetwood hospital within the next few weeks.
- Concerns were raised about prison leavers. It was explained that payment could be made into post office accounts. Prison work coaches had returned full-time into the prison environments, and they would make emergency appointments at the Job Centre for any prison leaver leaving custody.
- It was questioned why prison leavers could not make advanced claims. It was understood that it was not within the Universal Credit platform, but members asked for this to be raised at policy level within the DWP and feedback to the committee.
- In relation to safeguarding new customers during the six-week wait for new claims, the DWP offered an advance payment from day one. Their partner voluntary organisations were also looked to, to support these customers during this period. There was also the Flexible Support Fund and Household Support Fund which the DWP would offer to provide support. Members asked for this topic to be raised at policy level within the DWP to improve and cut down the six-week wait.
- Members congratulated the Kickstart scheme. It was noted that the scheme would come to an end in March 2022.
- In terms of the DWP evaluating the Kickstart scheme, it was expected for the evaluation to be published. There would also be a further evaluation by the National Audit Office, which the DWP would use to move forward.
- It was explained that opinions had changed positively since the first digital offer and partners were asking for Attendance Allowance to now be moved online. The digital offer was the way forward for the DWP, whilst protecting the customers who did not have any access.
- In response to the request for data on how customers approach claiming benefits, there was a portal called Stat-Xplore which members could

access. The DWP also asked for feedback from their partner organisations.

- With regards to safeguarding vulnerable customers who could not make digital claims themselves, there was a Visiting Officer team who would go out to customer's homes rather than them needing to appoint someone to act on their behalf. Details of the Visiting Officer team would be shared with the committee.
- It was clarified that during the DWP Procurement process, social value was a large consideration and a key value.
- Members asked for details of the DWP Partnership Team to be shared with the committee.
- For people who had no recourse to public funds or could no longer work due to ill-health but could not access Universal Credit or apply for a pension, the DWP relied on the Home Office as a lead organisation and worked with third-sector organisations to help these customers obtain residency to open these funds. Concerns were also raised for those migrant workers from Europe who had a five-year visa and became ill during that period. It was highlighted that people in these circumstances were eligible for some support such as carers allowance, but Universal Credit.
- On whether there was scope for utility companies to access DWP vulnerable customer data when responding to emergency situations to help identify those people in need of assistance, it was reported that the DWP would not disclose an individual's details. The DWP actively promoted the support offer from the utility companies to help people manage their bills. As a possible fix, it was suggested that utility companies share any information with the DWP, so they could cascade information to their customers in the impacted areas.
- On how the DWP are coping with Coronavirus restrictions, the Job Centre's had always been open throughout the pandemic. It was noted that the DWP took the safety of their staff and customers as paramount. They did not require for proof of tests or vaccination before customers visit centres.
- In terms of targeting youth unemployment at the end of Kickstart and potential further education or vocational training, it was clarified that a replacement for Kickstart was not expected until earliest May 2023. Currently, the focus would be skills training to get customers into the job vacancies available.
- It was clarified that when the DWP started Kickstart, there was a lot of scrutiny on new employers to ensure they were not looking for cheap labour from young people.
- It was explained that throughout any Kickstart opportunity via the appointed Work Start Coach, if the young person was found to be performing a role different from the employer's description this was picked up immediately.

Members thanked Tracey and Shane for their presentation and answers to the committee's questions.

Actions:

- DWP to share details of the Visiting Officer team and Partnership team with the committee.

Resolved: That the Department for Work and Pensions' representatives be asked to raise the following matters at policy level within the department and feedback to the committee on potential support for:

- i. Help for migrant workers during periods of ill health;
- ii. Improving and reducing the six-week wait for new customers with new claims; and
- iii. Advance payments for prison leavers.

b. Universal Credit Update

Clare Platt, Head of Service Health, Equity, Welfare and Partnerships, Joanne Barker, Welfare Rights Manager, Debbie Thompson, Public Health Specialist (Stronger and Safer Communities), Adeel Khan, Finance Assessment Performance Manager, and Karen Jones, Care Finance Assessment Manager from Lancashire County Council attended to present and answer committee questions on a Universal Credit update for Lancashire.

The presentation provided an update on changes to Universal Credit and outlined the potential impact of the continued migration of people from legacy benefits onto Universal Credit on a range of Lancashire County Council service areas. This followed the initial findings of the report that was presented to the committee as part of the Chair's update at its meeting on 16 March 2021.

The Care Financial Assessment Team undertook financial assessments for those receiving adult social care services to determine how much service users were required to contribute to their care costs in accordance with the Care Act 2014.

It was anticipated that the changes would have a financial impact on a range of county council services including:

- Financial Safeguarding Team – Managed the financial affairs of vulnerable people assessed as lacking mental capacity.
- The Shared Lives Service – Supported adults who had a social care assessment and an identified need for support to live in the community. The Shared Lives Service matched those adults with a carer who shared their home and provided all the support required to live as independent a life as possible.

Comments and questions from the committee after the presentation were as follows:

- It was clarified that new claimants in Shared Lives placements for Universal Credit would lose £67 per week in income payments and £30 per week for rent allowance. Existing Shared Lives claimants when migrated to Universal Credit would slowly see a reduction in payments.
- In terms of county council officers spending lengthy times on the phone to the DWP with Universal Credit queries, it was queried why there was not a dedicated phone line or nominated person that officers could call to reduce these waiting times. It was noted that the DWP would not provide this service, however, county council officers could contact the DWP Partnership Managers for assistance.
- On the consideration if crisis loans could be used again, it was clarified this would be a DWP decision.
- It was explained that councillors could refer people into Lancashire County Council for a care assessment, if not known to social services. For people with capacity who simply required digital access support, they could make telephone claims such as Citizens Advice Bureau 'Help to Claim'. Appointees should only be made for people who did not have mental capacity, rather than struggling with the application.

Resolved: That Lancashire County Council officers monitor the transition to Universal Credit in Lancashire and accumulate statistics, to be reviewed with the External Scrutiny Committee in three months.

5. Electricity North West - Storm Arwen

The Chair welcomed Paul Bircham, Regulation and Communications Director and Helen Norris, Stakeholder Engagement Manager from Electricity North West (ENW) who attended the meeting to present on the impact of Storm Arwen across Lancashire and the organisations response.

Storm Arwen caused significant damage across the UK with railways, roads, buildings, and overhead electricity supply lines all damaged by thousands of falling trees, high winds, and ice accumulation.

The worst-hit area of Lancashire was the Ribble Valley and when final restorations were made here, engineering teams were released to assist other areas in south Cumbria that still had customers off supply.

Comments and questions from the committee after the presentation were as follows:

- Members suggested that part of the ENW risk management should focus on communication strategies and advising the county council and/or district councils so that councillors could be informed and put out messages on social media platforms to advise local communities.

- Members requested statistics on properties that were affected in Lancashire by district and how long they were affected for.
- On the age of infrastructure in rural areas and overhead lines, there was a national standard for resilience that related to tree cutting and clearance around overhead lines and that the standard was based on a risk-based approach. However, generally it did not work at a standard where a piece of infrastructure supplied less than 4000 individual properties, such as Ribble Valley. Whilst the network met or exceeded all the national resilience standards, ENW appreciated that some of those standards needed to be reviewed.
- It was raised that communication for people without access to the Internet when electricity is down, were not contacted by post. It was clarified that ENW were considering different ways of communicating in the future such as knocking on doors, leafletting, and were in discussions with the Post Office for support in the future.
- On communication with local councils, it was explained that ENW saw success in communication routes with stakeholders to vulnerable communities and MPs were provided with regular briefings, along with 35 television and radio interviews, however, accept that they can improve on building networks with local councils and would investigate how best to organise this such as a single point of contact.
- On the provision of generators, it was noted that there were 280 generator deployments, using 140 generators (some deployed more than once). Also, that it was not always safe to immediately use generators, as repairs were required to the network first. ENW were looking into fitting additional equipment to be generator-ready and enhance resilience.
- It was queried if there was a date for publication of the BEIS and Ofgem reviews, it was explained that ENW would like this to be timely, however, they needed to discuss with the government first as to when government release their review. ENW hoped to conclude its own review within the first quarter of this year.
- In terms of working with district council officers in partnership with ENW, to encourage private landowners to cut-back trees on their land where risk was presented to power lines, ENW had good relationships established with officers and arborists from both district and county councils but would investigate strengthening these.
- ENW agreed to take forward the suggestion raised by members of contacting the DWP to cascade information to vulnerable residents on their behalf. It was noted that vulnerable residents did voluntarily supply information to ENW to join their priority services register.

Members thanked Paul and Helen for their presentation and responding to the questions posed by the committee.

Actions:

- ENW to provide statistics on properties that were affected in Lancashire by district and how long they were affected for.

Resolved: That Electricity North West return to the External Scrutiny Committee after the three reviews have been published to present a summary and answer any resulting questions.

6. External Scrutiny Committee Work Programme 2021/22

The committee received a report which provided information on the work programme for the External Scrutiny Committee.

The topics included in the work programme were identified at the joint work planning workshop for Internal and External Scrutiny held on 9 July 2021.

Resolved: That;

- i. The External Scrutiny Committee Work Programme 2021/22 be noted.
- ii. The two returning topics of Universal Credit in Lancashire and the ENW summary of review findings be added to the work programme.

7. Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

8. Date of Next Meeting

It was noted the next meeting of the External Scrutiny Committee would take place on Tuesday 1 March 2022 at 10:30am in County Hall, Preston.

L Sales
Director of Corporate Services

County Hall
Preston