

Lancashire County Council

External Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the Meeting held on Tuesday, 25th February, 2020 at 10.00 am in Committee Room 'B' - The Diamond Jubilee Room, County Hall, Preston

Present:

County Councillor Edward Nash PSC (Chair)

County Councillors

D Stansfield	D Foxcroft
A Ali	T Martin
J Burrows	Oades
A Cheetham	G Oliver
S Clarke	J Shedwick
C Crompton	

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Disclosure of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

None were disclosed.

3. Minutes of the Meeting held on 21 January 2020

Resolved: That the minutes from the meeting held on 21 January 2020, be confirmed as an accurate record and signed by the Chair.

4. Universal Credit in Lancashire

The Chair welcomed to the meeting Amena Patel, Equality and Welfare Reform Transformation Project Lead and Universal Credit Help to Claim Best Practice Lead from Citizens Advice Rossendale and Hyndburn who presented an overview of the Universal Credit Help to Claim service. In addition Joanne Barker, Welfare Rights Manager, Welfare Rights Service, Lancashire County Council presented her findings and the impact of Universal Credit on Lancashire County Council services.

Members made the following comments in response to the presentation from Citizens Advice:

- On access to computers it was suggested that Citizens Advice should link in with the county council's library service and provide 1:1 training sessions. Citizens Advice already provided light touch support and access to computers on site. In some cases they were able to access libraries,

however it was felt there was an opportunity and the scope to improve the current offer for their clients.

- It could take around two hours for Citizens Advice to support a client with complex needs in making a claim for Universal Credit. In one instance a claimant was unable to read or hold a conversation over the telephone. As such Citizens Advice had to make a non-digital claim for Universal Credit on behalf of the person. Subsequent correspondence from the DWP was in hard copy form.
- Having a bank account was a necessity in order to claim Universal Credit. It was highlighted that setting up a bank account was a daunting issue for some people to manage. There was a distinct lack of traditional banking methods and basic bank accounts on offer from banks and related providers.
- Advance payments were collected over the first twelve months and often left people in debt, as the payment was taken out of the standard allowance that was deemed appropriate to live on.
- It was noted that the Help to Claim service was funded by the DWP. However, it was not known whether this funding would continue beyond April 2020. It was suggested that the committee should lobby central government to ensure the funding continued.

Members made the following comments in response to the presentation from the Welfare Rights Service:

- It was noted that more social care staff were referring people into the Welfare Rights Service.
- Some emerging problems included:
 - Families facing eviction because Universal Credit had been refused and because they had children they sought financial assistance from children's services through Section 17 [Children Act 1989] monies.
 - Adults who were discharged into Residential Care from hospitals and their placement being fully funded by the council, instead of being in the community with benefits in place.
- On managing the frontline it was highlighted that staff in the Welfare Rights Service were not trained mental health specialists. However since the Welfare Rights Service had moved into the Public Health team, staff within the service had received suicide training and their own health and wellbeing was monitored.
- Concern was raised in relation to adult aged offspring with low level or severe disabilities who were not known to social services whose parents had passed away. It was highlighted in one case that the funeral director was the first to know about this situation. It was suggested that rather than wait for funeral directors to pick up on these issues, there was a preference for GPs to pick up on such circumstances and refer for timely and holistic support.
- It was highlighted that a number of people were falling out of the benefits system and staff within the Welfare Rights Service were having to become experts on the Equality Act [2010]. The Welfare Rights Service had picked

up on a number of cases that had been left unresolved for months. While in some cases the council had carers assisting people, there was no one helping with the benefits issue.

- On how the benefits system was affecting the people of Lancashire and the council's services, it was suggested that discussions should take place with all of the council's frontline services to identify the problems encountered.
- There was a call to work with partners such as Clinical Commissioning Groups. In addition it was suggested that the work of the Welfare Rights Service should be integrated into relevant teams across the council and for Cabinet to review the recent budget savings on the Welfare Rights Service.

In formulating recommendations further to suggestions made earlier in the meeting, there was a desire for Citizens Advice and the council to find new ways of working together and to strengthen the offer to support people. Citizens Advice was already in the process of working up recommendations from their own areas of research and findings on digital inclusion, Conditionality and complex needs. It was suggested that Citizens Advice present their findings on the areas of most concern to the committee at the appropriate time.

It was felt that the council alongside GPs and district councils should monitor the impact of benefits issues that frontline staff were dealing with in order to map out what the problems were, how people were ending up in those situations and to help identify suitable points of intervention. This information could then also be used to demonstrate the financial burden the savings made in the Department for Work Pensions were having on the council. It was suggested that this information be handed to the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureau to help lobby central government.

It was noted that most of the council's service users were still on legacy benefits and the upheaval of migration to Universal Credit and its impact had not started. The council needed to prepare itself in order to assist vulnerable people.

Resolved: That;

1. The External Scrutiny Committee highly commends the work of the Lancashire County Council Welfare Rights Service and the Citizens Advice in supporting the most disadvantaged people in Lancashire.
2. The committee note the burden put on to these services through the roll out of Universal Credit.
3. Cabinet give consideration to review and monitor the impact of the social security system (legacy benefits and Universal Credit) on Lancashire County Council front line services in order to identify the problems encountered and the cost to the county council.
4. Following the evidenced based review Cabinet give consideration to approaching the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to ask for

additional resources to enable the most disadvantaged in Lancashire to be properly supported.

5. Cabinet give consideration to:

- a. Identifying innovative place based partnership working opportunities with Citizens Advice, District Councils and the local NHS (primary care and clinical commissioning groups) to strengthen the welfare benefit support available to vulnerable people.
 - b. Commissioning a report to look at how the Lancashire Welfare Rights Service might be improved and options to invest in the service.
6. The Chief Officer of Rossendale and Hyndburn Citizens Advice be invited to attend a future meeting of the External Scrutiny Committee to present the findings of their research and recommendations to the Department for Work Pensions on digital support, conditionality and complex needs.

5. Chair's update

The committee was informed that the Chamber of Commerce had given its support on helping businesses go green with the recent launch of its Chamber Low Carbon programme. Further information was available on its website at: <https://www.chamberelancs.co.uk/services/low-carbon/>

The Chair was awaiting receipt of written responses from the Cabinet Member for Technical Services, Rural Affairs and Waste Management on the recommendations of the Strengthening Flood Risk Management and Preparedness Task and Finish Group. The responses would be presented at the next scheduled meeting of the committee on 21 April 2020.

An informal meeting had been arranged with representatives from the Department for Work and Pensions to meet with the Chair and the support officer to discuss the principles of Universal Credit implementation. The outcome of this meeting would be reported to the External Scrutiny Committee at its April meeting.

Resolved: That the update be noted.

6. External Scrutiny Committee Work Plan 2019/20

The report presented set out the External Scrutiny Committee's Work Programme for the municipal year 2019/20.

The Chair sought agreement from the committee to continue reviewing the three emerging themes of flood risk management, Universal Credit and carbon reduction into 2020/21.

Resolved: That

1. The report be noted.
2. The flood risk management, Universal Credit and carbon reduction work streams be carried over on to the External Scrutiny Committee's work programme for 2020/21.

7. Urgent Business

There were no items of Urgent Business.

8. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the External Scrutiny Committee would take place on Tuesday 21 April 2020 at 10.00am in Cabinet Room B (The Diamond Jubilee Room) at the County Hall, Preston.

L Sales
Director of Corporate Services

County Hall
Preston