
SCRUTINY PANEL A
MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 25 October 2012

Present: Councillors Kaur, McEwing, Mintoff, Vinson, Whitbread and Parnell

Apologies: Councillors Claisse and Daunt

1. **APOLOGIES AND CHANGES IN PANEL MEMBERSHIP (IF ANY)**

The Panel noted that Councillor Kaur had been appointed as a new Member of the Panel to replace Councillor Thomas and that Councillor Parnell was in attendance as a nominated substitute for Councillor Claisse in accordance with Council Procedure Rule 4.3.

2. **ELECTION OF CHAIR AND VICE-CHAIR**

RESOLVED that Councillor Kaur be elected as Chair and Councillor McEwing as Vice-Chair for the Municipal Year 2012/2013.

3. **WELFARE REFORMS INQUIRY MEETING 1: KEY NATIONAL AND LOCAL CHANGES**

The Panel considered the report of the Senior Manager, Customer and Business Improvement, which examined the impacts of the Welfare Reforms and outlined the national and local changes.

Cllr Letts, Cabinet Member for Resources was in attendance and outlined the key issues that the Panel needed to be aware of. They were:-

- Council Tax Benefit – there would be a reduction in the capital grant given to Councils as people of working age would no longer be entitled to 100% benefit. They would be expected to pay at least 25%. The impact on the Authority would be reduced income if people do not pay.
- Housing Benefit and Under- Occupancy – rules would be introduced that would mean Housing Benefit would be reduced if the property lived in was under occupied. Rules on the under-occupancy were not as simple as just having a spare room. This change will come in April 2013 and affects those in the social rented sector.
- Universal Credit will change a very complex scheme. Recipients of benefits would only receive one payment, which would include all of the elements that they were entitled to. This would be paid monthly in arrears. It would not be possible for housing benefits to be paid direct to landlords. For Council tenants, Housing Benefit would no longer be able transferred direct within the Council.
- The age of being able to claim for Local Housing Allowance (private rented) as a single person, for more than a room within a HMO has been raised from 25 years to 35 years.
- The Social Fund will be abolished from April 2013. Local authorities will receive funding for two years to develop local provision.

It was agreed that members of the Panel would be provided with more details relating to the rules regarding under-occupancy and how many Housing Benefit claimants would be affected.

The importance of ensuring that people were made aware of the changes was discussed. It was noted that Gateway to a Better Future, a Southampton Connect project led by Job Centre Plus, had been raising awareness and that more would be done in the winter. It was reported that other ways to publicise the changes was being looked at.

Concerns were raised about the impact on disabled people, which were of working age that would be affected under the proposed scheme to replace Council Tax Benefit In April 2013. The Panel asked to be made aware of any legal challenges against this and whether it was contrary to the Disability Discrimination Act.

The Panel then received a presentation from Bernadette Hagen from Jobcentre Plus. She stated that there would be 16 changes to the national welfare benefits.

The hope was that the changes would mean that the entitlement to benefits would be easier to understand, which would prevent fraud and errors. It would also support those people wanting to take up part time or temporary work but in the past were too concerned about their loss of benefit.

A major concern was the payment being monthly in arrears. As currently many benefits were paid fortnightly. People would then be expected to manage their finances and pay all the necessary bills, such as their rent. This aim of this is to mirror the job market and therefore prepare claimants for employment. Although there was concern that many of the people receiving benefits were not able to manage in this way.

It was noted that the families within Southampton who were receiving more than the benefit cap limit, that was being introduced, were already being engaged in discussions.

It was agreed that the statistics relating to benefit claimants in Southampton would be provided to Panel members.

The need to support people into employment was discussed, particularly young people with disabilities coming out of education. Many of the jobs available were not in the areas of work that people were seeking; such as care workers. It was noted that a lot of joint work was undertaken within the City to support the young people, by City Limits, Wheatsheaf Trust and Barnado's. The team also work closely with City College.

Paul Medland, Council Tax Benefits Project Manager then presented the main changes relating to Council Tax Benefits and the consultation that was taking place concerning the scheme that would be introduced in Southampton. (A copy of the presentation attached to these minutes).

Panel members discussed the possibility of there being some form of appeals system for residents. It was agreed that any possible system would probably be complex and costly, however it should still be considered and advice sought to check if it would be feasible to operate a process to support those who would find it difficult to pay.

The consultation of the Council's proposed scheme would end on the 16th December, ready for a report to be submitted to full Council in January. It was stated that the Panel would be able to make comments to feed into this process.

Denise Edghill, Senior Manager Skills and Economy and Sara Crawford presented the changes to the Social Fund and its transition to local provision. (A copy of the handout attached to these minutes). They would be looking for recommendations from the Panel, which have to be approved by Cabinet, on how the fund was administered and used.

It was stated that funding would only be guaranteed for 2 years.

Examples of different schemes were discussed. Including food banks, particularly, one scheme that would provide fresh foods and waste food from supermarkets, which they currently pay to dispose of.