

Southend-on-Sea Borough Council

Agenda
Item No.

Report of Corporate Director for Corporate Services

to
Cabinet

1st July 2014

Report prepared by:
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In depth scrutiny report - Impact of Welfare Changes

A Part 1 Agenda Item

1. Purpose of Report

To present the final report of the in depth scrutiny project “Impact of Welfare Changes”.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That Cabinet approves the report and recommendations from the in depth scrutiny project “Impact of Welfare Changes”, attached at **Appendix 1**.
- 2.2 To note that approval of any recommendations with budget implications will require consideration as part of future years’ budget processes prior to implementation.
- 2.3 That the draft Action Plan, attached at **Appendix 2** be agreed.

3. Background

- 3.1 The Policy & Resources Scrutiny Committee selected this topic at the meeting on 11th July 2013 (Minute 161 refers).
- 3.2 The project plan was agreed by the project team and then the Scrutiny Committee at the meeting on 10th October 2013 (Minute 372 refers), with the following objectives:
 - To gain an understanding of the legislative changes brought about by the implementation of the welfare reform act, including the financial impact on the local authority, residents and our partners.
 - To consider the impact on Council Tax collection and understand any particular household types struggling to pay the new charge. Then use this information to review the Local Council Tax Support Scheme to identify any need for recommendations to Council for changes.
 - To consider the impact of changes in housing benefit for tenants in the social sector and understand the affect, if any, these have had on rent arrears.
 - To understand the range of targeted funding and financial assistance available and review current policies regarding these. To ensure that all such funds are used effectively to reduce the risk of hardship and homelessness.

- To understand the timeline for the implementation of universal credit and the authorities role in delivery. Explore the partnership working arrangements with Southend's job centre plus.
- 3.3 The Member Project Team, which was Chaired by Councillor Ian Gilbert, met on 4 occasions and also held 2 witness sessions. Members heard from a number of key partners who reflected on the issues and shared their thoughts on the impact on residents in the Borough, the Council, with a view to recommending ways of mitigating the impacts of the overall welfare reform programme and provide localised support for people seeking work. Unfortunately the DWP felt unable to take part the formal witness session on welfare reforms.
- 3.4 The desired outcomes aim to consolidate existing support and ensure that any cross departmental/organisational duplication is eliminated. The proposed recommendations were shared with the witnesses and the report has been agreed by the project team.
- 3.5 Councillor Gilbert presented the draft scrutiny report to the Policy & Resources Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 10th April 2014 (Minute 964 refers).
- 3.6 At the meeting in April, the Committee suggested some minor changes to section 2 of the draft scrutiny report and also requested further information on claims regarding the Essential Living Fund, Discretionary Housing payments and the number of people in Southend affected by the removal of the bedroom subsidy. The report had been amended and the further information was sent to the Members of the Scrutiny Committee.
- 3.7 A draft action plan to take forward the recommendations from the project has now been prepared and this is attached at **Appendix 2**.

4. Recommendations

- 4.1 In accordance with Scrutiny Procedure Rule 10 (Part 4 (e) of the Constitution), the in depth scrutiny report is now attached at **Appendix 1** for approval by Cabinet. It should be noted that approval of any recommendations with budget implications will require consideration as part of future years' budget processes prior to implementation. The recommendations are as follows:

1	Produce a flow chart, mapping all current financial support given by the Local Authority, to identify any opportunities to merge financial assessments from the mapping exercise.
2	Work with the Job Centre Plus Network Group to identify gaps in local support for jobseekers and map the various training opportunities within the charitable and voluntary sectors to increase take up and positive resulting outcomes (synergy / efficiencies).
3	Deliver support to charitable and voluntary sector workers to enable them to assist residents in meeting JobCentre Plus (JCP) Conditionality Requirements.
4	Increasing awareness of SBC staff (e.g. benefits staff, contact centre staff) on where people can go for help if they have benefit sanctions etc.

5	Assess the effectiveness of the support provided by the Essential Living Fund team; consider funding arrangements to identify potential future savings delivered through the scheme. ¹
6	To work with SEPT and others to ensure that identified links between housing, mental health, substance abuse and poverty are addressed together rather than in isolation, ensuring there are sufficient resources and capacity to deal with the issues.
7	Explore with Health Commissioners and SEPT to identify potential joint preventative initiatives across different groups.
8	Explore the barriers to information sharing & communication between agencies to enhance support.

4.2 That the draft Action Plan attached at **Appendix 2** be agreed.

5. Other Options

Not applicable.

6. Corporate Implications

6.1 Contribution to Council's Vision and Critical Priorities – Becoming an excellent and high performing organisation.

6.2 Financial Implications - there are financial implications to some recommendations but as yet they are unquantifiable. However, any recommendations progressing with associated financial implications will need to go through the annual budgetary process before implementation, as currently no revenue or capital budgets exist for the proposals.

6.3 Legal Implications – none.

6.4 People Implications – none.

6.5 Property Implications – none.

6.6 Consultation – as described in report.

6.7 Equalities Impact Assessment – none.

6.8 Risk Assessment – none.

7. Background Papers

- Project team meeting notes – meetings held on – 26th September, 7th November 2013, 15th January 2014 and 13th March 2014.
- Agreed notes from witness sessions – meetings held on 9th December and 16th December 2013.
- Written evidence received

8. Appendices

Appendix 1 – in depth scrutiny project final report – Impact of Welfare Changes

Appendix 2 – draft Action Plan

¹ Note - the funding will be part of the Revenue Support Grant from 2015/16.