

Appendices: 0



CABINET REPORT

Report Title	Cabinet Response to Scrutiny Panel – Impact of the Welfare Reform Act
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AGENDA STATUS: PUBLIC

Cabinet Meeting Date:	15 th July 2015
Key Decision:	No
Within Policy:	Yes
Policy Document:	No
Directorate:	Customers and Communities
Accountable Cabinet Member:	Cllr Alan Bottwood
Ward(s)	All

1. Purpose

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to respond to the recommendations set out in the Overview and Scrutiny document constructed between January 2014 and July 2014 presented to cabinet 12th November 2014.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That the recommendations included in the Overview and Scrutiny report “Impact of the Welfare Reform Act” are accepted.
- 2.1.2 That the Scrutiny Panel are formally congratulated for their commitment to evaluating and mitigating the impact of the Welfare Reform Act on the public and council employees, their commitment to improving the customer experience and the high quality and comprehensive report produced and thanked for the time and effort given to produce it.

3. Issues and Choices

3.1 Report Background

- 3.1.1 It was highlighted in the original report that the Review took place between January 2014 and July 2014, and the Panel received evidence both written and spoken, from a variety of expert advisors.

3.2 Response to the Overview & Scrutiny Recommendations

- 3.2.1 All 22 recommendations in the Overview & Scrutiny report have been considered by LGSS Revenues & Benefits, Customer Services and Housing (including Northampton Partnership Homes) and the representatives from the Voluntary Sector.

- 3.2.2 Cabinet's response to the 22 recommendations in the Overview & Scrutiny report are as follows:

- (1) Raising awareness of the ongoing reforms, the impact and support available from partners, the Voluntary Sector and various community groups and organisations is continued.

Response:

This recommendation is accepted. The Revenues and Benefits Partnership and Development Officer will meet with landlords, voluntary organisations including Community Law and Citizens Advice and update them on Welfare Reform impacts. The Money Advice and Customer Service teams will give support and advice to customers including external support where appropriate.

- (2) Revenues and Benefits, LGSS, together with Officers from NBC continue to provide briefings in relation to the emerging reforms and their impact.

Response:

This recommendation is accepted and in addition to the briefings for staff, the voluntary sector and community groups this will also include briefings and updates to councillors. The officer welfare reform steering group will lead on this.

- (3) In recognising the timescales for relevant processes and procedures in relation to Welfare Reform, Revenues and Benefits, LGSS, works closely with Housing Services, NBC, in order that these processes and procedures are speeded up.

Response:

This recommendation is accepted. Housing services work closely with Customer services and revenues to ensure that where possible new tenants have their claims processed in one

day. Housing Services have a regular presence in the One Stop Shop to ensure that co-ordination between the relevant services is as streamlined as possible.

- (4) A dedicated resource for benefits advice, financial inclusion and digital inclusion is established.

Response:

This recommendation is accepted although the resource will be a mixture of officers and external support. Officers within the housing money advice team offer financial inclusion and advice, customer service and revenues and benefits officers offer face to face and telephone financial and benefit advice. The Credit Union are based in the one stop shop and regular referrals take place. We work closely with Barclays Digital Eagles who offer digital training and support and have floor walkers within the One Stop Shop who assist customers with making claims and will be trained to support customers with universal credit claims.

- (5) Claimants are continued to be advised of the availability of Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) and awarded payment as necessary.

Response:

This recommendation is accepted. Promotion takes place when customers claim either on the phone or face to face and LGSS Revenues and Benefits work closely with Northampton Partnership Homes and the Housing Options service to maintain tenancies and provide time and support to organise moves to more affordable accommodation.

- (6) A financial Risk Assessment is undertaken and published.

Response:

This recommendation is accepted whereby monthly reports are produced which monitor the amount of DHP awarded and the remaining balance within the fund for future applications. Each case is considered on its own merit and a customer financial risk assessment is undertaken as part of the application process.

- (7) A project is undertaken to establish the roles and responsibilities in relation to Welfare Reform, in particular Implementation, Transition and Post-Transition

Response: Revenues and Benefits have started a project looking at the specific impacts and actions required in line with the transition to Universal credit later in the year, this will outline the key personal required at each stage. There will be continuing discussions with NPH through the steering group on their activities.

This recommendation is accepted

- (8) Staff from the relevant service areas - Customer Services, Housing Services, NBC, and Revenues and Benefits, LGSS, are trained and skilled so that they can support individuals through Welfare Reform.

Response:

This recommendation is accepted. Staff are trained to understand the issues and support will be available from all service areas and voluntary sector organisations as appropriate.

- (9) Links with the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) are actively explored, including the possibility of benefits advice, in particular the application of sanction, and support presence within the one Stop Shop.

Response:

The provision of benefit advice from the DWP has been discussed and they do not provide this service. The DWP themselves provide benefit Advice at their benefit advice centres (via phone & email) and the Job Centres focus on into work activities. We have colocation for regular surgeries in the One Stop Shop for Job Search Advice but will not be able to get direct advice and will continue to assist customers where possible or signpost them to get this support.

- (10) Links with ATOS (or relevant organisation) regarding the impact of the delays in assessing the entitlement of PIPs and the delays with appeal are actively explored.

Response:

This recommendation is not accepted in so far as we cannot influence the process although we can make representations through our links to the relevant organisations for an improvement in assessment and appeals timescales.

- (11) The Sustainable Independent Living (SIL) Scheme Toolkit - Northamptonshire County Council Social Fund 2014/2015, as attached at appendix J of the Overview and Scrutiny Report constructed between January 2014 and July 2014, is disseminated to all Councillors and staff. A workshop for all Councillors is scheduled explaining the work of the Sustainable Independent Living Scheme and Charity Link and the application process.

Response:

This recommendation is no longer applicable due to the cessation of the SIL fund.

- (12) Consideration is given to the development of viable alternatives to pay day loans, for example, facilities are introduced to assist clients to set up direct debits from the Northamptonshire Credit Union to pay bills such as rent (Council and private sector), Council Tax and utilities.

Response:

This recommendation is accepted and customers for whom it would be appropriate are referred to the Credit Unit who offer an account “Budget Plus” which provides a means to ensure bills are paid first and only the balance of the income is transferred to a current account with the CU or high street bank. The cost is £1 per week.

- (13) Consideration is given to Northampton Borough Council joining the East Midlands Credit Union Initiative where rent would be paid directly to the Council, as the social landlord, rather than directly to the tenant.

Response:

During the past year, a variety of initiatives have been introduced by social landlords to improve tenants' budgeting skills and mitigate any negative impact that welfare reform has on rent collection rates. Consideration is being given to the relative merits of all of these initiatives (including the East Midlands Credit Union Initiative) but, at present, rent collection rates are still good.

- (14) The work of Northamptonshire Credit Union is promoted to encourage people to use it as an alternative to pay day loans.

Response:

This recommendation is accepted and ongoing promotion and partnership with the Credit Union includes a presence in the One Stop Shop. Since the Credit Union have been based in the One Stop Shop referrals have increased significantly.

- (15) Close links into and between the Voluntary Sector and Northampton Borough Council are promoted.

Response:

This recommendation is accepted and awards continue to be made annually to the voluntary sector both through Partnership Grants and Community Foundation grants.

Community Law Service and the Citizens Advice Bureau both hold regular surgeries in the One Stop Shop.

- (16) Active promotion of the work of Voluntary Sector organisations, such as (Charity Link, Citizens Advice Bureau and Community Las) takes place on the Council's website, within the One Stop Shop and as part of outreach activities such as tenants' conferences.

Response:

This recommendation is accepted.

- (17) Service Level Agreements with Voluntary Sector organisations are explicit in relation to the necessity to provide support and advice to customers facing sanction.

Response:

This recommendation is accepted and Service Level Agreements have been updated for 15/16 in relation to Information and Advice and include outcomes in relation to the number of customers supported.

- (18) Northampton Borough Council supports the development of Food Hubs.

Response:

This recommendation is accepted and Food Hubs continue to be promoted to those customers for whom this is beneficial.

- (19) Monitoring of the accumulative impact of Welfare Reform as changes are implemented and embedded continues, to inform the development of appropriate support and, in particular, to help prepare for the implementation of Universal Credit.

Response:

This recommendation is accepted and through the Officer Welfare Reform steering group will continue to be monitored.

- (20) Relevant key findings from this Scrutiny Review are presented to an evidence gathering meeting of the Scrutiny Panel that is investigating Poverty in the Town to inform its evidence base.

Response:

This recommendation is accepted and the key findings have been presented.

- (21) The Overview and Scrutiny considers commissioning a Scrutiny review on the impact of Universal Credit after it has been in operation in Northampton for 12 months.

Response:

This recommendation is accepted and will be considered through the Overview and Scrutiny Planning process.

- (22) The Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as part of its monitoring regime, reviews the impact of this report in six months' time.

Response:

This recommendation is accepted

3. Implications (including financial implications)

3.1 Policy

3.1.1 There are none specifically

3.2 Resources and Risk

3.2.1 There are no financial implications at this stage, from the adoption of these recommendations.

3.2 Legal

3.3.1 None specifically.

3.3 Equality and Health

3.3.1 There are no specific new equality implications in adopting these recommendations.

3.5 Consultees (Internal and External)

3.5.1 The Panel took evidence from a wide range of Stakeholders, Councillors from Northampton Borough Council;

- Cabinet Member for Housing, Northampton Borough Council
- Cabinet Member for Finance, Northampton Borough Council
- Head of Revenues and Benefits, LGSS
- Chair, Community Safety Partnership
- Director of Regeneration, Enterprise and Planning, Northampton Borough Council
- Community Law
- Central and East Northants Citizens' Advice Bureau
- Community and Voluntary Sector - Voluntary Impact Northampton
- University of Northampton
- Nationwide Building Society
- Director of Public Health, Northamptonshire County Council
- Northampton Inter Faith Forum
- Community Groups

3.6 How the Proposals deliver Priority Outcomes

3.6.1 NBC Corporate Plan – creating empowered communities and responding to your needs.

3.7 Other Implications

None

4. Background Papers

O & S Scrutiny Report to Cabinet 12th November 2014

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