# REPORT FOR: OVERVIEW AND

# SCRUTINY COMMITTEE AND SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEES

Date of Meeting: 20 September 2017

**Subject:** Update re Officers' response to

Scrutiny's Review of the Impacts of

Welfare Reform in Harrow

Responsible Officer: Fern Silverio – Collections & Housing

Benefits Head of Service

Scrutiny Lead Policy Lead Member – Councillor

Member area: Stephen Wright

Performance Lead Member -

Councillor Phillip O'Dell

Exempt: No

Wards affected: All

Enclosures: None

# **Section 1 – Summary and Recommendations**

The report provides members with a further progress update regarding actions implemented since the Committees' recommendations following its review into the impacts of welfare reform on Harrow residents.

#### **Recommendations:**

That Scrutiny Members note the updated actions carried out as set out in this report.



# **Section 2 - Report**

#### Introductory paragraph

The original scope of the Scrutiny review was to understand the experiences of benefit claimants and of those who had needed to claim benefits in the past or may need to so in future. It was also to understand what services are available and what policies are in place to help people come off, live better on, or avoid needing benefits and how effective these policies are.

The outcomes were set out in a number of recommendations which along with Officers responses', were set out in the first two columns in table A below. A further officer update has now been added in the third column on the right.

#### Table A

# Update to Officer Responses & actions to the recommendations from the Overview and Scrutiny Group deriving from the review on THE IMPACT OF WELFARE REFORMS IN HARROW

Recommendations	Action & Response	Officer Update as @
		May 2017
Harrow Council should ensure that sufficient provision remains in place for residents who will struggle to complete transactions with the Council using the internet and set out robust measures for determining if this is being achieved	There are 16 self-serve terminals based in the One Stop Shop where staff are at hand to help facilitate.  The Customer Service team has also met (and continues to meet) with community groups to share how the digital platform can be utilised more effectively.  Customers can contact the Council by telephone to request a service although there is a diminishing resource available to handle this.	The self service terminals are used by over 5,000 residents each month whereby they receive support where required.  The Digital Services team continues to meet with relevant groups to ensure that the website is positioned appropriately.  A small telephone team is in place to respond to customers.  We are in the process of recruiting an intern within Housing Resident Services. Part of their role will be to personally assist customers with accessing the internet and any other digital tools to complete transactions and form filling, particularly Housing Benefit.
Harrow Council should ensure that residents are able to transact with Harrow Council about their Council Tax using email, rather	The Council Tax email box has been closed and replaced with an intelligent web form which not only ensures that all the relevant information is captured but also integrates into the back office	No further update applicable

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than simply by post	system.	
	For the time being customers can also present personally at Access Harrow one stop shop with complex queries, albeit through an appointment system.	
	Moving away from a self service digital delivery model would go against the current strategy. As it would also increase Access Harrow costs and require extra staff resources. There is no additional funding available and any additional costs would need to be met from savings made elsewhere.	
3. Harrow Council should record first or preferred languages for people with poor English and explore the use of vetted volunteers to translate information relating to debt and support options into first languages where required	Residents who struggle to understand and/or speak English can request a translation through the Council's translation service.	A new contract for Translation and Interpretations was awarded on 1 <sup>st</sup> March 2017 to DA Languages.
4. Officers to investigate ways of ensuring that appointments are not automatically cancelled through failure to respond to a confirmation email (often due to lack of regular internet access).	The Council is investigating available technology to notify customers via text messages.	Appointments are retained for those booking them
5. Harrow Council to contact residents who are likely to be affected by the reduced Benefit Cap at the earliest possible opportunity and often thereafter, ensuring a joined up package of support across departments and organisations is provided; this should go beyond sending letters and be tailored to the needs of the individual households	We are planning to contact families we believe will be affected by the reduced benefit cap to offer an Housing Advice interview where we will discuss their income and housing options to try to prevent them becoming homeless. We will liaise with other services as required.  The best option is to avoid the cap by gaining employment (A minimum of 16 hours for a lone parent or 24 hours for a couple. There is generally still plenty of entry level part time employment available). We were very successful with this process when the cap was originally introduced in 2012.	As in previous years, we are working with families affected by the reduced benefit cap. Looking for cheaper housing solutions and use DHP or other prevention funds as a stop gap until longer term solutions (employment or lower cost accommodation) can be found.  As the cap is now so low, and private rents so high, many smaller families are affected.  All tenants affected who are residing in council property have been identified and contacted by Housing Resident

Services Income Officers. Where contact has not been made in writing, officers have a dedicated home visiting day to make contact. Housing Officers in Resident Services have also been contacting tenants who are affected by the benefit cap. They have been interviewing them and explaining that the best option is to gain employment. We have seen a rise in residents who have taken this advice and are now in employment. 6. Harrow Council should Housing officers already receive a Staff are regularly trained on ensure that housing high level of training on housing welfare reform changes. We officers and other and welfare benefits so they are have recruited a Welfare relevant officers are able to give expert advice. Benefit Officer on a fixed term trained to understand The only limiting factor is the large basis to help with new benefit how best to work with workload that we currently deal cap reduction. When the clients in order to with, and the extra pressure the Homelessness Reduction Bill encourage them benefit cap will cause. (and new burden funding) is in recognise and address Staff are experienced in advising place, we will consider and know when to intervene. debt issues at the establishing it permanently to earliest opportunity. help prevent homelessness. This includes behavioural aspects Resident Services have and how and when to specialist Income Officers who engage to achieve the are working with tenants to best outcome. prevent rent arrears at the earliest opportunity. Tenants are visited within 6 weeks of moving into their home where debt is discussed. The current court protocol is very strict with questions as to how rent recovery is managed with tenants insisting that debt advice is maximised before any order is awarded. Resident Services have a specialist Tenancy Welfare Housing Officer to work with vulnerable tenants. 7. All households affected After we have given affected Within Housing Resident Services a pilot financial or likely to be affected households expert advice, if there awareness workshop was by the Benefit Cap to are other non priority debt organised for residents of the be offered a referral to problems, we refer to specialist Pinner area in Feb 2017. We a relevant voluntary organisations such as Money are hoping to roll this out to sector organisation for Advice Trust. other areas. The workshop was

holistic financial advice to maximise income, reduce outgoings and deal with emergencies and priority debts		organised by the Resident Involvement team and facilitated by CAB. Residents learnt about better budgeting, money and debt management, energy saving tips and Universal Credit. There was an opportunity for tenants to discuss their personal money situation with the trainer.
8. Undertake a journey mapping exercise to understand the experiences of people using information and advice services to inform Harrow Council's information, advice and advocacy strategy development. This could include a focus on Care Act related services as they are relatively new services.	Care Act focus: As part of the contract monitoring and review of the information and advice and Independent Care Act Advocacy Service contracts we have been working closely with the winning providers (SWISH and Community Solutions) to ensure that the services are as responsive as possible to the needs of individual clients while also meeting our Care Act 2014 statutory obligations. There remains a Care Act information and advice working group, which is a cross directorate group aimed at updating and amending information on the Council website in order to support the Council in achieving its information and advice requirements.	As part of the co-production of the Information, Advice and Advocacy strategy we gathered case studies of people's experiences of accessing information and advice and used these to produce journey maps that were used in the design process.
9. Harrow Council should ensure that letters regarding Council Tax arrears are easy to understand and more supportive, and not threatening, in terms of the language used. They should include details of the local Citizens Advice and other relevant organisations that may be able to offer assistance and how residents can appeal decisions made by Harrow Council	Staff in Revenues are currently undertaking a review and revised document versions will be discussed with Portfolio Holders before implementation. Some changes are restricted by legislation as certain letters need to comply with prescribed text.  Many of the comments regarding the perceived harshness of the wording referred to Housing letters and staff in Housing collections will also review their services' documents that are sent to customers	The review of stationery was led by Digital Services Team based on their research to make them more user friendly and understandable as well as promoting self service. This included a review of the information on the website. The Revenues Team checked the new design for legislative requirements and are implementing these for 2017/18 recovery. We are currently awaiting the proofs from our external printers to share with the PH. This covers reminders and final notices.  Where appropriate we are also using Nudge techniques and implementing these into the revised letters.
Harrow Council should consider whether to provide a Discretionary	DHP is a limited pot of money where demand exceeds available funds. To pay a household who later become exempt will divert	Previous approach continues to apply

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all ap Ca be Ind Pa	ousing Payment to I those who are oplying for a Benefit ap exemption enefit (e.g. Personal dependence ayment) until the utcome is known	funds from other households who are not expected to have the cap removed. Should a household be refused an exempting benefit they can apply for a DHP retrospectively.	
ho Ta cla to ea re the	fficers to monitor ow many Council ax support aimants are subject legal proceedings ach year, and to port back on this to e Performance and nance Scrutiny Sub ommittee	Implementing this would require separating CTS claimants out of the automatic recovery runs and to monitor manually. This would require staff resources and incur additional cost. Any additional costs will need to be funded from existing budgets or from compensatory savings made.	No update applicable as insufficient resources exist to carry out this work
up pri pri the Go As Ci	vestigate signing to to the best ractice protocol, roduced jointly by	The protocol has already been considered and many suggestions contained within the protocol were implemented as part of Harrow's council tax recovery policy.	No further update applicable
(a: Co Vu to pri wi re ea the	ulnerable clients is defined by the ouncil's ulnerability Policy) receive more roactive support ith debt or money lated issues at an arly stage when ey become known Harrow Council	As part of the revised recovery policy implementation, the council tax recovery policy now defines vulnerable clients and caters for them where identified. Access Harrow staff have also been trained on the new policy and vulnerability. Policy is on Council's website.  Due to Harrow providing no specialised debt advice service, this can only be done by sign posting or through the voluntary sector, eg organisations such as the citizens advice bureau (CAB).  This could be provided through commissioned services and officers will see if it is possible to incorporate this within the information, advice and advocacy strategy which is currently being developed, as well as other commissioning arrangements for	Debt support being integrated into the Generalist Information and Advice Service which will be commissioned to the Voluntary Sector later in 2017.  As mentioned above Resident Services have a specialist Income Officers. The specialist Tenancy Welfare Housing Officer manages a caseload of vulnerable tenants where bespoke action plans are agreed to include debt management.

14.	Monitor how many people who receive an Emergency Relief Scheme award are subject to the Benefit Cap and use this intelligence to understand what is driving emergency needs and how best to respond to it	the voluntary community sector (VCS). However funding for this area is already under pressure so this will need to be considered as part of the wider budget setting process.  Currently around 500 applications are received annually of which around 250 are successful. The data will be analysed and shared with Housing to see if it can be linked to specific needs and the Benefit cap.	White Goods and Furniture support part of the Emergency Relief Scheme transferred to Housing with effect from 1/4/2017. This area accounts for 90% plus of the supported given and the change of delivery of the service to Housing will allow better analysis of data and cross referencing of cases so we can better understand demand and reasons for demand.
15.	Make the Council's policy on the allocation of Discretionary Housing Payment available to all relevant voluntary and community sector organisations	This will be circulated to all voluntary sector interested parties. It is already published on Harrow's website at <a href="https://www.harrow.gov.uk/dhp">www.harrow.gov.uk/dhp</a>	No further update applicable
16.	Harrow Council to ensure that departments share information about households to better understand, for instance, the impact of housing, debt or poverty issues on other needs, outcomes and services. This information should be used to improve the way services are delivered to individual families and build business cases for wider change	Information sharing already takes place with specific pieces of work, and through the Together with Families Programme (Troubled Families) there is a clear desire to share information on vulnerable families to best support developing and delivering effective interventions. The work to develop an Information, Advice and Advocacy strategy will also support this area from the perspective of understanding the needs of residents and supporting arrangements to give them early support where necessary and appropriate.	Further work on-going between the Collections & Housing Benefits Service and Children's and Adults to improve sharing of data and support to residents.  Advice and Advocacy strategy now completed and adopted by Cabinet.
17.	Encourage schools to be aware of good practice in relation to identifying families at risk of homelessness	The viability of compiling a list of indicators that may identify families at risk of homelessness will be explored in consultation with housing and welfare services.	The safeguarding leads for schools meet termly with the LSCB and with the Divisional Director for Children and Young people services. There has

Should this be successful, schools and helping them to been a regular briefing on homelessness. Schools are prevent this by will be provided with these indicators and a summary list of beginning to identify the early signposting when possible contacts so schools may share this indicators of homelessness; with and / or publish to parents as and are referring into Early appropriate. Support Services to gain assistance for these families at risk of homelessness. Schools have been provided with a list of contacts so that parents can refer themselves directly for help if needed. whether A statistical analysis completed by Harrow reablement services for 18. Investigate Harrow's BIU (Business Intelligence carers provide support concerns expressed Unit) on the Carers Survey showed about the potential addressing these issues. In for carers to have to that the two most significant factors addition a draft Carers strategy give up responsibility associated with carers feeling is being produce by the local for caring for people under excessive pressure (and at authority and CCG to address (who don't live with risk of breakdown) were not being these issues in a coordinated with able to maintain social contacts and them), way. subsequent becoming socially isolated, and feeling that they were not receiving additional costs for enough encouragement the local authority, actually support. Both are issues that can are happening be addressed by services and support offered by the Council. It is suggested that these areas are prioritised in carer assessments. However Harrow reablement services for carers provide support addressing these issues. addition a draft Carers strategy is being produce by the local authority and CCG to address these issues in a coordinated way. The Leader of the Should case investigations Process in place to escalate Council to write to substantiate the fact that DWP data this to Leader should the relevant Minister takes too long to reach the circumstances occur. to request that the authority, the Head of Service in Government reduce Housing Benefits will discuss the Harrow too as reviewed its own the time taken for issue with the Leader with a view to processes jointly with DWP to a letter being sent to the ensure any bottlenecks are information about Department of Work and Pensions removed from the authority's changes in benefit entitlement to be (DWP) in order to lobby end so earlier processing is communicated Government regarding the timely achieved. to Harrow Council, to issue of information regarding DWP known changes of circumstances enable timely payment so quicker housing benefit appropriate benefits assessment can occur. to residents. Officers to provide data to substantiate this claim Harrow Council Harrow has the joint highest Harrow as reviewed its own

processes jointly with DWP to should undertake a proportion of in-work private sector quicker assessment Housing Benefit claims in the ensure any bottlenecks are country. The majority of changes in removed from the authority's of housing benefit claims and circumstances received are end so earlier processing is reassessment in therefore from in-work households. achieved. Speed of processing response to changes It is not possible to prioritise these for changes of circumstances in income (people on claims due to the volumes. The kept at 12 days or below and zero hours contracts, further improvement should be service has however recently achieved by the end of Q1 in moving in or out of reviewed the way it treats earnings work. or self in an attempt to simplify the 2017/18. process. The turnaround time for employed etc.) all changes in circumstances is currently 12 days. Housing 21. Investigate how often The housing benefit application The Benefit online form (new claim and change in form was reviewed and housing benefit circumstances) is now an amended following comments forms are returned to automated web form. This online received from customers, because applicant solution allows us to offer online stakeholders and Council they are not help at the relevant parts of the officers. The enhancements completed properly, application process and a form went live at the end of January whether cannot be submitted without all the 2017 and have reduced the relevant information beina need for forms to be returned. anything needs to be available. Accuracy of claims done as a result. completed is under review with planned changes to the form to simplify the process and additional guidance is to be made available for common areas of error. 22. Investigate Rent for Temporary whether No further update applicable Harrow Council and Accommodation offered by the its partners could do council is within HB limits, so is more to support affordable. victims of domestic If requested we are usually able to abuse who have left assist with a move to cheaper the abuser and are accommodation away from the living in unaffordable area, outside London. This is usually the only option where temporary accommodation, affordability is an issue. or are not leaving for For existing social housing tenants, we work with our neighbouring financial reasons. This should include boroughs to get a reciprocal offer of a similar social tenancy in another clarifying the scale of such issues The Harrow Pension Fund is The Pension Fund Committee 23. Recommend to the Pension Fund Forum committed to pursuing a has recently agreed a new considers responsible investment policy and **Investment Strategy Statement** that it has recently changed its Statement which includes strengthened participation in the Investor of Investment Principles to reflect paragraphs on social, Collaborative bγ this. environmental and governance (ESG) considerations. In signing joint investor The Fund is pursuing a multi-strand particular, it considers that letters; selecting particular companies strategy to engage actively on long-term financial performance these issues: of a company is likely to be deeper enhanced if it follows good engagement (i.e. at Writing to all fund

managers to ensure they

AGMs);

and

practice in ESG activities. It

speaking directly to	are signed up the UN	expects its fund managers to
Asset Managers about areas of concern	Principles of Responsible Investment and other appropriate codes of practice  Identifying particular areas where environmental, social, and governance risks could impact financial performance  Supporting campaigns by Share Action to influence the behaviour of companies on issues such as air pollution or the living wage.  The Pension Fund is constrained in that it invests in pooled funds rather than directly in specific company shares. The bulk of action, therefore, must necessarily be to influence the behaviour of fund managers either directly or via the Local Authority Pension Fund Forum.	use their influence as major institutional investors to promote good practice and each time the Committee meets a manager this is a major item on the agenda.
	Investment collaboration and asset management engagement will be discussed with the new Chair of the Pension Fund Committee to agree the way to continue and enhance this approach.	
24. Officers to consider the Social Value weighting in procurement to determine whether there is any scope for extending this beyond 10%, or any way of expanding/ clarifying the questions for this section of the tender documentation to encourage companies to pay the living wage and to see this as a positive move.	Tender documents clearly clarify the metrics that are being used to evaluate social value and the inclusion of a commitment to pay London Living Wage (LLW) to employees and/or to encourage sub-contractors to do this will help contractors in terms of supporting social value. This is stated in the Social Value – Background Information For Bidders document:  Promoting fair employment practices.	No further undate applicable
25. That the issue of low pay is identified in Harrow Council's Corporate Plan as a priority area for	Our Procurement Strategy ensures that payment of the London Living Wage (LLW) is considered in our procurements by seeking contract prices both with and without	No further update applicable

	tackling in Harrow – this will allow Procurement colleagues to identify low pay as a particular issue in the Social Value section of the tendering documentation	payment of LLW. We also encourage first tier suppliers to adopt LLW for their wider workforce and sub-contractors employees who deliver services on our behalf.  The potential for payment of the London Living Wage within supply chains will continue to be explored.	
26.	Officers to contact the Living Wage Foundation with a view to getting advice towards Harrow Council becoming Living Wage accredited, and how to tackle the issues it faces in this (around contractors paying the Living Wage in particular).	Economic Development liaised with Caroline Reilly from London Living Wage in November 2014 to participate in an event to promote this to Harrow businesses but were advised that they "are only able to support accredited employers at the moment."  Further discussions were held with LLW and HR (Jon Turner) also liaised with LLW, regarding Harrow becoming accredited. However, requiring contractors to pay the LLW is currently unaffordable. We are continually reviewing options to increase the number of people paid the LLW.	No further update applicable
27.	Officers investigate whether there are any London Borough's comparable to Harrow that are Living Wage accredited, and if so to have a discussion with them to gain information as to how they have managed this.  Note: London Boroughs currently accredited are Brent, Camden, Lambeth, Croydon, Ealing, Enfield, Hounslow, Islington, Lewisham, Southwark, Tower Hamlets, Greenwich and City of London.	Officers will approach other West London boroughs' procurement teams.	Other boroughs ensure suppliers pay the LLW. In Brent and in Harrow (and other boroughs) where there is a contract that we are aware doesn't currently pay LLW we go to the market seeking 2 prices (with/without). This then enables Members to make a decision on whether to pay. Taking Brent as an example, for every contract that has come up so far, the Members have agreed to pay LLW. The procurement team has renegotiated a number of contracts that have 3 to 4 years before renewal to include LLW now rather than waiting for renewal.  In November 2015 work was undertaken by Terry Brewer and Donna Edwards to assess the impact of implementing LLW across contracts without LLWt. At that time it was calculated the costs to be £6.7m for Adults and £600K for children's. The costs may be a bit less now given the introduction of the NLW but this gives an idea of the scale of the problem and why Harrow isn't

			signed up to the LWF.
28.	Officers to investigate ways of highlighting workers' rights to particular areas of the community (ie those who do not speak/ understand English well).	There is currently no capacity to take this work forward. We have secured funding for skills and employment projects but have no capacity for additional work.	No further update applicable
29.	Officers to investigate ways of extending access to ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) classes in the Borough.	Skills Escalator funding is being used to extend access to ESOL. JCP will be funding additional provision	External funding was secured from DWP to increase provision in 16/17. Mapping exercise to be commissioned in 17/18 to determine provision. Subject to devolution further funding will be sought from a future West London Skills and Employment Board.
30.	Officers to investigate opportunities for upskilling start up businesses in financial management.	This is currently available through business support activities funded through our NHB programmes	No further update applicable.
31.	Officers to investigate Camden Council's pilot into utilising flexi working in apprenticeships to enable young parents to take up places, and to assess as to whether a similar project could be run in this Borough.	There appears to be no demand for this initiative, however officers will investigate further the viability of a similar pilot.	To be investigated in development of apprenticeship levy.
32.	Officers to undertake pilot research on the prevalence of payment below the minimum wage and National Living Wage, with a focus on high risk sectors and apprentices.	There is no capacity to take forward this work.	No further update applicable.

#### **Financial Implications**

Consideration will need to be given to any proposed service changes or the adoption of specific policies, and these should only be implemented where changes lead to "invest to save" or overall Council savings. Where implementation of the recommendations may lead to an increase in specific services revenue budgets, funding will need to be found from within existing budgets or by making compensatory savings elsewhere in the budgets.

#### **Performance Issues**

Whilst there is no measure for the broad actions that welfare reform brings, welfare reform has and will continue to impact on residents. Impacts are in the amount of disposable income those residents dependent on benefits will have and their ability to pay for housing and living costs generally.

Having less disposable income could lead to both poverty and inequality and in Harrow Council & other public bodies having to provide additional support which in turn increases public expenditure and adds further pressures on local government budgets.

#### **Environmental Impact**

Not applicable

#### **Risk Management Implications**

Welfare Reform brings risks to both residents' wellbeing, mental health and Council budgets. However Welfare Reform is a Central Government initiative and the authority has no say in the matter and can only prepare the best it can for potential impacts as well as highlighting potential issues and pressures. Bringing this update report to P&F ensures Members are informed and gives assurance that within existing budgets, Officers have done what they can to mitigate repercussions.

### **Equalities implications**

Welfare Reform is a Central Government policy and as such it is not for the local authority to conduct Equality Impact Assessments on the matter. However, where the reforms impact on local services, comprehensive Equality Impact Assessments (EqIA) are undertaken. An EqIA was not carried out specifically for this report as the report includes no specific proposals for service change. Where changes result from the acceptance of this report's responses and further work actions, these will be accompanied by an EqIA.

#### **Council Priorities**

By noting this report and agreeing to the actions set out in the responses, Members will be supporting those in financial need. As such, this report reflects the aims of our corporate priorities and will ensure we continue supporting the most vulnerable.

# **Section 3 - Statutory Officer Clearance**

Not required

Ward Councillors notified: NO

# **Section 4 - Contact Details and Background Papers**

#### Contact:

Fern Silverio (Head of Service – Collections & Housing Benefits), Tel: 020-8736-6818 / email: fern.silverio@harrow.gov.uk

# **Background Papers:**

None