NORWICH City Council

MINUTES

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

16:30 to 18:10 **19 July 2018**

Present: Councillors Wright (chair), Fullman (vice chair) Carlo, Fulton-McAlister (M), Hampton, Manning, Raby, Sands (M) (substitute for Sands (S)), Stewart, Thomas (Va) and Thomas (Vi)

Also present: Kim Wright, partnership manager (Department of Work and Pensions)

Alison Fearns, customer service leader (Department of Work and Pensions)

Paul Corney, head of service, Anglia Revenue Partnership

Apologies: Councillor Coleshill, Sands (S) and Smith

1. Public questions/petitions

There were no public questions or petitions

2. Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Minutes

RESOLVED to approve the accuracy of the minutes of the meeting held on 28 June 2018

4. Scrutiny committee work programme 2018-19

RESOLVED to note the scrutiny committee work programme 2018-19

5. The impact of Universal Credit on vulnerable groups

The chair welcomed Kim Wright and Alison Fearns from the Norwich Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) office and Paul Corney (Anglia Revenue Partnership).

The strategy manager presented the report. He said that Universal Credit was a wide ranging change to a series of benefits and how the council would handle these.

The implementation of Universal Credit was always supposed to be phased and a model of this had already been in place for around thirty months. This system represented a wholesale change to the way benefits would be paid with individuals receiving one payment only. This could prove challenging in terms of budgeting but the council was in a strong position to learn from what had happened around the country already.

Alison Fearns addressed the committee. She said that there were four areas being worked on around Universal Credit; complex needs, complex job plans, digital support and vulnerable workplace training and coaching. There would be a re-positioning of signposting resources and agencies, with work coaches who could look into lessons learnt from other agencies. Partners and colleagues including MAP, Citizens Advice and local authorities could have a presence in the job centre so claimants did not have to be referred out of the building.
Digital support was ongoing and had been in place for over a year. Claimants were being taught the skills to be able to make a claim and staff would be available to help those without the requisite digital skills. Members were invited to visit the Norwich DWP offices to see the arrangements in place.

In response to a member's question, Kim Wright said that various forms of identification were acceptable and DWP colleagues would be able to help claimants get ID in order to open a bank account. Computers at the DWP offices would be available for people to run journals and the telephone numbers for the DWP were Freephone numbers.
Members were concerned that claimants would not be able to call the various agencies needed if they did not have enough credit on their mobile phone; this included Norwich City Council.

In response to a question, Alison Fearns said that coaches would be working with claimants in receipt of Universal Credit to get claims paid and therefore to reduce the need for the use of the foodbank. The strategy manager added that the strategy team had access to statistics on foodbank use, broken down by ward and these would continue to be monitored once Universal Credit was rolled out. The financial inclusion manager said that discussions were taking place around developing clearer information on why people use the foodbank; however, the most common reason for use of the foodbank seemed to be claimants facing a benefits delay which would necessitate use of a foodbank.

Members discussed the potential increase in uptake once Universal Credit was rolled out and the success of the pilot group. Kim Wright said that there were no figures yet in terms of potential uptake but as six different benefits would be rolled into one payment, groups such as those claiming working tax credits would be seen by the DWP for the first time. Alison Fearns added that there would be a managed migration which meant that if a large number of claimants came through, the migration onto Universal Credit could be slowed. The head of service (Anglia Revenue Partnership) said that there could be no guarantee around numbers of claimants as these would be dependent on many different factors.

In response to a member's question, the strategy manager said that it would be difficult to quantify the cost to the council of administering Universal Credit as there were indirect costs to consider, such as digital inclusion work. There had been a funding arrangement with the DWP in place for the last two years for budgeting and digital support work. A process to identify what expenditure there had been around wider support work and how the council would be compensated for this would need to be developed.

In response to a member's question, Kim Wright said that she would find some further information regarding the policy of only being able to claim for two children and the proof that would be necessary to be able to claim for additional children, and circulate this to members via the scrutiny liaison officer.

Discussion ensued around Universal Credit being paid a month in arrears and how this would impact on claimants. Alison Fearns said that customers could apply for different arrangements, including up to 100% of the claim paid straight away. If a claimant would find it difficult to meet their rent arrangements for example, the money could be paid directly to the claimant's landlord. Kim Wright added that claimants were only encouraged to ask for what they needed in terms of advance payments to help them manage their income effectively. The claimant would then have twelve months to pay back the advance payment.

(The chair left the meeting and the vice chair took the chair).

In response to a member's question regarding identifying vulnerable claimants, the strategy manager said that when the live service began in December 2015, some initial modelling was undertaken to try and identify numbers of claimants who may need additional support. In practical terms, a work coach would ask the claimant if they needed any additional help with budgeting. Out of around one thousand claimants, only four needed digital support but the numbers needing general support would probably be higher than this. He added that it wasn't as straightforward as identifying vulnerable people at the point of claim; it would be about equipping a wider network of partners with the skills to help claimants where possible.

Members discussed the requirement to increase work hours referenced at paragraph 8 (c) of the report. Alison Fearns said that staff would work with claimants on an individual basis if necessary to advise on increasing hours of work. If a claimant was on a zero hours contract, staff would work with them to find more stable job opportunities or increase their qualifications.

RESOLVED to;

(1) Ask cabinet to:

a) consider the cost implications for residents to call the council free of charge
b) endorse the National Housing Federation recommendations at paragraph 28 of the report and write to the two Norwich MPs to ask them to do the same; and

(2) Remind members to contact Nicky Bristow if they would like to visit the Norwich DWP offices

The chair thanked Kim Wright, Alison Fearns and Paul Corney for attending the meeting.

6. Norfolk Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee update

The NHOSC representative said that at the most recent meeting, the committee had looked at maternity services and the impact of speech and language therapy.

Some schools were providing speech and language therapy services and shortages were due to a mixture of lack of funding, lack of speech therapists and the realisation that most children would benefit from some kind of speech and language therapy.

He added that the inadequacy of the Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital was discussed. The demographic projections of need had been underestimated which led to a shortage of beds. NHOSC would be considering the report on this, published by the Care Quality Commission at a later meeting.

Finally, he said that the future work programme would include an item on reaching out to the transgender community. He was pleased that this had been supported through the scoping process to be included.

RESOLVED to note the update of the Norfolk Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee representative.

CHAIR