NORWICH
City Council

MINUTES

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

16:35 to 18:45 **16 July 2015**

Present:	Councillors Wright (chair), Maxwell (vice chair),Bogelein, Bradford (substitute for Peek) Coleshill, Grahame, Haynes, Manning, Raby, Ryan, Sands (M)(substitute for Packer) Sands (S) and Schmierer
Also present:	Stacey Bright, St Martins Housing Trust; Julie Kemmy, information, advice and advocacy development manager, Equal Lives; Robert Lancaster, manager, MAP; Tim Adamson, DWP Norwich.
Apologies:	Councillors Packer and Peek

1. Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

2. Minutes

RESOLVED to agree the accuracy of the minutes of the meeting held on 6 July 2015.

3. Appointment of substitute for the Norfolk countywide community safety partnership scrutiny sub panel

RESOLVED to appoint councillor Graham as the substitute.

4. Scrutiny committee work programme 2015 -2016

The chair updated the committee on the work programme.

RESOLVED to note the scrutiny committee work programme 2015 – 2016

5. Update of the representative for the Norfolk health overview and scrutiny committee

Councillor Bogelein – Norwich City Council representative for the Norfolk health overview and scrutiny committee – explained that a number of general recommendations had been made at the meeting of the committee that had taken place earlier that day. She explained that she would circulate a note of

these to members via email, adding that a written update would be included with the scrutiny committee recommendations in September.

RESOLVED to:-

a) note the update from the representative for the Norfolk health overview and scrutiny committee; and,

b) remind members to liaise with Councillor Bogelein if they wish to raise any issues.

6. Benefit sanctions and their impact

The invited guests introduced themselves and explained the ways in which benefit sanctions have affected the services they provide:

St Martins Housing Trust representative Stacey Bright explained that use of their hostel and associated services have experienced a big impact from the sanctions, in the numbers of people accessing their services and using the hostel.

Julie Kemmy, information, advice and advocacy development manager at Equal Lives said that they hadn't yet experienced higher numbers of people accessing their services.

Robert Lancaster of MAP explained that he was the manager of the advice service.

Tim Adamson explained that he was from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and that the service deals with approximately 15,000 customers.

In response to a member's question, Tim Adamson explained that the lone parent families' area (which included a play area) had been removed due to there being fewer specialist lone parent advisors. Cuts which had been made to the DWP had meant a loss of twenty percent of staff at the Norwich Job Centre. As such, training had been introduced to ensure staff were multi-skilled, resulting in a multi-purpose centre, with little room for the kind of specialist areas previously seen. Tim said that he would feed back the details of the discussion and that if it were possible to fit in the lone parent area with the new business layout, then they would examine ways in which to reinstate it.

Tim then clarified the method by which the DWP refers decisions regarding possible sanctions via their Decision and Automated Referral Toolkit (DART). A process of evidence gathering is carried out by the Jobcentre advisors before auto referring a jobseekers allowance (JSA) entitlement doubt to a decision maker via the DART system. As a part of this process, a notification is sent to the individual involved, simply advising them of what is happening

but does not – at this stage – mention the potential introduction of benefit sanctions.

If a decision is then taken to place benefit sanctions upon an individual, this would be entered onto the DWP system which – as Tim Adamson understood it – would trigger an automatic notification to the city council.

In response to a member's question, the executive head of service for business relationship management and democracy said that if an individual was sanctioned and JSA was stopped, the potential for overpayment of housing benefit could arise. If other income is found – for example, an individual may be back in work – then a change would obviously be needed to the level of housing benefit being received. Tim Adamson added that in any situation where housing benefit entitlement was likely to change, individuals would always be advised to contact the city council.

In response to a member's question, Stacey Bright explained that the St Martin's Housing Trust was experiencing an increase in access to their services by nil-income individuals who had difficulty in understanding the contents of letters from both the city council and the DWP. She explained that she felt communication needs to be a lot clearer, with letters that properly transmit a sense of urgency. As it stood – she explained – the letters often generate a high number of calls to the city council and the DWP to simply clarify their contents.

Referring to the pie chart on page 43 of the report, Tim Adamson explained that those aged 18-24 were a target group for services due to high unemployment within that demographic. He said that the aim for this group was to see them for a meeting once a week, meaning that they experienced a higher rate of no-shows for appointments. As such, this has led to a higher rate of sanctions given to those within the 18-24 age bracket. He said that options were available, however, to assist with managing attendance, literacy problems and any help required gaining access to online services.

In response to a member's question, Tim Adamson said that the DWP had relationship managers who were happy to link in with the council when it came to meetings with customers. He said that they welcomed any support given by organisations and confirmed that they already worked closely with appropriate groups and that this engagement would continue in individual cases as long as there was willingness on behalf of the customer. He also explained that there were no targets to be met for the imposition of benefit sanctions.

In closing the item, the following points were made by the invited organisations:

- Everybody should work toward better, clearer information sharing between the agencies involved.

- It would be useful for advisors in the organisations to have a direct link to the council with a named advisor.

- Consider the use of text messaging when contacting younger people.

- It would be positive for the city council to include information (such as leaflets) for support agencies with relevant correspondence.

RESOLVED to:-

1) consider establishing a single point of contact within the city council for specific advice agencies dealing with the most vulnerable clients;

2) suggest ways in which single reference can be made into support and advice, building upon the recently commissioned debt and money advice consortium;

3) investigate alternative ways of contacting clients (especially younger people via text) to notify of changes to housing benefit entitlement as well as examining other non-written alternatives;

4) work with the DWP to establish a simple checklist of other benefits or entitlements which clients could consider claiming once benefit entitlement has been established;

5) work with the DWP and advice agencies and appropriate data protection advisors as necessary to find a simple way to encourage sharing of information between agencies - particularly as it may relate to literacy, numeracy, language or other communication barriers;

6) investigate to what extent benefit notifications - especially end of entitlement or benefit suspension - can include other information such as a 'nil entitlement' form and to look at the inter-relationship between types of benefits to minimise the occasions where housing benefit ends despite actual income remaining at the same level;

7) review the function of the benefit relationship meetings to focus on problem solving to include, for example, making best use of electronic data passed between systems to minimise loss of housing benefit;

8) request the DWP to pass on information regarding accessibility to and criteria for the job seekers allowance hardship fund and the city council to work with its advice partners and its own advisors to publicise entitlement;

9) double-check the current process around six week entitlement to benefits based upon a nil income declaration;

10) investigate an agreed programme of work shadowing and information sharing between agencies, advisors and councillors;

11) find an appropriate channel (given an estimated 75% rate of non-sanction) for the city council to lobby local MPs and the wider local government body for DWP nationally to look at ways of reducing sanction referrals from work programme providers; and,

12) ask the DWP locally to provide feedback on progress around:

i. reinstatement of a play area;

ii. training / reminders to front line staff to advise clients on the ability to appeal or access e.g. JSA hardship funds;

iii. investigate what options may be available to improve - or make better understood - notification letters or other communication methods; and,

iv. making available, in conjunction with the city council and other agencies, a list of advice and support networks (see also recommendation 2)

7. Housing benefits and council tax reduction scheme claims processing

The executive head of service for business relationship management and democracy presented the report and in response to members' questions, provided the following information:

- He agreed that some letters regarding changes in circumstance were difficult to understand. He added that such letters were constantly under review although legislation often dictated the content of such letters. As such, work was taking place to look at including simple explanatory notes with the letters.

- When writing to clients to ask for further information in the case potential overpayment of benefits, he agreed that this represented a good opportunity to include communication encouraging people to consider saving up to offset any such overpayment.

- When councillors have comments from particular constituents, they need to clearly advise the benefits team of specifics so that each issue can be dealt with fully.

RESOLVED to note the report.

CHAIR