

Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee - 13 December 2018

Non-confidential minutes of the meeting of the Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee held at on 13 December 2018 at 7.30 pm.

Present: **Councillors:** O'Halloran (Chair), Gallagher (Vice-Chair), Debono, Heather, Gantly, Chapman, Bell-Bradford, Khurana, Jeapes and Wayne
Also Present: **Councillors:** Hull

Councillor Una O'Halloran in the Chair

- 59 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item 1)**
 Councillors Chowdury, Woodbyrne, Spall and Champion
- 60 **DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item 2)**
 None
- 61 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (Item 3)**
 None
- 62 **TO APPROVE MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING (Item 4)**
 RESOLVED:
 That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 1 November 2018 be confirmed as a correct record of the proceedings and the Chair be authorised to sign them
- 63 **MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES (Item 5)**
- 64 **PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item 6)**
 The Chair outlined the process for Public questions and filming and recording at meetings
- 65 **CHAIR'S REPORT (Item 7)**
 The Chair reported that a visit had been made to the Barnsbury Job Centre in relation to the Universal Credit scrutiny and that the notes of the meeting had been laid round that evening for Members. The Chair added that further visits on Universal Credit would be taking place on 17 and 22 January, and if Members required any further visits/information in relation to UC these should be notified to her

 The Chair also outlined the Fire Evacuation procedures for those present
- 66 **SCRUTINY REVIEW - UNIVERSAL CREDIT - WITNESS EVIDENCE - VERBAL (Item 8)**

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Ian Adams, Robbie Rainbird and Annette Hobart, Islington Council, were present for consideration of this item, together with Alison Lamb and Jean Daly- Matthias of the Citizens Advice Bureau and a presentation was made to the Committee, copy interleaved

During consideration of the presentation the following main points were made –

- The UC full service started on 20 June 2018 and there are 4231 residents now claiming UC 69% of these are out of work
- There were 2361 new UC claims in Barnsbury and 1870 in Finsbury Park
- All 177 who were on UC live service have now transitioned onto full service and are included in the numbers detailed above
- Job Centres were seeing around 30-40 new claimants per day in October and November, but this might slow down now that live service claims have been migrated over
- The impact on Housing and Tenants – there are 1450 council tenants (rent accounts) now on UC. 411 are on Alternative Payment Arrangements (APA) and this equates to 28% of tenants on UC (national rate is around 20%)
- 1101 (76%) are in arrears compared to 40% in arrears for tenants still on HB
- Total rent arrears across UC tenants is now almost £1.4m, four times as much as in June. This has risen in line with the increase in tenants moving onto UC
- Average rent arrears for UC accounts in arrears is £1206 almost 4 times as much as the average arrears for HB tenants in arrears (£341.80). This rises to 7 times as much as if compared average arrears across all HB tenants - £909.19 and £138.41 respectively
- Feedback from the Housing Benefit team – the HB team receives notification from DWP where a UC claim incurs changes to payment of HB and a request for Council Tax support (CTS)
- UC stop advises HB team to cancel HB and award 2 week run on – new claim
- UCLTR advises team that UC has stopped or there has been a change of circumstances and a UCDSTLR is sent when a claimant has ticked the box in the UC claim expressing an interest in claiming CTS – Islington is accepting this as an application and is proactively contacting claimants. Calcs is an instruction to cancel HB. The team has experienced significant additional administrative burden due to the level of notifications it is having to check and process, over 4700 in November alone, this is a message echoed by other local authorities
- Demand for crisis report – Food Banks – Referrals to Islington Food Bank have quadrupled since UC full service went live – there were 167 referrals made by Customer Centre in October, compared to 46 in June
- Crisis support - 44 payments made through the Resident support scheme to support residents struggling as a result of UC and crisis support has doubled last month and Council is now allowing 2 requests in a year instead of 1
- Independent Advice and support – Advice partners have dealt with almost 1000 requests for Debt support since June 2018 and a further 450 clients needing advice on their UC claim
- Emerging issues for residents include – around 87% of claimants have received their first payment on time and in full but 13% have either not been paid or only paid or only paid part of their claim and this equates to over 460 residents
- Key issues that are resulting in delays include – Failure to make or attend an appointment with the work coach to verify ID means claims will not progress-incorrect rent details entered on the claim, need to be verified with the landlord and agreed by claimant where there is inconsistency
- Some landlords, not the Council, are taking time to verify rent and there are difficulties in providing relevant evidence to satisfy the Habitual Residency Test
- There are difficulties in getting through on UC helpline to start or resolve issues with a claim, but some improvements over recent weeks as system can recognise

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claimant phone number and passport through to relevant local team in Belfast. New telephone claims service established in Glasgow to enable vulnerable claimants to make a claim by phone. There are also verification of ID issues for residents who moved to the UK years ago but with no formal ID

- Emerging issues for Council and partners – Rent arrears are already rising, after only 5 months and frontline services (LBI) and partners are facing increased demand for crisis support
- There is limited data on UC claimants, which makes it difficult for the Council and partners to proactively target support – there is even no definitive number of tenants on UC. There is also no clear role for Local Authorities or resources, but Councils will continue to feel the impact of demand on services and will need to support residents in crisis
- DWP funding to CAB to provide support on making and managing a UC claim may not be enough to cope with demand at a local level. There is also decreased funding for HB administration but increased workload from UC
- Summary of announcements relating to UC in the Budget 29 October 2019 - £1000 annual increase to work allowance from April 2019
2 week run on to support transition to UC from income related elements of JSA, ESA, ad IS from July 2020
Reduce the maximum debt reduction rate from 40% to 30% of the standard allowance from October 2019
Extend the 12 month grace period for self-employed from July 2019 to fully implement from September 2020
Increase the period over which advances can be recovered from 12 to 16 months from October 2021
Surplus earning policy will be temporarily reduced, will continue to affect earnings spikes above £2500 until April 2020, when it will revert to affecting earnings spikes of £300
Implementation schedule revised and managed migration to start as a pilot in July 2019, before starting fully in 2020, to complete by December 2023
- Case studies were presented of residents experiencing difficulties in claiming UC
- Members noted that there is the following support for residents moving onto UC and the Council model builds on Islington's successful Universal Support Delivered Locally USDL DWP Pilot – Digital support @2 provided by the CAB – Personal Budgeting Support delivered by the CAB, co-located in Barnsbury and Finsbury Park job centres – Advice for Council tenants provided by Housing Income officers in both Job Centres – Information on benefit entitlement and better off calculations provided by IMAS and SHINE – Helping to find employment through Islington working, with initial triage through the i WORK team – Independent advice and advocacy provided by Advice Partners with over £1m funding from the Council – Crisis support through the resident support scheme – Referrals to local foodbanks and soup kitchens
- Communications with residents – It has been agreed not to undertake a mass UC campaign for residents and instead have – used routine communications with residents to gradually raise awareness of UC including article in Xmas edition of Islington Life and the Summer edition. In addition, rent statements amended to clearly set out the rent figure, following feedback that residents were not entering the correct figure in their UC claim. The website has been updated with a dedicated page on UC, over 2,000 hits since June 2018. Customer information leaflets to be handed out by frontline services, one is an overview of UC and the other a checklist of what to do/provide to make a successful claim. Drafted a letter for Housing colleagues to send to tenants when a rent verification request is received from DWP. Purchased predictive software (Policy in Practice dashboard) to provide us with better information on numbers/details of who will be impacted by UC, which will

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enable the Council to target support in limited circumstances. Contact is made with HB claimants whose youngest child is approaching 5 years of age

- Support for staff and partners – Training sessions delivered in partnership with DWP to over 60 teams and services – within the Council and VCS providers. Further bespoke training planned in the New Year for family support services including Bright Start teams in Children’s Centres, who are increasingly seeing parents struggling with UC and in real hardship, but do not feel empowered to help. UC training materials available on izzi, and also circulated to partners. Maps/addresses/opening times of food banks, and soup kitchens circulated to frontline teams. Engagement with Islington Food Banks to identify/sign up frontline services planned e.g. around Food Banks. Advice partners have held UC related training for the voluntary and community sector (VCS), on a range of advice issues including debt, PIP and housing. They have planned some full day UC advice training sessions for the VCS in the new year. VCS conference in September 2018 Universal Credit a Whole Community response – funded by the Council and organised/delivered by the Islington Strategic Advice Partners. The conference attracted 140 local organisations, and speakers included Emily Thornberry and representatives of the Council, VCS, CPAG, DWP, BAMER. DWP escalation routes have been circulated – names, contact details of key staff in local job centres and in Belfast processing centre to enable staff to directly talk to someone on behalf of a client
- Monitoring impact and addressing issues – within the Council there is a UC Executive Board, a UC working group, UC housing group, an HB UC transition group, a new UC Family support group, and a UC dashboard. There are also meetings with partners
- Members noted that the UC support offered to the Council was not what was originally intended – the USDL pilot included a significant council and partnership approach to support UC and a role for HB staff, however the UC support from April 2019 is – DWP has announced that from April 2019 they will fund Citizens Advice and Citizens Advice Scotland to deliver a new UC support service. They will receive a total of 351m to support claimants through every step of making a UC claim to managing their money when it arrives. £12m is being provided to set up the new service by April 2019, with a further £39m being paid from April onwards and the main focus will be on budgeting digital (as under the current offer)
- The Council has made a number of submissions on UC – written evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee – UC update inquiry by the Islington Debt coalition and the Islington resident support scheme in March 2017. Also updated written evidence submitted to the Work and Pensions Committee – UC update inquiry by the Islington Debt Coalition and the Islington resident support scheme – September 2017 and evidence to the Social Security Advisory Committee response to consultation on government proposals for moving claimants to UC from other working age benefits – August 2018
- Members were informed that the CAB were assisting residents in personal budgeting support at both of the Job Centres in the borough and claimants were struggling with delays in payments and causing mental health anxiety
- The CAB were having to allocate significant resources in order to train staff on UC however there was support from the Council and the local job centres
- Claimants can spend a great deal of time trying to telephone DWP. There is a high level of debt amongst claimants and a number of cases studies had been carried out and these could be circulated. Members were of the view that it would be useful if hard data could be provided with these e.g. numbers of BME claimants, those with mental health problems and other vulnerable claimants

- Concern was expressed at the lack of data sharing by the DWP and that it would be useful if the CAB were able to gather data on how many claimants were being referred to food banks etc.
- In response to a question it was stated that the CAB collected data locally to build up a joint database with the DWP and can be presented to the Government to recommend changes
- In response to a question it was stated that the CAB envisaged difficulties when more claimants came over to UC, however they did not want to upskill staff in areas where it might not be needed

The Chair thanked Ian Adams, Robbie Rainbird, Alison Lamb, Jean Daly -Matthias for their presentations

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QUARTER 1/ 2 PERFORMANCE UPDATE - WELL RUN COUNCIL (Item 9)

Councillor Andy Hull, Executive Member Finance, Performance and Resources was present for discussion of this item. Annette Hobart, Strategy and Change Manager (Lead on Performance) was also present

During consideration of the report the following main points were made –

- Members noted that a new suite of corporate performance indicators will be used to track progress in delivering the Council's new Corporate Plan 2018-22
- The Council are currently on track to meet targets for collection of Council Tax and Business Rates. However, it was noted that a change in the way that collection rates are calculated means that it is not possible to compare performance to last year
- In response to a question it was stated that it is anticipated that Islington were in a London wide business retention pooling arrangement and it was expected that it was expected that the target set of 97.5% would be met. It was stated that it was felt that small businesses were struggling and 2019/20 would be a difficult year for them as transitional relief will be ending. The Chair stated that if Members were aware of small businesses that were in difficulties these should be referred to Councillor Shaikh, who will endeavour to assist them
- Reference was made to the outstanding £24m in Council Tax/Business Tax arrears and it was stated that the Council are continuing to focus efforts on recovering old debt and the amount of arrears recovered in the first 6 months of the year was over £2.6m, comprising £837000 Council Tax arrears and £1.8m in business rates arrears
- Members noted that the number online transactions had increased, which was beneficial to the Council, however residents could still choose not to do transactions online
- Discussion took place as to the sickness levels detailed in paragraph 4.14 of the report and that the previous explanation given in relation to high levels of sickness in E&R, which had been stated this was mainly due to muscular/skeletal injuries, actually showed high levels of stress/depression/anxiety and mental health problems in addition
- Members also expressed concern at the high levels of sickness across most Directorates of the Council, particularly stress, anxiety, mental health etc. The view was expressed that this could be mainly due to the pressures placed on staff by the Government reduction in funding to the Council and the need for significant savings to be made. This not only caused more work for staff remaining but future need for savings caused uncertainty for staff. Councillor Hull stated that the Council were putting in place a 3 year budget to try to alleviate stress for staff

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- Members expressed the view that there are HR policies in place to manage staff sickness and there is a need to ensure that these are being effectively communicated and implemented by managers and HR support is being offered when needed
- The view was also expressed that in smaller departments figures could be affected by a small number of staff being on long term sickness

RESOLVED:

- (a) That a report be submitted to the next meeting of the Committee by the Head of HR detailing the following with regard to sickness across the Council, and such reports be submitted on a 6 monthly basis –
 - (i) A breakdown by Directorates of staff numbers by grade, sickness patterns within each Directorate, including management posts, and whether this has increased over the previous 3 years, including details of short/long term sickness, whether staff have repetitive patterns of sickness, the seasonality of sickness absence, and the procedures in place for managing sickness, (both by management and HR) in supporting staff to return to work. In addition, the report should detail the HR policies in place to support management and staff in reducing sickness levels. Furthermore, given the high levels of sickness absence due to stress, anxiety, depression and mental health issues, details should be provided in relation to what the Council does to publicise and offer assistance to staff suffering from these conditions
 - (ii) The Organisational structure of HR department and the number of interim and permanent staff in post
 - (iii) Details of engagement surveys be investigated to ascertain whether there were any reasons given by staff for dissatisfaction with their employment that may give rise to increased sickness absence
 - (iv) The cost of sickness absence by Directorate
- (b) That future reports include target details for performance indicators in the previous year, as well as the current year
- (c) That Councillor Hull be requested to provide details of the targets in 2017/18 that were set for number of new affordable homes completed by the Council and the numbers completed to date in 2018/19 and similarly details for the number of planning permissions agreed for new Council housing

The Chair thanked Councillor Hull for attending

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REPORT OF PROCUREMENT BOARD (Item 10)

Councillor Andy Hull, Executive Member Finance, Performance and Community Safety was present at the meeting for discussion of this item. Steve Key Service Director Finance, was also present

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the work of the Procurement Board during 2018/19 be noted
- (b) To note the actions of the Strategic Procurement and the Board following up the recommendations of the Committee

69 **FINANCIAL MONITORING (Item 11)**

Councillor Andy Hull, Executive Member Finance, Performance and Community Safety was present for discussion of this item. Steve Key, Service Director Finance was also present

During consideration of the report the following main points were made –

- Members noted the forecast revenue outturn for the General Fund, of a gross overspend on £0.6m, before taking into account the ongoing corporate contingency budget of £2m
- It was noted that the HRA is in a forecast break even position
- It was reported that the latest capital position is a forecast capital expenditure of £154.9m in 2018/19

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted

70 **OTHER BUSINESS (Item)**

The Chair stated that as this was the last meeting of the Committee before Xmas, she would like to wish the Committee and officers a merry Xmas and a Happy New Year

The meeting ended at 9.35p.m.

CHAIR