

MINUTE of MEETING of the PARTNERSHIP AND RESOURCES POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND SCRUTINY PANEL of WEST LoTHIAN COUNCIL held within COUNCIL CHAMBERS, CIVIC CENTRE, LIVINGSTON, on 16 JUNE 2017.

Present – Councillors Lawrence Fitzpatrick (Chair), Kirsteen Sullivan (Vice-Chair), Chris Horne, Dave King, George Paul, Moira Shemilt (substitute for Peter Johnston), Damian Timson

Apologies – Councillor Peter Johnston

In Attendance – James Proctor, West Lothian Voluntary Sector Gateway

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made.

2. MINUTE

The Partnership and Resources Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel approved the minute of its meeting held on 28 April 2017. The minute was then signed by the Chair.

3. IMPACT OF EU EXIT AND HORIZON SCAN - JUNE 2017

A report had been circulated by the Head of Finance and Property Services and Head of Planning, Economic Development and Regeneration providing the Panel with an update on potential implications following the UK referendum vote to leave the European Union (EU) and to present a summary of the latest UK economic indicators and announcements.

The Head of Finance and Property Services informed the Panel of the process for leaving the EU, noting that on 29 March 2017 the UK formally triggered Article 50, giving two years notice of the UK's withdrawal from the EU. Negotiations were expected to start following the results of the general election in June 2017 and end in Autumn 2018.

The report went on to examine UK economic implications in relation to:-

Debt and Borrowing
Economic Growth
Exports and Inward Investment
Inflation
Interest Rates

The Panel was informed that the Scottish economy was likely to be affected by Brexit in a similar way to that of the UK in general terms, however changes to the Scottish rate of income tax taking effect from

April 2017 would mean that Scotland's own economic performance would have a more direct impact on the Scottish Budget.

In relation to the impact on West Lothian, the Panel noted that in the 2011 Census the total number of West Lothian residents from other EU countries was 5,112 with 85 per cent of the total EU group of working age. Within West Lothian, social care services were supported considerably by a large EU migrant workforce.

The report examined the impact on employment and business in West Lothian. The report also examined borrowing and the immediate impact on West Lothian Council, together with the medium to long term impact.

The Head of Finance and Property Services advised that the outcome of the negotiations and the latest economic indicators would continue to be monitored on a regular basis, as part of the horizon scanning of factors that could have an impact on the council's medium term financial strategy.

The Panel was asked to note:-

1. the latest potential economic and financial position of the UK following the referendum decision to leave the EU.
2. the potential financial implications for the council's future financial planning.
3. the potential direct funding consequences on Planning, Economic Development and Regeneration resources, as a likely implication of EU funding programmes ceasing after 2019.
4. the other potential implications for businesses and employability within West Lothian.

Decision

To note the terms of the report.

4. KEEPING WARM IN WINTER

A report had been circulated by the Head of Finance and Property Services informing the Panel of the recent activity undertaken by the West Lothian Advice Network to ensure West Lothian residents had access to advice and support to keep warm in winter.

The report provided an appendix showing fuel poverty by data zone in West Lothian and, although West Lothian had the lowest rate of extreme fuel poverty in Scotland, 29% (21,460) of all households in West Lothian were in fuel poverty.

The Panel was informed that during the winter months of 2016/17, partners worked collaboratively to promote the benefits of energy advice through the 'Keep Warm in Winter' campaign. While some partners were unable to secure continued funding to retain an energy advisor, from

October to December 2016 the Advice Shop had offered energy advice to 699 customers, which resulted in fuel savings of £64,226. Other partners also continued to offer energy advice which secured annual savings of £12,644 comprising of £8,602 from fuel billing advice and £4,042 from energy savings. Other targeted winter energy provision included:

- Warm Home Discount scheme campaign
- Energy Advice Forum activity

The report went on to provide details of the West Lothian Advice Network. The network recognised that, with limited resources, there was a need for services to be able to respond flexibly in order to cope with shifting demand. One of the key aims of the network was to target resources to help people living in the most disadvantaged life circumstances. The network had developed a targeted winter campaign using the information contained in appendix one to help tackle fuel poverty.

The Panel noted that the Advice Shop had supported the delivery of the HEEPS: Area Based Scheme through the provision of energy advice and income maximisation checks.

The Head of Finance and Property Services concluded that, through working collaboratively, partners had ensured that over 700 households had been supported to be better off in relation to keeping their homes warm. The success of the HEEPS scheme continued to make a significant impact in supporting householders to reduce fuel bills over the longer term, and the addition of specific fuel poverty questions on the existing questionnaire would help identify those who needed further or more in-depth support with their fuel costs.

The Panel then heard advice by the Chief Executive in relation to a review of certain domestic and non-domestic properties to identify wall cavity types and fire safety issues.

It was recommended that the Panel note:

1. a continuing improving picture in West Lothian in relation to extreme fuel poverty;
2. that customers were helped to maximise their income to a value of £76,870 and 278 homes were insulated through the Home Energy Efficiency Programme;
3. the reduction in partners ability to offer fuel advice due to withdrawal of external funding, and
4. the intention to build on the success of the Keep Warm in Winter campaign.

Decision

To note the term of the report.

5. FUNERAL POVERTY

A report had been circulated by the Head of Finance and Property Services providing an update on the actions taken by the Anti-Poverty Development Group to mitigate the effects of funeral poverty.

The Panel was informed that that in January 2016, Citizens Advice Scotland had published 'Funeral Poverty: A Review for Scottish Government.' The report highlighted that many bereaved families found it hard to pay the costs of burying their loved ones.

Funeral Poverty was a generic term used to encompass a range of issues around the difficulties experience by people with insufficient funds faced with paying the cost of a funeral.

For those families which fell into Funeral Poverty, after the options of benefits/finance had been explored and they were still unable to afford the funeral, they might be eligible for a National Assistance Funeral paid for by West Lothian Council.

The report provided details on the costs associated with funerals and noted that people were increasingly taking on unmanageable debt to pay for funerals. The nature of a funeral was that it was often an unexpected purchase because the death was unexpected, but also because the cost was unexpected. Factors such as welfare reform, reduction in the availability of credit and the freezing of wages had impacted on people's available resources to meet such sudden and unexpected expenditure.

In West Lothian in 2015, there had been 13 National Assistance Funerals which had increased by 53% from 2006 when there had been six National Assistance Funerals. By contrast, Edinburgh council averaged 138 per year.

In November 2016, a short life working group was set up to explore how to mitigate the effects of funeral poverty. Participants included: West Lothian Council Advice Shop, Cemeteries and Registration services alongside Citizens Advice Bureau, West Lothian Credit Union, NHS Bereavement Co-ordinator and the Chair of the National Funeral Directors Association.

The Panel was informed of the development of a leaflet to be distributed to partners and provided to the public. This was attached as Appendix 1 to the report. The leaflet would be widely available to Funeral Directors, hospitals, health centres, Carers of West Lothian, Council offices and other local partners, and would be provided by registrations staff when customers were registering a death.

During discussion, officers undertook to consider removing two phrases from the leaflet as suggested by the Chief Executive.

The Panel was invited to note:

1. the national and local context of funeral poverty and

2. the actions taken by the Anti-Poverty Development group to raise awareness and mitigate the impact of Funeral Poverty.

Decision

To note the terms of the report and the leaflet attached as Appendix 1 to the report.

6. MITIGATING THE IMPACT OF THE LOWER BENEFIT CAP

A report had been circulated by the Head of Finance and Property Services informing the Panel of the work undertaken to mitigate the impact of the lowered benefit cap which came into effect on 7 November 2016.

The Panel was informed that the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 had introduced a new, lower overall benefit cap. The cap applied to certain working age benefits including Income Support, Employment and Support Allowance, Jobseekers Allowance, Child Benefit, Child Tax Credit and Housing Benefit. The new lower benefit cap reduced the overall level of benefit income from £500 per week for couples and claimants with children to £384.62 per week. Single claimants with no dependent children had the cap reduced from £350.0 to £257.69 per week.

The benefit cap campaign in West Lothian was a joint project involving a range of council services and external partners with the aim of engaging families affected to support them to manage the reduction in their Housing Benefit award and, in turn, to manage payments to their rent account to sustain their tenancy and avoid eviction.

The campaign included advice to all households identified as red, amber or green depending on assessed level of vulnerability. The advice was tailored to their individual household circumstance. This advice was then followed up by referrals to specialised advice providers, where appropriate, to assist them to successfully manage the reduction in their income.

A recent visit had been carried out to a neighbouring local authority to discuss approaches to supporting households affected by the benefit cap. The visit highlighted that the approach of offering tailored advice to individual households, using methods of direct contact for those considered vulnerable, was regarded as good practice.

The Head of Finance and Property Services concluded that households affected by the lower benefit cap in West Lothian were likely to be comprised of large families, many with lone parents and high housing costs. The benefit cap campaign had successfully engaged with 81% of households in West Lothian assessed as being at the highest risk of financial and social exclusion as a result of the application of the flower cap.

In order to ensure that those impacted had the ability to adjust to the cap

in the longer term, continued partnership work was required to ensure that customers had access to appropriate support to maximise income, sustain their tenancy and meet longer term employability goals.

Finally, it was noted that it was expected that particular effort would need to be made to engage households between January and March 2018, when they were likely to accept potential shortfall in income and therefore want support.

It was recommended that the Panel note the impact of the lowered overall benefit cap and the actions which the council had taken to mitigate this impact on affected households in West Lothian.

Questions raised by Panel members were then dealt with by the Head of Finance and Property Services and the Anti-Poverty and Welfare Advice Manager.

Decision

To note the terms of the report.

7. WELFARE REFORM: QUARTERLY UPDATE REPORT

A report had been circulated by the Head of Finance and Property Services informing the Panel of the recent developments in, and the continuing implications of, the ongoing programme of welfare changes.

The Panel was informed that in relation to Discretionary Housing Payment Fund (DHP), the council awarded £2,193,463 in 2016/17. The DHP was no longer provided by the department for Work and Pensions but had transferred from April 2017 to the Scottish Government. The Scottish Government would reimburse councils for mitigating the impact of the spare room subsidy. All applicants affected by the removal of the spare room subsidy or bedroom tax, and the benefit cap who were entitled to Housing Benefit, would continue to be awarded full DHP to cover the shortfall in 2017/18.

The report provided details of the 2017/18 Scottish Welfare Fund spend to 30 April 2017.

In relation to Universal Credit, it was noted that as previously reported, in addition to the "Live System" which dealt with simple claims there was a second, developing, more sophisticated "Full Digital Service". This would deal with all UC claims including the more complex cases and cases involving families. Currently only a small number of Job Centres throughout Britain operated the "Full Service."

The Panel was informed that the Scottish Government had written to the UK Government in March 2017 requesting an immediate halt to the roll-out of the Full Service of Universal credit until problems with its implementation were fully resolved.

The report went on to examine further welfare changes, including

Reductions to Universal Credit from April 2017, Benefit/Credit Freeze, Reduction in the Household Benefit Cap, Housing Support for 18 to 21 year olds and the Two Child Limit.

In relation to the Scotland Act 2016 and the Devolution of Welfare, the report provided a table providing an overview of responsibility for social security powers.

The Head of Finance and Property Services considered that, as the welfare changes were rolled out, and as further changes took effect, officers would assess the cumulative effects of these challenges in order to develop and shape work going forward. This would include further analysis of the measures in the Scotland Act and engagement with the Social Security Committee of the Scottish Parliament and with COSLA, and the IRRV, as the practicalities of the proposed changes were considered. The results of their work would continue to be reported to elected members via the PDSP process and relevant action would be proposed by the council and community planning partners to pro-actively address issues arising.

The Panel was asked to note the impacts of the welfare changes in West Lothian and the actions which the council and community planning partners were taking in response.

Decision

To note the terms of the report.

8. SICKNESS ABSENCE (1 APRIL 2016 - 31 MARCH 2017)

A report had been circulated by the Head of Corporate Services examining sickness absence rates for the 12 month period from 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017 and providing an update on the ongoing application of the council's Policy and Procedure on Managing Sickness Absence.

The sickness absence SPI for the full council for the period 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017 was set out at Appendix 1 to the report, together with the SPI performance indicators for the full years (2013/14, 2014/15 and 2015/16).

The sickness absence SPI for each individual service area for the period 1 April 2016 to 31 December 2012 was set out at Appendix 2.

The Panel was informed that of the seven council service areas, five had reported sickness absence rates above the council target of 3.6%. Only Corporate Services and Education Services had reported below the Council target of 3.6%.

The report went on to provide details of Long-Term Absence and Disregarded Absences. It also provided an analysis of categories of Absence, highlighting that the most common reason for long term across

the council fell within the category of Mental and Behavioural.

The Head of Corporate Services advised that the absence management team with HR Services had continued to work closely with managers across the council, providing advance and guidance on the management of sickness absence and monitoring the application of the Policy and Procedure on Managing Sickness Absence.

The report provided commentary in relation to the Occupational Health Tender, Mentally Healthy Workplace Training, HR Adviser Input and Employee Health and Wellbeing.

The Head of Corporate Services concluded that 2016/17 had seen an increase in sickness absence rates which was indicative of a rising trend over the previous 3 years although absent rates had been slower to increase and were similar to 2015/16 levels.

The council was applying a more targeted strategy for managing absence over the coming months, tailored to individual services and supported by ongoing robust application of the current Policy and Procedure on Managing Sickness Absence.

The Panel was asked to note the content of the report.

Decision

To note the terms of the report.

9. PERFORMANCE REPORT FROM THE CORPORATE PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

A report had been circulated by the deputy Chief Executive examining current levels of performance for all indicators that supported the council's Corporate Plan and were the responsibility of the Partnership and Resources Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel.

The Panel was informed that of the 37 performance indicators, 33 were categorised as green, 1 as amber and 3 as red.

The Panel noted that in the appendix to the report, an explanation was provided for each indicator from the services on the performance levels.

The report concluded that the majority of performance indicators were within target. The information contained in the appendix allowed the Panel to focus on the issues that services currently faced and highlighted where service performance was currently below target. The information allowed the Panel to function in accordance with the council's Code of Corporate Governance and the principles of Best Value.

Decision

To note the terms of the report.

10. LOTHIAN VALUATION JOINT BOARD

A report had been circulated by the Chief Executive attached the minutes of the meeting of the Lothian Valuation Joint Board held on 6 February 2017.

It was noted that, in accordance with the decision of the Council Executive on 29 June 2010, the business of Lothian Valuation Joint Board was to be reported to the Panel by the production of its minutes and annual report.

The report ensured that members were kept apprised of the activities of Lothian Valuation Joint Board as part of the council's Code of Corporate Governance.

The Panel was asked to note the terms of the minutes of the meeting held on 6 February 2017 of the Lothian Valuation Joint Board.

Decision

To note the terms of the report.

11. WORKPLAN

A copy of the Workplan had been circulated for information.

Decision

To note the Workplan.