

COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Communities Scrutiny Committee held in Conference Room 1a, County Hall, Ruthin on Thursday, 17 May 2018 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

Councillors Brian Blakeley, Meirick Davies, Rachel Flynn, Tina Jones, Merfyn Parry, Anton Sampson, Glenn Swinger, Andrew Thomas, Graham Timms (Vice-Chair), Cheryl Williams and Huw Williams (Chair)

Councillor Julian Thompson-Hill, Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Finance, Performance and Strategic Assets was in attendance at the Committee's request.

Observers - Councillor Tony Thomas and Councillor Emrys Wynne

ALSO PRESENT

Corporate Director Communities (NS), Chief Accountant (SG), Contracts and Performance Manager (PB), Contracts and Performance Project Manager (RT), Citizens Advice Denbighshire CEO (LP), DWP Partnership Manager (KG), Traffic, Parking and Road Safety Manager (MJ), Team Leader - Tourism, Marketing & Events (PM), Principal Engineer - Traffic Management (PL), Scrutiny Coordinator (RE) and Committee Administrator (SJ)

WELCOME

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and conveyed a special welcome to Lesley Powell, CEO Citizens Advice Denbighshire and Katie Goodwin, DWP Partnership Manager who were in attendance for agenda item 6 – Universal Credit.

1 APOLOGIES

The Leader, Councillor Hugh Evans gave his apologies as Lead member for agenda item 7- Tourism Signage Strategy for Denbighshire.

2 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Councillor Merfyn Parry declared a personal interest in agenda item 6 - Universal Credit.

3 APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR

Councillor Graham Timms was nominated and seconded for the role of Vice-Chair of the Communities Scrutiny Committee. No other nominations were received and it was:

RESOLVED that Councillor Graham Timms be appointed Vice-Chair of Communities Scrutiny Committee for the 2018/2019 municipal year.

4 URGENT MATTERS AS AGREED BY THE CHAIR

No urgent matters were raised.

5 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Communities Scrutiny Committee held on 22 March were submitted.

Matters arising –

Page 12- Agenda item 6 – Seagull Management Update Report – The Scrutiny Coordinator confirmed that correspondence with Betsi Cadwaladr University health Board (BCUHB) requesting information regarding numbers of individuals who had attended Local Hospitals had not included the number of individuals who attended General Practitioner's (GP) surgeries. The task to collate figures of all GP surgeries would be great.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 22 March 2018, be received and approved as a correct record.

6 UNIVERSAL CREDIT

The Lead Member for Finance, Performance and Strategic Assets introduced a report by Contracts and Performance Project Manager: Finance (previously circulated) which outlined the likely effects of the recent introduction of Universal Credit Full Service (UCFS) on Council services and the county's residents, and the planning and preparation work undertaken to date by the Council and its partners for the potential impact of its introduction. Prior to detailing the report's contents the Lead Member introduced the Council officers in attendance along with the representatives from the key partner organisations, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Citizens Advice Denbighshire (CAD), with whom the authority had been working closely with a view to managing the impact of the UCFS introduction in the county. During his introduction the Lead Member advised that whilst the majority of Denbighshire had formed part of the UCFS roll-out which commenced in April 2018, as it was served by the Rhyl Job Centre, residents in the southern part of the county had been subject to UCFS from October 2017 as their local Job Centre was at Wrexham, whilst some residing on the county's western fringes were going a few weeks later as they are impacted by Llandudno Job Centre.

Members were advised that the introduction of Universal Credit formed part of the UK Government's programme of welfare reform. It was a means-tested benefit, administered by the DWP, which was available to people of working age on low incomes, either in work or out of work. The new benefit replaced the six main benefits or tax credits which were available to people of working age and combined them into one single household payment on a monthly basis. Conscious of the potential implications of UCFS's introduction on residents and Council services alike the

Council established a Universal Credit Board in July 2017. The purpose of the Board, which comprised of officers from a wide range of Council services and key partner stakeholders i.e. DWP, CAD and Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) was to develop a corporate approach towards providing support and advice to residents affected by the changes to ensure that they were not missing out on their benefit entitlement or any associated entitlements i.e. Free School Meals FSMs etc. As part of the planning for UCFS's introduction in the county officers had liaised closely with other authorities, such as Flintshire, where UCFS had been rolled-out earlier with a view to learning from their experiences and capturing best practice.

Council officers in attendance explained to the Committee the measures implemented to date in a bid to mitigate the effects of the benefit's introduction on residents and on Council services, illustrating the linkages between the work of various groups and stakeholders. They outlined the risks identified in relation to its introduction and the mitigating actions instigated to manage those risks (as detailed in Appendix 3) and the various communications which had been issued to residents and stakeholders during the time leading up to, and following the benefit's introduction (Appendix 5). With a view to providing a seamless service and a multi-agency approach CAD and the Council have staff located in Rhyl Job Centre to provide a range of support and advice to those claiming UC including budgetary advice (CAD) and housing advice, homeless prevention and access to other entitlements available from the Council. The Council had also improved its referral process to CAD, it now referred potential clients digitally. In addition two videos had been produced and were available on the UC webpage of Council's website, the purpose of which were to signpost residents to where advice and help was available for them i.e. digital support from the Libraries and budgeting advice and support from CAD. Officers advised that frontline staff within all services had engaged well with the training and awareness sessions given on UC and had devised some useful solutions in order to strengthen and improve services for UC claimants. Members were assured that UC individuals in Denbighshire would have access to local support provided by the Council, CAD and DWP and at their DWP Service Centre at Bangor where there was a dedicated team for Denbighshire residents.

Contained in Appendix 4 to the report was a summary of the measures taken to date by a number of key Council services and partners to prepare for the impact on their services of the launch of UCFS along with an overview of the impact on those services to date following its introduction. The DWP's Partnership Manager for the county area served by Rhyl Job Centre detailed the safeguards put in place in a bid to support people claiming UC from falling behind with certain payments or not claiming all their entitlements. With the introduction of UC, housing costs would be paid to the claimant and not direct to the landlord as was possible in some cases previously, however managed payments to the landlord could be arranged if the individual's circumstances warranted this. The Job Centre had recently appointed a Customer Services Manager who would be visible in the Job Centre at all times and make for a welcoming and supportive atmosphere. Work was also underway with community partners with a view to improving staff's understanding of the barriers faced by some people when seeking employment e.g. health problems such as musculoskeletal constraints, mental health issues, autism etc. A Freephone service had recently been established to enable people to contact DWP without incurring a

charge and payment advances could be arranged for those experiencing financial hardship at the start of their UC benefit entitlement period.

The Chief Executive of CAD detailed the types of services they offered to residents in relation to UC. In the anticipation of the roll-out of UCFS to southern areas of the county during the autumn of 2017 CAD had established a rural support service. This included an extended service at the library at Llangollen, which included Skype facilities. CAD also provided services from Canolfan Ni in Corwen to the town and the 8 surrounding villages in the Edeyrnion area. Whilst the type of support and services may well differ in the more urban areas in the north of the county to those of the rural south CAD was still providing UC support and advice from satellite locations in St. Asaph and Rhuddlan libraries following the roll-out of UCFS in April in addition to providing it from its own offices in the area. It was anticipated that an additional satellite service would be provided from Bodelwyddan Community Centre from July 2018. CAD provided personal budgeting support to claimants to try and help them maximise financial benefit for the individual, be it from state benefits or entitlements or private insurances or finances which they themselves may hold but may not consider accessing. All new claimants would automatically be referred from the Job Centre to CAD for an initial period with a view to ensuring that they did not get into unmanageable debt. It was confirmed that since UCFS had been rolled-out to the majority of Denbighshire in April 2018 eight clients had been referred from CAD to its Debt Team for additional budgetary support. CAD were currently piloting a scheme with Rhyl Job Centre helping UC claimants to manage the initial period of their claim and managing payment advances.

In response to members' questions the Lead Member, Council officers, DWP and CAD representatives advised that:

- the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) benefit did not form part of the Universal Credit;
- the aim of Universal Credit was to support people to be personally responsible for managing their own finances and prepared for the world of work;
- both DWP and CAD did have officers who could visit people in their own homes if circumstances necessitated a home visit;
- either the claimant or the landlord could request a 'managed payment' for the housing element of UC. A request could be made if the payment of rent had been missed on two consecutive occasions;
- both 'managed payments' of housing costs and the amount of any advanced payments of UC, along with the associated repayment rates formed part of the personal budgeting advice service which CAD provided for UC claimants. To ensure that the repayment of any advanced payments was manageable, claimants could have up to twelve months to repay the advance received;
- to date approximately 400 people had claimed UC from Rhyl Job Centre to date, these were either new claimants or existing claimants who had experienced a significant 'change in circumstances' since UC had been rolled out in the county. People already in receipt of certain means-tested benefits who had not experienced a significant 'change in circumstances' continued to be in receipt of those benefits, until such time as their circumstances changed or on commencement of the managed migration process over to UC. A firm date for the migration of existing claimants over to UC was still awaited. It was anticipated that the migration of existing claimants to UC in the UK was

expected to start during July 2019 and be completed by 2022. By the end of the migration process a rough estimate of circa 14,000 people in Denbighshire could be claiming UC although figures were very difficult to predict;

- the 'Work Coach' officer based at the Job Centre would as a matter of routine highlight to the claimant any potential entitlement to other benefits or assistance available i.e. free school meals (FSMs) and council tax reduction (CTR). The Council's Housing Department staff and RSL staff had also been alerted to the need to ask tenants who were claiming or in receipt of UC whether they had claimed CTR and FSM;
- council officers had briefed staff at school cluster meetings on the introduction of UC and its potential impact on pupils and school budgets with a view to raising awareness and seeking their assistance in referring parents to CAD for personal budgeting advice;
- with respect to the costs to the Council associated with the introduction of UC more provision had been made in the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget for the impact of its introduction. However, the HB administration grant paid by central government to the Council had reduced and was now paid directly to the DWP, but the workload for the Revenues and Benefits Service operated by Civica had not decreased, therefore for the foreseeable future staffing levels in the Revenues and Benefits Services should remain at current levels. Staff across Council services and in partner organisations had undertaken the work associated with the introduction of UC willingly to ensure residents were supported wherever possible. In anticipation of potential budgetary pressures caused by the roll-out of UC the Council had set-aside £350K specifically for this purpose and it also held £450K in a Welfare Rights Reserve. All services had been asked to assess any pressures they could foresee impacting on their work from UC's introduction and officers were confident that these could be managed with the reserves and balances held corporately;
- a drive to ensure that all families who qualified for FSMs claimed their entitlements would also benefit the Council, as FSM entitlement fed into the Pupil Development Grant entitlement for individual schools which was then reflected in the Council's Revenue Support Grant (RSG) settlement. Claims for FSMs were submitted and processed by the Council;
- all partners were monitoring information on how and when existing means-tested benefits claimants would be migrated over to UC with a view to preparing for the migration and its impact on services and any support individuals may need. The DWP representative noted that the Child Poverty Action Group has published statistics that approximately 7,200 people in the county were currently in receipt of Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) and therefore in work, consequently the migration of those cases over to UC may not entail any intense support;
- the risk of housing costs money not being passed on to private landlords by tenants had been included on the 'risk register'. To mitigate against this risk the UK Government had, as part of its budget statement last autumn, made changes to the consent process for managed payments, whilst locally DWP and the Council had been highlighting the changes in the welfare benefits system to private landlords, private landlord forums, via social media and 'Rent Smart Wales';

- whilst elected members could not routinely observe a claimant making a claim for UC, they could sit in during a UC interview with the claimant's permission;
- there no longer was a need to travel excessive distances in order to maintain a UC claim. Whilst the initial interview was undertaken at the Job Centre, subsequent contact with the 'Work Coach' etc. could be made via telephone, Skype etc. Digital support was available at the Libraries and CAD had digital suites which were available for claimants to use. CAD would be willing to explore the potential use of the Facebook Messenger service in addition to Skype. The claimant's relationship with his/her Work Coach would be key in order for them to access all services and support they required to claim their entitlements and to secure work;
- DWP nationally was responsible for ensuring data security relating to personal information held on people who claimed benefits. Locally, advice on digital security would be provided to individuals as part of the support package offered by DWP and partners to claimants;
- as 98% of employers in the UK utilised the Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) Pay As You Earn (PAYE) system fluctuations in earnings would automatically feed through to DWP, however those working for the 2% of small employers would automatically receive prompts reminding them to report changes in earnings to the DWP. The 16 hour working rule no longer existed with the introduction of UC, eligibility was now based upon earnings;
- the Chief Executive of CAD noted that the approach taken in Denbighshire by the Council and its partners to plan for the introduction of UCFS and mitigate the impact of its introduction on services and residents could be argued as being unique and seemed to have worked well. Other areas awaiting roll-out had taken a keen interest in the approach taken in Denbighshire. Nationally the Citizens Advice Bureau were well aware of the work done in Denbighshire and CAD's involvement with the work, the proactive approach taken as well as best practice that had come to light had been shared with them.

Prior to concluding the discussion Committee members asked that their congratulations and gratitude be conveyed to all partners involved with the proactive approach taken to manage the impact of UCFS's introduction in Denbighshire, and for the support and advice provided to date. Having considered the contents of the report it was:

Resolved: - subject to the above observations

- (i) ***to continue to support the on-going work of the Universal Credit Board to understand and manage the impacts for both Council Services and Denbighshire residents of the introduction of Universal Credit; and***
- (ii) ***unless concerns merit earlier consideration, to request that a further report be presented to the Committee in twelve months' time on the impact of the introduction of Universal Credit Full Service on residents and Council services, and that the report include details of any lessons learnt from the initial roll-out and an overview of the work underway to mitigate the impact on the Council and residents of the migration of current benefit recipients to Universal Credit in due course***

At this juncture (11:20 a.m.) the meeting adjourned for a refreshment break.

The meeting reconvened at 11:35 a.m.

7 TOURISM SIGNAGE STRATEGY FOR DENBIGHSHIRE

In the absence of the Leader the Deputy Leader (Lead Member for Finance, Performance and Strategic Assets) introduced a joint report by the Council's Traffic, Parking and Road Safety Manager and the Team Leader: Tourism, Marketing and Events (previously circulated) which updated members on the initial development of a tourism signage strategy for Denbighshire. He briefed members on the background to the project and explained that once the 'brown' tourist signs were erected on the side of the A55 to direct visitors to Rhuddlan, St. Asaph and Denbigh, there would need to be other signs to signpost them to other attractions across the county. Lead Members and officers were of the view that erection of the A55 signs and the introduction of the Welsh Government's (WG) tourism initiative 'The Wales Way' (attached at appendix C to the report) which focussed on promoting three core tourism routes in the country, provided an ideal opportunity for the Council itself to develop a tourism signage strategy for Denbighshire which complemented both the A55 signs and the WG's vision, whilst developing the county's urban and rural economies. In addition to working with town and community councils, tourism and other businesses to develop and provide 'traditional' signage it would also be advisable to maximise digital information portals and business opportunities, such as 'i-beacons'.

Officers advised that North Wales local authorities had recently submitted a successful joint bid under 'The Wales Way' project to develop winter tourism in the region. Work was currently underway with local businesses across the region with a view to engaging them with a project that would see tourist related businesses open all year round and thriving, whatever the season. Whilst technology was developing on a daily basis, roadside signs were still an important way of drawing attractions to the attention of tourists, digital information was supplemental to signs.

Responding to members questions the Lead Member and officers advised that:

- tourist operator usually paid for 'brown' signs, but that the Council usually paid any maintenance costs relating to them despite not having a specific budget for maintenance costs of the signs;
- the proposed elected member and officer working group could work out the details of preferred and alternative tourist routes throughout the county, as part of its work in developing 'tourist trails'. The Group could also discuss with city, town and community councils the benefits of developing and purchasing signs which had a consistent branding. This working group would solely look at a signage strategy, including the inclusion of easily identifiable symbols etc., for the county's highways network, it would not examine trunk road signage as they were the responsibility of WG. Once established it was envisaged that there would be an opportunity for the Working Group to work with other neighbouring authorities with a view to ensuring that each authority's 'tourism

- trails' would complement each other's trails and those identified as part of the pan-North Wales Way bid;
- whilst the Council no longer had its own 'Sign Shop' it could still procure road signs at a competitive rate, albeit that there would be some time delay for delivery;
- the Working Group charged with progressing the A55 tourist signs for the Vale of Clwyd attractions had re-convened following the Committee's November meeting with a view to progressing the project. There was a slight shortfall in the funding available for the signs which the Assembly Member (AM) was attempting to solve via WG;
- whilst tourist were increasingly relying on digital information about where to visit etc. there would still be a need for paper documentation such as maps and guides; and
- political balance was not a requirement for a working group, although given the remit of the proposed group it would be beneficial if it was made up of members from across the county.

The Committee agreed that it was extremely important for tourists to be directed to all areas of the county to ensure that county's entire economy had an opportunity to benefit from their spending power. Members were of the view that a representative from WG should be invited to join the Denbighshire Tourism Signage Strategy Working Group to ensure that the Group's proposals supplemented the WG's own strategy.

Responding to members concerns about small local businesses and local authorities' ability to purchase 'digital' advertising space on line and on social media to promote their businesses in comparison to large national and multi-national companies officers advised that businesses could list themselves on Google and Google Maps free of charge. It would be a matter of educating businesses on how to list their business and what they had to offer. Another effective and low cost method of promoting a business etc. would be via a 'blog', as 'bloggers' attracted a wide international audience. Technology was evolving on a daily basis and provided excellent opportunities to draw services and businesses to the attention of tourists

Officers agreed to enquire whether the Local Government Act prescribed who should fund or contribute towards the cost of road signs.

Following a detailed discussion the Committee:

Resolved: - subject to the above observations

- (i) to support the continuation of the work to develop a tourism signage strategy for Denbighshire;***
- (ii) to confirm that, as part of its consideration it had read, understood and taken account of the Well-being Impact Assessment in Appendix A;***
- (iii) to recommend that the proposed officer and elected member working group to be established to develop a tourism signage strategy for Denbighshire comprise of 12 elected members, two representing***

- each Member Area Group (MAG), and a representative from Welsh Government (WG), along with relevant officers; and*
- (iv) that a report on the Working Group's progress in developing a tourism signage strategy, including information on potential funding sources and anticipated timescale for the project's delivery, be presented to the Committee in 12 months' time**

8 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Scrutiny Coordinator submitted a report (previously circulated) seeking members' review of the Committee's work programme and provided an update on relevant issues.

Discussion focused on the following -

- the two items on the work programme for the Committee's next meeting were re-affirmed and it was agreed to invite the relevant Lead Cabinet Members to that meeting;
- it was agreed to include an update report on Universal Credit and Tourism Signage Strategy for Denbighshire on the Committee's Forward Work programme in 12 month's time;
- reference was made to the Committee's information brief which included an update on actions from the last meeting together with further information as requested

It was:

Resolved: - subject to the above to confirm the Committee's forward work programme

9 FEEDBACK FROM COMMITTEE REPRESENTATIVES

Committee representatives reported upon their attendance at meetings as follows –

Councillor Huw Williams had attended the Service Performance Challenge for Finance and noted that an update report had been included in the information update brief.

The meeting concluded at 12:25 p.m.