

Attendance

Members of the Scrutiny Board

Cllr Ian Angus
Cllr Philip Bateman
Cllr Alan Bolshaw
Cllr Paula Brookfield
Cllr Craig Collingswood
Cllr Barry Findlay (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Dr Michael Hardacre
Cllr Peter O'Neill
Cllr Arun Photay
Cllr Rita Potter
Cllr Stephen Simkins (Chair)
Cllr Jacqueline Sweetman

Employees

Adam Hadley	Group Manager - Democracy
Keith Ireland	Managing Director
Abby Vella	Graduate Management Trainee
Mark Perlic	Principle Welfare Rights Officer

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 Apologies for absence**
Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Elias Mattu, Kevin O'Keefe, Mark Taylor and Tony Ivko.
- 2 Declarations of interest**
There were no declarations of interest.
- 3 Minutes of the previous meeting (8 September 2015)**
Resolved:
That the minutes of the meeting held on 8 September 2015 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.
- 4 Matters arising**
There were no matters arising.

5 **Tracking and Monitoring of the Welfare Reform - Unclaimed Benefits Scrutiny Review**

Mark Perlic, Principle Welfare Rights Officer gave an update on progress of the implementation of recommendations resulting from the Welfare Reform – Unclaimed Benefits scrutiny review which had been undertaken in 2014-15. He reported that a working group had identified problems posed by welfare reform for residents, local organisations, businesses and the City of Wolverhampton Council.

The Principle Welfare Rights Officer highlighted that a number of issues were identified in relation to Universal Credit, concerning the communication of correct information to residents and housing providers. He reported that the Welfare Rights Service provided training for a range of local organisations including Age UK, Citizens Advice Bureau and YMCA. To date, these had been attended by 681 people.

The Principle Welfare Rights Officer also advised that the Specialist Support Team and Communications Team were working in partnership to provide online information and signposting and to anticipate the implications of providing an online directory. He advised that this directory had two phases. The first was identifying advice-giving organisations in the City. The second was identifying what assistance these could provide following the introduction of Universal Credit.

The Board thanked the Principle Welfare Rights Officer for his presentation of the report and Cllr Potter for chairing the review.

A discussion took place between Councillors about the directory which highlighted the following:

- The full implementation of the online directory would be a difficult process as it required hard to reach groups, such as those with a disability or pensioners, to have access to the internet.
- It would be an important resource for residents who had been refused or lost benefits or who were appealing against a decision.
- There was uncertainty about its impact on other services, the budget and allocating resources.
- The potential impact of this change on food banks should payments be missed.
- The referral of residents to credit unions and responsible lenders would be inaccessible to those who were not on the electoral register.

The Principle Welfare Rights Officer advised that the directory was almost in a position to be launched ready for the arrival of Universal Credit in Wolverhampton during early February 2016 and could be used to signpost both individuals and local organisations to the appropriate help. He was aware of the issue of appeals and dispute cases but reported that work was being done to target hard to reach groups. He referred to work being undertaken by a body of law students at the University in the area of disability benefits, which resulted in an additional £450,000 in benefits being granted to those with disabilities.

Cllr Batemen enquired about the figures in 3.4 of the report, which stated that 36% of residents in Wolverhampton had no internet access. In response to a question from

Cllr Potter, the Principle Welfare Rights Officer responded that there had been ward by ward mapping on this which he agreed to circulate.

The Managing Director reported that the board for Welfare Reform - Unclaimed Benefits had been working on this and had been liaising with the customer service team. He advised that the overall strategy aimed to increase the number of people using the web, to release telephones and have employees with the right expertise available to visit residents from hard to reach groups. He commented that the Council had adopted a 'digital by design' approach rather than 'digital by default', however, communities, families and the voluntary sector needed to be utilised to support people without access to the internet.

Councillors discussed recommendation 8 regarding Job Seekers Allowance sanctions and it was agreed that the statistics were concerning and an equality analysis of those who had sanctions applied to them should be undertaken.

In response to a question from Cllr Potter, the Principle Welfare Rights Officer explained that in relation to people directly paying rent – this was already the case for the private sector and was now being extended to the social housing sector.

The Chair raised a concern about the monthly arrears. He advised that as this policy develops, accessibility to computers should be increased through possible liaison with schools.

Resolved:

1. That progress made to implement recommendations from the Review of Welfare Reform – Unclaimed Benefits which concluded in January 2015 was noted.
2. That the board receive an update of the Tracking and Monitoring of the Welfare Reform – Unclaimed Benefits Scrutiny Review in six months' time.
3. That the Group Manager – Democracy circulate a ward by ward break down of accessibility to computers in Wolverhampton.

6 **Information Governance Performance Report - Quarter One 2015/16**
Adam Hadley, Group Manager – Democracy, presented the quarterly one Information Governance Performance report.

The Group Manager – Democracy, reported that in the absence of local statistics for the cost of processing Information Governance (IG) requests, there was national base-lining data. He referred to paragraph 3.3 of the report which outlined these costs.

In reference to paragraph 3.4, the Group Manager – Democracy, advised that there was currently a review being undertaken about mandatory training for protecting information.

Cllr O'Neill enquired about the time spent by local authorities processing requests for information by the press and media.

The Group Manager – Democracy advised that the government was currently undertaking a review of freedom of information which he would circulate once published.

A discussion took place between the Councillors and the Managing Director about the identity of those requesting information. They recognised that processing these requests used a lot of resources and the costly exercise of processing freedom of information requests.

Resolved:

That the Group Manager – Democracy circulate results of the national review of freedom of information once published.

7 **Work programme**

The Group Manager - Democracy presented the work programme. He reported that the Chairs of the Review Panels were due to meet in November to discuss their work. He also commented that scrutiny of budget would take place in the next round of meetings.

It was agreed that the Tracking and Monitoring of the Welfare Reform – Employability and Skills report be moved to the 12 January 2016 meeting of Scrutiny Board.

The Chair reported that a meeting had been set up for the Chairs and Vice Chairs to discuss the development of the scrutiny function. The Chair invited feedback from Councillors about improving the scrutiny function.

Cllr Hardacre reported that following correspondence with various organisations during a scrutiny review, it appeared as though that obtaining Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) clearance was left to the volunteers.

It was agreed that this would be investigated further.

The Group Manager – Democracy requested that Specific Reserves Working Group be added to the Confident Capable Council work programme.

Cllr Brookfield enquired about additional panel and board meetings which were not scheduled in the work programme at the beginning of each municipal year. She commented that scheduled meetings throughout the year would be better than arranging additional ones.

The Chair advised that task and finish groups were also justified if there was a major issue to be worked on. It was agreed that this would be looked into further.

Resolved:

1. That subject to the following amendments, the work programme be agreed:
 - a. Tracking and Monitoring of the Welfare Reform – Unclaimed Benefits Scrutiny Review be moved to the 12 January 2016 Scrutiny Board meeting.
 - b. Specific Reserves Working Group be added to the Confident Capable Council work programme.

2. That the Group Manager – Democracy look into additional scrutiny meetings being included in the schedule of meetings.
3. That the process for volunteers obtaining DBS checks be investigated.