A meeting of the Universal Credit and Welfare Reform Task Group will be held at 5.30pm on Monday 9 September 2013 in Committee Room 1 at the Town Hall, Rugby.

Councillor T Mahoney
Chairman

A G E N D A

PART 1 – PUBLIC BUSINESS

1. Minutes – to approve the minutes of the meeting held on 5 June 2013.

2. Apologies – to receive apologies for absence from the meeting.

3. Declarations of Interest

To receive declarations of:

(a) non-pecuniary interests as defined by the Council’s Code of Conduct for Councillors;

(b) pecuniary interests as defined by the Council’s Code of Conduct for Councillors; and

(c) notice under Section 106 Local Government Finance Act 1992 – non-payment of Community Charge or Council Tax.

Note: Members are reminded that they should declare the existence and nature of their interests at the commencement of the meeting (or as soon as the interest becomes apparent). If that interest is a pecuniary interest the Member must withdraw from the room unless one of the exceptions applies.

Membership of Warwickshire County Council or any Parish Council is classed as a non-pecuniary interest under the Code of Conduct. A Member does not need to declare this interest unless the Member chooses to speak on a matter relating to their membership. If the Member does not wish to speak on the matter, the Member may still vote on the matter without making a declaration.
4. Welfare reform – policy update (briefing paper to follow)
5. Impact of welfare reform in Rugby – including latest position on the data measures agreed by the task group (briefing paper to follow)
6. Planning for meetings with partners and stakeholders
7. Review of one page strategy (attached)
8. Dates of future meetings – please bring your diaries to the meeting

**PART 2 – EXEMPT INFORMATION**

There is no business involving exempt information to be transacted.

**Membership of the Task Group:**

Councillors Mahoney (Chairman), Ms Edwards, Mrs Garcia, Mrs New, Roodhouse and Helen Walton

*If you have any general queries with regard to this agenda please contact Claire Waleczek, Democratic and Scrutiny Services Officer (Team Leader) (01788 533524 or e-mail claire.waleczek@rugby.gov.uk). Any specific queries concerning reports should be directed to the listed contact officer.*

*If you wish to attend the meeting and have any special requirements for access please contact the Democratic and Scrutiny Services Officer named above.*
UNIVERSAL CREDIT AND WELFARE REFORM TASK GROUP

9 SEPTEMBER 2013

Planning for future meetings

1. Background

At the first meeting it was agreed that the task group would hold meetings in November and January with partners and stakeholders. The meeting in November would involve representatives from the Local Strategic Partnership and other partners / agencies, and gather evidence on the work being undertaken in the borough in relation to the welfare reforms and to mitigate against potential negative outcomes. The meeting in January would involve wider stakeholders and provide a reality check on the impact of the welfare reforms on borough residents and the effectiveness of the measures in place.

This paper aims to support the task group in preparing for these meetings, including identifying suitable contributors and determining the key lines of enquiry to explore with them.

2. Meeting with partners, November 2013

The intended focus of this meeting is to gather evidence on the measures that the council and its partners are taking to implement the welfare reforms in the borough and to mitigate against potential negative impacts.

The 2012/13 scrutiny review on Housing Income Protection learned about various measures that the council was taking, including:

- appointment of dedicated welfare reform officers within Housing to work directly with affected council tenants
- provision of an under-occupation alleviation fund
- discretionary housing payments
- communications strategy
- development of a Corporate Debt Strategy
- amendments to the allocations policy to prevent under-occupation
- further redesignation of one-bedroom sheltered housing flats to general needs accommodation
- review of the rental income policy

It was also reported that a corporate officer welfare reform group had been established and that the council was using new community service level agreements as a tool to encourage voluntary and community sector partners to identify activities they could undertake to support financial inclusion.

The Housing Income Protection review task group also identified a number of actions being taken by, and with, other external partners. It was reported that the Local Strategic Partnership was taking an overarching view on welfare reforms and taking a lead role in working with partner agencies to coordinate activity on this issue. The role of partners included:
Warwickshire County Council – responsible for administering social fund elements from April 2013 and for implementing the Priority Families Programme, which coordinates support from different agencies to provide assistance to 180 families in Rugby identified as “troubled”.

Jobcentre Plus – providing (and signposting clients to) a wide range of support programmes and services to help people to enter employment

Registered Social Landlords – tackling the impact of the welfare changes on their own tenants.

With this in mind, it is suggested that the task group may wish to invite some or all of the following to attend the meeting in November to provide an update on the measures they are taking to support the implementation of the welfare reforms in the borough:

- RBC’s welfare reform officers
- Jobcentre Plus
- One or two housing associations operating in Rugby
- Warwickshire County Council
- Local Strategic Partnership Chair, Councillor Leigh Hunt

3. Meeting with stakeholders, January 2014

The intended focus of the stakeholder meeting is to provide a reality check on the impact of the welfare reforms on borough residents and the effectiveness of measures being taken by the council and its partners to mitigate against negative outcomes. This would involve organisations working directly with those affected by the welfare reforms, offering advice, support and practical assistance.

In addition to those listed in section 2, the following stakeholders attended select committee meetings organised by the Housing Income Protection and Localisation of Council Tax Support task groups and would be able to offer insight into the impact of the welfare reforms on council tenants:

- Rugby Credit Union
- Bedworth, Rugby and Nuneaton Citizens Advice Bureau
- Warwickshire Welfare Rights Advice Service
- Benn Partnership Centre
- Rugby Disability Forum
- HOPE4
- Rugby Disability Forum
- Tenant Representative Panel
- Brownsover Community Association
- Christians Against Poverty UK (Rugby branch)
- Rugby Foodbank

These organisations could be invited again to take part in the stakeholder meeting in January, to give feedback as to how the effects of the welfare changes are being managed in the borough.
Alternatively, the task group may wish to consider issuing a ‘call for evidence’, inviting written evidence from these groups and others about the impact of the reforms in the borough. On the basis of the submissions received the task group could then select those it would like to meet with to discuss their evidence further.

3.1 Key lines of enquiry

The aim of the stakeholder meeting would be to test whether the experience of those ‘on the ground’ correlates with other evidence received – both the statistical evidence about the impact of the benefits changes on local residents and the information received from council officers and partners about the measures in place to assist those affected. The task group will want to revisit some of the findings of the previous reviews relating to welfare reform and understand, for example:

- whether the communications strategy is working and reaching those affected with good information about what the changes mean to them and what support is available
- whether the discretionary relief made available is sufficient and being effectively promoted to those who need it
- the effectiveness of coordination between those agencies involved
- the extent to which vulnerable groups and individuals have been identified and appropriate support put in place to prevent rent and council tax arrears
- take-up and effectiveness of support mechanisms, such as financial skills training, access to affordable credit and debt counselling services
- the impact of activities to promote financial inclusion delivered through the new community SLAs
- the availability of appropriate housing to meet the needs of benefit claimants.

By January, it may also be appropriate to consider the measures being put in place to assist those making the transition to Universal Credit to manage the gap in income arising from the move to monthly payments in arrears. From a council tenant perspective, this will also be considered as part of the current rent end-to-end review, which is due to conclude in spring 2014.

4. Conclusion

Members are asked to confirm:

- the proposed focus of the meetings in November and January
- which officers and external organisations should be invited to contribute to these meetings; and
- whether or not to issue a ‘call for evidence’ prior to the January meeting.

It is expected that the task group will continue to receive updates on the data measures identified to monitor the impact of the reforms at each meeting, and these may generate further issues that the task group will wish to explore with partners and stakeholders.

Debbie Dawson, Scrutiny Officer, 28 August 2013
UNIVERSAL CREDIT AND WELFARE REFORMS TASK GROUP

ONE PAGE STRATEGY

What is the broad topic area?
Impact of welfare reforms on the council and the local community and preparations for the introduction of universal credit.

What is the specific topic area?
This task group will have a watching brief over the council’s corporate approach to managing the impact of the welfare reforms on the council and the local community. The task group’s role is one of oversight and accountability, and its remit does not extend to policy development and problem-solving in response to issues identified through its monitoring work.

The task group will monitor the effectiveness of the measures put in place by the council and partners to prepare for benefit changes and prevent significant detrimental impacts. Such measures include:

- communications strategy
- discretionary financial support
- activities to promote financial inclusion delivered through the new community SLAs
- other advice and support, for example relating to employment and budgeting skills
- redesignation of council housing

It will also consider the extent to which the work of partners in relation to welfare reform is being effectively coordinated to make optimum use of available resources.

In the longer-term the task group will consider the outcomes of the planned reviews of the council’s rental and allocations policies. It will also review preparations for the phased introduction of universal credit, which is unlikely to have a significant effect in the borough before 2015.

What is the ambition of the review?
To ensure that the council and its partners effectively support the implementation of welfare reforms within the borough and work to mitigate the risk of negative impact on vulnerable residents.

How well do we perform at the moment?
The LSP is understood to be taking a lead role in coordinating work related to the welfare reforms in the borough. A corporate officer welfare reform group has also been established.

The first task of this group will be to work with those officers to identify a set of measures that can demonstrate the impact of the welfare changes on individuals and on the council, and help identify where the council should be targeting its interventions. The group will use these measures as the basis for ongoing monitoring.
Who shall we consult about the current service and about how we can improve it?
The group will have ongoing engagement with members of the council’s corporate welfare reform officer group, and with the Sustainable and Inclusive Communities Portfolio Holder and Local Strategic Partnership Chairman.

The task group may, as appropriate, consult with local residents affected by the welfare reforms, statutory and voluntary sector partners, registered social landlords, private sector landlords and tenant representatives, where this would provide useful evidence in assessing the impact of the reforms and the effectiveness of the measures in place.

What other help do we need?
The group will need a clear understanding of the welfare reforms, regular updates on the national policy context and local implementation of the reforms, and clarity about the council’s statutory responsibilities in relation to those affected by the changes.

The group’s membership will be drawn from members of previous task groups relating to the welfare reforms, so a level of prior knowledge will be assumed.

How long should it take?
The task group will begin its work as early as possible in the 2013/14 municipal year and is expected to meet every 6 weeks. As the reforms are being phased in over several years, it is anticipated that the task group’s role will extend until 2015 and potentially longer. The ongoing role and necessity for the task group will be reviewed annually as part of the overview and scrutiny work programme process.

A progress report should be presented to Customer and Partnerships Committee in April 2014 and the one page strategy will be reviewed at that time.

What will be the outcome?
The task group may make recommendations to Cabinet, through Customer and Partnerships Committee, if it identifies a need for new interventions or different approaches to minimise detrimental impacts of the reforms.

More generally, the task group’s ongoing scrutiny should help to support the effective implementation of welfare reforms in the borough by giving clarity and consistency of focus to those responsible for their delivery.