



VOLUNTARY SECTOR COMMITTEE - 18TH SEPTEMBER 2013

SUBJECT: WELFARE REFORM UPDATE

REPORT BY: ACTING DIRECTOR CORPORATE SERVICES

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 Voluntary Sector Representatives have expressed their growing concerns at the impact of the bedroom tax, and other welfare reforms being introduced by the Westminster Government via the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and Localised Finance Act 2011. This paper provides an update on initiatives being pursued by Caerphilly County Borough Council (CCBC) and partner organisations to mitigate against potential negative impacts of the welfare reforms.

2. SUMMARY

- 2.1 In April 2013, the social sector size criteria (or bedroom tax) and cuts to support for Council Tax came into effect. Although for the Council Tax changes the Welsh Government has met the shortfall for 2013/2014. The benefit cap was introduced nationwide this summer (with all households that the cap applies to, to be capped by 30th September 2013, at £500 a week for couples/single parent households, and £350 a week for single adult households without children), with Universal Credit having a phased implementation between October 2013 to December 2017. CCBC and its housing and advice service partners have been working hard to both prepare and help local people with the reforms.

3. LINKS TO STRATEGY

- 3.1 This report provides an update on some of CCBC's support activities directly linked to the Council's Improvement Objectives, and *Caerphilly Delivers* – the Single Integrated Plan for implementing the Caerphilly borough Community Strategy in relation to the anti-poverty priorities of Caerphilly Local Service Board.

4. THE REPORT

- 4.1 The Voluntary Sector Liaison Committee has been invited to two presentations on the welfare reform changes, and receives regular updates on the roll out of the reforms through the *Policy Watch* briefing, and other welfare reform briefings.
- 4.2 The changes in benefits introduced by the Westminster Government have been seen as a priority by CCBC. A Programme Board was established in July 2012 to oversee projects to prepare the authority and local people for the changes.
- 4.3 The overall aim of the programme is to ensure that CCBC and its residents are adequately prepared for the impact of the Welfare Reform Act and the Council Tax Reduction Scheme. The programme currently includes four projects: 1) Welfare Reform Act and Council tax reduction Scheme Awareness; 2) Under-occupation (also known as bedroom tax); 3) Universal Credit Local Authority Led Pilot; 4) Local Support Service Framework.

- 4.4 A Policy & Resources Scrutiny Committee on 24th July 2013 received a report on these projects providing the following updates:-
- 1) Welfare Reform Act and Council Tax Reduction Scheme Awareness – a detailed awareness raising programme has been rolled out for local people, staff, and partner organisations involving meetings, newsletters, including contact with people affected by the changes.
 - 2) Under-Occupation - the latest data shows that CCBC has approximately 2,741 social housing tenants who will be affected by the under occupation, of these 560 are Registered Social Landlord Tenants and 2,181 are council tenants. Two additional staff were appointed in September 2012 by CCBC (Housing) to implement changes and assist council tenants in the transition to the new rule, and two further officers started in the same role (Tenancy Support Officer) from April 2013. The Officers are offering face-to-face support to council tenants in their own homes.
 - 3) Universal Credit Local Authority Led Pilot – CCBC is one of the 12 Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) pilot projects on how local authorities can better support residents claiming working age benefits on migration to the Universal Credit. The Caerphilly pilot focuses on coordinating existing initiatives and partner organisations to ensure:-
 - digitally excluded groups within communities are supported in the journey to *online* interaction;
 - appropriate signposting takes place to support access to employment;
 - support is provided to residents to improve their money management skills.
 - 4) Local Support Service Framework – according to the DWP with the introduction of the Universal Credit, the majority of the people will be able to “make their claim online and payments will be made monthly and direct to the household” but supplementary local support will be necessary to support claimants with additional needs (for example personal budgeting support) and the Local Support Service Framework deals with the design of the additional local support service provision. Representatives of the Programme Board are in contact with the DWP via the appropriate reference group and directly with Jobcentre Plus to progress with the discussion and preparation around the Local Support Service Framework.
- 4.5 CCBC is also the lead authority of a Gwent wide project on - *Mitigating Welfare Reform across Gwent*. The project will better align local delivery of money advice services and improve signposting and awareness of financial inclusion issues across the Gwent, ameliorating the consequences of welfare reform, tackling poverty and combating financial exclusion. A project manager and a research assistant are soon to be recruited. Current and predicted demand for money advice, financial services and service provision will be mapped. This will inform a development programme to better align current resources to need and to develop capacity to meet gaps in service provision. This will be through training programmes and developing capacity in new and existing organisations and guiding funding decisions

5. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Promoting equalities is a fundamental part of community planning, and is an integral part of the single integrated plan for implementing the Community Strategy.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The report is for information only and has therefore no financial implications. The welfare reform and relevant preparation activities have financial implications that have been and will be detailed in other suitable reports.

7. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

7.1 The report is for information only and has therefore no personnel implications.

8. CONSULTATIONS

8.1 This report includes all consultations as listed below.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1 For the report to be noted for information.

10. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS

10.1 The report contains information for the consideration of the Voluntary Sector Liaison Committee.

11. STATUTORY POWER

11.1 The Welfare Reform Act 2012 and the Local Government Finance Bill 2011.

Author: Jackie Dix, Policy & Research Manager, CCBC

Consultees: Mike Bridgman, Assistant Director of GAVO

Alessandra Veronese, Programme Manager Welfare Reform/E-Gov Team Leader

David Titley, Customer Services Manager, CCBC

David Regan, Lead Finance Officer (WRA), CCBC

Sandra Isaacs, Rents Manager, CCBC

David Thomas, Senior Equalities Officer, CCBC

Background Papers:

Welfare Programme Reform Programme Update, Policy & Resources Scrutiny Committee 24th July 2013 (the report is available on the CCBC website, and hard copies can be made available to Members on request)