

DARTFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY OVERVIEW COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting of the Policy Overview Committee held on Tuesday 18 June 2019 at 7.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor M J Davis (Chairman)
Councillor M I Peters (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor S H Brown
Councillor J Burrell
Councillor S P Butterfill
Councillor L A Canham
Councillor L H K Edie
Councillor B Garden
Councillor K J Grehan
Councillor R A S Jones
Councillor T A Maddison
Councillor D T Nicklen
Councillor T Oliver

ABSENT: Councillor R M Currans
Councillor Mrs J A Ozog
Councillor A S Sandhu, MBE
Councillor Mrs R F Storey

ALSO PRESENT: Trish Chapman – Dartford Borough Residents Forum

Dartford Borough Council Officers

Sarah Martin – Strategic Director (Internal Services)
Heather Gaynor – Benefits Manager (Sevenoaks Joint Service)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors R M Currans, J A Ozog and R F Storey.

2. CHAIRMAN'S WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

The incoming Chairman welcomed all new and returning Members to the first meeting of the Policy and Overview Committee (POC) in the 2019-20 municipal cycle. He praised the work undertaken by his predecessor over many years, former Councillor Eddy Lampkin, and thanked the Vice-Chairman for agreeing to continue in her role on the Committee, to enable new Members in particular to benefit from her experience on the POC gained over many years.

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The Chairman noted that in recent years the Committee's work had had a strong health focus, examining the service provision of the local NHS Trust, Clinical Commissioning Group and Kent County Council for Dartford residents. The preferred format for that work had been to receive substantive and detailed PowerPoint presentations from those health bodies, who were then asked to return and update Members in 6 or 12 months' time.

He believed that the Committee had now covered that work area in great detail [as previous Minutes attested] and that going forward, the Committee should broaden its focus into Council policy areas; to better fulfil its remit to Cabinet, as set out in its Terms of Reference (ToRs) and Protocol documents.

He proposed only 1 or 2 substantive items per meeting on the basis of written reports from Council officers [rather than PowerPoint presentations] to better focus Member discussion. He had agreed an item on Flytipping including Council Enforcement Measures, with the Strategic Director (External Services) in principal for the next Committee meeting on 10 September, and would welcome other proposals from Members. He was also due to meet the Leader of the Council in early July with his proposals for the Committee going forward, and would report back to Members on those discussions in September.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Edie advised for the record in relation to Item 8 – Welfare Reform Update that her father was a Housing Manager for the Council.

4. CONFIRMATION OF THE MINUTES OF THE POLICY OVERVIEW MEETING HELD ON 19 MARCH 2019

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting of the Policy Overview Committee held on 19 March 2019 be confirmed as accurate by those Members present who attended.

5. URGENT ITEMS

The Chairman advised that there were no urgent items for the Committee to consider.

6. TO CONSIDER REFERENCES FROM OTHER COMMITTEES (IF ANY)

There were no references from other Committees for Members to consider.

7. REGULATION 9 NOTICE

RESOLVED:

1. That Members note the contents of the Regulation 9 Notice for the period 15 May 2019 to 30 September 2019.

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8. ACTION POINTS ARISING FROM THE POLICY OVERVIEW COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 19 MARCH 2019

The Chairman explained for new Members, that the report from the Committee Co-ordinator, updated Members on the action taken to date in relation to topics already agreed by Members at previous meetings, as recorded in the relevant Minutes published on the Council website.

He advised that Item 1 was for general noting, and Items 4, 6, 7 and 8 for consideration in March 2020. He proposed that item 2 be dropped, given RELATE's continued resistance to the Committee's invitation to attend and advise Members on the services they provided to Dartford residents. The Vice-Chairman had been appointed at the Annual Meeting of the Council on 22 May to represent Dartford at RELATE meetings in the ensuing 2019-20 municipal cycle, and could feed-back to Members as appropriate. With regard to Item 3 he asked that Officers make a third (final) approach to the Chairman of KCC's Health and Overview Scrutiny Committee (HOSC) and if no response was received that item be dropped also.

RESOLVED:

1. That Members note the action taken in response to the points identified by the Committee on 19 March 2019 as set out in the report, and the proposed action as detailed above.

9. WELFARE REFORM UPDATE

The report from the Benefits Manager (Sevenoaks Joint Service) updated Members on the impact of the roll-out of Universal Credit Full Service across the Borough.

She highlighted the following salient points in her report for Members:

- Universal Credit (UC) was first introduced in April 2013 and was a means-tested benefit aimed at simplifying the existing welfare system to provide 1 single benefit (for people both *in* and *out* of work) and replaced the 6 'legacy benefits' of:
 - (i) Income Related Employment and Support Allowance
 - (ii) Income Based Jobseekers Allowance;
 - (iii) Income Support;
 - (iv) Housing Benefit (HB);
 - (v) Child Tax Credit;
 - (vi) Working Tax Credit
- The national roll-out of UC Full Service to all parts of the UK was completed in December 2018, and by March 2019 some 1.8 million individuals were in receipt of UC nationally, of whom just over a third were *in* work;

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- Transferral from the legacy benefit system to UC is currently undertaken by a process known as *Natural Migration* i.e. from new claims or a change in circumstances. The UC caseload is expected to reach 6.7 million by 2022-23 according to the Office of Budget Responsibility with the vast majority of that number coming from *Natural Migration*;
- *Managed Migration* – the transfer of existing claimants whose circumstances have *not* changed from legacy benefit(s) to UC, is planned to start in July 2019 and end in March 2023. An initial pilot scheme will be run in Harrogate for 10,000 claimants for 6 months from July 2019, to start the *Managed Migration* process. The outcome of the 6 month pilot will be presented to Parliament for a vote, prior to the commencement of the full programme nationwide, which will retain the March 2023 completion date;
- The Government had introduced a number of changes to UC in response to concerns from MPs, Social Landlords and Child Poverty Action Groups, key changes were:
 - (i) Housing Benefit would continue for a 2 further weeks from the date of the first UC claim, so that for the first 2 weeks of UC payment, the claimant would continue to receive Housing Benefit;
 - (ii) 7 day waiting period for UC scrapped [February 2018] so payment of UC would commence from date of claim, reducing the waiting time for claimants of that 1st UC payment from 6 down to 5 weeks;
 - (iii) From April 2018 where a customer has been placed in Temporary Accommodation under the Homeless Act 1996, they still have to claim HB for their housing costs, in addition to claiming UC for their living costs;
 - (iv) From May 2019 mixed age couples [where 1 is of pensionable age and the other is not] who need to top up their income, were no longer able to claim Pension Credit & Housing Benefit but must claim UC instead.
- There was still work to do in the national roll-out of UC Full Service, with some categories of applicant still suffering hardship in the change from legacy benefits to UC.

UC – Local Position

- The Borough is covered by 3 Jobcentres - in Dartford, at Gravesend and at Bexleyheath. Dartford underwent a staggered transition to UC Full Service, with the majority of customers going over to UC Full Service on 25 July 2018 and the remainder on 24 October 2018;
- By March 2019 some 2,190 individuals in the Borough were in receipt of UC, of which just over a third were *in* work – not a huge proportion but rising;

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- All working age customers who are on low income or *out* of work now need to apply for UC via the online application *except* for those who:
 - (i) Have reached State Pension age with a partner who has also reached State Pension age – they still need to apply for Housing Benefit;
 - (ii) Are in receipt of Severe Disability Premium – they still need to apply for Housing Benefit;
 - (iii) Live in supported accommodation e.g. where extra support and/or care services are needed- such customers must claim UC for their living costs and HB for their housing costs;
 - (iv) Have been placed in temporary accommodation by the Council's Housing Options Team – such customers must claim UC for their living costs and HB for their housing costs.
- The fact that UC is not back-dated means it is vitally important that new customers on low income or *out* of work, must get their initial UC claim right first time. Since April 2019 Citizens Advice in Dartford Jobcentre has been delivering 'Help to Claim' (previously known as Universal Support) advice to UC customers applying for the 1st time on line, and subsequently, prior to receipts of their 1st payment.

Impact on Benefits Service Work Load

- Change in type or work rather than overall reduction;
- Number of new Housing Benefit (HB) claims from working age customers have reduced from 3,737 (April 2018) down to 2,881 (May 2019);
- The Benefits Service continued to administer the HB working age caseload but this was reducing as customers' circumstances changed and they moved to UC;
- DWP records received by the Benefits Service had increased by 52% since roll-out of UC Full Service, but were of insufficient quality to allow them to be automated resulting in Benefits staff acting as 'paper sorters' to manage and administer these claims effectively;
- The Benefits Service continued to administer the working age Local Council Tax Reduction (CTR) scheme. A positive change since April 2019 was that if a council tax property band was re-assessed, it was no longer necessary to re-submit a CTR claim, provided a UC claim had already been processed for an applicant;
- Discretionary Housing Payments (for housing costs) work had increased by some 20% during 2018 year on year, and were still being made to UC recipients under a Government ring-fenced funding arrangement. It remained a problematical work area, given the fundamental problem with requests for *rent-in-advance* (deposits) which could not be made until the property was occupied;
- The Benefits Service continued to administer the Pension age Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction cases;
- The Service continued to work with all partners across the sector, DWP, DBC Housing Department and Citizens Advice in Dartford Jobcentre (including staff training) to meet the demands of UC Full Service roll out, and the remaining rump of legacy benefits work.

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The Chairman thanked the Benefits Manager for kindly summarising her comprehensive update report for Members.

The Benefits Manager confirmed the following additional points, in response to specific questions from the Chairman and other Committee Members:

- The Joint Dartford/Sevenoaks Benefits Service was based in Sevenoaks Council offices;
- The roll-out of Full Service Universal Credit in Dartford and nationally had been hampered by the original computer system used by the DWP which had not recognised all categories of UC applicant. The second updated computer system was working better;
- UC was a good idea in theory: but in reality, many applicants had been unable to deal with the self-budgeting aspects of UC and the initial '7 day wait' mechanism (now changed), and some continued to do so;
- The majority of applicants were better off under UC, but those applicants who had yet to migrate from Housing Benefit (HB) were a potential problem category for the future;
- The web-based application which had to be used by all customers applying for UC still posed problems for some disadvantaged and vulnerable customers. The Benefits Service co-ordinated extra help for disadvantaged customers with Jobcentre staff as appropriate, in addition to the help available from Citizens Advice (embedded in Dartford Jobcentre). Dartford Council's multi-agency Housing Services Hub also helped customers complete their UC applications. In addition, the DWP had on-line videos which can be found on YouTube to assist neuro-diverse customers, who could benefit from visual aids to help them complete their on-line UC applications;
- The Benefits Service chaired a monthly UC Working Group meeting of those service providers, representatives from the Churches and other charities dealing with the poor and disadvantaged, were welcome to join the multi-agency UC Working Group meetings;
- The DWP were in the lead regarding complex cases, which they assessed using their Complex Needs List. Requests from other agencies to access that DWP complex needs list had been declined to date, but the requests were being pursued with the government department;
- The payment of rental arrears and court fines could *not* be made from the Discretionary Housing Payments budget, which was a small and finite fiscal resource. However, advice on how to deal with debt was available to customers from the Council's multi-agency Housing Services Hub, both on-line and on a walk-in basis;
- Whilst waiting for their first UC payment customers could apply for an interest-free advance, repayable over 12 months (previously 6 months).

The Chairman thanked the Benefits Manager for responding to Members questions. He noted the views of several Members that the roll-out of Full Service UC to new customers, allied to the gradual migration of old customers from the 6 'legacy' benefits, involved enormous change for all concerned.

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Members RESOLVED to note the report with the following requests for further action:

- That 'sign-posting' on the Council website for customers wishing to claim UC be improved, in particular for vulnerable and disadvantaged customers;
- To receive an annual update on UC from the Benefits Manager;
- That attendance at the monthly UC Working Group be expanded to include church and charity representatives;
- That an annual review of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme be instituted with an attendant report to the Policy Overview Committee;
- That the Benefits Manager continue in her efforts to obtain access to the DWP complex needs list;
- That the Committee's requests, as listed above, be recorded in the Minutes and forwarded to Cabinet for comment and action as appropriate.

10. CORPORATE PLAN - KEY ACTIONS AND PERFORMANCE INDICATORS MONITORING REPORT, QUARTER 4 OF THE 2018/19 MUNICIPAL YEAR

RESOLVED:

1. That Members note the contents of the report.

11. POLICY OVERVIEW COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT FOR THE 2018/19 MUNICIPAL YEAR

The covering report from the Committee Co-ordinator attached as Appendix A, the *draft* Policy Overview Committee Annual Report 2018-19 which summarised the work undertaken by the Committee during the preceding municipal year.

Members were asked to comment on the *draft* 2018-19 Annual Report prior to submission to the Cabinet, as required by the Committee's Protocol.

RESOLVED:

1. That Members note the Committee's Annual Report for 2018-19 as submitted, for presentation to Cabinet;
2. That Members thank the Committee Co-ordinator for his report and general support of the Committee during the period under review.

12. POLICY OVERVIEW COMMITTEE PROTOCOL

The covering report from the Committee Co-ordinator asked Members to note the Protocol for the Policy Overview Committee (attached as Appendix A)

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which set out the procedures that the Committee should follow to operate effectively.

RESOLVED:

1. That Members note the Committee's Protocol attached as Appendix A to the report.

13. STATUTORY GUIDANCE ON OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY IN LOCAL AND COMBINED AUTHORITIES

This report asked Members to note the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's Statutory Guidance on Overview and Scrutiny in Local and Combined Authorities (attached as Appendix A to the report).

Members were advised [on behalf of the Head of Legal Services], that the Committee's Protocol considered elsewhere in the agenda [Min. No. 12 refers], conformed to the strictures laid down in the Ministry's statutory guidance document attached as Appendix A to the report.

RESOLVED:

1. That Members note the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government Statutory Guidance document on Overview and Scrutiny in Local and Combined Authorities, attached as Appendix A to the report.

14. COMMITTEE ROLLING WORK PLAN FOR 2019/20 AND BEYOND

The report from the Committee Co-ordinator attached for Members consideration and comment (Appendix A to the report) a draft rolling Work Plan for the 2019-20 municipal cycle and beyond.

Members noted the inclusion of the Chairman's proposal for a report from Council Officers on Flytipping including Enforcement for September 2019, and welcomed the inclusion of the 2019 Annual Status Report on Air Quality [in Dartford] at the same meeting.

Members also proposed a presentation on Mental Health from the appropriate team in the CCG/Dartford NHS Trust, including a presentation from the CAMHS team.

RESOLVED:

1. That Members note the Committee's rolling Work Plan for 2019-20 and beyond as set out in Appendix A to the report;
2. That the additional topics recommended by Members as detailed above, be included in the Work Plan for future meetings in the current 2019-20 municipal cycle.

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The meeting closed at 8.29 pm

Councillor M J Davis
CHAIRMAN