

HALTON STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP BOARD

Minutes of a meeting held on Wednesday, 6 March 2013 at the Halton Lea Library, Runcorn

Present:

Board Members:	Councillor Polhill Nick Atkins Simon Banks Councillor D Cargill Debbie Ainsworth Hayley Dooley Revd Jeremy Duff John Dwyer Councillor M Fry Darren Hebden Ann McIntyre Anna Nygaard Eileen O'Meara Janine Peterson Wesley Rourke Alex Waller Sally Yeoman	HBC (Chairman) Halton Housing Trust Halton CCG Cheshire Police & Crime Panel Job Centre Plus Job Centre Plus Faith Community Police & Crime Commissioner Community Representative Cheshire Police HBC – Children's Trust Bridgewater Community NHS Trust Director of Public Health JCP HBC – Chair, EL&S Cheshire Fire & Rescue Service Halton & St Helens VCA
Advisors to the Board:	Lisa Driscoll Shelah Semoff David Atkinson Councillor A Lowe Hitesh Patel Lynsey Carr Lucy Willis Lucy Woodcock	HBC – Policy and Strategy HBC – Policy and Strategy Halton Disability Partnership HBC CAB HBC HPIJ HBC HBC Housing Solutions
In Attendance:	Lynn Derbyshire (HBC), David Gray (HBC) Peter McCann (HBC)	

Apologies for Absence: Sarah Boycott (Cheshire Constabulary), Paula Cain (Halton Chamber of Commerce and Enterprise), Tim Gibbs (HBC), Kate Fallon (Bridgewater Community NHS Trust), Councillor Gerrard, Mick Noone (HBC), David Parr (CX HBC), Terry Parle (Halton Sports Partnership), John Rigby (Ormiston Bolingbroke Academy)and (Michael Sheehan (Riverside College).

25 PRESENTATION: CURRENT POSITION ON WELFARE REFORMS

The Partnership received a presentation on the Governments Welfare Benefit reforms from David Gray, Welfare Rights Manager and Peter McCann, Head of Revenues and Benefits and Customer Services which highlighted the following changes:-

- The introduction of Universal Credit;
- Housing benefit reform;
- The abolition of Council Tax benefit;
- The introduction of Personal Independence Payments;
- The introduction of Employment Support Allowance; and
- Enhanced benefit sanctions.

Members were advised that the Government anticipated the reforms would produce savings of 21 billion by 2015 and a further 10 billion by 2016.

The presentation also set out the changes to housing benefit in respect of under occupancy and the impact in Halton. It was noted that 2,600 households would be affected, with an anticipated £1,926,000 reduction in housing benefit. In response to these changes Halton had:-

- Supplied lists to Registered Social Landlords of households affected; and
- Written to claimants in December advising of under occupancy.

It was also noted that 80 households in Halton would be affected by the introduction of a benefits cap and 9000 claimants by the Council Tax reduction scheme (7000 would receive a bill for the first time and 2000 would see an increase). In January 2013 the Council wrote to those who would be impacted by the Council Tax reduction scheme.

The Chairman of the Board highlighted the importance of the Partnership working together to address the numerous challenges from the impact of the welfare reforms.

The following points arose from the discussion:-

- Clarity was sought on whether a bedroom would be considered as a box room if it was under 70 square feet. In response, it was reported that a 'box room' was referred to in the Housing Act 1885 which was linked to occupation and overcrowding. The Housing Benefit was not linked to this Act and the Council had worked very closely with Halton Housing Trust to ascertain the composition of properties in respect of the number of bedrooms. The Housing Benefit would be calculated on this information. It was also highlighted that the size of the bedroom was irrelevant;
- It was noted that the 'bedroom tax' did not affect houses that were privately rented as this had already been taken into account;
- It was reported that Housing providers and the Local Authority had allocated people homes on a flexi system to avoid several house moves. Halton Housing Trust had approximately 6300 homes out of which 15% were currently under occupied and some of which were significantly under occupied. With the reforms, the biggest asset, family homes, had now become the biggest liability. Re-housing and downsizing all the under occupancies, at the current rate of turnover, would take approximately 7 ½ years. In addition, it was reported that 900 households had stated that they

wished to remain and manage the reduction in the benefit. However, it was felt that this may change when the reforms were in place.

Furthermore, it was reported that the new build programme had planned to build 300/500 family homes in the next six years. As a result of the reforms, the new build would only be one and two bedroom properties. Alongside this, it was reported that people were finding it difficult to acquire a mortgage, and there had been an increase in demand from people who wished to downsize.

The Partnership were advised that the biggest challenge that had emerged during the last month was the social media, where organisations were being held responsible for the changes rather than central Government. There had been a national campaign of protest and it was a challenge to help people through a very difficult financial time. It was reported that all Partners would be affected to some degree and the role of the Partners would be to put in some additional resources to help people through a difficult period. Halton Housing Trust had doubled the provision of Welfare Benefit advice and increased provision for bad debt from £500,000 to £1.4m.

- Concern was raised that a lot of people had not engaged in the impact of the Welfare Reforms and the importance of getting the message across to the community was noted. The Board noted the challenge of relaying the knowledge and guiding people through the system. It was reported that a draft information leaflet had been produced for professionals that addressed some of the complicated and complex issues. It was highlighted that the leaflet could be branded for individual Local Authorities so that the contact list would be local and specific. The Board approved the draft leaflet that was circulated at the meeting;
- Job Centre Plus – it was noted that the Children's Advisory Board had undertaken training in Widnes. Several organisations had also worked together to get the message out to the community;
- It was suggested that a credit card containing a simple bullet point list of what to do/where to get help could be produced to get the message across;
- It was noted that it was important to target everyone, not just the people who would be affected by the reforms;
- It was noted that the current economic climate and the proposed welfare reforms were likely to increase the levels of people suffering from mental distress;
- It was suggested that the Credit Union could be advertised to help people through any financial difficulties and encouraged to stay away from loan sharks. It was suggested that more work could be done with the Credit Union regarding the role they could play with families with children over 18 years of age and armed forces personnel. It was reported that the Armed Forces Champion would be attending the next meeting of the Board. It was also reported that across the country housing providers had invested in Credit

Union and Halton Credit Union was working well. Furthermore, it was highlighted that the challenge was the capital sum against which they could loan. Sums of money had been invested to further the lending capacity but there was currently a three month waiting time as the funding was not available to lend out;

- The Partnership noted the importance of delivering a simple, clear consistent and strategic message to the community. It was suggested that an updatable briefing system for the press could be used to keep the public up to date. It was also noted that the Partnership would need to monitor the impact of the messages in the future as it was highlighted that if the same message was delivered frequently enough people would accept that it had already happened;
- It was reported that there had been an increase in demand for the Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB) and concern was raised that this would significantly increase when the changes in the welfare reform took place. It was reported that resources were being cut and the options were to provide a good service to a small number of people or a superficial service to a larger number of people. In addition, it was reported that the Partnership would need to make a decision on what level of service CAB provided and how the resources were targeted.

The Partnership were advised that people were attending CAB for advice as they were being prosecuted for theft as they had no money to buy food. It was reported that a £350,000 funding application had been submitted to the Big Lottery, outlining proposals to transform how advice agencies responded to local residents' current and future advice, information and advocacy needs, and the outcome would be known if approximately eight weeks. A multi-agency evening service and establishing a directory of local services was also being explored. It was highlighted that the biggest challenge was to replace a dramatic loss of paid advice. The CAB service, over a two year period were also training volunteers in order to increase the actual knowledge base. In addition, it was reported that the front line sector was being transformed so that it would be fit for purpose in the future.

Furthermore, it was reported that Halton had an online referral system which tracked where people were getting advice. The referral system was used by Cheshire Age Concern and it was hoped that this could be rolled out i.e. to Children's Centres. It was reported that very positive actions were being taken and the service was struggling with demand whilst trying to manage people's expectations;

- It was noted that all Partners would be affected by the impact of the reforms. It was also noted that an increase in mental health issues and suicides, would have a significant impact on policing as a 24 hour social service;
- It was reported that one of the key priorities in the Mental Health Action Plan was prevention. Work was being undertaken to look at stress and what could be put in place to prevent it. Work was also taking place with schools and it

was agreed that the Action Plan would be circulated to all Members of the Board.

- It was noted that Job Centre Plus were holding a sub-regional event on 7 March 2013 and an event for stakeholders was taking place on 20 March 2013. It was reported that the draft leaflet, would be vital in delivering a consistent message. In addition, it was reported that at the end of June/July a campaign would be targeting people to look at job opportunities. Furthermore, it was reported that work had been undertaken with the Credit Union had been identified that it was not suitable for people on benefits as they required people who were in paid employment. Debt provision was the main area that was being considered currently and a number of programmes would be starting in the near future on motivation and self-esteem which could help with mental health issues;
- It was noted that the Partners would need to ensure that there were no duplications; and
- The power of social networks was noted. It was also noted that there had been some protests via the social network and the police were monitoring the situation. It was reported that a professional response would be formulated to the comments.

The Chairman reported that a volunteer was required to co-ordinate the actions from the meeting. He also encouraged Partners to contribute funding so that the actions could be implemented. It was agreed that Members of the Board that details of nominations and contributions could be emailed to Shelah Semoff. It was also agreed that a summary of the points raised at the meeting would be circulated to all Members of the Board.

RESOLVED: That the presentation and comments raised be noted.

Meeting ended at 11.30 am