

ADULTS AND HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

10th September, 2013

PRESENT – Councillor Thistlethwaite (in the Chair); Councillors Harman, B Jones, , Kelley, S. Richmond and York (6)

APOLOGIES – Councillors Hutchinson, Mrs D. Jones, Knowles, Lister and J. Lyonette (5)

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE – Pauline Mitchell, Assistant Director, Housing and Building Services and Anthony Sandys, Head of Revenues and Benefits.

AH12. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST – There were no declarations of interest reported at the meeting.

AH13. MINUTES – Submitted – The Minutes (previously circulated) of a meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 18th June, 2013.

RESOLVED – That the Minutes be approved as a correct record.

AH14. WORK PROGRAMME – The Director of Resources submitted a report (previously circulated) requesting that consideration be given to the work programme items scheduled to be considered by this Scrutiny Committee during the current Municipal Year.

The submitted report outlined those areas where this Scrutiny Committee had previously identified it would like to focus its work and also emphasised that the work programme was a rolling programme and any Member of this Scrutiny could request an item to be included provided that a Quad of Aims had been submitted to the Scrutiny Committee to ensure that it contributed to the strategic aims of the Council.

Particular reference was made to a piece of work to be undertaken later this year by the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee in relation to young carers and to the suggestion that it might be useful for Members of this Scrutiny Committee to be involved in that Review and it was requested that consideration be given to nominating two Members in preparation of the Review Group being established.

RESOLVED – (a) That the current status of the Work Programme be noted.

(b) That Councillors Kelley and S Richmond be nominated to participate, on behalf of this Scrutiny Committee, in the proposed review by the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee in relation to young carers.

AH15. WELFARE REFORMS – UPDATE – The Director of Resources submitted a report (previously circulated) providing Members with an update on the changes to welfare benefits and Council Tax relief administered by the Council which had been implemented with effect from April 2013, the introduction of a Benefit Cap from July 2013; and the impact on Council services and residents.

The submitted report outlined the main changes to welfare benefits and Council Tax which included : the introduction of a new local Council Tax Support (CTS) scheme to replace Council Tax Benefit; a new local Council Tax empty property discount to replace certain empty property exemptions; a new empty property premium for long-term empty properties; a new local Social Fund scheme to replace certain aspects of the National Social Fund, which transferred to the Department for Works and Pensions; a Housing Benefit size criteria restriction (under occupancy rules) to tenants in the Social Rented Sector; and a Benefit Cap on the overall amount households could receive in Benefits and Council Tax.

Particular reference was made to each of the individual changes and detailed statistical information on the impact of each on residents and households was contained in the submitted report.

It was reported that, overall, the picture was better than originally anticipated although it was highlighted that the submitted report outlined the impact and experiences of the Revenues and Benefits Team within the Council and that a report on the wider economic and health effects was being compiled.

Discussion ensued on the additional staffing resource required to undertake additional recovery work as a result of the introduction of the Council Tax Scheme; the priority of the Council in reducing the level of empty properties within the Borough; the recycled furniture schemes operated by Kings Church and FRADE to assist with providing residents with access to a range of standard items such as beds, bedding, furniture and white goods ; some isolated concerns about the contents of the food parcels supplied by the Food Bank and whether basic instructions/recipes could be supplied with the parcels to assist customers using the service; and a piece of work being undertaken by the Public Health Team entitled 'Making every Contact Count' and whether that scheme could be utilised to signpost vulnerable residents to the Council.

RESOLVED - (a) That the report be noted and the thanks of this Scrutiny Committee be extended to the Head of Revenues and Benefits and his staff on the work being undertaken.

(b) That a further update report be submitted to a future meeting of this Scrutiny Committee in due course.

(c) That the Officers be requested to arrange a visit to the Kings Church and FRADE to view the work being undertaken by those organisations.