

ADULTS AND HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

12 January 2016

PRESENT – Councillor S Richmond (in the Chair); Councillors Culley, Knowles, Lister, Lyonette, Mills, M. Nicholson, T. Richmond, Storr and Tostevin. (10)

APOLOGIES – Councillor Kane

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE – Suzanne Joyner, Director of Children and Adult Services, Pauline Mitchell, Assistant Director, Housing and Building Services; Elizabeth Davison, Assistant Director, Finance and Human Resources, Kevin Kelly, Assistant Director, Adult Social Care, Anthony Sandys, Head of Revenues and Benefits and Bryan Huntley, Planning Policy Officer.

AH27. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST – There were no declarations of interest reported at the meeting.

AH28. MINUTES – Submitted – The Minutes (previously circulated) of a meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 3 November 2015.

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

AH29. WELFARE REFORMS – The Director of Neighbourhood Services and Resources submitted a report (previously circulated) giving Members an update on the Government's welfare reforms, the implementation of Universal Credit and the potential impact on residents and Council services.

The submitted report outlined the various reforms which had been implemented since April 2013, together with a number of further reforms which were proposed for 2015-16 onwards.

Particular reference was made to the introduction of Universal Credit which would replace six existing means tested benefits currently administered by a number of organisations, and which had begun its roll-out in Darlington in November 2015 with the full roll-out expected to be completed by 2021.

Discussion ensued on the number of people currently receiving Universal Credit in Darlington and the cumulative impact some of the changes would have on residents, particularly in relation to the introduction of the benefit cap.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted and that a further update report be submitted to a future meeting of this Scrutiny Committee once the full impact was known, such a report to include information to demonstrate the impact of the reforms and evidence the support and advice given to residents who are affected.

AH30. HOUSING STRATEGY MONITORING REPORT – The Director of Economic Growth submitted a report (previously circulated) updating Members on the progress made in relation to the Housing Strategy 2012-17, which had been approved in July 2012.

It was reported that, overall, good progress had been made in the first three years of implementing the Strategy, with 55 per cent of milestones being achieved in the first three years, a further 27 per cent of milestones being on schedule and the Council currently being on course to meet the six objectives.

The submitted report outlined the three areas where the Council was falling short on the objectives, namely, the provision of housing to meet local needs, the Town Centre fringe, and the delivery of the Making and Growing Places and discussion ensued on the actions being taken in relation to those areas.

Discussion ensued on the two objectives which were particularly relevant to the Adults and Housing Scrutiny Committee and it was reported that those two objectives of providing good quality advice to prevent crisis and ensuring access to appropriate housing and providing effective support and opportunities for vulnerable groups were being met.

RESOLVED – That the current position be noted.

AH31. THE LIFE STAGES SERVICE IN DARLINGTON – The Director of Commissioning submitted a report (previously circulated) updating Members on the progress following a review of the Life Stages Service within Darlington.

The submitted report outlined the background to the service which was launched in Darlington in 2011 and had been developed to address some of the long standing national and local issues in relation to supporting young disabled people and their families who needed support, make the transition from children's to adults services.

Discussion ensued on the current service model, which was a single service for 13-25 year olds, which brought together current Council services for disabled children, including elements of education, children's health and adults with a learning disability under a single management structure and which had now been in place for four years.

It was reported that the a formal evaluation of the service was planned for 2017, however, Officers felt that the current service model was delivering better outcomes for both individuals and the organisation.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted and that further quantitative data be provided to Members to enable them to evidence and ensure that the model was delivering better outcomes for individuals.

AH32. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT – MTFP2016/17 – 2020/21 – Submitted – A report (previously circulated) of the Director of Neighbourhood Services and Resources which had been considered by Cabinet at its meeting held on 1 December 2015, to propose the revenue budget, rent level and service charges for the Council's Housing Revenue Account (HRA) for the financial year 2016/17 in the context of the HRA Medium Term Financial Plan to 2019/20 and the 30 year business plan.

It was reported that the revenue from rental agreements was ring fenced for Housing Stock and that it was key to create a balance between raising rent and developing the Council's Housing Stock. The submitted report outlined the proposal by the Government to introduce, for the next four years, a compulsory one per cent reduction in Social and Affordable rents through the Welfare Reform and Work Bill 2015, resulting in all Council tenants having an average reduction in weekly rent of 0.77 pence.

Discussion ensued on a number of alternative options for generating income to partially compensate for the significant loss in rental income and it was noted that the majority of tenants would have any increases covered by benefits payments and that an Equality Impact Assessment had been undertaken to enable Members to understand the full impact of the proposed rent and service charges.

RESOLVED – That the report be received.

AH33. MEDIUM-TERM FINANCIAL PLAN - Submitted – A report (previously circulated) which had been considered by Cabinet at its meeting held on 1 December 2015, in relation to the Medium Term Financial Plan.

The submitted report outlined the background to the two-stage approach to revising the MTFP and the Assistant Director Finance and Human Resources referred to the first stage which was currently being consulted on in relation to the setting of the Council Tax for 2016/17 together with the fees and charges.

Discussion ensued on the setting of the Council Tax and to the Government's proposal to allow Councils with responsibility for Adult Social Care to be able to levy a 'precept' of two per cent on top of the current Council Tax referendum limit to help fund the increased cost of adult social care which, in Darlington was the largest overall budget. It was reported that the two per cent levy was required to help fund the on-going pressures within Adult Social Care, such as the introduction of the National Living Wage, which it was expected would impact on the Council's own workforce, but more significantly on social care contracts.

RESOLVED – That the report be received.

AH34. WORK PROGRAMME – The Director of Neighbourhood Services and 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. Reference was made to a number of items which were on the work programme to be considered at the next meeting of this Committee scheduled to be held on 23rd February, 2016 and it was suggested that some of these items be deferred until the April meeting.

It was reported that the Dementia Task and Finish Review Group was continuing with its work and that a training session for Members on becoming a Dementia Friend would be held on the 18th January 2016.

Particular reference was made to training for Scrutiny Members in safeguarding and it was reported that this was being looked at with the Centre for Public Scrutiny, along with some specific training for Members of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee.

RESOLVED – That the report be received.