

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

MUNICIPAL YEAR 2015-16

**OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE**

20TH APRIL 2016

**REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF
LEGAL & DEMOCRATIC SERVICES**

Agenda Item No. 5

**'MANAGING THE IMPACT OF WELFARE
REFORM CHANGES ON SOCIAL
HOUSING TENANTS IN WALES' –
PROGRESS REPORT**

**Author: Mrs A Edwards – 01443 424102
Scrutiny Support Officer**

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1,1 The purpose of the report is to provide Members with the opportunity to consider the progress made in response to the recommendations arising from the Wales Audit Office's report 'Managing the Impact of Welfare Reform Changes on Social Housing Tenants in Wales.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 Members are asked to form a view on the adequacy of progress in respect of the recommendations arising from the Wales Audit Office report and consider whether any further information is required.

3. BACKGROUND

3.1 In January 2015, the Wales Audit Office published its findings of a national review titled 'Managing the impact of Welfare Reform Changes on Social Housing Tenants in Wales'. The full report can be accessed via the following link:
<http://www.audit.wales/publication/managing-impact-welfare-reform-changes-social-housing-tenants-wales>

3.2 The findings from their national review led the Wales Audit Office to the conclusion that changes to the Housing Benefit introduced by the welfare-reform programme are having a significant impact on Welsh councils and housing associations, and they are struggling to deliver effective and sustainable solutions to address the challenges they face.

3.3 In response to their findings the Wales Audit Office formed several recommendations for improvement. These recommendations formed part of the WAO Annual Improvement Report 2014-15 for Rhondda Cynon Taf and at the meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee held on 21st October 2015 it was agreed that the Committee should receive an update on progress.

- 3.4 Members are therefore asked to consider the progress update from officers which is attached at Appendix 1 and form a view on the adequacy of progress in progressing the regulator's recommendations.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT, 1972
as amended by
THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985
RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL
OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
20TH APRIL 2016

Report of the Director Legal & Democratic Services

Item - Managing The Impact Of Welfare Reform Changes On Social Housing Tenants In Wales' – Progress Report

List Of Background Papers

- WAO report 'Managing the Impact of Welfare Reform Changes on Social Housing Tenants in Wales' - issued January 2015
- WAO Annual Improvement Report 2014/15 for Rhondda Cynon Taf – issued October 2015
- Minute 24 – Overview & Scrutiny Committee 21st October 2015

Contact Officer:-

Mrs A Edwards
The Pavilions,
Cambrian Park
Clydach Vale,
CF40 2XX

Tel. No. (01443) 424102

Managing the Impact of Welfare Reform Changes On Social Housing Tenants in Wales – Action plan up date to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee April 2016

What are we trying to achieve, the outcome	Reduce and alleviate the effects of poverty by mitigating the impact of welfare reform on households Rhondda Cynon Taf
Why we need to do it:	The changes being made to the Housing Benefit system as part of welfare reform will affect a greater proportion of social-housing tenants in Wales than in England or Scotland, and there is increasing poverty, debt and exclusion amongst some social-housing tenants which coincide with these changes

A copy of the full Wales Audit Office report can be accessed by clicking here: <http://www.audit.wales/publication/managing-impact-welfare-reform-changes-social-housing-tenants-wales>

Actions taken that will address the WAO recommendations contained in 'Managing the Impact of Welfare Reform Changes On Social Housing Tenants in Wales'	Update	Next Steps	Delivery Date	Responsible Member/ Officer
WAOMIWRR1 - Improve strategic planning and better co-ordinate activity to tackle the impact of welfare reform on social housing tenants by ensuring comprehensive action plans are in place that cover the work of all relevant council departments, housing associations and the work of external stakeholders.	<p>Tackling Poverty, which includes actions to mitigate the impact of welfare reform on all Rhondda Cynon Taf residents, not just those in social housing, has been a corporate improvement priority since 2010/11 and remains an ongoing priority for the Council. Whilst each year improvement plans have been produced which include a small number of priority actions there is currently no overarching plan that amalgamates all the relevant actions into one single plan with a clear set of agreed outcome measures that are aimed at tackling poverty and the impact of welfare reform in Rhondda Cynon Taf.</p> <p>To support the development of a more coordinated approach to tackling poverty, a</p>	As part of an on-going review and development of the Council's approach to tackling poverty work is underway to develop an overarching strategy and delivery plan that will incorporate actions aimed at mitigating the impact of welfare reform on Rhondda Cynon Taf residents, including those in social housing.	April 2017	Head of Communities & Prosperity

Managing the Impact of Welfare Reform Changes On Social Housing Tenants in Wales – Action plan up date to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee April 2016

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	<p>single RCT wide governance forum has been established to support the shift towards a more strategic approach to developing and delivering provision.</p> <p>A single coherent Communities First delivery plan has been established for 2016/17 that incorporates actions aimed at mitigating the impact of welfare reforms. The delivery plan incorporates actions aimed at supporting the roll out of Universal Credit specifically in relation to supporting individuals to access online services and budgetary support.</p>			
<p>WAOMIWRR2 - Improve governance and accountability for welfare reform by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • appointing member and officer leads to take responsibility for strategic leadership on welfare reform and be accountable for performance; and • ensuring members receive adequate training and regular briefings on welfare reform to be able to 	<p>Member and Officer leads in place prior to publication of WAO report. The Cabinet Member for Tackling Poverty, Engagement & Housing currently has lead responsibility and this incorporates welfare reform. There is also a dedicated Officer lead for the tackling poverty corporate improvement priority.</p> <p>Cabinet agreed on 24th November 2015 to establish dedicated Communities & Prosperity Service for the Council, which will take</p>	<p>Establish Communities & Prosperity Service:</p> <p>Phase 1: Restructure Communities First programme,</p> <p>Phase 2: Reconfigure commissioning arrangements for tackling poverty programmes under single service.</p>	<p>April 2016</p> <p>July 2016</p>	<p>Youth Engagement & Participation Service Manager</p>

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challenge and scrutinise performance and decisions.	responsibility for the strategic leadership of the wider tackling poverty agenda, which impact of welfare reforms will be a part. Prior to the introduction of the welfare reforms Member training was arranged and information provided to them about planned changes. Whilst there have not been regular briefings provided to members, up to date information is available through the Councils website and intranet.	With the roll out Universal Credit to commence in Rhondda Cynon Taf in March 2016, arrangements will be put in place to brief members of the planned changes and implementation timeframes of Universal Credit, plus any wider welfare reforms.	April 2016	Service Director, Public Health & Protection Head of Communities & Prosperity
WAOMIWRR3 - Ensure effective management of performance on welfare reform by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • setting appropriate measures to enable members, officers and the public to judge progress in delivering actions; • ensuring performance information covers the work of all relevant agencies and especially housing associations; and • establishing measures to judge the wider impact of welfare reform. 	Performance measures are incorporated within Corporate improvement plans, where practicable, which has allowed performance to be measured and compared over time and monitor progress in delivering agreed priority actions. However, these measures are predominately focused on measuring the impact of support programmes funded and/or delivered by the Council to help mitigate the impact of welfare reform changes on individual residents. Current measures however do not provide a balanced set of indicators that enables a multi-agency assessment of impact or provide an adequate judgement of the wider impact of welfare reform in Rhondda Cynon Taf.	Performance and outcome measures will be agreed as part tackling poverty strategy development and monitored through implementation of the delivery plan	April 2017	Head of Communities & Prosperity

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<p>WAOMIWRR4 - Strengthen how welfare-reform risks are managed by creating a single corporate-level approach that co ordinates activity across the Council and the work of others to provide adequate assurance that all the necessary and appropriate actions to mitigate risk are taking place.</p>	<p>Mitigating the risks associated with the Impact of welfare reform is an identified risk within the Council's strategic risk register, which has approved by Cabinet. Risks are currently managed through mitigating actions included in the Council's annual corporate improvement plan.</p> <p>To support the development of a more coordinated approach to tackling poverty, a single RCT wide governance forum has been established to support the shift towards a more strategic approach to developing and delivering provision.</p>	<p>Arrangements will be strengthened, where appropriate, as part of the tackling poverty strategy development and monitored through implementation of the delivery plan.</p>	<p>April 2017</p>	<p>Head of Communities & Prosperity</p>

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<p>WAOMIWRR5- Improve engagement with tenants affected by the removal of the spare-room subsidy through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the provision of regular advice and information on the options open to them to address the financial impact of the change in their circumstances; • the promotion of the 'Your benefits are changing' helpline; and • the provision of support to tenants specifically affected by the removal of the spare-room subsidy to participate in regional/national employment schemes. 	<p>The Council funds CAB locally to provide a range of up to date information and advice on a wide range of topics, including; support to those individuals impacted by welfare reforms. In addition, the Council has an in-house welfare Rights Teams that also provides information and advice to those individual needing support.</p> <p>The Council's Benefits Section have quarterly formal liaison meetings with majority RSL's and impact of all welfare reform issues are discussed and working arrangements reviewed as appropriate. Engagement with private sector landlords was through the Council's Landlord Forum, although ended around 12 months ago.</p> <p>Senior Benefit Officers meet bi-annually with colleagues from the Council's Welfare Rights Team to co-ordinate action and address any operational issues.</p> <p>Specific information on welfare reform is available on the Council's website, including promotion of the "your benefits are changing" helpline. The Council actively supports residents (including tenants) affected by the welfare reforms through a range of directly provided and/or commissioned support programmes aimed at improving an individual's access to education, employment and training opportunities.</p>	<p>No further action is planned at this time in relation to spare-room subsidy, but the situation will be subject to on-going monitoring. No issues currently being raised by Housing Associations, private sector landlords or advocacy services with the Council's approach to date.</p>	<p>Complete</p>	

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<p>WAOMIWRR7- Improve management, access to and use of Discretionary Housing Payments by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • establishing a clear policy or guide that is available in hard copy and online to the public that sets out the Council's policy and arrangements for administering Discretionary Housing Payments; • clearly defining eligible and non-eligible housing costs covered by Discretionary Housing Payments in application forms, policy documentation and applicant guidance leaflets; • clearly setting out the maximum/minimum length of time that such payments will be provided; • setting and publishing the timescale for the Council making a decision on Discretionary Housing Payments applications; • including information within public literature on the Council's policy for right to review or appeal of a decision and the timescales and process to be followed in deciding on these; and 	<p>DHP policy updated and the new operational framework implemented from April 2015.</p> <p>Latest copy of DHP policy and application form are available on Council's website.</p> <p>Rhondda Cynon Taf initiated a Pan-Wales project that involved 20 local authorities working in partnership with the WLGA and consultants from the Welfare Reform Club (www.welfareclub.net), to develop the new framework for awarding DHP's. The aim of the framework is to ensure tenants struggling to meet their rental costs are able to access fair and consistent financial assistance operated by the majority of Welsh local authorities.</p>	<p>Evaluate impact of updated DHP policy and new operating framework to ensure it is meeting its intended aims.</p>	<p>July 2016</p>	<p>Service Director Operational Finance</p>

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> clearly define the priority groups for Discretionary Housing Payments in public literature to ensure that those seeking assistance, and those agencies supporting them, can assess whether such payments are a viable option to address their housing and financial needs. 				

