

**COUNCIL SEMINAR
28th March, 2013**

Present:- Councillor Stone (in the Chair); Councillors Akhtar, Ali, Atkin, Beaumont, Ellis, Foden, Godfrey, Gosling, J. Hamilton, N. Hamilton, McNeely, Sims, Smith, Wallis, Whelbourn and Wyatt.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Doyle, Hoddinott and Lelliott.

**WELFARE REFORM AND LOCAL WELFARE PROVISION - THE
ROTHERHAM FUND FOR CHANGE.**

Councillor Roger Stone, Leader of the Council, welcomed Elected Members to the Seminar that had been arranged to inform them about the changes that were due to take place from 1st April, 2013, under the Government's programme of Welfare Reform. The Seminar would include details on the national changes and the local measures that Rotherham had put in place in response to the pressures created by Welfare Reform.

Karl Battersby, Strategic Director, Environment and Development Services, and Carole Haywood, Partnerships and Policy Manager, Commissioning, Policy and Performance, Resources Directorate, were in attendance.

Karl provided an overview of the Welfare Reform measures that would become effective from 1st April, 2013, and continue until 2015: -

- From 1st April, 2013, the responsibility for welfare assistance would transfer from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to local authorities in relation to crisis loans and community care grants (discretionary social fund): -
 - It was noted that Rotherham's funding allocation was 13% less than the DWP had paid during 2011/12 in the Rotherham area;
 - There was no confirmation of what Rotherham's funding allocation would be for 2014/15;
 - There were no statutory requirements on the Local Authority relating to required provision.
- Universal Credit – all payments would be made in a single payment, paid monthly in arrears and made to one nominated member of per household. This was being gradually phased in;
- Council Tax reforms;
- Bedroom Tax – loss of 14% of Housing Benefit for a single 'spare' room in a property where Housing Benefit was being paid, and 25% for second and subsequent 'spare' rooms (a limited number of exceptions were being reviewed nationally);

- Benefits would be capped at £500 per week (£26,000 per year) per household;
- Personal Independence Payments - changes to the assessment process;
- Applications for benefits would be undertaken through the internet for the majority of cases with only a few exceptions being paper-based. Proactive management would also be required for existing benefit claimant's benefit accounts on an internet portal.

Rotherham Fund for Change: -

In recognition of the Local Authority's new responsibility for administering the welfare assistance schemes, Rotherham had created a scheme called 'The Rotherham Fund for Change', which would be open for applications from 2nd April, 2013, following the Easter weekend. The scheme would reflect the Local Authority's focus on helping people to change their lives and avoid the need for on-going 'crisis' support. The fund was different to the Department for Work and Pension's previous fund, and eligibility criteria would be different.

- The DWP would stop receiving applications for their current scheme on 28th March, 2013, although they would continue to process live applications within their system;
 - The DWP would continue to provide short-term advances and budgeting advances under their Social Fund. These would be re-paid through the claimants' future benefit payments, over a period of three-months to one year;
 - Short Term Advances and Budgeting Advances could be applied for on 0845 603 6967.
- The Rotherham Fund for Change would provide grants and loans for people who were in urgent need or under exceptional pressure, or who needed support to remain or re-settle in the community;
- Eligibility criteria for the Rotherham Fund for Change would be: -
 - Be resident in Rotherham;
 - Be in receipt of one of the following benefits: Income Support, Income-based Job Seeker's allowance, Income-based Employment and Support Allowance or Pension Credit (guaranteed credit).
- Applications to the Rotherham Fund for Change would be received by phone on the following number 01709 336000;

- RMBC Customer Contact Centre staff would undertake an initial assessment. It was envisaged that they would be able to make an immediate decision on whether support would be available. The Customer Contact Centre would signpost applicants to the Lazer Credit Union and be able to arrange an appointment, all within the initial telephone call;
- The application process had been designed to limit applicants having to contact multiple Council departments/services, and streamline the process. Lessons learned by the Council and the Lazer Credit Union through administering the Festive Food scheme had been incorporated into the Fund for Change process;
- Applicants would be limited to one payment per year for a loan, crisis and grant payments;
- To receive their payment, applicants would be required to open a current account with the Lazer Credit Union. The Credit Union would help with setting up Direct Debits and money management issues as required;
- Timescales for applicants receiving their payments were: crisis payments – 2 days, loans – 4 days, grants – 15 days;
- There would be no right of appeal against a decision;
- Where applicants were not eligible for support under Rotherham's scheme, they would be signposted to other services and agencies that may be able to help. Requests for Section 17 payments (support for children to remain with their families) would be referred to the Common Assessment and Referral Team within Children and Young People's Services, and eligible applicants could also be referred to the DWP for their social fund scheme, and Food Banks and other charitable organisations.

Resources available to administer the Rotherham Fund for Change: -

- Three additional posts had been created in the Customer Contact Centre. Initially ten members of the team had been trained in the Rotherham Fund for Change procedure, and it was intended that training would be rolled-out to the whole team in the near future;
- Additional capacity and support had been provided to the Lazer Credit Union, including information technology equipment to provide appointment scheduling assistance;
- Relationships had been continued to be developed between the Local Authority and local Food Banks and charities that provided hot meals to people in crisis;

- Progress reporting would be provided to the Cabinet and/or the Deputy Leader on a regular basis;
- A six-month full progress review would be undertaken on how the Fund for Change was operating.

Discussion ensued, and the following issues were raised by Elected Members: -

- Working with partners in all sectors, did they have the capacity to respond to the expected demand? Were the organisations secure for the long-term?;
- What support was in place for the Customer Contact Team and partners when there were times of high demand/contacts?;
- A phone application system may not be a preferred method of applying – many applicants would prefer to speak to an officer face-to-face;
- Was there capacity for library staff to support applicants and benefit claimants to use the free technology available in libraries across the Borough?;
- Support for the Borough's outlying areas and the difficulties people could face in coming to the Town Centre;
- Accessing small cash payments through local post offices;
- Potential role for other Council assets, including the Borough-wide service centres and mobile provision;
- A composite document that had all of the contact numbers for the organisations available would be useful for Elected Members to refer to in their surgeries and when in contact with constituents;
- The importance of keeping local MPs, Area Assemblies and Parish and Town Councils up to date with the Rotherham Fund for Change;
- Positive endorsements for the contributions made by charities across Rotherham, often through donation and volunteering, and the importance of not over-loading these organisations.

Councillor Stone thanked Karl and Carole for their informative presentation and contribution to the discussion.

Resolved: - (1) That the information shared be noted.

(2) That a similar presentation, or communications, be made to local MPs, Area Assemblies and Parish and Town Councils.

(3) That a composite document be produced for quick-reference of the services and support available for Elected Members.