

**COUNCIL SEMINAR
23rd January, 2014**

Present:- Councillor Akhtar (in the Chair); Councillors Atkin, Beaumont, Clark, Dalton, Falvey, Goulty, J. Hamilton, Jepson, Kaye, Pickering, G. A. Russell, Sharman, Sims, Swift, Wallis, Whelbourn and Wootton.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Ali, Dodson, Hoddinott, P. A. Russell, R. S. Russell, Smith and Stone.

**PROJECTS TO ADDRESS THE IMPACT OF WELFARE REFORM ON
ROTHERHAM RESIDENTS.**

The Deputy Leader introduced Carole Haywood, Jenny Lingrell and Miles Crompton (of the Policy and Performance Team), who gave a presentation about the impact of the coalition Government's welfare reforms upon residents of the Rotherham Borough area, especially vulnerable families.

The presentation included information on:-

- the role of the Rotherham Partnership Welfare Steering Group and Task Group (including the involvement of the Council's partner organisations);
- background to the Welfare Reform Act 2012;
- continued pressure for further reductions in welfare benefits;
- the impact of benefit reductions impacts upon people of working age;
- statistics relating to the number of benefits' claimants and the financial impact;
- the potential impact of the welfare reforms upon vulnerable people (e.g. stress and illness; fuel poverty; increasing use of food banks);
- the Local Council Tax Support Scheme;
- crisis loans delivered through the Laser Credit Union;
- Funds for Change – central Government funding which may last only until 2015;
- the Benefits Cap – support for vulnerable families;
- specific assistance provided during the 2013 and 2014 festive period;
- Benefits Sanctions – a scrutiny review by the Council;

- the High Cost Lending Task Group – recently established by the Rotherham Partnership to address the rising concern about high interest lending which traps people in spiralling debt problems;
- support for families affected by the Benefits Cap – adopting an integrated approach which will involve officers which are already known to the families (e.g. staff of children’s centres; helping people to apply for discretionary housing payments);
- the presentation included details of a number of case studies;
- funding secured for the employment of an outreach worker, who will provide further support families;
- the community food hub – a partnership model is now in operation, involving the distribution of food to food banks and organisations in the Rotherham Borough area; as part of this arrangement, data is collected about this service provision, facilitating targeted support to areas of the Borough;
- proposed use of volunteers in service provision and the provision of training for volunteers;
- development of the Universal Credit Support Services Framework, with partner organisations, to support people affected by the implementation of Universal Credit.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- although food banks are beneficial to families, some have difficulty in preparing hot meals as a consequence of fuel poverty; it was noted that food supplies are being tailored by some organisations, such as GROW and the Gate Surgery;
- the local welfare provision : Fund for Change funding from the coalition Government was time-limited for two years, ending on 31 March 2015;
- the number of people who gained access to the Festive Food Fund, who subsequently continued their membership of a Credit Union;
- Members referred to (i) issues raised by the public at their surgeries; and (ii) specific examples from their own electoral Wards;
- the average loss of income for Rotherham families was £556 (per year) per working age adult, compared to a figure of £470 nationally;

- employment prospects in the Rotherham Borough area (e.g. temporary, short term, part-time and unskilled work; zero-hours contracts of employment); rates of claimant unemployment in the Rotherham Borough area have reduced during the past twelve months;
- Members noted the study by the Sheffield Hallam University on Tax Credits, showing the impact of the welfare reforms upon people in employment;
- the possibility of increasing the availability of Credit Unions throughout the Borough area;
- persons accessing the food banks who are awaiting decisions on their applications for asylum or refugee status;
- the impact of the welfare reforms upon individuals' receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance and Council Tax/Housing Benefit; there is a significant impact upon young, single people.

The officers were thanked for their informative presentation.