

To: City Executive Board

Date: 12th. June 2013

Report of: The Scrutiny Committee

Title of Report: Discretionary Housing Payments

Summary and Recommendations

Purpose of report: To report the comments and recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee on the proposed Discretionary Housing Payments Policy.

Key decision? No

Scrutiny Lead Member: Councillor Mark Mills

Executive lead member: Councillor Susan Brown

Policy Framework:

Recommendation(s): For the City Executive Board to say if it agrees or disagrees with the following recommendations.

Recommendation 1

To organise a general campaign of clear advice through as many agencies, partnerships and offices as possible making it clear the temporary nature of Discretionary Housing Payments and the requirements to engage in more sustainable solutions.

Recommendation 2

To extend current out reach work to include benefit take-up to maximise benefits to current and potential claimants.

Recommendation 3

To keep the Discretionary Housing Payment Policy under review and in particular to revisit it once regulations on further Welfare Reform are clear.

Recommendation 4

For the Scrutiny Committee to be included in the monitoring arrangements for this policy in both financial and outcome terms. To see this at the September Scrutiny Committee

Introduction

1. The Scrutiny Committee considered the proposals for future awards of Discretionary Housing Payments. They were supported in their debate by Paul Wilding and the committee would like to thank him for his time and advice.
2. The Committee found the proposals sensible in the circumstances but made recommendations for the City Executive Board to consider.

Conclusions and Recommendations

3. It was clear to the committee that the current and potential loss of benefit to current claimants in Oxford from Welfare Reform will cause hardship. The ability to use Discretionary Housing Payments to alleviate some of that hardship in a focused way is welcome and necessary but clearly not a long term solution.
4. In particular the Committee discussed anecdotal evidence from discussions with constituents which suggested that not all claimants understood that any award would be temporary in nature whilst they worked towards a more sustainable solution. The intentions of the scheme generally and specifically need to be clear to all.
5. The Committee was reassured to hear that a team of Customer Service staff had identified claimants who are or were to be affected by Welfare Reform changes and are making contact to offer advice and support. This along with the partnership work with Advice Agencies in the City is good practice and officers should be commended for this. The Committee wanted this work to go further to look more broadly and include benefit take up to ensure that all those who can claim benefit now are doing so.
6. To emphasise this point - it has been stressed that older people are protected from Welfare Reform and this reassurance may stop them understanding that they must act now to protect entitlement for the future.
For example it is proposed that entitlement to retirement benefits is no longer focused on the oldest partner in a couple but the youngest which means that both partners must be of the appropriate retirement age for their gender to qualify. This could mean a significant loss of income for couples with modest or large age differences.
7. Whilst recognising the policy had to have clear parameters to guide awards it was hoped that it would remain under review as circumstances changed and further Welfare Reform was implemented.

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Comments from the Director and Board Member

8. I am happy to support these recommendations.

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**List of background papers: City Executive Board Report 12th. June 2013
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