

Notes of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee
Social Inclusion Working Group
9th March 2015

Present: Councillors: George Cockman, David Coldwell, Christian Mitchell, Godfrey Newman, David Skipp, Tricia Youtan

Apologies: Councillors: Kate Rowbottom, Duncan England

By invitation: Age UK Horsham District, Janice Leeming, Chief Executive
Citizens Advice Bureau: Lee Furlong, Client Services Manager
Horsham Churches Together: Ian Fletcher, Deacon Tom Murray
Horsham Debt Advice Service: Moira du Bois, Chairman
West Sussex Credit Union: Jenny King, Chair

Officers: Lisa Boydell, Community Development Manager

1. TO ELECT A CHAIRMAN FOR THE MEETING

Councillor George Cockman was elected Chairman for the meeting in the absence of Councillor Kate Rowbottom.

2. TO APPROVE AS CORRECT THE RECORD OF THE MEETING HELD ON 9TH FEBRUARY 2015

The notes of the meeting held on 9th February 2015 were approved as a correct record.

3. TO RECEIVE ANY DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

4. ANNOUNCEMENTS FROM THE CHAIRMAN OR CHIEF EXECUTIVE

There were no announcements.

5. REVIEW OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PROVISION FOR LOCAL RESIDENTS WHO ARE IN FINANCIAL HARDSHIP

The Chairman welcomed the representatives of key organisations who were attending to participate in the review and to share information. He explained that, once evidence had been gathered, recommendations would be made to the Scrutiny and Overview Committee.

The Working Group was reminded of previous comments about how delays in processing benefit claims and receiving benefit payments was often the main reason for why people got into financial hardship and debt.

The Chairman suggested that the Finance & Performance Working Group could be requested to continue to closely monitor, as part of the quarterly performance data for the CenSus Revenues and Benefits service, the speed of processing new benefit claims and the speed of processing information on the changed circumstances of individual benefit applicants, and to check that the target times were not exceeded and that performance improved from the current position.

The representatives of Horsham Churches Together stated that, for some people using the Horsham Foodbank, issues about benefits was of major significance because they had encountered deferred benefit payments and/or financial penalties for missing specific meetings often because they were unaware of how the system worked. The Chief Executive of Age UK Horsham District echoed that view, stating that people could struggle with the complexities of the benefits system and, even when they understood the system, there could be significant delays in the process. The Chairman suggested that the Finance & Performance Working Group be informed of those comments.

Age UK Horsham District provided a small benefits advice service via its two part-time advisers who largely carried out that function by home visits. It had succeeded in obtaining around £1 million each year in unclaimed benefits. The Chief Executive of Age UK Horsham District stated that there had been a 20-30% increase in enquiries for its service over the past year. She highlighted that many people struggled with the benefits process. Age UK Horsham District found it difficult to contact the Department for Work and Pensions and the CenSus partnership on behalf of clients because Age UK did not have a direct telephone number for those offices. Members suggested that CenSus Revenues and Benefits be asked to provide a direct telephone number to allow agencies to bypass the public switchboard.

The Chief Executive of Age UK Horsham District stated that the transition from Disability Living Allowance to PIP (Personal Independence Payment) had resulted in some very major delays in relation to assessments and final decisions. Age UK Horsham District was aware of more people who were in crisis for various reasons and the increasing demand on its services and the complexity of cases it handled.

The Chairman of Horsham Debt Advice Service pointed out that the delays in the benefit assessment process could leave people facing debt, and if no crisis loan payments were available, the situation could become severe. The Client Services Manager for Citizens Advice Bureau reinforced the message about people slipping into crisis because of delays in benefits being paid. CAB was part of the Local Assistance Network, a West Sussex wide service for people on a low income and in a crisis situation, which had been established after crisis loans had been phased out. Horsham Matters was also a member of the LAN.

Members of the Working Group pointed out that that Horsham District Council was interested in any gaps in provision, and what it could do to assist or to co-ordinate groups to liaise, share knowledge and best practice. Knowledge about debt advice and benefits advice could be pooled. Reference was made again to the former Horsham District Community Partnership and the wish to reinstate it or something similar. HDC had hosted a special partnership conference on 2nd March 2015 to consider current social, economic, and health and wellbeing trends across the District, and issues and concerns for the local communities, in order to support and inform decision-making in providing services for local residents. The Community Development Manager offered to build on that event by arranging an annual partnership conference.

The Chair of the West Sussex Credit Union (WSCU) referred to the Adur and Worthing Financial Inclusion Group and circulated its leaflet which listed services and contact details which were available to those in financial crisis. The Working Group felt this could be a template for a similar leaflet which could be produced for services in Horsham District. Members suggested that a double page feature article with that information could also appear in the Autumn 2015 edition of Horsham District News magazine.

The invited attendees agreed that a leaflet and a magazine article would be useful but emphasised that the information needed to be widely disseminated to include GP practice managers, health service providers, Patient Participation Groups, public information screens, libraries, housing associations, children and family centres, local charities, churches and agencies, Jobcentre Plus, West Sussex County Council, neighbourhood and parish councils, and to be posted on the HDC Health & Wellbeing web pages.

The Chair of WSCU explained the work of that organisation which had been launched in October 2008. WSCU provided borrowing at a more competitive rate than pay day loan companies and encouraged personal saving. A feature about WSCU had been published in the Spring 2015 edition of the Horsham District News magazine which was resulting in more enquiries being received. Members suggested that future articles/advertisements should include case studies to highlight how individuals had benefited from membership of the WSCU.

WSCU was working in partnership with Saxon Weald Housing Association to disseminate information about the Credit Union to its tenants. WSCU had a Home Saver Account to assist those saving up for a deposit to buy a home; WSCU assessed if there was a need to borrow an amount to top up those savings to help its members secure a mortgage. WSCU also operated 'Save As You Earn', liaising with local employers to encourage staff to save directly from their wages and helping them to improve their financial resilience.

Members discussed how the move towards more online transactions for benefit applications could disadvantage those who lacked the ability to use that technology and/or did not have access to the internet and/or who were vulnerable or elderly and needed more support. Members noted that a key aspect of the Council's Business Transformation Programme was to increase the access to Council information and certain services via online transactions. The Working Group suggested a digital inclusion policy would be useful, along with a mapping exercise to list the public access to internet use and support which was available across the District.

The Working Group reflected on the evidence about how some people were struggling with financial hardship and a lack of knowledge about what support existed and how to access it. The Chairman of the Working Group suggested an article could be written for the local press/media to inform them about the Working Group's review and proposed actions. A draft article would be circulated to all attendees for comment before its release.

A Member suggested that, when Horsham District Council had completed its office move to Parkside in Horsham, a regular room booking might be made to allow volunteer(s) and relevant HDC staff to host a 'surgery' style service to provide advice to those who were in crisis and financial hardship.

The Chairman thanked all of the representatives and Members for their comments and contributions.

The Working Group agreed to recommend to the Scrutiny and Overview Committee that the Committee:

- (1) recommend to the Cabinet Member for a Safer and Healthier District to review the impact of the decision to disband the Horsham District Community Partnership and consider its reinstatement, or otherwise request the Council to host a forum once or twice a year, to facilitate the meeting of Council Members and officers with local organisations / agencies, councils and churches to discuss community issues of common interest (which could build on the example of the Council's 'Our Future Together' Partnership Conference held on 2nd March 2015);
- (2) recommend that the Health & Wellbeing web pages be updated to include more information about debt and money advice services, relevant local organisations and agencies; and also request the Communications team to publicise that information to staff on the intranet with a link to the relevant web pages; and request the Health & Wellbeing service to consider providing courses on financial management skills;
- (3) request that the Autumn edition of the Horsham District News magazine include a feature article detailing those organisations which provide advice and assistance to local residents who are in financial hardship, and later collate that information to include within a leaflet to be distributed widely across the District;

- (4) request the Finance and Performance Working Group to continue to monitor the performance data for the CenSus Revenues and Benefits service, in particular the speed of processing benefit claims and the speed of processing information on the changed circumstances of individual benefit applicants, to check that the target times were not exceeded and that performance was improving from the current position;
- (5) request the Cabinet Member for Finance to enquire about the performance of the CenSus telephone contact service and to propose that key organisations / agencies be provided with direct telephone contact numbers to circumvent the reported difficulties in contacting CenSus via the general public telephone number;
- (6) request the Cabinet Member for Communication, Special Projects and Horsham Town to consider how the Business Transformation Programme's provision of more Council communications and services to the public via online transactions might adversely impact on local residents who do not have internet access or might not have the ability or available support to communicate by that method; and to consider the preparation of a digital inclusion policy and to map the public access to internet use and support which was available across the District;
- (7) request that a room be made available in the Council offices in Parkside, Horsham for a regular 'surgery' which could be publicised to allow local residents who are in financial hardship/crisis and in need of advice to meet relevant volunteers and/or Council staff; and
- (8) request West Sussex County Council to promote financial management by inviting relevant agencies to visit District schools to speak on the topic as part of PSHE lessons (Personal, Social, Health and Economic education).

The meeting finished at 7.03 p.m. having commenced at 5.33 p.m.

CHAIRMAN