

STRONG AND SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE	Agenda Item No. 9
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Report of the Head of Legal Services

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SCRUTINY IN A DAY: A FOCUS ON WELFARE REFORM

1. PURPOSE

- 1.1 This report sets out proposals to hold an intensive, cross-scrutiny committee event focussing on the impacts of welfare reform in order to understand and mitigate against the breadth of impact on individuals, families, communities and businesses.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That a one-day Welfare Reform Scrutiny Summit be held in late autumn or early winter 2013 to understand the impact of Welfare Reform across all scrutiny agendas, and make recommendations to mitigate those impacts.
- 2.2 That a cross-scrutiny committee working group be formed to work with officers to plan the event and to oversee the implementation of recommendations from the event after it is held.

3. LINKS TO THE SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY

- 3.1 The welfare reform programme will present both opportunities and risks for many aspects of our work, and each of the priorities set out in the Sustainable Community Strategy could be impacted upon by these changes.

4. BACKGROUND

- 4.1 The 2012 Welfare Reform Act is making the biggest change to the welfare benefits system since the 1940's. These changes will have a direct impact for most benefit claimants, which for some will be significant. There may also be a number of indirect and unintended consequences, some negative (such as overcrowding) and some positive (such as greater innovation leading to new employment schemes).
- 4.2 Between 2012 and 2017, a number of important changes will come into effect on a range of welfare benefits such as housing benefit, council tax benefit, tax credits, disability living allowance and incapacity benefit amongst others. Welfare Reform will affect people both in and out of work.
- 4.3 The Act will also see the introduction of Universal Credit, which aims to simplify the current benefits system by bringing together a range of separate benefit payments into one single streamlined payment process. A key feature of Universal Credit is that it aims to provide greater support to people looking for work and will ensure that people are better off by being in work.
- 4.4 Welfare Reform will have an impact in how the council and its partners deliver support, advice and services to the public. The council will need to work even closer with local partners across the public and civil society sectors, and with businesses in delivering the changes that Welfare

Reform brings. Key to the successful implementation of Welfare Reform will be ensuring that the council and local partners have an agreed strategy and understanding of the issues and how they can be addressed.

5. KEY ISSUES

- 5.1 Given the scale and impact that changes will bring each of the council's scrutiny committees / commissions will have a strong interest in understanding these impacts on their areas of work and in making recommendations to manage these impacts.
- 5.2 It is therefore proposed that a one-day Welfare Reform Scrutiny Summit be held in late autumn/early winter 2013 to allow all committees / commissions the chance to understand in-depth and scrutinise responses on this cross-cutting agenda. The summit would provide a chance to understand the Government's strategy on Welfare Reform, and how it affects Peterborough. It will also allow the committees to understand how Welfare Reform will impact individuals, families and communities from a range of different perspectives.
- 5.3 It is proposed that the event is organised in a similar way to a conference – a number of speakers presenting on the key aspects of the reform agenda and how it is impacting or may impact on residents and businesses, followed by more in-depth work focussing in on the issues pertinent to each committee / commission. The event would be supported by robust evidence as well as case studies.
- 5.4 To ensure this important event is as relevant and meaningful as possible, it is further proposed that representatives from each scrutiny committee / commission form a working group to plan the event and to oversee delivery of the recommendations that emerge from it.

6. IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Focussing on a single cross-cutting theme in this way will ensure that the council's response to the opportunities and challenges presented by welfare reform is completely joined-up and has the highest possible impact.

7. CONSULTATION

- 7.1 These proposals are being presented to each scrutiny committee / commission for discussion and debate.

8. NEXT STEPS

- 8.1 If the committees agree with the recommendations set out in this report, a small cross-committee working group will be established to work with officers to plan for the event.

9. BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

- 9.1 None

10. APPENDICES

- 10.1 None