

17 December 2014

Community Committee

Local Support Services Framework

Report of: *Rick Steels, Revenues & Benefits Manager*

Wards Affected: *All*

This report is: *Public*

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report provides Members with an update on the introduction of the Local Support Services Framework, a partnership of organizations that will provide specialist advice and support to residents who have suffered major life changing events or who have been affected by welfare reforms which have resulted in a cessation or reduction of payments to the Council.
- 1.2 In addition, the Council has been asked by the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) to provide advice and support to residents on making claims for Universal Credit and enhancing a resident's prospects of finding employment.
- 1.3 It is expected that there will be a soft launch of the framework in early 2015 with Universal Credit support provided from March 2015 onwards.

The amount of Universal Credit support is dependant on the level of funding received.

2. Recommendation/s

- 2.1 **That Members note the expansion of the group and endorse the continuing development of the Local Support Services Framework.**
- 2.2 **That Members agree to the provision of advice and support with claims for Universal Credit, subject to appropriate funding being received.**

3. Introduction and Background

- 3.1 The Welfare Reform Act 2012 introduced a number of regulations that were designed to simplify the benefits system and make work pay. One significant step towards this aim was the introduction of a Universal Credit to replace a range of existing benefits and smooth the transition for people moving into and out of work.
- 3.2 Councils have been encouraged to think about the role they will play in supporting residents with additional or complex needs, to help them make and manage Universal Credit claims and prepare for work once Universal Credit is rolled out to this area.
- 3.3 There are ongoing discussions with the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) regarding appropriate funding for this support. The amount of financial support provided will have a significant bearing on the level of support that residents will receive through the framework.
- 3.4 Another welfare reform of note was the abolition of Council Tax Benefit from April 2013. The Welfare Reform Act 2012 introduced a requirement for local authorities to set up a localised Council Tax Support scheme but instead of full funding for Council Tax Benefit, based on the claim caseload, funding was strictly cash limited. Councils were therefore left to make some difficult decisions regarding the level of support that could be provided to residents.
- 3.5 The Brentwood Borough Council scheme supports working age residents who are unemployed with a maximum 80% Council Tax Support leaving a remaining 20% to be found. Recognising the potential impact this could have on resident's ability to pay Council Tax, the need to introduce a framework of support for these and other residents has been identified.
- 3.6 At a previous meeting of this Committee held on 21st July 2014, Members were made aware that the framework included other organisations such as the local Job Centre and Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) in addition to Synergy (a voluntary organisation with expertise in supporting residents with alcohol and or drug abuse issues). The framework has since been expanded to include Brentwood Mind (a voluntary organisation with expertise in supporting residents with mental health issues) and Family Mosaic whose main role is to ensure that wherever possible families can stay together.
- 3.7 Although the initial remit of the framework was to support residents with issues around debt it is now expected that the role of partner organisations will be expanded to include the provision of support with Universal Credit claims.

4. Aims & Objectives of the Framework

4.1 The purpose of the framework is to support residents, in particular vulnerable people who have encountered difficulty in making payments of rent, service charges or Council Tax as a result of welfare reforms or a recent life change such as bereavement, sickness, marital breakdown or who have had a recent change in their circumstances which they have found to be beyond their immediate control.

4.2 Residents, who have missed their rent, service charges or Council Tax payments when they become due, will be identified and contacted during the early intervention process, to establish why they have been unable to make payments. Where it is established that the missed payments are the result of welfare reform or a recent life change, the resident will be offered the opportunity to be supported by the framework.

4.3 Early intervention

Those residents that choose the framework option will be offered advice on maximising their income. This will include advice and support on making claims for benefits and other sources of income that are available to them. Staff from the Council and CAB will have primary responsibility to provide this support but any organisation within the framework will also provide advice and support where appropriate.

4.4 Debt and budgetary advice

Our experience of dealing with customers, tells us that if they owe rent, service charges or Council Tax, there is a possibility that they may have debt(s) with other organisations and in these cases, customers will be referred to the CAB to seek expert advice on debt management and managing household budgets. Help with managing domestic bills will be particularly useful for residents who are liable for paying their housing costs as a result of welfare reforms.

4.5 Training towards employment

There will inevitably be some residents with individual issues that require specialist support. These issues could include, for example, drug or alcohol abuse or mental health issues.

In cases where there is a need for specialist support, the appropriate voluntary organisation will be approached and will offer help and advice.

In addition to any specialist support provision, Synergy will be approached to provide advice and support to unemployed customers to prepare them for seeking work.

This specialist support includes raising self esteem, improving motivation and training of interview techniques.

4.6 Finding work/starting a business

Job Centre Plus (JCP) has a responsibility to ensure residents claiming Job Seekers Allowance are actively seeking work. The aim of this framework is to ensure a smoother transition back into work for claimants; in particular, residents making a claim for Universal Credit will be provided with a range of support that will enhance individual employability.

During the back to work process JCP will not only identify job opportunities but provide entrepreneurial support for any customers with a desire to become self employed.

Through the Council's Business Development service, the local Federation of Small Businesses (FSB), the Renaissance Group and Brentwood Growth will all be encouraged to provide further support, with the aim of creating additional businesses within the Borough.

The Chamber of Commerce will also be encouraged, through this framework, to provide local jobs for local people.

5 Progress since last report

- 5.1 The latest version of the steering group project plan has been produced (Appendix A to this report).
- 5.2 A Partnership Agreement (Appendix B) has now been signed which ensures consensus is reached between the participating organisations regarding roles and responsibilities so that the objectives of the framework may be delivered.
- 5.3 Welfare rights training has been provided to ensure that staff from all participating organisations are better informed and skilled at supporting residents.
- 5.4 Staff from organisations within the framework have been involved in a staff mingle, hosted by the Council, which was aimed at increasing knowledge and understanding of the work undertaken by each representative. Staff were also given the opportunity to ask questions about the framework and make suggestions for improvements.

6. What next

- 6.1 A 'third party sharing agreement' is being drafted by the voluntary organisations for use by Council and Job Centre staff when referring cases for support. Residents identified as potentially needing support will be asked to sign the agreement before referral.

- 6.2 An Equality Impact Assessment is also being drafted which will identify barriers to access, especially for the more vulnerable groups.
- 6.3 Work on publicising and communicating the framework begins with this report and will subsequently include press releases, updates on the websites of all partner organisations and the use of social media.
- 6.4 During the early meetings of the steering group, the option of sharing office accommodation was also discussed which would provide residents using the framework with a single point of contact. As the Town Hall was identified as being under-occupied and due to be refurbished, the option of using the Town Hall as the hub of the framework was discussed.
- 6.5 Many of the partner organisations involved in the framework have since expressed an interest in having some presence within the Town Hall, once refurbishment is completed in 2015, and work is ongoing to establish the costs of both IT and accommodation.

7. Issue, Options and Analysis of Options

- 7.1 Welfare reforms brought a number of challenges for local authorities in particular the provision of support to those residents faced with making payments of tax and or rent which had previously been covered by Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit.
- 7.2 Universal Credit is now being introduced throughout the country following successful pilots in selected areas. New claims for Universal Credit could be made in this Borough from as early as March 2015 onwards.

However this timetable has not been confirmed by the DWP.

- 7.3 The introduction of a framework of organisations will ensure residents affected by welfare reforms, recent life changing events or those making claims for Universal Credit receive the right advice and support at the right time.

8. Reasons for Recommendation

- 8.1 To provide Members with details of the work undertaken, to date, by Officers of the Council and representatives from other partner organisations, towards the development of a local support services framework.

9. Consultation

- 9.1 At all stages of the development of the framework, key partners have been involved in both informal and formal discussions and have subsequently formed a steering group with the task of ensuring the successful implementation of the framework.

10. References to Corporate Plan

- 10.1 Localism - The framework introduces closer working with our community partners to make Brentwood a borough where people are supported to do more for themselves and rely less on public services.

11. Implications

Financial Implications

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- 11.1 None

Legal Implications

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- 11.2 None

Other Implications (where significant) – i.e. Health and Safety, Asset Management, Equality and Diversity, Risk Management, Section 17 – Crime & Disorder, Sustainability, ICT

- 11.3 The scheme will be applied equally across all sectors of the community and accessibility promoted.
- 11.4 Sharing of information relevant to residents will only be shared once signed authorisation for data exchange is received from the resident.

12. Background Papers (include their location and identify whether any are exempt or protected by copyright)

- 12.1 None.

13. Appendices to this report

Appendix A - LSSF project plan

Appendix B - LSSF partnership agreement

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