

GATESHEAD METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL
CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING

Monday, 27 February 2017

PRESENT: Councillor John Eagle (Chair)

Councillor(s): P Foy, J Wallace, D Bradford, M Charlton,
P Dillon, T Graham, J Green, S Green, M Hall, B Oliphant
and N Weatherley

APOLOGIES: Councillor(s): L Caffrey, M Henry, M Ord and A Thompson

CR34 MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 13 February 2017 be approved as a correct record.

CR35 CASE STUDY - WELFARE REFORM UPDATE AND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF UNIVERSAL CREDIT IN GATESHEAD

The Committee received an update report on the implementation of Universal Credit (UC) within Gateshead and other changes arising from: the Welfare Reform Act 2012; the Chancellors Autumn Statement 2015; and the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016.

It was noted that UC will be made via an online application and will be a single household payment, paid monthly in arrears.

It was reported that to date, UC has been implemented in Gateshead, Blaydon and Felling Job Centre areas (as of 15 June 2015) for a limited client group. Birtley, Chopwell and Rowlands Gill were included from September 2015, followed by parts of Leam Lane and Wrekenton from November 2015.

To support the implementation of UC, the Council agreed a Delivery Partnership Agreement with DWP. As part of this agreement the Council provides support to clients and this was summarised in the report.

The Committee was informed that, to date, there have been 361 UC claimants within Gateshead, who were previously in receipt of Housing Benefit. A further 384 UC claimants have been assessed for Local Council Tax Support.

The report and a presentation outlined the actions taken by the Council and The Gateshead Housing Company (TGHC) as a result of this initial implementation of UC.

The report also provided updates on: under occupation; UC Full Service implementation; Local Housing Allowance; and benefit capping.

A number of case studies were provided in the presentation to illustrate the impact of the changes on claimants with varied circumstances.

It was queried why there is difficulty letting flats when there is a waiting list. It was reported that the waiting list has reduced from 11,000 to 6,000 since the introduction of housing benefit reductions for under-occupation. There has also been an increase in potential tenants choosing to rent properties in the private rental sector. The growth of the private rental sector is having an impact on demand for social housing.

It was noted that it is often necessary for TGHC to re-advertise vacant flats, however houses remain popular and in demand. Of the 500 vacant properties over 300 of them are flats.

The Committee was satisfied that the £400k of funds from the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) was effectively used as it sustained tenancies which, had they ceased, would have resulted in rental income loss.

It was queried whether TGHC could actively market the flats to young professionals and/or students. It was reported that it is an option to market to college and university students however the range of choices available within this market makes it difficult.

It was commented that there are examples of exploitation within the student rental market and that marketing properties to this group may help to address that wider issue. It was also commented that a venturesome approach to marketing the properties is now required.

It was requested that costs to the Council of the support it provides (as part of the Delivery Partnership Agreement with DWP) be identified and provided to the Committee. It was reported that TGHC has so far managed the changes within existing resources but that pressures could increase.

It was queried whether the vacant properties are suitable for young people who are leaving care and are in need of housing. It was confirmed that the properties are suitable and that vacancies exist across Gateshead. It was also reported that a longer-term solution is currently being devised for the accommodation of young people leaving care.

There were concerns that the DWP is not able to assist with early interventions for the most vulnerable.

- RESOLVED:
- i. That the issues arising from the implementation of Universal Credit were noted.
 - ii. That the actions taken by the Council and The Gateshead Housing Company were noted.

The Committee received a report on arrangements for Information Governance across the Council, including the annual reporting of data breaches. The report also provided details of the Council's use of covert surveillance and compliance with the requirements of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (RIPA).

Information Governance

This was the second annual report to the Committee regarding the Council's Information Governance framework, which forms an important part of the Council's Overview and Scrutiny framework. The report outlined the legislative context (within which, the Council manages a range of sensitive information and personal data) and details the Council's performance in this area over a 12 month period.

Effective and secure exchange and management of information is vital for both good service delivery, and for compliance with a legislative framework at both a national and European level.

The Council's approach to Information Governance is based on the guidelines produced in 2010 and revised in 2014, by the Local Government Association.

It was reported that the Council has an Information Charter and an Information Strategy.

Details of the data breach reporting process were included in the report along with information on breaches within the last twelve months. Overall, the Committee was satisfied with the actions taken.

The Council's use of powers under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000

In accordance with the codes of conduct produced by the Office of the Surveillance Commissioner, the Committee received the second annual report in relation to the Council's use of RIPA.

The two types of covert surveillance that the Council can use are 'directed' (this involves observing, following or watching a subject of surveillance) and 'CHIS' (this involves using volunteer adults or children to attempt to make test purchases).

Typically, this Council uses RIPA in relation to benefit or Council Tax fraud when information is received that a claimant has someone living with them or is working and claiming benefits.

The Council uses CHIS when it receives information that, for example, a housebuilder is selling illegal tobacco or a shop is selling age restricted products to children.

It was reported that the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012 amended RIPA to restrict when Councils can use the powers it provides. Authorisation can only be made by

Councils now if certain conditions are met, these were outlined in the report.

Statistics were provided in relation to the use of RIPA by the Council during the years 2013 – 2016.

- RESOLVED:
- i. That the Committee noted the information in the annual report.
 - ii. That the Committee was satisfied that the Information Governance is operating satisfactorily and that the Council uses the powers under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act appropriately.

Chair.....