

Audit and Standards Committee

Meeting held 25 March 2021

**PRESENT:** Councillors Simon Clement-Jones (Chair), Angela Argenzio, Adam Hurst, Mohammed Mahroof, Dianne Hurst and Alison Howard (Independent Co-Opted Member)

Also in attendance was David Waxman (Independent Person)

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**1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

1.1 Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Sioned-Mair Richards.

**2. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC**

2.1 No items were identified where resolutions may be moved to exclude the press and public.

**3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

3.1 There were no declarations of interest made.

**4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

4.1 The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 18<sup>th</sup> February 2021 were approved as a correct record, subject to amendment of a typographical error in persons present at that meeting.

**5. PROGRESS REPORT OF THE EXTERNAL AUDITORS**

5.1 Janet Dawson and Hayley Clark from Ernst and Young were in attendance to update the committee.

5.2 It was reported that good progress was being made with the Council's finance team and were supplying regular updates. The audit was on track for sign off in April, however Easter break would add issues to the timings. The external auditors advised that they were currently working on another progress report for the next meeting.

5.3 The Committee were advised that discussions was been held regarding the date of the next meeting and it had been suggested that it be moved on a week, due to key officer availability and to allow more time for the report to be finalised.

- 5.4 The Chair advised that discussions were still ongoing regarding the date of the next meeting.
- 5.5 Hayley Clarke advised that she would supply the most updated position of the external audit at the next meeting.
- 5.6 **RESOLVED:** - That the report be noted.

## **6. UNIVERSAL CREDIT UPDATE**

- 6.1 Tim Hardie (Head of Commercial Business Development) attended the meeting alongside Cat Arnold (Policy and Improvement Officer) and Rachel Dawson (Operations and Development Manager, Income Management and Financial Inclusion Team) to provide an update on Universal Credit (UC) and answer any questions the committee had.
- 6.2 An update on UC was last brought to the committee in January 2020 which concentrated on UC impact upon residents.
- 6.3 Tim Hardie advised that DWP started the roll out of full-service UC in Sheffield in November 2018. Over the last year the Covid-19 pandemic had seen the number of claimants for UC increase substantially. However, it also meant that the impacts of UC were now difficult to distinguish from the wider impacts of the crisis.
- 6.4 As of February 2021, 49,420 people in Sheffield were claiming UC, the impacts of lockdown had led to a significant increase in the number of people claiming. This was roughly double the number of claimants at the beginning of the pandemic and contrasted with the last figures reported to the Committee of 16,604 people at the end of September 2019. There was a cohort of new people claiming due to job losses.
- 6.5 Cat Arnold outlined what had been done in Sheffield to support claimants of UC and a lot of focus was around helping people pay their rent.
- 6.6 A Universal Credit Partnership was set up in May 2018 to coordinate the city's activity on UC, bringing together key representatives from Sheffield City Council, DWP and voluntary services, the community and faith organisations to share knowledge and create links between different strands of activity around UC. The Council had been working closely with the Citizens Advice Sheffield, who provided a Help to Claim Service, funded nationally by DWP.
- 6.7 As outlined in the report, figures for rent arrears for UC claimants continued to be an issue, however considering the numbers currently claiming UC, and the impact of Covid-19 was having on people; performance on arrears was still positive.
- 6.8 The impact of UC on citizens was now very difficult to unpick from the wider impacts of the pandemic and this had been set out in a Rapid Health Impact Assessment commissioned by the Sheffield Health and Wellbeing Board. This was published in September 2020.

- 6.9 There was an uncertainty about the number of UC claims likely to be made over the coming months. The furlough scheme had been extended until September 2021, as had the extra £20 per week top up for UC claimant. It was advised that this was positive news for both employees and UC claimants. However, other government support for free school meals over the summer holidays and Defra funding would come to end in March 2021. There was always a possibility that furlough would be phased out, more people losing their jobs and therefore the need to apply for UC. As part of supporting these people, the Council had developed some resources to help people facing redundancy, further information was on the Council's website.
- 6.10 Councillor Angela Argenzio asked whether the Council was evicting council tenants due to rent arrears due to UC. Rachel Dawson advised that only this week had the Council restarted any form of legal action. Initially serving Notice Seeking Possession only on those without financial hardship who had not engaged with all support offered. Evictions were still on hold until at least 31 May 2021, unless the tenant was over 6 months in arrears or was subject to serious ASB and Domestic Violence cases. The Council would not evict a tenant solely on rent arrears arising from Universal Credit problems, this was true even prior to Covid.
- 6.11 Councillor Mohammed Mahroof commented that people coming off the furlough scheme would be claiming UC due to their circumstances, there would be people coming forward who the council would not normally expect. Councillor Mahroof asked if a breakdown was available on how individual wards were being affected by Universal Credit and he noticed in the report that there had been a 47% rise in the claimants aged 24-40. Was this due to unemployment and was action being taken against people in Council Tax arrears.
- 6.12 Cat Arnold advised that the Council did not hold a breakdown of figures for individual wards, it was DWP figures that were used in the report. The Council is very aware through discussions throughout Covid that people claiming Universal Credit were a combination of people from very deprived areas and people who were new to the system. The council have pulled together some information for people who are facing redundancy especially for people who have never claimed before.
- 6.13 In terms of the 47% rise in claimants aged 24-40 Rachel Dawson advised that there was a higher rate in Council tenants of this age claiming UC, however that was the same pre-Covid. The Income Management and Financial Inclusion Team (IMFIT) work closely with Citizens Advice and include information on how to contact CAB and other support services in the information and advice they send out. Citizens advice had advised IMFIT that they were seeing a change in their clientele and more so from the 24-40 age bracket and those that had never claimed welfare benefits previously.
- 6.14 It was advised that when large companies such as John Lewis announce redundancies, the DWP go in with Prospect career services to help people before the redundancy occurs. DWP would also ensure that people claimed the benefits

they were entitled to.

- 6.15 Claimants of Universal Credit would automatically trigger for Council Tax relief, however there was information leaflets available that were included with the council tax bills. Tim Hardie also advised that there was also a council tax hardship scheme and processes where in place if people needed support. It was important for customers to contact the Council if they required support with Council Tax. The Council could only help people if they engaged.
- 6.16 Councillor Dianne Hurst asked what would happen when the furlough scheme came to an end, what would the impact be. Also, what information was available and what networks were in place to assist people.
- 6.17 Cat Arnold advised that she had been working closely with organisations to get support for people and had worked closely with Citizens Advice. There were links on the Council's website to information around redundancy and there was a Covid helpline (SCC helpline) which had taken 25,000 calls to date.
- 6.18 Following a further question from Councillor Angela Argenzio it was advised that Council tenants could access support digitally or via paper copy information, however there no plans for postcards at this time. Information on how to access support had been sent out in the end of year letters that tenants received. Rachel Dawson advised they are preparing for the end of furlough scheme for council tenants now, by collecting information on tenants' circumstances, and offering help and advice now, so they are resilient when the time comes and prepared.
- 6.19 The Chair and members of the Committee thanked the officers for their update and for attending the meeting.
- 6.20 **RESOLVED:** - That the update be noted

## **7. MEMBERS CODE OF CONDUCT AND TRAINING**

- 7.1 Gillian Duckworth, the Council's Monitoring Officer, presented a report to provide members with the updated Members' Code of Conduct following agreement that the council would adopt the Model Code of Conduct incorporating elements of the current code of conduct.
- 7.2 The report also outlined the code of conduct training for members. The Monitoring Officer informed members that she had agreed a programme of development for all members with the LGA for the new municipal year.
- 7.3 The proposal was for the Council's induction programme to be run in a similar format to last year and in addition dates would be agreed with each political group for specific training around the code of conduct. There would also be training for all members on local decision making, with the introduction of Local Area committees.

- 7.4 The programme would run for a period of 12 months and would be flexible enough for members to help shape it. the programme will also address member/officer relationships and would be coupled with a complimentary training schedule for officers.
- 7.5 The rollout and timings of the proposal would be discussed and agreed with the Whips.
- 7.6 Councillor Angela Argenzio commented that the Council needed to develop the training provided around Equality and the programme should also include training on personal safety. Councillor Argenzio asked whether we were positive and encouraged that all members would be involved in the training programme.
- 7.7 The Monitoring Officer advised that the training was intended for all Councillors and there would be a reliance on the individual groups to encourage its members to attend and be involved in the training. The Council would be looking for group champions to engage with fellow members.
- 7.8 There was a need to re-energise the training and it was felt that equality, information management training should be mandatory for all members. It would also be mandatory for members to complete Planning and Licensing training before sitting on these committees as is the current position.
- 7.9 Councillor Mohammed Mahroof felt that it was important that the training programme needed to be backed up by a robust officer training programme.
- 7.10 **RESOLVED:** - That (1) the committee agrees the updated Members' Code of Conduct and (2) agrees the proposals for the Member Development Training Programme.

## **10. WORK PROGRAMME**

- 10.1 The Committee discussed moving the next meeting on a week from its original date of the 15<sup>th</sup> April 2021. It was agreed that the meeting on the 15<sup>th</sup> April 2021 would be cancelled due to key officer availability and to allow the external auditors more time to complete the next update report for the Committee.

The Whistleblowing Policy report had been delayed. All policy work had been suspended during the pandemic and no consultations had yet been sent out in order to start the work needed. This would be chased up with HR for an update.

The next meeting of the Audit and Standards Committee would look at:

- Education Health Care Plan- which had been deferred from a previous meeting.
- Internal Audit Plan 2021/22
- Progress in High Opinion Audit Reports
- Compliance with International Auditing Standards
- Audit Results (ISA 260) Recommendations
- Work Programme

10.2 **RESOLVED:** That (1) the work programme be noted; and (2) changes to the work programme be made as detailed above.

**11. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS**

11.1 Future meetings of the Audit and Standards Committee would be held on:

Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2021 (TBC)

Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> June 2021

Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> July 2021