

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON TUESDAY, 21 MARCH 2017**

COUNCILLORS

PRESENT Derek Levy, Abdul Abdullahi, Katherine Chibah, Nneka Keazor, Joanne Laban and Edward Smith.

**STATUTORY
CO-OPTES:** *1 vacancy (Church of England diocese representative), Mr Simon Goulden (other faiths/denominations representative), Mr Tony Murphy (Catholic diocese representative), Alicia Meniru & 1 vacancy (Parent Governor representative) - Italics Denotes absence*

OFFICERS: Sally McTernan, Assistant Director, Council Services, Libraries & Council Assessments
Sally Sanders, Head of Financial Assessment
Andy Ellis, Governance & Scrutiny Officer
Stacey Gilmour, Governance & Scrutiny Secretary

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WELCOME & APOLOGIES

The Chair welcomed attendees to the meeting. Apologies for absence were received from Tony Murphy and Alicia Meniru.

The Chair explained that this meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee had been arranged to look at the issues that had been raised regarding the Processing Times for Benefit Change in Circumstances, previously discussed as part of the Quarter 2 Performance Report, presented to O&SC at its meeting on 17 January 2017. This meeting would give Members the opportunity to discuss this matter in more detail and seek clarification on any concerns from the Officers in attendance.

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DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were put forward.

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PROCESSING TIMES FOR BENEFIT CHANGE IN CIRCUMSTANCES (TO FOLLOW)

RECEIVED an update from Sally Sanders, Head of Financial Assessment.

NOTED:

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- (i) The performance for processing times for Benefit Change in Circumstances (average number of days) is green and progressing well;
- (ii) The target to process benefit changes in circumstances is set nationally at an average of 7 days. The number of days for 2016/17 as at 22/2/17 is 6.66 days
- (iii) This represents 91,757 changes being processed from 1/4/16 to 22/2/17 of which
 - 71,896 (78.35%) took 7 days or less to process, the quickest being 1 day.
 - 19,861 (21.65%) took more than 7 days to process, the longest being 135 days.
- (iv) Possible reasons for the delays include:
 - Evidence of change not being provided at the time;
 - Evidence of the change being requested late
 - After evidence is received for the change reported, discrepancies are found that need further investigation.
- (v) Potential improvements to the % age taking longer than 7 days to process include:
 - Change in circs part of benefits is still to go live on Enfield Connected. In future when a change is reported on Enfield Connected the system will automatically ask for the evidence required if applicable, cutting down the time taken in asking for the evidence. Members were advised however that this part of the Enfield Connected system was in the very early stages and testing would commence in mid-April. It would go live only when there was 100% confidence that the product is working efficiently and correctly;
 - The amount of evidence being asked for is also being reviewed and where information can be sought elsewhere this evidence will no longer be asked for. This is also part of the changes to go live on Enfield Connected;
 - HMRC changes during 2017/18 will provide earnings and information changes online for Housing Benefit claimants, ensuring earnings information is provided and processed quicker.

The following questions/issues were then raised:

- Q. If 22% of cases are taking more than 7 days, is there an average/medium spread time wise?
- A. This could be anything between 8 days and 135 days. This would have to be looked into further to come up with an average time scale spread.
Action: Sally Sanders
- Q. How does the process work from beginning to end?
- A. Customers are provided with the time limits in which to provide the required evidence and information. This is usually a two week period. Further contact is then made to prompt the customer again for the

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requested evidence. If after this nothing is still received then the case is closed.

- Q Information provided by the Citizen Advice Bureau (CAB) states that the biggest cause for concern is online applications. Why is this?
- A. The online system CAB refer to is not unique to Enfield. The method of application is always the greatest concern.
- Q. Figures were provided from a Government Website in relation to the number of days for the turn-around of Change of Circumstances cases across the London Boroughs. This showed Enfield as 19th out of 32 London Boroughs. Does this raise cause for concern?
- A The figures referred to are last year's figures. Enfield's figures for this year are much improved. It should also be remembered that when looking at the top line figures the complexity of the caseloads is not always clear, as Enfield do not have a cohort of households that are easy to administer. Enfield has an extremely high number of working households which, although positive in itself, presents a lot of challenges to the Authority due to fluctuating circumstances, for example, zero hour contracts, change in income real time information from the Inland Revenue etc.
- Q. Are library staff trained to help people fill in the required forms/paperwork?
- A. The offers in libraries can differ from branch to branch. Some of the libraries are run by volunteers therefore this support is not always available. Research has shown that the main places people go to for assistance is the Civic Centre Reception and John Wilkes House. We are however looking again at the offer in libraries.
- Q. Can we look at what our new hub libraries offers are in relation to this issue as they should be One Stop Shops, therefore equipped to offer the necessary support.
- A. As we are now in the process of looking at the library offers it would be most helpful to have a bit of a challenge around this from O&SC to ensure that we get the offer right. Edmonton Green library will be the first to have a Customer Service Reception, with a customer service offer built into the design.
- Q. How does the process work bearing in mind the number of people now on zero hour contracts? It must prove very time consuming trying to keep on top of this.
- A. Benefits regulations are very out of date, especially given the introduction and increase in zero hour contracts. The regulations have not unfortunately caught up with the present day changes.
- Q. No system or person can cope with these types of fluctuations. Why can't it be done like the Inland Revenue Tax Credits where it is looked at once a year and any discrepancies are then dealt with at the end of that period?

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- A. The Government has agreed that the current process does not work, hence why it has introduced Universal Credits. In November this year Enfield will become a Universal Credit Borough but it will take years to wean everything off of the old system. In the meantime a whole review is taking place on the sort of evidence that is asked for to ensure that information and requests are not be duplicated, therefore delaying the process.
- Q. Do we advertise in the Our Enfield magazine, offering information about how to advise the Council on changes to circumstances etc?
- A. This has been done in the past and we will look into advertising in Our Enfield again in the very near future.

Action: Sally McTernan

- Q. Are we learning anything from Boroughs who have already rolled out to Universal Credits?
- A. A visit will be made to Croydon on the 6th April 2017 to see what impact the introduction of Universal Credits is having.

In conclusion Sally McTernan said that this had been a genuinely useful exercise to look at information below the top line figures and therefore challenge ourselves.

Overview & Scrutiny Committee noted the update and Sally McTernan and Sally Sanders were thanked for presenting it.

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OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY WORKSTREAM 2017/18

Final workstream meetings for 2016/17 were now taking place. Committee Members were therefore invited to consider new workstreams for the next Municipal Year, 2017/18.

Members were provided with a list of potential workstreams, taken from headline topic/subjects that had been looked at by other Boroughs as part of their Scrutiny process. This list was by no means exhaustive and Members were encouraged to give some further thought to this matter and advised to email Andy Ellis, Governance & Scrutiny Officer with any questions or suggestions for future workstreams.

The object was to then finalise and agree the 2017/18 workstreams at the next business meeting on 27 April 2017.

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AGENDA PLANNING AND WORK PROGRAMME

NOTED the following agenda items for the O&SC business meeting on 27 April 2017:

- Adoption Regionalisation

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- HR Issues – How do we recruit and support people with disabilities and mental health issues
- Care Act/Better Care Fund (including delayed transfers of care)
- Town Centres & Inward Investments
- Further discussions on the proposed Workstreams for 2017/18

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MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 23 FEBRUARY 2017

AGREED the minutes of the meeting held on 23 February 2017

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DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

NOTED the dates of future meetings:

Provisional Call-Ins:

Wednesday 12 April 2017

Business meetings of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee will be held on:

Thursday 27 April 2017