

Title of Report:	The impact of welfare reform in West Berkshire
Report to be considered by:	Overview & Scrutiny Management Commission
Date of Meeting:	20 May 2014

Purpose of Report: To identify recommendations for consideration by the Executive.

Recommended Action: To agree further scrutiny activity and recommendations for onward consideration by the Executive.

Key background documentation: Minute 80 from the meeting of 25 February 2014.

Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission Chairman	
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Executive Report

1. Introduction

- 1.1 At its meeting of 25 February 2014 the Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission considered an item outlining the local impact of the government's changes to the welfare system.
- 1.2 The Commission resolved that the Chairman (Councillor Brian Bedwell) would work with Councillor Tony Vickers to identify recommendations for the Executive and future Scrutiny activity.
- 1.3 This report sets out a number of proposals for the Commission's consideration as activity within its own work programme or for onward recommendation to the Executive.

2. Proposals

- 2.1 The suggestions below are proposed for submission to the Executive.
 - (1) The Head of Finance should make arrangements for any monies allocated for Discretionary Housing Payments remaining unspent at year end to be carried forward to subsequent years.
 - (2) The Housing Strategy and Operations Manager should amend the Policy for Discretionary Housing Payments to allow the period for awards to extend past the existing annual 31 March cut off.
 - (3) The extent to which the Housing Strategy and Operations Manager has been able to encourage all Registered Social Landlords in West Berkshire to make full and effective use of the 'Homeswappers' website.
 - (4) The extent to which the Housing Strategy and Operations Manager has been able encourage Registered Social Landlords to advise, or remind, their tenants that it is permissible for their spare rooms to be sub-let.
 - (5) The Head of Finance should investigate the feasibility of Registered Social Landlords being able to leverage the Council's borrowing potential with the Public Works Loan Board to secure funding for the development of social housing.
 - (6) The Head of Customer Services should establish a working group to identify and implement actions that will mitigate the potentially negative effects of the welfare change programme on social housing tenants.

Membership of the group might include representation from Sovereign South+West, the Housing Strategy and Operations Manager, the Client Financial Services Manager and the Economic Development Officer.

Initiatives to be considered would include the provision of assistance in finding employment; help with the organisation and logistics of

downsizing; and support accessing online claims and other information associated with Universal Credit.

- (7) The Scrutiny and Partnerships Manager should request that the Department of Works and Pensions in its introduction of the Universal Credit:
 - (a) remove the obstacles to the sharing of personal data with local authorities and Registered Social Landlords
 - (b) ensure that the provision of advice and guidance for those affected is appropriately funded and supported.

2.2 In addition to the recommendations to the Executive, it is proposed that the local impact of the welfare changes be considered again by the Commission at its meeting of 16 September 2014 with a focus on

- (1) A report from the Head of Customer Services on any relational or causal link between
 - (a) rates of employment
 - (b) the number of summonses for non-payment of Council Tax
 - (c) the number claimants of Council Tax Support.
- (2) Performance information from the Department for Work and Pensions about the time taken to process new and amended benefit applications (Scrutiny and Partnerships Manager to obtain).
- (3) Performance monitoring data from Sovereign South + West on the number of evictions taking place in West Berkshire and, if held, any comparator data (Scrutiny and Partnerships Manager to obtain).

3. Recommendation

3.1 It is recommended that the Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission agrees the action to be taken following the consideration of the welfare changes item on 25 February 2014.

Appendices

There are no appendices to this report.