

17 July, 2013.

LLANELLI RURAL COUNCIL

Minute Nos: 146 – 151

At a Meeting of the **POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE** of the Llanelli Rural Council held at the Council Chamber, Vauxhall Buildings, Vauxhall, Llanelli, on Wednesday, 17 July, 2013 at 4.45 p.m.

Present: Cllr. M. V. Davies (Chairman)

Cllrs.

L. J. Butler	H. J. Evans
D. M. Cundy	R. E. Evans
S. L. Davies	A. G. Morgan
S. M. Donoghue	A. J. Rogers
W. V. Thomas	

146. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs. L. A. Beer (Cllr. W. V. Thomas deputising), T. Devichand (Cllr. S. L. Davies deputising), M. L. Evans, T. J. Jones (Cllr. R. E. Evans deputising) and C. A. Rees.

147. MEMBERS' DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made.

148. GOVERNMENT WELFARE REFORMS

Further to Minute No. 63, the Chairman welcomed Mr Chris Clark, Employer and Partnership Manager, Department for Work and Pensions, to the meeting. Mr Clark had kindly agreed to provide the Council with a presentation on the suite of welfare reforms brought about by The Welfare Reform Act 2012.

Mr Clark began his presentation by stating the Act introduced the most fundamental reforms to the social security system for 60 years. The aim being a simpler, fairer benefits system to ensure work pays. Money needed to be targeted more effectively to ensure support continued to be available to those who needed it most. Employment must be an aspiration for everyone who was able to work. Mr Clark explained that national finances needed to be put on a more sustainable footing. The reforms intended to ensure people were always better off in work than on benefits and would provide unconditional support for disabled people that needed it. The reforms aimed to prepare the long term unemployed for the world of work whilst ensuring people received a fairer pension and were encouraged to save for retirement. Furthermore, support would be provided for separating families.

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In terms of changes, Members were informed that 'Universal Credit' was being introduced from October 2013 with it being phased in and fully implemented by 2017. It replaced six main benefits, creating a simpler, single monthly payment for people in work or out of work. Claimants would be able to apply for their benefit online. However, telephone and other support services would be available if needed. As claimants earned more money, financial support would be withdrawn at a slower rate than was the case under the current system. A single payment would be made to a household rather than an individual. However, in exceptional circumstances payments could be split within the household, some examples of which Mr Clark illustrated to Members. Mr Clark recognised the challenges of introducing a monthly payment as currently the Job Seekers Allowance was paid fortnightly and so a lot of work would be needed to help prepare people to manage budgets in a different way to the present arrangements.

Personal Independence Payment (PIP) had now replaced Disability Living Allowance for working age claimants (16 – 64 years old). The new benefit included an assessment of individual needs and aimed to ensure financial support was targeted at those who faced the greatest challenges to living independently. Mr Clark commented that Universal Credit would remove the financial risks for disabled people moving back into employment. It would help people with fluctuating conditions who wanted to work when their condition allowed, or for those who could only work limited hours because of their condition. Mr Clark confirmed Access to Work support was being made more widely available and funding was being increased to deliver enhanced outcomes for disabled people.

Mr Clark then went on to speak about changes to housing benefit support. From April 2013 all tenants renting from a local authority, housing association or other registered social landlord would receive housing support based on household size. This allowed for one bedroom for each person or couple living as part of the household. Both people in a couple must be of working age to be affected. Two children under 16 of the same gender would be expected to share a room, as would two children under ten regardless of gender. Where a property was deemed under occupied the eligible rent under Housing Benefit would be reduced by 14 percent for one room and 25 percent if under occupied by two rooms or more. This change was more commonly known as the bedroom tax.

At this juncture, Cllr. S. L. Davies left the meeting.

Mr Clark then spoke about the benefit cap introduced on 15 April, 2013. The cap was introduced on the total amount of benefit that working age claimants could receive. The cap was based on average earnings (after tax and national insurance) of working families. This equated to £500 a week for couples (with or without children) and single parent households and £350 a week for single adults. However, certain households would be exempt from the benefit cap. Mr Clark confirmed that community care grants and crisis loans were abolished on 1 April, 2013. The Welsh Government was free to deliver its own local arrangements for assistance for people facing a crisis or short term unavoidable need. This support would now be delivered under the Discretionary Assistance Fund. Payments from the fund would be administered by Northgate (a private partner contracted to the Welsh Government).

Mr Clark then referred to the Government's 'employment offer'. Significant changes had been made to the welfare-to-work programmes available to Jobcentre Plus claimants. Changes included Universal Jobmatch which was an online job posting and matching service available to all jobseekers, not just those claiming benefit. Youth Contract was a £1 billion

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programme designed to get more young people into meaningful employment, training or work experience whereas Work Programme offered greater freedom to tailor support to the needs of the individual claimants. Furthermore, Work Choice was a specialist disability employment programme which was launched in October 2010. Work Choice provided tailored support to help disabled people who faced the most complex barriers to employment find and stay in work.

During and after Mr Clark's presentation, Members posed a range of questions and concerns covering the following areas:

- the change from fortnightly to monthly payments and how the likes of the Job Centre was going to help people manage budgets;
- the level of advice and advisors available in the community especially in communities first cluster areas;
- anecdotal experiences of rigorous claimant assessments being carried out and not always performed by an appropriate professional assessor, e.g. mental illness assessed by a physio therapist. This caused widespread panic and worry within the community;
- the general implementation of the whole package of reforms and the impact on IT, data systems and records;
- monthly payments paid in arrears and the experience of pilot areas such as Torfaen, South Wales where people's debt accumulated exponentially with housing benefit being paid directly into the claimant's bank accounts. Clawing back rent arrears was proving difficult and Members enquired what support would the Department for Work and Pensions offer County Councils when picking up the tab;
- the percentage of real job opportunities for disabled people and whether special consideration had been given to supporting former Remploy employees;
- ploys adopted to encourage online registration and enquiries and general internet access for certain disadvantage people . Also broadband did not cover all of Wales; and
- the benefits cap and the impact on the unemployed.

Mr Clark by way of response addressed most, if not all of the concerns and attempted to provide reassurance to Members over the transitional arrangements. To that end, Mr Clark kindly agreed to return to the Council to provide Members with an update on the implementation of the reforms and to share experience. He suggested he return in three months time and this was welcomed by Members. The Chairman thanked Mr Clark for his presentation and for offering to revisit the Council. Thereupon Mr Clark withdrew from the meeting.

149. LOCAL GOVERNMENT (WALES) MEASURE 2011 PART 7: COMMUNITIES AND COMMUNITY COUNCILS

Members considered a consultation document from the Welsh Government in respect of new guidance under Part 7 of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 concerning communities and community councils.

The guidance provided an explanation of the powers and requirement of the Measure and what they mean to community and town councils and where appropriate, to principal councils.

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Cllr. R. E. Evans left the meeting.

Following discussion, it was

RESOLVED that the guidance document be welcomed and generally supported.

Arising out of discussion of 'Chapter 4 Appointment of Community Youth Representatives, it was

FURTHER RESOLVED that the Clerk prepares a report for a future meeting on the subject of Community Youth Representatives possibly serving on the Council.

150. PUBLIC BODIES (ADMISSION TO MEETINGS) ACT, 1960

RESOLVED that in view of the confidential nature of the business to be transacted, the following matter be considered in private and that the power of exclusion of the public under Section 1(2) of the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act, 1960 be exercised.

151. STAFFING MATTERS

Members considered the report of the Deputy Clerk (Administration) informing of staffing matters.

RESOLVED that the report referenced 7:2013 be accepted.

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The meeting concluded at 6.10 p.m.

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The afore-mentioned Minutes were declared to be a true record of the proceedings and signed by the Chairman presiding thereat and were, on 10 September, 2013, adopted by the Council.