

AUDITOR GENERAL FOR WALES REPORT ON IMPACT OF WELFARE REFORM - FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL PROGRESS AGAINST RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION	FLINTSHIRE POSITION	FURTHER COMMENT
<p>1. Improve strategic planning and better co-ordinate activity to tackle the impact of welfare reform on social-housing tenants by ensuring comprehensive action plans are in place that cover the work of all relevant council departments, housing associations and the work of external stakeholders.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FCC strategically assessed the inherent risks from the provisions within the Welfare Reform Act 2012, identifying the provisions that would require effective and proactive management in order to mitigate negative impacts from falling upon residents, service providers, businesses and the Council. To oversee the development of comprehensive welfare reform mitigating action plans and the implementation of the operational activities a Welfare Reform Board, chaired by the Leader of the Council and with representation from key stakeholders, was established. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The next phase of welfare reforms aim to reduce expenditure on working age benefits by £12 billion pa from 2016. The negative impacts of the welfare benefit changes, required to achieve this level of savings, upon social housing tenants and their landlords will be analysed and appropriate mitigating actions implemented. The introduction of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 and the new person centred homeless prevention service will only be attained through effective cooperation between FCC and Registered Social Landlords.
<p>2. Improve governance and accountability for welfare reform by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> appointing member and officer leads to take responsibility for strategic leadership on welfare reform and be accountable for performance; <p>and</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ensuring members receive adequate training and regular briefings on welfare reform to be able to challenge and scrutinise performance and decisions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Following the implementation of the operational activities, the Welfare Reform Board stood down. However, the following measures are in place to report on the welfare reforms and the operational activities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Council Members - reports to Cabinet/ Scrutiny and briefing sessions being held as appropriate. II. Partner organisations, - regular reports to the Local Services Board, Tackling Poverty Partnership, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Due to the links between the welfare reforms and the tackling poverty agenda's, consideration could be given to the FCC 'Anti-Poverty Champions' taking on the remit of 'Welfare Reform leads'.

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<p>3. Ensure effective management of performance on welfare reform by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • setting appropriate measures to enable members, officers and the public to judge progress in delivering actions; • ensuring performance information covers the work of all relevant agencies and especially housing associations; and • establishing measures to judge the wider impact of welfare reform. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managing the on-going impact of the welfare reforms is one of the three workstreams of the Health, Wellbeing and Independence priority of the Single Integrated Plan within Flintshire • A suite of welfare reform performance measures has been established within the Flintshire Single Integrated Plan and FCC Improvement Plan – used to monitor performance across a range of mitigation activities and their impact upon tackling/preventing poverty. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welfare reform related performance measures within the Flintshire Single Integrated Plan and FCC Improvement Plan have been revised to ensure they are appropriate for challenges to be faced in 2015/16.
<p>4. Strengthen how welfare-reform risks are managed by creating a single corporate-level approach that co-ordinates activity across the council and the work of others to provide adequate assurance that all the necessary and appropriate actions to mitigate risk are taking place.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flintshire's Tackling Poverty Partnership is developing a strategic overview of welfare reform mitigating activities to ensure a coordinated approach amongst key stakeholders that maximises effective use of resources and promotes optimum outcomes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To help working age tenants, who currently receive Housing Benefit, to effectively prepare for the changes and challenges that being a UC claimant will pose for them Social Housing and advice/support providers will need to develop close working relationships.
<p>5. Improve engagement with tenants affected by the removal of the spare-room subsidy through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the provision of regular advice and information on the options open to them to address the financial impact of the change in their circumstances; • the promotion of the 'Your benefits are changing' helpline; and • the provision of support to tenants specifically 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FCC Welfare Reform Response Team led the positive work to assist FCC tenants to identify and implement solutions in order to manage the problems caused by the reduction in their HB award. The Welfare Reform Response Team is now working with applicants applying for a discretionary housing payments to help them to help themselves to reduce their dependency upon such payments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social housing providers will need to maintain their proactive engagement and support programmes with working age tenants in order to prepare them for the future changes to their social security entitlements, generated by the next phase of welfare reforms which aims to cut expenditure on working age benefits by £12 billion pa from 2016.

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affected by the removal of the spare-room subsidy to participate in regional/national employment schemes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The 'Empowering Flintshire's Front Line Project' is ensuring that a wider audience of practitioners develop the knowledge, skills and confidence to be able to advise and support their residents impacted by the welfare reforms on a range of social welfare issues. 	
6. Establish a set of minimum service standards on lettings and transfers to ensure that tenants affected by the removal of the spare-room subsidy receive a minimum standard of service from their landlord.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The implementation of a Common Housing Register in Flintshire in April 2015 and the ongoing development of the Single Access Route to Housing Project (SARTH) across the North East Wales sub region will enable best practice to be incorporated across social landlords. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The introduction of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 and the new person centred homeless prevention service will only be attained through effective cooperation between FCC and Registered Social Landlords.
<p>7. Improve management, access to and use of Discretionary Housing Payments by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> establishing a clear policy or guide that is available in hard copy and online to the public that sets out the council's policy and arrangements for administering Discretionary Housing Payments; clearly defining eligible and non-eligible housing costs covered by Discretionary Housing Payments in application forms, policy documentation and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FCC has an established discretionary housing payment policy (agreed by Members) covering all the recommended areas. The policy is accessible to applicants and representatives' organisations in hard copy and online. FCC continues to proactively work with discretionary housing payment claimants to assist some to reduce their dependency on DHP, whilst identifying those who will be in need of this type of support for a considerable period of time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The impact for social housing tenants of the reduction in the level of the discretionary housing payment grant, provided to FCC by the Department for Work and Pensions for 2015/16, and the continuation of the spare room subsidy and Universal Credit in their current formats will be closely monitored.

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applicant guidance leaflets; • clearly setting out the maximum/minimum length of time that such payments will be provided;		
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