

Cabinet Meeting		Agenda Item No. 13
Meeting Date	11 March 2015	
Report Title	Scrutiny Committee recommendations on Welfare Reform Update	
Cabinet Member	Cllr John Wright, Cabinet Member for Housing	
SMT Lead		
Head of Service	Amber Christou – Head of Housing	
Key Decision	No	
Classification	Open	
Forward Plan	N/A	
Recommendations	1. Cabinet is asked to note the Scrutiny Committee recommendation as attached in Appendix I; a full response will be prepared for the meeting on 15 April 2015.	

1 Purpose of Report and Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Scrutiny Committee received an update on Welfare Reform at their meeting on 11 February 2015. The Scrutiny Committee made a recommendation which is attached as Appendix I.

2 Background

- 2.1 The Minutes of the Scrutiny Committee's discussion is set out below for completeness (Minute No. 488/02/15 refers):

The Chairman welcomed the Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager and the Cabinet Member for Finance to the meeting to provide an update on welfare reform.

The Cabinet Member for Finance praised the Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager for her hard work on implementing the new welfare reform proposals. He welcomed the proposal for a Job Centre Plus presence in Swale House and at Sheerness Gateway, and the training of benefits staff to provide budgeting advice.

The Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager referred Members to the tabled report which provided an update on Discretionary Housing Payments and Universal Credit. In addition to the note she advised that the initial phase of Universal Credit would be for single people who were likely to be non-dependents. Benefits officers would be trained to provide budget advice but specifically not debt advice.

In response to a question, the Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager confirmed that the consultation on Discretionary Housing Payments had been promoted through the Council's website, Facebook, Twitter, press releases and on letters sent to landlords.

A Member raised concern that a lack of flexibility restricted people from moving to alternative accommodation even when there was a demonstrable need. Councillor Mike Henderson proposed the following motion: "That our Housing Department discusses with Amicus Horizon and other Housing Associations to allow greater flexibility where it will help to provide extra or smaller properties". This was seconded and upon being put to the vote was agreed.

A Member asked how many claimants had internet access and could the Benefits Team write out to all claimants to advise them of the consultation.

The Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager advised that no information was available on how many claimants had internet access and advised that it was not viable to write out to each claimant separately due to the cost involved. However, a note would be added to the end-of-year letters sent out in March.

A Member asked what support had been offered by Housing Associations to advertise the consultation. The Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager confirmed that the Housing Associations had been advised and they had offered to include information on the consultation in their newsletters to residents, which the Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager confirmed would be followed up.

- Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager

In response to questions regarding Universal Credit, the Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager explained that the first phase was aimed at those claimants who were fit for work. The process would be reviewed again after the General Election but the principle was to encourage people into work. She explained that Swale, Maidstone and Ashford had been chosen for the first phase in Kent as the Councils had good working relationships with the Job Centre Plus for their area. The decision not to pay Universal Credit into Post Office accounts had been taken by the Department of Work and Pensions.

A Member considered that there was a lack of information available to residents on the housing register and the process for bidding for properties; in particular, can residents be moved down the priority list once bidding had closed, and what happened after the bidding process has completed. The Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager undertook to take these comments back to the Head of Housing for consideration.

- Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager

The Chairman thanked the Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager and Cabinet Member for Finance for attending the meeting.

RESOLVED:

(1) The Scrutiny Committee proposes to Cabinet that our Housing Department discusses with Amicus Horizon and other Housing Associations to allow greater flexibility where it will help to provide extra or smaller properties.

3 Proposals

3.1 Cabinet is asked to note the Scrutiny Committee recommendation as attached in Appendix I; a full response will be prepared for the meeting on 15 April 2015.

4 Alternative Options

None.

5 Consultation Undertaken or Proposed

N/A

6 Implications

6.1 None identified at this stage.

7 Appendices

7.1 The following documents are to be published with this report and form part of the report:

- Appendix I: Scrutiny Committee Recommendation

8 Background Papers

None.

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Scrutiny Committee Recommendation on Welfare Reform Review

Policy Overview Committee Recommendations	Cabinet Response	Portfolio Holders	Lead Officer
<p>R1:</p> <p>The Scrutiny Committee proposes to Cabinet that our Housing Department discusses with Amicus Horizon and other Housing Associations to allow greater flexibility where it will help to provide extra or smaller properties.</p>		<p>Councillor John Wright Cabinet Member for Housing</p>	<p>Amber Christou, Head of Housing</p>