

THREE RIVERS DISTRICT COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **Local Strategic Partnership Board** held in the Penn Chamber, Three Rivers House, Rickmansworth, on Wednesday 12 October 2016 from 10am to 11.34am.

Present:	Steven Halls (Chairman)	Three Rivers District Council
	Tina Barnard	Watford Community Housing Trust
	Deirdre Dent	Herts Constabulary
	Cllr Stephen Giles-Medhurst	Three Rivers District Council
	Councillor Teresa Heritage	Herts County Council
	Jon Horastead	Herts Fire and Rescue Service
	Marion Ingram	Herts County Council
	Elspeth Mackenzie (EM)	Thrive Homes
	Chris Pearson	West Herts College
	Marion Seneschall	Three Rivers CAB

In attendance:

Jo Barrett	Thrive Homes
Anne Bijum (AB)	Thrive Homes
Sarah Hill	Herts Valleys CCG
Concetta Kyriakou (CK)	Job Centre Plus
Gary Vaux (GV)	Herts County Council
Cllr Angela Killick	Three Rivers District Council
Cllr Roger Seabourne	Three Rivers District Council
Andy Stovold (AST)	Three Rivers District Council
Karl Stonebank	Three Rivers District Council
Mike Simpson	Three Rivers District Council

Also in attendance were four interested parties from partner agencies.

Apologies for absence were received from Sue Coster (Job Centre Plus) and Cllr Sara Bedford.

LSP11/16 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 08 June 2016 were agreed by the Board and signed by the Chairman.

LSP12/16 MATTERS ARISING NOT ON THE AGENDA

There were no matters arising.

LSP13/16 BENEFIT REFORM UPDATE

(i) The Board received a presentation from Gary Vaux (GV) of the Money Advice Unit at Hertfordshire County Council.

He spoke about the impact of welfare reform for Social and Affordable Housing and the changes to the Benefit Cap which currently stood at £26,000 per annum and which would, from November 2016, reduce to £23,000 within London and £20,000 outside London. Across the County, 2,139 households were due to be capped, 440 of them being in Watford and Three Rivers. It was emphasised that the aim of the changes was to effect behavioural change by encouraging people to return to work, although the benefit included any accommodation allowance and the high price of renting property in Three Rivers would make it almost impossible for such recipients to obtain accommodation.

GV explained the forthcoming changes to Local Housing Allowance (LHA) in the social sector, and explained the disparate responses of Social and Private landlords, in which the former were expected to work with tenants to offer support, but it was likely the latter would decline to take on benefit claimants due to the increased risk. In addition, he spoke of the changes in tax credit arrangements which, from 1 April 2017, would limit payments to the first two children, although exceptions would apply.

GV told the Board that housing benefit was to be removed for individuals aged 18-21, with exceptions, and spoke of the introduction of Universal Credit which would ultimately replace all other payments. Claims for Universal Credit would be online, requiring claimants to possess digital skills.

The roll-out of the full Universal Credit scheme would take place nationally from July 2019 and was due to be completed by March 2022.

Concetta Kyriakou (CK) said that it was possible for claimants of Universal Credit to receive an upfront sum and a repayment schedule if they required financial assistance, but GV expressed doubt that such an advance would be used to pay rent, and claimants would be more likely to use the money to purchase food.

(ii) The scheduled presentation by Jane Walker, Benefits Manager at Watford and Three Rivers Shared Revenues did not take place due to the absence of the speaker, despite a number of reminders.

(iii) CK from Watford Job Centre said a significant number of claimants of Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) suffered from mental health problems, and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) was focused on supporting such individuals. She added that Watford Job Centre had organised employer workshops where local employers were encouraged to engage with individuals on Jobseekers' allowance, and the agency supported work experience opportunities on a voluntary basis.

CK informed the Board that, unlike the Jobseekers' Allowance, Universal Credit did not feature a 16-hours employment limit beyond which claimants were not paid, and the new arrangement was welcomed both by claimants and employers. Universal Credit had been available in Three Rivers since November 2015.

(iii) Marion Seneschall of Three Rivers CAB made a presentation to the group concerning the current workload of the bureau in relation to benefits and housing, and the consequences of debt accrual. She said that Council Tax was the third largest cause of debt behind rent and credit/store cards, and in the current financial climate it was very difficult for clients who, like the CAB, were under a great deal of pressure.

Moving away from the area to where rents were cheaper was not usually a practical solution for individuals as they generally had family or other ties to the locality, and another major problem for the agency was non-engagement by clients, many of whom could otherwise be offered assistance.

The Chairman asked the Board whether anyone saw a solution. It was said that housing providers faced a big challenge as they did not have sufficient time to engage with clients. Greater discussion with agency partners would be beneficial and would result in identifying solutions sooner.

EM said that the changes to benefit payments meant that housing providers now had to undertake more in-depth financial assessments of potential customers, resulting in tension between the provider and the local authority when customers were declined.

TH said she had recently attended a Mental Health ASGM at which it was agreed that Housing Associations, the DWP and other partners would work more collaboratively.

Cllr Giles-Medhurst said he recently learnt of several employment opportunities at The Grove hotel which they were struggling to fill, but accepted that it was possible the employer was not offering a realistic wage.

He also expressed concern that clients without internet access and Smart phones would be disadvantaged in terms of claiming Universal Credit. CK said that the Job Centre offered a telephone claim service and would continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

GV said that digital access for Universal Credit was a big issue, not just for the initial claim but also subsequent processes and communication with the DWP. It was accepted that the using of public libraries was not a practical solution to the problem long-term, and access to broadband and equipment would also be required, and the introduction of Universal Credit across all groups would be more difficult when less computer-literate claimants were involved.

The Chairman asked if there was any reason why multi-partnership meetings could not take place, to which EM replied that it would be possible, but would need to be on a local level and representative in terms of housing providers and other agencies, and political input would be necessary.

RESOLVED:-

That the contents of the presentations were noted and the establishment or continuation of multi-partnership meetings welcomed.

LSP14/16 HOUSING AND PLANNING ACT UPDATE

(i) The Board received a presentation from Jo Barrett and Anne Bijum of Thrive Homes about the implications for Housing Providers following the introduction of the Housing and Planning Act and the Welfare Reform Act.

Thrive Homes had adopted the 'Pay to Stay' / High Income Social Tenants (HISTs) programme, and was engaged in schemes to encourage the purchase of starter homes, capped at £250,000 outside London and for which restrictions on onward sale applied. The Board also heard about the positive impact of deregulation in the sector with the emphasis on providing value for money, although the introduction of the Welfare Reform Act would apply further pressure both to claimants and housing providers. AB said a big problem was that many claimants who were classified as being available to work were, in fact, not.

(ii) Tina Barnard of Watford Community Housing Trust made a presentation on the impact of benefit reform on housing provision, and current grant-funding for new

homes. TB said that the picture so far was gloomy, and she wanted to put a more positive slant on the situation. She said that the May Government had signalled a different approach would be taken with regard to housing provision, and the new Minister for Housing had indicated a change of policy towards home ownership. The Government's autumn statement in November would be key.

TB told the Board that WCHT would not be introducing 'Pay to Stay' and that for them the principal issue was to provide affordable housing.

In response to a question about how WCHT was dealing with the present situation, TB said the provider was bullish about the need to deliver new homes and sees the current challenge as an opportunity to do things differently, and was collaborating with Mears Homes to supply new homes for outright sale.

Cllr Giles-Medhurst said that while rents go up, benefits do not, and asked about service charges, adding that in his ward some landlords had increased them by 50%.

EM said that Thrive Homes did not increase service charges, and that a housing provider did much more than supply bricks and mortar, and other services were under more pressure too.

RESOLVED:-

That the contents of the presentations were noted.

LSP15/16 DOMESTIC ABUSE CASEWORKER

AST explained that the CSP had a £5,500 shortfall in funding for the Domestic Abuse Caseworker, and asked the Board to support a bid to the office of the Police and Crime Commissioner to maintain the service for a further three years.

RESOLVED:-

That the bid was agreed

ITEMS FOR INFORMATION

LSP16/16 LSP FUNDED PROJECT PERFORMANCE UPDATE

The Board received an update on the performance of the LSP funded project.

RESOLVED:-

That the performance update be noted.

LSP17/16 WORKPLAN 2016-17

AST asked that the Workplan 2016-17 be presented at the next meeting of the Board, in which each agency would make a five minute presentation on key issues.

The Workplan would be discussed further next summer when a new strategy would be prepared for 2018.

RESOLVED:-

That the proposal be agreed.

LSP18/16 AOB

There was no other business.

DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS:

8 March 2017 at 10am

CHAIRMAN