

## **Portfolio Holder Report – Council 24 July 2013**

**By Cllr Jackie Branson – Governance and Logistics**

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### **Legal, Democratic and Electoral**

The Constitution has been adopted and will be placed on the Councils web site shortly ensuring that the links make it easier to access. Staff training on the changes will be taking place during September and October.

### **Audit & Governance**

The new internal audit arrangements continue to work well. Our new Chief Internal Auditor, Neil Pitman, introduced himself to the Joint Governance Committee on 29 May and told them about the new service.

### **Revenues and Benefits**

#### **Welfare Reform**

##### **Size criteria for social sector Housing Benefit awards (Bedroom tax)**

These changes, which the national press are calling the “bedroom tax”, have now been fully implemented. Figures in June showed that 477 households had a 14% reduction in Benefit because of 1 excess bedroom and 100 households had a 25% reduction because of 2 or more excess bedrooms. The average deduction amounted to £16.73 per week.

##### **Benefit Cap**

The introduction of a cap on the total amount of benefit that working age people can receive. The cap will be set at £500 per week for out of work couples and lone parents and £350 per week for single out of work adults. The cap will not affect working families, pensioners and those on disability benefits. The cap will be applied as a deduction from the households Housing Benefit payments.

The Government have now confirmed details of how these changes will be implemented. For Havant Borough Council implementation commences on 15 July 2013 and should be complete by 16 August 2013. The Department for Work & Pensions will control the process which will be phased over this five week period. Each week we will be sent details of a number of the households affected. We will then be responsible for applying the deduction to the Housing Benefit entitlement and advising the claimant of their revised Housing Benefit payments.

The latest estimates show that 72 households are likely to be affected by the cap with an average reduction of £61.59 per week.

## Discretionary Housing Payments

The welfare reform changes have created a significant increase in the number of applications for Discretionary Housing Payments. The team dealt with 164 applications in the period March – June 2013 compared to 43 in the same period last year.

## Universal Credit

The first Universal Credit pathfinder was launched on 29 April 2013 when Ashton-under-Lyne job centre began accepting new claims for Universal Credit from single newly unemployed job-seekers. A second pathfinder commenced on 1 July 2013 in Wigan with a further two due to start on 29 July 2013 (Oldham and Warrington).

The progressive national roll-out is due to start from October 2013 and, on 10 July, the Government announced details of the next phase which will comprise three strands:

- six more Jobcentres will begin to take new claims to Universal Credit (Hammersmith, Rugby, Inverness, Harrogate, Bath and Shotton) following the approach taken in the pathfinders;
- At the same time, the other components of Universal Credit that will support the cultural transformation, such as the Claimant Commitment and enhanced jobsearch support will roll out across the country; and
- There will also be 10 in-work conditionality pilots and improved access to digital services will expand across the Jobcentre Plus network.

Further details will be outlined in the autumn with the roll-out due to be completed in the UK by 2017. On the basis of these plans, it seems unlikely that we will see any new claims to Universal Credit in the Borough before 2014 at the earliest.

## Facilities Management

### **Tree Sculpture**

Chain saw artist, Matthew Crabb, completed the artistic tree sculpture outside the Public Service Plaza, Civic Centre Road, Havant. Owing to a limb falling in the strong winds last year the tree was reduced to a stump for health and safety reasons. It was decided, at that point, that this should be carved into a work of art.

A planning condition also stipulated that some of the funding for the refurbishment must be used to commission a piece of art dedicated to the completion of the refurbishment project.