



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

PUBLICATION, DOCUMENT

Streamlining Welsh Benefits Steering Group meeting: 14 February 2024

Summary of the minutes of the meeting held on 14 February 2024.

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Attendees

Fran Targett (Chair), Independent
Amanda Main, Caerphilly CBC
Anna Friend, Flintshire County Council
Beatrice Orchard, The Trussell Trust
Claire Germain, Welsh Government
Helal Uddin, Ethnic Minorities & Youth Support Team
Joanna Goodwin, Centre for Digital Public Services
Karen McFarlane, Children in Wales
Lindsey Phillips, Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA)
Lisa Hayward, Welsh Local Government Association
Matthew Evans, Welsh Association of Revenue and Benefits Managers
Nigel Griffiths, Bridgend CBC
Nigel Oanea-Cram, The Trussell Trust
Rhian Davies, Disability Wales
Steffan Evans, The Bevan Foundation
Victoria Lloyd, Age Cymru

Facilitators

Paul Neave, Welsh Government
Mel James, Welsh Government
Sam Pidduck, Welsh Government

Apologies

Simon Hatch, Citizen's Advice Cymru

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Chairs welcome and introductions

The session started with brief introductions and the Chair's welcoming speech which set out the role of the steering group to maintain strategic oversight of the work to streamline Welsh Benefits and develop an implementation plan which will bring the Welsh Benefits Charter commitments to life.

This will drive better administration of Welsh benefits, which ensures that individuals can claim what they are entitled to and reduce the pressure on services that support people in making their applications.

Of utmost importance when developing actions is that the culture around Welsh Benefits is a positive and compassionate one and that any unintended consequences for individuals are considered prior to any actions being put forward for implementation.

Alongside the development of the implementation plan, the steering group will be responsible for designing the appropriate mechanisms and measures suitable for monitoring the impact of the implementation of the Charter.

Terms of reference

The steering group agreed to adopt the draft terms of reference. Members noted the terms of reference is a live document that might be subject to revision as the work of the group progresses.

Decision: Adopt terms of reference.

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Forward look: scope, aim, outcomes

Scope

Ultimately all the payments, grants and benefits that are devolved to Welsh Government are potential areas of focus. However, some schemes such as Student Finance Loans may not lend themselves to the work of the group as easily as others.

It was discussed that the high-level aim of the group, is to steer and advise on the best administration system that can be put in place within the parameters of the existing System. Ensuring the digital exclusion/inclusion consequences of any suggestions are fully considered.

The work to streamline the Welsh Benefits System should not be carried out in isolation and the steering group recognises the importance of maintaining good communication with the Department for Work and Pensions.

Whilst work begins to make rapid progress in the administration of the application process for the Welsh Benefits included in Phase One (Council Tax Reduction Scheme, Schools Essentials Grant, and free school meals), work will run concurrently that focuses on the longer-term actions required for a streamlined Welsh Benefits System.

Aim

To produce an implementation plan by Summer 2024.

Outcomes

It was agreed that a future meeting of the steering group will need to consider how to evaluate the extent to which progress is made.

The importance of outcome selection was noted, outcomes need to be appropriate and be able to be collected from early on and/or have comparative baseline figures.

Similarly, in assessing the take-up of Welsh Benefits, it was discussed that any outcome must take into account external factors that can influence demand for financial support.

It was noted that the attainment of an outcome should not be taken to mean that work in any given area is complete. It is important to ensure that outcomes are improved across all claimant groups, not just for the large majority. For example, it was shared how the scheme providing free bus passes for refugees is easily accessible for those from Ukraine but often not so much for those from other countries. Similar issues were mentioned regarding the free bus pass for disabled people.

Action point 1: Future meeting of the steering group to consider how best to evaluate progress.

Open discussion: proposed Workstreams and relevant issues

Digital/data

Due to the interrelatedness between the considerations relevant for digital and

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data, it was decided that a workstream should focus on them jointly.

It was agreed that this workstream should be renamed to design/data. This is to reflect the fact that proposed solutions should be accessible in both digital and non-digital formats. Proposals should be clear in their focus of improving the experience of service users and adherence to digital in/exclusion best practices.

In line with the above, it was suggested that the description of the Design/Data workstream should be reworked to reflect the change in name and enhanced focus on user needs.

Research

It was decided that the work around the evaluation of the Welsh Benefits Charter and actions of the steering group will sit primarily within the research workstream.

Strategic Communications

There was a discussion on whether in addition to managing stakeholder communications, this workstream could also focus on awareness raising and promotion.

It was raised that we need to be careful to set the parameters of the group so as not to encroach and duplicate work that is already going on within Welsh Government such as Income Maximisation work which incorporates a promotional campaign for all benefits including Welsh Benefits. All workstreams will need to align to other work within Welsh Government.

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Broader discussion

Furthermore, the following workstreams were confirmed i) Phase 1 (the streamlining of the administration of Council Tax Reduction Scheme, Schools Essentials Grant and free school meals), ii) eligibility and iii) learning and development for local authorities.

The need for some issues to be considered by 2 or more workstreams was discussed and the importance therefore of workstreams to be feeding back to the steering group was agreed.

Decision: Workstreams focusing on the following issues will be established:

- design/data
- research
- strategic communications
- phase 1
- learning and development
- eligibility

Proposed workstreams: leads, membership and priorities

During this section members of the steering group were asked to consider which workstreams they (or members of their organisations) could participate in.

Alongside this, members were asked to consider the key priorities for each workstream.

The possibility of accessing funding for the work of the steering group was

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raised. It was discussed that the first priority of the steering group is to identify and then propose ways to overcome existing barriers. Should some of these solutions require funding, then there will be the opportunity to put forward a case for it. Additionally, it was proposed that many changes will not require further funding just innovative thinking and new ways of working.

Action point 2: Members to consider what workstreams they would like to join and feed back to the Welsh Government facilitators by 23 February.

Action point 3: Members to consider what 2 initial priorities each of the workstreams should focus on and feed back to the Welsh Government facilitators by 23 February.

Arrangement for the next meeting

It was confirmed that the next meeting of the steering group will be held virtually in March, and in April the group will meet in person.

Any other business

No any other business was raised.

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