

NORTH LANARKSHIRE COUNCIL
REPORT

To: HOUSING & SOCIAL WORK SERVICES COMMITTEE		Subject: A SUMMARY REPORT OF WELFARE RIGHTS ACTIVITY 1 APRIL 2007 – 31 MARCH 2008
From: HEAD OF HOUSING & SOCIAL WORK RESOURCES		
Date: 20 AUGUST 2008	Ref: RP/JC	

1. Purpose of Report / Introduction

To advise Committee of the work undertaken and benefit income generated by the Housing and Social Work Welfare Rights Service in the financial year 2007/2008.

2. Background

- 2.1. Welfare Rights staff provide support and assistance to staff about the range of state benefits, and assist service users to claim all benefits to which they are entitled. The main thrust of all Welfare Rights activity is the maximisation of income for individuals, for the Council and for the community as a whole. This forms an integral part of the Council's Social Inclusion Strategy.
- 2.2. The complexity of the benefits system, the capacity for the review of assessments and decision making, and disincentives to claim benefits, resulting in low uptake, ensure that general and specialist Welfare Rights services are crucial to individuals and families dependent on benefits. Given the poverty indicators within North Lanarkshire, Social Work mobilises its resources to tackle poverty amongst service users and in the wider community.
- 2.3. Reception Services within the Social Work Service provide service users and members of the public with advice and assistance on a wide variety of benefit-related issues. A full benefits check is offered to new service users. Income maximisation also plays a vital role in longer term Social Work services such as Community Care, Children and Families, Justice Services, Mental Health and Addictions.
- 2.4. Services offered include:
 - completing claim forms and giving advice on the full range of social security benefits;
 - providing supportive evidence;
 - liaising with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), public utilities and housing authorities;
 - crisis intervention to prevent fuel disconnection, eviction, loss of benefit books, etc;
 - challenging unfavorable decisions;
 - accompanying service users to interviews and reviews;
 - resolving a range of other difficulties which claimants can experience; and
 - representation at Appeal Tribunals.

- 2.5. All fieldwork staff undertake a comprehensive training programme delivered by Welfare Rights staff to equip them with the skills and knowledge base to offer a professional service. This training programme is supplemented by specialist courses, seminars and consultation with Welfare Rights officers.

3. Income Generated in 2007/2008

- 3.1. Income generated for the financial year 2007/08 across the entire service amounted to **£10,618,222.58**, an increase of **£1,400,148.13** from 2006/07 (15.2%). These figures are based upon known outcomes. Many people assisted by the Welfare Rights Service and other Social Work staff to lodge claims for benefit do not always advise if the outcome is successful. This figure was made up as follows:

OFFICE	TOTAL
Airdrie	£1,108,047.23
Bellshill	£2,213,290.59
Coatbridge	£1,448,662.76
Cumbernauld	£1,692,405.04
Motherwell	£1,612,309.43
Shotts	£628,452.28
Wishaw	£1,458,724.94
Hospitals	£432,914.86
Supported Employment	£23,415.45
Total	£10,618,222.58

- 3.2. The Welfare Rights Service (Welfare Rights officers and Income Maximisers) generated 57% of the income, Reception Services accounted for 28% and the Care sections made up the other 15%.
- 3.3. Where individuals are awarded extra benefit, including increased income, they are better able to manage their own affairs and do not always require further Social Work services.
- 3.4. Income generated over the last four years has amounted to £36,835,771.79.

4. Appeals

- 4.1. Representation is a core element of a Welfare Rights Officer's work. During 2007/08, Welfare Rights Officers represented at 881 appeals. The success rate was 68%, which is higher than the national average (64%). 84% of individuals supported to appeal were satisfied with the service they received.

5. Training

- 5.1. Throughout 2007/08, the Service has provided 8 five-day training courses to Housing and Social Work staff, including staff from Social Care providers. Local training was also provided in Social Work localities and other Social Work teams covering updates on benefits and legislation, financial assessments, local housing allowance and other welfare benefits-related subjects.
- 5.2. A number of briefings were carried out on general benefits and the role of the service to numerous health staff via the single assessment training and housing services teams, such as private housing benefit team, the fraud team and most of the housing First Stop Shops. Training was provided to a number of local community groups covering welfare benefits and the impact of legislative changes on local communities.

6. Other Activity

- 6.1. Other areas of activity include services and benefits for refugees, asylum seekers and migrant workers, looked after and accommodated children, kinship carers, supported living services, closure and discharge programmes and events such as redundancy support, through the PACE initiative.
- 6.2. The Service plays an active role in the North Lanarkshire Information and Advice Forum (NLIAF), has been involved in the establishment of a welfare rights practitioners group for advice services in North Lanarkshire and taken part in two advice fairs held by the NLIAF.

7. National Standards

- 7.1. The Scottish National Standards for Information and Advice Providers are topic-specific competences for advisors and agencies, which will be a necessary accreditation for all information and advice providers in the future. The National Standards are in three parts, comprising Organisational Standards, Topic-Specific Competences for Advisors and Good Practice.
- 7.2. Whilst all advisors and agencies must meet the generic competences, the topic-specific competences have three different levels:

Type 1 – Active information, sign-posting and explanation;
Type 2 – Casework; and
Type 3 – Advocacy, representation and mediation.
- 7.3. North Lanarkshire Council Welfare Rights Service has applied for the accreditation as a Type 3 service and, over the last 16 months, has been developing existing processes and procedures to meet the National Standards, whilst maintaining the current process, procedures and structure of Housing and Social Work Services.

- 7.4. The Service is due to be audited in September 2008 and, if successful, will be the first local authority welfare rights service to be accredited as meeting the National Standards for Information and Advice Providers.

8. Legislative/Policy Changes

- 8.1. From April 2008 **Local Housing Allowance** is the new way of assessing Housing Benefit for people on low income/benefits in private rented accommodation.
- 8.2. **Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)** is a new benefit due to be introduced on 27 October 2008 for people who have limited capability for work because of illness or disability. ESA will replace new claims for incapacity benefit and income support paid on the basis of 'disability'. A new 'work capability assessment' will replace the current 'personal capability assessment'
- 8.3. The introduction of Employment and Support Allowance is a major change to the benefits system and will have a major impact on service users and the Welfare Rights Service.
- 8.4. **Welfare to Work (Pathways and Flexi New Deal – Westminster and Scottish Governments anti-poverty strategy)** The Welfare to Work programme will impact on all areas of Housing and Social Work's care sections, including homelessness, mental health, criminal justice and lone parents. The Financial Inclusion Team will work closely with the Council's Regeneration Unit, Employability Services and all care sections to ensure that service users are able to choose the right course for them within the programme.
- 8.5. **Restrictions on Backdating** – from 2008/09 backdating of some benefits will be reduced from 12 months to 3 months. These restrictions will impact on income generated by Housing and Social Work Services in the future.

9. Financial/Personnel/Legal/Policy Implications

- 9.1 The work undertaken by the Welfare Rights Service supports a range of council policies which include social inclusion and health and wellbeing. Income generated also helps to stimulate the local economy.

10. Recommendation

Committee is asked to note this report.



Ronnie Paul
Head of Housing and Social Work Resources
11 June 2008

For further information on this report please contact John Campbell, Co-ordinator Financial Inclusion, tel: 01698 332566.