

NORTH LANARKSHIRE COUNCIL

REPORT

To: HOUSING & SOCIAL WORK SERVICES COMMITTEE	Subject: A SUMMARY REPORT OF WELFARE RIGHTS ACTIVITY 1 APRIL 2009 – 31 MARCH 2010
From: HEAD OF HOUSING & SOCIAL WORK RESOURCES	
Date: 5 AUGUST 2010	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 2009/2010.

2. Background

- 2.1. Welfare Rights staff within Social Work Services 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 work 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. Housing and Social Work's Reception Services 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 all 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, 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.
- 2.6. A key role of the Welfare Rights Service is to support the income maximisation service through consultation and guidance for fieldwork staff, training, representing clients at tribunals and hearings, and supporting specialist social work services.

3. Income Generated in 2009/2010

- 3.1. Income generated for the financial year 2009/10 across the entire service amounted to **£12,557,729**. This figure was made up as follows:

Office	Total
Airdrie	£1,474,179
Bellshill	£2,516,532
Coatbridge	£2,329,983
Cumbernauld	£1,711,710
Motherwell	£1,629,800
Shotts	£721,473
Wishaw	£1,775,125
Headquarters	£398,927
Total	£12,557,729

- 3.2. The Welfare Rights Service (Welfare Rights Officers and Income Maximisers) generated 62.5% of the income, Reception Services accounted for 26% and the Care sections made up the other 11.5%.
- 3.3. It should be noted that 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 return if the outcome is successful.
- 3.4. Successful Welfare Rights intervention, where individuals are awarded extra benefit, frequently means that, as a result of increased income, they are better able to manage their own affairs and often do not require further Social Work services.
- 3.5. Income generated over the last six years amounted to £62,860,345.

4. Appeals

- 4.1. Representation is a core element of a Welfare Rights Officer's work. During 2009/10, Welfare Rights Officers represented at 1373 appeals (an increase of 258 from 2008/09). The success rate was 61 %, which is higher than the national average of 58%.
- 4.2. The Service is committed to providing service users with the best possible representation at appeals. To ensure continuous improvement every service user represented by North Lanarkshire Council Welfare Rights Service is sent a questionnaire requesting feedback on their appeal with regards to:
 - a) Service prior to the appeal – 93% were satisfied with the service prior to the appeal;
 - b) Service during the appeal – 87% strongly agreed or agreed that the service they received was professional; and
 - c) Service after the appeal – 79% were satisfied.

The Service is currently reviewing the questionnaires where the service user has stated they are unsatisfied with the service, this will allow us to ascertain whether they are unsatisfied with the outcome of the appeal as opposed to the service provided.

5. Training

- 5.1. Throughout 2009/10, the Service has provided, via the Learning and Organisational Development Team, 4 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, other Social Work teams and Housing Services covering updates on benefits and legislation, financial assessments, employment and support allowance and other welfare benefits-related subjects.

6. Other Activity

- 6.1. The Welfare Rights Service has also been involved in other activities within the Service/Council, including: Housing Services, Services and Benefits for Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Migrant Workers, Educational Services, Looked After and Accommodated Children, Kinship carers, Supported Living Services, Closure and Discharge programmes and events such as Punch the Crunch, Redundancy Support, through the PACE initiative.
- 6.2. The Service plays an active role in North Lanarkshire Information and Advice Forum (NLI AF). The Service was involved in the Strictly Senior Campaign run by NLI AF on behalf of the Older People Living Well Strategy Group from 1 September to 1 December 2009, generating over £200,000 in benefits for Older People.
- 6.3. The Service is taking part in the Council's Future Jobs Fund scheme. Fourteen unemployed people have received training on welfare benefits and they are now employed by the Council as Welfare Benefits Assistants, currently working in Social Work Services Localities and other Social Work teams providing a welfare rights service.
- 6.4. The Service is also working jointly with the Council's Regeneration Service (Employability Service) and Routes to Work, providing "Better off Calculations" for unemployed people looking to enter employment.

- 6.5 The Service has worked jointly with other external services and has received 550 referrals from agencies such as Macmillan/CAB, CAB's, Punch the Crunch and GEMAP.

7. Legislative/Policy Changes

- 7.1. **Welfare Reform** - Following the introduction of Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) in October 2008, existing claimants of Incapacity Benefit are due to migrate to ESA from October 2010 through to 2014. This change will affect approximately 20,000 claimants within North Lanarkshire, around 69% of whom it is envisaged will not be entitled to ESA. This will have major implications in terms of reduced income for residents, a loss of income for the local economy and an increase in demand for services in relation to income maximisation, appeals representation and general advice and support.
- 7.2. **Welfare to Work Programme** – The new coalition Government will end all existing Welfare to Work Programmes and will create a single programme to help all unemployed people back into work. Details of the new programme are still to be issued.
- 7.3. The Welfare Reform/Welfare to Work programme will impact on all areas of Housing and Social Work's care sections, including homelessness, mental health, justice services 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.
- 7.4 In July 2009, the UK Government published a Green Paper which outlined a vision for a new care and support system in England. One particular aspect of the Green Paper relates to use of Attendance Allowance and Disability Living Allowance to pay for the new care and support system, however Attendance Allowance and Disability Living Allowance are UK wide benefits. It will be important that Housing and Social Work Services keeps itself apprised of any developments in this area.

8. Recommendation

Committee is asked to note this report.



Ronnie Paul
Head of Housing and Social Work Resources
9 June 2010

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