

To: SOCIAL WORK (OPERATIONS AND SERVICES) SUB COMMITTEE		Subject: A SUMMARY REPORT OF WELFARE RIGHTS ACTIVITY FOR THE PERIOD APRIL 2003 TO END OF FEBRUARY 2004
From: DIRECTOR OF SOCIAL WORK		
Date: 4 MAY 2004	Ref: GMcI/CMcK	

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT / INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. To advise Committee of the work undertaken and benefit income generated by the Department's Welfare Rights Officers.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1. Welfare Rights Officers within Social Work provide support and assistance to staff about the range of state benefits and assist service users claim all benefits to which they are entitled. The main thrust of all Welfare rights work is the maximisation of income for individuals and for the Council. 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, ensures 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. The Departments Reception Services provide service users and members of the public with advice and assistance with 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 hospital discharge, community care, criminal justice and child care.
- 2.4. Services which the Department can offer include:
- completing claim forms and giving advice on the full range of social security benefits;
 - providing supportive evidence;
 - liaising with the Benefits Agency, 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.
- 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. The training is also at times open to voluntary sector staff.

3. PROPOSALS / CONSIDERATIONS

- 3.1. It is important to note the distinct role of the Welfare Rights Officers 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.
- 3.2. The relatively recent introduction of Tax and Pension Credits has resulted in massive changes to the way in which Benefits are now calculated and paid. Training materials and courses for Social Work staff have now been completely re-written and extended to take account of the introduction of Working Tax, Child Tax and State Pension Credits in recognition of the significant impact which these benefits will have.
- 3.3. Over the coming year the Welfare Rights Service will be contributing to strategic activity around anti-poverty approaches including a review of financially related information and advice services and the development of a Fuel Poverty Strategy.
- 3.4. As part of the Department's role in providing support to the North Lanarkshire Advice Forum, (which is an umbrella structure linking voluntary and statutory advice providers) Social Work Welfare Rights staff are involved in establishing and co-ordinating a cross-sectoral Welfare Rights Practitioners Forum.
- 3.5. Following the recruitment of Welfare Rights Officers and Income Maximisers during February and March 2004 the Welfare Rights Service will be up to full establishment as of May 2004.
- 3.6. As a result of recorded gains over an eleven month period between April 2003 – March 2004 a full year projection of benefits generated £4,538,491 can be estimated. This figure only pertains to the work of Welfare Rights staff. The figure is broken down into Area Offices as follows:

Office	Full year Projection £
Airdrie	286,909
Bellshill	607,097
Coatbridge	1,077,577
Cumbernauld	387,466
Motherwell	793,320
Wishaw	714,837
Shotts	414,545
Hospital	256,740
	£4,538,491

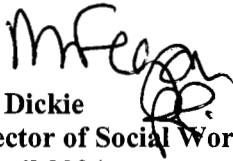
- 3.7. The variation in returns reflects vacancies and one member of staff undertaking the social work qualifying course.
- 3.8. It should be noted that these figures are based upon known income being paid to service users. They do not include potential income where claims are lodged but the outcome is unknown. Many people assisted by the Welfare Rights Service to lodge, and follow through, claims for benefit do not return if the outcome is successful. The figures also do not include Home Care gains as such income generation is spread across a number of staff, e.g. Income Maximisers. The figures for the Income Maximisers are still in the process of collation but are not expected to be around £1.5 million
- 3.9. The figures do not include income generated from Transitional Housing Benefit, which has now ended, but was applicable over the period under consideration.
- 3.10. Also not recorded are the returns from giving advice and information at talks and other events such as Redundancy Support as the nature of such information and advice giving does not lead to easy collection of such information.

4. FINANCIAL / PERSONNEL / LEGAL / POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1. The activity of Welfare Rights Officers assists the Council promote its Social Inclusion policy by enabling individuals to increase income and therefore user choice.
- 4.2. There are no Financial/Legal or Policy issues.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.1. Committee is asked to note the contents of the report



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Director of Social Work
5 April 2004

*For further information on this report please contact George McNally Manager Social Work Strategy
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