

# NORTHUMBERLAND

Northumberland County Council

## HEALTH AND WELLBEING OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

DATE: 3 October 2017

### Welfare Rights Annual Report 2016-17

Report of the Interim Chief Executive, Daljit Lally

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Veronica Jones, Adult Wellbeing & Health

#### Purpose of report

To update Members about the activities of the Welfare Rights Advisory Unit for the year ending 31 March 2017, and on key current issues about supporting people with benefits during a time of ongoing major changes to the benefits system.

#### Recommendations

1. **This report is for Members' information and comment.**

#### Link to Corporate Plan

This report is relevant to the Health and Well Being and Economic Growth priorities in the Corporate Plan.

#### Key issues

1. The welfare rights team provides staff in Adult Services, Children's Services, and the voluntary and community sector with training and access to a telephone advice line. In addition, the team provides targeted direct support to people with social care needs in cases involving complex issues, including appeals.
2. During 2016/17, the welfare rights officers and the financial assessment & benefits officers increased the incomes of older and disabled people by more than £3.4 million. This boosted the county's economy by an estimated £5.8 million. Numbers of disability benefit recipients have also historically been an element in the formula for calculating local authority revenue grant, though the future arrangements for calculating spending needs to support redistribution between local authorities under the planned business rate retention system are not yet known.
3. Looking forwards, the next few years are expected to see the continuing impact of ongoing fundamental changes to the benefits system. It is crucial, for the well-being of vulnerable and disabled people in the county, and also for the county's wider economy and the Council's own finances, to make sure that Northumberland residents receive the support they need to cope with changes to their income through ongoing implementation of welfare reform. The welfare rights team will continue to provide

expert support and training to frontline staff across agencies and work to promote a wider network of benefits advice services. It will also contribute to the wider programme of work needed across the Council and its partners to address the challenges of welfare reform, and the impact which these major changes will have on the county's population and on Council services.

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# Welfare Rights Annual Report 2016-17

## BACKGROUND

### 1. Introduction

- 1.1 The first major aspects of the current Welfare Reform programme began under the Coalition Government in April 2011, building in some areas on changes already taking place as a result of legislation created under the previous Labour Government. Further extensive transformation of the benefits system was introduced by the Conservative Government through the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016. During 2016-17 we saw continuing implementation of changes that were introduced, but only partially completed, under earlier Governments.
- 1.2 Among the main current issues, highlighted in the annual report are:
- Reassessment of working age disabled people receiving Disability Living Allowance
  - National roll-out of Universal Credit to include disabled people is expected to be implemented in Northumberland from June 2018
  - Proposed changes to the way housing benefit will be calculated for people living in social housing, including supported accommodation
  - Changes to the way some benefits are administered by DWP, for example Universal Credit payments are made calendar monthly and most contact with the DWP is expected to be done using the internet
- 1.3 With almost every benefit and tax credit being changed and remaining claimants of the main benefit for disabled people being reassessed, welfare rights knowledge and expertise will be needed to understand the impact of the changes on people accessing services, and to ensure that vulnerable individuals receive their correct benefit entitlements.

### 2. Role of the Welfare Rights Team

- 2.1 The Welfare Rights team, a service funded by the Council and located in Northumbria Healthcare Foundation Trust as part of the Council's wider partnership arrangement with the Trust, has three roles to play in ensuring that people in Northumberland get the support they need through these changes:
- a) it provides training and expert advice to frontline staff across adult services, the Council, and related agencies
  - b) it carries out some casework in complex cases, usually where adult services or children's services have statutory involvement
  - c) it has a strategic role in advising the Council and members and in working with both public sector and voluntary sector bodies to ensure that accessible and good quality benefits advice is available to people who need it.
- 2.2 The first two of those roles are described in more detail in the welfare rights annual report for 2016-17 which is attached as an appendix to this report.

2.3 The third role has been through involvement in the Council's relationship with Citizens Advice Northumberland and supporting the Council to understand the impact on residents, and on its revenue, of changes to the benefits system.

## BACKGROUND PAPERS

There are no background documents for this report within the meaning of the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985.

## IMPLICATIONS ARISING OUT OF THE REPORT

<b>Policy</b>	Increasing the income of vulnerable people helps to alleviate pensioner poverty, child poverty and promotes financial inclusion and wellbeing. At a time of major change to the benefits system, the County Council has a crucial role in ensuring that the most vulnerable benefit recipients are able to receive the support which they are entitled to.
<b>Finance and value for money</b>	Welfare rights officers and the financial assessment & benefits officers increased the incomes of older and disabled people by £3.4 million, boosting the county's economy by an estimated £5.8 million.
<b>Human Resources</b>	None
<b>Property</b>	None
<b>Equalities</b> (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	This report is for information. The equalities impact of any future proposed changes in arrangements for providing benefits advice will be considered before changes are confirmed.
<b>Risk Assessment</b>	Not required.
<b>Crime &amp; Disorder</b>	None.
<b>Customer Considerations</b>	When the team carries out direct casework with customers, advice is provided in the format that is most suitable for the service user's situation. This can be by telephone, in writing and/or face to face. Feedback is obtained using anonymous customer evaluation forms.
<b>Carbon reduction</b>	The team promotes services available to improve the energy efficiency of vulnerable people's homes, and reduce both their costs and their carbon footprint.
<b>Wards</b>	All

### Report sign off.

Finance Officer	Julie Briggs
Monitoring Officer/Legal	N/A
Human Resources	N/A
Procurement	N/A
I.T.	N/A

Interim Chief Executive	Daljit Lally
Portfolio Holder(s)	Cllr Veronica Jones