



Northumberland County Council

HEALTH AND WELLBEING OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date: 3 July 2018

Welfare Rights annual report

Report of the Executive Director of Adult Care

Cabinet Member: Councillor Veronica Jones, Adult Wellbeing and Public Health

Purpose of report

To update Members about the activities of the Welfare Rights Advisory Unit for the year ending 31 March 2018, and on key current issues about supporting people with benefits during a time of ongoing major changes to the benefits system.

Recommendations

The Committee is recommended:

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

Link to Corporate Plan

This report is relevant to the "Living" priority 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 2017/18, the welfare rights officers and the financial assessment & benefits officers increased the incomes of older and disabled people by more than £2.9 million. This boosted the county's economy by an estimated £4.9 million.
3. Numbers of disability benefit recipients have also historically been an element in the formula for calculating local authority revenue grant and recently-published proposals for assessment of relative spending needs under the revised local government funding arrangements suggest a formula in which assumed annual expenditure needs will increase by around £1,500 for each person claiming Attendance Allowance.
4. In addition to boosting the local economy, increasing the take up of Attendance Allowance means a greater number of older people are able to continue living independently in their own homes. The importance of supporting older, disabled people to claim Attendance Allowance has been acknowledged through the recruitment of a further three staff into the Support Planning team in the care management service.

5. 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 arising from changes to benefits, including the roll-out of Universal Credit in Northumberland from November 2018, and the impact which these major changes will have on the county's population and on Council services.

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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 2017-18 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:
- The ongoing 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 November 2018
 - Proposed changes to the way housing costs are paid for people living in 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 via the internet using an on-line “journal”.
- 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. A recent National Audit Office report ([Rolling out Universal Credit](#)) provides evidence that support for vulnerable people who claim Universal Credit is essential to mitigate the impact many people have experienced in other areas. Universal Credit claimants have experienced lengthy periods without receiving payments caused by poor administration of Universal Credit as well as in built, systemic, barriers faced by vulnerable people (even when the administration is working well) who are digitally excluded or have difficulty managing their personal finances.

2. The 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

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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 2017-18 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.

IMPLICATIONS ARISING OUT OF THE REPORT

Policy	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.
Finance and value for money	Welfare rights officers and the financial assessment & benefits officers increased the incomes of older and disabled people by £2.9 million, boosting the county's economy by an estimated £4.9 million. Increasing the take up of certain disability benefits, including Attendance Allowance, can have a positive impact on the local authority revenue grant.
Legal	None
Procurement	None
Human Resources	None
Property	None
Equalities (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.
Risk Assessment	Not required
Crime & Disorder	None

Customer Considerations	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.
Carbon reduction	None
Wards	All

BACKGROUND PAPERS

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

Report sign off.

Authors must ensure that officers and members have agreed the content of the report.

	Initials
Monitoring Officer/Legal	n/a
Executive Director of Finance & S151 Officer	n/a
Executive Director	VB
Executive Director of Children's Services	CM
Portfolio Holder(s)	WD

Author and contact details

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