



Northumberland County Council

Health and Wellbeing OSC

Tuesday, 7 November 2023

Welfare Rights report 2019-2023

Report of Councillor(s) Wendy Pattison, Cabinet Member for Caring for Adults

Responsible Officer(s): Neil Bradley, Executive Director for Adults, Ageing & Wellbeing

1. Link to Key Priorities of the Corporate Plan

This report is relevant to the Tackling Inequalities priority in the Corporate Plan.

2. Purpose of report

The annual report in the appendix updates Members about the activities of the Welfare Rights Advisory Unit for the period 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2023, and on key current issues about supporting people with benefits during a time of ongoing major changes to the benefits system.

3. Recommendations

3.1 None – this report is for information only.

4. Forward plan date and reason for urgency if applicable

Not applicable

5. Background

The welfare rights unit

5.1 The Welfare Rights Advisory Unit provides staff in adult social care and children's services, and the voluntary and community sector, with training and access to email and telephone advice. (It does not usually provide advice directly to the public or to users of adult and children's services, except in complex cases.)

5.2 Social care staff, backed up by the expert advice provided by welfare rights officers, are then able to maximise the incomes of older and disabled residents and families in need in Northumberland.

5.3 Further information about the work of the welfare rights team can be found in the appendix to this report.

Changes to the benefits system

5.4 Much of the current Welfare Reform programme began in April 2011 under the Coalition Government. These changes accelerated the implementation of some changes arising from legislation created under the previous Government and added further major reforms. Further extensive transformation of the benefits system was introduced by the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016. During the following years, including the period of this report 2019-2023, we have seen the ongoing implementation of changes that were introduced, but only partially completed, under earlier Governments.

5.5 Among the main current issues, highlighted in the appendix to this report, are:

- The continuing migration of existing legacy benefit claimants onto Universal Credit
- The impact of changes to qualifying ages for “mixed age” older couples claiming means tested benefits including Pension Credit and Housing Benefit
- Changes to the way some benefits are administered by DWP.

5.6 With almost every benefit and tax credit being changed and delays to the managed migration programme for disabled people claiming one of the main legacy benefits (Employment and Support Allowance) welfare rights knowledge and expertise continues to be needed to understand the impact of the changes on people accessing services, and to ensure that vulnerable individuals receive their correct benefit entitlements.

6. Implications

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 can receive the support which they are entitled to.
Finance and value for money	Welfare rights officers increased the incomes of older and disabled people by £1.1 million between 2019 and 2023, boosting the county’s economy by an estimated £1.75 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 have been identified
Procurement	None have been identified

Human resources	None have been identified
Property	None have been identified
The Equalities Act: is a full impact assessment required and attached?	No - not required at this point 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	None have been identified
Crime and disorder	None have been identified
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
Carbon reduction	None have been identified
Health and wellbeing	Increasing the incomes of disabled people may enable them to become more socially active and eat more nutritious meals.
Wards	All wards

7. Background papers

Not applicable

8. Links to other key reports already published

Not applicable

9. Author and Contact Details

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