

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL

Report by the Executive Director of Social Work and Health

Social Work and Health Improvement Committee: 21 November 2007

Subject: Welfare Rights Services

1. Purpose

- 1.1** The purpose of this report is to provide elected members with up to date information relating to the services provided by West Dunbartonshire, Welfare Rights Unit (WRU); and to advise Committee that the service will be part of the Council's pilot project for Continuous Improvement within the Public Services Improvement Framework.

2. Background

- 2.1** The WRU is based at Bridge Street, Dumbarton where each service area (detailed in Appendix 1) is managed and co-ordinated. The service has a key role to play in relation to increasing the personal prosperity of the residents of West Dunbartonshire.
- 2.2** The Welfare Rights Service is central to the Department's duty of Social Welfare. Most referrals to the Department have an underlying financial issue and the Welfare Rights Information/Advice workers play a key role within the Department's Duty service in identifying and assisting people to improve their personal prosperity, as do the other Welfare Rights Officers and Information/Advice workers based at Bridge Street working within other service areas.
- 2.3** The WRU consists of a management team, Welfare Rights/Money Advice Officers, Information/Advice Officers and administration staff. The service offers representation, advice and assistance to the most socially excluded people within the local community and service user base covers all client groups as follows:
- Older people
 - People with physical disabilities
 - People with learning difficulties
 - People with mental health issues
 - People diagnosed with cancer
 - People experiencing problems with drugs or alcohol
 - People who suffer from an industrial injury
 - People who suffer from an industrial disease
 - Lone parents

- People attempting to enter employment, education or training
- People with money/debt issues
- People requiring representation at appeal hearings
- Children and families affected by disability
- Carers

2.4 The service also advises Council staff and elected members, where required, on legislative changes in relation to state benefits, which will inevitably affect the local community.

3. Key Outcomes

3.1 On an annual basis the number of people within the community who will access the services offered by Welfare Rights exceeds 5000. For 2006-07 the number of claims and income generated was 3090 and £6.5million respectively. The detailed information is set out in Appendix 2.

4. Key Issues and Developments

4.1 Changes in legislation being brought into force by the Welfare Reform Act 2007, will most likely increase the number of people accessing the Welfare Rights Service. Changes in the way that Housing Benefit (to be known as Local Housing Allowance) is paid for tenants in privately rented accommodation (i.e. someone who rents property or a room from a private landlord) could exacerbate problems for people who have difficulty managing their finances when the Local Housing Allowance will be paid directly to the tenant.

4.2 Levels of personal debt and raised interest rates and the introduction of Trust Deeds for people in rented accommodation with debts of between £7-14k will increase demand for services. The Debt/Money Advisors within the Welfare Rights Service will continue to monitor the rising debt problem within West Dunbartonshire. The Welfare Rights Unit will continue to work closely with the Council's Financial Services.

4.3 The Government has introduced a variety of programmes to assist people back to work The Welfare Rights staff continues to support families with in-work benefits advice and 'better off' calculations in Partnership with Working For Families and referrals are continuing to increase. Support is also given in relation Debt/Money Advice.

4.4 The Welfare Rights Service also continues to work in Partnership with Macmillan Cancer, The Pension Service, NHS Community Health Partnership, Community Planning Partnership (CPP), CAB, Money Advice Scotland, Clydebank Asbestos Group, CHAS and Maggie's Centre as well as internal services across all client groups. The nature of the joint working within the above Partnership agreements means that the unit staff continues to provide support in-kind through follow up work after the initial claim is made,

representation at Tribunals and clerical support. An overview of the current status of these Partnerships is included in Appendix 1.

- 4.5** The Welfare Rights Unit has committed to further joint ventures to support the work of the CPP Financial Inclusion Partnership. This will include targeted support to groups unable to move into employment (offenders and people with addiction issues); additional support to cancer sufferers and carers; and programmes of accredited training for all advice staff and volunteers.
- 4.6** It is intended that the Welfare Rights Service will attain Charter Mark as part of the ongoing commitment to PSIF. The service is currently drawing up a project plan, which will include re-organisation and consolidation of the service, continued Partnership working with internal and external services and staff development. It is hoped that this will be achieved within the next year.

5. Personnel Issues

- 5.1** There are no personnel issues.

6. Financial Implications

- 6.1** There are no financial implications.

7. Recommendations

- 7.1** It is recommended that the committee takes note of the contents of the report and gives its full support to increase the personal prosperity and assistance into employment for the people of West Dunbartonshire.

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Background Papers:	Social Security Reform Act
Appendix:	Appendix 1 – Service Overview Appendix 2 – Benefits Maximisation to March 2007
Wards Affected:	All