

Area North Committee – 22nd August 2007

9. Report on Welfare Benefit Work in South Somerset

Head of Service: Colin McDonald, Head of Housing and Welfare
Lead Officer: Fiona Johnson, Senior Housing Support Officer
Contact Details: fiona.johnson@southsomerset.gov.uk or (01935) 462737

Purpose of the Report

To update and inform members on the work of the Welfare Benefit unit including the provisional figures for the Year 2006/7.

Recommendation

Members are invited to comment on the report.

Background

Arising from our own assessment of poverty in the District in 1996 and later work done on benefit take-up for the Somerset County Council Poverty Commission in 1998, the Council decided to back a 3 year Welfare Benefits Take-Up Campaign for South Somerset. This was a pilot designed to test what we as a District Council could achieve, by both tapping into our own resources (primarily via Community Advisers in community offices) and enabling more take up work in other sectors through practical support and identification of external funding.

This initiative, managed in partnership with South Somerset CAB, was resourced with a sum of £100,000 over the 3-year period commencing April 2000. This enabled SSDC to employ a Welfare Benefit Officer based in the Social Inclusion Team. In response to demand the service grew and by 2001 the existence of the welfare benefits programme supported and complemented the introduction of the Verification Framework into Housing Benefits, giving members and officers increased confidence that deliberate fraud would be tackled whilst maintaining a safety net for supporting vulnerable people.

When the Social Inclusion Unit ceased to exist the Welfare Benefit Team transferred to the Housing and Welfare Section - which has resulted in even closer working with the housing teams to prevent the loss of tenancies.

Addressing Need

Up to £8.04 billion of means tested benefits were unclaimed in 2004/5 (87% expenditure take-up and 76% caseload take up) by as many as 6.3 million potential claimants nationally. On a proportional basis, based on the mid-2005 population estimates (Office of National Statistics), this would indicate that up to £21.5 million could go unclaimed by the people of South Somerset.

Client Case Study 1

Andrew is a client that we initially helped last year. He is a single parent, in his late 50's, with an 11 year old daughter. He had worked all his life and it came as a shock when he started suffering from back problems. By the time he asked for our help he had been diagnosed with crumbling vertebrae for which he was awaiting surgery. We helped him to apply for Disability Living Allowance (DLA) which was initially refused. We challenged this decision and he was awarded DLA for 12 months, pending surgery. The DLA award also increased his income support, resulting in a total increase to his annual income of £9,921.60 per annum.

Unfortunately Andrew's surgery was unsuccessful and his condition continues to deteriorate. This year his DLA award was refused renewal at the end of the initial 12 month period. We appealed and took his case to Tribunal, where we represented him. We won the Tribunal and his DLA was reinstated.

We also referred him to SSAFA who have assisted with the purchase of his daughter's school uniform.

*All names used are fictitious

Report

Progress to Date

The table shown at Appendix 1 gives an overview of what has been achieved over the last 6 years.

Despite 2006/7 being a difficult year due to staffing problems (for the greater part of the year we were down to the equivalent of one full time Welfare Benefit Adviser only) we undertook casework for **342 clients, achieving an Annual Income for clients of £543,010. In addition clients received a total of £101,319 in Lump Sums.** Please see Appendix 1 for further details.

Fortunately 2007/8 appears set to be an easier year in relation to staffing levels. In April we took on two new Welfare Benefit Advisers: 1 x temporary contract for one year at 4 days per week, and 1 x permanent post at 15 hours per week. This equates to total Welfare Benefit Adviser hours of 8 x permanent days per week and 4 temporary days per week.

As a result of the additional hours we have been able to set up a Welfare Benefit Surgery in the Crewkerne office. These sessions are held on a Wednesday. They commenced in mid May and we are pleased with the response to date.

A report "Benefit for All", written by Chris Avanti, was published in September 2006. This included an Action Plan and dates by which progress reports on issues relating to welfare benefit take up across South Somerset should be produced. An update on this report, and the progress made, is being taken to LSP members on the 14th September.

Both the Welfare Benefit and Careline teams are now managed by the Senior Housing Support Officer. Bringing these teams together has resulted in even closer working, and Careline staff are now able to offer benefit advice direct to their clients.

Careline continues to supply peace of mind to over 1,750 clients, secure in the knowledge that emergency help or advice is available at the touch of a button, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Client Case Study 2

Pam and Keith are both in their late 40's. They live in private rented accommodation in Langport. Their children have grown up and left home.

Keith works full time. Unfortunately Pam struggles with rheumatoid arthritis and osteoporosis. Pam is in constant pain and has limited mobility and as a result is unable to work. They were struggling to afford their rent coupled with the cost of living on Keith's earnings when they approached us.

The Welfare Benefits Adviser helped Pam to claim Disability Living Allowance, resulting in an annual award of £5694 plus a lump sum payment of £2400.

They were delighted and relieved to receive this award as it means they can now afford to stay in their home.

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It should be noted that the figures show only those details confirmed by clients to us. Not all clients confirm receipt of their awards, and it is considered that a significant amount of income gained goes unreported. An educated guess as to unconfirmed results would be in the region of at least an additional £75,000 - £125,000 per annum.

It should also be noted that much of the total represents an annual income figure and as such is likely to continue on a recurring basis. Moreover, the effects of this on the local economy should not be overlooked.

We continue to hold the Quality Mark awarded by the national Community Legal Service. This is in recognition of the quality of general help with casework provided by the team. The Quality Mark is only awarded to organisations that pass regular quality checks carried out by the Legal Services Commission.

Achieving Multiple Added Value

Apart from putting money in the pockets of those who need it, there is widespread added value from this work, including:

1. Working with the Homelessness Team we assist in preventing loss of tenancies. The estimated cost for a 2 child family if an eviction takes place and a homeless application is made is £5,813. By ensuring that clients are in receipt of all their benefits we are on occasions able to prevent the eviction from proceeding. In such cases the savings made are significant for SSDC in relation to B&B/temporary accommodation, Housing Officer time in terms of prevention and investigation, Spend to Save budget etc. In addition the financial and emotional impact on clients not receiving such assistance will be considerable.
2. The link between health and wealth needs to be acknowledged. The Acheson Report specifically recommended benefit take up as a measure to tackle health inequalities.

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3. Both the payment to the individual clients and the payments to SSC/SSDC contribute to increased spending in the local economy.
4. Provision of advice around Welfare Rights to ensure people claim all they are entitled to has been shown to have large economic benefits to local communities. A report in Scotland ("Extending Scottish Input – Output Systems, McNicoll) found that for every £1 million of benefits recovered the local multiplier effect generates 36 full time jobs in the local (Scottish) economy. On this basis, last year approximately 18 jobs could potentially have been created or sustained as a consequence of this work.
5. Disabled Facilities Grants (DFG's) are rationed; linking clients in with potential additional welfare benefits can be advantageous in enabling them to fund their own purchase of items.
6. Until recently receipt of certain benefits affected the Formula Spending Share (FSS). This was paid to Somerset County Council (SCC) by the Government on an annual basis. For example an individual award of Attendance Allowance (for people over 65) was paid at £310 in Year 1, £620 in Year 2 and £930 in Year 3. An assumption was made that some of the money paid to SCC would filter down to South Somerset. However this formula is currently being replaced by the 4 Block Model. Once details of this are received from SCC we will update our information accordingly.
7. The welfare benefit work also supports that of the Private Sector Tenancy Support Officer, working with clients to ensure that they are receiving all the benefits they are entitled to, thereby assisting them in successfully maintaining their tenancy.

Financial Implications

None.

Implications for Corporate Priorities

Works towards Corporate Aims No. 2 and 3.

Other implications

None.

Background Papers: *McNicoll I H and Blakemore D (1993) "A Pilot Study on the Construction of a Scottish Environmental Input-Output System, Report to Scottish Enterprise*
Independent Inquiry into Inequalities in Health Report by Sir Donald Acheson (Nov 98)
