

Area West Committee – 18th June 2008

## 6. Report on Welfare Benefit Work in South Somerset

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### Purpose of the Report

To update and inform members on the work of the Welfare Benefit unit (including the provisional figures for the Year 2007/8).

### 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.

### What does the Welfare Benefit Team consist of?

The Welfare Benefits Team consists of a small group of Welfare Benefit Advisers (equivalent to 2.4 full time posts) who are responsible for undertaking casework for clients, identifying their welfare benefit entitlement. This includes home visits, pursuing claims, preparing appeals up to and including Social Security Commissioners level, and representing clients at Tribunal hearings.

The staff are based across the areas. In May 2007 we set up a Welfare Benefit Surgery in the Crewkerne office, and we have been consistently pleased with the response to the sessions, which are held every Wednesday.

## Addressing Need

Up to £9.4 billion of means tested benefits were unclaimed in 2005/6 (82% expenditure take-up). Using estimates supplied by the Office of National Statistics, this would indicate that up to £25.2 million could go unclaimed by the people of South Somerset.

### Client Case Study 1

We had been working with Mr and Mrs West, who are both in their early 50's, for over a year and had seen their problems gradually escalate.

They were living in the house that they had brought their family up in, but unfortunately Mrs West had had to give up her job in January 2007 because of Rheumatoid Arthritis. In due course her income reduced from full time wages to Incapacity Benefit of £61.35 per week. Mr West's earnings did not quite cover the mortgage. Mr West, due to the stress caused by his wife's ill health and the mounting debts as a consequence of her being unable to work, also began to suffer ill health.

We supported an appeal for Disability Living Allowance, which was successful, but it was only granted for a limited period. At least it meant that a back payment of approx £3,000 was paid. We also got them a charitable grant of £500. However by now they were being threatened with repossession, and the £3,000 barely covered the mortgage arrears, and left other mounting debts still untouched. They were both suffering from depression and felt that they could not go on.

We continued to work with them and finally got a continuous award of Disability Living Allowance.

At the end of the year of working with them they had received Lump Sums totalling £4,751 and increase to Annual Income of £6,950 (including Council Tax Benefit). We also referred the case to the Housing Team and, due to Mrs West ongoing health issues, they were able to offer them a bungalow on a sheltered housing scheme. Mr and Mrs West are delighted with their new home and beginning to feel settled and happy again at last.

*All names used are fictitious*

## Report

### Progress to Date

The table shown at Appendix 1 (pages 6-7) gives an overview of what has been achieved over the last 8 years.

During 2007/8 the Welfare Benefit Team undertook casework for **over 501 clients, achieving an Annual Income for clients of £626,978. In addition clients received a total of £145,456 in Lump Sums.** These figures are provisional due to the time lag involved in benefits being awarded/clients confirming their award, and we would expect the figure to increase considerably over the coming months. Appendix 2 (page 8) gives details of the percentage of each type of benefit awarded.

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.

During 2007/8 we achieved 36 x Saved Tenancies for clients. Saved Tenancies are those cases which would have resulted in the loss of the tenancy but for the intervention of the Welfare Benefit Team. In addition the Team assisted clients to maintain a further 30 tenancies. Maintained Tenancies are those where the Welfare Benefit Team have undertaken a significant amount of work with the clients working towards assisting in the successful maintenance of the tenancy.

Assuming the cost to SSDC of dealing with a homeless application is £5,000\* per family, the 36 x tenancies saved by the intervention of the Welfare Benefit Team equates to a potential saving of £180,000. It is also arguable that further potential savings were made by the 30 x Maintained Tenancies, as it is highly probable that a number of these would have progressed to the stage of loss of tenancy without early intervention.

### **Client Case Study 2**

Leonard, age 55, was self-employed and worked in the building trade. He had looked after himself and was fit and healthy. Whilst at work one day he began to feel a bit unwell: he suffered a stroke and had to spend the next 2 months in hospital.

After discharge from hospital, Leonard had to stay with a friend because of the care needs stemming from the after effects of the stroke. He was subsequently referred to one of our Welfare Benefits Advisors who was able to help him claim Disability Living Allowance, Incapacity Benefit and Council Tax Benefit.

Leonard was subsequently awarded the middle rate of the care component of Disability Living Allowance of £43.15 per week (£2,243.80 per annum), Incapacity Benefit of £61.35 per week later increased to £72.55 per week after 28 weeks (£3,772.60 per annum), Income Support top up of £23.15 per week after the award of Disability Living Allowance and then subsequently reduced to £11.95 per week (£621.40 per annum) when his Incapacity Benefit was increased. Additionally he received help with his Council Tax Benefit.

Leonard had been in the process of selling his house at the time of his stroke, and without this assistance he would not have been able to cover his mortgage costs over this period.

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We were particularly pleased that at the recent Inspection of the Strategic Housing Service (April 08) the feedback on strengths and weaknesses of the service states: "There are very high levels of satisfaction being stated by customers with regard to the Welfare Benefit Service".

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.

It is also worth noting that Fiona Johnson, Senior Housing Support Officer, now also manages South Somerset Careline in addition to the Welfare Benefit Team. This has had the added bonus of the Careline staff being able to identify welfare benefit issues in the course of their work.

Careline is an alarm system, which enables people to enjoy living independently in their own home, secure in the knowledge that emergency help or advice is available at the touch of a button.

Within seconds of pushing the alarm button they are through to a team of advisers, all of whom are fully trained to respond to those in need. Their experience comes from handling thousands of calls a year from the elderly and frail, the disabled, those convalescing, young or vulnerable, and those working or living in isolation.

Careline also offers a comfort call service, for example for those who are unwell or just left hospital.

All that is needed to join the Careline service is a modern BT point and an electric socket close by. No hard wiring is required. It is easy to use, easy and quick to install.

Careline – “Peace of Mind at the touch of a Button” - is self sustaining and was serving 1,835 clients at the end of March 2008.

## **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. In addition to the potential direct savings to SSDC there are other associated savings. In 2004 the estimated cost for a 2 child family if an eviction took place without a homeless application being made was £3,563. The wider social costs in relation to education and health services were estimated to be £4,896. (Somerset Community Legal Service Partnership: County Court Project). In addition the 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.
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 21 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. The welfare benefit work also supports that of the Private Sector Tenancy Support post, 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.

\* The assumption that the cost to SSDC of dealing with a Homeless Application is approx £5,000 per family is made up as follows:

- Processing Homelessness application (3 days x Officer and Admin time): £252
  - Housing family pending decision – 6 weeks at £550 per week: £3,300
  - Ongoing Housing Solution – deposit (e.g. loss of interest, proportion of bad debt), rent in advance, fees, etc: £1,400
- Total: £4,952

**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)*  
*Somerset Community Legal Service Partnership: County Court Advice Project Report dated 24/3/04*