

STOCKTON-ON-TEES BOROUGH COUNCIL

CABINET RECOMMENDATIONS

PROFORMA

Cabinet Meeting14th July 2016

1. Title of Item/Report

Q4 Welfare Reform Update

2. Record of the Decision

Consideration was given to a report that provided an update on monitoring of the outcomes/impact of welfare reform and a summary of actions undertaken by the Council to mitigate against circumstances arising from the implementation of these changes.

The monitoring framework was set out under the following issues:

- Advice and Information Services;
- Discretionary Housing Payments;
- Social Fund/Crisis Payments;
- Housing;
- Local Council Tax Support Scheme;
- Employment; and
- General/cross cutting.

The Welfare Rights Unit was now a part of the Council's Finance and Business Services Directorate, and was based at 16 Church Road, Stockton-on-Tees.

This was a small service, consisting of a manager, four welfare rights officers and a first contact officer. Additional resources had been provided to enable two additional welfare rights officers to be seconded for a temporary period to the service, helping to undertake specific projects.

The Welfare Rights Unit were producing some excellent results, with £1,414,306 in additional benefits paid in 2015-16 to some of the borough's most vulnerable people, including £839,715 to social care clients.

An example of the type of project work that the Welfare Rights Unit had recently undertaken was provided.

The Council's Welfare Rights Unit (WRU), working in partnership with the

Council's Housing Benefits Service, identified nearly 1,150 such households containing an over 85 year old.

Of these households, 388 were not on a pass-ported benefit and it was this group that was initially targeted in the benefit take-up campaign. Partner organisations, Stockton District Advice and Information Services (SDAIS), the Thirteen Group and Age UK agreed to assist with a number of claimants.

A personal letter was sent to each targeted household, explaining the reason for contact, and requesting that the householder contact the Welfare Rights Unit, so that a benefits check could be carried out.

For each respondent, a Welfare Rights Officer carried out a full benefits check, identifying any further entitlement to benefits, assisting them to make claims and liaising with appropriate agencies.

Outcomes

Personal letters sent: 388

Responses received: 160

No Further Action: 43

Home Visits: 117

Claims Made: 158 (some of the households were entitled to claim for more than one benefit).

From the 160 responses received, home visits were organised for 117 households. As a result of these 117 home visits, 48 households were found to have had their correct entitlement and no further action was taken on those cases.

However, 69 households were found to have an entitlement to additional assistance, with 155 separate successful claims made for combinations of Attendance Allowance, Pension Credit, Council Tax Support, Housing Benefit and Carer's Allowance.

For these 69 households, the average award per week was £98.44, which equates to £353,220 when calculated on an annualised basis.

In addition to the average of £98.44 per week additional income achieved, a further £57,560 was awarded in backdated benefits to these vulnerable people, an average of £834.20 per household, made up

mainly of Attendance Allowance and Pension Credit.

Members were provided with copies of some of the positive feedback received.

Stage Two of the benefits take-up campaign would concentrate on the nearly 800 households identified with an over 85 year old, that were currently on a pass-ported benefit, and it was hoped that this will be completed by March 2017.

The Welfare Rights Unit have been provided with a list of 400 households from the Department of Work and Pensions that were at risk of detriment from the newly reduced Benefit Cap of £20,000 per annum.

This list was being examined to determine the levels of cap for individual households. The families most likely to be adversely affected would be contacted to advise of possible exemptions and to provide budgeting support and help with moving into work. Full details of this campaign would be provided in the next Welfare Reform report.

Stockton and District Advice and Information Service (SDAIS) recently led a partnership of four voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations which had been successful in a bid to bring in significant new funding from the Big Lottery Fund to support vulnerable people in the borough.

The funding was to develop services for people in hardship and crisis and it is a partnership of four agencies including:

- SDAIS - to give holistic advice and on-going support including benefits, debt and housing advice; co-ordination of project;
- Billingham Food Bank – to develop their services in the borough;
- Bridges – to provide support to people in crisis affected by substance misuse; and
- ACTES – Achieving Change Through Enterprising Solutions - to help people in crisis move into training and employment.

The four organisations had joined together to deliver the “Help through Crisis” project in the borough, which would provide long term support to move people away from crisis and develop their resilience and stability. The total funding secured was just under £500,000 for five years, meaning that each year around £100,000 would be split between the four agencies to deliver this new project.

This project was one of only five successful bids in the North East. One reason the bid was successful is because the project builds on existing work that SDAIS, the food bank and Bridges had been doing for the last

year. Members may recall that this initial work was funded through a one-year grant from Stockton BC's Public Health budget, and has meant that there was better co-ordination and reporting on the numbers of people using food banks and the reasons why they were going to emergency food providers. This has shown that the single biggest cause of people having to access food banks was due to problems about welfare benefits; including benefit sanctions and payment delays.

It was this initial investment to address some of the problems linked to welfare reform that had now led to this significant new funding coming in to provide enhanced support services for vulnerable people in crisis in the borough.

Details of the service aims and projections were provided.

Details were also provided on the following:-

- Supported Accommodation
- Universal Credit
- Administering Housing Benefit during the implementation of Universal Credit
- Local Council Tax Support
- Supporting to struggling Council Tax Payers
- Bedroom Restrictions
- Advice and Information Services
- Discretionary Housing Payments
- Social Fund/Crisis Payments
- Housing
- Local Council Tax Support Scheme
- Tax Credits

RESOLVED that

- The contents of this report be noted
- The performance monitoring outcomes and observations provided be noted.
- The additional funding of approximately £70,000 per annum from the Welfare Reform Fund for three years from 2017-18 to 2019-20 to maintain the current level of staffing and service in the Council's Welfare Rights Unit be approved.
- The additional funding of approximately £40,000 per annum from the Welfare Reform Fund for three years from 2017-18 to 2019-20 to continue to assist residents in receipt of Local Council Tax Support to access all the relevant benefit and support they were entitled to be

approved.

3. Reasons for the Decision

This report provides an update on the various welfare reforms, highlighting indications of impact and areas of concern.

4. Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

None

5. Declared (Cabinet Member) Conflicts of Interest

Cllr Ann McCoy declared a personal non prejudicial item in the Agenda Item 7 – Welfare Reform Update – Q4 2015/16 as she was a representative on Stockton District Information Advice Service.

Cllr Steve Nelson declared a personal non prejudicial item in the Agenda Item 7 – Welfare Reform Update – Q4 2015/16 as he was a Board Member of Thirteen Group.

6. Details of any Dispensations

N/A

7. Date and Time by which Call In must be executed

Midnight, 25th July 2016

Proper Officer
19 July 2016