



## Report of the Director of Social Services

Poverty Reduction Policy Development Committee – 27 September 2021

### Benefits Take Up

**Purpose:** To provide the Poverty Reduction Policy Development Committee with information about the problems with claiming benefits, the reasons for under-claiming, example of work we have undertaken in the past to increase benefit take up, current campaigns, the identification of future priorities in terms of increasing benefit take up and how the PDC can support this work in the future.

**Report Author:** Jane Storer

**Finance Officer:** Paul Roach

**Legal Officer:** Craig Davies

**Access to Services Officer:** Rhian Millar

#### For Information

### 1. Background

1.1 The Poverty Reduction Policy Development Committee has identified the need to increase the take-up of benefits in Swansea. The maximization of benefit entitlement aims to ensure that people claim their entitlements and maximize their household income. This is an update report from the February report which is attached as Appendix 1.

### 2. The problem with claiming benefits

2.1 There are a number of problems that people can experience when trying to claiming benefits. These include;

- People lacking the knowledge and understanding of the benefits system. They need to know what questions to ask in order to establish entitlement. But if you do not know what questions to ask, then how can they establish entitlement?

- The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) administer benefits and staff are only trained in the area that they are working in – so do not know how benefits link together.
- People may ring DWP and believe that they are seeking advice – but they are getting through to a call centre. There is a regular occurrence of call centre staff providing information and advice which leads the claimant to believe that they are not entitled to benefit. However unless a claim is made, entitlement has not been established.
- People's circumstances differ – so entitlement is dependent on their individual circumstances. There is a lot of information about benefits on-line – but this can be misleading, out of date and can take you down different paths until you are completely overwhelmed. The Welfare Rights Team would recommend that people use sites such as Citizen's Advice; Turn2Us. In addition, not everyone has access to the internet or the necessary skills to interpret the written word.
- Access to free and impartial advice – all organisations that do provide this are overwhelmed; there are waiting lists; queues; and calls are not always answered.
- There are constant changes to the benefit system, claimants moving in and out of entitlement and changing circumstances affecting entitlement which benefit claimants do not realise will have an impact.

### **3. The reason for under claiming**

3.1 There are a number of reasons why people under claim benefits. These include;

- a lack of resources to help claimants through the process,
- a lack of knowledge about the benefits that are available,
- Claimant's don't think that they are entitled to benefits,
- Poor past experience,
- Continual reassessments,
- Fear,
- Stigma.

### **4. The extent of under claiming**

4.1 Research has shown that both nationally and locally that under claiming benefits is a wide spread problem amongst certain groups of people. For example, 2 out of 5 pensioners do not claim the Pension Credit that they are entitled too, and 1 in 7 working households do not claim help with their rent.

- 4.2 The latest (2017/18) UK Government figures estimated more than £16 billion goes unclaimed in means tested benefits. These figures do not include tax credits, universal credit or council tax reduction.

## **5. What works**

- 5.1 A number of actions have been proven to increase the take up of benefits. Firstly, raising awareness of people's entitlement to benefits can increase the take up of benefits. However, simply raising the awareness of benefit entitlement is not sufficient to increase benefit take up amongst all those groups of people who under claim benefits. A key factor which can drive an increase in benefit take up is to challenge people's perceptions of benefit claimants, negative stereotyping and the way in which organisations perceive and interact with benefit claimants. One of the most effective ways of increasing benefit take up is to provide tailored 1 to 1 support.
- 5.2 Our experience has also shown that we need to provide additional tailored support to the individuals when they need it e.g when their benefits are being reviewed, or when their circumstances change. Finally take up campaigns should be targeted at particular groups where we know that there is evidence of wide spread under claiming or there is a change in legislation and we need to protect claimants income or future entitlement.

## **6. What's going on right now?**

- 6.1 Tackling Poverty is one of the key priorities for Swansea Council. The Welfare Rights Team are a small team that provides a second tier service. Their remit is to increase the knowledge and capacity of the workforce to try and meet the demand for welfare benefits advice and support. The team do this by providing training on a range of welfare benefits, an advice line, joint appointments for complex casework, appeal representation and publications. The team also undertake targeted take up campaigns.
- 6.2 The latest Welfare Reforms whilst focussing on those of working age has impacted across age groups, with some client groups being more affected than others. The roll out of Universal Credit which is a benefit for those of working age, has had a negative impact on the most vulnerable citizens, from making online claims to reduce amounts of income for those who are severely sick and disabled. The increase in the use of technology marginalises the vulnerable from making online claims to lodging appeals and appeal hearings taking place via telephone and video.
- 6.3 Due to the pandemic, there has been an increase in the number of claimants of Universal Credit. This could potentially change people's perceptions of 'benefit claimants' and being seen as a separate group

but more of a situation we can all find ourselves in. However, it could have an adverse effect, in that those who have skills and experience and have managed to remove themselves from benefit entitlement having even less understanding and empathy for those who through no fault of their own, have to remain on benefits.

- 6.4 The Universal Credit £20 uplift is due to be removed this month. This will have an impact on benefit claimants, especially those with families and in low paid work. The team are already receiving calls from distressed claimants concerned over how they will be able to manage financially.
- 6.4 Another area that is and will have an impact on services is the UK's removal from the European Union. EEA nationals, even if they already have a permanent right to reside in the UK, need to ensure that they have applied for settled and pre-settled status originally before June 2021, however the DWP are accepting late applications. The DWP are aware that 50,000 current EEA benefit claimants have not applied to this scheme.
- 6.5 Welsh Government have commissioned free benefit awareness training to try and increase knowledge to identify those that may be missing out. Swansea's Welfare Rights Team will be delivering this training on behalf of Dangos Cymru.

## **7. Pension Credit take up campaign**

- 7.1 UK Government figures have shown that 2 out of 5 pensioners are not claiming the pension credit that they are entitled too. Pensioners who do not claim this benefit not only lose the income from this benefit, but are also missing out on accessing other grants and benefits because pension credit can act as a "passport" to other entitlements.
- 7.2 The Welfare Rights Team are leading on a Pension Credit take up campaign for this group because they are easily identifiable and systems have been developed to make it easier to claim – telephone claims; claim forms and online claiming.
- 7.3 The Council's Revenues and Benefits service initially identified potentially 465 claimants who may be entitled and not receiving this benefit; as a consequence of the numbers involved the welfare rights team decided to take a partnership approach.
- 7.4 The welfare rights team contacted Citizen's Advice; Swansea Carer's Centre; Age Cymru West Glamorgan; Care and Repair Western Bay. As these three organisations also covered Neath Port Talbot; Neath Port Talbot Welfare Rights Unit were also contacted to provide a partnership approach to this take up campaign. Unfortunately due to sickness and workload, Age Cymru West Glamorgan were unable to

participate in this take up campaign, however the team continue to work with the other organisations

7.4 A free phone helpline which operates between Monday to Thursday from 10 – 3 was established on the 21<sup>st</sup> December. To date, Swansea Revenue's and Benefits section and have sent out letters to 465 potential claimants on the first run and a further 535 on the second run to claimants who may be entitled to Pension Credit. Port Talbot sent around 165 to residents in Neath Port Talbot; there have been articles in the Evening Post relating to this take up campaign; information on social media and newsletters. To date we have taken around 250 calls and Swansea have been allocated 58 cases from calls taken, but have received referrals from other sources, which has resulted in 83 enquiries in total. Out of these cases we have:

- 8 successful claims for Attendance Allowance;
- 3 successful supersessions for Personal Independence Payment
- 33 claims have been made for Pension Credit
- 5 'underlying entitlement' to Carer's Allowance claimed
- 5 people met the criteria for an award of Disability Benefits but would not claim it
- 2 claims for Council Tax Discount
- 1 claim for Council Tax Reduction
- 6 claims for health benefits

7.5 We have raised £781.70 per week in disability benefits; claimants have received £9,272.54 backdated payments. Pension Credit claims have increased the weekly income by £10,492.45 per week; these claimants have received £20,877.93 in backdated payments. For every £1 a week increase in benefit income has a multiplier effect and is worth an extra £4 to the local economy, This means that this is worth £45,096.60 to our local economy – keeping people in jobs.

## **8. Other take up campaigns?**

8.1 When there are changes to the benefit system, there will always be an opportunity to implement a targeted take up campaign. Welfare Reform has provided many opportunities for;

- (i) Mixed Aged Couples,
- (ii) Sick and Disabled claimants,
- (iii) Disabled Children.

8.2 Universal Credit still causes the most concern. Claimants being advised to claim Universal Credit when they may have entitlement to remain on legacy benefits along with poor decision making within the DWP are contributing to some claimants losing out on a substantial amount of income now and in the future; It is really important claimants seek immediate welfare rights advice before making a claim for

Universal Credit – however advice agencies do not have capacity to manage this.

- 8.3 The groups that we should be focusing on now are those claimants who are in receipt of a legacy benefit and are not claiming a disability benefit; or not claiming the correct rate. By focusing on this group it will have a long term impact as it will increase the likelihood of protection of higher benefit levels when transferring over to Universal Credit. There is only a short period for acting or those potential increases will be lost permanently, but it is a vicious circle as claimants are continually being reassessed and losing entitlement. This group includes families with a disabled child who are not claiming a disability benefit or not claiming the correct rate; By ensuring the child is receiving the correct disability benefit rates, not only brings in much extra income but reduces the rules and conditionality on means tested benefits and allows the necessary time to focus on care.

## **9. Equality and Engagement Implications**

- 9.1 The Council is subject to the Public Sector Equality Duty (Wales) and must, in the exercise of their functions, have due regard to the need to:
- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act.
  - Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
  - Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

Our Equality Impact Assessment process ensures that we have paid due regard to the above. (tbc by AtS)

## **10. Financial Implications**

- 10.1 There are no financial implications

## **11. Legal Implications**

- 11.1 There are no legal implications

**Background papers:** None.

**Appendices:** Appendix A – Previous Committee Report – February 2021.