



City and County of Swansea

Notes of the **Scrutiny Working Group - Welfare Reform**

Committee Room 5 - Guildhall, Swansea

Monday, 14 January 2019 at 10.00 am

Present: Councillor L S Gibbard (Chair) Presided

Councillor(s)

Y V Jardine
L R Jones

Councillor(s)

S M Jones
L V Walton

Other Attendees

Mary Sherwood

Cabinet Member - Better Communities

Officer(s)

Liz Jordan
Rachel Moxey

Scrutiny Officer
Head of Poverty & Prevention

Apologies for Absence

Councillor(s): C A Holley, H M Morris, S Pritchard and G J Tanner

1 Disclosure of Personal and Prejudicial Interests.

No disclosures of interest were received.

2 For Information Report

Jackie Preston from Citizens Advice (CA) attended and briefed the Working Group on the last 12 months since the roll out of Universal Credit (UC) in Swansea. They are funded by the local authority to provide services and are concentrating on welfare reform.

The following main issues were discussed:

- Starting to see household debt increase as predicted
- Half of the increase in demand for food vouchers is due to UC
- CA still dealing with queries around personal independent payments
- CA has come across some unlicensed landlords. Under UC the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) do not have to check for Rent Smart Wales accreditation so tenants are at the mercy of landlords. Working Group worried that people could be living in substandard housing.
- People can still receive payments for housing through UC even if the landlord is not registered with Rent Smart Wales

- DWP's IT system is not adequate and is making wrong calculations, for example for bedroom tax. Citizen's Advice have informed DWP and it is being rectified
- Deductions for overpayments of legacy benefits are being taken from UC
- Housing benefits system has changed, this is positive
- Citizen's Advice has a good relationship with council tax.

3 Welfare Reform Report

Mary Sherwood, Cabinet Member for Better Communities (People) and Rachel Moxey, Head of Poverty and Prevention attended. They went through the report, highlighting the main issues and answering questions.

The following main issues were discussed:

- Local Authority (LA) has little statutory duty in this area. It pays benefits on behalf of DWP
- From a preventative point of view it is in the Authority's interests to make people aware of what they are entitled to
- Welfare Rights has a 95% success rate for appeals
- Most people who are on benefits do not have any involvement with the LA. Only people who are in major difficulty do
- Revenue and Benefits are working on a policy to enable some data sharing. They will target people who are known through housing benefit and council tax benefit to inform them of the advice and support available from the Authority. A letter would be sent from Revenue and Benefits initially and if they respond they would be put in touch with Poverty and Prevention team. The first people to be targeted would be families with children about to turn 5
- Cabinet Member thinks it is vital that when Social Services first go into people's homes they are asked about their financial situation
- Would be useful for Welfare Rights to have contact with Social Services and other front line staff and for them to be aware of the advice line for Welfare Rights. It would also be useful for councillors to be reminded about this.
- The Authority is increasingly working in a cross cutting way and trying to take a preventative approach. Able to advice people on budgeting, learning new skills etc
- Would be useful for everyone working in the community to have training from Welfare Rights or to have flashcards or some sort of checklist to take out with them
- Working Group concerned that as job of social worker is stressful and sickness levels are high there are a large number of agency workers. This makes it difficult to ensure they are aware of recent legislation and advice. Social Services are gradually reducing the number of agency workers
- Authority has little involvement and influence over DWP but think there are some things we could do locally and take advantage of the good relationship we have with DWP locally
- DWP do not do any affordability assessments. The Working Group and local authority feel these need to be undertaken especially on people's ability to pay back UC advances

- Many people are unaware that they do not need to go onto UC until the full migration takes place as they could be worse off. Need to use ways to reinforce this message. Welfare Rights could use councillors more to get the message out
- There is a newsletter called 'Quids In' which has been circulated to libraries and all councillors. This should be redistributed to councillors for their onward circulation
- There could be a welfare rights officer situated within teams in the Authority such as Housing, Rents etc which could make a difference. Welfare Rights are currently providing training to departments which is the second best option. The Department is looking at how training is provided to try and increase the reach.
- Welfare Rights produce a training bulletin. It would be useful for all councillors to receive this.
- It would be useful for the Working Group to receive all of the Policy in Practice reports so they can see the full context and history.

4 Discussion and Conclusions

The Working Group discussed progress and made the following conclusions:

1. We recommend that as a matter of urgency we work with the DWP locally to ensure people are A) given the correct advice as to whether or not they need to go onto UC and B) given sufficient help such that if they will not be able to manage without an advance payment then an affordability assessment is always carried out to make sure the repayments are reasonable.
2. We would like to commend the team on the work that they are doing – for the proactive approach and the preventative approach that they are taking.
3. We would like to express our concern about the Rent Smart Wales Register of landlords. This system needs to change, as, in some instances, landlords can still get rent paid under UC even if they are not registered.
4. Working Group is pleased that the team has a good working relationship with Housing but we feel more could be done with Social Services – more training etc.
5. We feel it is much better to have permanent staff with good local knowledge and are concerned, for example, about the use of agency workers in social services.
6. We would like to see the Authority explore having a Welfare Rights officer in different teams such as Housing.
7. We feel it is a positive step that there will soon be a policy in place to allow some data sharing. This should enable the targeting of people to inform them of the advice and support available from the Authority.

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8. We feel that Welfare Rights could use councillors more to get the message out about the support and advice available. Information should go out regularly to councillors so that it is more of a two-way street. For example, it would be useful for councillors to have the 'Quids In' newsletter to pass on.
9. We would like to see all staff, especially councillors and front line staff receiving welfare rights training. We feel it is worth exploring if this training could be undertaken on line.

Following on from this meeting:

- A letter will be written from the convener of the Working Group to the Cabinet Member, summarising the discussion and outlining the Working Group's thoughts and recommendations.

The meeting ended at 11.45 am