



To:
Councillor Mary Sherwood
Cabinet Member for Better Communities
(People)

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Date 05 February 2019
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Summary: This is a letter from the Welfare Reform Working Group to the Cabinet Member for Better Communities (People) following the meeting of the Working Group on 14 January 2019. It is about the impacts of welfare reform in Swansea.

Dear Cllr Sherwood

The Welfare Reform Scrutiny Working Group met on 14 January to look at the impacts of Welfare Reform in Swansea and works / measures in place to support citizens and mitigate problems. It also received evidence from Citizen's Advice Swansea Neath Port Talbot in respect of Universal Credit (UC) queries handled by them during the 12 months since the roll out of UC in Swansea. This letter provides you with feedback from that meeting.

We would like to thank you and Rachel Moxey for attending to present the report and answer questions and Jackie Preston for providing the evidence from Citizens Advice. We appreciate your engagement and input.

Whilst the Working Group found the meeting informative and interesting, it did have some concerns and we would like to make the following comments.

The Working Group discussed the evidence from Citizens Advice:

- We heard that they are funded by the Authority to provide services and are concentrating on welfare reform.
- We heard that we are starting to see household debt increase as predicted and that half of the increase in demand for food vouchers is due to UC. We were not surprised to hear this but it is a concern.
- We also heard that Citizens Advice is still dealing with queries around personal independent payments.

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- We were informed that Citizens Advice has come across some unlicensed landlords and that under UC the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) do not have to check for Rent Smart Wales accreditation. People can still receive payments for housing through UC even if the landlord is not registered with Rent Smart Wales. We expressed our concern that tenants are at the mercy of landlords and the worry that people could be living in substandard housing.
- We heard that the DWP's IT system is not adequate and is making wrong calculations, for example for bedroom tax. We were pleased to hear that Citizens Advice has informed DWP and it is being rectified.
- It was positive to hear that the Authority's Housing Benefit system has changed for the better and that Citizens Advice has a good relationship with the Council Tax department.
- We were informed that deductions for overpayments of legacy benefits are being taken from UC. We were very concerned to hear this.
- We were pleased to hear that there is an agreement with DWP for Citizens Advice nationally to deliver a new UC Support Service offer from April 2019.

We then moved on to discuss the report from the Cabinet Member for Better Communities (People):

- We were informed that the Local Authority (LA) has little statutory duty in this area. It pays benefits on behalf of DWP.
- We agreed with your comment that from a preventative point of view it is in the Authority's interests to make people aware of what they are entitled to
- We were very pleased to hear that the Welfare Rights Team has a 95% success rate for appeals.
- We heard that most people who are on benefits do not have any involvement with the LA. Only people who are in major difficulty and trigger some sort of intervention from the Authority do.
- We were pleased to hear that 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 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 the Poverty and Prevention team. The first people to be targeted would be families with children about to turn 5.
- You informed us that you think it is vital that when Social Services first go into people's homes they are asked about their financial situation.
- We feel it 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.
- We were pleased to hear that the Authority is increasingly working in a cross cutting way and trying to take a preventative approach, and is able to advice people on budgeting, learning new skills etc.
- We feel it 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.
- The Working Group is concerned that as the 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. We were

informed that Social Services are gradually reducing the number of agency workers.

- We heard that the Authority has little involvement and influence over DWP nationally but that there are some things we could do locally and take advantage of the good relationship we have with DWP locally.
- We also heard that DWP do not do any affordability assessments. The Working Group feels these need to be undertaken especially on people's ability to pay back UC advances.
- We expressed our concern that many people are unaware that they do not need to go onto UC until the full migration takes place and that they could be worse off on UC. We feel the Authority needs to use ways to reinforce this message. Welfare Rights could use Councillors more to get the message out.
- We heard that there is a newsletter called 'Quids In' which has been circulated to libraries and all councillors. We feel this should be redistributed to councillors for their onward circulation.
- We heard that there could be a Welfare Rights Officer situated within teams in the Authority such as Housing, Rents etc which could make a difference. And that a Welfare Rights are currently providing training to departments which is the second best option. We also heard that the Department is looking at how training is provided to try and increase the reach.
- We were informed that Welfare Rights produce a training bulletin. We feel it would be useful for all Councillors to receive this.
- You suggested that it would be useful for the Working Group to see all the Policy in Practice reports so we can see the full context and history.

Following the meeting, we 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. We are 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 about the use of agency workers, particularly 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.
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.

Your Response

We hope you find this letter useful and informative. We are interested in hearing your thoughts about the issues raised and would ask that you respond to the 9 points in our conclusions by Monday 25 February 2019.

Yours sincerely

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