

Councillor Louise Gibbard
Convener – Welfare Reform Scrutiny
Working Group

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Our Ref: MS/KH
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Date: 18 February 2019

Summary: This is a letter from the Cabinet Member for Better Communities (People) in response to the letter from the Convener, Welfare Reform Scrutiny Working Group dated 5 February 2019 regarding the impacts of welfare reform in Swansea.

Dear Councillor Gibbard

Thank you for your letter following the Welfare Reform Scrutiny Working Group held on 14 January 2019 and your ongoing interest and commitment to mitigating the impacts of welfare reform on the people and families of Swansea. The work of the Welfare Reform Scrutiny Working Group and its contributors supports the ongoing challenge for Swansea Council and its partners in providing timely and effective services that meet the needs of people in Swansea. It is through these interventions that the cost of poverty on the public purse can be minimised and the long lasting impact on families be mitigated. As requested, I have provided a response to each of the recommendations made by the group as set out below.

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.*

The local authority and Swansea DWP have developed good working relations with ongoing open dialogue and partnership working on the ground as well as through wider forum membership such as the Swansea Poverty Partnership Forum and Financial Inclusion Steering Group. Through the positive work of their Partnership Manager, the DWP in Swansea are encouraging an internal culture of 'doing the right thing at the right time, every time, for the client.' DWP where they can, will support clients to make informed decisions but this is limited as DWP are not advice providers, they are administrators of benefits. As such, their staff are not trained in providing holistic advice covering the range of benefits and options. DWP will not advise a client as to whether they should or should not claim Universal Credit. That decision sits with the client. Letters from regional centres

notifying claimants when they have had a change of circumstances suggest that they may be entitled to claim Universal Credit. A query has recently been raised with the DWP locally as to whether these letters could suggest that the claimant seek independent advice about their benefit entitlement.

If a client requests an advance payment then DWP will suggest that the amount of the advance be limited to only what the individual needs. Affordability assessments are not built into the process; this is an issue of national policy rather than of local practice, connected with the fact that the DWP does not regard itself as a “lender” and therefore does not follow processes expected of “responsible lenders” in checking that debt is going to be affordable. As you know, this matter is being raised with UK government in line with the motion passed by Council last month. Unless there is central policy change on this matter, I would not expect local practice to be able to change, but we will have a conversation with our local DWP partners about the process they follow in discussing advances. It is important that people requesting advance payments fully understand the implications and are fully supported to make an informed decision.

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.*

Many thanks - your comments will be passed onto the relevant teams.

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.*

This is true. Although a landlord would be in breach of the Rent Smart regulations by failing to register, there is no legislation that would prevent them from creating a liability for rent. I will discuss this with the relevant Welsh Government Minister and let you know of their response.

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.*

We continue to encourage Social Workers to use the Welfare Rights Advice Line to access benefit advice to identify benefit entitlement and rectify benefit issues at the earliest opportunity. Working with the Social Worker / Support Worker in this way does increase their knowledge and builds capacity. The Welfare Rights Team provides a training programme which covers a range of welfare benefits. The first problem we would raise is that demand is greater than capacity. The second is that issue of whether or not Social Workers avail themselves of these training and development opportunities is not one we are able to tackle from within this team. We would suggest that the commitment of Social Workers to exploring the financial well-being of the people they work with and seeking early help from Welfare Rights where necessary, should be looked at via Scrutiny. I have discussed this suggestion with my relevant Cabinet colleagues who are very welcoming of this, and I would be grateful if you could progress that suggestion.

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.*

Where possible, we want to develop and retain the skills of knowledgeable staff that are well resourced and connected. In some rare instances agency staff are deployed in Social Worker posts, this is a rare occurrence when, for example, the role is only funded for a few months because funding has been received at the end of the financial year. Social Services are not an exception to the current recruitment restrictions. All vacancies are being offered on a temporary basis and this in itself causes issues for effective recruitment. It is also worth noting that the Welfare Benefits system is national, not local: an agency worker may in fact have more confidence in broaching family finances and dealing with benefit issues than a long-term council employee. Permanency of tenure within this organisation does not necessarily confer benefits expertise or commitment to deploying it.

6. *We would like to see the Authority explore having a Welfare Rights officer in different teams such as Housing.*

Access to front facing first tier welfare rights advice for services delivered by the Local Authority is key to preventing situations from escalating. The Welfare Rights Team have met with Child and Family Services to look at setting up a procedure when applications for emergency payments have been made where there are benefit issues, which will hopefully identify benefit problems at the earliest opportunity and reduce pressure on the emergency payments budget.

From the perspective of the Housing Service, my Cabinet colleague Cllr Andrea Lewis is currently exploring the option of having a Welfare Rights resource within the Rents Team. This is being considered as part of the wider Housing Commissioning Review. Meanwhile, Cllr Lewis welcomes the idea of Scrutiny processes examining how well Housing officers are working with Welfare Rights and others in Poverty & Prevention. In a context where specialist Welfare Rights Advisers are not plentiful enough to be stationed throughout the organization, Scrutiny could take an interest in how well all service delivery departments are owning the commitment to “tackling poverty being everybody’s business” and supporting the drive to ensure all citizens claim their entitlements. Educational Welfare Officers, for example, could also be very well placed to detect early financial crisis and support a family with a Benefits problem. Gas fitters who service boilers, gardeners who deliver “Tend and Mend” services and others could likewise be well placed to notice a problem and encourage a householder to take up support.

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.*

A Data Sharing Policy has been developed that supports Poverty and Prevention to plan and carry out the targeted work enabled by the *Policy in Practice* report and data set relating to the Single Housing Benefit Extract for Swansea at September 2018. The practical arrangements for the effective management of this are currently underway.

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 councilors so that it is more of a two-way street. For example, it would be useful*

for Councillor's to have the 'Quids In!' newsletter to pass on.

A copy of the *Quids In! Universal Credit Guide* and the 10th Anniversary Edition that focusses on loan sharks has been circulated to all Councillors. A limited supply of the *Quids In! Universal Credit* guide were produced and circulated widely in 2017, including to all councilors. The information contained within the publication will become dated as changes to government policy are implemented. The publication therefore has a shelf life. I believe that information goes fairly regularly to councillors but few are motivated to act upon it. I asked for the *Quids In! Universal Credit* guide to be distributed to all councillors when it was first produced, along with a request councillors to contact us for further copies to pass on if needed. There was a very low response rate. However, the team has some ideas about quick-reference resources which councillors could use when supporting someone with money worries, which we will roll out as resources allow. I am particularly keen to promote the advice line but I am wary of our restricted Welfare Rights resource and mindful that councillors must be prepared to take the advice and progress the case themselves.

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 online.*

The Welfare Rights Team are in the process of developing an online Benefits Awareness course and would recommend that it becomes mandatory for all staff in the Local Authority. Due to the technical and complex nature of benefits advice however, learning support is essential. If staff are to be expected to apply their knowledge and understanding with people they are supporting, then this is more in depth and requires more interaction during training than online only can provide. If there is an ambition for more officers to deliver hands-on benefits support, a commitment to grow the Welfare Rights team to support this would probably be needed.

Yours sincerely



COUNCILLOR MARY SHERWOOD
CABINET MEMBER FOR BETTER COMMUNITIES - PEOPLE