

REPORT TO ADULT SOCIAL CARE PARTNERSHIP BOARD

12 JULY 2010

BY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR HEALTH, HOUSING AND ADULT SERVICES

STRATEGIC PLAN FOR WELFARE RIGHTS ADVICE (2008-2011) UPDATE

1 PURPOSE

1.1 To update the Adult Social Care Partnership Board Holders about;

- The welfare rights advice development activity undertaken over the last three years linked to the implementation of the Strategic Plan for Welfare Rights Advice (SAP).
- The council's intended approach to developing this further, including improved financial inclusion provision, over the next few years.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 In 2008 the Adult Social Care Partnership Board (ASCPB) sponsored a review of current and future demand in Sunderland for welfare rights advice (benefits, debt, housing and employment) which led to the creation and launch of the SAP.

2.2 A 3 year action plan was created to deliver improvements against 5 key intentions, building on existing good practice and activity to provide a more coordinated and effective city wide approach for this type of advice.

2.3 As a result there have been a number of improvements made in relation to advice provision for people in Sunderland. These include;

- Active involvement in creating a committed network of advice providers whose shared aim is to improve access to their services; the network is called libra and has its own website and provider directory.
- Developing more responsive local services. This includes making advice available from more locations, reduced waiting times and additional resources being made available to advice providers during the economic downturn (through WNF funding) to help them meet increased demand.
- Creating clearer pathways into and between the city's advice services - through agreed referral processes and public information.
- Creating additional services for some vulnerable groups in partnership with other funders / service providers (for example, the Macmillan Welfare Benefits Service).
- Increasing access channels for people needing advice - including telephone advice and on-line provision.

(SAP Achievements Report attached for reference).

- 2.4 Continuing this coordinated approach and joint activity around service improvement is vitally important given the challenges facing the advice sector, and the people that they assist;
- Demand for advice continues to rise and is projected to rise further – especially in relation to debt and welfare benefits advice, due to demographic change, significant welfare reform, and unsustainable personal debt levels.
- 2.5 The government had announced a series of reforms initially calculated to save 18 billion pounds, the majority of which are based on reducing benefit payments.
- 2.6 The reforms/savings will affect people of working age more than the retired, with the purpose and stated intention for many of the changes being to reduce benefit dependency and to make work pay. They build on a series of benefit changes introduced by the last government – particularly in relation to “sickness benefits” but in both scale and scope go much further
- 2.7 While these reforms are being introduced in phases the impact of these may be cumulative for some people. For example the same resident could be affected for example by conversion from Incapacity Benefit (IB) to Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) or to Job Seekers Allowance (JSA), and then face reductions in their Housing Benefit (HB) and by Disability Living Allowance Changes.
- Public sector funding for such services is under severe pressure due to competing priorities. In addition national funding for specialist advice services is also at risk.
- 2.8 The national debt advice service funded by FIF funding was due to end in March. The government has extended this funding by one year (to end March 2012) but has strongly indicated that this is likely to be the end of their funding.
- 2.9 We have recently learned that the Legal Aid review will result in welfare benefits , debt and housing issues mostly being taken out of the scope of future Legal Services Commission contracts (from 2012 onwards). This will have an impact in terms of access to specialist advice in these areas.

3 PLANNED APPROACH TO WELFARE RIGHTS DEVELOPMENT

- 3.1 Sunderland’s approach is designed to consolidate and build on SAPs achievements, and to better manage demand for these services within available resources. This is in keeping with the city councils core values, Outcomes Framework and operating model, providing us with both the challenge and opportunity of working smartly to meet the demand and provide a more personalised service.
- 3.2 The plans embed the principles of targeted and proportionate support and actively empower people to act early and self help; providing them with the tools they need to do this effectively. They link to wider council objectives including reducing

poverty, inequality and deprivation, improving health and well being, increasing aspirations and opportunities, and further developing customer centric services.

3.3 The approach can be summarised by saying we intend to spend time working 'on the business' (as the networks and providers exist already and know their business) to promote, enhance and improve the integrated model. We won't be creating a new plan or strategy as the original aims still hold true, it's more about looking at how we do things to ensure maximum impact for the available resources.

3.4 Our aim is to work within existing or emerging frameworks to deliver an annual work plan of service improvements based on SWOW principles that in the first year will include;

- Promoting financial inclusion with a focus on increasing people's awareness of their rights and responsibilities.
- Developing as part of the councils Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) Review and advice model, new on-line, self serve and mediated access tools and services. These will provide maximum access for the majority of people that have low level needs and that may only require minimal help. The Councils' Welfare Rights Service will pilot this model.
- Diverting resource to 'in-reach activity. This is about creating capacity within communities by supporting local organisations to help their own customers to self serve so that they can meet their own basic advice and information needs. This will involve working together with Compact Members and other organisations.
- Continuing locality based services as part of the councils new as part of the council's new advice model but working with these services to ensure that face to face services are only provided to those that are most in need of them.
- Specialist support will have clearer criteria about how this more expensive provision is accessed.
- Creating capacity to deal with increasing demand by implementing proactive and preventative services, with early and time limited interventions. This helps to reduce avoidable contacts, reduces repeat customers and dependency, and limits the need to direct people to more expensive and specialist services.
- Reviewing the Councils Welfare Rights Service and commissioned services, within the context of wider Council Service Reviews (including IAG and Health Inequalities) to ensure better targeting of resource and achievement of sustainable outcomes.

3.5 This programme of activity will continue the move towards an improved delivery model which does involve a cultural change for some of the people traditionally assisted by these services as 'those that can' will be encouraged and supported to self serve. It has been recognised however that people may need different levels of support at different times, within this overall delivery model, so the service offer should always be appropriate to the presenting need.

3.6 It is also recognised that developing the tools to enable effective self service and mediated access, and promoting these will be a major challenge for the council and advice providers.

4. RECOMMENDATION

4.1 The board are asked to receive this report for information