

# **Strategic Welfare Rights Advice Plan**

## **The Route to Advice in Sunderland**

### **Achievements 2008-2011**

## To co-ordinate the city council's activity in relation to welfare rights advice

- Advice and financial inclusion initiatives embedded into wider council and partnership plans - such as the Child Poverty Strategy, so that more people receive a wider range of support
- Worked together with CFEB and other agencies to improve financial inclusion within the city - with over 500 people gaining practical skills/knowledge through Making the Most of Your Money sessions
- More customers enabled to help themselves and others through improving council Online information:
  - ◆ Support provided for people and businesses during the economic downturn via the Recession Portal
  - ◆ The council's Advice Portal has received over 300,000 hits
  - ◆ Carers pages developed to enable carers to obtain information more easily
- Council services arranging joint training for staff, and providing joint responses to consultations in order to share expertise
- Council services increasing awareness of their services and reducing costs through jointly organised publicity campaigns and attendance at local events
- Developing an advice model that will be rolled out through the council's ongoing Information, Advice and Guidance Review. Its implementation over the next year will enable more people to receive help with improved customer service
- Supported the Sunderland Way of Working and helping council staff thinking about retirement/career change, by providing them with advice to inform their options at events and through fact sheets

### Outcome

Effective leadership and management of resources

## To work with partners to develop a more comprehensive city wide network to enhance access opportunities and choice in relation to first tier advice provision

- **The libra advice network membership substantially increased and activity coordinated so public and professionals have easy access to advice/information**
- libra website improved through use of council innovations funding, and migration to the larger Northern Money Website
- Holding a series of financial inclusion events attended by 20+ organisations to identify key issues/priority improvement actions
- More effective promotion of advice services and the libra network through:
  - ◆ Including libra details with Council Tax Bills, to reach over 124,000 properties each year
  - ◆ Articles and sponsored supplements in the local press
  - ◆ Promoting libra within Gentoo's Wear Living magazine, reaching over 29,000 households twice per year, and including libra details with all Gentoo Arrears letters
- **Thinking Sunderland** - council funding has helped to develop local advice services enabling them to employ local people and deal with over 33,000 individual enquiries in the two years to March 2011

### Outcomes

50 % of people surveyed now know where to go to get advice and this advice is valued.

The Sunderland Residents Survey 2010 rated welfare benefits/ debt advice as being as important as the council Customer Service Centres

## To increase accessibility to specialist advice provision available within the city

- Specialist advice providers now work from council bases across the city, making these services more available locally. These include preventative financial inclusion services from providers such as Citizens Advice Sunderland
- Closer working relationships between a range of providers and the Housing Options Team (HOT) to improve access to housing advice and provide earlier interventions. This resulted in over 300 extra 300 referrals into HOT
- HOT have enhanced their services to reach more customers in need . Over 2000 households have been prevented from becoming homeless since 2009 and other examples include:
  - ◆ A new post holder has worked with the cities private hostels to help manage residents entrenched housing need. They have engaged 330 customers, with 163 being helped into alternative or more settled accommodation
  - ◆ Actively engaging with the Mortgage Rescue Scheme . There have been 14 cases that met the criteria for help but due to people approaching HOT for assistance earlier a further 396 cases have been provided with advice or actually had their homelessness prevented to resolve their situation
- Clearer pathways provided into the city's Legal Services Commission/Financial Inclusion Fund funded services to enable more people struggling with debts to receive the help they needed
- Held two successful events as part of a regional Advice Day event. These brought together a range of organisations so that a greater number of customer enquiries could be resolved at the point of contact

### Outcome

Increased early intervention provision and more targeted use of specialist provision.

## To provide more effective and accessible advice services for vulnerable or other hard to reach groups

- Secured substantial grant funding and worked closely with Macmillan so that people affected by cancer have a dedicated service to help them relieve financial pressures:
  - ◆ The service is available from a range of venues including the Royal Hospital - and over 1,000 people have been helped in its first two years
- On site support provided to Carers, through weekly Welfare Rights Service outreach sessions at the Carers Centre and the provision of targeted information
- Targeted support provided to range of other community organisations, including the Bangladeshi Centre, Washington Mind, and to Health / Social Care Professionals:
  - ◆ Awareness raising , so that staff can help with many basic queries directly
  - ◆ Provided support to organisations so that they can raise the profile of issues affecting their own customers
- Benefits advice offered as part of the overall package for people moving into Extra Care Accommodation
- Shelters new PRS Access Scheme will also be helping people to better access private rented accommodation and / or help them sustain an existing tenancy
- More elderly and disabled people helped to maximise their incomes. People with social care needs that approach the council and that have a full care assessment are now offered a full welfare benefits check
- Identifying the need to find a resource to take forwards dedicated' in reach activity to engage more effectively with local communities and organisations working with them

### Outcome

Reducing poverty, inequality and deprivation

## To maximise and use as efficiently as possible the investment into advice services within the city

- Many more people helped at the first point of contact - preventing issues escalating in seriousness and cost
- Clearer referral arrangements developed with people streamed into a range of new services created to help them - for example Gentoos Tenants can now use Gentoos own benefits/debt advice
- The 2010 Sunderland Residents Survey showed that 60% of those that responded were satisfied with advice on welfare benefits or debt management
- Over 1.3 million in additional funding for welfare rights advice services from a number of sources (including Big Lotteries, Macmillan, Gentoos, Northern Rock Foundation, Supporting People and Crisis) - in many cases facilitated by initial council funding or support
- Implementing a new advice model that provides a more proportionate response to peoples presenting needs in order to manage growing demand and resource pressures:
  - ◆ Improving self serve materials for the majority that may only need a little bit of help
  - ◆ Continuing to provide more intensive help for those that need it - either directly - or through additional support to community/ voluntary organisations
- The council's own contracting arrangements and commissioning models are being reviewed and improved, with this delivery model being built into future plans and specifications

### Outcome

Creating an inclusive city economy for people all ages - with people and their local communities made better off as a result of advice activity

## Making a difference to people's lives

### Easing Financial Pressures

Mr and Mrs H were referred to the Macmillan Welfare Benefits Service after Mr H was diagnosed with terminal cancer. The couple were visited at a local hospice.

Various entitlements were identified for the couple, including additional support for Mrs H in her caring role once Mr H returned home. Mr H was awarded Disability Living Allowance and Mrs H was awarded Carers Allowance and the couple also qualified for Income Support, Housing and Council Tax Benefit. The couple were just over £350 better off - easing their financial pressures and allowing them to concentrate on their new life together as they had recently been married.

The couple were also awarded a Macmillan Grant of £450.00, which was used in part to help them celebrate their marriage as a honeymoon hadn't been possible due to Mr H's poor health.

The couple also received equipment from the council to enable them to manage in their home - including grab rails, chair blocks and bathing/toileting aids. The Carers Centre supported Mrs H in her caring role. Information on bereavement benefits was also provided to reassure the couple that Mrs H would be able to manage in the future.

### Giving customers more options

Mr S is 23 years old and contacted the Welfare Rights Service when his entitlement to Employment and Support Allowance was reviewed. Mr S had been struggling to manage an alcohol problem and suffered from panic attacks during the night.

The welfare rights adviser discussed how Mr S could challenge the Employment and Support Allowance decision and helped him to prepare his appeal. Once all of the criteria had been discussed, Mr S accepted that the prospects of getting the decision changed in his case were low.

However the adviser explained that whilst an appeal was ongoing Mr S would continue to be paid benefit, and that it could take up to 6 months for a tribunal to hear his appeal.

This allowed Mr S some time to consider his next steps, accepting that his best option would be a return to the work place.

The adviser referred Mr S to Washington Mind to receive one-to-one counselling support. He was also signposted to Job Linkage and took up one of the training opportunities available through this community network.

As a result of these initial contacts he also received help from another agency that led to

him improving his money management skills.

Mr S had left school with few qualifications but had hoped to seek training as an apprentice.

Unfortunately his poor mental health had prevented him from progressing this ambition.

With initial support from the Welfare Rights Service, Mr S was provided with additional help from a number of organisations, leading to an increase in his confidence, mental health, life skills and employability.

## Making a difference to people's lives

### Customer comments

"I've never faced a situation like this before, worked all my life and fell into ill health. I had no experience of these procedures and it was very reassuring to have a representative present with me. Thank you".

"I think the service offered is exceptional. The staff are very understanding and know what advice is needed for your enquiry."

"The staff who helped me in person were extremely sensitive especially Hazel who attended my tribunal, as I've been dealing with breast cancer I get very emotional at times and she was very sympathetic."

"Contacting the CAB was the best thing I ever did the adviser who handled my case explained everything to me. I was expecting to wait about 2 months for the outcome but actually only waited a few days. My wife and I felt a great weight lifted from our shoulders from the result - all thanks to the CAB."

"We were very worried at the time we came to your office for advice. The adviser calmed us down and advised us what we needed to do. Finally there was light at the end of the tunnel and we can sleep at night."

"(Adviser) has been brilliant with me as I don't pick up on things very well. I was informed with everything and he made sure that I understood everything."

"Very helpful - Gave me peace of mind."

"Easy process and great to get free and impartial advice."

"When you have a benefit query it's very handy and helpful to be able to contact someone who knows what they are talking about."

"The adviser knew exactly what the problem was and dealt with it straightaway."

"A much needed service in the area and friendly advisers."

"I was very worried, but the adviser put my mind at ease and dealt with the problem quickly."

"I didn't know where to turn but everybody was so helpful and I even got a bag of groceries."

"Carers often find it difficult to access and obtain services due to their caring responsibilities which mean they are unable to leave the house very often. The Welfare Rights Service have been incredibly helpful and efficient in the provision of advice services to carers and made advice more easily accessible to this group" - Sunderland Carers Centre.