

<b>SUBJECT:</b>	<b>WELFARE TEAM UPDATE</b>
<b>DIRECTORATE:</b>	<b>CHIEF EXECUTIVE</b>
<b>REPORT AUTHOR:</b>	<b>JOANNE CROOKES, CUSTOMER SERVICES MANAGER, CITY OF LINCOLN COUNCIL</b>

## **1. Purpose of Report**

- 1.1 To provide Members with an update on the activity undertaken and the outcomes achieved by the Welfare Advisers in the Revenues and Benefits shared service.

## **2. Background**

- 2.1 This report provides an update on the previous financial year (2018-2019)
- 2.2 The Welfare Team is an integral part of the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service. The team has 7.5 FTE advisers based in both Lincoln and Sleaford. The advisers deliver the service by agile working. They have the technology to enable them to work from home, from customer addresses, from outreach offices and council premises. They are able to tailor service delivery to the needs of the customer.
- 2.3 The team offer two distinct but closely linked services. Benefits Advice and Money Advice. The Benefits Advice Service offers a help-desk facility during council opening times. This is effectively a 'duty' officer who is available to answer customers' enquiries, book appointments and home visits; calculate individual entitlement to means-tested benefits and see drop-in customers if necessary for emergencies such as the provision of food larder vouchers. The advisers run a series of outreach sessions and see customers in office appointments and where necessary in their own homes
- 2.4 The Money Advice side of the service is operated under the administrative auspices of Community Money Advice and is regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA). The FCA require that there is a clear and distinct separation between the line management of staff giving regulated debt advice and the line management of staff who are responsible for the collection of income. As a result of this requirement the Welfare Team report to the Customer Services Manager at City of Lincoln Council.

## **3. Team performance**

- 3.1 Performance data is collated quarterly and distributed to the Head of Shared Revenues and Benefits, and housing management at both authorities. Information on money advice caseloads and debt levels are also monitored

and reported through to Community Money Advice and the FCA.

- 3.2 The team do not have performance targets as such. This is due to the nature of the role and the service that is provided. Many of the customers are very vulnerable and they present with a range of challenges. It is imperative that the welfare advisers are able to spend as long as necessary to provide the support that each individual needs to negotiate their benefit claim

#### 4. Performance statistics

- 4.1 The team have been as busy as ever this year providing advice and support to some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged residents in the districts. In total the team have dealt with 7,326 customers for benefit related queries. This is a marked increase on the previous 12 months when the total was 5,484.

- 4.2 As well as advising people about the benefits they are entitled to claim the team also help with the completion of forms which can be difficult for customers to understand. Some of the forms are extremely lengthy and complex and without this assistance there is no doubt that some eligible people would be discouraged from applying and accessing their entitlements.

- 4.3 Assistance is given with every type of Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) benefit as well as Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) tax credits and local authority benefits. The team also advise on charitable awards and grants from a wide range of providers. There have been a number of successful applications to the Anglian Water Trust fund for example.

- 4.4 **Food Vouchers.** In the year 2018-2019 the team issued a total of 505 food vouchers for local community larders and food banks. In line with the national trend this is a big increase on the previous year's total which was 306. This represents an increase of 65% year on year. This is often in response to a crisis or where claimants have been affected by delays in the processing of benefit claims. The rollout of Universal Credit has had an obvious impact here. In these instances the team will also endeavour to help resolve the long-term issues affecting the individual's ability to afford to feed themselves and their families. In many cases this will result in the person becoming part of the money advice casework.

- 4.5 **Additional benefits** claimed by customers who have sought the advice and assistance of the Welfare Team are set out in the table below. The figures are weekly amounts of benefit awarded. The amounts reported are actually in payment. Where customers qualify for a benefit but choose not to apply for it this amount is not counted as awarded.

<b>Benefit Type</b>	<b>Weekly value awarded (£) NK District</b>	<b>Weekly value awarded (£) City of Lincoln</b>
Attendance Allowance	8,586.50	2,884.10

Bereavement Benefits	0.00	48.08
Carers Allowance	366.40	588.55
Child Benefit	0.00	34.40
Child Tax Credit	357.57	361.90
Council Tax Discounts	35.96	5.49
Council Tax Support	673.80	14,636.90
DHP	259.87	1,422.00
DLA Child	79.95	634.40
EHP	26.06	29.05
Employment Support Allowance	221.45	3,955.33
Housing Benefits	2,131.43	5,591.40
Income Support	44.50	44.50
Jobseekers Allowance	146.20	244.05
Pension Credit	1,733.69	1,334.43
Personal Independence payment	3,546.60	7,964.54
State Retirement Pension	186.44	520.01
Universal Credit	603.95	3,898.20
Working Tax Credit	71.89	0.00
Grants	16.96	223.70
<b>TOTAL value of additional income weekly</b>	<b>£19,089.22</b>	<b>£ 44,421.03</b>
<b>TOTAL value of additional income paid over 52 weeks</b>	<b>£992,639.44</b>	<b>£2,309,893.56</b>
<b>TOTAL value of additional income paid over 52 weeks for both districts in the Shared Service</b>	<b>£3,302,533.00</b> <i>(2017/18 total: £2,988,383.84)</i>	

4.6 It should be noted that there are many instances where people are advised that they do not qualify for anything. Many of the enquiries made will result in the team giving bad news about the likelihood of a benefit being awarded or explaining that a change in circumstances might bring an entitlement to an end.

4.7 In addition to the weekly amounts of benefit awarded to individuals and listed above at 4.5, in many cases customers have backdated awards or lump-sum payments. These payment are shown in the following table.

<b>Benefit Type</b>	<b>Lump sum payments (£) NK District</b>	<b>Lump sum payments (£) City of Lincoln</b>
Attendance Allowance	70,098.80	16,870.40
Bereavement Benefits	1,500.00	5,100.00
Carer's Allowance	2,648.60	2,979.00
Child Benefit	0.00	279.80
Child Tax Credit	375.64	118.56

Council Tax Discounts	3,849.24	69.82
Council Tax Support	10,452.37	6,454.72
DHP	6,225.59	7,343.37
DLA Child	1,599.00	1,540.81
EHP	360.94	474.06
Employment Support Allowance	7,752.93	53,564.87
Housing Benefits	13,454.17	15,912.27
Jobseeker's Allowance	219.30	4,464.05
Pension Credit	31,900.20	12,656.31
Personal Independence payment	37,024.16	46,116.67
Social Fund	0.00	1,900.00
State Retirement Pension	0.00	11,000.00
Universal Credit	194.34	1,507.28
Winter Fuel payment	280.00	0.00
Working Tax Credit	0.00	584.39
Grants	1,926.46	4,772.85
<b>TOTAL value of lump sum payments</b>	<b>£189,861.74</b>	<b>£193,709.23</b>
	<b>£383,570.97</b>	
<b>TOTAL value of lump sum payments to both districts</b>	<i>(2017/18 total: £393,742.98)</i>	

4.8 The statistics and figures of additional benefits claimed across the board are impressive when viewed in isolation. It is the individual cases and the incredible impact that the team can have which is particularly inspiring and gratifying.

## 5 Money Advice Casework

5.1 A crucial service offered by the team is the FCA regulated debt advice which is the Money Advice caseworker support. 60% of the team are trained in debt casework and they offer a full service, starting with the preparation of the Standard Financial Statement (SFS). Customers' income and expenditure levels are explored to establish whether there are options to claim additional benefits or increase income in some other way.

5.2 Expenditure levels are explored to establish whether they are reasonable and where possible these are reduced. Often this can be a discussion with the client about their expectations and their financial maturity. Sometimes it is a matter of looking at cheaper tariffs for utilities or taking a relatively simple step such as installing a water meter.

5.3 All debts are tackled and the advisers will engage with creditors, negotiating where possible to agree affordable repayment plans. Where this is not feasible other options including Debt Relief Orders (DRO) and bankruptcy are explored. There is a registered and authorised DRO intermediary at both sites.

- 5.4 In 2018-2019 the team received 263 referrals for Money Advice, compared to 272 in the previous year. This slight reduction may be explained by the budgeting support offered to some clients as part of the Universal Credit Support Project team. 156 individuals, couples and families were signed up for casework and given support to deal with their debts. The total debt managed was:

2018-2019

£514,256.21 for 85 North Kesteven Residents

£465,559.51 for 71 City of Lincoln Residents

**£979,815.72 Total debt**

This compares to the previous year's figures of:

2017-2018

£924,252.46 for 95 North Kesteven residents.

£399,104.41 for 73 City of Lincoln residents.

£1,323,356.87 Total Debt.

- 5.5 In the North Kesteven District area 49% of the Money Advice clients are local authority tenants. In the City of Lincoln this figure is 52%

- 5.6 The total level of debt managed across the shared service was £979,815.72. The average (mean) debt for the clients assisted works out at £6,280 per client which is a lower figure than the previous year when it was £7,877 per client. It should be noted however that there are vast differences between the individuals helped. Some people present with relatively small rent and Council Tax arrears and other clients have huge mortgage arrears and multiple loan and credit card debts.

## **6. Individual Successes**

- 6.1 It is difficult to quantify how much the Welfare Team means to residents in terms of alleviating the stress and confusion caused by the difficulties in negotiating the benefit system, or dealing with debt which has got out of control. However it is worth looking at some more qualitative data to underline how the team impact on the circumstances of some of last year's key success stories.
- 6.2 Mrs B was referred to us by Social Services to help her claim Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support. She had been temporarily living in a Nursing Home following her husband's death. We helped her with her claim and she was awarded HB of £154.35pw and CTS of £16.45pw. At the appointment we established that she was not getting any Attendance Allowance and helped with a successful claim for this. She was awarded £57.30pw with backdated arrears of £515.70. This then resulted in her Pension Credit increasing by an additional £64.30pw, with backdated arrears of £578.70.
- 6.3 Client LP was claiming Disability Living Allowance but when he had to convert to Personal Independence Payment this was disallowed. We helped with a successful appeal. LP lives with his mother who claims Universal Credit. We advised her not to claim Carer's Allowance or the Carer's addition in spite of the advice she had been given elsewhere, as they would be better

off overall if she didn't and allowed her son to get the Severe Disability Premium with his ESA. After seeing appointments we helped him to get this extra amount, and he received an arrears backdate of £3994.50 for ESA.

6.4 Yet another Personal Independence Payment success. No apologies for including these as they really are a source of huge payments and help very vulnerable residents. Miss R is another person who had previously been getting Disability Living Allowance but was turned down for Personal Independence Payment when she had to migrate her claim. She was left with just Jobseekers Allowance giving her a weekly income of £73.10. Her appeal was successful (after 11 months) She was awarded standard rate for both mobility and daily living, totalling £79.95 per week. Going forward she also became entitled to Disability and Severe Disability Premiums increasing her Jobseekers Allowance by £97.85pw. She is now better off by £177.80pw. Miss R also gained total arrears payments close to £9,500.00

6.5 Mr & Mrs M had already been to Stepchange for help with debts and re-payment arrangements were in place, however a full income maximisation check had not been completed. Looking at their benefits we applied for Attendance Allowance for Mr M, which he got at the higher rate. We then organised an underlying entitlement claim for Carers Allowance for Mrs M, who already had AA, so they then qualified for Pension Credit. There were complications with an interest only trust fund which led to multiple evidence requests, which almost resulted in the couple giving up their claim. The process started in May 2018 and it was not until January 2019 that the issues were resolved. Mr & Mrs M received over £8,100 in arrears of Pension Credit.

## 7. **Future priorities**

7.1 The team are getting to grips with the introduction of Universal Credit. This change has come on top of the problems associated with PIP replacing DLA. Many customers are needing support to manage the change in their relationship with the benefit system

7.2 It is early days but the future trend for the team is likely to see less assistance with benefit calculations and form completion and more help with personal budgeting and debt casework. We are also working closely with our Housing colleagues to manage the impact on rent arrears.

## 8. **Strategic Priorities**

8.1 Both City of Lincoln and North Kesteven have a number of strategic priorities. Two that are directly affected by the work undertaken and the outcomes achieved by this team are :-

- Lincoln: "Let's Reduce Inequality".
- North Kesteven: "Our Community Our Economy".

8.2 The Welfare Team plays a key role in reducing inequality by ensuring residents receive the benefits they are entitled to and providing money / debt advice.

8.3 Digital Inclusion, Channel Shift / Customer Experience, Financial Inclusion and Partnership Working are all key priorities for the shared service.

**9. Organisational Impacts**

9.1 Finance: There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

9.2 Legal Implications including Procurement Rules: There are no direct Legal or Procurement implications arising from this report.

9.3 Equality, Diversity & Human Rights: There are no direct implications arising from this report.

**10. Risk Implications**

10.1 A Risk Register is in place for the Revenues and Benefits shared service.

**11. Recommendations**

11.1 Note the performance information as set out in this report.

11.2 Note that a further update will be provided to this Committee in 12 months time.

**Is this a key decision?** No

**Do the exempt information categories apply?** No

**Does Rule 15 of the Scrutiny Procedure Rules (call-in and urgency) apply?** No

**How many appendices does the report contain?** None

**List of Background Papers:** None

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