

ADDITIONAL WELFARE RIGHTS SUPPORT

1.0 INTRODUCTION

As part of the focus on Improving Opportunities for People and Communities, Argyll and Bute Council agreed to provide additional resources to proactively support people experiencing poverty and hardship by investing in two additional Welfare Rights support staff for two years. The amount of additional funding is £172k.

This report advises the Committee on the options considered and the option approved by the departmental management team in order to best achieve this aim in the timescale prescribed.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The Community Services Committee note the terms of the report.

3.0 DETAIL

The Welfare Rights team provide advice to clients on welfare rights issues to maximize income, support independence, prevent homelessness and reduce the impact of poverty on individuals and families.

As the Covid-19 restrictions are reduced, demand for advice is expected to increase. With improved and more flexible capacity Welfare Rights will be better placed to deal with the additional demand for the service.

The target for annual income generated through Welfare Rights intervention will be increased from £2.5 million to £2.75 million per annum.

Following discussion with the team and management on how to use this additional resource, the following non-exclusive areas for development were considered with the overall aim of **increasing income maximisation, increasing representation and an increase in referrals from untapped sources:**

- **Increased capacity for appeal representation and visits**

The Department of Work and Pensions have delayed reviews of time limited awards for disability benefits and reduced medical assessments for entitlement to or rate of benefit. This may result in additional demand in the near future.

DWP figures show that the numbers of ESA work capability assessments dropped by over 75% between Q2 2019 & Q2 2020 (170K to 40K). It is not currently clear how much of this drop is due to Covid & how much is due to the move to Universal Credit

DWP have confirmed the timetable for the resumption of face to face (F2F) assessments for health and disability benefits – F2F assessments for Personal Independence Payment and WCA for UC and ESA will resume from May 2021, initially for those it is unable to fully assess by other channels.

The resumption of F2F will hopefully reduce any current backlog, but is likely to increase the number of requests for assistance received by WR. Increased WRO capacity would assist with this additional expected demand for appeal representation.

The purpose of this will be to improve the capacity to deal with the expected increase in demand for assistance to dispute adverse decisions.

The outcome of this will be increased assistance with mandatory reconsiderations of benefit decisions and increased availability of appeal representation.

- **Greater engagement with partners, particularly the HSCP**

In 2019/20, 25% of referrals were received from the Health and Social Care Partnership. This figure increases to 36% if referrals from Macmillan support services are included. These referrals are a priority within the triage process and help to ensure resources are targeted at particularly vulnerable individuals and families

Using additional resources to produce and deliver briefings for HSCP colleagues would:

1. help to keep them updated with Social Security changes; and
2. lead to increased awareness of how their clients might be helped financially.

This could result in additional relevant referrals to WR and contribute to income maximisation for these vulnerable and disadvantaged clients.

Engagement with the HSCP is currently ongoing in relation to reducing child poverty and addressing poverty awareness however more capacity is needed to contribute to delivering the priority actions.

The purpose of this will be to increase the number of referrals to Welfare Rights from the Health and Social Care Partnership.

The outcome of this will be additional financial support through income maximisation for a vulnerable group of individuals or families.

- **More support for remote island communities**

There is limited availability of face to face welfare rights advice on the islands of Islay & Jura, Before Covid-19 restrictions, two welfare rights advisers visited Islay roughly every six weeks usually for two days at a time. In normal circumstances, interview slots are always fully booked in advance, and some clients have to wait until the next planned visit for their appointment.

There is a good relationship with health services on the island and referrals are regularly received and currently dealt with remotely. However pent-up demand for welfare rights advice is expected and extra capacity to assist would be beneficial.

Islands like Mull have been visited based on demand however it would be a further development of the service to be able to offer an occasional visit to some of the other islands post pandemic as restrictions allow.

The purpose of this would be to raise awareness on the islands of the availability of remote appointments for Welfare Rights advice and assistance.

The outcome of this would be to increase referrals to Welfare Rights and alleviate pent-up demand.

- **Increasing the profile of the service**

Increased capacity would allow the service to be further promoted amongst other partners and within the community. There would be more capacity to provide newsletters, disseminate information and deliver briefings on relevant topics. Attendance at community events could be increased.

The purpose of this would be to develop a Communications Plan to raise awareness of the service. Also to share information about changes to Social Security more widely and improve benefit take-up

The outcome of this would be increased knowledge of welfare rights and how to access the service and the triage process.

- **Staff development and training**

Extra resources potentially provide an opportunity for staff to further develop their knowledge and skills in the constantly changing field of Social Security. Although face to face advice will remain a necessity for many, staff need to be upskilled in alternative ways of working remotely and digitally. Training on new systems like Teams in order to deliver or take part in briefings is essential going forward.

The purpose of this is to engage with training providers both internal and external to explore opportunities for online training and staff development.

The outcome of this will be increased knowledge and skills as staff can access more training courses.

4.0 Options considered by Departmental Management Team

Option 1 - Recruitment of two Welfare Rights Officers

Welfare Rights Officers would be able to carry out all of the activities described in section 2, in particular providing appeal representation also designing and delivering training.

The staffing costs associated with this option may reduce the extra funding available to carry out some of the activities that would require travel, subsistence and accommodation costs like support for the islands and training. This option of recruiting may be limited as these are short-term contracts.

Option 2 - Recruitment of one Welfare Rights Officer and one Welfare Rights Assistant

This option would offer some extra capacity for all the activities described in section 2 including appeal representation. There would also be extra capacity for advice provision up to the stage of mandatory reconsiderations.

A Welfare Rights Assistant is able to assist with the organization and co-ordination of training. With this option, more funding will be available to support the provision of the activities described in section 2.

Option 3 - Recruitment of two Welfare Rights Assistants

This option would not increase capacity to deliver additional appeal representation or training. There would be additional support for delivering welfare rights advice in general and this could result in more appeals being lodged.

This option would be supportive in delivering most of the activities described in section 2. It is possible this option could result in an under spend of the funding as there is uncertainty about resuming face to face advice and travel.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Whilst all three options detailed above have their merits & demerits, the preferred option agreed by the Departmental Management Team was Option 2 with the WRO being based in the East, where it is predicted that demand will increase for appeal representation and/or challenging decisions and the WRA being based in the West, where additional capacity for advice services will reduce client waiting time.

The process for recruiting into these posts is underway.

5.0 IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Policy – None
- 5.2 Financial – Increase in income maximized for customers referred to the service
- 5.3 Legal – None
- 5.4 HR – None
- 5.5 Fairer Duty Scotland – None
- 5.5.1 Equalities – None
- 5.5.2 Socio-Economic Duty – None
- 5.5.3 Islands – Improved service to island customers
- 5.6 Risk – None
- 5.7 Customer Service – Improved service available to customers

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – current structure of Welfare Rights Team

Appendix 1

Current structure of Welfare Rights section.

Senior Welfare Rights Officer	
East team – covering Helensburgh & Lomond and Cowal and Bute	West team – covering Mid Argyll, Kintyre & Islay and Oban, Lorn & the Isles
1 Welfare Rights Officer	3 Welfare Rights Officers
2 Welfare Rights Assistants – 1 temporary post and 1 post with temporary additional hours	1 Macmillan Welfare Rights Assistant – temporary post