

# Scrutiny Board

3 November 2015

<b>Report title</b>	Tracking and Monitoring of the Welfare Reform – Unclaimed Benefits Scrutiny Review	
<b>Cabinet member with lead responsibility</b>	Councillor Elias Mattu Adults	
<b>Wards affected</b>	All	
<b>Accountable director</b>	Linda Sanders, Strategic Director People	
<b>Originating service</b>	Older people	
<b>Accountable employee(s)</b>	Anthony Ivko	Service Director, Older People
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<b>Report to be/has been considered by</b>	n/a	

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## Recommendation(s) for action or decision:

The Scrutiny Board is recommended to:

1. Consider progress made to implement recommendations from the 'Review of Welfare Reform – Unclaimed Benefits' which concluded in January 2015.
2. Agree to sign off the recommendations in the review that are complete and receive a further update following implementation of the Universal Credit in February 2016.

## **1.0 Purpose**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update Scrutiny Board on progress on the implementation of recommendations resulting from the Welfare Reform - Unclaimed Benefits scrutiny review undertaken in 2014-15 and to seek sign off of recommendations in the review that are complete.

## **2.0 Background**

- 2.1 The [Scrutiny Review of Welfare Reform-communications](#) was reported to Cabinet 22 May 2013. The review focussed on the [Welfare Reform Act 2012](#) and communicating information about changes to benefits. In 2013/14 the Scrutiny Board agreed to review welfare reform with a focus on implementation of Universal Credit (UC).
- 2.2 Welfare reforms, arising from the Welfare Reform Act 2012, caused a fundamental change to many of the City's most vulnerable residents with many finding change confusing and the reduction in income hard to deal with.
- 2.3 Based on the evidence received, the review group made eight recommendations. The review group focussed on the need to develop a co-ordinated advice and support framework and strategy across the City to enable people access to the tools, information and support they need and to encourage people to help themselves to information and guidance.

## **3.0 Context**

- 3.1 Universal Credit (UC) will replace both out of work and in work benefits. Wolverhampton is in the fourth tranche of delivery where the rollout will start for single claimants 8 February 2016.
- 3.2 The Department of Works and Pensions (DWP) are entering into Delivery Partnerships with local authorities with the aim of delivering a joined up and coherent journey between services for claimants.
- 3.3 The correlation between deprivation, debt, unemployment and benefits means that often people will need access to more than one service. The review identified a need to be able to distinguish between general advice and specialist services at the first point of contact. The Council's transformation programme and Customer Services Strategy highlights the need to move towards enabling customers and partners to access services, advice and support and to signpost others to it.
- 3.4 Some residents in Wolverhampton will face challenges in the transition to UC, claimants will need to apply for and manage their account online. Currently 36% of Wolverhampton residents do not have access to the internet at home and 20% lack the skills and expertise to use a computer independently. In addition, claimants will receive their benefit monthly in arrears and will need to pay their rent direct to the landlord.
- 3.5 Wolverhampton, at the time of the review, had the ninth highest indebtedness in England and Wales and Wolverhampton's Welfare Reform Impact Assessment (January 2013)

highlighted debt as a significant issue in Wolverhampton thus the importance of personal budgeting support.

- 3.6 The transition to monthly payments will be difficult, some people having to wait four weeks between their last normal payment and new consolidated payment, leaving people short of money. This and a risk that there may be other demands on their income, indicates that rent and other debts may not be paid. The potential impact of getting this wrong for residents is significant, and has potential to lead to an increase in demand for public services relating to debt, homelessness and mental health issues.

#### **4.0 Universal Support Delivery Partnership**

- 4.1 The Delivery Partnership between the Department of Works and Pensions (DWP) and the City of Wolverhampton Council outlines our respective roles to deliver services required by claimants of Universal Credit as part of “Universal Support – delivered locally” with the aim of delivering a joined up and coherent journey between services for the claimant. This will include:
- Getting online to make a claim (digital inclusion)
  - Receiving budgeting support to prepare and support claimants for the financial changes Universal Credit brings – single household payment, monthly payment and housing costs paid directly to the claimant.
- 4.2 Partnership working should be based on and leveraged against infrastructure and services that are already in place, building on existing successful partnerships and learning from successful models. In recognition of the importance of wider partnership working, Wolverhampton Inclusion Board is maintaining an oversight of preparations for the rollout and a Task and Finish group, including City Direct, Housing Benefits, Welfare Rights and Wolverhampton Citizens Advice (personal budgeting support), libraries and community venues (digital inclusion) to drive forward preparations.
- 4.3 A report will be considered by Cabinet Resources Panel next month to consider the requirements for the Council under the Delivery Partnership, together with existing progress to deliver these requirements.

#### **5.0 Progress**

- 5.1 The progress and outcomes against each of the recommendations is detailed in Appendix 1.

#### **6.0 Legal implications**

- 6.1 The Welfare Reform Act became law in March 2012 and introduced major changes to the way people receive housing and other welfare benefits. The Care Act requires us to provide information and advice.
- 6.2 The legislation governing Welfare Reforms is available via the following link:  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/simplifying-the-welfare-system-and-making-sure-work-pays/supporting-pages/welfare-reform-act-2012-regulations>

6.3 The Council is required to comply with the Equalities Act 2010 when exercising its functions, including those relating to Welfare Reform. At the time when decisions are taken about the Council's policy on Welfare Reform, the Council will need to have regard to the matters set out in section 149 of the Act.  
[RB/19102015/A]

## **7.0 Financial implications**

7.1 A budget of £20,000 has been allocated from the Public Health Interventions Ringfenced Reserve to cover this work.  
[AS/21102015/K]

## **8.0 Equalities implications**

8.1 The Welfare Reform equality assessment undertaken in November 2013 provides an analysis of the impact of welfare reform measures on individuals and households in Wolverhampton, as well as the consequential impacts on the Council, its partners and other service providers concerned for the welfare of those affected.

## **9.0 Environmental implications**

9.1 There are no environmental implications as a direct result of this report.

## **10.0 Human resources implications**

10.1 An internal canvass of Council employees is recommended to recruit volunteers with experience of benefits and working in social care environment to work with the CAB and to receive relevant welfare rights training. The Employee Volunteering Scheme gives Council workers the chance to volunteer in the community in Wolverhampton for up to two working days per annum.

## **11.0 Corporate landlord implications**

11.1 There are no corporate landlord issues as a direct result of this report.

## **12.0 Schedule of background papers**

12.1 Communicating information about Welfare reforms in the City was subject of a scrutiny review in 2013 following implementation of the Welfare Reform Act 2012. Empowering People and Communities is a key theme of the Wolverhampton City Strategy. With the following priorities for action:

- Undertaking early intervention and prevention
- Supporting financial inclusion
- Encouraging healthier lifestyles and independence at all stages of life
- Supporting more people to be active within their communities
- Encouraging the voluntary and community sectors

**EXECUTIVE RESPONSE: WELFARE REFORM UNCLAIMED BENEFITS**

**Recommendation 1**

To request the City’s Inclusion Board to receive the report of the review group and to consider the feasibility of developing a partnership forum to oversee development of a co-ordinated advice and support strategy for the City.

The aim of the partnership forum would be to focus on unclaimed benefits, in-work and out of work, to maximise incomes and defend benefit entitlement in the City.

The review suggests the following are considered for inclusion in terms of reference:

- a) To develop options for a hub and spoke framework and a coordinated. Advice and support strategy relating to income maximisation and defending benefit entitlement.
- b) To carry out a mapping exercise of existing mechanisms for access to information, advice and support relating to benefits and income maximisation across the City.
- c) To consider operational issues: process, communication, support accessibility and equality monitoring.
- d) To align advice and support for welfare rights and benefits with employability and skills and link into existing signposting, advice and guidance networks.
- e) To identify and prepare joint funding bids for advice and support in the City.
- f) To promote case studies to the wider public to raise awareness and encourage people who may recognise themselves in the scenario to seek advice and find out if they could be claiming benefits or back claiming if there has been a genuine problem or mistake made.

Comment	Timescale/progress so far	Officer Responsible
<p>The Inclusion Board is a voluntary partnership Board. The recommendations have been discussed with the Chair of the Board and the Chair of the Scrutiny Review. Concerns have been expressed that the recommendations are overly resource intensive and lack clear outcomes. It is proposed that they are amended as follows:</p> <p>The council to investigate if a small one-off budget can be identified to the Inclusion Board to commission the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A workshop with partners and ward</li> </ul>	<p>Funding has been identified from the public health budget to commission works identified in the executive response to recommendation one.</p> <p>The budget of £20,000 has been allocated from the Public Health Interventions Reserve to cover the work with a particular focus around communications around support available linked to the rollout of UC building on the Communications strategy currently under development.</p> <p>The rollout of Universal Credit (UC) is due to start 8 February 2016. A cross-partner task group, overseen by the Inclusion Board, is meeting monthly to ensure that support is in place in advance of the rollout, in</p>	<p>Dr Keren Jones</p>

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<p>councillors to complete a mapping exercise of benefits and support agencies.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Produce a series of posters that covers:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a) <b>Getting sorted:</b> a framework of the benefits and advice available for particular needs.</li><li>b) <b>Wolverhampton Working Well:</b> Next steps for pathways to employment of opportunities for social inclusion e.g. pensioners.</li></ul></li><li>• Disseminate posters to all those partners that have regular contact with vulnerable groups within the community e.g. doctor surgeries, schools, housing associations.</li><li>• A training session for key agencies.</li><li>• The Inclusion Board continue to review information and update on an annual bases.</li></ul>	<p>particular around triage, digital inclusion and personal budgeting support – public health funding has already been secured for a pilot for the latter.</p> <p>Initial discussions are being held with DWP re a delivery partnership in advance of the rollout of UC and a report is to go to Cabinet Resources in December 2015 to agree its signoff.</p> <p>Progress made by Welfare Rights Service:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Welfare Rights Service Specialist Support Team have been working with voluntary and community organisations to complete a Wolverhampton information and Advice Directory. The Directory is due to be launched in November 2015 to make sure that pathways to benefit advice is clear.</li><li>• The Welfare Rights Service has developed on-line benefits information and advice including advice about Universal Credit.</li><li>• The Welfare Rights Service has undertaken 66 training courses on various key benefit issues (such as sanctions, Employment and Support Allowance, Universal Credit etc.) for 681 individuals from 38 different voluntary and community organisations and provided access to specialist benefits advice and consultancy for workers/volunteers from key agencies.</li></ul> <p>Implementation of the Digital Inclusion Strategy is underway, with close links to support for those affected by the rollout of UC whereby claimants will have to apply for and manage their account online. A bid, led by a VCS partner, has been submitted to roll out the libraries digital mentor scheme offering one-to-one support. Organisations who have proceeded to the second bidding stage for the ESF/Big Lottery funded financial and digital inclusion intervention should be known in October.</p> <p>In addition, a bid has been submitted to Art Council to expand wi fi in libraries across Wolverhampton.</p>	
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**Recommendation 2**

To accelerate delivery of the Wolverhampton Digital Inclusion Strategy and Customer Services Strategy to enable access to the use of social media, information portals and mobile devices as tools to promote income maximisation, to signpost job seekers and people on benefits to relevant and accurate information.

Comment	Timescale/progress so far	Officer Responsible
<p>This is in line with the Councils Digital Inclusion Strategy. A consultant is now on site working to implement findings of the recent review.</p>	<p>To be launched by 31<sup>st</sup> January 2015. Completed</p>	<p>Sue Handy</p>
<p>A 'Find my nearest' tool will be coming to the Council website soon and will via a post-code look up signpost customers to the nearest places of interest and/or of assistance to them whether they are new or established in the area.</p>	<p>February 2015. Completed</p>	<p>Sue Handy</p>
<p>The Council website will be made full 'mobile responsive' ensuring that customers accessing the corporate site via their mobile devices of electronic tablets will have access to all information contained within the desktop version with improved ease of use.</p>	<p>Staff in both the Channel Shift team and Corporate Communications are receiving training in December. Completed</p>	<p>Sue Handy</p>
<p>A social media monitoring tool 'SocialSign On' has been procured and will allow Customer Services and Corporate communications to 'listen' to social media channels for issues, queries and to effectively tailor/target messages to audiences.</p>	<p>50% of website forms have been 'tagged' with Google analytics – this work is to be accelerated in the new year. Completed</p>	<p>Sue Handy</p>
<p>Through the focus of 'customer insight' in the Customer Services Strategy, it is expected that utilising trends data from Google Analytics will provide more real-time feedback as to how customers access our digital services and we can engage with them to ask how we may best improve our digital offering.</p>		
<p>An 'event's app being developed with ICTS will give the opportunity to promote advice events through the app stores.</p>	<p>A report recommending a new approach to digital events promotion and marketing is being presented to Strategic Executive Board in the next couple of weeks.</p>	<p>Andy Hoare/Ian Fegan</p>

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### Recommendation 3

That each Community Hub should develop information stations which offer advice about benefits, work training and volunteering opportunities, and that a pilot hub be developed to provide advice and support 'drop in' sessions at Ashmore Park Community Hub.

Comment	Timescale/progress so far	Officer Responsible
The Welfare Rights Service training sessions have been made available to Community Hub volunteers in order to enable access help with claiming benefits to be available at the Community Hubs. The trained volunteers are also offered support with helping Wolverhampton residents with benefit queries via the Welfare Rights Specialist Support Team. In addition, volunteering opportunities and access to help with the requirements of the actively seeking work rules whilst volunteering are being developed.	Economic Inclusion team are working in our most deprived areas to engage and support residents towards employment building on best practice from elsewhere. They are also working with work clubs across Wolverhampton to build their capacity including working with Barclays.	Anthony Ivko

### Recommendation 4

That City Direct continues to develop and update the website relating to advice and support about benefits and income maximisation. That work with customer focus groups is undertaken to review what the Council website holds and that issues arising from research and development are built into future service planning.

Comment	Timescale/progress so far	Officer Responsible
The review will feed into the future customer services target operating model.  The website is managed centrally by Customer Services who hold expert Web Development Officers who ensure that content is written in Plain English, displayed in appropriate formats and that the 'site map'	Last year the website achieved a 3* SOCITM rating. We are currently awaiting results of our annual assessment and hope to be celebrating a 4* rating in March 2015.  Improved in 2015 but not enough to achieve 4* assessment remained at 3*. Work currently being undertaken to achieve 4* in 2016.	Sue Handy

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<p>and search function within the site is optimal. The team are consistently focussed on further enhancing web content, bridging any gaps based on analytics recorded on each individual web page. User testing and the user experience are quintessential in driving forward the corporate website.</p> <p>A 'feedback' function is being planned to obtain 'live' customer feedback on web content – pages around advice/support for benefits could be targeted as part of this work.</p>	<p>Completed</p>	<p>Sue Handy</p>
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### Recommendation 5

That an internal canvass of Council employees is undertaken to recruit volunteers with awareness of benefits and working in a social care environment.

Comment	Timescale/progress so far	Officer Responsible
<p>Accept</p>	<p>Welfare rights training is available for volunteers and the Councils staff volunteering policy enables employees two days per annum to work with the CAB or other voluntary sector organisations.</p>	<p>Helen Winfield / Martha Cummings</p>

### Recommendation 6

That partners work to develop evaluation of volunteering work to give recognition of the additional skills, experience and confidence that volunteering can afford individuals and as a pathway into employment which can be taken into account as part of the claimant commitment when seeking employment opportunities.

Comment	Timescale/progress so far	Officer Responsible
<p>Accept</p>	<p>Some of this is already happening through the LAW project hosted by CAB. Of the groups participating in the project some of the 'funded Partners' are currently funded by the Council and will make for some obvious and natural partners.</p>	<p>Dr Keren Jones / Martha Cummings</p>

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	<p>The Council is in the process of helping Community Associations develop a volunteer scheme which will address the needs of volunteers in relation to their own pathways to employment and also help equip them, through training, to deliver help and support to residents in the community.</p> <p>A bid led by a VCS partner has been submitted, as part of the UC work, to rollout the digital mentor scheme. The lead organisation up-skills volunteers they work with.</p>	<p>Anthony Ivko/Helen Winfield</p>
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### Recommendation 7

That the Welfare Rights Team develop the work with law students in defending benefit entitlement and contact Wolverhampton University and College to discuss students from health and social care training courses getting involved. That students be offered opportunity to receive training and work experience in a volunteer capacity relating to benefit maximisation.

Comment	Timescale/progress so far	Officer Responsible
<p>Attached is a Press Release about the Volunteer Law Student Representation</p>  <p>LEGAL SUPPORT FOR BENEFITS APPEALS</p> <p>Project: Big Centre TV 9<sup>th</sup> September 2015 interview “A Wolverhampton Council initiative is providing law students with real experience” Link to Youtube clip: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=joSgwOuWyal">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=joSgwOuWyal</a></p> <p>In addition the project has been nominated for the Wolverhampton Law Society’s Community Award:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Since autumn 2014 to the current time and continuing, students from the University of Wolverhampton Law School have, in partnership with the Council’s Welfare Rights Service, been engaged in pro-bono legal activities through the Law Student Representation Project.</li> <li>• It provides much needed appeals representation to vulnerable and disadvantaged people living in Wolverhampton who are in dispute with the Department for Work and Pensions over entitlements to Disability benefits aimed at people who may be considered to be too sick to work (Employment and Support Allowance) and those who may be considered to be so disabled they need help with their ‘daily living’ and ‘mobility’ (Personal Independence Payment).</li> <li>• Whilst also enabling students to apply legal skills and knowledge they have developed through education in ‘real world’ work situations which enhances their</li> </ul>	<p>Anthony Ivko/Helen Winfield</p>

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 <p>Revised LSNomination.docx</p>	<p>employability.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Students are provided with in-depth benefits training by the Welfare Rights Service Specialist Support Team and mentored on a case by case basis.</li><li>• Figures up to 8th of October 2015 show that students undertook 75 appeals out of which they won 87%, and financially the cumulative overall sum won as a result of successful appeals is in excess of £450,000.</li><li>• This sum of money not only goes back into the Wolverhampton economy but also provides successful appellants with much needed funds to enhance the quality of life and scope for independent living.</li><li>• The Council also benefits from the project as less demand is placed on public funds.</li><li>• Judiciary has continued to support the project and District Judge attends initial training sessions to brief law students.</li></ul>	
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### Recommendation 8

The Inclusion Board receives the response and considers the implications of the Department of Works and Pensions Freedom of Information analysis relating to the impact of Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) sanctions in Wolverhampton.

Comment	Timescale/progress so far	Officer Responsible
The request will be put forward to the Inclusion Board for consideration.	The Department for Work and Pensions statistics for Jobseekers Allowance Sanctions from 22 <sup>nd</sup> October 2012 to 31 <sup>st</sup> March 2014 show that for Central England 280,439 claimants had an adverse sanction decision applied – the highest number of all the regions in Great Britain which, as a whole, had 1,282,503 adverse sanction decisions applied.	Dr Keren Jones