

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
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:	Funding has been identified from the public health budget to commission works identified in the executive response to recommendation one. Although not yet detailed, budget of £20,000 has been allocated from the Public Health Interventions Reserveto cover the work.	Dr Keren Jones

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<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">• A workshop with partners and ward councillors to complete a mapping exercise of benefits and support agencies.• Produce a series of posters that covers:<ul style="list-style-type: none">a) Getting sorted: a framework of the benefits and advice available for particular needs.b) Wolverhampton Working Well: Next steps for pathways to employment of opportunities for social inclusion e.g. pensioners.• Disseminate posters to all those partners that have regular contact with vulnerable groups within the community e.g. doctor surgeries, schools, housing associations.• A training session for key agencies.• The Inclusion Board continue to review information and update on an annual bases.	<p>In preparation for the implementation of Universal Credit a workshop was held on 27 November involving a broad range of stakeholders to start developing Wolverhampton's response, known as Universal Support Services (formally Local Support Services), to support local residents through triage; Digital Inclusion and Personal Budgeting Support. The findings of this review has informed the workshop and highlighted the need for a co-ordinated advice and support strategy.</p> <p>Progress made by Welfare Rights Service:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Welfare Rights Service Specialist Support Team have been working with voluntary and community organisations to complete this mapping exercise and to coordinate a training programme (underway) with a consultancy resource in relation to benefits advice.• In relation to benefits advice, the Welfare Rights Service is working with LAW and other agencies to make sure that pathways to benefits advice is clear including on-line access.• The Welfare Rights Service has undertaken about 20 training courses on various key benefit issues (such as sanctions, Employment and Support Allowance etc.) for voluntary and community organisations which have, each, on average attracted about 13 workers/volunteers from key agencies.	
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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>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>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>A social media monitoring tool 'SocialSign On' has been procured and will allow Customer Services and Corporate communications to 'Isiten' to social media channels for issues, queries and to effectively tailor/target messages to audiences.</p>	<p>To be launched by 31st January 2015.</p> <p>February 2015.</p> <p>Staff in both the Channel Shift team and Corporate Communications are receiving training in December.</p>	<p>Sue Handy</p> <p>Sue Handy</p> <p>Sue Handy</p>

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<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>50% of website forms have been 'tagged' with google analytics – this work is to be accelerated in the new year.</p>	<p>Sue Handy</p>
<p>An 'event's app being developed with ICTS will give the opportunity to promote advice events through the app stores.</p>	<p>Being procured 'off the shelf' with the view to being implemented by March 2015.</p>	<p>Andy Hoare/Ian Fegan</p>

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
<p>The Welfare Rights Service training sessions will be 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 would also be 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 will be developed.</p>		<p>Anthony Ivko</p>

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
<p>The review will feed into the future customer services target operating model.</p> <p>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' 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>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.</p> <p>To be confirmed.</p>	<p>Sue Handy</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
Accept	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.	Anthony Ivko / Martha Cummings


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
Accept	<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>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>Dr Keren Jones / Martha Cummings</p> <p>Anthony Ivko/Helen Winfield</p>

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 Law Student volunteer's testimony:</p>  <p>LAW STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnership developed with the University of Wolverhampton Law Faculty • students briefed by Principal Welfare Rights Officer • More in-depth training on Employment and Support Allowance provided to students expressing a continued interest • Students interviewed, references sought and successful students appointed as volunteers • Judiciary welcomed project and District Judge attended a training session to brief law students • Students completed all training and checks and allocated to Welfare Rights Officer (WRO) Mentors • On-going training and support provided to students by WRO Mentors • Over the last three months 4 law student volunteers have represented at 19 appeals of which 17 have been allowed; 2 appeals have been disallowed (one of which is the subject of a further appeal to the Upper Tribunal) – a success rate of 90% • Discussions have started regarding the next intake of law students from Years 2 and 3 and extending the scope of representation from ESA to ESA, Personal Independence Payment (PIP) and Job-seekers Allowance/ESA Sanctions appeals. 	<p>Anthony Ivko/Helen Winfield</p>

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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 request and proposed approach to be discussed at next Inclusion Board meeting on 12 th December. The decision of the Board will be feedback to the Chair of the Scrutiny Review. Two FOIs have been sent to the DWP and we are awaiting the response. We have asked for a breakdown of the number of people on ESA sanctioned by gender, age and ethnicity and the number of JSA claimants sanctioned by gender, age and ethnicity. We have also asked how many hardship claims have been made as a result of sanctions and how many have succeeded.	Dr Keren Jones