

ROTHERHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL – REPORT TO MEMBERS

1. Meeting:	Cabinet Member for Resources and Commissioning
2. Date:	8th November, 2010
3. Title:	Welfare Rights & Money Advice Service
4. Directorate:	RBT

5. Summary

This paper seeks to provide information in relation to the current performance and external factors impacting the Welfare Rights and Money Advice service. This paper also details the impending internal service changes in order to assist with the continually increasing customer demand.

6. Recommendations

The Cabinet Member for Resources and Commissioning is asked to;

- Note the range of information provided in the report, along with the external factors impacting and the changes being made to address the issues.

7. Proposals and Details

1. Background

The Welfare Rights and Money Advice Team sits within RBT Customer Services and is dedicated to providing a high quality and effective first contact service for Rotherham residents. In June 2009, RBT secured funding from Macmillan Cancer Support to deliver Welfare Rights to people living with cancer, who live or receive treatment in Rotherham; this team has helped increase the capacity of what the overall service can deliver.

2. Performance

Welfare Rights Performance, including Macmillan.

The recent press articles about the Macmillan Welfare Rights team were very positive and very pleasing. These articles in the local press highlighted the fantastic work of this small team and the benefits being received by cancer patients and their families since the service started in June 2009.

Last year (2009/10) the Welfare Rights service helped 1529 Clients (951 general, 578 Macmillan). The value of secured benefits during this period was £5,253,857.60 (£3,658,218.00 existing team , £1,595,639.60 Macmillan).

For the period 1.4.09 to 30.9.09 the Welfare Rights Service received 647 Client referrals (432 General, 170 Macmillan, 45 Breathing Space Project). For the same period in 2010 this has amounted to 794 Client referrals (300 General, 494 Macmillan), demonstrating an overall increase of 147.

As at the 25th October there are 57 referrals awaiting appointments.

Money Advice Service Performance

In 2009/10 the service assisted 475 clients, advising on £19,271,691.84. of unsecured debt and £13,694,518.00 of secured debt. £717,390 of debt was written off following advice and intervention from the team.

For the period 1.4.09 to 30.9.09 the team assisted 211 clients advising on £16,156,525.01 unsecured debt and £4,305,395.95 of secured debt. £527,630.00 was written-off following advice and intervention from the team. For the same period this year (2010) the team has assisted 181 clients, advising on £3,018,994.79 of unsecured debt and £5,862,537 of secured debt. £625,871.00 was written of off.

As at the 25th October, 2010, there are no customers awaiting appointments.

3. Customer Satisfaction

For the period 01.04.10 - 30.09.10, 75 Clients returned questionnaires, results were as follows:

- 88% of our customers said that we gave information that was very easy to understand and 12% fairly easy
- 94% of our customers were very satisfied and 6% fairly satisfied that the service provided to them met their needs.
- 87% of our customers said we kept them up to date very well and 12% fairly well

The service continues to be accredited by the Community Legal Services Quality Mark.

4. External factors impacting the Service

Welfare Rights

Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) is impacting on advice agencies nationally. Generally, quite a number of ESA cases are being turned down by DWP at the initial stage. Consequently, the service has encountered an increase in the number of appeals for ESA within the team, which are complex and time consuming. Notification has been received that the Appeals Officer at Citizens Advice Bureau has retired, which will impact further on the Welfare Rights service as these clients will need to be referred on. The lack of specialist Appeals Officers within the Advice Sector as a whole causes additional impact on the service.

The recession continues to have an impact, there has been an increase in clients telephoning for advice or help with the benefits system. Many clients are new to the Welfare benefits system and are desperate for the right advice as they are met with circumstances beyond their control.

The Government has recently announced £7bn in additional welfare budget cuts. Changes to legislation over the forthcoming months and years will mean an increase in demand.

In addition to ESA there is a rolling programme in place over the next 2 years to move all Incapacity benefit claimants onto Income Support. All clients will have to have a limited capability to work assessment which, as with ESA, will create more appeals.

The limited capability for work test has just been revised and the National Association of Welfare Rights Workers (NAWRA) estimate that a further 5% of clients will be turned down/won't reach the criteria for the support component of ESA which is again will increase the number of appeals.

The criteria for lone parents on Income Support has changed in that any lone parent with a child over 5 years old will no longer qualify and must apply for Jobseekers Allowance. This will increase enquiries to the service as sanctions will be placed on those not turning up for work focused interviews due to childcare issues etc. This will lead the hardship in certain cases.

Proposed tax credit changes will more than likely create confusion and overpayments or incorrect payments, which will increase the number of request for assistance.

Money Advice Service

The national economic downturn and the detrimental effect that this has had on employment within Rotherham continues to create an increase in demand on the service.

The service is helping more clients with mortgage arrears, as an example, for the period 1.4.10 to 30.9.10, clients with mortgage arrears totalled £140,771.85. A comparison between the financial years 2008/9 and 2009/10 shows the team dealt with increased mortgage debt in 2009-10 of £12,868,034.00.

The team are finding that mortgage lenders are becoming much more difficult to negotiate with and more cases will end up in court if agreement cannot be reached beforehand. Also there is a growing trend for creditors who have obtained charging orders on properties to try and force a sale. There has been a noticeable increase in certain employment groups e.g. building trade workers requesting assistance.

Money Advice continues to work with, and accept referrals from the Key Choices service and 2010 Ltd.

The service remains the only non means tested money advice service in the Borough and it has become a balancing act for advisors to judge who is in the most urgent need.

5. Forthcoming changes to the service

In order to further improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the service, it will be restructured to improve how casework is both handled and processed. This will include the implementation of a case management system and the transferring of Neighbourhood Benefit Officers (NBO) from the Revenues and Benefits service into the Welfare Rights team. The NBO service complements that of the Welfare Rights Team and already handles cases that cover the wider benefits schemes; it is therefore practical to bring the services together to co-ordinate similar activity across the Council's area. This will allow the NBOs' to be developed and have direct access to the Macmillan Welfare Rights and the Money Advice teams. Allow referrals and home visits to be managed better and reduce any potential duplication.

As part of the recent Scrutiny report into debt recovery a scheme has been agreed in how to deal with customers who have multiple debts with the Council (rent, council tax, sundry debtors, housing benefit overpayment), which are at advanced stages of debt recovery. Part of the new agreed procedure is to enable customers to refer themselves to the Money Advice service during a period where action is on hold pending them contacting the service.

In order to implement these changes it has been identified that some short-term help will be required to alleviate the build up of cases and one of the retired Welfare Rights member through a recruitment agency has been temporarily appointed to allow for the new structure and case management system to be implemented to lessen the impact on the operation.

8. Finance

The cost for the temporary appointment through a recruitment agency of an experienced Welfare Rights Officer is to be met by RBT.

9. Risks and Uncertainties

There is a risk that the service is unable to absorb the continued increase in demand resulting in some customers being unable to obtain advice and assistance.

10. Policy and Performance Agenda Implications

Failure to provide advice services will have a detrimental impact on the most disadvantaged people and communities within the Borough with consequential negative effects on tackling inequalities and improving life chances of the most vulnerable.

11. Background Papers and Consultation

None

Contact Name:

Dave Morley
Service Leader
Extension 23310
Dave.morley@rotherham.gov.uk

Zoe Oxley
Service and Development Manager
Extension 34283
zoe.oxley@rotherham.gov.uk