

WIRRAL COUNCIL

COUNCIL EXCELLENCE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

4 JULY 2012

SUBJECT:	WELFARE AND DEBT ADVICE SERVICES
WARD/S AFFECTED	ALL
REPORT OF:	DIRECTOR OF FINANCE
RESPONSIBLE PORTFOLIO HOLDER:	COUNCILLOR PHIL DAVIES
KEY DECISION:	NO

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 This report sets out the work undertaken at the One Stop Shops (OSS) and Libraries with regard to financial advice to residents. It also details the provision of information and advice on fuel tariffs and the opening of bank accounts to further improve financial inclusion. The report was requested by, and noted by, Cabinet on 12 April 2012

2.0 BACKGROUND AND KEY ISSUES

2.1 Cabinet on 21 February 2012 agreed as part of the budget for 2012/13 that the One Stop Shops Service, already providing financial advice, should look to expand the range of advice to fuel tariffs and the opening of bank accounts to improve financial inclusion.

2.2. One Stop Shops have been established for 14 years and in that time have expanded the range of work and advice offering a variety of information and advice on Council and non Council services. Staff are trained to ask relevant questions when a customer presents with one query as there may often be another issue, for example health and debt are often problems.

2.3 Current work at One Stop Shops

2.3.1 The major area of work is Council Tax and Housing Benefits which link to advice in a number of ways:

- In terms of Housing and Council Tax Benefit staff are able to maximise income through identifying other potential benefits not being claimed and translate the complexities of the benefit schemes to ensure that customers are aware of what information they need to provide to the Council.
- Staff are able to explain the role of basic bank accounts to customers who currently don't have an account and need one in order to have their Housing Benefit paid into it.

- With regard to Council Tax, staff can negotiate repayment periods within the same financial year with customers who fall behind with their instalments and can make arrangements with customers for arrears of Council Tax where customers have received a summons for non payment.
- Staff utilise the Council Fair Debt Policy which offers an arrangement based on income and expenditure details to make one single payment to clear arrears in addition to keeping current year debt payments up to date and thereby avoid any further charges. As one debt is paid the arrangement moves to the next debt and by doing this the aim is to break the cycle of debt.
- Education Welfare Benefits - Advisors promote the take up of free school meals to eligible parents which positively impacts on the weekly income the household has available.

2.3.2 There are a number of stand alone and linked areas that support the advice work such as:

- Loan Sharks - Advisors receive training to help identify unexplained patterns of payments when reviewing Housing Benefit documents which might indicate that a customer is paying a loan shark. In such circumstances they will sensitively enquire to establish if this is an issue and will offer to assist the customer in contacting the Illegal Money Lending Team or provide details to the customer should they prefer that option.
- Credit Unions - Discussions have taken place with Wirral Credit Union to enable them to work in partnership with the Council from Library and OSS sites. Wirral Credit Union would be able to promote their services and use the Library and OSS sites as collection points. This will enable customers who do not have access to a bank account to set up saving accounts and take out affordable loans based on the amount of their saving and their ability to repay loans.
- Affordable Loans - Advisors promote the Moneyline service to customers who are not able to get loans from their own bank but may be eligible through Moneyline. Surgeries are currently held at Seacombe One Stop Shop, which are proving to be successful and productive with a higher than average number of customers opening bank accounts.
- Fuel Poverty - Advisors are kept up to date on initiatives that will help customers to reduce their fuel bills or assist them in keeping their homes warmer. This includes initiatives such as the Warm Front scheme, Cosy Homes Heating Grants along with reference to the Energy Saving Trust website for additional advice.

- Tell Us Once -This national service allows advisors to inform a range of Council and Government departments that someone has died. It also provides an opportunity to give advice on a wide range of topics that will help the surviving spouse/family members. This service is to be extended to include the registration of Births. This will provide an opportunity to ensure that the parent is aware of all the services that are available to them at an early stage.
- Consumer advice - The impact of poor/faulty goods to someone on a limited budget can be significant. Advisors can provide initial advice on customer rights and the remedies available. This support is also available on a wide range of topics e.g. doorstep sales.
- Signposting - One Stop Shops have established links with a number of agencies which can help to improve the finances of individuals, e.g. regular surgeries are held by Age UK and the Pension Service across the sites. NHS Wirral surgeries also show how debt and well being are linked.

2.4 **Advice and support on Fuel and Bank Accounts**

2.4.1 With regard to Advice on Fuel Tariffs the One Stop Shops are progressing with the Director of Regeneration, Housing and Planning Home Energy Officer a range of initiatives including:

- British Gas has funding for a fuel debt advice service which covers Wirral and work is progressing on how this service could be delivered from Libraries and One Stop Shops.
- As part of the Affordable Warmth Implementation Plan 2012-14, there are plans to improve the fuel tariff advice initially by linking with a Consumer Focus accredited energy comparison service. There is a potential income stream for the Council as for every successful switch the service would pay a rebate.

2.4.2 With regard to advice and promotion of Bank Accounts advisors will have refresher training on how to promote bank accounts and this will ensure they are able to explain the difference between different types of accounts available e.g. current or basic bank accounts.

2.4.3 Advisors will also be able to explain which key features should be considered when opening a current account having understood the customers needs e.g. whether they want to access their account through a local bank branch or prefer to bank using the telephone or online.

2.4.4 For those customers who are not able to open a current account the advisors will be able to explain the key features of the different basic bank accounts offered and the services provided by them e.g. if they provide a free “buffer zone” or the amount charged for any unpaid direct debits or standing orders. For many people opening a basic bank account can be the first step to opening a current account.

2.4.5 Advisors will also be able to act as an advocate for the customer in completing the relevant documentation and where necessary may liaise directly with the banks. Where appropriate they will provide free financial guidance leaflets for customers to refer to when making a decision on which bank account is most suitable for the individual. As with fuel tariff advice it will be vital that our advice in this area is impartial.

2.5 **Future Developments on Advice**

2.5.1 While advice on fuel tariffs and bank accounts are clearly important there are other aspects of advice that are being progressed via the merged Libraries and One Stop Shops and these are detailed below:

- (a) Advisors can offer a benefit check e.g. using the Personal Advisor on Directgov. This can be offered when an advisor is dealing with an enquiry relating to a Council Tax reminder/summons for non payment.
- (b) Advisors can establish if there are grants available to assist with any issues discussed e.g. "Turn 2 Us" website. This could be offered to identify additional income to which the customer may be entitled.
- (c) Meetings are being arranged to progress more local Credit Unions working within the One Stop Shops and Library network.
- (d) The Library IT suites are venues to hold money management training courses. This maximises use of IT in Libraries and advances the principle of being the local source of support and advice.
- (e) The recent approval of the contracts for Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector Support and General Advice Services will allow the Libraries/OSS to offer and extend work with the successful tenderers. I will look to dovetail and refer customers between services to be clear on identifying who delivers what to reduce duplication and customer confusion. These organisations can be offered the availability to work from within the One Stop Shop and Library sites.
- (f) In the delivery of debt advice more advisors will be trained to deliver first tier debt advice and some staff will be trained to become accredited debt advisors. There is the possibility of this service being delivered at One Stop Shops and Libraries on an appointment basis.
- (g) We will develop a Wirral Financial Help Pack in liaison with the Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector as well as the General Advice Service which would identify sources of help.

- (h) There is an opportunity to promote and expand the services the One Stop Shop Advisors can offer to Department of Adult Social Services customers. Clients and Financial Agents should be able to hand in their financial assessment forms, disability related expenditure forms and income/expenditure forms at a site near to them which will be more convenient. They should also be able to obtain free debt advice or be signposted to external free advice debt agencies if they are experiencing problems paying a Council invoice. Repayment arrangements and the Fair Debt Policy will be offered where relevant. Crucially advisors may identify financial abuse, therefore there will be agreed mechanisms in place for Advisors to report this type of Safeguarding issue to the relevant professional. Where relevant, advisors will be able to signpost Clients and Financial Agents to the Department for Work and Pensions in order to maximise benefits that are not being claimed.
- (i) There are also identifiable links between the work of the One Stop Shops and the Benefits service with the work of the Department of Adult Social Services (DASS) Welfare Rights Unit. In order to deliver a more effective and coherent service under the management and overview of one Department this function is being transferred from DASS to the Finance Department.

3.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 3.1 If the developments do not take place there is a risk of uncoordinated, duplicated or inefficient advice being given on a range of issues. Conversely, without proper planning and training incorrect or impractical advice could be given. Mitigation of these latter risks is being undertaken via staff training with internal and external support.

4.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 4.1 To not undertake such work which would be inefficient for both the Council and service users.

5.0 CONSULTATION

- 5.1 Consultation has already taken place with a number of organisations as well as with internal departments. As detailed plans are formulated this will extend to other relevant groups and organisations.
- 5.2 The discussion and consultation with both internal and external bodies will help to maximise use of both staff and properties and advance further the Libraries and One Stop Shops service being recognised as a place of local support in respect of a wide variety of issues and organisations able to be dealt with on site.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR VOLUNTARY, COMMUNITY AND FAITH GROUPS

- 6.1 This work will look to support Voluntary, Community and Faith organisations as well as the General Advice Sector to present efficient ways of offering linked services to the benefit of the community.

7.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS; FINANCIAL, IT, STAFFING & ASSETS

7.1 **Financial** – These proposals are being progressed within the current funding of the Library and One Stop Shop service and any improvements in efficiency will further support this.

7.2 **IT** – There are none arising directly from this report.

7.3. **Staffing** – These proposals will have a consequential impact on staff training. The staffing establishment and budget for the Welfare Rights Unit, currently located in DASS has been transferred to the Finance Department as agreed by Cabinet on 12 April 2012.

7.4. **Assets** – There are none arising directly from this report.

8.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

8.1 There will be a need to ensure that advice given is impartial and completed in a way that minimises any liability to the Authority.

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

9.1 This development should continue to assist equality of access to local services for the benefit of all users. The commitment to equality and diversity is integral to delivering excellent customer contact services responsive to all users including those who may not be current users. The recognition that users have different physical and service needs informs access and service plans.

9.2. The link to the Equality Impact Assessment for Library and One Stop Shops is below; <http://www.wirral.gov.uk/my-services/community-and-living/equality-diversity-cohesion/equality-impact-assessments/eias-2010/finance>

10.0 CARBON REDUCTION IMPLICATIONS

10.1 There are none arising directly from this report.

11.0 PLANNING AND COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

11.1 There are none arising directly from this report.

12.0 RECOMMENDATION

12.1 That Members note the progress on the delivery of welfare and debt advice services.

13.0 REASON FOR RECOMMENDATION

13.1 To make Members aware of the work undertaken by the service, the transfer of the Welfare Rights Unit to the Finance Department, and the work that is in development.

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APPENDIX

None

REFERENCE MATERIAL

None

SUBJECT HISTORY

Council Meeting	Date
Cabinet	21 February 2012
Cabinet	12 April 2012