

Report

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| Report to: | Social Work Resources Committee |
| Date of Meeting: | 25 April 2018 |
| Report by: | Director, Health and Social Care Executive Director (Finance and Corporate Resources) |

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| Subject: | Money Matters Advice Service - Scottish Legal Aid Board Funding |
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1. Purpose of Report

1.1. The purpose of the report is to:-

- ◆ provide an update on the Money Matters Advice Service funding from the Scottish Legal Aid Board (SLAB) and seek approval to increase the staffing establishment

2. Recommendation(s)

2.1. The Committee is asked to approve the following recommendation(s):-

- (1) that the funding from the Scottish Legal Aid Board be noted;
- (2) that the continuation of the additional staffing, as detailed in section 6, for one Welfare Rights Officer, 2 Benefits Advice Assistant and 0.5 Clerical Assistant posts, be approved; and
- (3) that the recruitment of two Benefits Advice Assistant posts be approved.

3. Background

- 3.1. The Money Matters Advice Service (MMAS) has been in receipt of "Making Advice Work" grant funding administered by SLAB since 2014. Funding has been extended on an annual basis.
- 3.2. In November 2017, both SLAB funded Benefits Advice Assistants, who were in post, obtained permanent posts within the core MMAS structure. On advice from SLAB, a hold was put on recruitment for these posts, pending notification of funding for 2018/2019.
- 3.3. The yearly confirmation of funding and temporary nature of contracts means that officers within the SLAB structure seek to move into permanent posts. This has resulted in reduced resources and instability within the team, and an inability to draw down full funding from the SLAB. It has meant a reduction in resources to meet the needs of vulnerable individuals and families for help to maximise incomes and navigate the challenges that welfare reform imposes on them.
- 3.4. SLAB has confirmed that funding for the project has been extended for the year to 19 March 2019. The grant available for the extended period is £110,301.

3.5. The structure funded by the grant consists of 1 x Welfare Rights Officer, 2 x Benefits Advice Assistants and 0.5 Clerical Assistant. The Welfare Rights Officer and 0.5 Clerical Assistant are currently in post on a temporary basis. The Benefits Advice Assistant posts are currently vacant.

3.6. The level of the grant for 2018/2019 will fully fund the structure.

4. Objective of SLAB Funding

4.1. The objective of the SLAB funded service is to provide a welfare rights service for people who are affected by welfare reform. This means that, as different aspects of welfare reform have been implemented, the service has evolved since 2014. Since 1 April 2017, the objective has been to provide a welfare rights service for Universal Credit claimants.

4.2. Universal Credit Full Service (UC FS) was rolled out in South Lanarkshire in October 2017 for all new working age claimants who would have previously claimed legacy benefits. Legacy benefits are: income based Employment and Support Allowance and Job Seekers' Allowance, Housing Benefit, Working and Child Tax Credits and Income Support.

4.3. The Welfare Rights Officer currently funded by the SLAB provides much needed advice and assistance on UC FS matters to claimants to help guide them through the process and resolve issues as they arise as well as supporting Housing and Social Work staff with information and advice.

5. Universal Credit Full Service

5.1. Universal Credit is designed to place more responsibility on the claimant and claims must be made and maintained online, except in very limited circumstances. When claiming for housing costs, it relies on the claimant's knowledge of their rent and service charges.

5.2. Everyone who receives Universal Credit is placed in a conditionality group based on their circumstances and work capability. The group they are in will determine what is expected of them during their claim. In order to receive benefit, the claimant must sign a claimant commitment to say that they understand what is expected of them. If they fail to meet the claimant commitment without good cause, they may face a benefit sanction.

5.3. Until Universal Credit is fully implemented across all claimants, there will be different benefits systems running alongside each other. It is inevitable that there will be confusion around whether a claimant whose circumstances have changed should claim Universal Credit and be subject to natural migration or when they can remain on current legacy benefits until they are subject to managed migration. The claimant needs to know if these options are available to them as well as the financial implications for the household.

5.4. The replacement of six welfare benefits has been administratively and digitally challenging for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and they have adopted a test and learn approach with improvements and changes to systems made as problems emerge. On the face of it, this makes good sense, however, it does not mean that there are inevitably more issues arising during the claims process than normal and this can be difficult for the DWP staff and claimants to manage.

- 5.5. These are considerable changes for benefit claimants and many are finding the process very difficult. Good quality and well informed advice and assistance continues to be important to assist claimants with some of the difficulties outlined.
- 5.6. Between 4 October 2017 and 6 March 2018, the Welfare Rights Officer provided 386 people with targeted advice and assistance on Universal Credit matters. The number of people being naturally migrated to Universal Credit as well as the increasing number of new claimants means that the need for this type of advice will continue to increase, at least until Universal Credit Full Service is fully implemented.

6. Employee Implications

- 6.1. The employee implications for implementing the SLAB funding is detailed in the table below:

| Post | Proposed Number of Posts (FTE) | Grade | SCP Range | Hourly Rate | Annual Salary | Gross Cost inc on costs 30.3% |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------|---------|-----------|-----------------|-------------------|-------------------------------|
| Welfare Rights Officer | 1 | G2 L3/4 | 44 - 57 | £12.43 - £15.04 | £22,683 – £27,446 | £29, 555 - £35,762 |
| Benefits Advice Assistant | 2 | G2 L1-3 | 33 - 48 | £10.58 - £13.19 | £19,307 - £24,070 | £25,157 – £31,363 |
| Clerical Assistant | 0.5 | G1 L3 | 25 - 27 | £9.42 - £9.69 | £8,595 - £8,841 | £11,199 - £11,519 |
| Total | 3.5 | | | | | £91,068 - £110,007 |

*The SLAB funding allocation has made an allowance for the application of a pay award.

- 6.2. The team will continue to be managed from existing resources.

7. Financial Implications

- 7.1. The proposed level of grant from the SLAB is £110,301 and will fully fund the posts. There are no financial implications within this report in the financial year 2018/2019. SLAB funding has been agreed annually since 2013. In the event this is reduced or removed in coming years, there is sufficient turnover within the section and redeployment of MMAS and staff with similar experiences is successful within the Council.

8. Other Implications

- 8.1. There are no risk or sustainability implications associated with this report.
- 8.2. There are no other implications associated with this report.

9. Equality Impact Assessment and Consultation Arrangements

- 9.1. This report does not introduce a new policy function or strategy, nor does it recommend a change to existing policy, function or strategy, therefore, no impact assessment is required.
- 9.2. The Trade Unions have been provided with an update in regard to the annual SLAB funding renewal and the proposals to seek approval for additional staffing.

Val de Souza
Director, Health and Social Care

Paul Manning
Executive Director (Finance and Corporate Resources)

5 April 2018

Link(s) to Council Values/Ambitions/Objectives

- ◆ focused on people and their needs
- ◆ accountable, effective, efficient and transparent
- ◆ work with communities and partners to promote high quality, thriving and sustainable communities

Previous References

- ◆ none

List of Background Papers

- ◆ none

Contact for Further Information

If you would like to inspect the background papers or want further information, please contact:-

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