

Welfare Reform Update to the Health Improvement Board, 25th September 2014

European Social Fund (ESF) Project Bi – Monthly Update - August 2014

Programme Overview

The Welfare Reform Team (WRT) brings together a range of existing work streams in Revenues and Benefits, particularly around customers affected by Welfare Reform, and through support and training opportunities helps to bring customers in to welfare reform, or closer to the workplace.

The main work streams of the WRT are as follows:

Localised Support Services Framework (LSSF) pilot project. This part ESF funded project is building on the learning of last year's LA led pilot, supporting people with 1-2-1 casework, referrals, and training, and developing a network of local delivery partners: in the process establishing an operational LSSF as envisaged under the forthcoming Universal Credit.

Discretionary Housing Payments(DHP's). The Welfare Reform programme monitors and awards DHPs, measures expenditure and the effectiveness of short term 'conditions' that are applied to each award under the Council's DHP policy.

Key Measures

The Welfare Reform Team have a total of 113 customers active in casework as at the end of August. A further 57 customers are managed by the Discretionary Housing Payment Officer, helping customers who are further from the workplace with downsizing, reducing costs, or assisting with other methods of gaining exemption from the Benefits Cap.

25 customers have been moved into work so far this year, compared with 13 customers at the end of June.

DHP expenditure for the year is £188,928 to the end of August.

451 DHP's have been awarded from a total of 551 applications. An applicants' success rate of 82%.

DHP applications are awarded with 'conditions' of customer activity attached to each award. 'Finding Work' is the top condition attached to this year's DHPs, currently running at 40% of successful awards against an annualised target of 50%.

ESF Performance & Reporting

The ESF pilot project commenced in June and by the end of August has enrolled 80 customers into supported casework. This compares with a projected number of 130 enrolled customers for the same period. 6 ESF enrolled customers have found work so far, against a projected number of 24.

The participant numbers are lower than target for the first two months of the project. Initially the target numbers were flattened across the life of the project, whereas there has been a relatively slow take up of participants in the early stages of the project.

In addition to this there were limited availability of partner referrals and training projects which were wound down during the school holidays period. These referrals/outcomes are coming back on stream in September. WRT staff resources were also reduced over the same summer holiday period.

The number of self-referrals of customers applying directly to the WRT for DHPs are lower than hoped, as are referrals of customers who are on Jobseekers Allowance (JSA), probably as a result of the overall reduction in the number of Oxford residents claiming Housing Benefit and JSA.

The WRT are working with numerous partners, particularly the Job Centre Plus (JCP) and Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), to actively promote the project and increase the number of participants in the project. Other initiatives have been undertaken with internal Council teams including Benefits and HomeChoice with the aim of increasing referrals of potential participants to the ESF project.

ESF Partners Network

In addition to supporting customers directly through casework meetings, WRT refer customers to a network of partners including;

- Citizens Advice Bureau. For financial inclusion training and support around managing debts.
- Job Clubs/Aspire. Referring customers who are seeking work for group and 1-2-1 coaching with work/CV specialist advice at the Job Clubs around the city.
- 1-2-1 employment advice sessions held at St Aldate's with an Employment Coach who has been seconded to the WRT from JCP.
- Workers Educational Association (WEA) run courses commissioned by WRT exclusively for our customers. After reviewing specific customer needs, WRT have run a 'Communicating With Confidence' course for customers further from the workplace, and in September WEA are commencing a 5 week course 'Preparation For Work' for customers who are closer to the workplace.

The delivery network of partners has grown to include local providers across a wide spectrum of support areas. In addition to the CAB, Job Clubs/Aspire, and WEA mentioned above the WRT are also working with/referring customers to Crisis Skylight and City of Oxford College for training, MIND, Connections, and Restore for support around Mental Health issues, and EMBS (Ethnic Minorities Business Service) for language and IT/Digital skills training.

In partnership with the JCP Oxford, the WRT are organising a Job Fair at the Town Hall on October 1st. We have invited 30+ employers who are currently recruiting to exhibit and promote their vacancies in The Assembly Room. In addition we are inviting partners to exhibit in the support/training area in the Old Library.

Communications

The WRT has an approved Communications plan, which aims to promote and create awareness of the ESF project, and the wider work of the WRT. Further to actively

encourage delivery partners and other stakeholders to refer potential participants to the project.

Recent articles have appeared in community newsletters, explaining the work of WRT and outlining the help that can offer to customers.

The forthcoming Job Fair is being marketed by postcard mailouts, emails, and calls to our existing and potential customers, and via posters at community centres, job clubs, city parks and leisure centres, and internally at the Customer Contact centres. Post cards and flyers are also being distributed via the JCP, who are inviting JSA and other claimants who are closer to work to attend.

CASE STUDIES

Recent Case Study 1

WRT - Thriving Families (Troubled Families) Joint case study

The customer came to our attention in July 2013 after the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) applied the Benefit Cap to her Housing Benefit (HB) claim. The customer was seeing a £151.14 per week reduction in HB which was unaffordable and would make her tenancy unsustainable.

Using our established data sharing agreement, we initiated a meeting with Oxfordshire County Council's Thriving Families team and the customer. We established that the Thriving Families Team were already tackling issues the customer was already facing, such as their children's school truancy and anti-social behaviour. They were beginning to look at the customer moving into work after being unemployed since at least 1993 (when records began) which is when the Welfare Reform Team identified that the customer's only way forward to sustain her tenancy in Oxford would be to increase her income through work and become exempt from the Benefit Cap. The officers and customer agreed to work together to help her achieve this.

To further support the customer, the Welfare Reform Team helped her to complete a Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) application. This was successful, and covered the full Benefit Cap shortfall for 3 months. The conditions within the DHP award required the customer to continue to engage with the two teams and to undertake training with the ultimate aim to find 16 hours work.

Over the second half of 2013 the customer engaged with basic employability training supplied by Thriving Families, and more enhanced support aided by the Welfare Reform Team through support from the city's Work Clubs. As a result, the customer started applying for jobs. The officers stayed in regular contact, and the DHP was renewed for a further 3 months via a verbal application due to the customer's positive activity.

When a housing benefit overpayment occurred and the customer fell into rent arrears, a "customer crisis" which had the potential to affect the customer's progress into work was averted by close and intense work by the two officers. The Social Worker led on helping the customer with her home finances, bank account issues,

gathered evidence for Housing Benefit assessment and dealt with the private sector landlord. At the same time the Welfare Reform officer communicated exactly what the benefit issues were and how to resolve them, sped up the reassessment of the Housing Benefit by working with Housing Benefit colleagues and gave advice on how to move to direct payment to landlord to control the arrears. This work stabilised the situation, avoided homelessness and allowed the customer then to refocus on the job search.

In early 2014 the customer and two officers met for a review. The customer confirmed she had attended a few interviews and had successfully found 11 hours work in a bar. While this was not enough to exempt the customer from the Benefit Cap it lowered her cap loss and saw her start work for the first time in years. We agreed to continue to keep pushing for the target of 16 hours work and the Welfare Reform Team adjusted and extended the customer's DHP accordingly.

Regular contact was maintained and a few months later the customer and social worker contacted the Welfare Reform Team officer informing them that the customer had been offered extra hours in a local school. However, they were not sure she would be better off as a result.

The Welfare Reform Team completed a 'Better Off In Work' calculation which showed the customer would be significantly better off taking the extra hours; this was also adapted to factor in changed Local Council Tax Support given a fuller picture than most calculations. As a result the customer accepted the job and the combination of jobs took her to 16 hours, qualifying her for Working Tax Credit and an exemption from the benefit cap.

This working partnership and sustained support now means that the customer no longer requires DHP and can sustain her tenancy herself.

Recent Case Study 2

The customer applied for DHP due to being effected by the Bedroom Tax. She met with an officer and identified that she wanted to sustain her 3 bed tenancy by increasing her income through work, but advised she would need support to overcome the barriers to achieving this. The team referred the customer to Skills Training UK to support her with her move into work and temporarily sustained the tenancy through a DHP payment which was tied to a condition that she must engage with the support to find employment.

Another issue stopping the customer progressing was the burden of credit card and catalogue debts, she agreed to be referred to CAB to resolve this, and this was added as a condition of the DHP. The customer worked with both partners, starting to apply for jobs in schools, enrolled on a course on working with children and found a voluntary placement at a school. We later agreed to move her to a different partnership at the Littlemore Job Club to better suit her needs. Every 3 months we would go through a renewal of the DHP where progress was taken stock, conditions checked and then updated to better reflect the next period.

After 6 months the customer was offered a part time permanent job at a local school and started claiming working tax credit this was found through the Job Club, and while she is still claiming partial housing benefit she can now afford to cover the Under Occupancy Charge herself. The CAB has helped her with a debt relief order and now is clear of all debts.