



Equality Analysis Toolkit

Welfare Rights Service (WRS)

For Decision Making Items

8 August 2019

Question 1 - What is the nature of and are the key components of the proposal being presented?

The proposal is to reduce the Welfare Rights Service (referred to in this report as Welfare Rights) to achieve a saving of £340,000. There is also an attached saving for the Customer Access Service (referred to in the report at CAS) to reduce their staffing by 1.7FTE to achieve a saving of £40,000, giving a total saving of £380,000.

The proposal is to reduce access to the provision of welfare benefit advice and guidance services. This would mean that Welfare Rights would focus on advising and assisting in legal challenges against benefit decisions, including representation at appeal tribunals within the limited resources available. As a consequence, Welfare Rights would not continue, except where it involves an appeal, to advise and assist vulnerable customers under pension age, older people or provide urgent advice and support with referrals from health professionals.

Access to Welfare Rights would be restricted due to the removal of telephony support via the Customer Access Service and the significant reduction in staff numbers, and instead would be by referral only via agreed pathways with a limited number of key stakeholders.

In 2018/19 Welfare Rights supported cases which brought just over £7.8 million extra annual benefits to those vulnerable Lancashire residents they helped.

- Approximately £5.2 million was realised by the ten Welfare Rights Officers whose primary purpose is to support complex cases involving a mandatory reconsideration or appeal against a decision.
- Approximately £2.1 million was realised by the three Technical Support Officers whose primary purpose is to target and maximise the income to elderly residents who otherwise would not seek advice.
- Approximately £0.5 million was realised by the 1.5 Assistant Welfare Rights Officers whose primary purpose is to meet the technical advice needs of the working age population who have a sudden change of circumstances, like a life changing event – divorce, bereavement, loss of job, and need urgent advice for themselves, their family or carers, with the aim of maximising income and resolving administrative errors by the office administering the benefit, without the need to proceed to appeal.

The proposal would require a significant structural change with a focus solely on benefit appeals, and a reduction in the number of appeals that would be able to be supported due to the staff reduction. Almost all of the Welfare Rights budget is staff expenditure, so any reduction to budget means a reduction in staff and a consequent reduction in advice provision.

Question 2 - Scope of the Proposal

Is the proposal likely to affect people across the county in a similar way or are specific areas likely to be affected – e.g. are a set number of branches/sites to be affected?

The decision will impact on services and people across Lancashire as this is a countywide service.

Welfare Rights was established over 30 years ago and is a well-respected, well-established service across Lancashire for people having problems in accessing appropriate benefit entitlements. Its core is to provide a high quality, comprehensive and independent personal welfare rights service to the most vulnerable Lancashire residents unable to get advice for themselves elsewhere. It aims to make them aware of and receive their maximum entitlement to state welfare benefits, enabling them to be more financially secure, to be less reliant on statutory services for support and to be able to contribute to their care needs.

Welfare Rights Advisers are specialists in the complex field of welfare benefits legislation. All staff have many years of experience of dealing with complex benefits advice and this is clearly acknowledged and respected in consultation feedback. The service advises and represents people in courts across Lancashire at First Tier Tribunal hearings and Upper Tribunal hearings when the First Tier Tribunal decision contains an error of law. It works closely with internal and external services across Lancashire which support residents (shown in examples below), in particular the most vulnerable residents who are at risk of needing or are already receiving support from statutory services.

Accessing the service:

The service uses a neighbourhood approach and operates in various LCC sites across the county, enabling residents with complex enquiries to be seen locally where possible. Advice cannot be given online and requires mainly phone, and sometimes, face to face delivery and the remaining service will struggle to maintain this together with the maintaining the current well established relationships with LCC colleagues as well as the VCFS sector and other external stakeholders.

Ability to access the service by direct approach would be reduced due to the ceasing of the Customer Access Helpline.

Historical changes to service:

The consultation highlighted that there is an inequity of benefit advice services

across Lancashire due to differences in core funding, therefore a significant reduction of a countywide Welfare Rights service would have a compounding and disproportionate effect across the county. The service has gradually reduced as a result of past financial challenges and has ceased to undertake many "low level" advice duties. To mitigate this, Welfare Rights has developed close and effective working relationships with partners and the VCFS community. This has enabled a wider system to develop with VCFS and partner organisations undertaking low level enquiries and Welfare Rights engaging in the more complex cases.

Welfare Rights has formed relationships with the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), in particular, utilising its form completion service for when a customer cannot do so due to their disability or vulnerability. This has enabled Welfare Rights to concentrate its capacity on the most complex work, effectively targeting the most vulnerable residents.

Where appropriate, the service has utilised online information. It has promoted the use of online benefit calculators for customers who wanted a simple benefit check, encouraging them to access this support where no advice is needed. CAS already directed people to DWP information or online information for basic questions. The average number of calls to the service is 17,000 per annum.

Welfare Rights is used by a range of stakeholders both external and internal to LCC. Those stakeholders external to LCC include:

- General public
- MacMillan Cancer Nurses
- Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector (VCFS) (e.g. Citizens Advice, Homeless Charities, Mental Health charities, Debt Advisers)
- NHS (e.g. specialist nurses, district nurses, community nurses)
- District Councils (benefits processing teams, Housing Advice staff)
- Housing Associations
- DWP/Job Centre Plus
- MPs
- District Councillors and County Councillors
- Carers Service
- Lancashire Wellbeing Service

Internal stakeholders include:

- Exchequer Services (Care Financial Assessment Team, Financial Safeguarding Team, Children's Services Finance team)
- Shared Lives Service
- Social Workers (Children's/Adults/Mental Health/Learning Disabilities/Older

- People)
- Reablement Team

Question 3 – Protected Characteristics Potentially Affected

Could the proposal have a particular impact on any group of individuals sharing protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010, namely:

- Age
- Disability including Deaf people
- Gender reassignment
- Pregnancy and maternity
- Race/ethnicity/nationality
- Religion or belief
- Sex/gender
- Sexual orientation
- Marriage or Civil Partnership Status

And what information is available about these groups in the County's population or as service users/customers?

The proposed changes to Welfare Rights will impact on individuals with protected characteristics defined within the Equality Act 2010. The protected characteristic most likely to be impacted by this proposal are disability, age and gender.

The consultation highlighted that 'Attendees expressed concern that this proposal, if agreed, would impact on the most vulnerable in our communities, especially to those with disabilities, including mental health, age and gender, in respect of women'. Terminology such as 'it's discrimination' and 'disadvantaged' was used.

Disability: The proposal will disproportionately impact on individuals with disabilities given the analysis of Welfare Rights customers (see below).

Between 1 March 2019 and 30 April 2019 488 individuals accessed casework support from Welfare Rights. Of these individuals:

- 86% had a disability, and of these 27% have both a physical and mental health problems, 36% have just a physical disability and 37% have a mental health problem.
- Approximately 7% of cases involve someone with a terminal illness.

Age: The proposed changes to Welfare Rights will disproportionately affect individuals between the ages of 50 and 69 years old. The following age profile demonstrates this and relates to the 488 customers accessing Welfare Rights between 1 March 2019 and 30 April 2019.

| | |
|-----------|-------|
| Over 70: | 14% |
| 60-69: | 22.4% |
| 50-59: | 32.1% |
| 40-49: | 14.7% |
| 30-39: | 7% |
| 20-29: | 7% |
| Under 20: | 2.8% |

The proposal will impact on older people (over pension age) due to the cessation of the benefits take-up work with older people which accounts for virtually all enquiries for the 70yrs+ age group. In 2018/19 enquiries from the 70+ age group made up 25.6% of casework.

If the proposal is agreed the Welfare Rights staffing budget will be significantly reduced. It will lose its Assistant Welfare Rights Officers and its focus will be limited to appeal cases only. With this limitation, the proposal will impact on young people due to the cessation of advice provision to carers applying for Special Guardianship Orders for children it is taking in to its care. The change to financial support available from LCC, which now takes into account available welfare benefits payable for the children, has been a challenging transition for all services involved in this work. Without clear and accurate advice and support to ensure relevant benefits are awarded in a timely way, the relationship between LCC and some carers can be strained and ultimately the placements are at risk unless LCC continue to pay out higher levels of support.

Gender: The proposed changes to Welfare Rights will disproportionately affect women who account for 57% of service users.

Of the most recent ninety cases for Special Guardianship Orders that Welfare Rights has provided advice for, 74 were for women and 16 were for men. In this cohort that equates to women being the main carer for 82.2% of Special Guardianship Order cases.

It is generally acknowledged that Women in the United Kingdom earn less than men, shoulder a greater amount of unpaid labour and are more likely to experience poverty. Single female pensioners consistently experience poverty at a higher rate than others. In Lancashire, women make up 51% of the population and therefore a figure of 57% is statistically significant.

CAS have identified that they receive 1,725 calls monthly for WRS, usually from a number of groups: elderly, low income, pregnancy and maternity, disability and general enquiries. Given the customer base of very vulnerable people who are digitally excluded and / or have poor literacy skills, it is not currently feasible to become an online only service.

Residents of working age: Working age customers are referred for advice and support when all other channels have been exhausted and there is a need for

specialist benefits advice and support to secure the customers entitlement and stabilise their financial situation. This has a direct impact on the health and wellbeing of the resident, many of whom are in crisis as a direct result of the benefit issue they are facing. If the proposal is agreed, the service will be a referral only service, accepting referrals from a limited number of specific stakeholders only, where help is needed with an appeal.

Residents over pension age: Take-up of benefits amongst older people is low, yet the impact on the customers being able to live independently for longer and with less financial stress is significant as shown by the customer feedback the service receives. Benefit take-up campaigns, in partnership with GP surgeries and District Councils, have been successful in maximising the income of elderly residents, and have had a positive impact in enabling residents to live healthier and independently without the need for statutory support, or by delaying the need for statutory support. In addition the proposed change to increase the charge for older people's day services whilst removing the advice provision for older people could impact on their ability to pay more. If the proposal is agreed there will be no benefit take-up campaign work for elderly residents, as the only help available will be where help is needed with an appeal via referral from a specific stakeholder.

From practice experience and consultation feedback, there is evidence of a need for specialist Welfare Rights advice to support service areas within LCC as they have a need for specific advice requirements where, due to the very complex financial arrangements which complicate matters when trying to secure benefit entitlements, they need to access the Welfare Rights expertise which is not available within those service areas. If the proposal is agreed, the service will be a referral only service, accepting referrals from specific stakeholders where help is needed with an appeal and will not undertake the consultancy advice work with LCC services.

Example 1: LCC Shared Lives staff routinely consult with Welfare Rights where benefit problems occur, and in some cases may as an interim arrangement cover any shortfall in the client's contribution to their placement in order to maintain it as it could otherwise fail. Shared Lives staff have explained that the extra cost if they have to place the service user in residential or similar accommodation is approximately £30k per person per year, so it is essential to get the correct advice and support to challenge any incorrect benefit decision to avoid further financial burden on LCC. If the proposal is agreed in future the service will be a referral only service, accepting referrals from specific stakeholders where help is needed with an appeal and will not undertake the consultancy advice work with Shared Lives.

Example 2: LCC Exchequer Services has relied on significant levels of support for Special Guardianship Orders (SGO's). The complex benefits advice needs of many of these carers are outside the expertise of Exchequer Services and it now refers to Welfare Rights to enable the completion of a means test for Court purposes. This

ensures a robust and accurate financial assessment has been undertaken and reduces reputational risks to LCC at court. The financial impact on LCC is reduced by increasing the contribution from available benefit entitlements for the children subject to care proceedings as well as the household in general. If the proposal is agreed the service will be a referral only service, accepting referrals from specific stakeholders where help is needed with an appeal and will not undertake the consultancy advice work with SGO & Exchequer services.

Question 4 – Engagement/Consultation

How have people/groups been involved in or engaged with, in developing this proposal?

Consultation

The consultation ran between 15 April 2019 and 9 June 2019. In total, 419 service user/general public consultation questionnaires were completed (9 paper copies and 410 online copies). 68% of respondees were female. Respondees aged between 35 and 64 years accounted for 68% of responses. 46% of respondees identified themselves as having some kind of disability.

The consultation was promoted via social media, a press release and on the county council website. It was promoted to LCC employees on the intranet, through Heads of Services and to county councillors via C-First (the councillors' portal). An email promoting this and other consultations was also sent from our Chief Executive to the Chief Executives of the district and unitary councils, public health, Clinical Commissioning Groups and MPs. LCC services were asked to circulate the links to the consultation through appropriate partnerships and fora.

In total, 64 organisation consultation questionnaires were also completed. We also received eight email/letter responses to the proposals during the consultation period.

Summary of Key findings – service users and general public

Using the Welfare Rights Service:

- 53% said that they had used the Welfare Rights Service.
- Of those respondents who have used the Welfare Rights Service, 59% said that they had used general benefit advice by telephone for people under the pension age, 42% said that they had used help with an appeal/mandatory reconsideration and 25% had used benefit advice for people over pension age. Of those respondents who have used the Welfare Rights Service, 84% said that the advice they received was very helpful.

- Of those respondents who have used the Welfare Rights Service, 38% said that they were referred to the service.
- Those respondents who were referred to the Welfare Rights Service most commonly said that they were referred by the Citizens Advice Bureau (20%), GP or other medical professional (15%) and a charity or voluntary organisation (14%). 11% said they were referred by a Social Worker.
- 27% of respondents said that they had sought help from other organisations and 73% said that they hadn't sought help from other organisations.
- Of those respondents who sought help with their benefits from any other organisation, 58% said that they sought help from the Citizens Advice Bureau. 17% of respondents who sought help from other organisations said that the help they received was not good.
- 42% of respondents said 'no' they haven't and wouldn't consider using an online service to access benefit advice and guidance.
- When asked why they would or wouldn't consider using an online service to access benefit advice and guidance, respondents were most likely to say that they prefer to talk to someone in person (51%), not everyone has access/ability to use the internet (25%) and information/wording online can be difficult to understand (22%).

The proposal for the Welfare Rights Service:

- 83% said that they strongly disagree with our proposal to reduce access to the provision of welfare benefit advice and guidance services.
- The most common reason given for agreeing or disagreeing with the proposal was that it's a vital service used by vulnerable people (62%).
- Respondents were most likely to say that if the proposal happens they are concerned that support won't be available anywhere (28%) and although they don't need the service at the moment they may do in future (23%).
- When asked if there is anything else that they think we need to consider or that we could do differently, respondents were most likely to comment that the service should be kept as it is (33%) and that the proposal will directly affect vulnerable people (19%).

Summary of Key findings – organisations:

- 60 out of 64 respondents said that they disagree with the proposal (48 strongly disagree and 11 tend to disagree).
- The most common reasons given for disagreeing with the proposal were that vulnerable people use and need the support (39 respondents) and it will increase the strain on other services and/or people won't access the support they need (35 respondents).
- When asked how it would affect their service and the people they support if the proposal happened, respondents were most likely to say that it will lead people into severe hardship and/or crisis (31 respondents), people will have

difficulty/won't be able to appeal/challenge decisions (18 respondents) and it will increase strain on services (18 respondents).

- When asked if there is anything else that they think we need to consider or that we could do differently, respondents were most likely to say that we need to consider the wider and/or long-term implications on vulnerable people and/or communities (23 respondents) and don't make any cuts to the service (19 respondents).
- When asked how they think they or their clients would get the support needed in future if they were unable to access the Welfare Rights Service, the most common response to this question was that they won't get support (34 respondents).
- 37 respondents said that they do provide benefit advice.
- Respondents were most likely to say they provide advice about Attendance Allowance (AA), Personal Independence Payment (PIP), Universal Credit (UC), Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), sanctions etc. (15 respondents) and help with form filling (11 respondents).

Other responses:

We received nine email/letter responses to the proposals during the consultation period. We received six responses from members of the public, one from Chorley Council, one from Charnock Richard and Wrightington Parish Councils and one from Seema Kennedy MP. These responses all expressed concern about the potential negative impact of the proposal on vulnerable people.

The Executive Leader of Chorley Council proposed taking this opportunity to work together to develop solutions and alternative delivery models that will avoid the most negative consequences for our residents, highlighting the need for early intervention.

Workshops:

Consultation workshops with service providers and partner organisations were held between 18 March and 5 June 2019. In total, 93 people attended the workshops (30 internal stakeholders and 63 service providers/partner organisations).

Summary of Key findings:

- No other service that offers the level of expertise provided by Welfare Rights.
- Stakeholders favoured retaining the service, with the majority stating that the service is vital to their own ability to support service users across a wide range of needs.
- Overwhelmingly, workshop participants informed the consultation that Welfare Rights is a well-established service with a reputation for independent, consistent and accurate benefit advice. It was clear that this respect extended to the fact that it was the only organisation which gave complex case advice and supported complex appeals at court across Lancashire.

- Feedback identified that previous financial savings across this sector generally have led to a number of system changes taking place already. Most of the VCFS services consequently operate a "low level" benefits advice offer, escalating to Welfare Rights only when the need is complex or at appeal case level. Whilst the consultation did identify that some organisations did offer some appeal support, for example housing associations, it was only in a specific locality or for a specific client base, such as those people requiring housing with those associations, therefore other people were excluded from that support.
- The workshops identified the significant demand pressures on the services supporting the welfare system. Most of the organisational stakeholders attending reported that they were struggling, "imploding", or not coping with meeting the demand from people needing benefits advice at low and complex levels. They all reported increasing demand, growing waiting lists and a concern that the quality of their services were being undermined by the pressure of demand.
- Attendees expressed concern that this proposal, if agreed, would impact on the most vulnerable in our communities, especially to those with disabilities, including mental health, age and gender, in respect of women. They used terminology such as 'it's discrimination' and "disadvantaged".
- A £340,000 reduction in Welfare Rights budget will have a detrimental effect on all stakeholders. Taking into account the feedback received from stakeholders across Lancashire, together with the implementation of other service challenge proposals from LCC to reduce other front line services such as the Lancashire Wellbeing Service, there will be an increase in the number of vulnerable people in crisis. This will have a direct impact on the other services both internal and external to LCC.
- Attendees reported that their ability to recruit to the level required to support complex case work and appeals, either through paid staff or by volunteers, was a real challenge. The expertise and knowledge gained over years of experience in the sector was difficult to find and difficult to maintain and sustain within a financially challenged VCFS organisation or other stakeholders. Recruiting volunteers with expertise that are expected to work for free on complex cases, lasting over twelve months in some cases, is an insurmountable challenge.
- Internal stakeholders confirmed that Welfare Rights advice underpins their service offers and contributes to some of their targets to deliver organisational savings. They acknowledged that Welfare Rights provides accurate and trusted advice to their service users which allowed the services to retain their service users, to support and enable them to secure their maximum income to be able to contribute towards their care needs. These services included the Shared Lives team, which highlighted a concern that the impact of the proposal to its team could be potentially £30k per person. The Care Financial Assessment Team, Financial Safeguarding Team, Care Leavers Team,

Exchequer Services Team all expressed concern about the potential impact on their service and service users.

- Workshops identified that whilst most of their organisations and services are providing as much as they can digitally, there are limitations to this. Firstly, feedback confirmed that advice cannot be given online and that it needs to be in person, either face to face or over the phone. Secondly, digital exclusion and poor literacy skills have an impact on the effectiveness of online provision.
- There will be an impact on the revenue that Welfare Rights brings in to the county each year. In 2018/19 that revenue totalled £7,800,000. If the service sees a reduction in budget then this figure will be significantly reduced. The workshop feedback has identified that both external and internal stakeholders alike have recognised the financial value that this places to their services.
- The proposal to reduce Welfare Rights could not have come at a worse time given the ongoing welfare reform agenda and its impact on residents and services which would have a significant impact on already stretched organisations such as VCFS and other service providers. This would have a cumulative impact on the most vulnerable people in Lancashire. It would result in an increased demand for complex advice, and an increase in people in crisis coming in to statutory services.

Question 5 – Analysing Impact

Could this proposal potentially disadvantage particular groups sharing protected characteristics and if so which groups and in what way? This pays particular attention to the general aims of the Public Sector Equality Duty:

- To eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment or victimisation because of protected characteristics;
- To advance equality of opportunity for those who share protected characteristics;
- To encourage people who share a relevant protected characteristic to participate in public life;
- To contribute to fostering good relations between those who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not/community cohesion.

Welfare Rights achieved annual cash gains of almost £8 million in 2018/19. This is new cash gains and does not include ongoing cash gains from previous years. The proposal will likely reduce annual cash gains to around £3 million, which is a loss of income to disabled people, elderly residents, and to the local economy where most of the money is spent.

Consultation respondents felt the proposal was discriminatory, comments such as 'it's discrimination', 'there should be an EIA to consider the disproportionate impact

on elderly and disabled people', 'disabled people are discriminated against in all areas of life and this will make life harder for people who need the most help'.

The consultation highlighted concern about the impact of this proposal on specific groups of people including:

- Those with mental health issues who could face 'additional issues of debts, housing issues, poor health and malnutrition. The support they receive from WRS can make a huge difference'.
- People with visual impairments who could 'experience increased social isolation and be prejudicially affected in their ability to claim benefits to which they are entitled and potentially experience a deterioration in mental and emotional wellbeing'.
- Single parents and families with young children with comments such as 'because of WRS I can support myself and my son financially' and 'approached your service for advice on benefits after having a baby. Found it a lot more useful than any on-line information'.
- People with learning disabilities are more likely to be 'unable to use technology to claim benefits and need more assistance'

Disabilities, including mental health:

An analysis of Welfare Rights enquiries has identified that 86% of customer enquiries are from people with disabilities, therefore it is highly probable that the proposal will negatively impact on many disabled people who will not be able to receive advice in future and may struggle to access accurate and timely advice elsewhere.

Due to the current Welfare Rights offer and pathways, the current client base is predominantly made up of people with disabilities or long term health problems, carers, and elderly people. As CAS already redirect people with low level benefit issues to appropriate alternative support, for those who can access it digital information and benefit calculators, the remaining customer base are predominantly people who cannot or would not be able to get advice elsewhere or online.

It is also extremely important that people affected by severe or terminal illness and cancer can claim and receive the vital benefits at a time when they need them the most as this will ease the loss of income¹.

¹ MacMillan Cancer Support. Cancer's Hidden Price Tag: Revealing the costs behind the illness. Accessed here https://www.macmillan.org.uk/images/Cancers-Hidden-Price-Tag-report-England_tcm9-270862.pdf

Age:

The analysis also found that 14% of enquiries are from customers over 70 years of age. In 2018/19 enquiries for people over the age of 70 years made up 25.6% of casework. These enquiries are primarily due to the take-up work undertaken to promote benefits advice to the elderly, and referrals from key services like LCC reablement and social work teams. It is highly probable that the proposal will negatively impact on the elderly as this advice provision will cease, and DWP reports highlight pensioners are under claiming benefits available to them. Last year Welfare Rights secured an extra £2.1 million for elderly residents, and this is ongoing benefit entitlement that will continue in many cases for the lifetime of the resident. It is income that is usually spent in the local economy and on services to assist in enabling elderly people to remain independent in their own home.

Shared challenges to these groups:

Welfare Reform: The ongoing Welfare Reform agenda has had a significant impact on disabled residents and those in low paid employment, but the migration of customers from Disability Living Allowance to Personal Independence Payment is not yet complete, and the migration of people from legacy benefits to Universal Credit has not yet started but from the small number of claimants currently on the benefit the problems for the most vulnerable are significant. Unfortunately many service users will be affected by these changes and therefore the consequent financial problems will have a significant impact on both the income generated from care charges, and the workloads of Social Workers who expect further increases in people seeking support whilst in crisis. There are case studies which detail when people have been placed in residential care to keep them safe due to benefit problems and have been referred to Welfare Rights to access its expertise to achieve a speedy resolution. Many vulnerable people drop out of the benefit system during the migration process as they are unable to cope with the process. Inevitably they are then more likely to enter statutory services at a cost to LCC. Currently, Welfare Rights takes on these cases and takes action to both secure an income and to get that income backdated to when they 'dropped out' of the welfare system.

LCC Service Challenge: During the implementation of the proposal, if agreed, there may be increased demand for Welfare Rights as there is likely to be a compounding effect from the cessation of the Lancashire Wellbeing Service in December 2019. The Home Improvement Service will also be dis-established. That service provided support for vulnerable residents to access information for themselves or to access local support services for basic benefit issues and online benefits calculators.

As LCC seeks to maximise income through charging for services there are reputational risks and financial risks in reducing the advice currently available. For example the proposed change to increase the charge for older people's day services

whilst removing the advice provision for older people could lead to more people cancelling their service as they cannot afford to pay more, and more older people will not be claiming benefits available to them to assist with such costs.

Digital by Default: Both the Lancashire Wellbeing Service and Welfare Rights share a similar customer base. There are consultation responses highlighting concerns for those with no digital access or support, and further cuts to basic help. Evidence tells us that overall roll-out of broadband internet in the United Kingdom may be high, but many poorer and more vulnerable households are effectively offline.² According to the DWP's own 2018 survey³, only 54 per cent of all claimants were able to apply online independently, without assistance. One third of new UC claims fail in the application process and never reach the payment stage.

In 2018/19 Welfare Rights received 233 messages from customers showing sincere appreciation of the service and its staff. Three examples of these are given below:

- *I don't know if you ever get follow ups from people you've helped but I'd like you to know how much better my life is. I now have a lovely girl who cleans my flat and clears any rubbish for me, a very nice chiropodist who is looking after my feet and a laundry who washes all my heavy washing, sheets and towels. But best of all on my good days I can get out of the flat because I can now afford a taxi, and I've also been able to take my friends for a lunch, to thank them for their care and support through a very bad time. It was bad, I would go to bed and pray to die in my sleep because I just couldn't cope, it was a lovely paramedic that referred me to you and you who got me the much needed help to make my life worth living. Thank you, with a big smile on my face*
- *Where do I start? I put in for PIP and was getting nowhere. I got to the point of appeal and there was no fight left in me and at the last minute I went for it. I give my adviser my box of papers and he told me he would get in touch. Some of the papers were very private to me. I was at an all-time low, really down but he did not push me too much. About all the detail. I still can't talk too much about it, even now at 53 it hurts. But my adviser was kind and understanding, he looked at it all and said to me "We have a case". From 4 points on PIP form we won enhanced rate and standard rate - that tells your service works and without it people like me, or worse than me have no safety net. Who knows what would happen? My appeal took just over a year- that can't be right. Sorry the whole process took a year but from the start I was treated with respect and dignity from all your staff. So from me I can say what*

² Ofcom, "Internet use and attitudes: 2017 Metrics Bulletin", 3 August 2017.

³ Department for Work and Pensions, *Universal Credit Full Service Survey*, June 2018.

a service! Without you I would not have won.

- I would just like to thank you very much for the help you gave me I was very worried about what would happen to me when I had to let my husband go into care and you sorted it all out for me. I don't think I would have got anywhere without your help I am still not right as you can see with my writing but I am getting there, thank you again.*

The customer feedback also evidences those customers with protected characteristics, many referring to their age, health problems, language problems or general difficulty understanding the process. There are many comments such as 'I have never claimed before' and 'I did not know', and references to the support, knowledge, advice and professionalism received from Welfare Rights staff which has made a positive difference to those customers lives. It is clear that face to face, phone and email are all valued by different customers with different needs. This ease of access will be lost by moving to a referral only service which may have a detrimental impact on many people with disabilities who are the main customer base. Many of these customers are likely to attempt to re-contact the service in future when they face reassessments of their benefits, and also say they will recommend others to contact the service when they need help. However, the same access and the same support will no longer be available which is a negative impact on the 'advancing equality of opportunity' aim of the Public Sector Equality Duty.

Question 6 – Combined/Cumulative Effect

Due to the recent service challenge decisions and the continuing impact of welfare reform, there will be a cumulative effect across Lancashire, particularly on those with protected characteristics mentioned in section three.

Impact on LCC services

The consultation highlighted concerns about managing increasing demands for benefits advice as specific reforms to the welfare state continue. Of particular concern to LCC services is the introduction of Personal Independence Payment and the more regular reassessments of disabled people, with case studies available of service users having lost benefits and a consequent inability to contribute to the cost of their service.

Universal Credit (UC) is available across Lancashire for new claims, however some customers will naturally migrate to when specific changes of circumstances occur. There are case studies available of service users struggling to manage the UC claims process and errors to their payments resulting in considerable financial

stress. The managed migration of customers on legacy benefits (i.e. income-related Employment and Support Allowance, income-based Jobseekers Allowance, Income Support, Tax Credits and Housing Benefit) has not yet started and is not expected to start until 2020 at the earliest. Given the impact on service users already, and the advice needs from services such as Exchequer Services and Shared Lives, the removal of most of the support currently available to these services is a significant risk.

The ability to provide assistance to internal services will have to be reviewed immediately as Welfare Rights will have a significantly reduced capacity to support the internal stakeholders who require vital support and advice for their services. All internal training and support offers will cease.

Impact on the VCF Sector

There is a cumulative effect on these protected groups from financial savings challenges of LCC and other partners, the ceasing of the Lancashire Wellbeing Service and welfare reform implementation. The consultation highlighted that the VCFS is struggling to attract core funding. It also highlighted the difficulties in recruiting and sustaining volunteers generally for its core work and that this is extremely difficult or impossible for specialised complex advice work. This has been highlighted in the consultation feedback with comments from Citizens Advice such as 'We would see increased demand for our services and would struggle to meet this without additional funding from elsewhere' and 'there is an expectation that CA will always just be there and do everything that LCC will no longer do due to the cuts. These cuts are already having a huge impact on our services, the most vulnerable use our services already, those with mental health issues, learning difficulties, BME' and 'CA and many other advice agencies in Lancashire already filter off clients needing the advice you are planning to cut'.

Question 7 – Identifying Initial Results of Your Analysis

As a result of the analysis, has the original proposal been changed/amended, if so please describe:

The original proposal has changed to reflect the outcome of the consultation and the impact on vulnerable people, service providers and LCC services.

The proposal has been revised i.e. a total budget reduction of £101,250 per annum, comprising £61,251 per annum from the Welfare Rights Service and £40,000 per annum from the Customer Access Service; and to redesign access to the Welfare Rights Service to cease telephony demand into the Customer Access Service.

The consultation confirmed that Welfare Rights provides a specific offer across

Lancashire to meet the demand for complex welfare advice. This offer is not replicated by any other organisation across Lancashire. Analysis has shown that Welfare Rights is part of a wider system (a network of stakeholders) of support, but that it operates at a specific level, where that expertise is not found in the rest of the system and on which the rest of the system relies.

The feedback from the stakeholders is the same, in that without Welfare Rights there will be a detrimental impact to their services. LCCs internal stakeholders are reliant on Welfare Rights for advice and guidance on welfare benefits as this provides savings and generates income for them, one of the examples given being that £30k per person saving made by Shared Lives as it relies on Welfare Rights advice and guidance to ensure they can support their customers.

The consultation has highlighted the protected groups which this proposal would impact upon and which LCC has a statutory duty to protect. In order to ensure the most vulnerable receive the correct benefits, it is vital that this effective support network is provided.

Contributors (internal and external to LCC and the general public) to the consultation have identified and recognised the value of the financial gains made by the service to residents and services across Lancashire.

Question 8 – Mitigation

Will any steps be taken to mitigate/reduce any potential adverse effects of the proposal?

The LCC website will be enhanced to provide details of where to access information and guidance, and the key partners that will refer complex cases requiring tribunal support. The service will continue to refer the public to the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) online form filing service and to other basic welfare benefit online support.

There is an opportunity to investigate further income generation from training provision to stakeholders

Question 9 – Balancing the Proposal/Countervailing Factors

This weighs up the reasons for the proposal – e.g. need for budget savings; damaging

effects of not taking forward the proposal at this time – against the findings of the analysis.

The rationale behind the original proposal was to support the financial challenges faced by the County Council. The risks in not following the proposal are that Lancashire County Council reduces its ability to set a balanced budget.

In the main, the revised proposal retains the capacity of the Welfare Rights service, and in particular the staff capacity to deal with the increasing complexity of support. Telephony support currently provided through the Customer Access Service will be removed, so access to the service will require redesign.

Question 10 – Final Proposal

In summary, what is the final proposal and which groups may be affected and how?

The proposal has been revised i.e. a total budget reduction of £101,250 per annum, comprising £61,251 per annum from the Welfare Rights Service and £40,000 per annum from the Customer Access Service; and to redesign access to the Welfare Rights Service to cease telephony demand into the Customer Access Service.

The groups most likely to be affected by the proposal are disabled people, older people and women, but given the revision, the impact is considered minimal.

Question 11 – Review and Monitoring Arrangements

What arrangements will be put in place to review and monitor the effects of this proposal?

Welfare Rights will continue to monitor its cash gains and service user information. It will review and identify the capacity that Welfare Rights provides in support of internal LCC services
It will establish effective referral mechanisms for key external stakeholders and monitor the access to and uptake of service by protected characteristics, cash gains, service user information where possible.

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