

## **SCRUTINY OF MONEY ADVICE UNIT**

### Report of Head of Money Advice Unit

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#### **1. Purpose of Report**

To give members of the Scrutiny committee an opportunity to examine the work of the Money Advice Unit, in particular in relation to the partnership working with Citizens Advice Bureau.

#### **2.1 Background**

The Money Advice Unit (MAU) is part of the Corporate Services Department of Hertfordshire County Council.

The key aims of the MAU are :-

- Encourage the take-up of benefits amongst Hertfordshire residents
- Promote benefits advice and money advice across the County
- Use the experience gained from it's work to influence local and national policy and practices

The MAU works to fulfil these aims by providing the following services:-

- Take-up work, to increase the income of disadvantaged individuals and communities
- Advice to front-line staff in statutory and voluntary sector
- Training in benefits and money advice
- Information for staff and public
- Policy advice

In April 2001, the MAU moved from its original home in Social Services to the Chief Executives Department (Corporate Services). The MAU has nevertheless continued to have a very close working relationship with Adult Care Services and Children, Schools and Families.

#### **2.2 Take-up**

The majority of the Unit's staff and resources are devoted to what is known as the Benefits Outreach Project. This project has been extremely successful in recent years, directly reaching and advising around 1,200 pensioners and other home-care and day care service users per year. Around 50% of these are referred by Adult Care Services staff; the rest come from outreach work, partner organisations such as Health or District

Councils, publicity campaigns etc. The MAU also use the county's newspaper, Herts Direct, to reach potential claimants and inform people of relevant changes to benefit rules.

The value to the individuals concerned, and to the local economy, of the benefits generated by this one project is approximately £4.5 m per annum.

As part of the preventative strategy to assist carers, the MAU is engaged in an additional project funded by the Carers Support Grant. The aim is to provide benefit advice to around 150 carers per year, particularly those who are caring for people who are not using ACS services. So far, it has raised a projected £263,000 in extra benefits for carers.

The Unit also has a project worker who advises the parents and carers of children with disabilities, and the professionals who work with them. She sees approximately 130 families per year and has raised £1.8m for families of disabled children, calculated over a conservative 5 year period.

A new project began in January 2003. This involves providing benefit advice to disabled people who are moving into or considering employment, to enable them to work without loss of income.

All of our take-up work is planned in close partnership with local CAB, at both district and county-wide level. Responsibility for the funding that the County Council provides for CAB take-up work (£48,000 in 2002/3; £65,000 in 2003/4) is currently held by the Chief Executives Dept., with advice from the MAU.

Although the MAU provides direct advice to 1500 or more Hertfordshire residents per year, it is not an 'open-door' advice service, unlike the CAB. The MAU and CAB network are therefore complementary. In addition, the CAB offer a much broader range of advice services (housing, immigration, consumer, employment etc). Where the work of the MAU and CAB potentially overlap (e.g. outreach advice to elderly people), there are local arrangements in place to ensure that there is no duplication of effort. With an estimated 10,000 Hertfordshire residents failing to claim attendance allowance, and 14,000 failing to claim the income support due to them (based on estimates derived from Department for Work and Pensions data), there is ample opportunity for MAU and CAB to co-exist without duplication.

### **2.3 Advice**

The MAU primarily offers a second-tier advice service to organisations and individuals who themselves give advice to benefit claimants. This includes local CAB. The daily advice phone-line takes around 3,500 enquiries per year, including 200 by email.

### **2.4 Training**

The MAU provides training in all aspects of social security and money advice, from basic courses to seminars on the latest developments for more experienced advisers. We are closely involved in CAB training programmes for their new and existing advisers.

The MAU will run around 45 courses in 2002/3 plus a further 25 in-house courses, training approximately 1300 people per year.

## **2.5 Information Services and Web Channel**

MAU provides information to front-line staff through the quarterly Herts Adviser; through occasional briefings and by producing a series of 15 benefit fact-sheets and information packs. Of particular importance in 2002/3 has been the MAU's Benefits Advice channel on the HertsDirect website. The channel includes all 15 MAU factsheets, as well as news items and links to other relevant websites. It receives around 5,000 'hits' every month.

The MAU is funded by the Legal Services Commission (LSC) to provide additional specialist advice on welfare benefits to local solicitors and other advice organisations in Hertfordshire.

## **2.6 Policy advice**

The MAU is instrumental in establishing and supporting the 4 Community Legal Service Partnerships that now cover Hertfordshire.

In the last 12 months, the MAU provided policy input into the following areas:-

- Community Legal Services
- Pensions Service and Job Centre Plus service delivery
- Residential and domiciliary charging policies
- Implementation of Children (Leaving Care) Act
- Supporting People and the Transitional Housing Benefit Scheme
- Community strategies, locality action plans and neighbourhood renewal
- Welfare to work for disabled people
- Tribunal services within Hertfordshire
- DWP consultation on benefit changes as appropriate e.g. Minimum Income Guarantee, Pension Credit, Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit
- Concessionary fees for education and discretionary charges in CSF
- Financial support for kinship carers
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## **2.7 Resources**

The cost of the MAU is £760,000 per annum, the majority of which are staff costs. However, £40,000 of these costs are met by the Legal Services Commission, £40,000 is funded by the Dept of Health Carers Support Grant, £35,000 is provided by the Welfare To Work for Disabled People JIP and £32,000 is provided via CSF from Quality Protects.

The Unit employs 24 whole time equivalent employees.

## **2.8 Revenue**

On the revenue side, the work done by the MAU contributes to the income of the County Council, to such an extent that the Unit is not only self-financing, but also contributes an income stream to the County Council that would not otherwise be available. This occurs primarily through the PSS Formula Spending Share formula, where the County Council receives over £1.5m. more than it otherwise would have received.

The PSS FSS uses the number of people in receipt of key benefits as one indicator in determining the grant that HCC receives. The MAU's Benefits Outreach Project concentrates on promoting income support and attendance allowance claims, which are two very important indicators.

The MAU database shows that in the years relevant to the 2003/4 PSS FSS (1999-2001), the MAU generated, on average, around 1100 attendance allowance claims and 650 income support claims for people aged 60+ each year.

The impact on the Elderly sub-block of the Personal Social Services FSS is as follows:

	£	Per claim £
Impact if 1,100 Attendance Allowance Claims not generated	1,280,458	1,164
Impact if 650 Income Support Claims not generated	377,184	580
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,567,642</b>	

### **3. Conclusion**

Members are asked to note, review and scrutinise the work of the MAU as listed above and identify any aspects that they wish to scrutinise in more detail, or that they wish to recommend to another committee for scrutiny.