

MONEY ADVICE UNIT - PROGRESS REPORT ON INCREASING BENEFITS TAKE UP

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1. Purpose of report

To follow-up the reports on the Money Advice Unit (MAU) presented to the Resources Scrutiny Committee on 20 March 2003, 19 June 2003 and 16 October 2003.

In the BVPP for 2003/4 and 2004 /5, the County Council made and continue to make a promise to “help people to help themselves we will make it easier for people to get the information and advice they need from us”.

The earlier reports detailed some aspects of the MAU’s work programme in response to this promise and looked at possibilities for future developments. The Scrutiny Committee has indicated that, on this occasion, they wish to scrutinise the work of the MAU by particular reference to our partner organisations. We have therefore invited the following people to attend Committee:-

Heather Day, manager of Hertford CAB

Carole, a service-user (parent of a disabled child) – surname withheld for confidentiality purposes.

Rosemary Davies, The Pensions Service (Stevenage)

2. Summary

The MAU is committed to partnership working with a wide range of partners (voluntary and statutory sector, Health, DWP etc). This report details some of the results or outcomes of those partnerships.

3. Conclusion

The Scrutiny Committee is invited to indicate whether it wishes to undertake further scrutiny of the MAU and / or make any recommendations to the Council, Cabinet or Chief Officer.

4. The work of the Money Advice Unit (MAU)

- 4.1 The Money Advice Unit (MAU) is part of the Corporate Services Department of Hertfordshire County Council.
- 4.2 The key aims of the MAU are to increase take-up of benefits for Hertfordshire residents and promote accurate advice and advocacy on benefits and debt by organisations within Hertfordshire.
- 4.3 To achieve those aims in 2004/5, the MAU aims to directly advise and assist 2,000 local people who are failing to claim what they are entitled to (people aged over 60, carers, parents of disabled children and people with disabilities).
- 4.4 In addition, the MAU provides a training programme, a telephone and email advisory service, consultancy advice, written and electronic information and other support services to front-line social care, voluntary sector, health and housing staff throughout the county.
- 4.5 The existing projects underway within the MAU include :-
- Benefits Outreach, aimed at elderly and disabled people who are failing to claim attendance allowance, housing and council tax benefit and pension credit.
 - Carers Project, for carers of disabled people
 - Children With Disabilities Project
 - Financial Literacy (aimed at school pupils and their families)
 - Welfare to Work, providing benefits advice for disabled people moving into employment
- 4.6 There are a number of other projects that we are currently seeking external funding for. These include:-
- Working with district and borough councils throughout Hertfordshire, and using their housing and council tax benefit records to identify elderly people who are failing to claim other benefits.
 - Working with the Watford Muslim Community Project to improve benefit take-up amongst isolated and elderly Muslims.
 - Working with North Herts District Council to provide benefits advice to meals on wheels recipients in rural areas.
 - Extending the Welfare to Work project, in partnership with the Job Centre Plus, ECDU and ESF, to reach lone parents, carers and others returning to work after unemployment.
 - Extending the Children with Disabilities project, as we are unable to cope with existing demand for advice. The project has been very successful, given that it only has two part-time employees, but they are not able to adequately respond to all requests for help within an acceptable time.
- 4.7 The success of the children with disabilities project can be measured in many ways. The most obvious is by looking at the actual and direct financial benefits accruing to individuals that we have assisted in the last year. The latest available figures show that we have enabled parents of disabled children to claim an additional £23,536.75 per week in the last year alone. This equates to an additional £1.22 million over a full year, for a total cost to HCC of around £35,000.
- 4.8 Our partnership work with The Pensions Service (Department for Work and Pensions) continues to grow. There have been preliminary discussions over the establishment of

a joint visiting team involving TPS and ACS staff, who would share information for both benefit and financial assessment purposes.

- 4.9 In addition, we have co-operated wherever possible in the promotion of Pension Credit claims in Hertfordshire. The attached chart shows how progress has been made in Parliamentary constituencies in Hertfordshire since pension credit was introduced in October 2003.

Constituency	Number of Households getting Pension Credit in November 2003	Number of Households getting Pension Credit in May 2004
Broxbourne	2,611	2,980
Hemel Hempstead	2,314	3,239
Hertford and Stortford	1,837	2,563
Hertsmere	2,319	2,900
Hitchin and Harpenden	1,582	2,272
South West Hertfordshire	1,850	2,494
St Albans	1,566	2,152
Stevenage	2,445	3,363
North East Hertfordshire	2,047	3,002
Watford	2,242	3,050
Welwyn Hatfield	2,172	2,954

- 4.10 We have regular liaison with the CAB service in Hertfordshire, both at bureau level and county-wide. This is to ensure that we are working in partnership where possible (e.g. in Broxbourne, with a highly successful take-up campaign that also involves the Borough Council). Where we do not have partnerships, liaison ensures that we are working collaboratively, avoiding both duplication and gaps in the provision of advice services.

5. Access to Service Implications

- 5.1 Virtually the whole remit of the MAU is to promote access to benefits advice, either directly through take-up work or indirectly through partnerships, training, consultancy, information etc. Therefore any expansion or contraction of the MAU's work has a direct impact on access to services.
- 5.2 In planning our work programme, we try to ensure that we consider all forms of access for all client groups e.g. MAU information is available in a range of formats and can be translated. Although we increasingly use our web channel to circulate information for example, we know that this is not a good option for many low-income service users, so written versions are also provided.

Background Papers

Reports to Resources Scrutiny Committee 20 March, 19 June and 16 October 2003.