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## **PETITION - WELFARE BENEFITS SERVICE CHANGES**

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### **Briefing Note By Service Director Customer & Communities**

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## **AUDIT & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**23 August 2018**

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### **1 PURPOSE AND SUMMARY**

- 1.1 The briefing note advises the Audit & Scrutiny Committee of the background to a petition received in relation to Welfare Benefits Service Changes.**
- 1.2 Since 1 November 2017 Customer Services, the Homelessness and Welfare Benefits Services have merged and restructured to become one integrated service called Customer Advice and Support Service.
- 1.3 Welfare Benefits Officers are now known as Financial Inclusion Officers, forming part of the Financial Support and Inclusion Team along with the Scottish Welfare Fund Team. This team sits within the wider Homelessness and Financial Support Team.
- 1.4 The aim of the restructure was to ensure that the level of service provided continued and in some areas improved, ensuring Scottish Borders Council (SBC) was prepared for ongoing Welfare Reform including the rollout of Universal Credit. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) expectation on customers to self-serve online has created increased demands on Council services to assist customers.
- 1.5 Prior to 1 November 2017 the equivalent of 1.7 Welfare Benefit Assistants were employed to assist with basic benefit enquiries including form filling with customers. We now have 49 Customer Advice & Support Advisors (CASA's) across a wider range of locations, with a remit to assist customers at the first point of contact with their enquiry whether they present in a locality office face to face, over the telephone or online. These Advisers already deal with a range of benefit enquiries and applications as well as carrying out assessments for blue badges. The aim is to provide a holistic service where a customer can speak to the same member of staff on a range of topics.

- 1.6 The re-development of some former welfare benefits staff into other areas within CASS has retained their expert knowledge and skills within the service. Both customers and staff are therefore benefiting from easier knowledge and service accessibility and the new structure provides wider, better accessibility to learning opportunities, access to systems, training and support.
- 1.7 SBC has for many years contracted the Borders Citizens Advice Consortium (BCAC) to provide services to customers including benefit, money and debt advice and assistance to challenge benefit decisions. Contract monitoring meetings occur quarterly between SBC managers and BCAC managers. Quarterly liaison meetings occur between front line SBC team leaders and BCAC managers to discuss trends, issues and share best practice. SBC and BCAC staff regularly attend external meetings to discuss current benefit related issues. SBC team leaders are in regular contact with BCAC managers via email or telephone to immediately respond to any issues.
- 1.8 Comprehensive advice continues to extend from initial contact advice to representation at appeals; the delivery of that advice is continuing to evolve to improve speed and efficiency to the advantage of customers.
- 1.9 Telephone calls are being answered by Customer Advice and Support Service's via the 0300 100 1800 number. This provides additional capacity for call handling including taking calls over extended hours. Customers are provided with the correct advice at the first point of contact reducing any delay in assistance and eradicating backlogs. This change has ensured that contacts going to Financial Inclusion Officers have now reduced allowing Financial Inclusion Officers to concentrate on their core duties rather than handling routine enquiries which do not require their expertise.
- 1.10 The SBC website is being continually updated to allow customers to access more benefit information online. An e-form is currently in development to allow customers to request assistance with a benefit appeal online.
- 1.11 Home visits continue to be available to those in need though on occasions this is appropriate for other organisations such as Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) rather than SBC. The new Scottish Government Social Security Agency to be set up from 2019 has made a commitment to offering home visits to customers. This will increase the home visiting capacity across the Scottish Borders to ensure the most vulnerable customers are able to access benefit advice and assistance.
- 1.12 Resources exist to assist in the maximisation of benefit entitlement however this is a wider responsibility than SBC and is delivered in various ways by SBC, DWP, BCAC, Registered Social Landlords and third sector organisations. The DWP welfare reforms have placed an expectation on customers to self-serve online; this has created new and increased demands on SBC staff to assist customers with digital skills to allow access to benefits.
- 1.13 It is acknowledged that a wider consultation should have taken place and this will be borne in mind for the future.

- 1.14 Monitoring of the financial position of people within the Borders will continue, however the degree of impact which can be attributed to any single measure within SBC is impossible to gauge. Since major reforms and changes are taking place nationally that directly affect a cross section of the population in a large number of ways, it would be impossible to attribute any particular impact or outcome solely to the restructure which has taken place within SBC.
- 1.15 The level and type of resources will be continually reviewed as the impact of Universal Credit is better understood and further welfare reforms take place. The shape of the local support of the new Scottish Society Security Agency will also be an important factor in the services provided in the future.

## 2 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 **I recommend that the Audit & Risk Committee acknowledges the Petition for Welfare Benefits Service Changes but takes no further action at this time.**

**Approved by**

**Jenni Craig**

**Service Director Customer & Communities Signature .....**

### **Author(s)**

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### **Background Papers:**

### **Previous Minute Reference:**

**Note** – You can get this document on tape, in Braille, large print and various computer formats by contacting the address below. Jenni Craig can also give information on other language translations as well as providing additional copies.

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