

Warwickshire Welfare Rights Advice Service



Annual Report 2007/8

WWRAS is funded to increase awareness of Social Security benefits amongst staff of WCC and related agencies and to promote take up of benefits claimed in Warwickshire by supporting frontline staff to identify claims.

Much of our work involves income generation for vulnerable clients and their families. This year WCC funding of 288,595 has enabled us to generate known gains of £1.79 million which is a more than six fold return on the income spent. If we add in the non WCC funded gains of £852,000 this increase to an eightfold return. This is in fact a considerable under-estimate as most of the awards we secure as for 3-5 years not just the one year for which we count the gain.

In addition WCC benefits indirectly as for each disability benefit entitlement we secure there is an increase in Central Government rate support. Given that over 80% of our work is on disability benefits and that much of it is with older people the gains are clear.

On top of this we know from our follow up survey of pensioners that the extra money is spent locally to buy goods and services and contribute to care costs in order to improve health, wellbeing and overall quality of life.

Benefits Enquiry Line

This is our telephone helpline for WCC staff and staff in other statutory and voluntary agencies across the county. We offer expert advice to help front line staff, who are not benefits experts so that we can jointly identify extra entitlements and how to claim these.

We maintained the helpline between 10 and 1 each weekday morning and record additional queries which come in through the main switchboard, re-directing callers to the BEL or other agencies as appropriate. Calls are fairly evenly spread across each day of the week, with slightly higher volumes on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The difference is not sufficiently significant to change the days of opening, though there is a need to review whether the opening hours should be extended or supplemented by offering an email enquiry facility.

Number of enquiries per year

We dealt with 1110 enquiries this year which represents a slight drop in usage over last year, despite the fact that at the half year point calls were coming in at a higher level. In view of the recent renewal of the SLA on the same terms we have now re-publicised the serviced more widely and are already seeing an increase in usage.

There is a varied range of calls from the different parts of the county. Warwick District agencies, as ever, make significant use of this service (28% of calls) as does NBBC (23%). North Warwickshire as the smallest area makes the least (7%) with Rugby at 18% and Stratford 17%. The remainder of calls were from county wide services with a few calls from outside the county.

Breakdown of users

40% of calls come from WCC staff and their adult health colleagues. About 39% of these are from Children's services with 61% from AHCS.

20% of calls come from Citizens Advice Bureaux. 23% are from other (mainly voluntary sector agencies) most of which are funded by WCC. There are still a high number of members of the public directly accessing our helpline (17%) having often been inappropriately signposted there by other agencies (especially WCC staff!)

We monitor the type of clients that the calls relate to and the breakdown is as follows. 49% are disabled with a higher volume of physical disability (29%) as opposed to mental disability (20%). 9% are pensioners and 15% children or young people. 21% are families or non disabled single people. The remaining 6% were not classified.

Type of enquiry

The majority of calls still relate to disability and ill-health benefits and the associated means tested benefits which clients can claim. We record all cases where we have helped to identify and advise on additional benefit claims and our work has helped to identify £448,605 in unclaimed benefits. 40% of this income was generated through calls from WCC staff.

Training

We ran 25 courses this year as well as 24 in-house training sessions, with 3 brand new courses in the programme. All courses are popular, with high levels of booking and we had to schedule in extra courses to meet demand for certain subjects.

682 people booked onto courses and 585 people attended (due mainly to a problem with attendance on some courses during the second quarter).

Many courses bookings are now done directly from our website and we use this and email to reduce the administration and cost involved in processing bookings. However we have found that some trainees fail to respond to E-mail confirmation of bookings and we have had to resume sending out paper confirmation of course places in some cases to ensure attendance. This is particularly the case when one person in the organisation books other staff onto courses. We are liaising with these agencies to remedy the problem.

Range of courses

The subject matter of courses done this year in both the main training programme and locally based sessions are shown below. Our training aims to give a general overview of entitlements and how to claim them so that staff who are in contact with potential claimants can alert them to these and ensure they are claimed. This indirectly promotes take up more widely.

Main training programme

Locally based courses

Residential Care & Benefits - The Basics	DLA Form Filling
Updating Seminar	Effective Referrals
Grants & Loans: Families	DLA Care Form filling
Housing Benefit - The Basics	Updating seminar
Learning Disability & Benefits	Benefit System
Module B1: Pension Plus	IB50 Form Filling
Module C1: Top-ups for over 60's	Mental Health and Benefits
Children & Family Benefits	Incapacity Benefits
CT Help for the Disabled & Carers	Carers & Benefits
Benefit System & How it Works	Independent Living Fund
Benefits for Children with a Disability	Housing Benefit Basics
In work benefits for the disabled	Independent Living Fund
Filling in the AA claim pack	Learning Disability
Top ups for under 60s	Transitional Benefits
Benefits for 16 & 17 year olds	Carers Allowance & Spin Offs
Care and Mobility Benefits	Basic Benefit Awareness
Benefits and Mental Health	Learning Disability & Bens
DLA form filling for Disabled children	
Transitional Benefits – child to adult	
Residential Care and Benefits	
Incapacity for work	
Carers and Benefits	
Learning Disability and Benefits	
Housing Benefit	

Feedback from users

Evaluations are always done for courses and there are as ever a consistently high level of positive comments from trainees on our courses. 99% of trainees said our courses were pitched at the right level for them and there were 88% of positive comments on courses.

Post training surveys were sent out to all trainees who attended courses to check that the content of courses is relevant to their work. The results show that all participants found the training to be relevant to their work when dealing with clients and that most had used it to pass useful information on to colleagues. 61% knew of clients who had received more money as a result of the information they had gained which demonstrates how our training contributes to take up and social inclusion.

Information

Benefits Bulletin and Benefit Rates items

Our Benefit Rates posters and leaflets have been very popular and we had to do a second print run in response to demand. This is also one of the items that is most downloaded from our website. Four issues of the Bulletin were produced and distributed and the second is in preparation at present.

We are keen to do more email distribution to ensure wider circulation. Alongside this we would still wish to distribute some hard copies of items for ease of reference and wider circulation

New items this year

We have produced the following 5 new items:

1. In response to the confusion surrounding the new rules we produced an "Advisers Guide to the Independent Living Fund"
2. Following a request from the Fostering team we wrote an item on "Private Fostering and Benefits" which they are using to promote interest in this area and encourage registration of private foster carers.
3. We have produced a simple leaflet advising appellants about "What to claim pending an Incapacity Benefit appeal"
4. We have written a "Quick Guide to Benefits for Carers"
5. We have produced a leaflet on the new "Local Housing Allowances" which will affect all new claimants of rent rebates.

The Website is still very popular and we continue to monitor usage. There were 18,258 visits to the site and users looked at 96,825 pages. We are constantly updating material on the site to encourage re-visits and our publications can be accessed, training courses viewed and booked and electronic referrals made.

80 agencies have now registered for the adviser section of the site and this figure is growing as this service is promoted.

All publications were checked for accuracy and up-to-date content for the start of the financial year and there is a rolling programme of updating these throughout the year. It is essential that items are maintained as they are kept on the website and very widely used and this is an ongoing priority. We had 74 publications during this year so this is a large and on-going piece of work given that benefits legislation changes several times per year.

We have distributed 17,178 items by post this year.

This is a combination of quarterly mailshots of our Bulletin (which accounted for 8493 items) and training programmes (2411 items). We also sent out our 2874 of our Benefit Rates posters and leaflet to all on our database. This is a one off annual mailing to coincide with the new rates coming out. The remaining 3,400 items were in response to orders for specific leaflets and fact-sheets.

In addition users of our website have downloaded 7,723 of our information items. With our Benefit Rates items, Publications Lists, local contacts and residential care leaflet being the most frequently used.

We sent our "What We Do" leaflet to all Adult and Children's services staff via the intranet to remind them of our services and ensure they are appropriately used.

User feedback

We did a survey of the readers of our Benefits ✓ Bulletin by enclosing a questionnaire in the second quarter of the year. Only 32 replies were received and these were mainly from those who received their own copy of the Bulletin (as opposed to those who share an office copy). This may partly explain the low response rate and those who shared a copy said they would like their own!

Around half commented positively on the Bulletin and all particularly used articles on disability benefits and those for older people.

Appeals Casework

We dealt with 477 appeal referrals this year, including 26 appeals where we only offered advice and not representation. This was as a result of a decision at the end of the previous year to reduce the number of incoming referrals because the volume was well in excess of our target. We continued to restrict the number in the first month of this year to keep within our annual target of 400.

Despite this we have again taking more referrals than we are funded to do but will continue to take on cases for as long as resources permit. We are committed to offering our appeals service to all who need it and even the 26 referrals we were not represent were given information and advice about their appeals and followed up to ensure satisfactory outcomes.

The spread of referrals coming from each area was;

NBBC	140 (22%)	NW	50 (10%)	S	71(15%)
WD	140 (29%)	R	106 ((22%)		

In addition 6 Warwickshire residents were referred by agencies outside the county.

229 (48%) came from CABx, 83 (18%) were self referrals, 55 (12%) from WCC staff and 107 (22%) from other agencies (including those with whom AHCS contract).

Ethnicity details are always requested and are recorded wherever the client gives this information. Our records show that we have data for 62% of our appeal clients and 8% of them were from non white European backgrounds. We have changed our recording procedures to encourage a fuller response to this. It should be borne in mind of course that all our appeal cases are on referral only and that we have limited control over the ethnicity or indeed other details of clients referred.

Tribunal representation done

467 appeal cases were closed. 56 of these were the unrepresented clients (A/U) referred to above (some of which were referred in the previous year but completed in this). 411 of these clients had received the full service (A). The results for each are shown separately below.

Outcome	Appeal	A/U	Total
Revised before hearing	79	16	95
Won at hearing	134	10	144
Lost at hearing	75	21	96
Withdrawn	117	9	126
Supersessions allowed	6	0	6
Total	411	56	467

This shows that 20% of cases were successfully settled by negotiation prior to the hearing which avoids the stress for the clients of attending a hearing. 240 cases went to a full appeal hearing, with a 64% success rate where we represented and only 33% where we did not. A further 6 cases were allowed using the supersession rather than the appeal process. The overall success rate on referrals pursued to appeal was 75%

Alongside this 27% of all referrals were not pursued. A lot of work goes into these before a decision is made not to proceed. This is sometimes at the clients request but often on our advice as there is a sometimes a risk to the clients current award if an appeal is pursued.

Amount of benefits raised.

Money gains from appeal referrals amount to £1,134,503 from appeals work. 53% of this was for disability and carers benefits, 21% for sickness benefits, and 26% for means tested top ups. Our appeals work clearly protects and increases the entitlement of severely disabled people to benefits and our expertise makes a significant difference to the outcome as demonstrated by the comparison between the represented and unrepresented appellants.

Feedback from users

We have for some years been sending out client satisfaction surveys to all appeal clients when their cases are closed to help inform our service provision. This year we continued to do so for the first 6 months and this analysis relates to that period.

The results show that of 197 questionnaires sent out 99 were returned (50%). There was almost universal satisfaction with the service even though some respondents did not win their appeal or did not proceed to a hearing (either because they chose to withdraw or their appeal was revised prior to hearing)

For each question there up to 6 non-responses. We have included all the surveys in our analysis and this shows that:

- 94% found our advice easy to understand – only 3 said it was not and 3 did not reply
- 93% felt we had kept them fully up to date – 2 did not and 4 did not reply
- 94% felt we listened to their point of view – 6 did not reply
- 99% were happy with the way the representative presented their case. Only one person was not and 20 others said this was not applicable as their case did not go to hearing
- 92% were very satisfied with the overall service – 3 were not and 5 did not reply
- 94% would recommend us to others (and indeed they do as our level of self referral shows!) 2 would not and 4 did not reply.

This extraordinarily high level of both response and satisfaction must also be seen in the light of only three complaints against the service in the whole year, only one of which was upheld.

Take-up

Campaigns done

Work with Fairer Charging clients

This take-up work is done in partnership with the Financial Assessment Visiting Team, who identify and refer applications for increases in disability benefits to us.

We continued to deal with 27 clients whose claims were outstanding from 2006/7. A further 32 claims were allowed for 23 of these claimants, with 4 clients refused. This has resulted in an extra £109,439 in benefit income

This year we have had 75 new referrals. 44 cases have been resolved so far. 17 clients have been paid extra benefits, 5 were refused (4 of which are being appealed) and no application was pursued in 15 cases. 7 clients died or did not pursue the claim.

Money gains so far of £75,807 making a total of £185, 246 this year for WCC service users, much of which goes towards their care charges.

Benefit Checks for deaf service users

This service is offered in partnership with the Deaf Services Team who identify and refer clients for advice and help. We always use a BSL interpreter to advise and make claims but checking outcomes in these cases tends to take more time due to communication difficulties.

We have dealt with 15 referrals for benefit checks and help with DLA/AA claims so far this year and ongoing work with 5 clients from last year.

12 cases were closed this year. These involved 5 new claims, 3 of which were successful, 2 successful requests for an increase in benefit, 2 who required advice only and 3 which were not pursued as there were no extra entitlements.

Benefit gains of £17, 228 were generated. The bulk of this was for means tested benefits with around 17% for disability benefit claims.

Staff Development and Training

The first quarter of the year saw two members of staff off with major and long-term health problems which meant considerable reallocation of work and responsibilities. We had to manage continuing high workloads during their absence and despite this I am pleased to report that all targets have been met.

Staff are encouraged to attend a wide range of training and other learning events and courses available are highlighted at monthly team meetings and put on circulation within the office as they arise. We also run in-house training using our own staff to ensure the requisite level of expertise. This is essential as we have a team of long-serving and very experienced staff and finding training at the appropriate level is increasingly difficult.

Staff have attended 43 training courses on 25 different topics this year (due to several staff attending the same course).

Other work taken on

- We continue to be actively involved in the Voluntary Sector forums in relation to both the Older Peoples Strategy and Children, Young People and Families. We also represent the voluntary sector on the CYP Strategy Forum
- We have regular liaison meetings with the statutory agencies responsible for benefits administration and appeals (DWP, HMRC, District and Borough Councils) at both local and national level. We regularly attend national DWP conferences and contribute to policy discussions
- We continue to service Warwick District Welfare Rights Forum for those interested in welfare rights provision and benefit issues generally.
- We are working with NBBC and Warwick District Councils on anti-poverty work and have also been asked to do so by North Warwickshire Borough Council.

Quality Standards

A key achievement this year was the award of the ISO 9001 quality standard which we were formally accredited with in October. This is external recognition of the high standard of service we provide and our commitment to quality.

However good quality services need proper long term funding. WWRAS has been faced with 3 years of very short-term contract agreements and delays in renewing these. This could easily have adversely affected our services to clients. We have been lucky to retain the loyalty, experience and expertise of a strong staff group and a small but committed Management Board which has ensured continuing high quality services, as witnessed by the award of our ISO9001 award.

We now have security of funding for a further two years and with additional funds already secured for new projects we look forward to continuing the seemingly never-ending task of further increasing take up in Warwickshire.

Non WCC Funded Take-up Work

We have continued to bring in additional funds from other sources to promote take-up of benefits amongst clients who do not traditionally access advice services. This year we limited our fundraising because of uncertainties about our WCC contract but we nevertheless raised £35k for this extra work which helps promote benefits more widely. These campaigns are described below.

This year we were commissioned to write a Take-up Strategy on Council administered benefits for the 5 District and Borough Councils in Warwickshire and we have advised them on how to implement this and supported this work. As the year ends we have been asked to formally take on the project management of this work which we look forward to doing.

Targetted take-up work with older people

This work has been done with additional funding over a 7 year period and has hitherto raised £6 million for pensioners across the county.

Work in 2007/8 was done at a reduced level with the cessation of the two year funding from the Department of Work and Pensions but we secured other funds from a charitable trust to continue this work in partnership with Age Concern. We are in regular liaison with the Pension Service, WCC staff and other advice services in the county who are also doing take up work with pensioners and it was agreed that it would be premature for us to cease doing this work as we continue to identify claimants not reached by these other services.

We dealt with 240 referrals for advice and help with claims. Over half of these clients (57%) have been assisted to make claims for benefits and 180 claims have been decided so far giving benefit gains of £428,989. 62 clients were not entitled to any extras, 34 were referred to Pension Service colleagues for help with claims. A number of claim outcomes are still awaited so the gains will continue to increase.

£144,606 and was raised for pensioners during the current financial year.

Take-up Work with the Sikh Community in Warwick District

This service offers interpreter support benefits advice to the Sikh community. It operates from the Sikh Community Centre in Leamington Spa

We had 268 visits to the service during this year. 74 clients brought new queries to the service 77 came back to discuss ongoing issues.

The number of male and female clients is split 42/58% and the service continues to be predominantly used by older people. This is not surprising given that we are targetting non English speakers.

We advise on a wide range of benefits, though disability and incapacity benefits feature highly. 20% of enquiries related to new claims, 14% to disputes and appeals and the remainder to more general better off advice.

The money gains to these clients amount to £90,667. This is mainly for disability and ill health benefits.

Carers Take-up

We completed all work from last years campaign to identify hidden carers in Stratford with £45,681 in extra gains and 24 new carers referred into support services.

Nuneaton and Bedworth cases were also wound down with over £99,500 in extra benefits being raised and 19 carers referred into and using Guidepost services.

We were given a further grant by Stratford District Council do more take-up work with Carers in their District from October 2007. The intention was to contact households with a disabled person living there and ask them to pass on our invitation to have a free benefit check to their carer, if any. Where they respond we also help them to access services from South Warwickshire Carers Support Service.

100 mailshots were sent out over the last half of the financial year and these generated a 30% response rate. All respondents were given details of Carers Support Services and encouraged to make use of their services. We then did benefit checks and helped 20 clients to make claims for 26 extra benefits and advised 10 that there was nothing extra to claim.

These carers have been assisted to claim benefits worth £35,658 as well as being given access to support and other services.

Take up gains 2007/8

	Gains		Funding
POP	144606	2006/7	10000
	428,989	2007/8	
Sikh Centre	97,154		12300
Carer NB	99,526		
Carers S	45,681	2006/7	
	35,658	2007/8	5000
Total	851614		27300