

PROPOSED OPTIONS PAPER

FOR BARNET WELFARE RIGHTS UNIT

BY THE STAFF OF THE UNIT – SEPTEMBER 2004



WELFARE RIGHTS UNIT

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Background

The Council set up the Welfare Rights Unit in August 1986 within the (then) Social Services Department. The Unit was subsequently incorporated into the Strategic Planning and Research Section of Community Services. During this time the Unit expanded in number from 4 to 10 and broadened its scope to take on special project casework, in addition to acting as a second tier service supporting front line advisers in all sectors.

In April 1999, WRU became part of the Social Exclusion Service. Following the 'disaggregation' of the Social Exclusion Service the Unit became part of Finance (later Borough Treasurer's) as a temporary arrangement. At around the same time the Unit Manager was made redundant. After a Best Value review which concluded that the welfare rights unit should remain in- house, management responsibility was transferred to Toni Carney, Special Project's Officer.

The location and management of the Unit now needs to be addressed so that development of the service and the unit's contribution to strategic planning within the Council can be taken forward. A final business plan can only be drafted when these issues have been resolved.

This issue was last addressed in the Options Report of June 2001 which concluded that the Council should continue to provide an in-house welfare rights service.

This document considers:

Direction of the Unit-The decision about which areas of work to concentrate on will also drive the decision about whether the Welfare Rights Unit should continue to be a part of Borough Treasurer's, relocated to a more suitable part of the Council, or outsourced. Where the Unit is based also impacts on the ability of the Unit to deliver corporate priorities and contribute to strategic planning.

Location within the Council structure – Unit staff believe the Unit should serve a strategic, cross-Council function.

Staffing issues as relevant to service delivery and management issues; the loss of the dedicated manager post and continuing failure to fill vacant posts have had a major impact on the direction and role of the Unit and quality of service offered.

Mission Statement

1. To contribute to the reduction of social exclusion and poverty through implementation of income maximisation strategies which target families or individuals who are vulnerable through low income, illness, disability or ethnicity.
2. To develop strategic partnerships with council services and other service providers which seek to improve the quality and extent of welfare benefit advice and to identify gaps in provision and, where consistent with the above aim, provide services which fill those gaps.
3. To provide policy advice to the Council on the implications of social security changes and their interaction with the financing of and delivery of council services.
4. To consider the community's need for benefits advice whenever the Council is developing social inclusion and financial inclusion strategies, and regeneration projects. Where gaps are identified consider provision or take up projects to meet gaps.
5. To ensure social care support services delivered by Barnet Council and key partners are "advice proofed" to ensure the most vulnerable service users have access to advice and that statutory obligations in this area are complied with.*

Activities

Welfare rights work is a mix of pro-active take-up campaigns, case-work, training, information, publicity and policy work. The Welfare Rights Unit provides the following services:

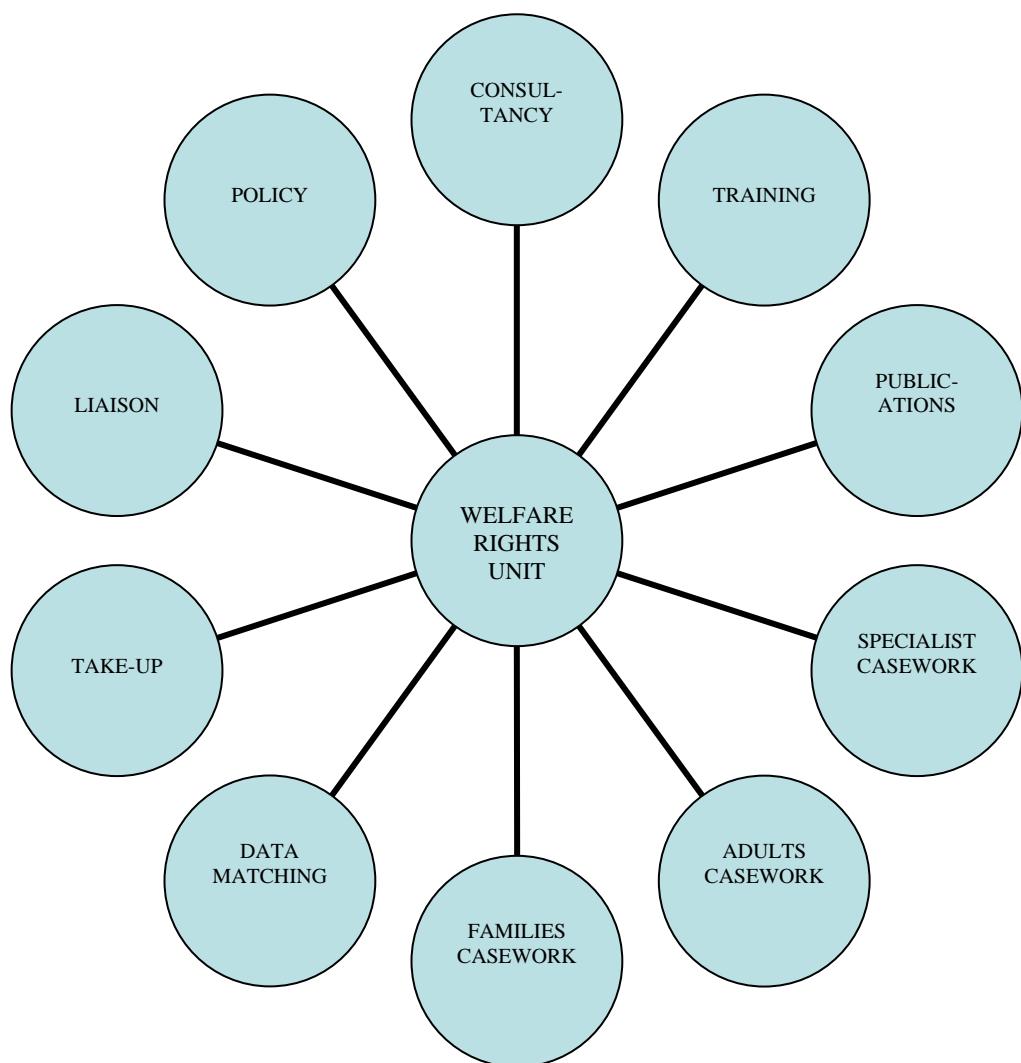
Consultancy

Barnet Council employees, and other colleagues from health and voluntary agencies, contact the unit's advice line if about their service-user's benefit and tax credit entitlements. This may involve conducting a benefit check and/or giving advice on a specific query. The service is available by telephone, e mail, fax and letter

Training

The unit supports and encourages partner agencies to do income maximisation work by delivering training, talks and presentations on benefits and tax credits. On-going training after support is available through the consultancy line.

* See Appendix for further information



Publications

The unit aims to provide a range of information and publicity material for council staff, advisers and members of the public to increase knowledge and take up of benefits and tax credits. This includes e based and paper publicity.

Guides and leaflets

The Unit produces a number of guides and leaflets covering the following topics: benefits for carers; financial help if your child has special needs; help with completing a disability living allowance claim form for a child; looked after children; foster carers; prospective adoptive parents; maternity benefits; choices at 16 for children with special needs; guide for Barnet leaseholders; tax credits and pension credit.

A Quick Guide to Welfare Benefits.

A desktop leaflet distributed each April, which provides a quick guide to benefit rates.

Money Matters.

Bi-monthly magazine distributed to our partners, both inside and outside the Council, which provides information on changes to benefits, tax credits and related issues.

Specialist Casework Service

The unit takes cases referred from other parts of the Council and community organisations who lack the expertise to provide more complex welfare benefit legal advice.

Referral Criteria: The Welfare Rights Unit will provide assistance with cases which require complex Welfare Rights Advice or representation at Tribunal. The Unit is one of the few advice providers which offer representation at Tribunal and has a high success rate.

Direct Casework with vulnerable adults

Barnet Residents who receive a homecare package, or are in the process of being assessed for homecare services, can be referred to the welfare rights unit for assistance with claiming benefits. This work links with Fairer Charging which places a statutory obligation on Councils to ensure that residents who are charged for their care package receive welfare rights advice and assistance with claiming benefits

The Welfare Rights Unit has a dedicated Mental Health post for service users at Barnet Psychiatric Unit. This is funded through the Mental Health Services core grant, secured after a take up project run by the Unit highlighted the need for this service.

Direct Casework with vulnerable families

Children with special educational needs, looked after children, clients of the home school teaching service, families using child and adolescent mental health services and child development clinics can be referred to the unit's children and families' adviser.

Users of other children's services can be referred where more complex welfare rights support is needed.

The Unit has an adviser to work with families with young children in Barnet's SureStart areas. This post is funded by Sure Start. Following the success of this project, funding has been secured for another adviser. The two Sure Start advisers will offer advice to families with children under 5, or where one of the family is pregnant, through the new Children's Centres.

Cases referred by councillors and MPs.

Families or individuals presenting in councillor or MPs' surgeries can be referred to the Unit.

Data matching

The Welfare Rights Unit uses housing benefit and council tax benefit records to identify people who are not receiving their full benefit entitlement, and advise them as to their possible entitlement and how to claim.

Benefit Take-up Projects and short focused Campaigns

It is widely acknowledged that low take up is a problem among the most vulnerable sections of our communities. Take up is of key concern to local authorities in the context of their statutory duties, in promoting social inclusion and revenue collection.

Improving peoples' incomes helps them to maintain successful lives in the community and can contribute to the tackling of health and education in-equalities. It promotes independence by helping people secure additional support to buy the services they need and reduces social exclusion caused through financial barriers.

This wide-ranging work is undertaken because of the important links between poverty and ill health, educational under achievement, disability and ill health.

The reasons why people fail to claim their full benefit are many and complicated. There are various mechanisms which can be used to encourage people to claim benefits. The Welfare Rights Unit has a history of innovative project development in this area and has received LGA recognition and an award for securing funds for the SureStart adviser post.

The Welfare Rights Service cannot develop these campaigns in isolation. We work extensively with partners both from within Barnet Council and with outside organisations.

The aim of this work is to help tackle poverty by identifying both the gaps in the take-up of benefits (and now tax credits) but also in the provision of advice services, targeting those groups most vulnerable to poverty and low income. Where a take up project is evaluated as successful and highly valued this service may then be offered as a long term specialist project, for example the mental health post mentioned earlier.

Additionally take up projects may consider ways in which benefits and tax credits can be used to help construct effective strategies for developing pathways out of poverty e.g. through supporting people in times of transition, such as moving back to work, or into education. Such strategies may involve providing training and talks and information for groups of key professionals, use of IT data bases, running and evaluating time-limited projects, producing user-friendly and accessible information, running advice surgeries etc. They require detailed knowledge of welfare benefits and tax credit legislation and administration as well as knowledge of wider strategic issues. They involve widespread networking to sustain and create new partnerships, awareness of pathways into and out of poverty as well as considering the use of different forms of communication to best meet the needs of differing client groups.

Three aspects of work by the Unit related to child poverty have been recognised by the LGA as examples of good practice and produced plaudits for Barnet Council: having such a post in the first place, the work done with families of children with

statements of special educational need and the collaboration with the children's information service to provide information about benefits and tax credits for their web site.

Other work has lead to projects with the Carer's Centre, the Multi-cultural Centre and the Chinese Community.

Take-Up projects offer support and advocacy from initial claim to tribunal representation.

Maintain effective liaison with key advice services and agencies . The Unit promotes regular liaison with a broad range of partner agencies, from government departments, to local authority services the voluntary and community sector and not for profit agencies. It also supports the Community Legal Service Partnership.

Policy.

The Unit contributes to national and local operational and policy work. It belongs to the National Association of Welfare Rights Advisers, networks with other units around the country and links with national campaigns e.g. a recent project with the Local Government Association. At local level it belongs to the London Welfare Rights Officers' Group and has links with a wide range of organisations such as the DWP, Connexions, voluntary advice agencies, etc. One of the advisers is a social security adviser for the LGA.

Need to Refocus

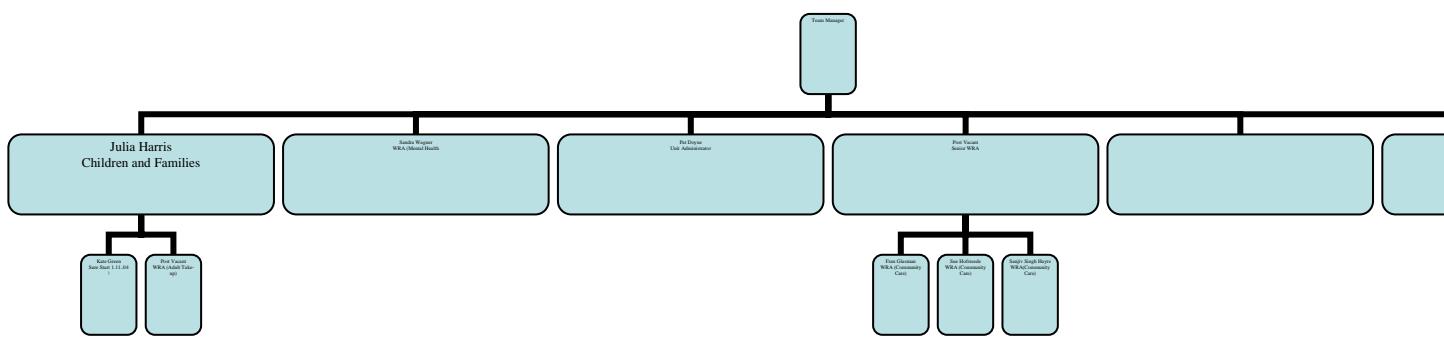
Over the past three years four posts have been lost or frozen. This has resulted in the following problems

- ❖ Stakeholders are unclear about what service we provide (service delivery has been restricted because of frozen posts)
- ❖ The Council is failing to meet its statutory obligation to provide benefit checks to those assessed for charges
- ❖ The Units strategic role has been diminished as a result of the loss of a management post and a senior adviser post
- ❖ Lack of capacity to develop e- govt projects and quality marks
- ❖ The level and extent of case work support has been reduced, with the result that the unit is now longer reaching it target of generating £2 million extra revenue for Barnet residents
- ❖ Disappointment that we no longer provide help which was previously available
- ❖ Lack of flexibility. We have been unable to engage in new take up campaigns as the post has been vacant since January 03. We have been unable to do as much as we would have liked to promote the take up of Pension Credits, resulting in residents missing out on benefits. The Unit has concentrated on provision of advice services to social or educational service users.

If these posts are not filled in the foreseeable future, there is a need to refocus the work of the Welfare rights Unit.

Management issues.

There is currently no Unit Manager. Until June all staff were managed by the Finance Project Manager. There is one senior adviser who supervises, but does not manage, one other member of staff. The loss of a manager post also significantly curtails the ability of the Unit to contribute to the Council's strategic policies.



The organization chart shows lines of casework supervision, but all staff are managed by the team manager. All posts are SO1 except Kieran Lynch which is SO2 and Pat Doyne which is Admin Grade 4

Possible Directions

Option A- Maximise Income for Council Service Users

Concentrate on areas where the Unit can make greatest use of data already held by the Council to identify and target under claiming.

✓ We currently offer benefit checks to applicants for Community Care and parents of children with special educational needs (which was recognised as an example of good practice by the Local Government Association). This work could be extended to provide a greater reach to other service users, , for example:

- Applicants for Blue Badges (disabled parking). A scheme in Blackburn, where Blue Badges are administered by the Rights, Advice and Entitlements Department, last year raised £500, 000, with one part time adviser.

- Those presenting as homeless. The links between poor housing, poverty and ill health are well established.
 - Users of day centres and family centres
- ✓ Greater use of Housing Benefit, Social Services and Education records to identify under claiming.
- ✓ Use of data to target areas, either geographic, by community, or by disability.
- ✓ Targeted literature, training, and talks to groups identified as under claiming.
- ✓ Make use of other funding streams to work on targeted take up campaigns. Currently the mental health worker is funded by a grant from the Barnet, Enfield and Haringey Mental Health NHS Trust, and the new adviser for families with young children is funded by a grant from SureStart.
- ✓ Make more use of Barnet's websites to provide information and services to residents.
- ✓ Short term focussed interventions.
- ✓ Focus on groups where the income maximisation potential is greatest. This is likely to be primarily, but not exclusively, people with disabilities.

Option B- Protect Council Revenues and Maximise Council Income

Work on areas that either maximise income or minimise outgoings for the council.

- ✓ Concentrate on those clients who have a positive impact on the FSA.
- ✓ Work with clients who are charged for Council Services, including those in residential care. Ensuring that clients who pay for council services have maximised their benefit income means that they are both more willing and more able to pay for services
- ✓ Ensure that the Council is not supporting people who could be supported by social security, or paying for services that could be provided by other sources. Examples include Care Leavers who could receive social security benefits, and avoiding paying higher foster care / adoption allowances by providing the adopters/ foster carers with a benefits check.
- ✓ Protect Council budgets. Concentrate preventative support on families or individuals

Option C- Target only the most excluded and dependent clients

- ✓ Work with clients identified as needing extra help with accessing benefits.
- ✓ Work with regular clients and repeat claims.
- ✓ Established caseloads for staff

Performance Indicators

Targets for direct work under option A should be set as amount of money raised, as well as numbers of clients informed or advised.

Targets under option B should reflect effect on council revenues and budgets

Under Option C less money will be raised, and targets should be set as number of cases rather than financial gains.

Location Options

Option A – because of the extensive use of Council held data this option is best used within the Council, in a Department that has a Council wide remit.

Options should include Customer Care, Borough Treasurer's, and Corporate Performance Office to allow strategic working across departments reflecting the fact that this work involves many different Council Departments.

Option B– The examination of other Departments procedures to ensure that resources are not being wasted will be best achieved with the authority of the Borough Treasurer or the Corporate Performance Office.

Option C- May be best achieved by staff working to the demands of individual services. Services which have a such a need include Community Care, Children and Families, Education, Barnet Homes, and voluntary organisations.

Some of the targeted work may be best met by staff working to the demands of individual services. However, if the Unit were divided and split along service delivery lines then it may meet the needs of Children and Families and Community Care Services but would be unlikely to meet the service needs of other services and partners. Services which have such a need for welfare rights advice include Community Care, Children and Families, Education, Housing, Barnet Homes, voluntary and community groups and health services.

Implications for dividing the Welfare Rights Unit

- Loss of resources for other services, and therefore loss of support to vulnerable groups who do not have links with service areas. Particular resources which would be lost are likely to include the dedicated advice line, training and talks, and information on new benefits and tax credits, or changes to existing benefits.
- Costs would increase because of the need to duplicate resources
- Loss of group dynamic and support

- Total amount of liaison and networking would be reduced, and there would also be duplication in many areas
- Reduced ability to assist in the absence of a particular member of staff

In house or outsourced?

The following factors should be taken into account in addressing the issue of whether the Welfare Rights Unit should remain as part of the Council:

- ◆ Both LGA and ALG advocate that promoting take up and income maximization strategies is a key concern for Local Authorities in the context of tackling child and pensioner poverty, and tackling health inequalities. It plays a key role in social inclusion and equalities work. The Majority of London Boroughs provide either an in-house Welfare Rights Unit (examples include Greenwich, Newham, Hounslow, Croydon, Camden, Enfield, Islington, Havering, Redbridge) or directly employ Welfare Rights Advisers in their Social Services Departments (examples include Haringey, Brent, Westminster, Southwark, Merton, Tower Hamlets).
- ◆ Raising revenue for the Council. Bringing increased revenue through FSA and through other Grants from Central Government. Numbers of people claiming IS/JSA/Incap Ben/SDA/ Elderly on DLA/AA & families receiving WFTC/DPTC in Barnet are all factors that affect the amount of money the council gets through the FSA. Increasing take up of these benefits through project and take up campaigns can positively affect Barnet's FSA. Promoting take up of Pension Credit and Tax Credits and Housing and Council Tax benefits maximises the income residents have to pay their rent and council tax, and so helps reduce council tax and rent arrears.
- ◆ Protecting Council resources by reducing demand on social service budgets. Poverty increases stress and puts pressure on services such as health, education and social services. The work of the unit also more directly reduces strain on budgets by ensuring Departments access Central Govt funding through DWP and IR administered benefits and Tax Credits to support their service users rather than depleting locally held service budgets. By helping residents who receive home care receive DLA and AA and severe disability premium of Pension Credit, Barnet Council is able to increase revenue brought through the charging policies.
- ◆ Regeneration; Increased awareness of the role of benefits and Tax Credits helps support and encourage people moving into paid and self employment and to sustain employment, for example accessing the childcare element of Tax Credits. Research shows that lack of awareness of in-work financial support is a major barrier to lone parents entering employment.
- ◆ There is a statutory obligation for Local Authorities to commission Welfare Rights Advice in relation to fairer Charging Policies. Providing this service in-house fosters

joint working with charging and finance and social services because it removes problems of sharing confidential data needed to deliver the service.

- ◆ Statutory duties and core performance indicators require 'advice proofed service delivery'; however these duties and performance indicators are subject to frequent change. There would be problems negotiating a service level agreement with a voluntary agency which could offer the flexibility to respond to the pace of change
- ◆ Funding streams, including funding from DWP and IR tend to be the most complex for the most vulnerable section in our community. Promoting the take up of benefits and Tax Credits makes a real difference to the social inclusion of vulnerable people, both supporting those who can work and those whose caring , disability or health problems restricts their ability to work. Providing this service in-house fosters joint working with social services departments and health services which support these people because it removes problems of sharing of confidential data needed to deliver the service.
- ◆ LAs are uniquely placed to deliver take up / income maximisation strategies. The Unit currently uses SWIFT, HBIS and has access to social services records, housing benefit statistics, SEN and Disabled children registers. Social services provide direct work with the most vulnerable sections of the community and this facilitates referrals to the unit. Issues of data protection and confidential information sharing would prohibit much of the Unit current casework if the service were outsourced to the voluntary and community sector.
- ◆ In house service provision allows for more flexible response to the changing statutory obligations and priorities councils face. It fosters partnership working with other key agencies such as Health and the voluntary and community advice sector, and helps prioritise service delivery in relation to the Council's Corporate objectives. No other advice provider plays such a significant strategic role in delivering and designing advice.
- ◆ Policy. The Unit has links with LGA, LWROG which provide information and support on how changes to the social security system will impact on the delivery of council functions and how the social security system can help the Council in developing its social inclusion and financial inclusion strategies, equalities and regeneration projects and meet key performance targets. These links would be lost if the service were outsourced.

Conclusions

1. We have demonstrated the value to residents of the Borough and to the Council of a welfare benefits casework, take-up, training and information service.
2. The Welfare Rights Unit is a net contributor to Council finances. This allows the Council to provide a valuable resource to vulnerable residents, without the need to cut resources to other areas in order to provide the service.

3. The service currently provided by the Welfare Rights Unit could not be delivered from within the voluntary sector.
4. We think that splitting the Unit up would undermine the service: casework informs take-up and take-up extends the scope of casework. Practitioners need peer support and supervision to work most effectively. Recruitment to lone posts outside of a welfare rights unit is likely to be more difficult.
5. We recommend Option A as the most effective in:
 - a) supporting vulnerable people across the Borough through income maximisation,
 - b) helping the Council to meet its own and central government objectives in combating poverty, particularly in households with children, vulnerable young people, pensioners and people with disabilities and
 - c) minimising pressures on Council budgets through timely and strategic welfare rights input.
6. Key stakeholders should be consulted if there is a major change in the role, direction or location of the Unit.

Appendix

Role in Supporting Corporate Objectives

Welfare Rights has a central role in social inclusion and equalities work of local government. Detailed below are some examples of how the Unit contributes towards supporting key corporate priorities relating to this.

Community Plan - Core priorities relevant to direct Targets:

From page 5 of the Community Plan: Ensure that vulnerable people have access to quality advice and support to take control over their lives.

Provide quality and co-ordinated advice on welfare.

Role of WRU: Contribute to Legal Services Partnership and delivery of advice services

The Legal Services Commission and research commissioned by Barnet from Middlesex University both identified lack of access to welfare benefits advice as a key concern and that the Unit plays a key role in providing advice in this area. The Welfare Rights Units delivers services that are not available elsewhere in the Borough such as representation and focuses support on the harder to reach families and individuals who need advice. The unit also provides consultancy, training and information support to those agencies which deliver advice.

A secure and supportive community

Removing financial barriers which prevent disabled and other vulnerable groups from accessing services and contribute towards their sense and experience of social exclusion

A Healthy and Caring Community

Ensure barriers to opportunity are tackled for Disabled People and those with long term health problems;

Role of WRU: Accessing key health and disability related benefits to ensure disabled and those suffering from ill health have greater choice about purchasing their care and securing funds to help them access other support / key services. This

contributes towards their social inclusion and also helps them to access benefits and smooth transitions into work or study

Objective: Improve Services for older adults.

Role of WRU: Enable people to live at home longer by securing benefits which support independence at home, by securing funds to buy care and so promote choice. The WRU also helps carers to access financial support, which assists carers in their capacity to provide care.

Objective: Deliver e- government to support better services

Target; Continue to develop projects which increase the capacity and effectiveness of inter agency working.

Role of WRU: Work with CIS in partnership to improve information and advice on parent support services include information needs of families with disabled or SEN children. Develop the existing intranet site to the internet. Identify openings for similar work.

Corporate Plan

Supporting the Vulnerable in our Community

Children and Families: Secure excellent services to enhance life chances for young people and families at risk.

Child poverty is an important issue. It contributes to poor health, low educational and economic achievement both throughout childhood and in adult life. By using income maximisation strategies we can help to tackle child poverty. The work of the children and family officer secured LGA awards for good practice in this area.

Sure Start Adviser will play an important role in provision of the sure start service, and meeting the aims and objectives in Sure Start may contribute to the development of a similar service in the Borough's Children's Centres.

Provide first class care for vulnerable adults:

Support vulnerable adults at risk through low income (please refer to support of community plan objectives discussed above).

Reducing Health Inequalities / Improving Health:

The link between poverty and health is well established. It is widely accepted that Welfare Rights Advice has an important role to play in reducing health inequalities associated with low income .

Barnet Health Improvement Modernisation Plan

"Disability living allowance is payable to people who are disabled and need help with personal care, getting around, or both, and who become disabled before the age of 65 years. Attendance allowance is a benefit for people over the age of 65 who are so severely disabled, physically or mentally, that they need a great deal of help with

personal care or supervision. Whilst there is a general trend for there to be more claims for one or the other of these allowances in the more deprived areas, this is not the rule and claims are lower in some deprived wards. There is likely to be some under-claiming of such benefits. **One area of action for both Barnet PCT and Barnet Council is to enable all those people who are entitled to receive such benefits to obtain them.** Income is one of the key determinants of health (see Table 1) and some groups of people are particularly disadvantaged because of low income, including many people with learning disability and those who are 'living rough'. They are often amongst the poorest in our society."

"It is vital to pin-point ways of preventing diseases from developing or worsening. Firstly, this means focusing on particular illnesses which are major causes of death and suffering and on situations where medical intervention (such as screening) can be most effective. **Secondly, it means looking at the concerns of particular groups within the community who have to access health services more than the general population such as children, older people and those with mental health problems.**"

"Crucially, there is substantial evidence linking these socioeconomic and education factors with the health and wellbeing of both individuals and populations – poorer living conditions lead to poorer health. Further, prejudice and discrimination can directly affect people's health. Discrimination especially affects black and ethnic minority groups, refugees and gay men with HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. And, especially amongst new migrants to the country, a lack of familiarity with the health and social care systems, lack of information about services and difficulty with the English language can aggravate such problems further. Overcoming discrimination is therefore the focus of a number of health promotion campaigns, **as are the provision of information and the development of more easily accessible services.**"

Mental Health

In Barnet, there is a close relationship between the 'psychiatric needs index' and admission rates for mental health disease. This is shown in Figure 33. The coefficient of correlation (i.e. the measure of the closeness between the two factors being compared) is 0.7 – which is high. This is not particularly surprising – the index is designed to identify people at risk of needing mental health services. **However, what is more significant is the fact that there is also a close correlation between deprivation and psychiatric admissions. This is shown in Figure 34, where the coefficient of correlation is 0.69.**

Figure 35 also shows the relationship between deprivation, psychiatric needs and mental health hospital admissions. These are closely related – the trend is for there to be higher hospital admission rates with increasing deprivation and increasing psychiatric needs.

Children

Action points include:

- providing accessible play and leisure opportunities;

- making local placements so that children and young people do not need to leave their communities to get the care that they need;
- promoting access to opportunities for learning, training and education.

Barnet Council is leading on the development of a Barnet *Statement of Intent: Plan for Services for Vulnerable Children & Young People in Barnet*(2002/03). This aims to enable an improved life for the children, young people and families who are at risk of social exclusion and poorer health in Barnet. ‘Social exclusion’ is a term to describe what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems, such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown.

The effect of deprivation – of low social capital and of social exclusion – on the health of children in Barnet is demonstrated in Figure 37. This shows a clear (but not exclusive) relationship between deprivation and emergency hospital admissions requiring stays of three or more days. Six of the ten most deprived wards in Barnet have admission rates for children admitted as emergencies to hospital for three or more days that are above the median for the borough. This effect is more marked for childhood admissions for asthma. **Such children and young people are defined as those whose life chances will be affected unless action is taken to reduce the risk of social exclusion, and it includes children in need as defined in the Children Act 1989. This vulnerability can limit their access to educational opportunities and to health care and can make it difficult for them to enjoy the same cultural and leisure opportunities as other children and young people in the same area.**

The key aims of Barnet Council’s Statement of Intent – which is supported by Barnet PCT – therefore include the promotion of children’s and young people’s good health, happiness and well-being. These are areas that Barnet Council and Barnet PCT are already involved in addressing and this work will be extended in the coming years.

The strategy’s aims also include the promotion of learning opportunities, **the reduction of child poverty**, the improvement of housing facilities and living conditions and **the provision of community and other support for children, young people and their families**.

Best Value Performance Indicators 2005

Proposed BV177 – % of local authority expenditure on community legal services
PURPOSE:

1. The amount spent by the local authority on the provision of legal advice/guidance* in social exclusion areas within the five following groupings:
 1. Family (divorce, relationship breakdown, domestic violence, children)
 2. Housing (rented housing, owned housing, neighbours, homelessness)
 3. Injury and Health (personal injury, clinical negligence, mental health)
 4. Consumer and Money (consumer, money/debt, welfare benefits, employment)
 5. Other (discrimination, unfair treatment by police, immigration); broken down by:
 - (a) External organizations holding the CLS Quality Mark; and
 - (b) Directly by the authority

2. The total number of people who received help under 1. above, broken down by:
- organizations holding the CLS Quality Mark; and
 - directly by the authority

*Advice/Guidance = ‘Where information is tailored to the clients individual and specific circumstances’. This is not the same as ‘Information’ which is general and may simply involve for example the provision of a leaflet or telephone number or the referral to a specific provider.

WRU would help to meet target by

Continue consultancy and casework support to all Voluntary Advice Sector as well as Social Care Services to ensure their service users receive targeted income maximisation strategies to maximise entitlement to Benefits and Tax Credits and continue to record extent of casework and consultancy delivered.

Proposed BV(X16) – Households who considered themselves as homeless, who approached the local housing authority’s housing advice service(s), and for whom housing advice casework intervention resolved their situation.

INTRODUCTION / PURPOSE:

The purpose of this indicator is to measure the effectiveness of housing advice in preventing homelessness or the threat of homelessness. Under section 179(1) of the Housing Act 1996 part VII, as amended by the Housing Act 2002, housing authorities have a duty to ensure that advice and information about homelessness and prevention of homelessness are available free of charge to anyone in their district. The provision of comprehensive advice will play an important part in delivering the housing authority’s strategy for preventing homelessness in their district. Advice can be provided directly by the housing authority or through grants provided to a third party such as a Citizens’ Advice Bureau or Shelter.

WRU would help to meet target by

- Continue consultancy support to Barnet Housing Services to ensure homeless persons / families receive targeted income maximisation strategies to maximise entitlement to Housing Benefit and other benefits and Tax Credit to help them secure funds needed to secure accommodation if homeless or prevent homelessness.
- Ensure housing services and other social service support are ‘advice ringed’ so Housing, social services and Barnet Homes refer families or individuals for income maximisation intervention from the Unit where there are financial issues contributing to service users security of tenure or to help them secure accommodation.
- Offer benefit check to all homeless families including those moving from temporary to permanent accommodation.

Proposed BV (X31) – Percentage of referrals to joint local authority fairer charging /pension service visiting teams which resulted in a successful claim(s) for additional benefit and (b) Average value of additional benefit per referral.

INTRODUCTION/PURPOSE:

Local Authority Fairer Charging teams and The Pension Service Local Service visiting teams are encouraged to work jointly. Joint working reduces intrusion into customers' lives and improves efficiency because the customer is visited only once to meet the needs of both organisations. Joint working is also expected to increase the opportunity for benefit take-up because the visit includes a detailed examination of each customers circumstances and provision of information about entitlement. This BVPI seeks to measure the achievement of any increased benefit take-up in terms of both numbers and value.

DEFINITION:

Joint Team – A single integrated visiting team involving the Local Authority and The Pension Service where all members of the team are meeting the information gathering requirements for all partners and there are robust management arrangements in place which are committed (if not already in place) to co-location of all elements of the team. In addition to Local Authority Fairer Charging and Pension Service visiting staff, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit visiting and promotion staff may also be included in the team.

Referral – a request for a customer to be seen and a full benefit check to be completed and/or for a specific issue to be resolved. All referrals are recorded on system, wherever they originate and all outcomes will feed into this BVPI.

Additional benefit – Any benefit or entitlement which was claimed or applied for as a direct result of activity by the Joint Team. Benefits include those administered by the Department for Work and Pension (e.g. Pension Credit, Attendance Allowance, etc., by Local Authorities (Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit) and Inland Revenue (Tax Credits, Child Benefit).

TARGET SETTING: Local

SCOPE: Metropolitan Borough Councils, London Borough Councils, Unitary Authorities, County Councils, Common Council of City of London and Council of the Isles of Scilly

WRU would help to meet target by

- Continue consultancy and casework support to Community Care Services to ensure their service users receive targeted income maximisation strategies to maximise entitlement to Housing Benefit and other benefits and Tax Credit so prevent eviction due to rent arrears.
- Take forward Joint Team and Working with Pensions Service through Unit liaison and networking and policy functions

BV9 – Percentage of council tax collected

PURPOSE: This BVPI is being amended so that apart from recording the percentage of council tax due and collected in the financial year, it also records the collection of arrears over the financial year which were actually due in previous years.

BV66a – Local authority rent collection and arrears: proportion of rent collected
PURPOSE: This indicator was designed to measure the effectiveness of a local authority's rent collection service. Local housing authorities have two main sources of income, through their rental income and through their housing subsidy. An efficient rent collection service is important to ensuring that as much of the rent due, and thus potential income, is collected and received

WRU would help to meet target these targets by

- Continue consultancy and casework support to all Social Care Services to ensure their service users receive targeted income maximisation strategies to maximise entitlement to Housing Benefit and other benefits and Tax Credit are claimed so maximise revenue collection by increasing take up of housing and council tax benefit.
- Continue consultancy and casework support to all Barnet Homes to ensure tenants receive targeted income maximisation strategies to maximise entitlement to Housing Benefit and other benefits and Tax Credit are claimed so maximise revenue collection by increasing take up of housing and council tax benefit.
- Continue anti-poverty report where the Unit uses HBIS to identify and contact recipients of housing benefit and council tax benefit who are not receiving their additional means tested benefits or tax credits.
- Use Council Data bases to identify those pensioners who are missing out on Pension Credit and therefore passported entitlement to housing and council tax benefit or missing out on Council Tax reductions of benefit.

Impact on council finances

In 2001 it was established that the Welfare Rights Unit brought in more money to the Council than it cost to run, based on the effect of social security claims on the Standard Spending Assessment.

The calculation of the effect on the SSA was a conservative figure because:

- It only measured the effect on the SSA of claims arising from direct casework by the Welfare Rights Unit. The effect of other activities carried out by the Unit will also have had a significant positive effect on the SSA, but will be more difficult to measure.
- The calculations only looked at the effect on the SSA on an annual basis. Although some clients will die or move out of the area, the majority will continue to claim for more than one year, and will therefore continue to improve the SSA.

Although the SSA has now been replaced by the FSA there is no significant difference in the way the two formulas treat social security claimants.

A comparison with the London Borough of Bromley, which has no significant welfare rights presence, shows that Bromley has 4316 more residents aged over 65, but Barnet has 605 more residents in receipt of Attendance Allowance. The importance of this is that each resident over 65 in receipt of Attendance Allowance attracts more than £1000 through the FSA.

It is also significant for those pensioners in receipt of benefit that a majority of Attendance Allowance claimants in Bromley receive the lower rate, while the majority of Barnet's Attendance Allowance claimants receive the higher rate.

Although Barnet compares well to Bromley, it does have a smaller proportion of elderly residents in receipt of Attendance Allowance than many other areas, including Camden, where the Welfare Rights Unit has achieved beacon status.