

# **Welfare Rights Team**

## **Annual Report**

**April 2008 - March 2009**

## **Introduction**

The Welfare Rights & Anti Poverty Unit is a non statutory service which sits within the Health and Well Being service area of Adult and Community Services.

Being the 14<sup>th</sup> most deprived local authority in the country the provision of an effective Welfare Rights Service is of significant importance to the residents of Sandwell. The service provides the people who use it with the appropriate support and assistance they require to be able to access their welfare rights entitlements, thus enabling them to address more personal issues concerning their health and well being.

Over the last five years the Welfare Rights Team has assisted tens of thousands of Sandwell's most vulnerable residents claim over £87 million pounds worth of benefit entitlements which would have otherwise gone unclaimed. Evidence shows that a high percentage of this money which people have received will be spent within the area in which people live on local goods and services. Therefore the performance of the Welfare Rights Team not only has an impact on the people who access it, but it also has an impact on the local economy and local economic regeneration.

The continued success of the Welfare Rights Team over the last five years has enabled the team to grow and engage in new and productive partnerships enhancing the provision of service to people living in Sandwell.

This report outlines the work that has been undertaken by the Welfare Rights Team over the last 12 months and identifies the level of performance that has been achieved throughout the year.

Neil Cox  
Welfare Rights Team Manager

## Overview of the Welfare Rights Team

Sandwell MBC's Welfare Rights Team is divided into 3 distinct areas of service:

- A pro-active take up service
- An open door service
- The Joint Team

### The Pro-active Take Up Service

The pro-active take up service is made up of Welfare Rights Officers who cover the whole of the borough from a central location in West Bromwich, the service is delivered on a home visiting basis.

The pro-active service assists people by targeting specific areas and vulnerable groups who have been identified as potentially under claiming their benefit entitlement, engaging individuals, community groups and frontline agencies and providing them with the necessary advice, support and

assistance to claim their correct entitlements and maximise their income.

#### Agencies Providing external funding:

- ❖ Bridges Cancer Support Service
- ❖ Sure Start
- ❖ Children & Young Peoples Services
- ❖ Mental Health Trust
- ❖ Children & Young Peoples Trust
- ❖ Early Years Support Service

This element of the pro active function of the Welfare Rights Team's service has been successful in attracting external funding, 55% of the Welfare Rights Officers within the team are funded through external sources and deliver services to residents as agreed in Service Level

Agreements with the agencies providing funding. The other Welfare Rights Officers are funded through Adult and Community Services and target vulnerable groups such as people over the age of 60 across the borough and provide them with assistance.

### The Open Door Service

The open door service is made up of Welfare Rights Advisers based in Sandwell Homes Neighbourhood Offices across the 6 towns and will see all clients who have a welfare rights issue or query that they need support with.

The advisers will work with agencies operating in their locality to promote the existence of the service and to ensure that it is utilised as fully as possible.

The open door service works in conjunction with Citizens Advice Bureau and other advice provisions across the borough provided by Black and Minority

Ethnic Community Groups. Cross referrals take place between agencies so that residents receive a service that meets their needs in the most suitable and appropriate way.

### The Joint Team

The Joint Team is a pool of staff, made up of Welfare Rights Assistants, who work in partnership with the Pension Service and visit people who are affected by charges for Home Care or Day Care. The Joint Team also identify potential clients by utilising the intelligence and information that the Pension Service hold as a national agency and assessing that information to identify where people may be under claiming their entitlement.

They are able to assist people with claiming their full welfare rights entitlement, complete financial assessments to ensure they are charged correctly for their care and verify documents to speed up the claiming process for benefits administered by the Pension Service.

### Senior Welfare Rights Officers & Business Support Team

To support the function of the Welfare Rights Team we have in place a team of Senior Welfare Rights Officers and a Business Support Team

The Senior Welfare Rights Officers role is to provide line management support for each member of the Welfare Rights Team and manage the operational aspect of service delivery. The Business Support team provide administrative support for team as well as implementing and supporting the various business processes that are in place to support the function of the Welfare Rights Team. The Business Support Team also take a lead on the monitoring and collation of statistical information relating to the performance of the service.

## Overall Team Performance

The 2008-2009 financial year begun with the team attempting to build on the success of the previous financial year which saw nearly 9,000 people claim £20.8 million. On a service delivery level physical capacity was going to be reduced due to a small number of staff being on maternity leave and efficiencies generated through the restructuring process which took place during 2007-08.

As we now know 2008-09 held challenges which could not have been foreseen at the start of the year in the form of the Economic Downturn and Credit Crunch. Fortunately for the team forward plans which had been made to make staff more versatile enabled us to respond to these challenges in an effective manner, debt and bankruptcy training put staff in a position where they were able to advise people needing our help who we may have otherwise been unable to assist.

On a practical level this year also posed a challenge due to various welfare reforms which took place. The introduction of the Employment Support Allowance was a key focus for part of the year due to the need to understand the complexities of the new benefit and its potential impact for people using our service. There were also changes to other key benefits as well as the introduction of the Local Housing Allowance.

During the course of the financial year 2008-2009 the Welfare Rights Team:

- Dealt with 8,977 enquiries
- Claimed £20.8 million worth of previously unclaimed benefit
- Have increased the weekly income of clients requiring casework by an average of £62
- Have claimed a average lump sum payments of £763 for clients requiring casework

Demand for the service of the team continued at a rate which matched that seen in previous years, of the total number of people seen:

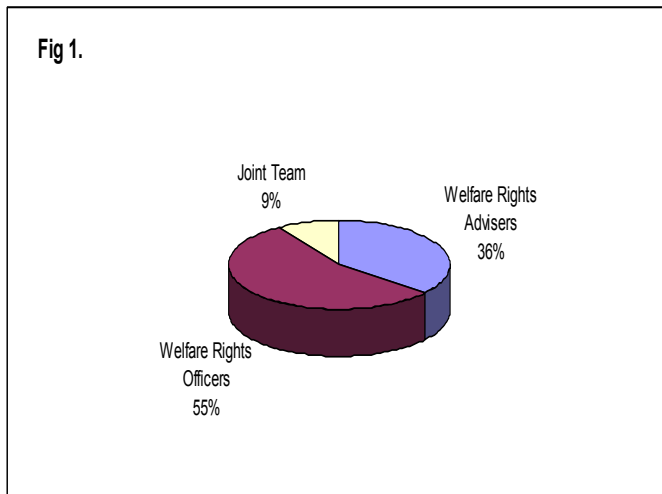
- 3% were unwilling to pursue their potential entitlement
- 15% were one off enquiries
- 12% were receiving their full welfare rights entitlement

Claiming benefits entitlements is still a subject which has a stigma attached to it for many people, in particular the elderly and retired. For only 3% of the enquiries dealt with not to be pursued on the basis that the client did not wish to demonstrate that the team are providing support for people in a way which removes the stigma many of them may feel and giving them the support and encouragement to claim what they are rightfully entitled to.

Just under 30% of the enquiries received were either one off enquiries or were made by people who were already in receipt of their full welfare rights

entitlement. The reverse of this shows that 70% of the enquiries we received during the last financial year were from people who were under claiming their welfare rights entitlement. Given the nature of benefit entitlements, and who they are aimed at assisting, this figure demonstrates that there remains a high number of people within Sandwell who live in poverty and experience financial exclusion on a daily basis.

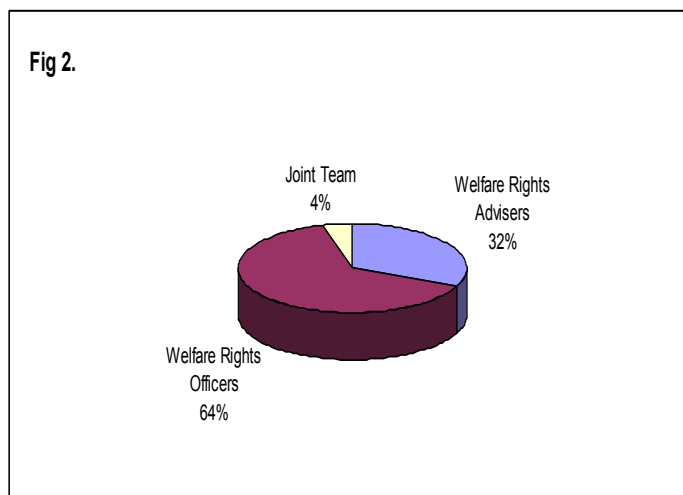
Of the claims we made on behalf of the people we saw only 3% of those claims failed, which given the discretionary nature of the benefits system and its administration is an incredible achievement. It is an achievement which demonstrates that the team as whole are giving good quality, accurate advice and are effectively and efficiently identifying potential under claiming, enabling them to target their efforts appropriately.



The chart in Fig 1. shows the breakdown of the total number of enquiries the team received

divided into the separate areas of service the team operates. This breakdown is also reflective of the breakdown of staffing levels for each of these service areas.

The chart in Fig. 2 below shows the of the total value of financial gains achieved by the team divided amongst the separate areas of service the team operates. As can be seen from comparing the two charts despite seeing 55% of the total number of clients, the pro active take up service operated by the Welfare Rights Officers accounts for 64% of the financial gains achieved.



This demonstrates the importance of having a Welfare Rights Service which operates in a pro active fashion. Often

people who are living in poverty are both financially and socially excluded, expecting people in such a position to recognise that they are entitled to more

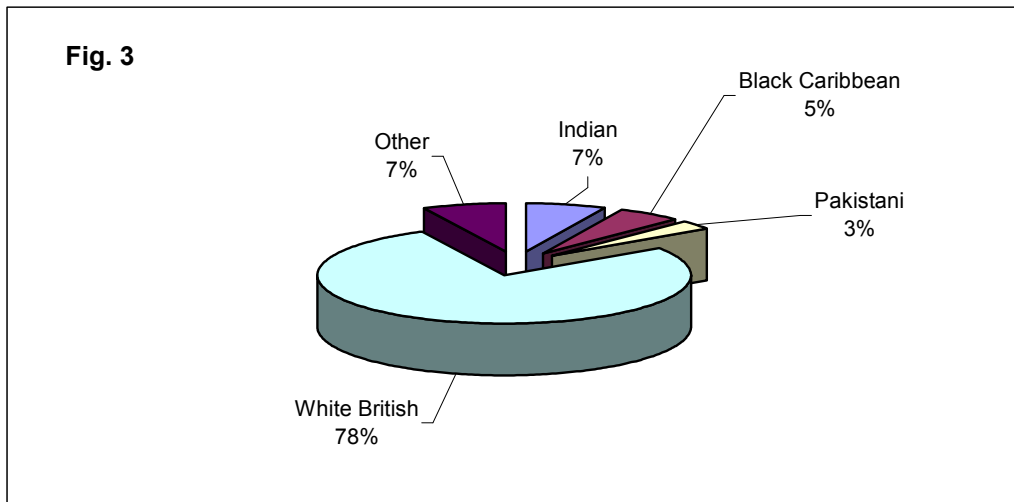
support and to be able to advocate for themselves to receive their entitlements is both unfair and unrealistic.

The success of the pro active service has been achieved through identifying those people who either did not realise they were under claiming their entitlements or were unable to pursue their entitlement, and providing them with the necessary support and assistance to do so. Identifying where and how to target such services has been achieved by building effective partnerships with agencies working across the borough, and promoting the take up of benefits entitlements through community networks.

### Client Demographics

When delivering a service such as Welfare Rights it is important to ensure that the service is accessible to anyone who may need its support. This involves engaging with diverse communities and enabling them to receive advice and guidance which will consequently lead to them to receiving their full welfare rights entitlement.

The chart in Fig. 3 shows a breakdown of clients seen during the financial year based on their ethnicity.



There is potentially a misconception that the need for support with issues relating to welfare rights is needed more by people who fall into a specific category of relationship type. The figures for the Welfare Rights Team over the course of the financial year, shown in the table below, demonstrate that the issue of support required for assistance in claiming welfare rights entitlements is one which is spread across relationship types and not specific to one particular relationship type or family type. The issues of financial exclusion,

Relationship Type	% of Clients seen
Co-habiting	5%
Divorced	3%
Married	39%
Separated	4%
Single	32%
Widowed	17%

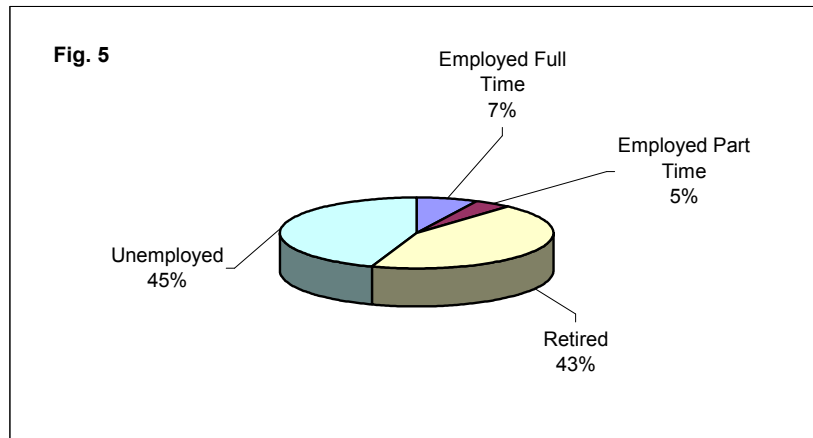
poverty and deprivation are experienced by people regardless of the relationship they are in or family environment in which they live.

Another misconception with welfare rights work is that it is primarily aimed at supporting those people who are unemployed, due to the nature of the work a large proportion of people assisted by the service are going to be unemployed, but this can be for many different reasons. Within Sandwell there are a number of people who are unable to work due to illnesses or disabilities they may suffer from, the Welfare Rights Team works to support these people to assist them so that their health and well being is not detrimentally affected due to a lack of income.

There are also people who are unemployed who need assistance to claim their full entitlements

to enable them to go back to work. Entitlements such as tax credits are in place to subsidise low income employment and support family and childcare costs. Sandwell is an area with a high number of low skill, low wage jobs, if people fail to claim entitlements such as tax credits correctly then work becomes unaffordable and to many turns into an option which is not in their and their family's best interest.

The chart in Fig. 5 shows that a considerable percentage of the people seen by the Welfare Rights Team are unemployed, but the team also supports a large number of people who are retired, and works to support people who are also in employment.



Housing Type	% of Clients Seen
Council Tenant	42%
Homeless (includes temporarily housed)	1%
Living with family/friends	14%
Owner Occupier	30%
Private Rented	9%
Registered Social Landlord (RSL)	2%
Residential Care	1%
Sheltered	1%

The table opposite demonstrates that the majority of support provided by the Welfare Rights Team has been received by people living in Sandwell Homes properties, it is likely that this is due to the location of the open door service in Sandwell Homes Neighbourhood offices. But the figures also show that a considerable number of owner occupiers have been supported by the work of the Welfare Rights

Team.

## Bridges Cancer Support Service

At the beginning of the financial year the Welfare Rights Team entered a partnership agreement with Bridges Cancer Support Service. Hoping to build on the success of previous partnership work between Sandwell MBC Welfare Rights Unit and Macmillan Cancer Support, Bridges Cancer Support Service funded a full time Welfare Rights Officer to provide welfare rights advice and guidance to their staff and clients.

An integral part of the service level agreement between the two agencies outlined that referrals from Bridges support workers would be made to the Welfare Rights Officer for clients who had been diagnosed with cancer. The Welfare Rights Officer would then visit the client to carry out a welfare rights assessment and assist them to claim any additional benefits entitlement.

As well as providing casework support to clients the Welfare Rights Officer has attended awareness raising events to promote their work and promote awareness that people being diagnosed with cancer often fail to claim their full welfare rights entitlement. Training has also been provided to Bridges staff so that they are able to identify potential under claiming amongst their clients and are able to signpost them to appropriate services.

Over the course of the financial year 344 people were seen through this service and

£942,773 worth of benefit entitlements were claimed for people diagnosed with cancer. Over 80% of the people seen by the project were not claiming their full welfare rights entitlement at a point in their life where financial support was greatly needed.

An excellent working relationship has been developed between Bridges Cancer Support Service

and the Welfare Rights Team which we will continue to build on so that we support people using both services as effectively as possible in the future.

'My son John has had Hodgkin's Disease since he was in year 11 at King Edwards Grammar School. I was working at the time but had to have so much time off work caring for him that I had to give my job up.

I soon found it really tough financially as I only had child benefit and child tax credit to live on but I believed John would soon be better so I felt guilty claiming any benefits. I contacted the Department for Work and Pensions and they were very unhelpful, they made me feel as if I was begging for money and this just frustrated me even more.

When I saw the McMillan nurse she referred me to Harpal who came to see us, she was very sympathetic towards us and promised that she would help to get all the benefits sorted out. She got in touch with the disability benefits department and sorted out our claim, she arranged for a grant for a washing machine and she completed the carers allowance form for me.

I felt I had someone to talk to and discuss my feelings with other than doctors and health professionals, she was very understanding and helpful. Harpal did everything for me which took a weight off my mind.'

## Sure Start Children's Centre's

The Welfare Rights Team has service level agreements with three Sure Start Children's Centres across the borough (Uplands, Beeches Road and Rood End).

The service between the agencies enables families accessing Sure Start facilities in these locations to be referred directly to a Welfare Rights Officer who will arrange to meet with them and ensure they are receiving their full welfare rights entitlements.

For families on a low income accessing their correct welfare rights entitlement is of major importance as it enables them to be better able to provide for and support their families. Reducing levels of child poverty is of major importance, to help Sandwell as a borough to move forward it's children need to be supported so they are able to lead a full and active life.

Failing to claim correct welfare rights entitlements can also be a barrier preventing parents from feeling able to re-enter employment. Correctly claiming entitlements to tax credits for example can make the difference between an employment opportunity appearing to be unmanageable as it will negatively impact on income or appearing to be a chance to begin achieving a higher level of income.

Financial Gains broken down into individual benefit types:	
<b>Benefit</b>	<b>Amount</b>
Child Tax Credit	£688,090
Working Tax Credit	£241,586
Income Support	£187,072
Housing Benefit	£82,102
Disability Living Allowance	£73,831
Social Fund	£61,788

Over the course of the financial year the projects funded by Sure Start Children's Centres saw a combined total 458 people and assisted those people to claim £1,025,869. This demonstrates a return of 20 times the amount that was invested into funding this work to be carried out.

The table above shows a list of the main benefits that were claimed. The prevalence of benefits such as Child Tax Credit, Working Tax Credit, Income Support and Housing benefit, which are all means tested benefit and act as a subsidy to low income families, demonstrates how important this service has been in enabling low income families to be better able to afford their living expenses. The fact that such financial gains have been able to be achieved in such areas also illustrates the need for such work and support to be far more widespread and available if poverty and financial exclusion are to be tackled effectively.

## The Community Mental Health Team

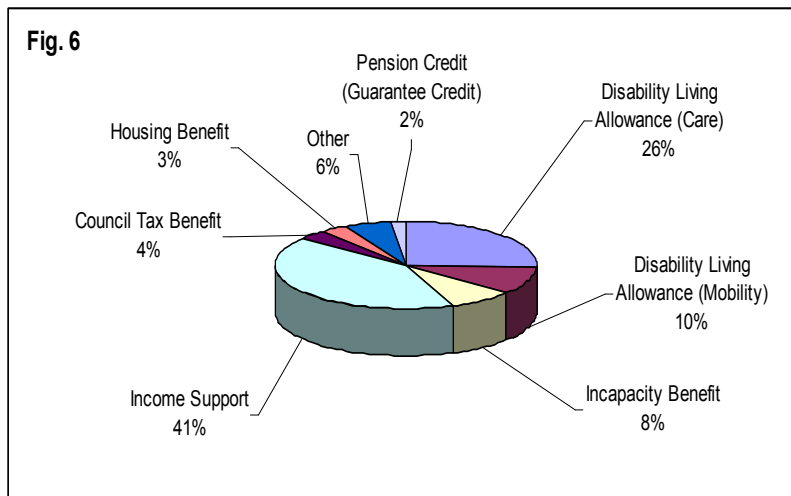
For people experiencing mental health problems, the complexity of claiming and pursuing benefit entitlements can be issues which cause them stress and potentially contribute to their mental health problems deteriorating. The Welfare Rights Team has a partnership agreement with the Community Mental Health Team which provides support to their clients, from two Welfare Rights Officers, with any issues they may have which relate to welfare rights.

It can often be very difficult for people with mental health problems to articulate the difficulties they experience on a daily basis in a way that enables the agencies administering benefits entitlement to appropriately assess the level of support they need, and therefore make an appropriate benefits award. The expertise of the Welfare Rights Officers who focus on this area of work, combined with the professional knowledge of members of the Community Mental Health Team have resulted in people who are supported through this service being in a better position to receive their correct welfare rights entitlement.

Often work on this project can involve representing clients at appeals tribunals to claim their entitlements, as well as having to gather supporting information from various health professionals who provide support. Because of their vulnerability this is something a person experiencing mental health problems would find difficult to manage without support and therefore the service is of vital importance to them.

During the course of the year our work supporting people who suffer from mental health problems has resulted in us seeing 445 people and assisting

them to claim over £1.9 million worth of benefits.



The chart in Fig. 6 shows a breakdown of the benefits claimed to make up the £1.9 million gained. Disability Living Allowance

proved to be the benefit which saw the highest level of financial gains with a combined total of over £700,000 claimed. Given the difficulty people experiencing mental health problems have securing entitlement to disability benefits this is a particularly notable achievement. Considerable amounts of various means tested benefits were also claimed which will support people with mental health problems to lead an active and healthy life.

## Community Learning Disability Team

The Welfare Rights Team continues to provide a Welfare Rights Service to the Community Learning Disability Team in a partnership arrangement which has existed for a number of years. The service is funded by the Learning Disability Partnership Board and support is provided through a Welfare Rights Officer who supports both staff and users of the service and their families in all matters relating to benefit take-up including representation before tribunals. The service has, since early 2009, been extended to cover the Transitions Team to deliver the same support to teenagers with learning disabilities who are moving into adulthood.

An integral part of this role has been to increase the take-up of funding available from the Independent Living Fund (ILF) to support independent living. Over the course of the year negotiation and discussion with the funds administrators has resulted in important policy developments which will potentially see an increase in the number of people from Sandwell who are able to access the fund in future. The significant engagement that has taken place with ILF has created a simpler approach to accessing ILF funding streams both for staff and ILF assessors.

Over the course of the financial year this piece of work assisted the people it saw to claim nearly £220,000 worth of previously unclaimed benefits which will assist people to afford to live independently with the appropriate support they require.

The hard work that has also been undertaken in building a better understanding and relationship with the Independent Living Fund will be of huge benefit to people requiring extensive care and support in Sandwell and the local authority. In future the assessment of people's eligibility to receive money from the Independent Living Fund will be based on a more accurate criteria, enabling those people in need of finance to fund their care and support to access it appropriately.

A client of the project said:

"It was expensive work having to look after my 47 year old disabled daughter. I wanted to speak to somebody regarding my benefit entitlement, as I was finding it hard to manage. I was referred to the Welfare Rights Team by the social worker.

The lady that came to assist me was very friendly and put me at ease, she simplified all the complex benefit rules and made it easier for me to understand. She completed all the forms and posted them for me. She kept in touch until my claim was resolved.

The extra money came in very handy, I was able to buy extra things for my daughter, worry less about fuel bills and more importantly I was able to spend more on healthy food.

I am so glad that I was referred to the Welfare Rights Team, I am a lot happier than before. It is reassuring to know that help is out there for people like me. I would certainly recommend the Service to others."

## Children & Young Peoples Services

The local authority's Children and Young Peoples Service area funded two welfare rights projects during 2008-09, one supporting Teenagers who have fallen pregnant and one supporting children with disabilities who are in the care of the local authority.

### Teenage Pregnancy:

At the beginning of 2005 the Welfare Rights Team entered into a new partnership agreement with Teenage Pregnancy, now managed by Children and Young People's Trust Partnership. The project has been extremely successful and continues to be funded.

Over the years the Welfare Rights Team and Teenage Pregnancy staff have built a partnership which has seen us provide training on benefits, enable staff to identify potential claimants and create referral pathways to other complementary agencies such as Connexions and Baby Clinics. The Welfare Rights Officer also provides advice, support and guidance to the staff from the linking agencies and their clients.

A client of this project told us:

"When I was at Bristnall School I got pregnant and I was worried about being bullied by the other girls. My midwife referred me to Nicky for advice and information on the money side of things. I was living at home with my mom but I didn't go to school because of me being worried about the other girls. Nicky came to see me and my mom and helped my mom to fill in the claim forms for my baby, because I was only 15 and she mentioned Batmans Hill School to me, where the girls are teenagers and either pregnant or moms themselves. Nicky spoke to Kate at the school and arranged for me to have a look around.

My mom then sold her house and I had to go and live with my Grandad so Nicky came to see me again to fill all the forms in for me to get my own money for Spencer, she also saw me at Batmans School to make sure everything was okay with my benefits and to see how I was getting on at school. I didn't feel left out at school and could concentrate on my lessons more especially as Spencer was in the nursery at the school.

I was much happier at Batmans Hill with the other girls and their babies and was glad that she told me about the school. I found all the benefit forms hard to fill in and was reassured and confident of getting what I was allowed to have. I didn't have to depend on my Grandad or Mom for money and could buy Spencer toys, clothes and treats."

In delivering this work the Welfare Rights Officer will receive a referral and contact the young person or their family for an appointment, the Welfare Rights Officer will advise them of their entitlement and complete all the necessary forms. Often these cases are open for long periods of time, as a referral will need to be dealt with throughout the pregnancy of the young person right until after the birth of the child.

Often due to the age of the young person, they may

not be able to claim benefits in their own right and it is therefore important for the Welfare Rights Officer to build relationships with the young person and

their guardian. The Welfare Rights Officer also works with young and expectant fathers and also holds weekly surgeries at Batman's Hill Pupil Referral Unit. As part of the partnership agreement the Welfare Rights Team monitor statistical information which is supplied to the Children and Young Peoples Trust Partnership on a quarterly basis.

Over the course of the financial year our work supporting teenage parents has assisted 234 people claim nearly £750,000 in welfare rights entitlements, 90% of the people we have seen have needed our help and support to access this money. The money gained for people using this service has enabled them to live independently or re-enter employment or education, it has also put them in a better position to support their new born child so that they as a family are able to lead a far more active and healthy life than they would have.

#### Early Years Support Service:

At the beginning of October 2008 the Welfare Rights Team entered into a new Service Level Agreement with the Early Years Support Service. The aim of this project was to attach a half time Welfare Rights Officer to provide welfare rights advice and guidance to the Early Year Support Team and to the families that are registered with the team. Part of the Service Level Agreement between Early Years and ourselves outlined that referrals would be made to the Welfare Rights Officer for children who had been diagnosed with a disability and received support from the Early Years Support Service.

The Welfare Rights Officer visited the clients and carried out a welfare rights assessment to assist them to claim any additional benefit entitlement, this took a great deal of pressure away from many families who already had a lot to cope with. The Welfare Rights Officer completed all relevant claim forms and provided ongoing casework support to the family right throughout the duration of their claims. Receiving their correct benefit entitlement has enabled clients to experience more financial freedom and less worry as often families have to reduce their working hours or even give up work due to their child's disability.

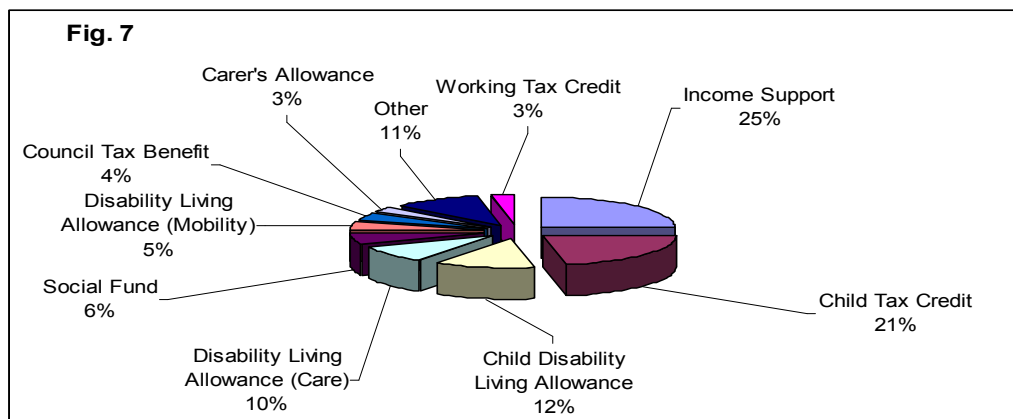
As well as providing this service the Welfare Rights Officer has attended awareness events to promote our work and to promote that children diagnosed with a disability or awaiting a diagnosis can get help. A close working relationship was also formed and training was provided to the Early Years Support Team to identify potential families under claiming.

During the 6 months in which the project was running it assisted 53 people claim £461,306 in previously unclaimed benefit, of the people seen by the project only 15% were claiming their correct welfare rights entitlement. Of the financial gains achieved by the work a combined total of over £90,000 was claimed in Disability Living Allowance for Children and Carer's Allowance, thus allowing young children with health problems gain much need assistance to receive the help and support they require.

## Children & Young Peoples Trust Partnership

At the beginning of April 2006 the Welfare Rights Team entered into a new Service Level Agreement with Children's Challenge Fund now managed by Children & Young People's Trust Partnership. The aim of this project was to allow a half time Welfare Rights Officer to provide welfare rights advice and guidance to all families with a child or young person aged 5-13. The Welfare Rights Officer focused their take up work towards families in neighbourhoods deemed most in need as per the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index. Each year that the project has been funded the areas have therefore changed. The Welfare Rights Officer has consequently had to build new networks and make contact with local schools in a range of areas to advertise the project and promote the services available to them.

Families become aware of the service through advertisements from their school and once they have chosen to contact our service the Welfare Rights Officer will provide a detailed welfare assessment to see whether the families are entitled to any additional benefits. All the relevant and appropriate claim forms will be completed by the Welfare Rights Officer and support is provided through the whole claiming process. An element of this work also supports families in managing debt so that the burden and stress it creates is reduced. By doing this we aim to reduce the level of poverty clients experience and reduce financial hardship.



Over the course of the financial year this work supported 158 people to claim nearly £410,000 of previously unclaimed welfare rights entitlements. The chart in Fig. 7 shows the financial gains achieved broken down in to benefit types, as can be seen Child Tax Credit and Income Support were the benefits which saw the highest financial gains, but outside of this the wide range of support needs people accessing the service had can be seen by the variety of other benefits that were claimed.

## Area's of Targeted Work

In addition to the work that is funded by partner agencies the Welfare Rights Team focuses on other specific areas of work. Two of the mains areas of work which are focused on are supporting people over the age of 60 in each of the six towns and assisting people affected by charges for Local Authority care.

### Over 60's Support

The Welfare Rights Team has provided targeted support to people over the age of 60 for the last 4 years. Older people are often the most likely people to under claim their benefits entitlement, this can be for numerous different reasons.

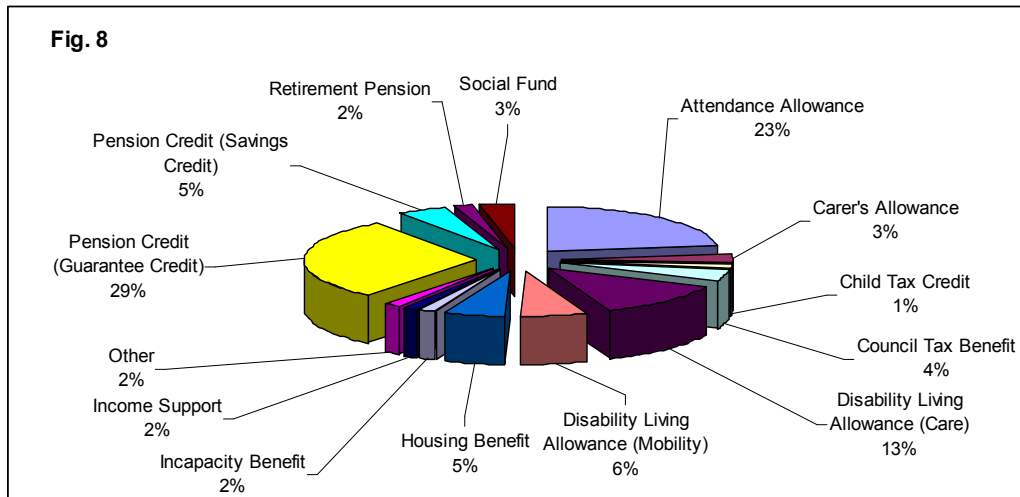
For many people the complicated nature of the benefits claiming process and the way in which benefit claims are administered can create a deterrent to claiming. For others it is the stigma associated to claiming benefits which prevents them accessing the help they need, deserve and are entitled to. And for a number of people it is simply due to the fact that they are unaware that they may be entitled to extra support that they don't claim their full entitlements.

Financial Gains broken down into individual towns:		
Town	People Seen	Amount Gained
Smethwick	211	£659,190
Rowley Regis	152	£505,858
Tipton	172	£622,174
Wednesbury	183	£788,241
Oldbury	312	£1,122,070
West Bromwich	421	£1,465,306

Not accessing their full welfare rights entitlement can have a major impact on the health and well being of older people. Leaving on a low income can cause people a great deal of stress and lead them to feel the need to save money by

reducing spending on essential items such as heating and food. A lack of income will also prevent people from being able to access the help and support they need, people will not be in a position to receive the appropriate care or afford to fund their transport needs which consequently affects their mobility.

Over the course of the financial year the work of the Welfare Rights Team in pro actively targeting and supporting people over the age of 60 has assisted 1451 people claim £5,162,839, the table above shows how this is broken down across the six towns in Sandwell.



The chart in Fig. 8 shows a breakdown of how the financial gains achieved for our work with over 60's is broken down across different benefit types. The majority of financial gains have been achieved through claims for Attendance Allowance, Disability Living Allowance and Pension Credit. This information shows that the Welfare Rights Team has been effective in identifying and supporting older people who require help to fund their daily care and support needs, and those people whose income is below the minimum amount the government considers people of their age and circumstances need to live on.

#### People charged for Local Authority Care.

People who receive care from the local authority, whether it be residential care or domiciliary care, are subject to a financial assessment in order to assess how that care is funded.

The Welfare Rights Team ensures that everyone who undergoes a financial assessment in relation to a package of care, also receives assistance and advice to ensure that they are claiming their full welfare rights entitlement to enable them to pay any appropriate contribution towards that care package.

During the course of the financial year our work with people being charged for Local Authority care has assisted 1,391 people claim over £2.2 million in previously unclaimed welfare rights entitlements. As can be seen in the table opposite, a large percentage of the financial gains achieved through this work have been done so through claiming disability benefits, as would be expected given the client group being supported. The money received through disability benefits enables people to contribute to the cost of their care and pay for assistance with other support needs they may have.

Financial Gains broken down into individual benefit types:

<b>Benefit</b>	<b>Amount</b>
Attendance Allowance	£1,210,791
Disability Living Allowance	£225,909
Pension Credit	£219,448
Council Tax	£251,236

## The Open Door Service

The open door service is based in Sandwell Homes Neighbourhood Offices across the 6 towns and delivered by Welfare Rights Advisers. The service will see all clients who have a welfare rights issue or query that they need support with.

In addition to providing casework support the advisers will work with agencies operating in their locality to promote the existence of the service and to ensure that it is utilised as fully as possible. The service also works in partnership with other advice agencies and makes referrals to those agencies so that residents receive a service that meets their needs in the most suitable and appropriate way.

Financial Gains broken down into individual neighbourhood offices:		
Neighbourhood Office	People Seen	Amount Gained
Oldbury	334	£729,413
Princes End	359	£611,247
Stone Cross	209	£162,330
Cape Hill	194	£447,341
Wednesbury	258	£650,092
Ford Street	247	£1,061,059
Cradley Heath	170	£501,989
Greets Green	272	£511,773
Blackheath	237	£672,780
Woods Mesty	152	£353,714
Bearwood	130	£414,692

During the financial year the open door service provision of the Welfare Rights Team has seen 2,432 people and claimed over £5.7 million pounds for the people who have accessed the service.

The table opposite shows the financial gains achieved in each neighbourhood office, the numbers of people seen in

these neighbourhood offices varies due to the extent of the provision provided there, some offices run an advice service on a full time basis where as others only have a Welfare Rights Adviser based there for part of the week. The strategic location of advisers is dependent on many factors such as accommodation, accessibility of the neighbourhood office, demand, and co-ordinating the provision with other existing advice services in the area.

Of the 2,432 people seen through our open door advice service provision 83% needed assistance with welfare rights casework and to claim further entitlements, this is a considerably high number and demonstrates the significant need people have for advice and assistance across the borough.

## **What people who use our service said...**

As well as using statistical information to measure the effectiveness of the service the Welfare Rights Team are also keen to get the views of people who use our service to find out how they felt about the service they received, and also to try and identify how the service can be improved to better meet people's needs in future.

The team receives a lot of positive feedback from people voluntarily which is always welcomed but we also try to illicit feedback from people using our service by randomly sending out feedback surveys on a periodic basis.

The feedback survey concentrates on five different area's:

- where the person using the service heard about it
- their initial reason for contacting the Welfare Rights Team
- what the service received has helped them to do
- how they feel as a result of the service they have received
- how they would describe the service they received from the Welfare Rights Team.

Our feedback showed us that 68% of people heard about our service from either friend's or relatives, another council department or another partner organisation, this demonstrates the effectiveness of our work with partners to create effective referral pathways and that people who have received a service from us are satisfied with it to the point where they have been happy to recommend it to others. 13% of people who used the service did so after being approached by the service itself which highlights the effectiveness of the pro active take up work which the Welfare Rights Team undertakes.

Approximately 50% of the people who contacted the service did so after it was recommended to them that they should get assistance. The Welfare Rights Team, in its approach to pro active take up work, spends a considerable amount of time educating partner agencies frontline staff of the issues they should be aware of which may demonstrate someone needs assistance to claim their full welfare rights entitlements. This feedback demonstrates that the work of the team in this area is effective and that partners are effectively supporting and promoting the work of the Welfare Rights Team.

Only 11% of people contacting the Welfare Rights Team did so as they were experiencing financial difficulties, given the amount achieved for the team in financial gains over the course of the year this figure demonstrates that our pro active approach to work is effective in supporting people to improve their financial situation before they begin to experience difficulties, thus preventing any unnecessary or unwanted stress or worry.

When asked about what the service they had received had helped them to do the most common response was that people were now able to worry less about heating bills and were able to spend more on food. Listed below is what else people identified as being able to do as a result of the advice they received:

- See family and friends more
- Use car's, buses, taxi's and other public transport
- Join in with social activities
- Pay for personal care and assistance
- Afford a holiday
- Save for something special
- Engage with others socially

The majority of people providing feedback about the service said that it had left them feeling happier than they were before and that they now worried less about making ends meet. Nearly three quarters said that the service they received had lead them to have more self respect and over half felt the service had resulted in them feeling healthier than they did before.

On the subject of how they would describe the Welfare Rights Team the majority of people described it as being:

- Accurate for their needs
- Knowledgeable
- Friendly
- Quick
- Helpful

## **Conclusion**

Following the successful delivery of service achieved throughout the financial year 2008-09 the Welfare Rights Team has been able to achieve financial gains of over £107 million for the last six years. This is money that is going to people who need it to help them afford the cost of daily living, our information shows that it is spent on local products and services and therefore provides the local economy with a boost.

The coming financial year will see the team attempt to build on the overall performance of the previous financial year and the successful delivery of projects in partnership with other agencies. We will also identify the ways in which our service can be improved so that it accurately meets the needs and aspirations of the people who use it.

The financial year we embark upon will provide us with a variety of challenges, the economic downturn has created a situation in which the people of Sandwell are in need of the support of an efficient and effective Welfare Rights Team more than any other time in our recent history. People need support in new ways, there is a greater call for advice on issues such as debt and energy consumption and the Welfare Rights Team has to ensure it is in a position to meet these changing needs and demands. In light of this Sandwell M.B.C has invested £200,000 into the Welfare Rights Team for the next two financial years.

The team will also seek to build links with complementary agencies so that we are able to assist and signpost people who use our service towards other services that may be of assistance to them, assisting other services extend the reach of their service and ensuring the people who use our service receive as holistic a service as possible.

As a team we would like to thank all those people from different agencies who support our team and support us to reach people in Sandwell who need our help, without whom we would be unable to deliver our service to the standard that we achieve.

Neil Cox  
Welfare Rights Team Manager