

Making your funding go further – working with non-specialist staff to increase benefits take up *Julia Timothy, Bristol City Council Welfare Rights and Money Advice Service*

Background

Part of our team was funded by Supporting People to carry out welfare rights work for people with housing related support plans. Most caseworkers in workgroup were Outreach Workers, competent to carry out casework including benefit checks, DLA and AA claims and supersessions.

Support Providers - included variety of client groups - initially many older people, but then service split into short term and long term support providers, we were asked to work with the short term providers. Client groups increasingly diverse, including many service users of drug and alcohol support services, people in hostels and first time tenancies.

Problem of too many referrals - often closing waiting list, could not meet demand

Changes to ways of working

Change to contract to undertake capacity building in Support Providers. We now work to increase the skills of support workers - “we will help you to do this” rather than “we will do this for you”.

Our team reorganised so that all caseworkers in this workgroup are Adviser level ie able to write and deliver training, offer consultancy, as well as help others with casework and represent at appeals

Key tools for capacity development

Helpline - dedicated phone line for support workers for consultancy and referrals, we increasingly ask more of support workers - eg please find out x y z and ring us back when you have the information rather than taking on to waiting list and finding out ourselves. We decide whether query can be dealt with over the phone or whether we need to take on to waiting list.

Training programme - crucial part of the work, staged approach (eg have to go on Introduction to Welfare Benefits before can have a place on other welfare rights training courses such as ESA)

Assisted casework - mainly DLA new claims, renewals and supersessions. We leave “ownership” of work with support worker. They have responsibility for eg asking GP for letter. Some resistance at first, but have gradually taken to it. Taking part in the process of completing DLA form increases knowledge and confidence. Can be adapted to individual's needs - often amounts to a one to one training session. First time - adviser may ask client questions and support worker write replies on the form. Then the next time they may take part in asking questions, with some back up from adviser. A further stage is that they may discuss with adviser on helpline, complete form, then send/drop it in to us to look over and make suggestions for more questions to ask before sending.

Support workers responses (February 2011 support workers satisfaction survey)

Overall, 93% felt their welfare rights knowledge had increased since working with WRAMAS and 90% said their confidence to advise clients on welfare rights issues had increased

Helpline - 93% use the helpline at least once a month and 95% rate telephone support as very important or extremely important to their work

Training programme - 87% have been on our training courses, 88% anticipate needing welfare rights training in the future and 89% consider our training to be very or extremely important to their work

Assisted casework - 83% consider assisted casework to be very or extremely important to their work

74% have helped a client with a DLA claim as a result of contact with WRAMAS and 80% anticipate doing so in the future

34% have helped a client with a DLA change of circumstances form and 58% anticipate doing so in the future

Take on the Take Up Challenge

We have started to building on this model to work with other frontline teams within the council to increase benefits take up - mainly aiming for DLA/AA, WTC

First step - we put out an "advert" on the council intranet

Responses came back, we contacted them and set up meetings to look at how they might be able to incorporate benefits take up into their work

Training then offered to all staff in team - some just doing one day Introduction to Welfare Benefits, others also going on one or two day DLA/AA training.

Follow up meeting with managers/supervisors to discuss how to take it forward. What can they expect from us - what can we expect from them? Who will do what? What can they record? This has needed a flexible approach, team by team as all have different levels of involvement with clients and work with them for different lengths of time. Generally there is more emphasis on spotting potential entitlement, joint working, more referrals to WRAMAS for casework (but only for take up - not appeals)

Teams involved so far:

Home adaptations and Housing Action Zones team.

Intermediate Care (people coming out of hospital)

Parking Services (blue badge)

Anti-social Behaviour team - includes people working with complainants and those complained about - work with whole family.

Housing Advice teams

Private Renting team - support for people moving from homelessness into private rented accommodation

Learning Communities - provide courses and mentoring for low skilled adult learners

Children's Centres - provide support for families with pre-school children

Challenges

- approach “top down” or “bottom up”?
- Need to ensure benefits take up is seen as integral part of job, not just for a few keen individuals
- can the work be built into team /individual targets?
- Who will supervise the work? Need to ensure training for supervisors too
- Recording and monitoring - we need results/outcomes to show for the work we are putting in!