

Riverside Advice briefing for CASSC on Specialist Welfare Rights Advice Services in Cardiff for Vulnerable people

Riverside Advice;-

- Delivers a specialist Welfare Rights services and has been delivering Advice services since 1975.
- Has the Legal Aid Specialist Quality Mark and has this and a Legal Aid Contract for Welfare Rights Advice since 1997
- Receives the majority of our Welfare Rights Advice casework from referrals from Council funded services, but no funding from Cardiff Council to support this work.

Until 2013 (*when the UK Government took most of Social Welfare Legal Aid out of scope*) Riverside Advice had the largest Social Welfare Legal Aid Contract in Wales. 1500 specialist cases for Welfare Benefits and Debt a year. This was a major loss of Specialist level Advice services to Cardiff and not replaced.

Riverside Advice still has a Legal Aid Contract for what is left of Social Welfare Legal Aid for Housing and Welfare Benefits Upper Tribunals casework

Since September 2015 Riverside Advice has had no funding from Cardiff Council, when the Welfare Rights Advice funding from all Council Departments (Communities and Housing and Adult Services) was placed into the Communities and Housing single contractor Hub Advice Contract, and Children's Services Advice funding had gone into Families First Contracts.

Previously Riverside Advice had Cardiff Council funding from;-

- Communities and Housing for Asian Language and Open Door service
- Communities and Housing for the City Centre service delivered from Bridge Street, (one year)
- Adult Services for Specialist Welfare Benefits service for Carers
- Children Services under Sure Start funding for Welfare Rights for Families with Children 4 and under.

This amalgamation of Welfare Rights Advice funding for several organisations and bespoke services into essentially one funding pot has led we believe to lack of specialist, expert and bespoke Welfare Rights Advice services in Cardiff. These type of services are particularly required for vulnerable people who often have specific access requirements, such as unable to cope with triage systems and different levels of advisors and waiting in queue with other people.

Due to the amalgamation of the Advice grants into one single contract the loss of funding contributed to closure of Cardiff Law Centre, and lead to closure of Age Concerns Welfare Rights Unit, Somali Advice closing and loss of the bespoke work delivered by these organisations and only leaving the couple of independent Welfare Rights Advice

organisations left, such as Riverside Advice with high risk of a possible funding crisis and closure.

80% of Riverside Advice's Welfare Rights casework services are by referral from support workers and organisations from all sectors, particularly from Cardiff Council funded services. These are for the most vulnerable people, with high level of Mental Health illnesses and chaotic life styles, people who would not be able to cope with the Advice Hub in terms of accessing advice services there. These vulnerable people are therefore referred to Riverside Advice as the support organisations believe we are the only organisation that delivers services to meet their needs. This is stated in reference letters we have for a variety of Support organisations to demonstrate this need.

Riverside statistics demonstrate that in the last year, since Support People Contract was awarded to just 3 organisations Gwalia, United Welsh and Salvation Army that these organisations collectively referred over 200 people to Riverside Advice. This at @ £200 - £250 a case (*Legal Aid costings – and often under resourced at that rate*) this is £40,000 to £50,000 of specialist case work in Welfare Benefits and Debt with no specific funding for this work.

Many other organisations and services such as Llamau, Ty Canna, Advice HUB, Housing Options and internal Council Services such as Social Workers and Probation also refer there service users to Riverside Advice from Council funded services.

There is a great need to recognise this critical situation and to fund a specialist and expert Welfare Rights service which is in addition and outside what is possible within the funded City Centre Hub style service. Particularly as this Welfare Rights case work is essential to good outcomes of the work delivered by other key Council funded services for vulnerable people. Specialist and expert Welfare Rights is also key to those Cardiff Council funded services providing successful outcomes for their service users, i.e. if vulnerable peoples finances, Benefits and Debt are not sorted there is much more likely of another future crisis and spiral downwards – then requiring more assistance and costs to other Council funded services. Welfare Rights prevents poverty and is key preventative work.

We understand that most of the Advice services have now been removed from Families First – due to Welsh Government rules. We are told by Adult /Social Services that Welfare Rights, - even though there is a direct link between poverty/ finances, health and well being, and impacting on stability of families, - Welfare Rights is not in their remit – or '*any of their business*'.

The much needed and promised Cardiff Welfare Rights Advice Review incorporating the views of all the Advice Providers (many now shut as noted above), in existence at that time, as directed by Community & Adult Services Scrutiny Committee (CASSC in November 2012) did not materialise. This review was for Advice Providers to work with the Cardiff Council during 2013 to look at needs and demands in the development of futures Advice services for Cardiff. Unfortunately this Review never materialised before the Advice Single Provider Contract for Hub Advice Package was announced and finalised in October 2013 without the Review. We have no wish to go back over the circumstances of why this Advice Review did not happen, or why the concerns from the previous Advice Review by BDO on

the potential issues related to a centralise HUB style model were not recognised, but want to move forward to establish and recognise the issues and needs now.

The Council needs to recognise that if due to cuts in any other Advice funding streams, - as always possible, and the remaining independent Welfare Rights organisations may be forced to closure. If this happens there is no capacity or other Advice services in Cardiff for the vulnerable people who are currently being referred to Riverside Advice from Council funded services to go. This is specialist casework for nearly 1000 vulnerable people a year from across Cardiff for Welfare Benefits and Debt casework and raising nearly £2,000,000 of income for them in Welfare Benefits resulting from challenges and Appeal Tribunals. Where will these vulnerable people's specialist Welfare Benefit, Debt and Housing issues be resolved? If vulnerable people's financial issues are not resolved this is likely to result in further costs to other Cardiff Council funded services, - such as Housing, Social Services, due to potential homelessness and family breakdown and effecting children, - all real and researched outcomes as results of financial deprivation.

We hope this Scrutiny Committee can address these real concerns. The Advice sector needs some support to not only deliver the specialist casework for vulnerable people, but importantly for infrastructure to prevent any amount of funding loss resulting in viability issues and potential closures which will result in the loss of all the other Advice funding and services that those organisations have and deliver for the people of Cardiff. The impact of this on vulnerable people will be very serious.