

Involve Northwest Benefits Advice Service – June 2021



Organisation name: Involve Northwest

Project name: Benefits Advice Service

Location: The Wirral, North West England

Grant amount: £449,739

Award date and duration: November 2016, 3 years

Project context: Involve Northwest is a charity based in the Wirral, in the North West of England. The organisation is made up of several small teams, who offer a wide range of services to local individuals and families (such as advice and support relating to domestic violence, employment, and mental health). The grant funded the disability or long-term sick benefits advice service.

Project aims: The aim of the benefits advice service is to help the local long-term sick and disabled population (including physical and mental health) access the benefits they are entitled to, through an increase in capacity.

Project aims

The aim of the project was to fund a benefits advice service specific to the local long-term sick and disabled population (including physical and mental health). Through this service, the aim was to ensure all in the local area could access the benefits they are entitled to.

About the grant

When the grant was received from The National Lottery Community Fund in 2016, it was used to **assist local people claiming disability and long-term sick welfare benefits through their information and advice service** (for example, PIP, DLA, UC, Attendance Allowance). Previously, the team also focussed on employment related welfare, but it was felt due to the growing need, they needed a specialised team to work solely with people claiming or seeking to claim long term sick or disability benefits.

Services include assisting with completion of benefits forms, preparing people for medical assessments and providing tribunal representation at benefit appeals for vulnerable people.

The advice team comprises Martin (the service lead/welfare advisor), Steve* (welfare advisor), Jane* (an administrator and welfare advisor) and Leanne*¹ (a debt and money advisor).

Project delivery and set up

The grant was used to hire a front-line office administrator to help manage the demand, moving the organisation towards an appointments-based system, which **grew the service's capacity and reach**. Before they received the grant, they did not have a system for triaging and booking appointments with people, which led to the team often being overrun and feeling like they were leaning more towards quantity than quality. Beneficiaries are now triaged through the administrator to ensure they are ready with the evidence they need when they meet with the welfare advisers. They offer telephone and face to face support, as well as home visits for those that cannot leave their home.

The grant was also used to **increase the reach of their team**, allowing them to offer 14 weekly outreach community drop ins where they can offer advice on the spot, or book people in for an appointment with an advisor. This is an additional 8 weekly sessions compared to before they received the grant. The drop ins were held at a

¹Asterix indicates names have been changed.

variety of locations, to ensure the greatest reach across the community. Locations included housing estates, the local MPs surgery, within the local probation service, at the Macmillan hospice and with a local Cardiomyopathy group. They received referrals from a variety of local agencies, such as the Jobcentre, Citizens Advice and The Primary Care Trust. They also receive referrals from other teams in Involve Northwest dealing with service users who first contacted the organisations about another issue (for example dealing with domestic violence), but also need help with their benefits.

The **beneficiaries of the grant were local individuals and families who were seeking advice from the service about disability related welfare benefits.**

Each beneficiary came to the advice service at a difficult or stressful point in their life, for example, at the onset of a long-term illness. This, coupled with the interactions which beneficiaries were having with DWP about claiming disability welfare benefits, caused a lot of worry and panic. Some struggled to fill in the long application forms, worrying they would give the wrong information, causing them to be ineligible for the benefits. All the beneficiaries had **a very positive experience** with the advice service, and were keen to point out the professional, but friendly, way they were dealt with by Martin and Steve (the welfare advisors). The key seemed to be the compassionate way in which they were treated, with real care and attention to their individual needs. Rose, a beneficiary of the service, spoke about how she never felt rushed, and was given all the time she needed to explain her situation. There was an overall sense of relief felt once Involve Northwest started helping Rose, as it offered her expert knowledge of disability benefits, and reassurance that any of their issues could be solved.

"It was just because he didn't steal my dignity, in my heart, there is a shame in asking for help... I was overwhelmed by the gentle way I was treated. I expected to be judged and go through a wringer"

Rose, Beneficiary

Beneficiaries struggled to think of anything which could have been better about their experience with the team, as all who took part in the research had their problems solved and an overall positive experience with the team. All have kept in contact with the team, going to them with other issues with other welfare benefits, or when they get any other contact from DWP. Martin explained this is very typical, and the **beneficiaries viewed the team as friends.**

Project impact

Key highlights

<p>Numbers supported</p>	<p>The Involve Northwest benefits advice team supported 1142 clients with their disability benefits service during the grant period.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Of those 1142 clients, 75% were successfully awarded benefits. • They hosted 14 drop ins per week throughout the Wirral.
<p>Key impacts</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased capacity to reach more people. • Local people’s financial and material wellbeing was improved. • People’s short-term basic needs were met – food, clothing, shopping, benefits. • People’s mental health and wellbeing was better
<p>Website</p>	<p>https://involvenorthwest.org.uk/what-we-do/advice-services/</p>

All beneficiaries felt that their contact with Involve Northwest’s benefits advice service had a positive impact on their life, in both **the short-term regarding access to welfare benefits, but also in the long-term.**

People’s mental health and wellbeing was better, and people’s financial and material wellbeing was improved

Longer term benefits were often related to a **greater mental wellbeing, due to a greater sense of financial and material wellbeing** and peace of mind about the future. Before Involve Northwest got involved in peoples claims, people worried about losing their home, not being able to pay for their basic needs such as disability apparatus or their child’s school transport. In most cases (75% between 2016-2019²), the advice received by the team ensured that people were successful in accessing the welfare they were entitled to. In turn, this meant they were able to buy the things they needed. One

“Without Involve, I don’t think I would have been able to get the money, filling in the forms were too stressful, and I didn’t know what to put”

Rose, beneficiary

² Data provided by Involve Northwest.

beneficiary, Rose, felt that without the support of Involve Northwest with her initial PIP claim, she would not have been able to successfully apply alone and would not have received her entitlements.

There was an **overwhelming sense of gratitude** towards the welfare advisors from the beneficiaries interviewed. The team at Involve Northwest have forged long-term trusting relationships with their clients and now look after their claims for them in the long term, dealing with their renewals and removing this stress for their clients.

Pete and Kate were two beneficiaries who felt a positive impact on both their **financial and mental wellbeing**, as a result of the advice service.

Pete approached Involve Northwest when he was diagnosed with cancer. Before his diagnosis, he was working in a good job and had just bought his first home and had no experiences of *'being on the dole'*. His illness drastically changed his life, there were times he could barely speak or move in hospital. He was placed in a Job Seekers Allowance working group and was being sent to job interviews for physical roles he couldn't do with his health and without transport, and he was having trouble communicating this to the DWP. Not only was Pete physically unwell, his financial situation and poor health was taking a toll on his mental health, and he felt very low. Involve Northwest helped gather evidence for Pete to apply for Disability Living Allowance (DLA) and then Personal Independence Payments (PIP), via face-to-face meetings in their office, and over the phone advice. They were ultimately **successful in helping him receive his entitlement**. Pete felt that having Involve North West's help **really improved his state of mind**, as without the help and advice from the team, he saw he could have lost his house and continued with very low mental health.

"I wasn't going to bed, I was sitting up all day worrying about paying my mortgage, I'd got myself into such a lifestyle with having such a good job. Getting the help from them meant I didn't have to worry anymore". **Pete, beneficiary**

Kate has been in contact with Involve Northwest numerous times throughout the last 6 years. Kate approached Involve Northwest looking to appeal a decision with DWP, to get her child's condition verified. Involve helped her complete the forms and submit an appeal, which she ultimately won and began receiving her benefit entitlements. She felt relieved to have her financial difficulties sorted and felt she would not use any other service for help in the future, as they knew her, and she could trust them.

"Now, because of their help...I'm claiming DLA, I can put petrol in the car to get her [her daughter] to school, as she won't take public transport, I can afford a trusted babysitter when I need one. Without them...I'd be in financial difficulty really badly" **Kate, beneficiary**

Increase capacity / reach more beneficiaries

Receiving the grant has allowed Involve Northwest to **increase the capacity and the reach** of who they can help, through the implantation of **more efficient systems**. By moving away from a purely drop-in/first come-first-service service, and towards appointment booking once the funding began, Steve knew the quality of work internally improved, as they were not in a rush with people queuing up for their help at the drop in. An unexpected positive outcome of this, is that they have been able to help local people with their welfare claims earlier in their application process, and as a result are seeing less claims go to a tribunal process. This is because people can fill out their forms correctly and provide the necessary evidence the first time around, with assistance from Steve and Martin.

The **increased capacity** has meant that the wider teams within the Involve Northwest organisation have been able to refer people to the disability welfare advice team. Martin was glad they were able to offer this service to their colleagues, rather than ask them to refer clients to other organisations, as it kept the service personal and built trust with this vulnerable client base.

Overall reflections

In 2016, when the team started to change their processes and move to an appointment-based system, there was a small worry that some service users would be put off by not being able to just drop in and be seen as and when they were available. The team found that quickly users got used to the new system and were always able to fit people in within a few days. Users came to appreciate no longer having to queue up to be seen, and instead came to the interviews prepared after the initial triage phone call.

The grant has had a positive impact on both the organisation itself, and the local community in the Wirral. Martin viewed the grant as a **'real kickstart'**, putting the organisation in a position which means they can help everyone and not need to turn anyone away, which he said gave him a lovely feeling. This grant has allowed them to grow and refine their processes, putting them in an efficient place to continue to carry out their services as a charity, and help more people in the Wirral.

About the case study

As part of this case study, IFF Research spoke to Martin, the Lead Welfare Adviser along with benefits advisor, Steve*, a volunteer, Marcus*, and four beneficiaries, Kate*, Jane*, Rose* and Pete*. **Names have been changed*