

Plymouth Welfare Rights Forum Conference

“Change – What are the Benefits?”

Thursday 23rd October, 2008

at

The Theatre Royal, Royal Parade, Plymouth

9.30am to 4pm

Conference opened by: Vivien Pengelly, The Leader of Plymouth City Council

Keynote Speaker: Teresa Perchard, Director of Policy, Citizens Advice

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Change – What are the Benefits?

This conference is for those working in social welfare and highlights the new challenges we are facing because of a significant change in Government thinking. What is driving these changes? Money or need? Who are the winners and what about the losers? We have an unsustainable economy – people are living longer and fewer younger people are working. It does not balance. There are new priorities now; reducing child poverty, social inclusion, renewable energy and low carbon emissions, a healthier lifestyle, empowerment, financial capability, numeracy and literacy, etc. We have all come to expect a good standard of living which no-one wants to lose. The challenge for the Government is to ensure that individuals and families are better off working, and many of us advising around benefit take-up know this is not necessarily the case.

The focus is moving away from ensuring people have enough to live on if they are unable to work or earn much, to helping people back into work or indeed to find work for those who have never worked. What about the barriers to returning to work? An employer wants the best person for the job – he/she may not be able to afford a social conscience. A debtor returning to work will re-open harassment for payment. What about the latch-key children getting even younger as single parents are forced back into work?

The welfare benefit system needs radical change! Does anyone really understand it all? It is a complex and convoluted system that is often inaccessible and incomprehensible to many and is sometimes open to abuse. It raises barriers to those that are most in need and encourages others to fit the claim criteria. Where is joined-up Government thinking in this arena? Does it pay to save for a rainy day or for retirement? What about the mistakes made with the introduction of the new tax credit system making poor people even poorer and now in debt too! Why are there postcode lotteries (council tax, dentists, health care) and a system of first come first served (access to the social fund)? Why do advisers have to support people in going to appeal or tribunals to get justice? Why are some benefits means tested and other benefits open to everyone, rich or poor? Why does the tax system recognise only married couples and not cohabitants like the benefit system?

Changes in benefits, changes in the cost of living and changes in policy - can things get much worse for the poorest in our communities? Sometimes change is beneficial but the confusion caused by the Government abolishing the 10p tax rate earlier this year left some individuals much worse off. Although the Government later reversed this decision, it demonstrates how vulnerable some sections of society really are to change.

Many of us voice our concerns about change but does anyone really listen? The answer is yes, sometimes. Come to our conference, air your opinions, join the debate and learn about change and challenges facing advisers.

Workshop Choices. You may attend two

1. INCAPACITY BENEFIT CHANGES – how are they working?

There will be a large number of people with long term health needs being challenged about their fitness to work. What is happening in the field? Are the changes causing alarm and exacerbating ill health with the resulting worry and anxiety?

Facilitated by: Julie Jackson, Welfare Benefits Caseworker, Plymouth CAB
Presented by: Richard Wakerell, Director, Plymouth and District MIND

2. BACK TO WORK - preparing the workless?

Do 'back to work' schemes work? What are the success rates? Are they cost effective? How long do people remain in work? How difficult will it be for those families who are into their third generation of worklessness to adapt to a regular work pattern? Talk to someone who has got the t-shirt.

Facilitated by: Frances Brennan, Working Links Director for South West
Presented by: Neil Pick, Director, Tellus Group Ltd

3. BACK TO WORK - implications for employers?

Are employers able to provide the vital support some of those people coming off Incapacity Benefit need to return to work? For those who have mental health conditions there will need to be understanding when their health suddenly deteriorates and time off is needed, for some with sensory impairments they will need support workers and for those with physical disabilities, facilities in many cases will have to be improved considerably. Are employers ready for these changes and sufficiently compensated? Every day we hear that there are plenty of jobs available, but is this work that these groups of people could do, even with training?

Facilitated by: Nick Pennell, Assistant Director for Adult Mental Health & Learning Disabilities, Primary Care Services
Presented by: Anthony Newson, Plymouth City Council and Rod Burnett, Development Manager, Pluss

4. LOCAL HOUSING ALLOWANCE.

The Local Housing Allowance allocates a predetermined amount of benefit to cover rent, depending on household need. Are the amounts decided adequate or realistic? Will the amounts cause people to endure poor housing conditions because this is all they can afford? Will landlords decline to accept tenants on benefits? Or will they abuse the system to line their pockets? How will the most vulnerable people cope with having to manage their payments? Join the debate six months into the scheme.

Facilitated by: Ian Byworth, Manager Shelter
Presented by: Gary Edwards, Accounts Processing Manager, Plymouth City Council Revenues and Benefits

Conference Agenda

9.30 a.m.	Registration and coffee. A chance to visit the exhibition.
10.00 a.m.	Conference welcome and opening remarks, Vivien Pengelly, The Leader of Plymouth City Council Introductions by the Chair of the Conference, Darin Halifax, Community Cohesion Officer, Plymouth City Council
10.15 a.m.	Keynote speech by Teresa Perchard, Director of Policy, Citizens Advice, followed by questions and answers
10.45 a.m.	Refreshment break and visit the exhibition
11.15 a.m.	Choice of workshops (see previous page)
12.30 p.m.	Lunch
2.00 p.m.	Repeat of workshops (see previous page)
3.15 p.m.	Refreshment break
3.45 p.m.	Summary and conclusions by the Chair
4.00 p.m.	Conference ends

Who is this conference for?

Welfare rights advisers, health workers, social workers, staff at DWP, HMRC, and JobCentre Plus, Sure Start Children's Centres, CABs, housing associations, agencies supporting people back into work and employers.

You will have the opportunity to attend two workshops, exchange information and share experience, ideas and opinions.

The conference is fully accessible.

Fees and Exhibition stands

The fees for this day conference, including all refreshments and lunch are as follows:-

Delegate Fee

Voluntary and not for profit sectors	£40.00
Public sector	£60.00
Private sector	£80.00

Exhibition Fee

Small pop up stand **	£50.00
Large stand **	£100.00

*** Exhibition Fee also entitles one person to attend the conference at 50% of the normal Delegate Fee.*

For more information contact Jane Guy on **01752 507710** or jane.cab@plymouthcab.org.uk

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