

Plymouth Welfare Rights Forum

Warspite Room
Council House

Thursday 31st January 2008
1.00 to 4.00pm

Agenda:

- New Chair – Gloria Davenport, works as a volunteer at CAB
- Welcome by Chair and apologies

Apologies:

Maggie Dolan

Ann Holdsworth – Shelter

Colin Trend

David Monk

Chris Hulbert

Clare Shaw

Donna Ryall

Dave Hay

- Accuracy of minutes from 29th November 2007

Accuracy:

OK

- Matters Arising

Chris J: two matters from JCP report: Use of PO address (PO Box 66) no longer exists as of October – items will be lost. Flyers were sent out June/July. New address in Breakwater road is one that should be used:

Jobcentre Plus

Plymouth BDC

Breakwater Road

Plymouth

PL95 8BL

All correspondence from JCP should now have new address on!
 Some problems reported by clients as they've sent to old address (as address on correspondence or given by JCP staff)
 Other item in JCP report below

- Statutory Sector Reports to include:
 - Housing Benefit

UPDATE -

The current situation regarding claims awaiting processing is as follows:

Working Age-

New Applications/Change of address – 195
 Change of circumstances - 541

Pension Age -

New Applications/Change of address - 37
 Change of circumstances - 122

Total claims awaiting processing = 895

Claims pending further information

New Applications/Change of addresses – 817

Our work position is much improved, the new systems are now settling down and we have been able to consolidate our position in preparation for the next major change with the introduction of Local Housing Allowance on 7/04/08. Where we have all the information to process a claim, they are being put into payment within 2 to 3 weeks.

Quarterly report of total number of claims processed and the number of defective claims

Period 01/07/07 to 30/09/07	New Claims Decided	Defective Claims	% Defective
Working Age	3187	466	14.62%
Pension Age	428	25	5.84%
Total	3615	491	13.58%
Period 01/10/07 to 31/12/07	New Claims Decided	Defective Claims	% Defective
Working Age	2544	415	16.31%
Pension Age	345	19	5.51%
Total	2889	434	15.02%

Over the coming months we are introducing new working practices so that we are far

more pro-active in chasing up information on claims from customers. Our assessment staff will try to telephone the customer in the first instance to chase up information. We hope that this will reduce the time taken to process the claims and also reduce the number of defective claims.

Discretionary Housing Payment - current position

Budget 07/08 £68,519
Spend to date £56,174
Left to spend £12,345

We are on target to spend the budget assuming claims keep coming in , if you are aware of situations where client's are in receipt of housing benefit but have short term financial issues, please encourage them to submit a DHP claim.

Local Housing Allowance (comes in 7th April)

Project team in place and working on –

Safeguard policy.
BACS take-up
Presentations for stakeholders
Training for staff

Gary Edwards/31/01/08

Tessa M: problem when letters sent out by PCC, no name or signature on them, so don't know who has sent them. This makes it difficult for advisers to address letters back.

Susan F: the call centre handles all enquiries and passes on messages; all letters get linked to related case and should then be sent to the person dealing with the case.

Tessa: sometimes the query is only simple, asking if letter received etc.

Debbie: email works – gets forwarded to case worker on the case

LHA email address: lhabenefits@plymouth.gov.uk
Also leaflets for info.

Steve: what about people with no accounts

Gary: people will be given support.

Tracey: Banks not keen to work in partnership (PCC LHA team has been in touch to arrange)

Gloria: what if people refuse to open account?

Gary: will pay by cheque, but is not PCC preferred option. Will encourage bank accounts

Steve: beware accounts that are dormant – if PCC are given details that relate to those accounts they might not work

Margaret: what about PCC & HA tenants?

Gary: LHA doesn't apply to those tenants

Majority of claimants will have Allowance paid direct to them – to encourage them to take the responsibility

Gloria: has this been tried in other areas?

Gary: yes, piloted over few years

Tracey: been piloted in 18 areas inc Teignbridge

Gloria: any major probs?

Gary: no increase in homeless etc. Landlords come into & go out of taking tenants on benefits. Landlords wouldn't necessarily know if a tenant is in receipt of benefits

Paula: has CAB or Shelter done any reports on the pilots?

See separate paper

Gary: benefit levels went up across the board over the pilots, because allowance is based on family need rather than property size. But people squeezed into property too small and kept extra income

Gary: indicative amounts were have been discussed with landlords, who then asked if they could force a break in claim so that tenants would go onto new scheme and make more money (as more generous than HB amounts)

Margaret: will this affect homeless & street sleepers?

Gary: no, they are dealt with under a different system but government is looking to bring everyone under the same scheme nationwide

Tessa: DHP, what is this?

Debbie: is separate pot of money available to people who have shortfall between rent and HB. Applications are decided by a panel which looks at income & outgoings (which aren't normally taken in to account for HB) and any award is decided on that. No mass policy because it's a discretionary payment, so the decision aims to be fair

Paula: what's the longest period it's paid for?

Debbie: depends on application, though unlikely to be paid for more than 12 months

Steve: If debt accrued because of change in circumstances, would DHP cover the repayments towards this debt?

Debbie: not normally, but include circumstances and put in a claim

Gloria: how long would it take to make a decision?

Debbie: depends

- Disability Benefits Centre

No news, no apologies

- Inland Revenue

Will come to every other meeting, so will attend the next one in March.
Will address any issues brought up in the meantime by email

- Jobcentre Plus

90% calls should be answered when received – achieving 92% currently
350 new claims received per week

250 claims are processed per week, the remainder due to not having enough information

Incapacity Benefit average one day processing, but currently 112 days behind

Current (December) processing times, in days (figure in bracket is target times)

Income Support:

New claims 10.95 (11)
Change in circumstances 1.99 (4)
Jobseekers:
New 10.25 (12)
Change in circumstances 3.25 (4)

Incapacity Benefit:
New 9.5 (18)
Change in circumstances 3.97 (no target)

From matters arising (from Dean's report):

When someone is awarded DLA/AA and this should trigger a premium increase, JCP get a card from DBC notifying JCP of award. If IS claim in progress, JCP would check claim and adjust as necessary. However JCP only keep cards for one year.

Gill Joyce: still do get cards in Pension Service, even of CA awarded.

Chris: now the computers talk to each other.

Tessa: client put in IS claim, disallowed then eligible because DLA awarded, but still having probs with backdating
Paula: several cases coming to light now re backdating. Pension Service seem to have it sorted and make correct payments

Dean: people not getting premiums (eg if partner getting LRC DLA), on JSA claim. Also non-dependent deduction shouldn't be made if any element of DLA Care being paid. This is too much for advice agencies to be dealing with and raises a big policy issue for DWP

Chris: systems talk to each other so JCP policy dept don't see this as a problem.

Want Disability & Carers Centre to change info on award/notification letter so people are advised to go back to JCP for additional benefits/premiums, also especially with non-dependent situations, need to inform the householder

Dean: Also HMRC because of eg children getting DLA, an additional amount will be added to CTC

Need a fool-proof system – is a welfare right

Susan F PCC: People don't inform PCC when they receive a CA award as they don't realise this is a relevant change

Chris: system interface doesn't always work – some people still having to have clerical claims

Chris is trying to raise with DBC – has been told cost is an issue, although award letter has recently been changed

Dean: previously had advice column in Herald, informed public and people clearly weren't aware that they would be entitled to more money – always assumed that by getting more money they would have money reduced, not increased.

Chris: Used to send out a leaflet but because people don't ask for them, JCP don't keep stocks of them any more

Gill: We (Pension Service) address this by carrying out home visits and inform people then

Mitch: DWP rely on Sect 31 notification of change in circs. But as clients, general public don't see it as change

Chris: claim form asks if receiving or waiting to hear about claim for DLA/AA but doesn't ask about any non-dependents

Mitch: new claim for IS – how long to process?

Chris: 10.95 days average
Some claims older, but usually cos waiting for info

Mitch: prob with some re delays

Chris: most complaints received are about delays, but very rarely are there any unnecessary delays – will pull staff off other sections as new claims are priority

Change in circumstances processing might be delayed more as this is less of a priority

Dean: prob with work focussed interview – IB claimants having to wait in queue, which causes them to be late for their appointment. Many have physical/mental health problems, which can cause panic etc. Can't they be asked to come 10 mins early?

Chris: they certainly used to be. JCP also used to have queue-busters to ask if people had come for appointment.

- Pension Service

Gill: nothing to report. Claims are being processed quickly. This varies but is usually within 10 working days. Gill only gets involved if there are delays – used to have problems with Swansea but these have since been resolved

Mitch: self-employed people have delays

Gill: PS needs information on income, so often waiting for that. This can cause processing to take a lot longer

Mitch: any stats on ethnicity? Want to carry out comparison

Gill: yes, but for whole of Devon, because processing is centralised in Swansea and covers the area from Swansea to Penzance.

- Social Inclusion (PCC)

Benefit take up figures

- Refugee Action – benefit issues under new HO procedures

See notes at end...

- Themes for future meetings

March – LHA & ESA

May – Older people: TOPS, Fuel Poverty

July – TC overpayments (Mitch) re: ombudsman etc;

Bankruptcy & benefits overpayments – 5 page paper to be sent round

- Conference

Theme – change (impact of benefits changes)

Funding – PCC & Working Links

Speakers – David Harker

Workshops - incapacity, employer perspective, LHA, diversity

Any ideas or comments, please email KS

- Any Other Business

Gill: Q on fuel poverty – has heard there is a “discount” scheme.

Steve: Social tariff amounts are difficult to get hold of, best to contact supplier and explain circumstances

Can register vulnerable/disabled people, will get free gas appliance checks etc – there are advantages & disadvantages to being on register

Margaret: Powergen/Eon have different tariff rates for over 60s?

Paula: would this apply to anyone on DLA?

Steve: depends on personal circs – would need to contact energy supplier

Emma: Energywatch will take details & contact the supplier and ask for assistance on behalf of customers. Home energy team can be contacted at PCC (Emma’s team). Email address:

energy@plymouth.gov.uk

Steve: some terms will come to an end at end of March, so things might change then. Also, Energywatch’s role is being reduced with the view to closing down by the end of September

Steve: If anyone is on prepayment meter, there’s a myth that they can’t change supplier, but is not true.

Paula: what about if arrears?

Steve: can’t change then because owe money

Refugee Action

Jane Robinson (Refugee Action) and Rupert Blomfield (Devon Inclusive Housing Project) attended the Forum to discuss benefit issues affecting

Asylum Seekers

Quarter of asylum seekers are granted refugee status, prior to that they receive NASS support

They have 28 days to sort housing & benefits once granted. This causes problems especially with Tax Credits & children and magnifies problems the families face.

As a result there are lots of destitute families

Rupert -

Been coordinating a response to Home Office "legacy" cases – reviewed & clearing backlog.

30 families dispersed to Plymouth between Oct & Mar will be granted indefinite leave to remain

The families get 28 days notice to quit property, they are evicted & also need to claim benefits

Homeless unit will house the family, assuming benefits are paid in time.

Basically this is not enough time to get things sorted.

NINO issues are now being sorted more quickly, although this is just beginning of the problem in obtaining all entitlements.

Child Benefit & Child Tax Credits are taking 16 weeks to process – this is affecting all the families

Example: A mother & her 5 children have been on single person amount for 3 months now, causing huge budgeting problems

Agencies are overwhelmed. Students & Refugees Together (START) report – impact on charitable support DCRS– food parcels, Red cross £5 per week vouchers

Need to speed up award of tax credit

Discretionary way is to deal case by case, but there are too many cases. How best can we advise?

Carole: direct line number given, got spare capacity at Family Information Service

Mitch: any specific ethnic group?

No

Mitch: outside refugee rules?

Yes, essentially to clear backlog

Mitch: Iraqis can bypass normal rules

Jane: Status is that they can access benefits, not related to **Rashib??**

Case

Rupert: is purely a capacity problem, Plymouth is dealing with 10 families at the moment, but 5 this week are being referred and it's estimated that this could total 30-45 before end March

CHB is the main cause, as this delay prevents access to CTC, which won't be paid until CHB in place
Is a national problem

KS: is it prerequisite that CHB in payment? Legislation needs to be looked at

Rupert: consider looking at as option

*Can HMRC contact CHB to fast track (is within same dept)?
NASS have details of all the children already – can't these be passed on to HMRC?*

KS to chase up with HMRC – email sent to HMRC representatives

Rupert: Another problem is that these families are having to go through housing allocation system

This has always been problematic, but now because of influx this has been highlighted. It is especially difficult with larger families (eg 5 children) and will continue till 2011

Carole: FIS will also deal with over 25s working and need help with WTCs – adviser will travel to RA office to give advice if necessary
Jane: can you deal with ongoing cases?

Carole: we'll come & see and pass to any partners. All benefits like TCs CHB HB Surestart. If anything more complex will pass to partners like CAB & MAP. Family Information Service is based in Devonport – JCP & Working Links & solicitor all do outreach at the office.

FIS deals with all families, birth to death (condoms & pregnancy tests included) and covers all of Plymouth. One Full Time Equivalent caseworker.

Rupert: under these legacy rules, the Asylum Seekers are not granted refugee status, so the effect is that they can't have family members come to join them, nor backdate claims to IS (which altered prior to this programme).

Single males are not being dealt with yet – families are being cleared first.

Rupert: PATH takes on refugees, especially single men. They will deal with families under the START project

Plymouth Focus currently taking on new clients? Capacity issues & funding streams (geographical etc constraints)

Steve: Under A4a, need to have firm referral systems

Jane: how many agencies have access to interpreters?
Most – through translate Plymouth etc

Steve: political issue: has the 28 day limit on gaining housing & benefits been challenged?

Jane: consultation on this started in 2001 and initially started at 14 days, but lots of input from refugee support councils etc pushed that to 28 days

Rupert: there seems to be no way of avoiding the social housing route – is going to have an impact on their capacity with this many families
One family had to move out of temp accommodation within one week because of harassment – racial tensions are going to be an issue

Private renting is not an option at the moment – rents are too high
BIA considering whether to meet payments – in meantime housing services are shouldering burden

Chris: need strong backing from MPs to make changes in process etc to reduce waiting times for CHB/CTC. It should be possible to get their backing because housing issues and child poverty issues are high on the government agenda.

Potentially they could put in a clerical process – although they would want to avoid that because it's costly

Date of next meeting

Thursday 27th March 2008 1 pm – 4 pm.

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