

Plymouth Welfare Rights Forum

Thursday 31 July 2008 1 – 4 pm

Warspite Room, Council House

Present

Gloria Davenport (CAB) Chair	Gill Tishler (CAB)
Fiona Harrison (HMRC)	Gary Edwards (Plymouth City Council – Housing Benefit)
Scott Robertson (PATH)	Russ King (Broadreach Housing Related Support)
Lynn Herbert (Pluss Workable)	Mo Rafferty (William Sutton Homes)
Les Cole (FIS Devonport JCP)	Carole Ford (JCP Old Tree Court)
Chris Johnson (JCP Old Tree Court)	Pat Newton (PCC Midland House)
Julia Slade (LARK Children's Centre)	(Plymouth PCT/Routeways)
Jane Robinson (Refugee Action)	

Apologies

Gill Joyce (Pension Service)	Darin Halifax (PCC)
Steve Guy (MAP)	Sue Smith (DCS Bristol)
Karen Sharpe (CAB)	Carys Evans (START)
Les Cole (FIS Devonport JCP)	Maggie Dolan (Broadreach Resettlement)
Patrick Healy (DIAC)	John Williams (PCU)

1. Welcome and minutes of last meeting

Gloria welcomed everyone to the meeting. The minutes were agreed with one correction: at the end of the JCP report at 2.4 Chris Johnson clarified that the initiative was with the PCT to contact JCP rather than as recorded. **Action: Dawn Slater to initiate strategic contact via Nick Pennell.**

2. Matters Arising

Gloria updated on the date for the open evening for voluntary statutory and business organizations mentioned at 5.4 in the previous minutes. This will now take place at a date in November at Marjohns. An invitation will be circulated to all forum members.

3. Statutory Sector Reports

3.1 Housing Benefit (report from Gary Edwards)

Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Performance Indicators

Statistics produced re: June 08

Percentage of claims processed within 14 days for private claims – 67%

(June 07 was 65%: 2% increase)

Percentage of claims processed within 14 days for council tenants – 51%

(June 07 53%: 2% decrease)

Percentage of claims processed within 14 days for CTB – 62%

(June 07 was 60%: 2% increase)

Average Processing Times – NEW CLAIMS

Private	39.20 days (June 07 43.76: 4.5 day reduction)
Council	37.31 days (June 07 48.64: 11.3 day reduction)
CTB	38.24 days (June 07 47.05: 8.8 day reduction)

Average Processing Times – Change of Circs

18.11 days (June 07 18.56: .45 day reduction)

Current work situation

We are in a relatively stable position work wise and have no particular backlog areas. We are currently reviewing our processes and looking at them very much from a customer perspective, with a view to reducing the number of days it takes to process a claim or change of circumstances and improve the whole customer experience. This review is being undertaken by staff who are actually involved in the processing cycle.

LHA (Local Housing allowance)

The implementation of LHA has gone very well and no major issues have come up to date. We have received some queries from landlords regarding direct payment, but have not been inundated. All new private sector claims are now paid in accordance with the LHA rates, which are reviewed monthly by the rent service.

ESA (Employment Support Allowance)

This allowance will replace Incapacity benefit for new claimants from 27/10/08. An award of ESA will have broadly the same effect on the HB/CTB awards as an award of the benefit it replaces. Wherever possible the structure of HB/CTB will be aligned with that of ESA.

Currently claims for incapacity benefit are processed through the CMS (Customer Management System) and the claim for HB/CTB is sent by the JCP to the LA. Jobcentre Plus are in the process of implementing the CAM (Customer Account Management) as used by the Pension Service and claims for ESA will be captured using this system, but initially information for the HB/CTB claim will not be captured by this system and the customer will be given the old HCTB1 to complete and return to the local authority.

Two queries were raised about LHA rates because some clients were getting less than the published rate because of their benefits. Someone on the shared room rate was getting £57 per week instead of £60. Gary suggested letting him have details of individual cases where this is happening on

----- Contact details restricted -----

3.2 Disability Benefits Centre

Gill read the report from Sue.Smith, Disability Benefits Centre as follows:

‘ We have received a significant increase in the number of new claims received so far this year compared to the number received for the same period last year (over 1000 since April). However, we are still meeting our AACT and AAOT targets for DLA and AA new claims, although the DM holding has increased and we are now into peak leave time which will have an impact.

We have identified a postal problem in as much as our old postal address is being used instead of the latest: PO Box 35, BS80 8AJ. This has been causing a delay in claims getting to the office.’

3.3 HMRC

Gloria introduced Fiona Harrison who had travelled to the meeting from Lewes, near Brighton. The Plymouth Welfare Rights Forum is the only forum in the country which is attended regularly by HMRC. Fiona manages 75 enquiry centres in the south of the country from Penzance to Redditch. HMRC has not yet decided its policy in relation to attendance at these meetings and is looking at whether attendance adds value for HMRC. One of the perceived problems is the range of issues that HMRC cover and the fact that it will be difficult to provide experts in all areas to attend meetings. Gloria pointed out that having a link person with HMRC at a local level was vitally important. Without that it was very difficult to get answers on behalf of clients when the usual routes failed. Fiona pointed out that this is not the way that HMRC is structured. And it would not be possible to have even a central name because issues are so varied that it would be impossible to have the name of someone who could answer all queries.

Fiona explained that HMRC's channel strategy is working well. People can usually get through on the phone to the contact centres. It is possible to have face to face appointments if a customer needs this but it may well be that a phone call or using the website will provide the answer quicker. The Big Word (interpretation service) has helped with people whose first language is not English. There is no longer any drop in facility at any of the offices. Those taking phone calls use a diagnostic process to establish if the caller needs an appointment.

There are 279 enquiry centres in the UK. Starting from the week of 4 August a customer satisfaction exit survey will be carried out one day a week in each enquiry centre. In the pilot 12 enquiry centres scored 97%. The links to tax credit staff are good and there are now good escalation routes. A query was raised on the average waiting time for tax credits. Fiona said it was impossible to give an

average. The case was quoted of a client with learning disabilities who has been waiting a month and it has proved impossible to get a reply to queries by telephone, despite being told that someone from HMRC would call back. Fiona said such problems should be escalated by going up the line management chain since not having a promised response is unacceptable.

The point was made by a number of those present that the lack of a named contact who can act as the interface with the forum and help deal with commonly occurring problems is a real issue and one that needs to be resolved positively. Fiona again pointed out that this is not the way that HMRC is structured. We asked how the forum could influence the policy on engagement currently being worked on at HMRC. Suggestions were:

- Push this issue at national level through Citizens Advice **Action: Gill to take up with relevant policy team member at Cit A**
- Raise the issue via local MPs **Action: Forum members**

Fiona clarified that the process for booking appointments is via the telephone service or by coming into the enquiry centre – if an appointment is deemed appropriate for the customer then one will be arranged. She noted the suggestion that any draft policy on engagement could come back to the Forum for comment which would be a good use of the experience around the table and would add value to HMRC's attendance.

3.4 Jobcentre Plus

TELEPHONY

Target = to answer 90% of calls received in the BDC.

In June 2008 -

INCOME SUPPORT = 98%

JSA = 92%

INCAPACITY BENEFIT = 94%

Benefit Processing (year to date figures up to the end of June 2008)

INCOME SUPPORT

NEW CLAIMS

Average clearance time of 10.15 days (target is 10 days)

CHANGES

Average clearance time of 1.94 days (target is 4 days)

JSA

NEW CLAIMS

Average clearance time of 10.49 days (target is 11.5 days)

CHANGES

Average clearance time of 3.01 days (target is 4 days)

INCAPACITY BENEFIT

NEW CLAIMS

Average clearance time of 11.81 days (target is 15 days)

(there is no data or a target for changes)

All of the clearance times above have increased slightly over the first quarter of this financial year. This is due to a number of factors, including the recruitment and training of new staff, and the on-going allocation of staff to new ESA teams which are in the process of being set up.

There has also been a sharp rise on the number of new benefit applications being received over the last 4 – 6 weeks, particularly on JSA.

Work is on-going on virtually a daily basis in an attempt to minimise delays and impact on customers by prioritising areas of work where the need is most desperate. Emphasis has been on Income

Support and JSA new claims during July. In July the Income Support average clearance time stands at (unofficially) 9.2 days in contrast to our year to date figure of 10.15 days at the end of June.

JCP ENVELOPES IN POST OFFICE BRANCHES

At a number of previous forum meetings the issue of obtaining pre-paid reply envelopes from Post Office branches has been raised. After some lengthy investigation I have been able to establish the following:

Post Offices are no longer required to hold pre-paid reply envelopes for any part of the DWP.

The formal process for Post Offices to obtain stocks of our return envelopes ended some years ago, when Post Office Counters Ltd decided that they no longer wished to stock these envelopes on our behalf. Unfortunately, JCP standard system issued letters still contain the instruction that such envelopes can be collected from a Post Office branch.

This issue has already been raised on a national basis and agreement has been reached for our systems to be amended. However, this amendment is not our biggest system priority at present. Due to various other factors (such as the Pension Reform and the roll out of ESA) the required amendment to our standard letters is now pencilled in for completion around October 2009.

On a brighter note, the new standard system issued letters for ESA have taken this factor into account, and any letters issued by our ESA system will contain no reference to reply envelopes being held at Post Office branches.'

Some work has been done at Old Tree Court to improve access for hearing impaired customers.

The in and out of work pilot project between JCP, HMRC and the local authority has gone well and the links between JCP and LA can now be rolled out because the technology will support it. However the HMRC systems are incompatible.

Chris stressed that medical certificates cannot be handed in at JCP. They have to be posted - this is to ensure a fair and equal service across the whole of Devon (NB. PO box 66 is no longer in operation). If there are problems with certificates not arriving and it's an emergency, it is possible to ask for the GP to be phoned to confirm that it's been issued.

For proof of benefits clients should be using the 0845 number. This can take up to 10 days so it's important to specify if it is needed sooner for any reason.

3.5 Pension Service – no report, apologies sent

3.6 Social Inclusion (PCC) – no report, apologies sent

4. Themes for future meetings

Suggestions for speakers/themes for future meetings were:

- The new lone parent obligations
- Lou Beachgood of A4e to talk about the new pathways programme
- Steve Guy to talk about fuel poverty
- Lloyd in September for discussion on ESA

There was a brief discussion about what is known at the moment about ESA, but until the final details are made available all is subject to change. There are no changes suggested at present to permitted work. Plymouth is a provider led programme. JCP will do one interview and then A4e will do five. The medicals will use the same medically trained disability analyst.

5. Conference

Gill reminded members of the Welfare Rights Conference on 23 October. The brochure, with booking information will be available electronically from 6 August and will be e-mailed to all members. Hard copies will be available from 13 August.

6. Date of next meeting: 25th September 2008