

Plymouth Welfare Rights Forum

Warspite Room
Council House

Thursday 31st May 2007
1.00 to 4.00pm

IN ATTENDANCE:

Anne Freeman

Colin Trend

Darin Halifax

Gary Edwards

Chris Mutton

Tony Barrett

Chris Johnson

Les Cole

Val Willcocks

Donna Ryall

Chris Hulbert

Paula Pick

Mo Rafferty

Maggie Dolan

Linus McCloskey

Bruce Chapman

Patrick Healy

Lynne Herbert

Scott Robertson

Pat Newton

Tessa Merrett

Caroline Ackerman

Cllr Mary Aspinall

John Williams

Gill Joyce

Claire Flower

Secretary

Chair

PCC Social Inclusion

Housing Benefits

WTCs Ltd

JCP

JCP

JCP/CFIS

Plymouth Claimants Union

MIND/Zone

MIND

Glenbourne

William Sutton Homes

Broadreach Resettlement

Westcountry HA

Astor hall

Benefit Angels

Pluss Workable

PATH

PCC

MAP

Bristol DBC

PCC Councillor

DIAC

Pension Service

Routeways PTCT

Apologies:

Susan Fulcher

Dave Hays

Julie Jackson

WELCOME

Colin welcomed all to the forum today. Round table introductions were done and attendance list circulated for attendance and apologies. Colin moved the agenda around to accommodate Social Inclusion who needed to leave early.

Social Inclusion:

DH reported that they now have take up figures for 06/07 and they achieved well over £5.1 million was gained. £1.2 disability related, £2.15 other benefits and £1.75 for older people.

Now have a handle on the debt work. CAB last year alone on PCC contract dealt with £46m of personal debt. City wide is over £100m personal debt issues. Plan for next year is to make this more sophisticated and break down into utility, personal etc.

New action plan for 07/08 and report on 06/07 from the IM strategy steering group.

Now have a new PCC Cllr Brookshaw, portfolio holder for housing, supporting people, safer communities and community cohesion. Specific information around welfare benefits. Cllr M Aspinall said this is a good councillor to work with. New person on team, Antony Newson is the new Disability and Inclusion officer who would like to come to the Forum in the future.

DH also said they need volunteers to sit on the steering group to help run the future direction.

ACCURACY OF MINUTES FROM LAST MEETING

John Williams was present in the March forum, representing PCU.

MATTERS ARISING

Carry forward previous matters arising.

No other matters arising

DLA report:

Just over 4000 claims outstanding awaiting decisions. Emphasis is quality over quantity. Now looking at claims within 48 hours where all info is there and able to make a decision. Some decisions been sent out just a few days after the claim being received.

CA talked about Community 500, where staff members go into the community to see how other jobs work etc etc, learn about illnesses and disabilities. Instead of only placing 500 staff this year, the aim is to place 1000 staff members.

CA has audio tapes, CD's, Braille, DVD's and other information packs that have been specifically written. CD's on Direct Gov which you play on pc's to show how Direct Gov works and what it is all about.

Reports, thick Braille packs on disability benefits etc. Please email CA if you require any of the promotional items.

CA talked about the DLA forms being completed on line. Still need to print forms out

to send off. The new DLA forms are longer, but in theory are quicker to fill in. CA is coming to Plymouth next month for CAB, DIAC and Saltash CAB to go over the new DLA form completion.

AF suggested that CA comes down to Plymouth and does another session in the Council house on the completion of DLA forms. This was agreed at the forum and will be arranged for September.

PH said that the section on mental health has been eliminated. CA said that some questions have had the mental health side incorporated in. CA explained how the previous big 'empty' box has now been replaced with some tick boxes to try and make it easier for people as feedback had shown that clients didn't know what to write in there.

PH said about the bottom of questions where the client is being asked how many times they need help for an activity. CA said that it is not unusual to see a large number in this box, say for toilet needs, if a client is on water tablets, then it is not unusual for them to need help 30+ times per day.

Question asked if we can carry on using old stock. Yes, old stock can continue to be used at the moment. If you are ordering from supplies at the moment, then the new ones are being sent out. There is no cut off date for the old stock.

PH asked about DLA for children, PH gave example of 2.5 yr child who will be 3 later this year, care component runs out in Sept, child turns 3 in Oct, will DLA look at the mobility component for when the child turns 3? PH asked should a gentle reminder letter be given to DLA for this? Might be a good idea. CA said that she does now have a contact within the Blackpool office and she is able to contact this person regarding problems and communications. CA will try and bring other decision makers with her to the forum so they can see how we work and improve our communication levels.

PH said that he has been issued the wrong prepaid reply envelopes with his DLA forms. CA said she needs to know about this as stores will have issued the wrong envelopes.

LM asked if the Blackpool office will have the customer service office set up again? CA replied no. This work has been passed out to geographic teams to deal with.

JCP report

CJ introduced Tony from the actual jobcentre plus side of things. CJ feedback re permitted work question from Workable Plus. LH said that there was issues around the national minimum wage and permitted work. CJ said no plans to change this at present. CJ said the lower limit of £20 will not change. LH asked if this will increase with inflation or will clients have to reduce their weekly hours? CJ said yes clients will have to reduce their weekly hours. LH asked what incentive is being given to clients then to increase their weekly income and even return to work? CJ said about ESA and how this is more work focused. Not sure what format this will take, being trialled in Sheffield but permitted work not yet been looked at.

ESA will have to take into account permitted work and hours worked. So it is possible that there may be changes in the future.

CJ also said about how HB said about their phone set up for calls where the client is present. CJ said unfortunately jobcentre plus cannot follow the same format as HB.

More claims and post coming in as all Devon work comes into Plymouth. Communications have improved between the processing centre and actual jobcentre plus offices. More claims are now ready for processing when they come in as communication has improved.

CJ said that telephony seems to be working. More experienced staff on the phones. 90% target for incoming calls to be answered. IS and JSA answering 96% and IB answering 98%. With regards to call backs not happening, work has been done on this and JSA last week have only had 12 call backs not made which is a huge improvement.

CJ said that the call backs not made that we talked about at the last forum turned out some had actually been made, but not noted on the computer that an attempt had been made and contact not established.

CJ said been a large number of requests for backdating citing not aware of the regulations as reason for backdating. CJ said this is not good cause for backdating.

0800 055 6688 – new contact number for claiming benefits. Still need to phone the 0845 number at the contact centre for initial contact.

National agreement with CAB's for them to have certain phone numbers to contact the offices. As of last week, any advice organisation can have these contact numbers also. No longer exclusive to CAB's. These numbers are not to be given to clients, but are for advisors to use **when all other avenues have been exhausted first**. These are for urgent queries where the client is present and you cannot get through on the usual numbers. Please ensure these numbers are used correctly so they don't get removed. **Action Point:** numbers to be published on the website.

BG asked about where IS and/or IB has been combined with DLA, entitlement to IS or IB has ceased and the local office has failed to notify the DLA office that they need to resume direct payments. AF gave recent example of this happening with a former CAB client and that Louise Ferris had been involved in her prior role as the Gatekeeper for JCP. Louise was ensuring that a reminder was sent out to all staff reminding them to inform the DLA office when combined payments have ceased.

DH asked about Tavistock JCP office possible closure.. Found that also affects Saltash and Looe also. Currently a 6 week consultation exercise taking place.

JW asked about telephony. Is the use of the internal phones in the job centres also monitored. CJ said a successful call is one that reaches the JCP exchange, it doesn't give information about those who may leave the queue however, so some figures can be slightly out.

Discussion surrounding the call centre and successful calls. JW asked about policy regarding permitted work for only 6 months. CJ said not aware of any policy change as of yet, but something may well change for when ESA comes in.

CT asked if the 0800 number is a national number. Yes it is. You need to use the new 0800 number to make a claim for benefit.

Discussion surrounding when further information is needed and 'lost' paperwork.

PH said that if not getting sufficient help from the advisor that you are talking to who do we contact? CJ said to ask to speak to a supervisor. This should then be referred onto the most appropriate person to help with the type of query. PH gave example of where the call handler had not passed the technical query on to another person to deal with and therefore this had caused a lot of frustration. CJ said you must ask to speak to a supervisor to deal with this.

AF asked about how an outreach service had informed her that drop-ins at jobcentre offices would no longer be dealt with in person – is this right?

Tony said that face to face facility will still operate. However initial drop ins will be given an appointment to come back. They can no longer supply the demand without it being more structured, over 2000 clients per day come in through the door. Its not fair for drop ins to come in and not have their queries answered, so if an appointment is given, JCP can make sure that the client is able to access the right information and expertise upon their return. Front line staff are not able to deal with technical queries on the spot and so clients were not getting the best service. By having a more structured service, the service can be improved further.

Tony said he is very keen to remain involved with the Forum and aims to work with us where possible.

PP asked about clients who have been on IS and have DLA awarded, but the correct premiums are not awarded on the calculation and backdating of the premiums are not given for more than 3 months. CJ asked for the details of this to be sent to him to look into.

Scott from Path said he wanted some info about advocacy with some of his refugees. PATH have a generic consent form that they send out to multi agencies, JCP are now bouncing this back to PATH saying that it is not acceptable. Tony JCP said if you are attending in person with a client, then JCP need to know about this beforehand. Tony said that they had had problems with customers claiming to be advocates and then harassing staff for money for drugs. Tony said that they need to know the person attending is right for the customer and that all is above board. JCP have serious concerns about 'friends' attending as it has been known that the customer is being coerced perhaps. Also, just bear in mind that there are restricted number of seats.

Discussion between PATH and JCP rep over the advocacy and the way forward with this. JCP said that they can only work to change things and access by knowing

where the difficulties are and what can be done to resolve them.

Further discussion surrounding accessibility and languages.

CF said that if ID badges are presented, will this be sufficient? Tony said that he will leave his email address here and he will take this up with JCP. It may well be that all advocacy details need to be emailed through beforehand to avoid people being turned away.

CF also said she had urgent query where client went into JCP and couldn't be supplied with a private room, client is very poorly. Client was then told to work down to another JCP office where there would be a private room available. Tony said there are only 9 private interview rooms. Unusual for all 9 rooms to be in use at once. Tony would like the client details from CF so that he can check this through the system to ensure all procedures are followed correctly. Tony said they will always try to make provision and have a room available.

JW asked if they were expecting the number of queries to fall? Tony said that the number of drop in queries are expected to fall. JW said that if JCP are expecting number of queries to fall then they are deterring clients from being able to make the query in the first place. Tony said that the front line staff do not have the expertise to answer the query, but they will be helped, but just not on the drop in, they will be given an appointment to come back for the query to be dealt with to ensure that the expertise is there for them. Alternatively, the office will contact the customer by telephone if that is acceptable.

JW said that all he is saying is that they want a point of contact that is in a manner that is acceptable to the client.

CT rounded up by saying that we need to make use of the numbers available and look at how else matters can be taken up, ie MP etc.

PN asked who they contact in the JCP office to say they are coming in with a client? Tony said to call the JCP office, but preferably to email details across to Tony and he will sit down and work out a process. **Action Point:** AF to contact Tony and draw up a pro forma for advisors to complete and sent across to Tony for registering.

Discussion surrounding the move forward by JCP and how we can help to identify the gaps and work towards solutions.

Tony is quite happy to challenge the standard operating model if it does not meet the customer needs. But he can only do this with specific details and numbers etc. He cannot do this without evidence.

TM said she had been faxing form of authority to the JCP office before telephoning to discuss claims and clients. Is there a better way of getting this across to the office? CJ reminded that the PIP is on the forum website that explains about form of authority etc. discussion surrounding form of authority. CJ said there are a number of different fax numbers. If you are faxing through on the 0845 number, it wont get through to the right section/processor until the next day.

Discussion surrounding forms of authority.

HB report:

MATTERS ARISING FROM PREVIOUS MEETING:

None

UPDATE -

The current situation regarding claims awaiting processing is as follows:

Working Age-

New Applications/Change of address – 802

Pension Age -

New Applications/Change of address - 120

Total claims awaiting processing = 922

Claims pending further information

New Applications/Change of addresses = 381

There has been a further increase in the number of claims waiting processing since my last report. We experienced a number of problems at our year end, which led to some system downtime and additional work at a very busy time of year. We have a plan in place to clear this backlog and we are making good progress against this plan and the amount of work outstanding is decreasing week on week. We continue to prioritise new claims received to ensure we get claims into payment as quickly as possible and there is a fast track system in place for claims if we are alerted that rent arrears are becoming a problem.

Upgrade of our Document Management System – we have decided to delay this upgrade until after the summer holidays to allow us to concentrate resources on the clearance of outstanding work.

Local Housing Allowance – National roll-out is still due to take place in April 2008, regulations are due to be laid in October. Preparation for this change will start to ramp up in June 2007 and we have a project team in place to start some initial work, particularly in respect of direct payment to customers bank accounts. I did a presentation to landlords at the recent landlord Expo. Giving details of the main changes to the HB scheme. I am happy to do a presentation at the next forum on LHA.

MR asked for average time for claim to be processed? GE replied that takes between 2-5 weeks.

Tony from JCP said about problems at the Devonport JCP office.

Meeting on 4th June for communication between LA and JCP. Direct access points will be set up for local offices and HB office.

JW asked about document management system. Will you be able to view still from the old system? GE explained this is only an upgrade and all docs will be converted across to the new system. Is a more integrated system and is case based rather than document based which will be smoother for processors. JW also asked about failed claims due to lack of proof, what is the timetable on this? GE said this will depend on the availability for systems control. GE is hoping to have something in place for the next forum to show how many claims have failed, but this may not show the actual reason why the claim had failed.

PP asked about is 2AR the same as the single persons discount. AF explained the difference between 2AR and the single persons discount, the criteria for 2AR and the income bandings.

PH asked about the direct number that can use, is that a general number? GE explained that agencies telephone the usual contact number (66800 or 304889), listen to automated message and choose option, then when the call is answered, the caller states they are with an agency with the client present and are requesting an immediate call back. This call back then takes place within 20 mins. There is no dedicated number for agencies.

GE to do presentation at September forum on the Local Housing Allowance.

Pension Credit

Backlog of home visits totalling 8 weeks, staff off sick, resigning due to pressures and then 6-8 weeks to process the pension credit claim. Can take up to 2-3 months. Local services not happy with service that is being provided. Local staff are very concerned over the work levels and backlogs. Telephony staff at Swansea are new in and have a 90 second turn around. GJ has experienced herself the rubbish that is being said in order for the call handler to move onto the next call. Local services systems went down for a week and staff had to keep trekking across to Old Tree Court to access systems.

Local community organisations such as Age Concern and DIAC are being swamped with queries due to the delays which is not helping these agencies either.

Entering into the leave period with the work 6-8 weeks behind which is also concerning staff.

GJ very happy for people to contact her at Ballard House with any urgent queries. Team are trying to prioritise recently bereaved, customers being encouraged to complete their own DLA and AA forms due to delays, however, no customer is being refused a visit for any form filling etc.

Cllr Aspinall asked question about a client how had thought she was entitled to her

SRP when out of the country, but upon her return she had found that there were problems. Customer is blind, is there the capacity to issue forms and paperwork in Braille? GJ said that any document can be issued in Braille and that SRP is payable to the customer wherever they are, however, only some EU countries have the additions payable.

CT asked if it would be helpful for audio documents? Cllr A replied this would be very helpful if she could be pointed in the right direction to access the documents.

Secretary report:

- CPAG membership allocations:
 1. Broadreach House
 2. PATH
 3. WTCS
 4. Workable Pluss
 5. Plymouth Claimants Union
 6. Glenbourne Money Advice
 7. Plymouth MIND – The Zone base
 8. Routeways – PCT project
 9. Glenbourne Welfare Rights

 10. Benefit Angels
 11. Devon Law Centre
 12. MAP
 13. Routeways – CIS project
 14. Full Potential Advice Service (host Resettlement Agency)
 15. Lark Childrens Centre
 16. DIAC
 17. Student Services – Plymouth College

- There are now only 3 memberships available and we have 3 applications outstanding, these will be discussed at the committee today.

- Website due to be updated next week and new pages added along with links to other sites. Had to look at amount of traffic that would pass thru our site first to ensure that we would not exceed our bandwidth allowance.

- I contacted Steve Donnison regarding membership to Benefits & Work. If we were to purchase say, 8 memberships, they have to be individual and not a blanket membership. It was quote in the region of £42.50 per organisation, providing we purchased more than 8 memberships. Is this something that the forum wish to pursue? **Agreed to pursue 8 memberships at a cost of £340.**

- Still no update on SRB, monies ring fenced in the account. Accounts due to be submitted to the Auditor, Marjorie Clarridge and presented to the July forum which will also be our AGM.

- Re forum dates. All dates for the remainder of the year are to be changed by PCC as the room is now required by planning committee. Therefore, we will look at the previous Thursday to the date set, where possible. However, in the meantime, this means that our date set of 26th July now presents problems. This is our AGM date, but this room is not available. I cannot make any other date due to leave difficulties and having already made plans around this date. Therefore, if you wish to change the date to 23rd July, this room is available, but you will need to find another minute taker for that meeting. Alternatively, we can use the DIAC meeting room for that meeting so the same date can be kept the same. The DIAC room will cost £45 to hire and tea/coffee is included. Decision needed on this please.
- Future printing of the mailout needs to be considered. Until now, we have relied on certain organisations goodwill to support our copying facilities. It has needed to be some where accessible for the secretary/chair to access for copying. The May forum needed printing and this was done by MAP at a cost of £25. It needs to be discussed how we continue to produce our paper copies for members who still require paper copies. It is likely that there will be a cost for copying. Wherever copying is done, it needs to be accessible by either the secretary or one of the committee members. If by one of the committee members, then they will also be responsible for stuffing the envelopes and actually producing the mailout as it is unlikely that that access will be available out of hours to the secretary. (transport/cost of parking/lack of transport etc all need to be taken into consideration).
- Apart from the above, no other work has been undertaken due to the secretary starting her new job and needing to divert energies at this time.

Change the forum date bit back to the original dates, next forum is on Thurs 26th July and will be our AGM.

CT gathered consensus of opinion and it was agreed that we will purchase 8 x memberships @ £42.50 per head.

AOB

Had young parents day, still lots of Gov monies left for young parents under the age of 20 that wish to study in any form of learning. Contact Diane Williams at Plymouth College for further information.

DH advised that Plymouth CAB have advertised for a debt and welfare benefits manager for their unit, can the few who have the advert circulate it please. Seems a large proportion not aware of this advert.

CJ asked when the specific information is sent in, please ensure that his name is also on the front of the letter and not just on the envelope.

PH said that there was a rumour that MIND were no longer giving advice on benefits. CH said that benefit advice is only given to MIND members. PP explained that for

those using the drop in service for Oasis then the individual becomes a MIND member and only when they are a member can they access the service. Non members cannot access the welfare benefit service.

Cllr M Aspinall said the local care centre at Greenbank are now open and apparently underused. Contact the local care centre, is run by Age Concern.

Meeting closed @ 3.45pm

Date of next meeting

Thursday 26th July 1 pm – 4 pm.

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