

# **Plymouth Welfare Rights Forum**

Warspite Room  
Council House

Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> November 2009  
1.30 to 4.00pm

## **Agenda:**

### **1. Welcome by Chair and apologies**

#### **Attending:**

Gary Edwards	Housing Benefits PCC
Jo West	Plymouth Community Homes
Denis Johnston	PCC Housing Advice outreach
Pat Newton	PCC Welfare Benefits – Housing Advice
Gill Joyce	DWP – Pension Service
Les Cole	FIS – JCP Devonport
Matt Allison	Jobcentre Plus
Russ King	Ocean Quay – Broadreach House
Scarlett Ryder	Broadreach House
Sue Archard	Plymouth CAB
Eddie Wilson	DIAC (Plymouth Guild)
Victoria Roberts	Colebrook Housing Society
David Burr	Plymouth Mind Oasis Project
Donna Ryall	Plymouth Mind @ The Zone
Steven Guy	Money Advice Plymouth (MASW)
Margaret Bennett Jones	Senior Citizens Forum
Julia Slade	LARK Childrens Centre
Caroline Camm	Housing Benefits PCC
Karen Sharpe	Plymouth CAB (note taker)
Gill Tishler	Plymouth CAB (acting Chair)
Eunice Halliday	Plymouth Foodbank

#### **Apologies:**

Gloria Davenport – Plymouth CAB  
Chris Johnson - JCP  
Mo Rafferty - Affinity Sutton  
Jo Hambley – PCC  
Darin Halifax – PCC  
Julie Black – Routeways  
Stuart Toll – Devon Law Centre  
Jane Robinson – Refugee Action  
Bruce Abbott – Disability Action Network  
Christina Elia – Saltash CAB  
Mark Poole – MAP  
Chris Hulbert – MAP

Alison Jane – MAP  
Linda Johns – PCC Private Rented Team

Gill Tishler (acting Chair) welcomed everyone and introductions were made

## **2. Accuracy of minutes from 24<sup>th</sup> September 2009**

Corrections:

Julia Slade attended the forum 24<sup>th</sup> September 2009

Gary Edwards noted on p. 3 that he is Revenues & Benefits (not Revenues & Customs)

Gary noted caseload should read 3.500 not 350,000

Minutes 24<sup>th</sup> September amended & agreed as true record

## **3. Matters Arising**

None

## **4. Presentation by Linda Johns – Private Rented Sector Team (PCC)**

See separate Powerpoint presentation with additional notes attached.

## **5. Statutory Sector Reports to include:**

### **5.1 Housing Benefit – Gary Edwards**

See attached report from Gary ([Appendix A](#))

*KS: Any increase in HB claims as a result of recent benefit changes (Child Ben disregard & increase in disregarded capital for over 60s)?*

GE: Not aware of any

*KS: Is it OK for the Forum to promote those changes with eg a press release?*

GE: Yes

*RK: Can you foresee any significant changes following the review of the LHA?*

GE: No, other than the changeover causing an increase in work for staff. LHA rates seem better than previous rent allowance rates.

The main problem is landlords complaining about direct payments to tenants. In Plymouth generally this is working well though and there is the safeguard in place that any more than 8 weeks of arrears will be paid direct to landlords.

### **5.2 Disability Benefits Centre**

KS & GD to action visit to DBC – encourage attendance

### **5.3 HMRC**

No report. No apologies.

### **5.4 Jobcentre Plus**

See attached report from Matt Allison (also on behalf of Chris Johnson) ([Appendix B](#))

MA reported back on the Carers' Awareness event held at Jury's Inn

- was well attended
- the market is currently buoyant
- opportunities in adult social care & child care promoted

Forthcoming Event:

Employment Advice Training Event, being held in the Guildhall on 10<sup>th</sup> December from 10am – 2pm

*MBJ: Query amalgamation of JCPs & access for older people or people with disabilities*

MA: Provision can be made to see those people in alternative premises

*MBJ: What about access to information?*

MA: JCP encourages access to information via the internet. If people have problems accessing JCP (for interviews/appointments etc) then advise phoning to inform; a note can then be made on system.

*DR: Raised concern that Work Focussed interviews are now being carried out in DRC Partnership offices in Marlborough Street. Wasn't aware of this until attended Queens House with a client.*

MA: Will check this process.

*DR: Has heard there will be a dedicated Mental Health worker in JCP from 7<sup>th</sup> Dec*

MA: Will find out

*SG: Raised issue of cost of accessing benefits – travel & outgoing calls to JCP. Is there any research being carried out into this?*

MA: the 0845 number is a national ongoing issue. Will pass on concerns

**KS: Request forum members raise each case & report to KS to build evidence to raise at regional & national level**

MA: JCP can consider reimbursement of travel costs in certain circumstances – eg if asked to attend JCP, but not for normal signing on

*SG: Mainly a problem for people in Plympton (since JCP office closed there) – cost is proportionally higher compared to income.*

MA: JCP is aware of this

*KS: Request confirmation of JCP customer services manager at Queens House.*

*Raised concern over confidentiality issues of JCP adviser operating WFI in open plan DRC Partnership office. DR agrees she has same concern.*

MA: In Old Tree Court also have open plan office but there are screens & also option of requesting private interview room.

**Action: MA, KS & DR will report issue to Matt Brooks at Queens House**

*PN: Housing Advice outreach service is looking for suitable outreach centres (eg Children's Centres) & looking to link up with other advice days/ awareness events*

MA: Aware of need to be efficient at outreach – Jackie Williams coordinates outreach events & advises PN links with her

*DB: Reports problem with IS section acting on change of address – vital post often goes missing*

MA: will report this to Chris J

## 5.5 Pension Service – Gill Joyce

Information Points which are operating as drop-in service aren't being well used so PS will be offering home visits instead. These should be within 10 days of contact.

There is a 4 week turn-around at Swansea on new claims to PC

The capital limit brought in in November has been actioned on all cases, meaning pensioners are now getting an additional £8 pw

Winter Fuel payments are all being paid

There will be a PS presence at the Carers Day event at the Guildhall on 8<sup>th</sup> December to give advice

PS are anticipating an increase in workload due to the graduated increase in working age (which will ultimately be 68 over the next few years)

*KS & PN: Can GJ clarify the situation?*

GJ: There will be a staggered increase as of April 2010, in line with the increase in women's retirement age over time

*MBJ: Can GJ clarify the rules on deferring retirement pension?*

GJ: These will remain the same – anyone can still defer. It's the claiming age that will increase – women are on a sliding scale until the retirement age is in line with that for men.

## 5.6 Social Inclusion (PCC)

Jo Hambley is the newly appointed Financial Inclusion Officer.

Jo will attend future forums and will present a report each time.

Julie Black has agreed to be the WR Forum rep on the Financial Inclusion Strategy Steering Team

## 6. Themes for future meetings

Disability Benefits Centre presence & report

ATOS presentation and Q & A session

Financial Inclusion Strategy presentation

A4E presentation

Flexible New Deal caseworker presentation

Plymouth Community Homes & Devon Choice register – effect on clients' access to housing

## 7. Any Other Business

DJ & PN: Progress report on Housing Advice outreach service. Aim is to spread Housing Advice across the City. Surgeries are being held in St Budeaux fortnightly and in Efford Primary School. The team is building links with other advice agencies to offer additional/relevant support to clients

*SG: Is there any evidence that landlords are starting to refuse the PATH rent deposit scheme?*

DJ: Access criteria have changed **Action: Will email details to KS for circulation**  
**The Forum noted that Gary Edwards will be leaving PCC at the end**

*of January. Gary introduced his replacement to the Forum – Caroline Camm.*

*The Forum extends its thanks to Gary for the hard work and commitment he has given over the years and wishes him all the best for the future.*

**Date of next meeting**

**Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> January 2010**

**1 pm – 4 pm.**

**Warspite Room  
Council House**

## **Appendix A – Report From Gary Edwards**

### Welfare Rights Forum – Update 26/11/09

Current work situation –

We are processing claims in around 20 days on average, depending on how quickly customers supply any evidence required.

New claims are dealt with as a priority and we dealing with those claims as soon as they are received. Changes of circumstances are prioritised depending on the urgency of the change and we will fastrack changes if we are chased by the customer or their representative.

Outstanding work levels have reduced since my last report and the increase in caseload has started to slow down. Over the last 12 months we have seen a 9% increase in our overall caseload.

We are moving forward with our plans to deliver the revenues and benefits service as a complete service for the customer and expect to trial changes in our service delivery in January, with some HB assessors dealing with frontline enquiries.

The changes to the rules regarding disregard of child benefit and the increase in capital thresholds for pensioners were put in place at the beginning of November and resulted in 1800 customers receiving more benefit.

The review of LHA is due in April 2010, the DWP have yet to announce what form this review will take. Over 60% of our private tenant caseload is now being assessed under the new LHA rules.

The transfer of our council housing stock took place on 20/11/09, to a newly formed housing provider called Plymouth Community Homes. This meant we had to convert 9500 rent rebate claims to rent allowance claims, this was done successfully by computer programme and has caused minimal disruption to our day to day work.

On a personal note, I will be leaving the employment of PCC in January, so this will be my last forum meeting. Caroline Camm will take on the housing benefit manager's role and her contact details are as follows:

e-mail – [caroline.camm@plymouth.gov.uk](mailto:caroline.camm@plymouth.gov.uk) Tel: 01752 304033

Ge/25/11/09

## **Appendix B - Report from Matt Allison (also on behalf of Chris Johnson)**

### **Welfare rights forum – Jobcentre Report 26.11.09**

#### **Labour market**

##### **Care awareness event held at Jury's Inn 11<sup>th</sup> November.**

Opportunity for applicant to come along to an overview of working in the care sector (delivered by care ambassador) Selection of employers, training providers and voluntary organisations present.

Event included health, social adult and child care.

##### **Employment Advice and training seminars. Plymouth Guild Hall 10<sup>th</sup> December (10am-2pm)**

An opportunity for those who are recently unemployed or those facing redundancy to meet various organisations. Advice on training, self employment, benefits etc.

##### **Back to Work Sessions**

Rapid response sessions arranged for Esplex and Xfab staff (approx 40 employees)

##### **Royal Mail Assessment days**

JCP assistance to fill Xmas vacancies.

#### **Services**

##### **Extension to opening hours**

Plymouth Jobcentres to extend hours of opening to 8am to 6pm.

Old Tree Court go live 7<sup>th</sup> December, Devonport aim to go live as soon as possible from 7<sup>th</sup> December.

**Works undertaken in Devonport and OTC Jobcentres** to facilitate increased numbers of customers. Work will be conducted outside of office hours, it is not envisaged JC services will be compromised.

##### **Carers Strategy from 7<sup>th</sup> December**

Work Focussed Support and Replacement Care Funding available to carers:

- Aged 18 or over **and**
- Not working **or** working under 16 hours per week **and**
- Getting Carer's Allowance **or**
- Income Support as a Carer **or**
- Receiving a Carer Premium along with their benefit **or**
- If not in receipt of benefit Spends a significant proportion of their lives providing unpaid support to relatives, partner or friends who are ill, frail disabled or have mental health or substance misuse problems.

If a carer requests help to find work or training an appointment will be booked with a specialist Adviser who will go over the process for claiming expenses.

Advisers are expected to tailor employment support and advice to the needs of and

barriers faced by individual customers.

### **Benefits**

Jobseeker JSA live load levels Devonport 2486 Old Tree Court 5279 = total 7765

Crisis Loan payments – currently averaging 35 per day for Old Tree Court.

New benefit claims – Approx 70 per day

Date of Contact to new claims appointment +1 day ( some claim appointments are being booked on the same day as telephone contact )