

# Plymouth Welfare Rights Forum

Thursday 25 September 2008 1 – 4 pm  
Warspite Room, Council House

## Present

Peter Mitchell (CAB) Chair	Gill Tishler (CAB)
Gill Joyce (Pension Service)	Gary Edwards (Plymouth City Council – Housing Benefit)
Scott Robertson (Alabare)	Russ King (Broadreach Housing Related Support)
Lynn Herbert (Pluss Workable)	Mo Rafferty (William Sutton Homes)
Les Cole (FIS Devonport JCP)	Denise Crawford (JCP Old Tree Court)
Chris Johnson (JCP Old Tree Court)	Pat Newton (PCC Midland House)
Julia Slade (LARK Children's Centre)	Steve Guy (MAP)
Alison Jane (MAP)	Stuart Charles (Benefits Angels)
Donna Ryall (Mind@The Zone)	John Williams (PCU)
Carol Griffin (Broadreach House)	Susan Fulcher PCC
Emma Quest (NEA)	Carys Evans START
Sue Archard (Glenbourne Unit Money Advice)	Laura James START

## Apologies

Carol Rashleigh (Family Information Service)	Darin Halifax (PCC)
Katy Bradshaw	Sue Smith (DCS Bristol)
Karen Sharpe (CAB)	Mark (MAP)
Lloyd Hills JCP	

### 1. Welcome and minutes of last meeting

Peter Mitchell gave Gloria Davenport's apologies for the meeting and introduced himself as Chair on this occasion. The minutes of the meeting on 31 July 2008 were agreed as a true record. As a matter arising Peter reported that the date for the event for voluntary, statutory and business organizations (flagged up by Gloria at 5.4 in May minutes) had not yet been set.

### 2. Statutory sector reports

#### 2.1 Housing benefit (report from Gary Edwards)

#### Housing Benefit and Ctax Performance Indicators

Statistics produced re: August 08

Percentage of claims processed within 14 days for private claims – 68%

(June 08 was 67%: 1% increase)

Percentage of claims processed within 14 days for council tenants – 62%

(June 08 51%: 11% increase)

Percentage of claims processed within 14 days for CTB – 64%

(June 08 was 62%: 2% increase)

#### Average Processing Times – NEW CLAIMS

Private	32.63 days (June 08 39.20: 6.5 day reduction)
Council	27.47 days (June 08 37.31: 9.8 day reduction)
CTB	34.79 days (June 08 38.24: 3.4 day reduction)

#### Average Processing Times – Change of Circs

18.92 days (June 08 18.11 .81 day increase)

Current work situation –

We are in a good position and have maintained performance over the summer holiday period. We have seen a reduction in the average number of days on new claims processing and are maintaining status quo on the change of circumstances.

We are currently trialling new ways of working which involves cutting out wasted work and bringing the expertise closer to the point where the customer accesses our service whether it be, by phone, counter, e-mail or by post. Our aim is to further reduce the average number of days we take to process a claim or change of circumstances.

LHA – (Local Housing allowance)

There are no particular issues arising from the change over to LHA, most new claims are now paid direct to the tenant, payment to the landlord only being made in cases of vulnerability or where there are known issues regarding non-payment of rent.

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.

We are in the process of putting together training sessions for our staff on the changes and their affect on housing benefit.

Backdating Rules – currently we are able to backdate claims to a maximum for pension age customers of 12 months and claims for working age customers of 52 weeks.

From 6<sup>th</sup> October the rules change and the maximum we will be able to backdate claims for pension age will be 3 months and for working age 6 months. Working age customers will still have to show good cause as to why the claim should be backdated. At some point in the future the intention is to reduce the working age backdating period to 3 months in line with pension age claims.

A query was raised about the fact that the HB claim form still asks if payment should go direct to the landlord. Gary explained that there will be a new claim form soon. The hard copy of the form is not widely used except by those in work. If someone wants to make a claim and wants the landlord to be paid direct then a form with this

option can be sent. Gary will send some packs and will find out where stocks are kept. **Action: Gary Edwards**

Peter Mitchell asked whether or not Plymouth City Council were in the business of issuing certificates to landlords with reference to eligibility of Housing Benefit following judicial directions (Pre-action protocol for possession claims based on rent arrears), further details as attached. **Action: Gary Edwards**

Russ King expressed thanks from Broadreach for the action taken to resolve a query on LHA raised at the last meeting.

## **2.2 Disability Benefits Centre**

No report

## **2.3 HMRC**

No report

## **2.4 Jobcentre Plus**

Chris Johnson had not had time to produce the usual statistics for the meeting but reported that clearance times were unchanged. There had been a huge increase in JSA claims – of 25% for Plymouth in the June – September quarter. JCP were looking at recruiting more staff to help deal with this.

Training was being carried out for the introduction of ESA but no more details were available than at the last meeting. For the next meeting Chris will bring a member of the ESA team to answer queries.

A new telephony system is being introduced which will make it easier to track individual staff performance.

## **Social Fund Backlog**

(Post meeting report from Chris Johnson in response to a query about the timescales for review requests (appeals) made against negative Social Fund decisions.) As of Friday 19-9-08, there were 1,191 requests outstanding and roughly 280 new requests are coming in each week. The backlog is reducing week by week. On 19-9-08 requests received on 15-8-08 were being looked at. The aim and expectation is that the numbers will continue to reduce until they are back to an acceptable level. It is impossible to give an estimation of how long this will take but we are hopeful a satisfactory resolution will be reached in the near future.

On **Maternity Allowance** they had been 15 weeks behind but were now about 6 weeks behind and this should continue to improve. An extra 1800 calls are now being answered. 4000 calls are being taken in Plymouth. The contact number for Maternity Allowance in Yeovil is 0845 6088780.

Please note that this is only for existing applications - anyone wishing to make a new claim would need to call 0800 0556688.

## **Claims from EU nationals.**

Peter Mitchell asked if statistics could be supplied on the numbers of benefit applications (specifically JSA) made by EU nationals.

The simple answer is unfortunately no. No specific record of claims from this customer base is kept. There are numerous variables to consider when assessing claims from these customers, which mean some are quick and easy to process while others need referrals to specialised staff or centralised teams in other offices.

Chris confirmed that Incapacity Benefit will cease on 26 October.

## **2.5 Pension Service**

Gill Joyce reported that there is a new on-site computer system. There has been a lot of publicity about take up of pension credit but claims are still at a low level. Gill reminded the meeting that claims should be submitted soon or they will only be able to be backdated for 3 months.

## **2.6 Social Inclusion**

No report

## **3. Presentation by Steve Guy (MAP) and Emma Quest (NEA) on Energy Trust Funds and Warm Zones**

Steve Guy explained the funding of his post by EDF Energy to encourage applications to the EDF Energy Trust Fund. He described the background to fuel poverty and pointed out that in Plymouth fuel poverty is in the west and south of the city and is largely related to older housing stock. It is predicted that the average energy bill next year will be £1,406 and that by the end of the year, 1.1 million households will be in arrears on their gas payments and 1.5 million on electricity. Fuel poverty reinforces social exclusion – people become more isolated and risk ill health. Individuals are often unaware of the social tariffs available from energy providers and the eligibility criteria for these vary from supplier to supplier. Detailed notes on how to apply to EDF Energy and British Gas funds and Steve's Powerpoint slides are circulated with these minutes. Details of all the utilities schemes can be found on the British Gas Energy Trust website. For EDF and British Gas it must be the person who holds the account who applies. If the application is successful no one else in the household can get a further award for 2 years. EDF/Charis (who administer the grants on behalf of EDF Energy) prefer applications to be submitted with the assistance of advice agencies. Applications will fail if applicants can't demonstrate that they have sought advice on their debts. The application must be legible and provide proof of income.

Emma Quest introduced the Devon Warm Zones scheme. The Powerpoint slides from the presentation are circulated with these minutes. The aim of a Warm Zone is to help people access free energy advice, access heating and energy efficiency grants and discounts and access benefit entitlement checks. These can be accessed by referring clients to the Warm Zones team by phone (0800 512 012) or by e mail ([info@devonwarmzones.org.uk](mailto:info@devonwarmzones.org.uk)) or using a short referral card, or giving the client a referral card for them to make contact themselves (though they are quite likely not to follow this up.) It is possible to earn £15 per client referred provided they take up the offer of insulation.

Over 70s and those on income or disability related benefits are entitled to free loft and cavity wall insulation (in privately owned or rented properties). Heavily

discounted loft and cavity wall insulation is available for those not on benefits. A £500 grant towards loft and cavity wall insulation is available for those who suffer from cold related illnesses. Up to £2700 may also be available for heating grants to replace or repair inefficient heating and boiler systems.

Warm Zones will run until April 2011. There is a backlog of requests at the moment and it is taking up to six weeks between referral and a visit and then up to 7 months for installation so referrals from now are unlikely to improve the position for this winter, but would of course make a difference in the longer term.

Peter thanked Steve and Emma for their presentations. Further questions can be put to either of them on the contact details below:

Steve Guy [steve@moneyadviceplymouth.org.uk](mailto:steve@moneyadviceplymouth.org.uk)

Emma Quest [emma.quest@nea.org.uk](mailto:emma.quest@nea.org.uk)

#### **4. Presentation on A4e Pathways to Work**

Trudy Glasson explained that she was standing in at short notice for Lou Beachgood who is the Programme Manager in Plymouth for Pathways to Work. (contact details [l.beachgood@a4e.co.uk](mailto:l.beachgood@a4e.co.uk)) She explained that A4e is directly contracted to DWP to help people on health related benefits get back to work. Some of the clients coming to A4e have never worked and there is understandable anxiety about the process. The programme doesn't rush people. Those referred by JCP have to attend 5 work focused interviews. People can also join the programme on a voluntary basis. They are supported by a Pathways personal adviser and given in-work support and occupational health support, which can help people manage their health condition better. Employment coaches work with clients and help them keep in touch with all the appropriate agencies in relation to their benefits and help them chase up return to work credits. Some funding is available for work clothes and for the first month of travel costs on return to work. Funding can be applied for to support some training. A4e works in partnership with RNIB, RNID, Action for blind people, Tomorrows People and Remploy and many other agencies across the city.

Sue Archard asked how the programme would operate in relation to ESA. Trudy said clients on ESA are not expected to be coming through to A4e until the New Year. Clients will come to A4e after their 13 week assessment. If they are signposted to A4e and are not ready for the programme they can be deferred. Clients stay on the programme for up to a year.

#### **5. PWRF conference**

There are still some places available for the conference on 23 October.

#### **6. AOB**

It was suggested that it would be a good idea to ask the Independent Review Service of the Social Fund to come and do a seminar for the Welfare Rights Forum.

**Date of next meeting: ? 20 November**