

Plymouth Welfare Rights Forum

Warspite Room, Council House

Thursday 24th September 2009
1pm to 4pm

1. Welcomes & apologies

Present:

Karen Sharpe	Plymouth CAB (note taker)
Gloria Davenport	Plymouth CAB (Chair)
Julie Black	Routeways Family Information Centre
Gary Edwards	PCC Housing Benefits
Chris Johnson	JCP (Plymouth BDC)
Patrick Healy	DIAC & Benefit Angels
Wendy Hudson	Perennial
Steven Guy	MASW (MAP)
Mo Rafferty	William Sutton Homes
Sarah Lacey	Saltash CAB
Denis Fitzgerald	HMRC London
Eunice Halliday	Plymouth Foodbank
Gill Joyce	Pension Service (DWP)
Victoria Roberts	Colebrook Housing
Mary Partridge	Carers Champions
David Burr	Plymouth Mind Oasis Project
Donna Ryall	Plymouth Mind @ The Zone
John Williamson	Plymouth Mind @ Glenbourne Unit
Stuart Toll	Devon Law Centre
Pat Newton	PCC Welfare Benefits – Housing
Jo West	PCC Rent Arrears Intervention Worker
Lynn Herbert	Pluss Plymouth
Julia Slade	LARK Childrens' Centre

Apologies:

Sue Archard	Plymouth CAB
Chris Hulbert	MASW (MAP)
Jane Robinson	Refugee Action
Mel Coyne	Refugee Action
Les Cole	FIS (JCP)
Bruce Abbott	DAN
Matt Allison	JCP
Dave Hay	Mind Glenbourne

2. Previous Minutes

2.1 Corrections:

Chris Johnson: Habitual Residence Test & Right to Reside are decisions made by Wick staff not First Contact Centre staff

2.2 Matters Arising:

Chris J spoke to FCC staff about script. Problem has been inexperienced staff not

understanding IS/ESA. Chris advises clients “demand” an IS form as appropriate. GD & KS to visit DBC Bristol and request attendance at Forum (*please note this action will have to be carried forward as GD on sick leave*)

DH reports that new Social Inclusion Officer has now been appointed and he will bring them to the next Forum. Regular reports will be provided to the Forum.

3. Reports

3.3 HMRC (Denis Fitzgerald):

Denis explained that as a result of his and Sean Griffin’s visit to CAB, HMRC will now attend regularly. They are both in HMRC Customer Directorate.

Denis’ background is in benefits and credits. He acknowledges that the computer system has been the cause of major problems over the years but there is no government cash to resolve this. Their remit is therefore to change operational processes and service delivery. They are required to target specific delivery mechanisms to assist customer groups (eg telephone claim process for relationship breakdown).

There are also campaigns to prevent overpayments to avoid claims being terminated. One pilot involves contacting people who are within the first year of their claim (especially those with high awards) to talk through entitlement and possible renewals. They are also looking at other post-award interventions. Pilots are small so don’t benefit everyone, but aim is to roll out successful ones.

Problems raised: Appeals are taking a long time to hear; customer helpline isn’t very helpful; adviser helpline is working well.

Denis: HMRC are now trying to make the helpline more specialist. At present can be directed to any office and any staff member but move is to have helpline with TC experienced staff.

Problems with “authority” and advocating on behalf of clients – Pension Service (GJ) report probs with this – they can’t send people to their local office, older people can’t access a home visit and some of those people have problems with the phone. It is possible to book appointments at local office, but can’t do this without “authority”.

DF: At bens & credits strategy meetings, the “authority” problem comes up often – DF will report this back to HMRC

Julia: Tried to get appt for clt @ Derriford office – circuitous route, clt had previously gone alone, waited 4 hours, told no appts, pushed from pillar to post.

DF: Advice is to contact via helpline, then local office will be contacted by them to make appt. Agrees there should be clarity

Pat queried whether helpline is based in one office

DF explained that it isn’t and clt can be routed anywhere in country.

Bathgate has best reputation & has very helpful staff

Pat advises contacting offices via “say no to 0870” website – gives office numbers instead of generic helpline no.

Prob identified with TCs and IB – offices don’t communicate. CJ explained that this is because IB computer system is old and doesn’t communicate between depts.

DF says that ticking “benefits” and “working” boxes on TC form wouldn’t necessarily flag this up as it would take an adviser who knows system to identify this.

Stat agencies agreed it would be helpful to have computer systems that data match to avoid probs for clients.

Pat asked if “implied consent” (as with DWP guidance) is possible. Prob identified that staff aren’t aware of the guidance – CJ reports that staff are being strict because of pressure to comply with data protection (creditors will try accessing info via DWP)
DF: one idea is that on initial contact, lots of personal details are taken and clt or adviser then given a “token” which they then quote on any further contact

Donna R raised issue re FOAs – CJ pointed out that using coloured paper to fax FOA’s can be self-defeating as colour coding is used in DWP (orange = “destroy”)

DF: HMRC piloting voice recognition software to identify claimants who are possibly “non-compliant” – all pilots are listed on website. **Action:** DF to inform Forum of website address

Steve G: Is it possible for advisers to be given password so they can avoid having to jump through hoops every time they contact HMRC – will avoid additional costs on telephone calls – esp when calling from a mobile on home visits

DF: HMRC business model is to charge for calls – will keep pressing for 0800 numbers though – acknowledges people aren’t getting the service they should – tension between costs and service delivery (move to phone being only way to contact)

CJ: calls to 0845 etc numbers can be monitored – lists of areas called from, numbers of mobile phone users etc but 0800 nos. don’t gather this info

Julia identified a problem on renewal for a client – children were accidentally removed from her claim which resulted in NIL award but nobody at TCO could explain this on phone. Client went to Derriford office for hardship payment – got interim payment of only £50 (limits on emergency payments) – was not told she could have had more. Tax Credits ‘Adviserline’ told Julia this sometimes happens.

DF: can’t see how children ‘fall off’ – should resurrect old records and update/confirm. Will try to find out why this happens. Of so, anything that can be done to remedy?

Julia: now being told will take 4 weeks

DF: Should be able to reinstate immediately – can’t understand why

Chris: problems with computer systems – there are some “work arounds” but inherent problems likely with government departments

DF: Sean Griffin due to come next time

3.1 Housing Benefit (Gary Edwards):

Work levels & caseload still increasing though slowing.

One team now working on changes in circumstances therefore new claims are being dealt with more swiftly

Plan is to develop front facing team - customer service being merged (?) with revenues & benefits, therefore HB assessors will be accessible – efficiency drives, plan to do this within a year

LHA - Sarah was due to report last time. Of 3,500 claimants - only 58 are getting extra benefit over their actual rent and of those only 8 are getting the full £15 (local landlords

are charging up to LHA rates)

- (a) From November, CHB completely disregarded for HB – no take up or government awareness campaign being planned
- (b) Savings threshold for pensioners rising from £6,000 to £16,000 - software is being upgraded - no publicity for this either

Pat Newton: existing customers or only on new claims?

GE: should be all customers, some people will therefore become eligible. PC will be reassessing claims – Gill J confirms (not expecting massive extra work)

GE: will not necessarily have to reassess on CHB claims – but uncertain

Diana: to clarify is it HB/LHA and CTB?

GE: Yes

Julia: would it be treated as a break in claim?

GE: Not if already entitled, not sure what will happen in April. Over half of caseload on LHA now

Julie: problems with clients receiving HB – are arrears problems increasing?

GE: Some landlords say so but we are not seeing an increase in possession action

Best advice is for landlord to contact LA to flag up if tenants not paying.

8 weeks arrears get paid direct to landlord

LA do try to make sure large payments are going to landlords – otherwise is too tempting for clients to spend. Not likely that government will backtrack on direct payments

LHA not likely to be rolled out to HAs

John W: I have seen drop in private rented properties – availability and barriers for tenants (e.g. guarantor)

Steve: is it reflection of wider property market?

GD: choices avail to people on benefits are greatly reduced

JW: People in very poor housing cannot afford to move

GE: I have not seen a drop in housing avail to people on benefits

Pat: who polices the standard/safety of properties?

GE: Private sector team in LA

***GE will bring someone in from private rented team to come and talk**

Julia: Disrepair – what happens next if PCC cannot get landlord to repair?

3.2 Disability Benefits Centre No report, no rep – GD to follow up

3.4 JCP and BDC (Chris Johnson):

No written report. Big area of concern: ESA – big increase across board but this expected due to new computer system etc.

JSA incoming calls now farmed out (Nottingham, S Wales, etc). Lots of telephony staff are training on ESA – will take couple months. Processing etc will take longer until then
Call backs from JSA should now be improved
Plan to roll out to ESA call backs
Problem is due to centralising call centres although it is efficient, can pool expertise etc

John W: Problems with call backs, consent etc difficult due to mental health barriers

Chris: problem is bad publicity, causing checks on security issues – hence stringent criteria for obtaining authority. One option: fax FOA through – a note should be put on system (advises to phone 10 minutes later to check come through)

Julia: Social Fund – any improvement in CCGS, reviews etc? (been waiting 8 weeks for one review)

Chris: can look into – not seen figures on reviews (only been in Plymouth in total since 2/3 weeks ago)

Wendy Hewson: bereavement payments – how quick are they making decisions?

Gill J: never had complaints re delays

David Burr: old IB medicals being conducted by nurses – ‘qualified health professionals’ – (‘approved disability analyst’)

Stuart: regulations changed recently

Chris: ATOS can decide who is a health care professional

GD: We have a list of approved people

Chris: They have customer service division – **Action:** address to be sent to KS for distribution (**see end of minutes for response from Chris**)

Pat: problems with ESA form itself – clients not qualifying their answers

*Problem: client lost DLA – HRM and MRC – had EMP visit – benefit removed totally, motability car at risk – serious allegation came to light (client’s wife) – medical services took case up, in meantime tribunal hearing delayed so he lost car. Med Services investigation – sent 2 people to client – said was ‘pack of lies’ – EMP denied everything
At tribunal, chair adjourned because client knew medical person – further postponement*

Can this be taken further? – P265 in DR Handbook says can take to Independent Case Examiner

3.5 Pension Service (Gill Joyce):

Lots of work – especially via Ballard House Customer Services

Rules changing on capital – anyone on PC, recalculation will be automatic

No upper limit (although treated as notional income)

Lots of people still on ESA/IB/JSA over 60 – Chris agreed – should be actively encouraged to claim PC

Gill: we are happy to visit them or telephone them, not turning anyone away.

Beware client may lose NI credits (although as of next year will only need 30 years worth of contributions)

3.6 Social Inclusion

No rep this meeting (apologies) – will attend November Forum

4. Themes for future meetings

- A4E
- Private Rented Team
- DBC
- Social Inclusion (strategy)

5. AOB

a) *David B: All these can do DLA medicals:*

*Approved Disability Analyst
Registered Occupational Therapist
Registered Nurse
Registered Physiotherapist*

b) *'Future of Care' Green Paper - Julia flagged up DWP Policy Strategy minutes*

c) *Disability Rights Handbooks – still have 2 left. Committee will allocate to most appropriate agency/organisation following this Forum*

d) *Training being delivered by the Advice for All network – details on flyers*

e) *CPAG updates available for collection now*

Chris - As requested yesterday the address and telephone number for ATOS Healthcare customer services is -

**ATOS Healthcare
Block 1, Room G
Government Buildings
Otley Road
Lawnswood
Leeds
LS16 5PU**

0113 2309175

I was also asked about the time being taken for CCG reviews. Our target is to clear these within 10 working days where possible. At present we are a bit behind and currently running at about 17 or 18 days. The reviews are conducted in order of receipt so the oldest ones are dealt with first. We do have a few cases that are even older, but these are cases where we are waiting for further information or evidence from the customer before we can complete the review process. Thanks

Chris Johnson
Customer Service Manager
Plymouth Benefit Delivery Centre
TEL-01752 618441
FAX-01752 618480

Date of next meeting

Thursday 26th November 1 pm – 4 pm

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