



Hammersmith and Fulham Advice Forum

Minutes

27 April 2016, 2pm – 4pm

Copies and attachments to the minutes are held on the Advice Station website

Venue: Hammersmith Town Hall, London W6 9JU

Attendees:

Ben Baxter	Crosslight Advice
Carol Judge	LBHF
Clarissa Stoneham	HF CAB
Councillor Sue Fennimore	Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion
Doreen Taggart	Action on Disability
Duncan Brown	LBHF
Helen Jackson	HF Law Centre
Joseph Pasqual	LBHF
Leo Fenn	Hestia
Liam Hennessy	HF Mind
Malgosia Pakulska	EEAC (East European Advice Centre)
Mandy Goodall	HF Law Centre
Margaret Magnusson	HF CAB
Paul Rosenberg	LBHF
Reshma Begum	Hestia Housing and Support
Stephan Wiedmer	Crosslight Advice
Sue James	HF Law Centre
Teresa Itabor	LBHF Housing
Tom Coniffe	LBHF
Tracy Chambers	Staying First
Velma Baptiste	LBHF Housing

1. Minutes of the last meeting & matters arising

No comments or amendments to the minutes of the last meeting.

2. Feedback from sub group meetings

Mandy Goodall provided a brief summary of the first meetings (all held in April) of the three sub groups.

Advice Strategy:

Good representation from advice providers in the borough.

The Advice Strategy will be developed using the Low Commission toolkit. No timescale yet agreed.

Date of next meeting TBA

Housing and Homelessness:

Main issues that the group agreed to focus on are:

- Private rented sector – unethical Landlords, deposit retention.
- Ground 8 evictions
- Support Workers – better service to clients to help clients avoid eviction at a much earlier stage
- Client journey – need to be more joined up and improve referrals, signposting and information for clients.
- Other issues - overcrowding, debt, diversity

Next meeting July 12 at 12.30. Venue TBA.

Welfare Reform:

The focus of this meeting was Universal Credit as the full service goes live in Hammersmith on 29 June 2016 and in Fulham and Shepherds Bush by December 2016.

We had a DWP presentation explaining how the full service works.

Attendees raised issues and had many concerns:

- Change in circumstances trigger a new full UC claim and so a move from legacy benefits. Definitive list of what constitutes a change in circumstances is not yet available
- Under UC, rental money will go directly to claimants, rather than to the Landlord. A claimant can request that their rent is paid directly to their Landlord but this option is not available to all. All are concerned about the potential for rent arrears.
- Access to IT necessary as everything will be on line.
- The DWP will still make home visits but cannot help people complete UC forms online
- For new claimants there is a 7 day wait before UC begins. This does NOT apply to existing claimants (those moving from legacy benefits, triggered by a change in circumstances). But the claimant MUST inform their advisor at the time of applying for UC. There is no question or flag in the application process.
- Advance payments are possible. The claimant will need to request this. The money is then clawed back over 6 months. Concern that claimants will not be aware that advance payments are possible.

3. Universal Credit

Teresa Itabor explained how LBHF is preparing for UC. They will co locate with JCP at 145 King Street. LBHF are a trusted partner with DWP and are able to put their tenants on to alternate payment arrangements (APA), which will be reviewed every six months.

Joseph Pasqual explained that lack of data in relation to clients had been a problem in the past but with trusted partner status the notification process from DWP regarding client benefits works well.

Clients in council accommodation and temporary accommodation will be assisted by the council with UC. Concern about how the privately rented sector will respond to UC. Teresa Itabor will liaise with Mike England to try to come up with a plan.

LBHF have a UC pack specifically for trusted partners. There is a UC toolkit available from DWP. Mandy Goodall will circulate this.

Duncan Brown forecasted that UC claimants are likely to go up threefold from 29 June. With a five or six week delay in payments there is likely to be rent arrears. Any sign ups to council housing will be subject to a UC claim. All clients will be supported in making the UC claim as well as a council tax support claim.

The Rent Income team's main objectives remain to maximise rent and sustain tenancies. There is a new staff structure which places more people in a support role. The team is also recruiting a welfare reform officer and have seconded someone from HB.

The council have a Communications Group which is currently meeting regularly to consider the UC full service. The DWP attend and it would be useful to have attendance from the forum. Mandy Goodall to attend future meetings.

The council do not want to evict (sustain tenancies is an objective). Often this is the last resort - and four out of five possession proceedings do not lead to evictions. In all this, early intervention is key. Duncan suggested that someone from the Law Centre attend their next monthly meeting to start looking at prevention, protocols and joined up working. Mandy Goodall to agree dates with Duncan and a solicitor to attend.

Paul Rosenberg gave a housing benefit update. This is held with the minutes.

4. H&F Poverty and Worklessness Commission - Vision and aims

Tom Conniffe, Programme Manager to the H&F Poverty and Worklessness Commission explained that this commission is one of five policy and accountability commissions set up by the current administration. The Commission will:

- Aim to identify the factors underpinning the continuing prevalence of both poverty and worklessness in the borough. In doing so, it will draw upon the perspectives of local people living in, or on the edge of poverty and/or worklessness, as well as professionals, leading experts and best practice from elsewhere in the UK and around the world.
- Formulate recommendations for interventions and/or service redesign, to deliver better outcomes for local people living in, or on the edge of, poverty and/or worklessness, and increase economic, employment and other opportunities for all.
- Make proposals to local, regional and national policy makers for freedoms, flexibilities and funding where necessary to implement these longer-term, in so doing helping central government to deliver on its agenda of encouraging self-reliance in society while saving public funds.

An overview of the Commission is held with these minutes.

Trust for London have undertaken some research on poverty in H&F and report that poverty in the borough is mainly around council housing and unemployment. This is contrary to the modern poverty that we see in most London boroughs – people in work and living in privately rented accommodation. The Commission will include this type of poverty in its analysis.

Rob Rix is working with the Commission on research projects and is currently looking at trigger points for where people fall in to poverty. He hopes to gather any insights third sector organisations might have on those in the borough who experience poverty, particularly how life events impact on people living in and around poverty. He would also like to carry out some focus group work with people who are experiencing poverty. For more info please contact Rob Rix on robrix@hotmail.co.uk

5. Advice Forum meetings – agenda suggestions, pressing concerns and AOB

Attendees asked for Universal Credit to be on the agenda at the next meeting. MG will ask DWP to attend to present.

6. Date of next meeting

22 June 2016

The meeting will be held between 2pm and 4pm at H&F Town Hall.