

Fax No: 020 8359 2680

5th January 2009

Dear Councillor Freer

Re: Future of Barnet's Welfare Rights Unit

As a voluntary agency working with both vulnerable adults and parents and carers of children and adults with learning disabilities, we at Barnet Mencap are very concerned to hear that the Welfare Rights Unit may be under threat of closure.

We have worked closely with all members of the Team, accessing the Helpline regularly, getting expert advice and direct help for families in addition to the essential representation, when necessary, at Tribunals. Therefore from the basic advice through to the most complex, we find that the Team is able to help us to help more families increase their household income, apply for disability benefits and challenge inaccurate decisions by the DSS.

All the cases of Disability Living Allowance we have taken to Tribunal with the WRU had had 100% success. In addition, we have had many decisions reversed in the individual's favour before a Tribunal has been necessary. The care taken by the staff and the concern and individual support given to parents has enabled them to cope at a most stressful time. Many people underestimate what a parent goes through when trying to deal with the DLA application, a daunting and emotionally draining experience for many.

There is a unique service and one that we know is valued by other organisations also. There is a need for advice to those of us working with under 5's, through to the crucial time when children move on to adult benefits from 16 years old and then to ensure, for adults with learning disabilities, that they are getting their full entitlement. We need the Welfare Rights Unit to ensure that these vulnerable families do not miss out.

Most of the people we work with would not be able to access a Citizens Advice Bureau. If you are the parent of a child with special needs, you cannot sit and wait for an appointment and for vulnerable adults, you need a specialist service, responsive to the particular requirements of that person. In a time of challenging and exceptional economic circumstances, we believe the skills and expertise of the Welfare Rights Unit are more vital than ever.

Families of children and adults with learning disabilities often face greater financial costs and the Welfare Rights Unit does a lot to help the Council achieve its aim of maximising economic well-being for families. Please do not consider cutting this service back at such a crucial time for families.

We are very concerned that such a decision should not be made without consulting the voluntary sector in Barnet, who are very much in need of this very specialist service.

Yours sincerely

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Ray Booth
Chief Executive

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Jackie Silverman
Family Support Manager

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Shelley Gibbons
Brokerage Manager

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Grace Crilly
Equality Housing Manager

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Lorraine Jarman
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Anna Wakeford
Family Support Worker
Over 5's