



c/o Barnet Refugee Service
Suite 9, 2nd Floor Podium
Hyde House
The Hyde
London NW9 6LH

19 Feb. 09

Mr M Frear
Leader of the Council
London Borough of Barnet
North London Business Park
Oakleigh Road South
London N11 1NP

Dear Sirs,

Forum For Advice and Information in Barnet's (FAIB's) RESPONSE TO THE PROPOSED CLOSURE OF THE WELFARE RIGHTS UNIT IN BARNET

We are writing collectively to express our concern over the proposed closure of the Welfare Rights Unit in Barnet. It is quite clear that there is no other comparable service available for benefit advice in the borough. Furthermore, Barnet has not carried out a proper review of the Welfare Rights Unit even though a review has been proposed on many occasions. We believe that without this review, it is improbable that the decision could be seen as either fair or well thought through. We are therefore opposing this proposal and request that a proper review be conducted before a final decision is made. It is unanimously agreed that the Welfare Rights Unit provides an invaluable service to the disadvantaged and the vulnerable in the borough.

The current economic down turn has generated a heavy work load for the generalist advice sector, particularly the voluntary sector, and the closure of the Unit will compound the situation further, not to mention the detrimental effects the closure will have on both clients and organisations.

Our members have all put forward their views. The closure of the Welfare Rights Unit will leave the residents of Barnet worse off financially. The closure will have an impact on the Personal Social Service (PSS) budget- this is where the number of recipients of DLA has an effect on the formula spending share. The Unit helps to raise the take up rate of DLA. This is a boost to Barnet. However, research carried out in Wales by the University of Bangor found that DLA/AA take-up rates are highest in socio-economically deprived areas. This means that relatively affluent areas like Barnet are disadvantaged by the PSS formula.

The Welfare Rights Unit has helped both the disabled and the elderly to raise money which is beneficial to the local economy in terms of creating a healthy community and job creation. The University of Strathclyde findings in a research published in 2003 shows that welfare rights advice had a significant impact on the creation of jobs in the local economy of Glasgow. The creation of jobs emanates from the healthy level of spending in the immediate economy.

Some of the work that the Welfare Rights Unit undertakes includes casework, training, dissemination of information, and policy work.

Looking at casework, for example, the most vulnerable will be worst affected. These are those with experience of mental health, the sick, and housebound. As well as those with language difficulties and learning disabilities. For example, as pointed out by one of the social workers at the Noah's Ark Children's Hospice, there is no comparable service available for benefit advice. Families have to queue to be seen at a CAB on a first come, first served basis. Parents with severely disabled children often cannot do this. A referral to the Welfare Rights Unit enables advisers to work closely with these families and help to resolve cases, some of which may be quite complex.

Case Study

'Mrs 'S' has three young children. Her husband is severely disabled. She cares for him and their children with no family support. The property they live in needs adapting because of her husband's disability. She is facing harassment from her immediate neighbours. Her Carers Allowance had been stopped without any explanation; She felt that she was not getting the right level of Child Tax Credit. In addition to this, she was struggling with her water and gas bills. Although the local authority knew of her plight, she was denied the services of a social worker. With the help of the Welfare Rights Unit, her benefit was reinstated and she is now getting the right amount of Child Tax Credit. Also, they arranged for an assessment by Barnet Council in order for the adaptation to be carried out. The East Finchley Advice Service worked with Barnet Council and a Social Worker was allocated to this family. We also got the housing officer to resolve the harassment from the neighbours. The Advice Service then applied for grants from both the Social Funds of British Gas and Thames Water for the family.'

All of these would not have been possible without the help of the Welfare Rights Unit.

Based on cash successes obtained by the Welfare Rights Unit, it is estimated that service users will lose between £30 and £50 and more per week on unclaimed benefit, if the Welfare Rights Unit closes down. In addition, there will be more pressure upon the already stretched Social Workers and other advice organisations. For example, the East Finchley Advice Service is heavily reliant on the Welfare Rights Unit for giving in-depth benefit advice to its advisers.

Barnet Law Service also provides telephone consultancy to advice agency staff and volunteers, but has only a part-time caseworker who has a very high caseload, so is not always free to take calls.

Barnet CAB dealt with over 8,000 welfare benefit related enquiries last year and although rarely refers clients to the Unit, and only occasionally takes advantage of their consultancy services, is concerned at the impact of its removal on the level of demand on its services and the risk of vulnerable clients finding it more difficult to access the advice they need.

If the service goes, there will be a gap which will be difficult to fill, unless an identical or better welfare advice unit replaces it.

It has been shown that failure to access timely and appropriate advice can have adverse effect on the lives of our service users. Recent research by the Legal Services Research Centre shows that –

- More than half of all civil legal – especially welfare benefits- problems lead to adverse outcomes such as ill-health, unemployment and homelessness.
- A third of civil justice problems affect people's health (18% of problems lead to stress-related ill-health, and 16% of problems lead to physical ill-health)
- Of those who had physical health problems:

4 in 5 needed medical treatment

2 in 3 treated by GPs required an average of six appointments

1 in 10 who are hospitalised spend an average of 9.5 days as in-patient.

- In addition, 16% of problems leads to loss of income or employment and 6% lead to loss of home.
- Furthermore, research shows that civil-especially welfare benefits- problems can bring about and worsen social exclusion and half of victims of crime also report a civil justice problem.

In addition to the work of the Welfare Rights Unit listed above, it also provides the following services:

- Training to other partner agencies on the various welfare benefits and tax credits.
- The unit provides a wealth of information and publicity materials for advisers, members of the public and indeed council staff.
- Both local councillors and MPs refer clients to the Welfare Rights Unit
- The unit provides specialist casework service to the council and other community organisations
- It carries out direct casework with vulnerable adults.. This helps the council to fulfil its statutory obligation of ensuring that residents who are charged for their care package receive welfare rights advice and are also assisted in claiming their benefit entitlements.
- The unit also provides services to vulnerable families. For example, families with children in needs, families using mental health services and child

development clinics etc can be referred to the children and family adviser at the Welfare rights unit.

- The Welfare Rights Unit contributes to local and national operational policy work. It is part of the National Association of Welfare Rights Unit Advisers. It also has links with other organisations such as Connexions, the DWP and voluntary organisations- to name but a few.

As a consortium of over 40 advice organisations in Barnet, FAIB works to influence policy decisions at local level. In view of the scale of this opposition from our members, we believe it is imperative that The London Borough of Barnet retains the unit in its present form at the very least. We understand that as a responsible organisation, the council must balance its books. However, in light of all the information set out above we would ask that the council reconsiders its decision to cut the Welfare Rights Unit.

Yours sincerely,

Blessyn Ataguba
For and on behalf of FAIB