

TAMESIDE COMMUNITY LEGAL SERVICE PARTNERSHIP

MINUTES OF A PROVIDER GROUP MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 7TH MARCH 2006

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| Present: | Annette Goodfellow | - | Tameside Citizens Advice Bureau (in the Chair) |
| | Ahmed Ali | - | Equality Diversity Centre of Excellence |
| | Fiona Barratt | - | Bromley, Hyde and Robinson Solicitors |
| | Claire Bates | - | People First Housing Association |
| | Ruth Cheesbrough | - | Welfare Rights Unit, TMBC |
| | Karen Heathcote | - | Library Service, TMBC |
| | Lauren Hulse | - | Bromley, Hyde and Robinson Solicitors |
| | Cath Leach | - | Thompson and Cooke Solicitors |
| | Alex Mattur | - | Parker Bird Solicitors |
| | Alistair Newton | - | Trading Standards, TMBC |
| | Lorraine Pattison | - | Jobmatch, TMBC |
| | Gillian Rees | - | Adult Learning, TMBC |
| | Bob Shaw | - | Sure Start Tameside |
| | Jackie Taylor | - | Mental Health Team, TMBC |
| | Julie Vickers | - | New Charter Housing Trust |
| | Linda Walker | - | Partnership Secretary, TMBC |
| | Gill Williams | - | Tameside County Court |
| | Janine Yates | - | Senior Money Adviser, TMBC |
| Apologies | Eden Carruthers | - | Public Information Team, Social Care & Health |
| For absence: | Wendy Buckley | - | Pluck Andrew and Co |
| | Trish Deaville | - | Pluck Andrew and Co |
| | Carol Eckersley | - | DWP |
| | Stephanie Fearn | - | Joint Pension Team, TMBC |
| | Alan Franco | - | CLS Co-ordinator, TMBC |
| | Karen Morgan Hopwood | - | DWP |
| | Andrew Shanahan | - | Beevers Solicitors |

1. MINUTES

The Minutes of the proceedings of the meeting held on 6th December 2005, having been circulated, were approved as a correct record.

2. MATTERS ARISING

Item 5 – Review of Debt Advice in Tameside MBC

Annette Goodfellow advised that Citizens Advice had submitted a bid to the DTI for funding for 56 face-to-face advisers across the North West Region. If successful, this could mean an additional 2 advisers in Tameside.

Item 6 – Review of Housing Advice in Tameside

Julie Vickers reported on the criteria for a hardship fund recently launched by New Charter Housing Trust for financial assistance with New Charter debts in excess of £500 and other debts in excess of £3,000. The maximum help available was £250.

3. “ACCESSING ADVICE IN TAMESIDE”

Samantha Parnaby, CLS Development Manager and Pam Thorley, Partnership Support Officer, advised that the LSC North West Regional Office had been developing links with key agencies across the region to increase the knowledge of legal advice and improve access for vulnerable client groups. These key ‘problem noticer’ agencies had been targeted as they were most likely to have clients with a number of advice needs and/or work with clients likely to experience legal advice problems and included the Probation Service, Jobcentre Plus, Surestart and the Prison Service. A number of training sessions have already been held in the region and positive feedback had been received. Details of the programme for the half day training session were distributed for information.

An event held in Tameside had been attended by officers from Jobcentre Plus, the Probation Service and New Charter Housing Trust and had concentrated on case studies, provided information on local suppliers and received presentations from those taking part about the services they provide.

The North West Regional Office had also produced two lists of local specialist LSC funded providers which had been distributed together with CLS Direct leaflets to solicitors, those organisations with a quality mark and other key agencies. It was noted that whilst these leaflets concentrated on LSC funded providers it was recognised that there were a number of local quality marked organisations which could be included in future editions and the LSC would liaise with Alan Franco, CLS Co-ordinator on this matter.

Potential outreach services and how these could be developed were also being considered by the LSC as part of their plans to increase access to advice across the North West Region. The family advice sessions taking place at Tameside CAB were highlighted as an example of how this could be achieved with successful results.

4. WELFARE BENEFITS ADVICE

Ruth Cheesbrough, Tameside Welfare Rights Services, and Annette Goodfellow, Tameside CAB, outlined the staffing and outlined the range of services provided by their organisations and distributed statistical information regarding the number of clients seen receiving advice and representation. It was noted that since September 2005 the Tameside Welfare Rights Services had operated a Freephone telephone advice line giving direct access to a Welfare Rights Officer on three mornings each week.

A number of challenges facing both organisations were highlighted and discussed and these included:

- **Tax Credit problems** – There were a variety of issues especially relating to overpayments, duplicate correspondence and delays in processing information.
- **Jobcentre Plus** – Severe problems being experienced by clients including daily incidents of poor customer service resulting in hardship to customers. It was advised that Alan Franco was co-ordinating a meeting with the Contact Centre Manager and a local representative to discuss the problems and seek to influence some changes. The possibility of a CLSP response to these issues was also discussed.
- **Local Authority** – There appeared to be a culture of waiting for the DWP benefit decisions rather than the LA making their own decisions on entitlement on actual income/circumstances. This was creating problems sometimes leading to the threat of repossession by landlords.

Interpreter services available to those people accessing services from ethnic minority communities was discussed and Ahmed Ali gave details of the North West Interpreter Service which could be contacted through the Ashton Renewal Office.

5. FAMILY ADVICE IN TAMESIDE

Alex Mattur, Parker Bird, outlined the successful family advice sessions held at Tameside CAB and discussion ensued of extending this type of outreach work. The range of issues included under family advice eg divorce, financial cases and children's issues were dealt with on a fixed fee basis where the LSC provided a sum of money for the case to be completed within the budget available.

There was interest expressed by the family practitioners present in exploring the potential of further outreach sessions in family and housing matters perhaps in local Libraries, Health Living Centres and Surestart Centres and those interested were asked to contact Alex Mattur at Parker Bird.

6. TAMESIDE COMMUNITY LEGAL SERVICE PARTNERSHIP STEERING GROUP

The Chair advised on the main items which had been considered at the Steering Group meeting held on 9th February 2005 as follows:

- **Tameside Strategic Partnership –**
 - (a) **Focus on Work to Tackle Health Inequalities**
A Health Inequalities Strategy had been produced which highlighted a number of priority interventions including targeting the over 50s, early years support and reducing smoking and improving nutrition. The Tameside Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy, which focuses specifically on priority neighbourhoods, was also helping to develop and deliver on a number of these initiatives. The planned development of the Children's Centres was also discussed.
 - (b) **Local Area Agreements**
The Local Area Agreements (LAA) provided a framework for the Local Authority to work with its partners to achieve locally determined priorities. This was not a new source of funding and identified priorities would be delivered through a provision of shared targets and pooled budgets.
- **“Making Legal Rights a Reality”** – Feedback from the recent consultation exercise was reported and it was anticipated that the final version of this Strategy would be published at the end of March/beginning of April. The possible development of a Community Legal Advice Network in Tameside was also mentioned.
- **Contract Performance in Tameside** – A verbal progress report highlighted that in Tameside contracts were performing at 93%.
- **Performance Indicators** – The number of people in Tameside claiming Council Tax Benefit, Attendance Allowance, Pension Credit and Pension Credit Guarantee as well as those who had been issued with Council Tax Liability Orders was noted. Work was continuing to look at new approaches to identify possible claimants.
- **Action Plan** – The items which were highlighted were detailed as follows:
 - (a) Promote availability of discrimination advice.
 - (b) Support the mediation scheme between young people and their families to prevent homelessness.
 - (c) Support opportunities for volunteering in relevant agencies as an aid to skills and knowledge development amongst economically inactive so as to improve employability.
 - (d) Investigate the possibility of using proposed new Primary Care Centres as locations for advice provision.

7. CONSUMER DIRECT

Alistair Newton, Trading Standards, advised that as from 7th March 2006 all telephone enquiries relating to trading standards issues would be dealt with by Consumer Direct, a national telephone and online consumer advice service delivered in partnership with local authority Trading Standards Services. Customers could contact an adviser by calling 0845 4040506 for practical, impartial advice to help regarding problems with suppliers of goods or services. However, they would refer complex enquiries or those requiring further action to Tameside Trading Standards. It was also noted that Trading Standards advice was still available at the Council Offices in Ashton.

8. FINANCIAL SERVICES OMBUDSMAN

The Chair advised that the Financial Services Ombudsman would be visiting Tameside on the 15th June 2006 to talk about the role and jurisdiction of the FSA. Those interested in attending this event, which would be held in the Etherow Lounge, Ashton Town Hall, commencing at 10.00 am, were asked to contact Linda Walker on 0161 342 2798.

9. MR JIM GOURLEY

It was with sadness that the Chair announced the recent death of Mr Jim Gourley and referred to his valuable work with MENCAP over many years and more recently his contribution towards the CLSP. A letter of condolence would be sent to his family.

10. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Provider Group had been arranged for Tuesday 13th June 2006 and the focus would be employment and consumer advice.