

TAMESIDE COMMUNITY LEGAL SERVICE PARTNERSHIP

PROVIDER GROUP MEETING

6th March 2007

Commenced: 2.05 pm

Terminated: 3.25 pm

Present:	Alan Franco	-	CLS Co-ordinator (TMBC) (in the Chair)
	Ahmed Ali	-	TREC
	Claire Bates	-	People First Housing Association
	Naomi Becsham-Harris	-	Parker Bird Whiteley Solicitors
	Eden Carruthers	-	Social Care and Health, TMBC
	Ruth Cheesbrough	-	TMBC Welfare Rights
	Janet Frost	-	Neighbourhood Renewal, TMBC
	Nicola Hamer	-	Ashton Pioneer Homes
	Karen Heathcote	-	Library Service, TMBC
	Carol Renshaw	-	Tameside & Pension Service Joint Team
	Jackie Taylor	-	Mental Health Team, TMBC
	Linda Walker	-	Partnership Secretary, TMBC
	Gill Williams	-	Tameside County Court
	Janine Yates	-	TMBC, Mental Health Welfare Rights and Money Advice Service
Apologies for Absence:	Wendy Buckley	-	Pluck Andrew and Co
	Trish Deaville	-	Pluck Andrew and Co
	Annette Goodfellow	-	Tameside CAB
	Karen Morgan-Hopwood	-	Tameside & Pension Service Joint Team
	Gillian Rees	-	Adult Learning, TMBC
	Andrew Shanahan	-	Beevers Solicitors
	Julie Vickers	-	New Charter Housing Trust

Partnership Issues

1. PARTNERSHIP PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Consideration was given to the Partnership's Performance Indicators, the key points of which were highlighted as follows:

- **Tameside County Court Possession Summonses** – There was a clear upward trend in respect of mortgage possession hearings at the County Court having gradually increased from an average of 36 per month in 2003/4 to 66 per month this year to date. In terms of the level of mortgage arrears, it was noted that in many cases these were relatively small as they related to second loans secured on properties for those whose finances had become overstretched. In recent weeks the County Court had also experienced problems with representatives from companies offering to buy properties from those presenting themselves at Court and renting it back to them usually with no secure tenure and with rent levels only guaranteed for the first few months.
- **Council Tax Liability Orders** – There was a seasonal pattern to the issue of Council Tax Liability Orders, with a large number being issued in June for those who had not paid instalments on receipt of their Council Tax bills in April. It was noted that there was a fairly static number of around 10,000 people being issued with summonses each year. Concerns had been expressed regarding the lack of a consistent approach from Tameside MBC in terms of recovery and it was suggested that arrangements be made for a member of the Council Tax team to attend a forthcoming meeting of MINT to discuss this matter.

- **Council Tax Benefit (aged 60+) Pension Credit/Attendance Allowance** – Figures in relation to the the number of people claiming Council Tax Benefit, Pension Credit and Attendance Allowance had remained stable for the last year. The new Local Area Agreement would, from April, focus on the number of successful claims for these benefits made by the Tameside and Pension Service Joint team, Age Concern, Customer Services and the CAB. Demographics alone required that new claimants be identified all the time, in order for the number of claimants overall to remain static.

AGREED

- (1) **That the update report be noted.**
- (2) **That the concerns highlighted in relation to mortgage repossession summonses be raised with the Housing Strategy Team.**

General Business

2. MINUTES

The Minutes of the proceedings of the meeting held on 5th December 2006, having been circulated, were approved as a correct record.

3. WELFARE BENEFITS ADVICE

Ruth Cheesbrough, Tameside Welfare Rights Service, outlined the range of services provided and distributed copies of the Annual Report 2005/06. It was noted that 1354 new case files had been opened, 1927 callers provided with assistance through the freephone telephone advice line and 205 clients had been represented at appeals. The service was also involved in a drop in session at Jubilee Gardens targeting parents of children with disabilities and the Macmillan Welfare Rights Officer, was continuing to provide advice and support for clients with a terminal illness. It was noted that the part-time Vision First Welfare Rights Officer, providing advice to visually impaired Tameside residents, would soon be retiring. However, as there were no plans to appoint a replacement, the Welfare Rights Service would be considering ways to continue to provide support to this client group. This year would see the start of "Changing Lives", a new project in conjunction with the Regeneration team (Denton South and Smallshaw), aimed at helping people seeking work to gain access to appropriate Tax Credits and benefits.

Discussion ensued on the Government's proposal to introduce a new Employment Support Allowance in October 2008. This new allowance would replace Incapacity Benefit. All claimants, except, those with the most severe disabilities and health conditions, would be required to participate in work related activity, or see their benefit level reduced. Whilst the proposals were very much in their infancy it was anticipated that the introduction of this new allowance would generate a number of enquiries.

There had recently been a number of important changes to the way Jobcentre Plus dealt with benefit claims as part of its aim to modernise services. An initial claim for benefit would be made to a call centre which would then be passed to a processing centre which, for this area, was based at Jobcentre Plus, Beech House, Hyde. Social Fund and Crisis Loan applications had also been centralised and would be dealt with at the Jobcentre Plus office in Manchester. It was noted that there had been some problems during the transitional stage but the situation was improving. It had also been recognised that introducing a system exclusively telephone based would not be suitable for all claimants, in which case clerical forms were available for completion.

It was also highlighted that problems were still being experienced in relation to the Tax Credit system administered by the HM Revenues and Customer Services Department. David Heyes, MP, had obtained information that approximately 4,000 people in his constituency had been overpaid

and recovery was being sought. The Welfare Rights Service had received a substantial number of enquiries from those where there had been significant delays in their tax credits being adjusted which had resulted in payments being stopped and resulting in hardship. There was a formal complaints process and the Welfare Rights Service had published a guide to overpayment of tax credits on its website, a copy of which would be distributed with the minutes.

Carol Renshaw explained the work of the Tameside and Pension Service Joint Team in helping older people to maximise their entitlements. Referrals were made from a variety of sources including social workers, Stockport Pension Centre, Financial Assessments, Council Tax, Welfare Rights and members of the public. In addition to direct payment, home care assessments and residential assessments, visiting officers would also carry out a benefit check and signpost to other areas such as the Greater Manchester Fire Service who were providing free home fire risk assessments and smoke detectors. The Team also attended information points at Age Concern (twice per week), Hyde Town Hall and Ashton Customer Services and also provided assistance to younger people who needed home care or residential care due to ill health. Copies of the Joint Team's Annual Report 2005/06 were circulated for information.

AGREED

That the update report be noted.

4. FAMILY ADVICE

AGREED

That this item be deferred pending further information and an update on the development of the Children's Centres in Tameside.

5. UPDATE ON DISCRIMINATION AND EQUALITIES REVIEW

Ahmed Ali advised on The Equality Act 2006 which established the new Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR) to take over the work of Britain's three existing equality commissions, namely, the Equal Opportunities Commission, Commission for Racial Equality and the Disability Rights Commission, in October 2007 Trevor Phillips had recently been appointed as chairman of the CEHR which would bring together the expertise and resources to promote equality and tackle discrimination in relation to gender, gender reassignment, disability, sexual orientation, religion or belief, age, race and promote human rights. Locally, the Equality and Diversity Centre of Excellence provided a service to AGMA wide residents and would in the future be best placed to deal with all forms of discrimination.

He also referred to a summary of findings of the Equalities Review, chaired by Trevor Phillips, established to carry out an investigation into the causes of persistent discrimination and inequality in British society which had been published on 28th February 2007. Further details could be found on the Commission's website at www.cehr.org.uk.

AGREED

That the verbal update report be noted.

6. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

It was noted that the next meeting of the Provider Group would be held on Tuesday 19th June 2007 and the themes would be Employment and Consumer matters.