

**CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE OF CLAIMING COUNCIL ADMINISTERED  
BENEFITS AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT WORKING GROUP**

**MEETING HELD AT THE ASSEMBLY HALL, BOOTLE TOWN HALL  
ON THURSDAY 17TH DECEMBER, 2015**

PRESENT: Councillor Robinson (in the Chair)  
Councillors Cluskey and Dawson

ALSO PRESENT: Angela Ellis, Christine Finnigan and Mike Morris

**12. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

An apology for absence was received from Councillor McGuire.

**13. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS**

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of the Meetings held on 14 and 28 September 2015 be approved as a correct record.

**14. WITNESS INTERVIEWS**

The Lead Member (Councillor Robinson) welcomed the following witnesses to the meeting and thanked them for their co-operation in helping the Working Group to obtain evidence to meet its terms of reference and objectives:-

Jayne Vincent (JV), Sefton Council, Public Engagement and Consultation  
Wayne Leatherbarrow (WL), Sefton Council, Emergency Limited  
Assistance Scheme

Debbie Shelley (DS), St. Leonards' Foodbank

Karen Gray (KG), Sefton Council, Care Leavers, Corporate Parenting  
Service

Diane Turner (DT), Benefits Manager, arvato

Grant Bernard (GB), Sefton CAB

Mark Quillan (MQ), One Stop Shops Manager, arvato

All of the witnesses were present at the meeting at the same time to be interviewed by Members. Members asked the following questions:-

**Jayne Vincent**

Q. Was there an Accessible Information Standard and had it been looked at by the Council?

This would come into force July 2016. As requested by the Consultation and Engagement Panel, Jayne Vincent and June McGill had met to discuss with Sue Holden, Jan McMahon and Lauren

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Sadler

Actions being looked at were:

- Re-instating 'Browserloud' onto the Intranet/Internet (for the visually impaired)
- Discuss with Learning and Development Manager how to cascade 'Easy Read' training across the organisation
- Lauren Sadler to identify the top 5 letters that go out in Adult Social Care and review the content
- June McGill to adapt the ASC Assessment Process into an Easy read format
- All service areas to do a review of their standard letters for accessibility

DT indicated that arvato sent out vast quantities of letters and acknowledged that the style of some of the letters could be off-putting.

JV indicated that colleagues had suggested 3 or 4 different ways to improve letters and that she would be happy to put DT in touch with them.

JV indicated that it was important for customers to receive information in their preferred way. For example, some people preferred face to face interviews whilst hearing impaired people preferred information electronically.

Christine Finnigan indicated that some of the claim delays were due to a lack of evidence being provided and suggested that DT could liaise with JV to seek improvements in the way this could be addressed.

**Actions:**

- JV to put DT in touch with colleagues to discuss letter style/content.
- DT to liaise with JV to seek improvements in ensuring the correct evidence was obtained from claimants as quickly as possible to avoid processing delays.

**Wayne Leatherbarrow**

Q. Regarding the Emergency Limited Assistance Scheme (ELAS) was it feasible to locate a member of staff in the One Stop Shop(s) to speak to customers face to face.

WL – The scheme had been implemented to ensure that applications could be submitted simply, processed judiciously, responded to quickly and appropriate support provided to the applicants promptly. Applications for assistance were submitted via on-line application form <http://www.sefton.gov.uk/advice-benefits/emergency-assistance/emergency-limited-assistance-scheme.aspx>.

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Those that had difficulty accessing or completing the on-line form could speak to an advisor in the One Stop Shops or Council's contact centre who would assist in submitting an application. Typically applications were considered from Monday to Friday 9am to 4.30pm, although exceptions were applied during statutory holiday periods. As far as reasonably practical and subject to demand, decisions on applications for help with the costs of food, essential goods for infants/children, gas, electricity or emergency travel were made within a working day/24 hours. Decisions on applications for assistance with furniture or essential domestic appliances were made within a maximum of 5 working days. Applicants were notified of a decision on their application by telephone.

MQ – Some applications were processed within one hour.

WL – where we saw a pattern emerge, either with homeless or with those in severe financial deprivation, and to reduce repeated requests, we directed customers to means of further support. Collaborative work was undertaken in this respect with Citizens Advice Sefton advisors.

JV – many positive comments had been received regarding One Stop Shops. Regarding ELAS applicants preferred to speak to staff face to face.

**Action:**

- WL –consider locating a member of ELAS team in OSS to speak to customers face to face and speed up the application process.

Q. What was the current stance towards people whose first language was not English?

JV – we would make interpretation/translation services available

MQ - Southport One Stop Shop know the top five languages dealt with.

Angela Ellis - indicated that Google translate can be used for website issues

WL – confirmed that if staff encountered a customer with difficulty understanding English then Language Line would be used.

It was the Members' view that we should get simple, concise messages out to people.

Q. What measures were in place for mental health/alcohol/drug dependency issues?

DT – interested in hearing about accessibility issues from JV

JV- organisations were happy to speak to the Benefits Service

All letters should have similar logos (One Council approach) and have photographs.

Michele Anglesea (Adult Social Care) was the Council's Easy Read consultant and was an accredited assessor so all forms could go through her.

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JV- happy to liaise with DWP regarding delay issues and evidence required.

**Actions:**

- JV to provide DT with information about accessibility issues/once Council approach
- DT to have forms/communications run past Adult Social Care Easy Read consultant
- JV to liaise with DWP regarding delay issues and evidence required

Regarding ELAS what were the main reasons for claiming?

WL – initial observations would conclude that Benefits sanctions and migration to Universal Credit had proved a catalyst. Receiving funds monthly rather than weekly was the most significant factor in the increase in people facing extreme financial hardship.

However, over the last 12 months we had seen a rising number of claims from residents not in receipt of benefits. For example, from 18-25 year olds on zero hour contracts living independently, also the self-employed in more affluent areas. For many it was the difficulty of securing a regular guaranteed income.

Regarding single parent demand, single females had a relatively slim chance of getting work and this raised concerns as to the welfare of their children and family as they were struggling financially. The typical profile was that 74% of claimants lived in the south Sefton wards and were struggling with sanctions and had exhausted other means of financial/hardship assistance such as budgeting loans etc. KG – Care leavers were also suffering due to 5 week delay with Universal Credit.

DS – Because of the insufficiency of the funding available more and more families were finding themselves in financial difficulties. The Trussell Trust, open between 9.00 am and 5.00 pm, could issue emergency foodbank vouchers. St. Leonard's Foodbank and the Trussell Trust had a really good relationship with the One Stop Shops and ELAS team officers.

**Action:**

- WL - consideration to be given to issuing Emergency Foodbank vouchers by Trussell Trust.

In respect of claims for ELAS was there one particular reason for claimants being sanctioned?

GB – In relation to sanctions, the CAB had seen sanctions of up to 91 days with no access to budgeting loans. £40 hardship payments

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could go down to £20. The ELAS limit was 3 claims and GB asked if the Council had discretion to extend the limit, for example, in cases where delays regarding right to reside status with no access to eligible benefits. Children's welfare was paramount in such circumstances.

WL – Confirmed that the Council did have some discretion – but it had to balance who's in more need than anyone else, e.g. mothers who needed to feed children. The Council did award more than 3 applications (per year) exceptionally. The number of applications rose from 45 to 1645 when cash awards were made. A small minority claimed 3 awards every year. There were a number of applicants who were subject to "no right to reside" orders. These individuals were likely to be deported or would try to hide from the authorities. They were given emergency support and funding was ring fenced and could be rolled forward. An additional £500,000 had been secured for 2015/16. Funding amounted to £1.2m in 2013/14 and £500,000 in 2014/15. The Government's declared intention was to maintain funding until April 2017. Officers were particularly worried about the effect on the voluntary sector.

A Member asked about an appropriate timeline.

WL – Indicated that there was a very rigorous process of weekly monitoring and feedback to Members with a continuous dialogue with arvalo and the foodbanks. There would be a peak in demand at the start of the new financial year. This would correspond with a rise in demand from 35 cases a day to 85 a day. The scheme did operate over the Christmas period. An advance profile was taken and 50 food parcels were stored in a secure unit. Pre-printed utility bill top up vouchers were also produced.

DS – Commented that 250 festive bags were produced and 400 meat vouchers were printed which were redeemable at T.A. Owens (butchers). Of 350 vouchers printed last year, only 6 or 7 were not redeemed and only one individual tried to sell their voucher. The St Leonard's foodbank was open on Boxing Day and New Year's Eve. The Member indicated that he was happy with WL exercising discretion, as the legislation was supposed to protect all children. He asked if all sections of the Council were aware of this.

WL – The Council did have to validate applications which said that children were involved. Cases were always referred to social care provision where children were involved.

A Member asked if the Council could do anything to improve the Service.

WL – Indicated that sustainability beyond April 2017 was the main issue. The net result of reduced funding would be an increased cost to the Council and an increase in the number of vulnerable young people. He felt that it was important that Members were aware of the risk entailed.

A Member asked if delays were occurring.

WL – Stated that at least 60% of the "demand profile" were waiting for benefit to be processed, were sanctioned or realised they hadn't got enough money to live on because of loans, other avenues

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exhausted etc. which left them with little to live on. Many families were experiencing hardship, including some who had 3 jobs! The number of applications over the last 2/3 years involved an increase in the number of people from 7,500 to 8,000 per annum. The number of applications had levelled out to about 11,000. However, he was concerned that the Council may not be capturing the entire hardship demographic, given the deprivation in the Borough, because of the element of pride involved in making applications and that people were instead turning to family and friends for support.

A Member was interested in those cases where the DWP should be paying.

WL – Indicated that these cases would fall within the 60% mentioned of those waiting for approval, etc. Some people had been sanctioned because they had been 10 minutes late for interview. Stringent methods were being applied.

GB – Commented that the CAB was sometimes “picking up the tab” for the DWP. Subsequent appeals may not be heard for months and this could rise to 12 months for residency appeals. Following these protracted procedures, most applicants were eventually awarded back payments.

WL – Stated that the DWP would regard funding as having been pass-ported to Councils. The DWP had published little bits of paper re-directing people to the Council. He believed that the DWP had its own remit and austerity agenda. Although we tried to work closely, we should be working more collaboratively with JCP/DWP to be more people centred.

MQ – Stated that this also applied to Universal Credit.

A Member commented that some strange decisions were being made.

**Action:**

- All - Strive to work more collaboratively with DWP/JCP and be more people centred.

**Debbie Shelley**

DS – Indicated that with effect from September 2015, foodbank provision in the South Sefton area had been centred on just one site, namely, St. Leonard’s, Bootle who had merged with Crosby. Job Centres had foodbank vouchers available on the Internet (Trussell Trust). They did not appear to be receiving any from Bootle JCP, only from Waterloo JCP. She added that stopped payments caused much distress, particularly ESA Payments and tax credits which were stopped with immediate effect. She had recently met with other North West foodbanks who could not believe how well the system worked in Sefton. She felt that Sefton’s system gave optimum value for money. The Trussell Trust had a mechanism for feeding back information to Government.

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A Member asked how many applications were received per week at St. Leonard's.

DS – indicated that 32 vouchers were received between 10.30 a.m. and 2.30 p.m. last Friday alone, involving 92 people being provided with food. 1000 people every month were being fed and 120 agencies in Sefton gave out vouchers. The numbers were not going up, but plateauing. 12,000 people would have been fed by March/April 2016 and the Centre was one of the busiest of the Trussell Trust food banks. There was never enough food, but the donors were very generous.

A Member asked where the CAB and Terry Cain (Welfare Rights Adviser) came in.

DS – It was good to have Welfare Rights advisors from the Council at the Food Centres as they saw/interviewed everyone that came in, but more investment was needed from Government

A Member asked if the same families/individuals were applying for foodbank parcels.

DS – Replied that applicants could receive 3 vouchers per 6 months, but if there was an ongoing benefits problem, the foodbank could give more. Some applications were refused but generally the system was not abused and 99% of applicants did need the service. No-one wants to be in a foodbank! A Quality Assurance visit had been made recently. 120 volunteers were involved and there was a welcoming, loving environment at the Centre.

**Action:**

- All-Seek more investment from Government to support Welfare Advice provision at Foodbanks

**Karen Gray**

Could a Local Care Leavers Protocol be developed with the DWP and what should be included in such a Protocol.

KG - indicated that there was a local protocol designed to break down as many barriers as possible for care leavers and aid their transition into adulthood. There was also an early identification scheme brought in to face the challenges of Universal Credit. Care leavers were unable to claim in advance as they could before with Job Seekers Allowance. Also claims now went to national processing centres rather than being dealt with locally. A recent new idea was to notify local Job Centres of those care leavers who were likely to be attending the Centres. The Corporate Parenting Service had a really good dialogue and system of communication with Job Centre staff. She was very proud of these relationships and added that the DWP staff and the Leaving Care Personal Advisers had been fantastic.

A Member asked if there was anything that could be improved.

KG – Indicated that there was one issue which would assist: that was, if the Personal Advisers could be provided with a direct

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telephone line to staff in WL's team for ELAS. WL confirmed that this would not be a problem.

In answer to a question from a Member, KG confirmed that the Council's Revenues and Benefits service and DWP could develop a system for "flagging" the vulnerable nature of care leavers.

KG – Asked for it to be put on record that Carmel Brinkley and Nicky Armstrong in WL's team were extremely efficient officers.

A Member asked if care leavers were given help with budgeting.

KG – Confirmed that there was a very stringent statutory process for imparting independent learning skills. There was also a Dedicated Care Leaving Centre which was located behind the Crosby Lakeside Adventure Centre in Waterloo. 13 of the young people had obtained places at University. Universal Credit was a real problem for some of them, due to 5 week delays and particularly the requirement to demonstrate 35 hours of job searching per week.

**Actions:**

- WL-Personal advisors in Care Leavers team to have direct access to ELAS staff
- DT - Revenues/Benefits service to look into feasibility of having a system flag to alert if a claimant was a care leaver – also DWP to be asked if feasible on their systems.
- to put on record that Carmel Brinkley and Nicky Armstrong in WL's team were extremely efficient officers

**Diane Turner**

A Member indicated that there seemed to be lot of confusion with wording on Benefit Decision notification letters- how could this be improved?

DT - Most certainly there were issues with letters. Restricted because of computer system. Could put free text on back of letters.

A lot of work had been done with CAB over budgeting skills and trained staff to identify those clients with severe debt or other issues. CAB Referral measures were in place.

A Member indicated that Mencap provided Easy Read literature and gave an example of 1 of his constituents. Jason Duffy had sorted the problem out.

DT – This was a national problem and indicated that she would work with Christine Finnigan and Angela Ellis to try to improve.

A Member asked about Co-location with DWP

DT - This would work well. It was tried in 2013 when the Benefit Cap was introduced. Job Centre staff located in One Stop Shop but logistically took a while to set up.

MQ – Worked well for a while but DWP keen for staff to return.

CF - Regional Manager for NW Sue Riley could be approached with



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proposals outlined in a letter.

A Member indicated that he was confident that there was a trial calculation facility on our website. Local DWP Managers were very good but had difficulty in making decisions locally.

A Member stated that it was important to have nationally agreed protocols especially to prevent minor changes in circumstances stopping housing benefit and the customer was unaware.

DT – DWP were not telling us the reason for benefit stopping.

A Member indicated that DWP were not telling Council of minor changes. Letter from Minister 3 ½ years old.

A Member indicated that upon transferring from Job Seekers Allowance to Universal Credit there was a possible 5 week gap ... was housing benefit paid until Universal Credit was paid?

DT – This depended on how information came in to them. Some people contacted them themselves. In other cases, people didn't tell us about changes, but there shouldn't be a break in benefits.

GB – Cases had been seen where delays had been 9/10 weeks. Housing Benefit paid direct to landlord. Universal Credit claim process. When it came to recovery was the Council reimbursed?

DT – When Housing Benefit was the only benefit it was much simpler for us to recover. Much more difficult to recover Housing Benefit over-payment.

A Member indicated that a person could be receiving over-paid Housing Benefit for 8 – 10 weeks.

DT – We would suspend Housing Benefit immediately if we suspected over-payment.

A Member indicated that we did get a lot of DWP information but it scratched the surface of real circumstances in some cases.

A Member indicated that some claimants were sanctioned.

DT – We were given information re change of tax credit but not given details of what had changed. We needed more information and to make information sharing to be as seamless as possible as we were dealing with the same person.

CF – Could we feed information via the Working Group to make another approach to DWP?

**Actions:**

- Can we feed information via the Working Group to make another approach to DWP to discuss issues/co-location etc.
- CT to work with Client to improve claimant communications

**Grant Bernard**

Was there a SLA with Sefton?

GB – Yes

Did it impact on CAB?

GB No – mostly cases to do with debt/personal budgeting support – very few issues with ELAS or Housing Benefit. 7 specialists. Approx.

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8 Housing Benefit appeals a year. Disputes with LA were few. Most of the benefit issues tended to involve DWP not LA. If CAB had an issue they raised this with Mike Balshaw in the Benefits Service. Quarterly liaison meetings were also held with Housing Benefits. Use implied consent when client not present as could take up to 48 hours to get documentation signed. Used DWP guidelines when working with clients.

What were the main causes of cases?

GB - Change of circumstances – Housing Benefit decision, Council Tax reduction decisions, Overpayment decision, Council Tax demand – letters from landlord. Hard to unravel – especially if working hours changed. Could have award letters going out monthly. Sat with Pete McClusky from the Benefits Service and it had taken them hours. Recommended the inclusion of a summary letter Regarding the CAB Gateway system – how long did it take to see an adviser?

GB - Urgent on day – specialist team down to availability and urgency. Could be 2 weeks if it was an appeal. Do our best to see a specialist within 2 weeks.

Does CAB have enough capacity?

GB – Yes by generalist working beyond capacity. 30 by 9.30 a.m.

WL – Put discretionary funding into CAB. Operate a helpline – also provided by surgery and appointment times. Demand was extremely high. Try to see people within 3 days. Also operated surgery in One Stop Shops 1 day a week.

**Actions:**

- DT – Benefits Service to consider use of summary letter to accompany Benefit Decision/Entitlement notices.
- WL – consider putting discretionary funding into Citizens Advice Sefton.

**Mark Quillan**

A Member asked whether cases were referred to CAB; about re-instated CAB surgeries with effect from January; and co-location in One Stop Shops

MQ – Previously it worked very well. Appointment only – only few per surgeries, if there were no appointments they withdrew it!

A Member asked about the first Point of Contact.

MQ – First point of contact working very well. Some cases with small changes – staff trained to assess clients there and then.

DT – some cases were more complex. MQ's team dealt with similar enquiries quickly but some needed to be referred to back office staff.

Fast tracked cases where clients had all necessary paperwork.

CF – Why can't experienced staff be in One Stop Shop to deal with urgent cases?

MQ – Evictions within 24 hours.

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DT – They've got process to deal with evictions percentage.  
The Benefits Service dealt with over 3K processes in a week, very small proportion of work coming from OSS so staff were better located in the back office rather than providing general advice. Need staff to deal with quick wins at the front line and assist claimants with providing the right information.

A Member asked whether customers were seen in sequential order e.g. Cab rank system?

MQ – Taxi licensing is appointments, but all other enquiries are dealt with in sequential order.

CF – When's next OSS customer survey?

MQ – February 2016. Best results since 2008. But questions only in relation to OSS customer experience rather providing than overall service picture

**Action:**

MQ – Customer Survey – to consider widening scope to include customer feedback on all contact streams (e.g. telephone, email, contact forms etc.)