

# Minutes of Forum Meeting 27 March 2009

## **28 people present**

### **1. Welcome/Introductions**

Catherine welcomed everyone.

### **2. What's going on with Disability Backup?**

There are many different topics and themes that Disability Backup has the opportunity to get involved in. Catherine raised these topics to see which ones the Forum Members would most like to get involved in. Catherine also updated the group on ongoing topics.

- Parking- We have contacted the parking team to ask for a meeting in early June
- Choice in Hackney are offering Forum members free training in Disability Living Allowance and Employment Support Allowance on Wed 15th and Fri 17th April
- Hackney Museum are interested in holding an evening event for Forum members, Catherine to meet with museum manager to discuss this
- We have the opportunity to meet with the coordinator of the disability hate crime MET group; this could be a potential Forum Meeting to explore what is happening in Hackney regarding disability and crime.
- There is a new service centre being built called, .service first. this will be on Hillman Street (behind the town hall) We have been approached by the council to provide advice around the accessibility of the building, signage etc.
- Catherine asked the group if there was interest in working with the Olympic team. Forum members agreed that Disability Backup should be involved in the Olympics, providing consultation and advice.
- There is an Well Street Common User Group are holding their annual event on 17th May 12-5pm the Forum have been invited to have a stall. Catherine will be away at this time but some Forum members are willing to staff the stall at this event.

### **3. Housing Benefits**

- Jennifer Wynter and Kevin Barnes from Hackney Housing Benefits Service came to talk to the Forum about Housing Benefits
- The service aims to pay all new claims and changes of circumstances within 20 days; they are currently achieving 16 days. The service has recently received accreditation from the Audit Commission for the quality of its service.
- There is an online calculator to assess your entitlements to Housing Benefits, Tax credits you can also make an online application at <http://www.hackney.gov.uk/benefits-calculator.htm>

### **Q. What if you don't have internet access at home?**

A. You can go to the office at Keltan House to see an advisor, or you can complete the online application at any of Hackney's libraries. There are also 6 neighbourhood offices which have trained staff that can assist you. These offices are:

- Keltan House, Mare Street
- Homerton Office, Well Street
- North West Neighbourhood Office, Stoke Newington
- North East Neighbourhood Office, Stamford Hill (Council Tenants Only)
- Stamford Hill Library, Portland Avenue,
- Shoreditch Neighbourhood office, Cropley Street
- Debeauvoir and Queensbridge office, Debeauvoir
- Clapton, Gilpin Square

**Q. What if you are unable to leave the house?**

A. We can arrange home visits to help you complete the application form, call 0208 356 3399

- Local Housing Allowance is paid to the tenant, however, should the tenant have learning difficulties, medical conditions or language difficulties it may be paid directly to the landlord.
- If a customer moves home but cannot move into the new home until certain adaptations are completed, then benefit can be paid on both homes for up to 4 weeks
- If the customer is blind, receives DLA or attendance allowance and lives with a 'non dependant' their benefit will not be reduced.
- Employment Support Allowance replaces Incapacity Benefit, this is to try and support people back into paid employment. Currently receive approx £60.50 for the first 13 weeks, applicants undergo a work capability assessment, to assess the applicant's eligibility to work and their ESA should increase from week 14
- DLA is not considered as income but may result in an increase in HB/CTB due to an increased disability premium used in the calculation of entitlement
- Backdating claims can now only be backdated for 6 months for working age customers provided "good cause" is proved, if a customer is of a non working age then HB/CTB will usually be automatically backdated for 3 months
- Carers receiving carers allowance are not considered as 'non dependants' and your benefits will not be reduced
- Discretionary Housing Payment, if you are facing problems with your rent or council tax you may apply for a discretionary housing payment for support; this is totally at the discretion of the housing benefits team.

**Q. The letters that are sent out by the Housing Benefits team are too faint! Can you use a better ink to make it more accessible?**

A. The Benefits team will explore this issue and will consult with disability backup when they are developing new flyers, leaflet etc.

**Q. The letters that are sent to Self employed people are not representative / relevant to smaller self employed services; can you make them more accessible?**

A. We are updating and changing all of our forms and leaflets and will take this into account.

**Q. Carers are not treated 'specially', when coming to talk about Housing benefits and Employment support allowance, the questions asked are not applicable when claiming for someone with a severe disability. The team should be aware of the nature of the disability/ability of the claimant and should show special consideration to carers.**

A. Catherine suggested this was an issue that the Carers Centre could better represent. The speakers will take this back as good practice.

**Q. Are your staffed trained in Disability Awareness?**

A. Some staff at the offices have Disability Discrimination training, but not all of the staff in the department are trained. Catherine to give the team details of the Disability Awareness training that is currently happening for all Council Staff.

**Q. Landlords are regularly frightening, also can be unsupportive when they charge in advance but Housing Benefits is paid in arrears.**

A. The Housing Benefit Team work with landlords and there is a landlord liaison team who meet regularly with all registered social landlords. However, they are aware that there are issues with landlord's attitudes; this could be considered for a future forum meeting.

- Disability Relief is available for those who need an extra room, space or bathroom etc, due to their disability (e.g. somewhere for equipment, wheelchair accessible house, downstairs bathroom) Those eligible can receive one band off of your Council Tax
- You don't have to pay Council Tax if your property is unoccupied whilst you are in Hospital, a care home or receiving personal care
- Carers receive 25% deduction from Council Tax, where the only residents in the property are the council tax payer and their carer, and where the carer is not their partner, or son/daughter

For more information on any of these issues contact the Benefits Service on 0208 356 3399

For Council Tax call 0208 356 3154 Or call Catherine at Disability Backup for assistance

#### **4. Any other business**

Information Packs were given out at this meeting with copies of minutes, maps, application forms and other useful materials. If you were unable to attend the meeting but would like a pack, please contact Catherine.

**Catherine thanked everyone for attending.**

**Meeting closed.**