

## Notes from DBU Forum of 28<sup>th</sup> June 2012

Maureen Ford facilitated. 31 members attended. The Forum focused on housing issues relating to older people. Andy Green from Disabled People Against the Cuts, who had been unable to attend an earlier Forum also spoke.

**Maureen** spoke about the DBU Language Code and invited Cllr Alcock to sign it for a photo, which she did.

**Cllr Karen Alcock** (Deputy Mayor of Hackney) spoke on her role as cabinet member responsible for housing. She pointed out the salience of housing as an issue in Hackney and explained that top priority was to maintain as long as possible people's independence in their own home. The climate was one of government cuts, with potential reduction in adult social care; the coming replacement of DLA with PIP and the closure of the Independent Living Fund, which supported small repairs in people's homes. She acknowledged that the existing housing stock was not well adapted to people's needs and that more sensitive matching of tenants to properties was needed. It was not necessarily the case that a single person would not be housed. The main impact of cuts to date was on people of working age.

Members asked how they should raise maintenance issues which affected them seriously as disabled people (one member had been unable to get in and out of his property after new lino was laid) and whether there was a councillor acting as champion for disabled people. Cllr Alcock pointed out that there was a cabinet member responsible for equalities, although that was not quite the same thing and referred to Cllr Sally Mulready Jones, a former lead on equalities with a particular interest in disabled people. However a member pointed out that he had been unable to get a response from her.

Cllr Alcock said other cabinet members would be willing to speak to the Forum.

**Liz Watson** from the private sector team spoke about the availability of a grants programme for improvements and particularly the Disabled Facilities Grants were introduced 22 years ago to fund adaptations to disabled people's property. It is available for all forms of housing tenure to people who cannot afford to install necessary adaptations (if you can afford to contribute you have to). Grant can be anything up to £30K to install items like a stair lift, to improve access or to use facilities in the home. Renovation grants are also available – but only to owner occupiers. Liz's team will put pressure on private landlords to bring properties up to standard, before taking enforcement measures. They have far reaching legal powers to force landlords to do repair work. If there is rubbish and a hazard of vermin for example they will take action – similarly blocked drains and leaking gutters. She encouraged members to report instances of this kind – but to be sure they give proper details: addresses etc. A member raised the issue of leaseholders' contributions to communal doors, for which no grant was available.

**John Isted** is the lettings manager for Hackney. After 21 years working for the borough, he felt it was a good place to work. However there were 19,000 households on the waiting list and only 1,600 homes available per year. (including nominations to Housing Associations. Since 2006 a Choice Based Lettings system had been used. Houses already adapted for disabled people were advertised and administered by the Special needs Housing Team (cries of 'language code!'). An occupational therapist heads the team, which includes one partially sighted member. Housing Associations are now allowed to charge 80% of market rents and to introduce fixed term lettings (initially for one year and then reviewed with possible extension for further 5 years after which the tenancy would again be reviewed). Hackney Homes was not doing this. He referred to the Pan London Mobility Scheme, which enables tenants to move boroughs because of caring or work responsibilities (cf <http://www.housingmoves.org>) A member raised her own experience of being accommodated in temporary housing on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor, with stairs she could not manage and where her carer was unable to get in. John explained that such a hostel was stage 1 of rehousing. Stage 2 should follow within 4-5 weeks. Housing has to be 'suitable' for the tenant (but not perfect). Hackney had no plans to start deporting its homeless to other regions. Temporary accommodation provided was all in Hackney (even though Westminster was taking up accommodation in Hackney). It would be even more unreasonable to house disabled people out of the borough than others.

**Andy Green** from DPAC applauded the gains made by disabled campaigners, but emphasised that all these gains were now under threat. DPAC was joining forces with the BMA against the work tests being administered by ATOS, since GPs had condemned the work capability assessments. He also criticised the DLA reassessments and the higher bar likely to receive PIP. On the housing benefit penalties for under occupation, he argued that impact assessments were needed, since additional space might be needed because of an impairment. Disabled people should have a choice of supported and unsupported work. The language used by politicians was encouraging hate crime and a noticeable increase in abuse over parking spaces and similar incidents had been recorded. He encouraged members to be active citizens, engaging in the forums available to them – and to help build DPAC.