
*** HARINGEY COUNCIL ***

Scrutiny Services

Report of the Scrutiny Review of Benefit Take-Up

July 2005

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Executive Summary

This Executive Summary outlines the key findings and recommendations contained in the report of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's Review of Benefit Take-Up.

Benefits are complex and often confusing to many residents. Most Members will have come across people in their casework who have experienced severe difficulties in obtaining the benefits to which they are entitled, often causing them considerable hardship. Rectifying problems can also be a long winded exercise involving dealing with several different agencies, all with their own practices and procedures.

Many other people do not claim their entitlements and there is evidence that take up levels in Haringey may be lower than in comparable Boroughs in London. There is still a stigma attached to claiming benefits and people are still routinely vilified in the media as "scroungers" for doing so. In such circumstances, it is hardly surprising that some people decide not to claim what they are entitled to. Entitlements are aimed at the most impoverished and vulnerable groups within the community and therefore it is they that suffer most when they are not claimed.

We found that there was much good work being undertaken within the Borough to promote benefit take up, although it is generally small scale and limited in scope and there is not enough provision for advice. There is a lack of strategic co-ordination or direction and we have made a number of recommendations about how the Council and its partners can begin to rectify this.

The Panel reached a number of key findings and recommendations for overall service improvement:

Key Findings and Recommendations

Strategic Issues

Our key findings:

- ▶ Haringey has a high level of deprivation but does not currently have an anti poverty strategy. The development of one could provide a means of directing action as well as setting priorities and objectives. Increasing benefit take up should be an integral part of any such strategy that the Council may decide to develop.
- ▶ Despite the key role that increasing benefit take up can play in helping to alleviate poverty, increasing benefit take up is not currently an objective within the Community Strategy. The issue should need to be given strategic priority and made an integral part of action taken to address deprivation.
- ▶ People are reluctant to claim their benefit entitlements due to a number of reasons. In particular, many are put off by negative images of people that claim and this may inhibit the success of take up campaigns. In order to counter this, a publicity campaign should be mounted to encourage people that it is "okay to claim"

Our recommendations:

Recommendation 1

That the Executive gives specific consideration as to whether there is a need for an anti poverty strategy for the Borough.

Recommendation 2

That action to improve benefit take up levels be made a specific priority by the Council and that the Haringey Strategic Partnership be requested to give consideration to making this an explicit objective within the Borough's Community Strategy.

Recommendation 3

That consideration be given to developing a specific publicity campaign to counter stigmatisation of people claiming benefit entitlements through encouraging residents that "it's okay to claim".

Current Provision

Our key findings:

- ▶ The Council does not have a specific welfare rights function and benefit take-up work is undertaken principally as an "add on" to other services. It is not always clear to residents where to go for information and advice and simple queries can often require dealing with different people in different offices. Provision suffers from a lack of strategic co-ordination or any overarching policy. There is no single service within the Council that has overall responsibility for leading on benefit take up work and working with partners, resulting in there being a lack of a corporate position on the issue.
- ▶ There is a commitment amongst Council services and voluntary sector partners to improve services and develop closer working. Better co-ordination would help to ensure that services complement rather than duplicate each other. Progress could be made if key agencies from within and outside of the Council were to develop a strategy to increase take-up, with a specific Council service given overall responsibility for leading on such work. This should include developing a co-ordinated approach, improving the availability and quality of information, making sure that there is adequate advice capacity to follow up campaigns and deal with queries and joining up services.
- ▶ The voluntary sector is best placed to provide benefit advice to many people due to the fact that it is seen as acting primarily for the client. It is also able to access sections of the community that are hard to reach. Advice provided is often of high quality and this is demonstrated by the fact that several organisations have achieved the Legal Services Commission Quality Mark (LSCQM).
- ▶ The Haringey Community Legal Services Partnership, whilst acknowledging that there is a lack of benefits advice within the Borough, has not made it one of their top priorities for action. The issue of advice capacity should be reviewed by the partnership and, in the first instance, it should re-visit its needs analysis for the Borough in order that services are reflect accurately local needs. Any significant shortfall that is identified should strengthen arguments for increased funding.

Our recommendations:

Recommendation 4

That a strategic and co-ordinated approach to benefit take up work be developed by the Council and its partners and this specifically addresses:

- The initiation of effective take up initiatives and campaigns
- The provision of relevant information
- The setting of appropriate targets for increasing take up
- Ensuring that there is sufficient advice capacity to back up take up campaigns
- Improved joint working and reducing duplication
- Provision of a seamless service to clients

Recommendation 5

That a specific Council officer is given corporate responsibility for leading on income maximisation and benefit take up work and working to develop joint working with the Council's partners.

Recommendation 6

That the Haringey Community Legal Services Partnership (CLSP) give specific consideration to the issue of advice capacity and re-visit its needs analysis for the Borough in order to ensure that current local needs can be assessed accurately.

Recommendation 7

That consideration is given to appropriate Council advice providing services taking action to obtain the Legal Services Commission Quality Mark (LSCQM).

Take Up Initiatives

Our Key Findings

- ▶ Action to increase benefit take up has the potential to yield impressive results with considerable gains for both individuals and the community as a whole. It is some of the most disadvantaged groups within the community that stand to gain most for such initiatives.
- ▶ A limited amount of take up initiatives have been undertaken within the Borough, some of which have produced good results. As there is no specific service that has an overarching role in promoting benefit take up, such work that does take place is generally piecemeal and taken as an "add on" to other work. Closer working between services should provide scope for increasing the amount and effectiveness of work that is undertaken.
- ▶ Data sharing can provide a highly effective means of targeting take up initiatives at those most likely to benefit and there is considerable potential for this to be developed within Haringey, particularly as it appears to be a "data rich" Borough. However, efforts to initiate campaigns using information held by the Council and its partners have been limited due to data protection concerns that have, in some cases, been based on a restrictive interpretation of relevant data.

- ▶ As one of the key reasons that regeneration funding is provided for is to alleviate poverty, increasing benefit take up would appear to be an appropriate use of such monies. There is scope for further initiatives that are funded by such streams.
- ▶ The Council is one of the largest employers within the Borough and a sizeable percentage of the workforce may well have entitlements, particularly to Tax Credits. Placing leaflets within pay packets is cheap and can be effective and has been done by other local authorities such as Newham. A campaign to encourage its workforce to claim their entitlements should be undertaken and that this focus particularly on Tax Credits. Consideration should also be given to collaborating with other local employers such as the Primary Care Trust.

Recommendation 8

That the Head of Legal Services is requested to review the arrangements for providing advice to services on the interpretation of the Data Protection Act 1998 in order to ensure that advice takes fully into consideration other legislation that may impact upon it.

Recommendation 9

That consideration is given to extending the use of regeneration monies, such as NRF funding, to finance benefit take up initiatives and the provision of benefit advice services to support them.

Recommendation 10

That the Council undertake a take up campaign to encourage its workforce to claim their entitlements and, in particular, Tax Credits and that consideration be given to applying for appropriate Inland Revenue funding to assist with financing this.

Recommendation 11

That consideration is given by the Council to collaborating with other local employers partners, such as the Primary Care Trust, on benefit take up initiatives.

Link-Age and Joining Up Services

Our Key Findings

- ▶ Current provision falls short of providing a viable alternative to the potential benefits that the government expects joint teams should be able to provide through improved joint working. For example, although there has been a proposals to set up a verification agreements with the DWP, this has not yet been developed whilst data sharing has been severely limited due to data protection concerns.
- ▶ The objective of joining up services is to develop provision for older people that is seamless, reduces duplication and provides links to other services. Whilst this need not necessarily entail setting up a joint team, services that provide these benefits to the customer should be developed in partnership with the voluntary sector.
- ▶ Arrangements for joint teams can be tailored to fit local needs and preferences. Detailed negotiations need to be initiated on a corporate basis with the Pension Service to assess

whether they would be the best means of delivering the best service for local residents, our local strategic objectives.

Our Recommendations:

Recommendation 12

That the Council works together with relevant partners to develop a strategic response the Link-Age document and, in particular, develop proposals for the delivery of seamless, integrated and holistic services to promote benefit take up for older people.

Recommendation 13

That, as an integral part of this process, full consideration is given as to whether the setting up of a joint team in Haringey would be of benefit to residents.

Recommendation 14

That a specified Council officer be given overall responsibility for leading on this issue, developing a corporate approach and initiating detailed discussions on behalf of the Council with the Pension Service on the options available.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The suggestion for scrutiny to examine in detail the Council's work in the area of anti-poverty measures and income maximisation for vulnerable people arose during the work planning process at the start of the 2004/05 Municipal Year. Particular concerns were raised by Members regarding what was perceived to be the low level of benefit take up of entitlement within the Borough. There is also, judging from the levels of benefits related casework that Members undertake, an apparent unmet need for benefits advice. The benefits process is complicated and confusing and most Members will have dealt with constituents who have had severe difficulties in ensuring that they receive the benefits to which they are entitled.
- 1.2 In setting up the review, Members felt that although there was work being undertaken within the Borough to increase benefit take up, there appeared to be a lack of strategic co-ordination or overarching Council policy in this area. It was therefore agreed that a focused, high level review would be undertaken which examined the Council's approach to income maximisation for those entitled to but not claiming benefits.
- 1.3 The terms of reference for the review were:
- "To examine in broad detail the approach by the Council and its partners to benefits take-up and other forms of income maximisation work for vulnerable people with a view to making recommendations to improve the strategic approach in this area".
- 1.4 The Members of the Panel were as follows:
- Councillor Gideon Bull (Chair), Gina Adamou, Judy Bax and Richard Reynolds.
- 1.5 During the review, the Panel considered evidence from a range of sources including:
- Council officers from Social Services, Benefits and Local Taxation, Customer Services and the Voluntary Sector Team
 - The Pension Service
 - Haringey CABx
 - Age Concern Haringey
 - The Angolan Community Association
 - The Association of London Government
 - Neil Bateman, an independent welfare rights, social policy and performance management consultant
 - Waltham Forest Joint Visiting Team
 - London Borough of Newham
- 1.6 In addition, visits were made to the Waltham Forest's Joint Visiting Team and to Newham's Social Regeneration Unit. The Panel also considered a range of documentary and statistical evidence.

- 1.7 This was a short and focussed scrutiny review and there were limits to the range of issues that could be considered fully. We therefore concentrated and received evidence on a number of key areas, particularly:
- The strategic approach to benefit take up work within the Borough and how this relates to overall action to address deprivation
 - Effective take-up initiatives
 - Advice provision and capacity
 - 5Joining up services, particularly in respect of older people
 - The "Link Age" agenda and joint visiting teams
- 1.8 Whilst improvements can and should be made in the overall approach to benefit take up work and advice as well as services, there is nevertheless evidence of high quality work being undertaken. We were very impressed at the commitment and professionalism of many of the people that we spoke to during the review and their readiness to work together to improve the service that our residents receive. This is particularly true of colleagues from the voluntary sector who are often under resourced and, in many cases, unpaid volunteers.
- 1.9 We would like to thank all of the individuals and organisations that helped us with our review for their kind assistance.

2. Strategic Issues

Introduction

- 2.1 Whilst it is the most vulnerable people within the community who depend on benefits for their income, by the same token it is also they that suffer the most when entitlements are not claimed. National data shows backs this up by showing that there are particularly poor take-up levels by the following specific groups:
- Older people
 - Families with disabled children
 - Black and minority ethnic groups
 - Single working age people on a low wage
- 2.2 Take up of welfare benefits is variable depending on the type of entitlement. Some benefits such as Income Support and Housing Benefit have comparatively high levels of take up - up to 90% in some cases. For other benefits, take up can be low. For example, Pension Credit is claimed by only around 66% of those entitled whilst Disabled Living Allowance take up is only between 30% and 50% (care) and 50% to 70% (mobility). Council Tax Benefit take up is especially low, at around 65% to 71% of those entitled.
- 2.3 The take up of means tested benefits is markedly lower than those that are not and owner occupiers are far less likely to claim. Among pensioners judged, on an initial assessment, to be entitled to Minimum Income Guarantee in 2001/2 or 2002/3 but not claiming it, three fifths were owner-occupiers.
- 2.4 There are various reasons why people do not claim benefits:
- Perceived need - some people, particularly older ones, have low expectations and do feel that their needs are such that they require additional income
 - Negative views about the benefits system - people may be worried about being stigmatised a being a "scrounger"
 - Lack of basic knowledge about the benefit
 - Perceived usefulness
 - Previous negative experiences with the benefit system
 - Peer/family views
- 2.5 There is some evidence that levels of take up may be lower in Haringey than in similar authorities. For example, Attendance Allowance was paid to 13.54% of those over the age of 65 within the Borough in August 2004. Figures for neighbouring authorities were as follows:
- Islington: 15.42%

- Camden: 13.76%
- Newham 18.36%
- Enfield: 14.12%
- Waltham Forest: 15.85%

2.6 The national average is 14.97% of people over the age of 65. There are similar patterns for Minimum Income Guarantee (MIG) and Disabled Living Allowance (DLA). Whilst these figures may be influenced by socio-economic factors to some extent, they could also suggest the possibility that there may be fewer people claiming their entitlement within Haringey than in comparable Boroughs.

The Benefits of Increasing Take Up

2.7 Local authorities play an important role in encouraging people to claim their entitlements and increasing the income of people in need has clear immediate benefits to them. It leads to better life outcomes. The health and well being of individuals who have successfully claimed for additional benefits improves. It also gives more independence among vulnerable people. This can mean that they are less likely to need care services.

2.8 The benefits to be gained are not just to the individual - communities as a whole gain from improved take up. Improved benefit can also lead to the following:

- Additional money for the local economy. A high percentage of the additional money claimed is likely to be spent locally as people in receipt of benefits are generally more inclined to use local shops and businesses.
- More money for services. Figures for those claiming benefits within an authority's area are taken into account by the government in calculating the Formula Spending Share (FSS) level. In addition, money from benefits also assists in providing income from charges.
- Working to increase benefit take-up is good public relations for local authorities as it is a visible way of addressing poverty.
- Reduced debt. This can impact, amongst other things, on levels of rent and Council tax arrears leading to improved collection rates.
- Potential joining up of services. Take up work offers the opportunity for developing a holistic approach to services e.g. income maximisation and rent arrears.

2.9 There is clear evidence that take up work and effective benefits advice can have a significant effect on the levels that are claimed. The CAB estimates that over £20 million per year is generated in additional benefits across London as a result of their work with clients whilst Camden Council estimate that every £1 spent on advice generates at least £10 in extra benefit take up. As we noted from the evidence that we received, there are also particular approaches and types of initiative that have been shown to be capable of delivering good results.

Strategic Approach

2.10 Haringey has a high level of deprivation. It is the 20th. most deprived local authority in the England and the 6th. most in London. In addition, it has the fourth lowest number of people in full time employment of any local authority in Britain. Despite this, Haringey does not currently have an anti poverty strategy. Although we did not explore this issue in any detail during our review, we feel that the Executive should give consideration to developing one as a means of directing action and setting priorities and objectives. We also feel that increasing benefit take up should be an integral part of any anti poverty strategy that the Council may decide to develop.

Recommendation:

That the Executive gives specific consideration as to whether there is a need for an anti poverty strategy for the Borough.

2.11 There are comparatively high numbers people within the Borough who are entitled to benefits. It also appears likely that take up within Haringey is lower than in comparable Boroughs. As mentioned previously, there are considerable benefits to be gained from successful take up work and priority should therefore be given to it. Increasing benefit take up is not currently an explicit objective of the Borough's Community Strategy. We feel that it should be given a higher priority within Haringey and that consideration should be given to making this a specific objective within the Community Strategy.

Recommendation:

That action to improve benefit take up levels be made a specific priority by the Council and that the Haringey Strategic Partnership give requested to give consideration to making this an explicit objective within the Borough's Community Strategy.

2.12 We feel that the current comparatively low take up rates within the Borough could be because there is still perceived to be a stigma attached to claiming benefits by many people. This is fuelled by media references to "scroungers". In order for any take up initiatives to be effective, people need to feel comfortable with claiming their entitlement. We would therefore recommend that a specific publicity campaign be mounted within the Borough encouraging people to claim their entitlements and stressing that it is "okay to claim".

Recommendation:

That consideration be given to developing a specific publicity campaign to counter stigmatisation of people claiming benefit entitlements through encouraging residents that "it's okay to claim".

3. Current Provision

Introduction

4.1 There is generally a three level approach taken to the provision of benefits advice:

- Level 1; providing leaflets and signposting
- Level 2; form filling - training is required for staff that do this
- Level 3; specialist advice and advocacy, such as that provided by the CAB

4.2 Benefit take up and advice work is undertaken by a range of agencies, both within and outside of the Council and we heard from each of the key services involved in this, beginning with that provided internally.

Customer Services

4.3 From the customer's perspective, the key area of contact with the Council for Housing Benefit and Council Tax queries is through Customer Services. Following a Business Process Re-Design (BPR) exercise, Customer Services will now be taking on a proactive role in providing advice and guidance on Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit as well as acting as the front office for Benefits and Local Taxation. In particular, they will be assisting in providing advice on how to fill in claim forms and the sort of evidence that is likely to be required to verify claims. It is aimed to reduce the number of repeat visits that customers make to Customer Services Centres, which can be quite high. Around 17% of visits are repeats benefits enquiries. The Service currently does little proactive work to promote benefit take-up themselves but works in conjunction with other Council services on campaigns, such as the Financial Assessment Team.

Social Services Financial Assessment Team

4.4 Social Services has a Financial Assessment team within their Older Persons service. The government's "Fairer Charging" policy was introduced in October 2002 and the provision of benefits advice to those subject to community care charges was made a statutory duty. The service had already been offering this since 1995 and so only minor changes to the charging policy were required. Their prime focus is on generating income from charges and the bulk of their work on benefits is carried out as part of this. They are able to make home visits and go through the interrogative questions on claim forms with clients.

4.5 In addition to advice given as part of the assessment process, the team also works with some people who are not subject to community care charges. They provide general advice and information on welfare benefits in a range of settings around the Borough and can provide "second tier" advice to other Council services. A range of simple and easy to understand leaflets have been introduced and are available on the Council's website. The website contains a hyperlink to the Department for Work & Pensions and other useful websites. It is accessible and can facilitate translations and be blown up for visually impaired people. Translations of information and

leaflets can be undertaken where requested. They provide advice for social services staff through a telephone advice line and have trained Sure Start staff, particularly in respect of Working Families Tax Credit. The department's Welfare Support Officer is also kept abreast of changes in benefits and updates are regularly given on Harinet. They have also provided sessions for the "Fit for Life" and other groups and a programme of advice & information sessions in Day Care centres has been planned throughout the year. £303,000 in additional benefits was successfully claimed by clients in 2003/4.

- 4.6 Consideration is being given to the further development of the service as part of the development of the Council's overarching Older Persons strategy. Informing older people about the availability of reputable independent financial advice is also being considered in relation to private pensions, investments and other financial matters. Closer partnership working with Job Centre plus and the Pensions Service is being developed, including consideration of accreditation of claims by Council staff through verification agreements.

Benefits and Local Taxation

- 4.7 The Council's Benefits and Local Taxation service in the Finance Directorate administer Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. Claim forms are available from the Council's website and Customer Services Centres. If assistance is required in the filling in of forms, this can be obtained from Customer Service staff. Such take-up work that is undertaken is done in collaboration with other Council Services, particularly Social Services.

Supporting People

- 4.8 The provision of benefits advice is one of the core functions of the Supporting People programme. This is a government initiative led by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. Support is intended to be housing related. The objective is to assist vulnerable people in staying in their own homes and avoiding institutionalisation such as, for instance, hospitalisation or imprisonment. It had proven to be a very successful programme, growing from a budget of £11.8m to £23m and covering approximately 6000 households with a wide range of client groups such as teenage parents, families and offenders.
- 4.9 The initiatives have "floating" support services, which focus on providing practical support. In particular, they provided advocacy and can provide face-to-face advice on claiming. There are three floating support services and they accept both referrals and self-referral. The quality of the services is considered to be good and they have been successful in benefit maximisation. The "HARTS" scheme covers 700 families whilst the "Patchwork" scheme focuses on single people. There are also other schemes covering older and black and minority ethnic people. In addition to the floating schemes, there are 4,000 people covered by accommodation-based schemes that also provide benefits advice.

The Voluntary Sector

- 4.10 There are many different community organisations that undertake benefits advice within the Borough. The Haringey Community Legal Services Partnership (CLSP) has a strategic role in the provision of advice services and this includes welfare benefit advice. Their Strategic Plan for 2003-4 states that "all the evidence gathered to date indicates that there is insufficient welfare benefits advice available". However, addressing this issue was not made one of their top priorities. It was instead felt that there was a greater need to concentrate on debt services, black and minority ethnic community partnership, developing Quality Marked Legal Services and Funding Support. This will nevertheless assist indirectly in improving the level of welfare benefits advice.
- 4.11 The CLSP's advice strategy identified gaps in services and has been used to provide the criterion for funding. The partnership has encouraged organisations to gain the Legal Services Commission Quality Mark (LSCQM). Although there are several voluntary organisations that have achieved the quality mark, there are no Council services that have yet achieved it. A review of the strategy is underway and all relevant community organisations have been consulted.
- 4.12 The CLSP has taken the view that it will only fund "Level 3" benefit advice services as it is felt that quality levels should be high. Their strategy involves capacity building work being undertaken by the larger groups with smaller organisations and the Haringey CABx is a key part of this. Funding is aimed at organisations that are able to assist in this process. There is a wide range of communities within Haringey, with approximately 800 different community organisations so there are clear limitations on how many can be funded. There is often some duplication, with some communities having several different organisations doing similar work. For example, there are 15 different Somali organisations. Groups within communities are encouraged to work together. This has proven successful in the case of the Angolan community, who now have a model that it is hoped to replicate elsewhere. Their expertise on a range of issues is particularly useful as they are based at the Selby Centre and are therefore in a position to spread their knowledge around the other groups that are based there.
- 4.13 The review looked in detail at two key providers of benefit advice within the Borough, Haringey CABx and Age Concern Haringey:

Haringey Citizens Advice Bureaux (CABx)

Haringey CABx provide a range of services in relation to benefits, from form filling to advocacy and it constitutes 36% of their work. However, they are trying to concentrate on the more complex areas and leaving the form filling to the Pension Service and smaller community organisations. In particular, the Pension Service has the advantage of being able to verify claims. In addition to the services provided at their bureaux, they also have the following specific projects:

- *Housing Debt and Welfare Benefits; Housing Managers regularly refer individuals who have accrued rent arrears to their Housing Debt and Welfare Benefits for Council Tenants service. These are often due to problems with Housing Benefit, which is also*

administered by the Council. The CAB feels that earlier action by Housing could prevent arrears reaching crisis levels and that this should be built into their procedures.

- *Mental Health Outreach - sessions are held at St. Ann's Hospital, Tynemouth Road and Canning Crescent*
- *HIV/Aids Outreach - sessions are held at the Winkfield Resource Centre and by referral from Social Services*
- *NDC health based project - by self and third party referral and appointment at the Laurels Healthy Living Centre. This is for residents in the Seven Sisters New Deal for Communities area.*

The above projects that the CAB run can visit clients in their homes if need be. There are high satisfaction levels with their services.

The CAB feel that there are a small but significant number of individuals who feel unable to engage with agencies and that there is a need for additional outreach services to reach these people. Some people are suspicious of what they regard as officialdom and are less than keen at engaging with agencies and particularly those that could sometimes be involved in taking action against them. The CAB is in a good position to reach such people - it is independent and its prime focus is on addressing the needs of the client.

The service provided by the Citizens Advice Bureaux is running at full capacity. There are very high levels of demand on their services and access has had to be restricted due to limits to their capacity. There is also a problem with premises. In particular, the Hornsey bureau is in a poor state of repair.

Age Concern Haringey

Age Concern Haringey provides information and advice related to welfare benefits to older people and their carers. It also supports them with a range of housing, health and 'community care' issues. A specialist outreach service for Turkish speaking older people is provided. During 2003/4, they had 3,220 client contacts relating to approximately 4,000 issues. Of these some 53% were benefit related and more than half of all clients were from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities. Benefits of nearly a £1/4 million were claimed successfully on behalf of clients. They offer help by telephone as well as in person. In addition to providing advice and information through their offices in Tottenham, they also reach out to diverse communities of older people by regular outreach desks at venues across the Borough. They also offer home visits to those unable to access the service.

They feel that older people are still the group most likely to miss out on benefits cash, either because they do not realise that they are entitled, do not know how to claim or feel there is a stigma attached to claiming and would rather 'make do'. In their experience, the changing benefit structures have led to confusion amongst those older people about their entitlement. This is particularly true of the uptake of Pension Credit. They also stated that many people have a preference for their benefits claims to be handled by local voluntary sector organisations.

Conclusion

- 4.14 Current service provision to promote benefit take up and provide advice is fragmented in nature. The Council does not have a dedicated welfare rights service that is directly provided and benefit take-up work is undertaken principally as an "add on" to other services. It is not always clear to residents where to go for information and advice and simple queries can often require dealing with different people in different offices. There is a lack of strategic co-ordination or any overarching policy. There is no single service within the Council that has overall responsibility for leading on benefit take up work and working with partners, resulting in there being a lack of a corporate position on the issue.
- 4.15 During the course of our review, we worked closely with all of the Council services involved with benefits work as well as the Citizens Advice Bureau and Age Concern. There is a genuine commitment to improving services and closer working, especially amongst voluntary sector colleagues. Better co-ordination between the Council and voluntary sector provision would help to ensure that services complement rather than duplicate each other. Considerable progress could be made if key agencies from within and outside of the Council were to work towards developing a specific strategy to increase take-up, with a specific Council service given overall responsibility for leading and co-ordinating such work. This should include developing a co-ordinated approach, improving the availability and quality of information, making sure that there is adequate advice capacity to follow up campaigns and deal with queries and joining up services.

Recommendations:

- That a strategic and co-ordinated approach to benefit take up work be developed by the Council and its partners and this specifically addresses:
 - The initiation of effective take up initiatives and campaigns
 - The provision of relevant information
 - The setting of appropriate targets for increasing take up
 - Ensuring that there is sufficient advice capacity to back up take up campaigns
 - Improved joint working and reducing duplication
 - Provision of a seamless service to clients
 - That a specific Council officer be given corporate responsibility for leading on income maximisation and benefit take up work and working to develop joint working with the Council's partners.
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4.16 Take up initiatives need to be supported by effective advice services. We would concur with the view of both Haringey CABx and Age Concern that the voluntary sector is probably best placed to deliver this. Their first priority is the client and people are less likely to be suspicious of their motives. Individuals can feel that the Council and the Department of Work and Pensions have other priorities. They are also better placed to access hard-to-reach groups such as minority ethnic communities. In particular, it is often difficult to reach older people in such communities. There can be language barriers to overcome and there may also be suspicion of "officialdom". The greatest gains in increasing take up are likely to be made within the longer established communities such as the Cypriot and African Caribbean. This is because there are more older people within these communities and they are more likely to have pension entitlements due to the fact that they will probably have been resident for longer.

4.17 The voluntary sector has the capability to provide high quality advice as is shown by the fact that several organisations have obtained the Legal Services Commission Quality Mark. However, the issue of advice capacity should be addressed and we would therefore recommend that the CLSP considers this issue and, in the first instance, re-visits its needs analysis for the Borough in order that services are reflect accurately local needs. Any significant shortfall that is identified should strengthen arguments for increased funding.

Recommendation:

That the Haringey Community Legal Services Partnership (CLSP) give specific consideration to the issue of advice capacity and re-visit its needs analysis for the Borough in order to ensure that current local needs can be assessed accurately.

4.18 We noted that voluntary sector advice providers have to undergo a number of stringent quality assessments in order to obtain the Legal Services Commission quality mark (LSCQM). No Council advice providing service has yet obtained the LSCQM and therefore been subject to the same external assessment process. We feel that that key Council advice providing services should be aiming to obtain the LSCQM in order to demonstrate to residents that our services are of the same high quality as those provided by our voluntary sector partners who have obtained

quality assurance. Due to its foremost role within the Council in dealing with residents, we would suggest that it would be appropriate if Customer Services were the first Council service to state its intention to work towards attaining quality assurance. As the CAB already have the highest level of LSCQM, consideration should be given to commissioning them to provide the necessary support to Council services in achieving this.

Recommendation:

That consideration is given to appropriate Council advice providing services taking action to obtain the Legal Services Commission Quality Mark (LSCQM).

4. Take Up Initiatives

What Works

4.1 The Panel heard evidence from Neil Bateman, an expert on benefits issues, on the sorts of initiatives by local authorities that have generally yielded good results. He felt that the following approach was likely to assist in promoting high levels of take-up;

- A commitment from the top to increase benefit take-up
- A mixed economy of activity that involved agencies working together rather than leaving it to each other
- Sufficient capacity within advice services to follow up take up campaigns effectively
- Ongoing and targeted activity that uses data held by local authorities such as Housing Benefit and Council Tax records. In particular, he noted that Haringey appeared to be a "data rich" Borough. Local data can identify the smaller picture and census and local area profiles, DWP ward based data and feedback from advisers can all be used.
- A range of initiatives such as publicity, one-to-one advice, outreach and postal work. Co-operation from DWP can assist in ensuring that campaigns reached the right people.
- An evidence based approach with realistic targets and measuring of results enabling those people most likely to benefit to be targeted and outcomes evaluated.

4.2 Some sorts of initiatives have been shown to be particularly effective:

- Trawls of sheltered housing
- Primary care based advice e.g. advice sessions in doctors surgeries
- "Second tier" advice service within the local authority whereby specified staff are able to advise front line staff on benefits issues
- Use of Housing Benefit/Council Tax Benefit data for Income Support, Pension Credit, Attendance Allowance and Disability Living Allowance campaigns
- Niche targets: faith groups, community groups, types of disability, homeowners not getting Council Tax Benefit, advice via schools, occupational groups
- High profile publicity – e.g. Council Tax Benefit
- Income maximisation work in debt cases and for local authority service users

4.3 A multi-agency survey in 2001 and published by the DWP "Income take-up a good practice guide" showed the success ratios of specific kinds of initiative as a percentage of successful claims:

- Publicity: 25% of contacts (but low response rate)
- Outreach advice work: 50% of those who seek advice
- Targeted advice work: 80% of those targeted

4.4 Particular examples of local authorities that undertaken successful campaigns were are follows:

- Lancashire and Newcastle: Annual Housing Benefit/Council Tax Benefit data trawls in these areas had yielded success rates of up to 80% success rates
- Islington: Initiatives had taken place involving providing advice through schools
- Wolverhampton and Suffolk: Home care service users had been targeted
- Bristol and Derbyshire: Tax credit campaigns
- Hertfordshire: Campaigns had been run that focussed upon children with disabilities
- Salford: People with a learning disability had been targeted

4.5 We went to look at action taken by the London Borough of Newham to increase take up:

Case Study - Newham Council

All of the electoral wards within the Borough are covered by Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF) funding and this has funded a wide range of take-up work. Increasing benefit take up has been set as one of the Borough's specific priorities by its Mayor, Sir Robin Wales. The Social Regeneration Unit, whose function is to reduce social exclusion and maximise the incomes of residents, leads on benefit take up work. They have undertaken a wide range of campaigns including ones aimed at people with learning disabilities, carers and children and families. They have, in particular, worked closely with schools on these initiatives. They have also undertaken projects involving the placing of advisers in GP surgeries, which have been very successful. Much of their work has been targeted through the use of information held in their Data Warehouse and these campaigns have yielded take up levels of around 30% to 50%. Newham have also encouraged their own staff to claim their entitlements through initiatives such as placing information leaflets on Tax Credits within pay slips. They have also used money from the Inland Revenue to publicise the availability of tax credits.

Advice to back up take up campaigns is commissioned from the voluntary sector and there is particularly wide use of the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB). This is mainly resourced through NRF funding. In particular, there is an advice centre within each of the Council's One-Stop Shops. Links have also been developed with the Primary Care Trust (PCT). All of their clients are now given a benefit check when they are being assessed for services as part of the Single Assessment Process. The Social Regeneration Unit also provides "second tier" advice to Council officers and services.

- 4.6 We also spoke to officers at Newcastle City Council. They also use a targeted approach that utilises available data. In particular, they emphasise an assertive approach whereby clients have to "opt out" of receiving advice and claiming additional benefits, rather than "opting in".

What Haringey does

- 4.7 In Haringey, initiatives to increase take up have been undertaken but they have been comparatively modest in scope compared with work that is done in many Boroughs with similar levels of deprivation. The Financial Assessment has worked closely with Housing Benefits and Council Tax. For example, Council Tax Benefit (CTB) was subject to capping until recently. When the cap was removed, a direct mailshot was sent to all those affected and publicising the change and the availability of advice on benefits. Other initiatives are currently being considered. Although there is a higher level of poverty in the east of the Borough, there are likely to be many older people who are "asset rich and cash poor" in the west of the Borough, such as people alone living in large draughty houses, who may be unaware of their entitlement to benefits.

- 4.8 As mentioned previously, much successful take-up work has been undertaken in other authorities using Housing Benefit and Council Tax data. Whilst some has been undertaken within Haringey, the ability to do this has been hampered by data protection concerns. For example, officers in Benefits and Local Taxation were informed by the IT Service that sharing data with that held by the Department for Work and Pensions was contrary to the Data Protection Act (DPA). Advice provided to the Panel by Neil Bateman was that this is permissible under the Social Security Claims and Payments Regulations and this has since been confirmed as correct by the Head of Legal Services in consultation with the Information Commission. In addition, Mr. Bateman stated that, if forms enabled customers to give their consent to data being shared, it was permissible to do so and that there are often ways round such obstacles such as the use of "tick boxes" which allow customers the option of opting in or out of having their information shared with other agencies.

- 4.9 Benefits officers were also informed that the use of data on dates of birth collected in the issuing of Freedom Passes could not be matched with their data in order to facilitate a targeted take up campaign. However, the Local Government Act 2000 empowers a local authority to:

"do anything they consider is likely to achieve the promotion or improvement of the economic well-being of their area".

- 4.10 This section has been used by other authorities to justify the sharing of data such as this and the Head of Legal Services, after consultation with the Information Commission, has also confirmed that this section of the Act can be used to allow this.

- 4.11 The current arrangement appears to be that the IT Service implement and provide advice on the DPA and refer any legal issues to the Head of Legal Services. There

appear be instances where other pieces of legislation, which IT officers may not be aware of nor may have the expertise to provide guidance on, impact on the interpretation of what is permissible under the DPA. We would therefore suggest, particularly in the light of our experience, that this arrangement be reviewed as it appears to have the potential to lead to advice being given that can unnecessarily impede services from taking action which may be beneficial to residents.

Recommendation:

That the Head of Legal Services is requested to review the arrangements for providing advice to services on the interpretation of the Data Protection Act 1998 in order to ensure that advice takes fully into consideration other legislation that may impact upon it.

4.12 We noted from our visit to Newham how NRF funding had been used to invest in a range of benefit take up initiatives, particularly the provision of advice services. This has also been done to some extent in Haringey in specific wards of the Borough that are covered by Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF) funding. There are a small number of programmes that include an element of benefits advice. These are:

- Anti-Burglary Support Project. The project primarily provides an emergency handyperson service for older residents who have been victims of burglary. The project officer also gives security/counselling advice, some of which can include checking to ensure that they are receiving the benefits they are entitled to.
- Care and Repair in the Garden. This pilot project provides a subsidised gardening service to older residents in the White Hart Lane ward who cannot tend their own gardens. The project officer can provide benefit advice to these residents where appropriate.
- Safety and Comfort in the Home. The project provides security and energy efficiency upgrades to homes in the NRF wards. This is done in partnership with British Gas and is managed by Eaga Partnership. Included in the upgrade work is a benefit health check for eligible residents.
- Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Carers Support Group. The project supports a monthly BME carers support group which provides help, advice and a break from caring for BME carers in Haringey. One of the popular features of the group is the benefits advice carers can get at the meeting. Staff also ensure that people are in receipt of benefits they are eligible for.

4.13 As regeneration funding is aimed at areas suffering from deprivation, there would seem to be a strong argument for using it to increase the take up of benefits as this can be particularly effective way of alleviating poverty and promoting well being. There would appear to be scope for additional use of NRF funding within Haringey as well as the use of other regeneration monies for specific initiatives and advice capacity to back them up. Consideration could also be given to such initiatives acting as pilots for possible extension to other areas of the Borough.

Recommendation:

That consideration be given to extending the use of regeneration monies such as NRF funding to finance benefit take up initiatives and the provision of benefit advice services to support them.

4.14 We also noted that Newham had run specific campaigns aimed at their own staff, particularly on Tax Credits for families with children. They informed us that there is specific funding available from the Inland Revenue for such promotional work. Haringey Council is one of the largest employers within the Borough and a sizeable percentage of our workforce may well have entitlements, particularly to Tax Credits. Placing leaflets within pay packets is cheap and can be effective. We would therefore recommend that the Council mounts a campaign to encourage its workforce to claim their entitlements and that this focus particularly on Tax Credits and that consideration be given to applying for funding from the Inland Revenue to assist with financing this. Consideration should also be given to collaborating with other local employers partners such as the Primary Care Trust on take up initiatives.

Recommendation:

- That the Council undertake a take up campaign to encourage its workforce to claim their entitlements and, in particular, Tax Credits and that consideration be given to applying for appropriate Inland Revenue funding to assist with financing this.
- That consideration be given by the Council en to collaborating with other local employers partners such as the Primary Care Trust on benefit take up initiatives.

Conclusion

4.15 We feel that there is considerable scope for undertaking additional initiatives to increase take up by adopting some of the successful and innovative measures that have been taken by other local authorities. As mentioned, these need not be costly to undertake. The adoption of a strategic approach will help in progressing this issue as well as enabling agencies to focus their efforts on the areas that are likely to yield the best returns. As previously mentioned, it is essential that there is sufficient advice capacity to follow up take up campaigns.

4.16 We noted that the Financial Assessment Team was now finding fewer people with additional entitlements during assessments - it was estimated that this had gone down from 30-35% to 20 to 25%. It would therefore appear that there may be some limits to the amounts of additional income that can be generated by take up campaigns and that there is a point where additional investment delivers diminishing returns.

5. Link-Age and Joining Up Services

- 5.1 One of the areas that the review focussed upon was the needs of older people. Increasing benefit take up is a priority for the government and this is particularly true in respect of older people where it is viewed as part of an integrated and holistic approach to meeting their needs.
- 5.2 The Labour government's manifesto of 2001 made a commitment to develop 'third age services' to deliver modern services to older people. As a part of this agenda, the Pension Service in was set up 2002 and Pension Credit introduced in 2003. The government felt that this would lead to a move from a position where obtaining the right support involved completion of lengthy claim forms and office visits to one where:
- Pensioners had a dedicated service
 - There was a local service that was focused on visiting those older people who need home visits
 - Claims to Pension Credit (which replaced the Minimum Income Guarantee) and other relevant benefits could be taken over the telephone; and
 - The Pension Credit claim form was reduced from 40 pages to 10.
- 5.3 The Pension Service run 26 call centres throughout the country. The centre that deals with Haringey is in Glasgow. There had been an acknowledgement that many older people are not comfortable with telephone transactions and that was one of the reasons why the local service was therefore set up.
- 5.4 In 2004, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), in collaboration with other government departments and the Local Government Association, developed a "Link-Age" model which met the 2001 manifesto commitment to provide a better integration of health, housing, benefits and social care for older people. The document set out a vision for joined up, holistic services for older people, described progress to date and consulted on next steps. "Link-Age" also involved the setting up of local networks of services for older people and steps are already being taken to bring some of the services together. These include:
- Joint visiting teams: These involve the Pension Service working together with local authorities to form 'joint teams' where staff operate as a single team, undertaking visits, taking claims across the range of benefits and, at the same time, making financial assessments for services.
 - "Alternative Offices": These are offices that are authorised by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to receive and verify social security claims made by older people. This measure was taken in response to views expressed by older people and enables them to claim benefits in a range of settings including local charities, if they so wish. There are currently two categories of Alternative Office:
 - local authority offices which administer Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit
 - local offices of voluntary organisations such as Age Concern or the CAB;

- 5.5 The government received written comments in response to the Link-Age document and ran 20 regional consultation events. They responded by setting out a further programme to develop and build services to meet the need of older people. This is described in the recent strategy document "Opportunity Age".
- 5.6 This document states that, whilst the government feels that the developments arising from Link-Age are significant, they are now looking at developing them still further so that, as well as helping to ensure take-up of benefits, they can also help individuals access care and housing support as part of a "seamless service".
- 5.7 It is felt that older people can still find it difficult to make the best use of the options available to them, such as being able to claim Attendance Allowance as soon as they can or taking decisions at the right time about their future accommodation needs. The principal factor limiting older people's use of services is considered to be the bureaucratic and complex process required to claim them.
- 5.8 They therefore plan to develop their Link-Age model further and build more effective links between different parts of central government, local authorities and other organisations to join up the various parts of the system. The common theme in these areas of work is an approach to service delivery that puts customers first, ensuring that they have control and choice.

Key proposed developments:

- **Easier access to information about services:** The government is working with local authorities to develop single access points for information about services available locally, including e-methods for those who find them convenient and are developing a new 'welcome pack' to be sent automatically to people reaching age 65 setting out the range of services available to them.
- **Customer focus:** They will give older people more choice about how they make claims to Pension Credit and other benefits. A new single care assessment will be piloted so that older people with care needs have to give information only once and they will pilot a "Link-Age Plus" service that delivers a fully integrated service.
- **Promotion of well-being and independence:** Front-line public sector staff will be equipped so they can advise and signpost on a wide range of service offerings, including leisure, life-long learning and volunteering opportunities.
- **Tackling social exclusion:** New partnerships between are to be built between the Pension Service, fuel poverty scheme providers, such as Warm Front in England and similar schemes in the devolved administrations, and utility companies to eradicate fuel poverty.

Link-Age Plus

5.9 It is felt that the Link-Age programme will deliver significantly improved outcomes for older people. However, in a small number of areas, the government intends to go further and pilot a "Link-Age Plus" service to provide a fully integrated service. The pilots will be designed to meet the needs of each local area, but will conform to a set of principles including:

- Older people must be involved in the design of the service;
- Services will reflect the diversity of older people, their needs and aspirations;
- Pilots will be easy to access in terms of location, opening times, etc;
- They will be focused on promoting well-being and independence, going beyond health and social care; and
- The service will be respectful of its customers.

5.10 Possible different models for a Link-Age Plus area are described in the document and shown in the box below:

| Basic model/Broader model/Ambitious model: | Basic model plus: | Basic and broader model plus: |
|--|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social services • The Pension Service • Health services • Housing • local voluntary sector organisations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jobcentre - New Deal 50 Plus and adult careers • Home safety and improvement • Leisure services - t'ai chi and/or yoga • Transport • Adult education • Fire, police and neighbourhood wardens | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy • Approved trader scheme • IT • Shopping • Support for carers • Volunteering |

5.11 Over the forthcoming year, it is intended to develop the detail of the Link-Age Plus pilot, involving stakeholders throughout.

Joint Teams

5.12 As mentioned, one of the key proposals within the Link-Age document was the setting up of joint teams. This is an area that has proven to be controversial and has generated debate, particularly amongst practitioners within the Welfare Rights field.

5.13 Joint teams are integrated partnerships between local offices of the Pension Service and local authorities that are aimed at developing processes that reduce duplication and focus on improving services to the customer. Joint teams include all relevant Pension Service local service staff within the area of the local authority as well as staff from the local authority with management responsibilities coming under a single strategic management board.

5.14 The government feels that there are many benefits to be gained from joint teams and that is why they are proposing them as the model that they wish to pursue for the future delivery of services. They feel that they:

- Increase the ability to contact and support the most vulnerable members of society
 - Increase net take-up of entitlements and services
 - Reduce duplication
 - Enable customers to provide details of their personal circumstances only once
 - Improve the quality of life and independence of older people, by intervening before the time of acute need
 - Provide an integrated service
- 5.15 Whilst all members of the joint team are managed as a single team offering a holistic customer-focused service, the terms and conditions of employment remain the responsibility of the employing organisation. Authorised joint team members can have access to each others' IT systems for the specific purpose of delivering each delegated service and, by obtaining customer consent to share permitted information with the other service providers within the joint team, the need to collect and verify information more than once can be avoided.
- 5.16 The administration of social security and local authority functions is governed by separate statutes so the provision of integrated service delivery through a joint team requires partners to utilise the data controller/data processor provisions under the seventh principle of the Data Protection Act via a formal Memorandum of Understanding. This authorises the delegation of specified administrative functions to joint team partners, with permitted access to the information necessary to fulfil those functions. There is an accreditation process for joint team members whereby they are trained and accredited to carry out each others functions to an acceptable standard.
- 5.17 It is envisaged that voluntary sector organisations, such as the CAB and Age Concern will play a significant role in joint teams and have already become an integral part of some. Under such arrangements, they can become alternative offices if they hold the Legal Services Commission Quality Mark. This will allow them to take and verify claims for older people's entitlements in the same way that the Pension Service currently does. Organisations such as the CAB can undertake such a role if they wish or, alternatively, they can refer them to the Joint Team.
- 5.18 Joint teams can provide holistic services to customers in a variety of ways. The government states that each geographical area should plan to provide outreach surgeries and appointment-based surgeries to suit local needs. These surgeries should be held where it is convenient for older people to access them, in places they are likely to visit during their daily life or where they feel comfortable. Libraries, community centres, health centres and other local government buildings and the premises of voluntary partners such as the Citizens Advice Bureau and Age Concern can provide suitable sites that are generally convenient and well used by customers.
- 5.19 People who are unable to conduct their business by phone or through the post can be visited in their own homes by a joint team member. Visits may be carried out by local authority, the Pension Service Local Service or accredited voluntary sector

staff, all of whom are able to provide the same holistic service to the customer, irrespective of their parent organisation.

- 5.20 Integration with other organisations that already provide services for older people is felt to give wider and more immediate access to services and information. It is also felt to simplify the process for older people, as they only need to produce documents once. This can provide them with a single point of contact for all their entitlement and service enquiries.
- 5.21 Partners involved benefit from reduced duplication of effort, because the need for separate visits from different organisations in respect of each individual entitlement or service is eradicated. The integrated approach that a joint team provides streamlines the service and can lead to administrative efficiencies.
- 5.22 Joint teams that are already operational are felt to have improved the customer experience and "added value". This is supported by evidence of an increase in entitlement and service take-up.

London Wide Position

- 5.23 The position that London Boroughs have so far taken in respect of the joint teams is as follows:

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| Operational: | Croydon, Enfield, Harrow, Havering, Hillingdon, Hounslow, Kingston, Lewisham, Richmond, Southwark and Waltham Forest |
| Under Development: | Kensington and Chelsea, Sutton and Wandsworth, |
| Not pursuing: | Camden, Islington, |

- 5.24 The remainder of Boroughs have not so far made a conclusive decision on the issue. It is the policy of both the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Association of London Authorities (ALG) to promote the setting up of joint teams. The ALG have set up a specific project, funded by the Pension Service, to further this objective.
- 5.25 The respective set-ups of joint teams vary from Borough to Borough and there is scope for local choice. In Richmond, Age Concern provide advice and advocacy. In Enfield, the joint team does not include the local authority's fairer charging function and comprises of staff from the Pensions Service as well as provision for Housing Benefits. The service in Harrow is now the largest team in London and is managed by the local authority. Pension Service visiting officers are now based at Harrow Civic Centre where they have merged with local authority colleagues from the Supporting People, Fairer Charging and Housing Benefit teams. The arrangement also involves close working with the voluntary sector, who support the changes and have retained their independence to undertake advocacy work. It has allowed all of the benefit resources in the area to be combined and co-ordinated.
- 5.26 There is specific government funding available to local authorities who wish to set up joint teams. Bids can be made to fund a range of items such as premises, provision of IT and project management costs.

Local Pension Service for Haringey

- 5.27 We spoke to the local Pension Service for Haringey and they stated that they were committed to working to increase take-up and now have specific performance indicators relating to this. They are very keen to work more closely with the Council and particularly wish to set up a joint team. Older people have particular difficulties in claiming benefits and they feel that joint visiting teams would provide an improved service for them. They made sense to the customer, as there was less duplication. They also facilitated partnership working with voluntary sector organisations and allowed such groups to focus more of their time on advocacy and as well as other customer groups. They stated that they have no specific agenda on who would manage the combined service and that the arrangements can be tailored to reflect local needs priorities.
- 5.28 The local Pension Service has already set up various contact points where pensioners can access the service as well as a dedicated visiting service. They hold surgeries in a range of settings and can be asked to consider particular venues if it is felt that there might be demand for their services. They have undertaken some joint work with the Council's Financial Assessment Team and often use Council buildings to undertake their benefit surgeries. The sessions that they run are generally successful although there have occasionally been some sessions that have not been well attended.

Limitations of Joint Visiting Team Approach

- 5.29 As mentioned earlier, the subject of joint teams has generated controversy and there is a body of opinion opposed to them. We heard from Neil Bateman, an expert witness to the review, and a key critic of the new arrangements. He felt that there are limitations to joint teams and what they can achieve. Figures that are being used to show their effectiveness could be misleading as they include work that the Pension Service would in any case have undertaken.
- 5.30 There is a difference between administering benefits and advising people of their rights and joint teams should not be seen as a welfare rights service. Several authorities, such as Somerset County Council, have reduced funding for welfare rights following the setting up of a joint team on the basis that it was no longer necessary to provide the same level of provision. However, the ability of joint teams to provide advice and advocacy can be compromised by their lack of independence from agencies that administer benefits. They are also not a one-stop service as, in the event of their being a query or a dispute, it would be advisable for the customer to go elsewhere for advice and advocacy. This is because there is a conflict of interest in members of joint teams advocating on the decisions of others within the same team.
- 5.31 They can often have a small customer base. They typically involve the Pension Service joining up with the Fairer Charging teams within local authorities. Only approximately 4% of the over 60s are in receipt of a chargeable local authority service. This can therefore mean that the really hard-to-reach are missed out.

- 5.32 There are marked cultural differences between the agencies typically involved. The Pension Service has a different perspective, attitudes and ways of working from local authorities and the voluntary sector. In one London Borough, efforts had been made to involve Age Concern in fraud checks. There were also quality concerns in respect of the assessments undertaken by the Pension Service with a high percentage of errors being made. There were robust checking systems in place within the voluntary sector and a number of organisations held the Legal Services Commission Quality Mark (LSCQM). None of the joint teams had yet attained this. A restructuring of services would be required in order to set up a joint team and there was a considerable amount of bureaucracy involved including the setting up of a Strategic Management Board.
- 5.33 Mr. Bateman felt that there were alternatives to joint teams. It is already possible for local authorities to act as "alternative offices". There have been changes to the claims and payment regulations, which already allow claims to be taken by agencies other than the Pension Service. It is also possible to set up verification agreements so that clients who had been assessed by local authority offices or at advice centres did not have to produce documentation again for the Pension Service. Data sharing can still take place with the Pension Service without a joint team being set up and has been done very successfully in many places.

Case Study - Waltham Forest

The Review Panel and officers from Benefits and Local Taxation and Social Services, together with Robert Edmonds and Imelda Mullins from Age Concern Haringey and Markos Chrysostomou from Haringey CABx and Chair of the Haringey Community Legal Services Partnership visited the joint visiting team in Waltham Forest to hear about their experience.

Both the Pension Service and the Financial Assessment Unit (FAU) of the Council had previously had their own visiting teams. In particular, the approach taken by the FAU was to maximise income. In addition, Age Concern was a strong partner to the Council's Older People's Service and played a role in co-ordinating voluntary sector partnerships including a large number of minority ethnic groups.

The setting up of a joint team offered the opportunity to do the following in a signal visit:

- Complete benefit application forms
- Complete Fairer Charging forms
- Accept claims and verify information
- Signpost to other partner organisations
- Undertake full welfare benefit checks

There was a holistic approach to customer need with a single point of access. The process aimed to serve the customer and provide integration across providers. It removed the need to repeat information and made the complexity of the benefit set up irrelevant to the customer. It was noted that there were strong demographic similarities between Haringey and Waltham Forest particularly in respect of the number of older

people and people from ethnic minorities.

Joint team staff are accredited to verify Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit claims whilst local authority staff can now verify Pension Service claims. As there is a central system of administration, re-visits are reduced and there is less duplication of work. The team supports the Council's strategic target for hard-to-reach groups.

A Strategic Board is responsible for overseeing the effectiveness of the joint team and this is chaired by a Councillor from the local authority. The board had set a number of performance monitoring and quality standards and this is included as part of the Service Level Agreement between the agencies involved. In particular, there are performance indicators relating to maximising benefits. Statistics are kept on the level of increased benefit income that had been achieved and these showed a steady month-on-month increase, although it is difficult to make comparisons with the previous set up as figures were not kept in the same way. There is also clear evidence of a steady increase in income to the Council.

The team has tracking systems that allows them to ensure that benefits are maximised. These are currently paper systems but IT is being developed that will allow this to be done electronically. In addition, tablet systems are being introduced that would allow additional work to be undertaken in one visit. The setting up of the joint team allowed the local authority access to the Pension Service's "Legacy" IT system which made tracking possible as well as allowing claims to be previewed before assessments.

Advocacy was addressed through referral to a partner organisation such as Age Concern, the CAB or Dial. There is a particularly strong role for Age Concern. The Director of Age Concern Waltham Forest is a member of the Strategic Management Board. They also operate as an "alternative office" and can therefore take and verify claims. The verification agreements involved specific named people being accredited and this also allowed outreach work to be done by them. They are fully trained by the Pension Service and this also allowed them to train other themselves.

The customer base of the team includes Pension Service customers, who are people over the age of 60 and FAU customers referred by Social Services, who are people over the age of 18. The team therefore covers a wider range of customers than just older people.

The overall benefit to the local authority is seen as being as follows:

- Efficiency, less duplication and accuracy
- It puts more money into the local community through increasing take-up
- Seamless service to customers
- Promotes partnership working, especially with the PCT
- It links to the Single Assessment Process

The set up varies between each local authority and can therefore be driven by local issues. The Pension Service can provide assistance to Boroughs setting up joint teams. This includes funding to cover IT, premises and project management. This is achieved by a bid being made for resourcing.

The joint team in Waltham Forest has not yet undertaken any specific take up campaign but was aiming to do so shortly.

Haringey's Response

5.34 When Haringey had been approached initially, the invitation to set up a joint team was declined. This was because it was felt that the timing had not been right for Social Services as work was being undertaken on developing new information systems as well as pension surgeries. Social Services was, and still is, open to the concept. The Fairer Charging Team's priority is to generate income and, at the time of the original approach, the main concern had been to maintain this during the changes that had been taking place. Although there would be undoubted benefits from having a single point of contact for customers on benefit issues, Social Services feel that the joint teams would not automatically increase capacity as there would still be the same number of staff in total. They feel that the benefits associated with joint teams, such as verification agreements and data sharing, may be achievable without setting one up and the bureaucracy that this involves. The Benefits and Local Taxation service has some reservations about the possible benefits of joint teams but are assessing the options and looking at authorities who have taken this route. There is currently no corporate lead or position on the issue.

Conclusion

5.35 Joining up services has the potential to yield improvements through providing services that are seamless, reducing duplication and providing links to other services. We noted that there is a particular expectation by the government that local authorities should be able to deliver a comprehensive range of services to older people and this is reflected in the draft Comprehensive Performance Assessment framework for 2005. Local authorities are expected to demonstrate achievements in delivering a co-ordinated range of services to older people and these include income maximisation initiatives. The criteria for judgement for both level 2 and level 3 specifically refers to whether the council has set up a joint team.

5.36 This does not necessarily mean that it is essential to set up a joint team but it would appear that tangible evidence of there being robust alternative arrangements that are integrated, involve joint working and deliver the sort of benefits to customers that the government feels joint teams provide will need to be demonstrated by those local authorities not pursuing this option in order for them to obtain a favourable rating. An example of this approach was provided by the ALG. Camden Council have decided not to set up a joint team. However, they already have very integrated service provision that is able to deliver the same benefits as a joint team. They also have, unlike Haringey, a long standing dedicated welfare rights function.

5.37 We feel that provision that is currently in place within Haringey is not yet sufficiently integrated or seamless to provide a viable alternative arrangement to a joint team. Although there has been some talk of setting up verification agreements, this has not yet been developed whilst data sharing has been restricted due to problems

related to data protection. Although the Council's draft strategy for older people "Better Living for Older People" refers specifically to enabling older people to maximise their income through the provision of better and more comprehensive advice, it does not refer specifically to joining up services, closer working with the Pension Service or the setting up of joint teams.

- 5.38 We were impressed by the arrangements in place in Waltham Forest and appreciate some of the benefits that can be achieved by setting up joint teams. These are not only to the customer - they also have clear potential to increase the income of local authorities. In particular, access to the DWP's "Legacy" IT system will offer increased opportunities to undertake targeted take up campaigns. Whilst it may be possible for some data sharing to take place without a joint team, this may not be easy to arrange in practice due to data protection issues. There is no argument that considerably more data could be made available more easily if a joint team is set up. Even informal feedback that we obtained from officers in authorities where there is a degree of scepticism about the new arrangements, such as Newham and Newcastle City Council, indicated that they felt that, despite other reservations, the increased data sharing that joint teams made possible would be beneficial.
- 5.39 We are aware of the concerns that exist about joint teams. However, there is scope for arrangements to be developed that reflect local needs and we heard of many different models of joint teams. For example, Harrow have a highly integrated team covering a wide range of services whilst the team in Enfield has just entailed the secondment of one Council officer from the Housing Benefit team. The set up need not be static and can be developed if felt appropriate. Performance indicators can be set to ensure that the joint team generates additional income for residents and to guarantee rigorous quality standards.
- 5.40 Joint teams will, to some extent, compromise the independence of agencies that become alternative offices but then so will verification agreements as they both bring with them some degree of responsibility for administering public funds. The benefits to residents of better integrated services should outweigh any negative consequences from a possible reduction in the independence of advice that this may entail. If higher standards of accuracy in assessments are achieved through joint teams there should, in any case, be fewer queries or disputes.
- 5.41 We noted the concerns about joint teams having a small customer base but officers at Waltham Forest disputed this. Joint teams will impose an additional bureaucratic burden through the setting up of a strategic management board. Initially, the role of this body will be to manage the joint team. However, its role has the potential to be developed further to take a strategic role on income maximisation issues and delivering the sort of integrated services that the government envisages through Link Age and Link Age Plus.
- 5.42 The need for the Council to work with partners to develop a strategic, joined up approach to income maximisation work involving older people is pressing. We would recommend that a specific service be given lead responsibility for developing a corporate response to the developments in the Link-Age document and, in

particular, the provision of integrated services and joint working with the Pension Service and other partners.

- 5.43 We would recommend that the most appropriate service to undertake this work would be the Chief Executive's Service as the service responsible for leading on the Older Persons Strategy, which this should link into. This should also link in with our earlier recommendation regarding the development of an overarching strategy for benefit take up work.
- 5.44 As mentioned earlier, it may be possible to achieve the same overall objectives of joint teams without actually setting one up. In particular, there is the technology available to enable integrated working without the need for co-location. We feel that there is the issue needs to be considered thoroughly and the available options assessed fully. A key part of this process should be detailed negotiations with the local Pension Service that are conducted on a corporate basis as well as with voluntary sector partners. This should provide an opportunity to determine whether it is possible to develop a model for Haringey that adequately meets local needs.
- 5.45 In the event of the it being determined, after consideration of all the relevant issues and negotiations with the Pension Service, that the setting up of a joint team is not the way forward, we would expect that alternative arrangements are set up that are customer focussed, clear and simple to access, integrated and provide a one-stop link to a range of services. We see this as the ultimate aim and joint teams as a key option for delivering it.

Recommendations:

- That the Council and its partners work together to develop a strategic response the Link-Age document and, in particular, develop proposals for the delivery of seamless, integrated and holistic services to promote benefit take up for older people.
 - That, as an integral part of this process, full consideration is given as to whether the setting up of a joint team in Haringey would be of benefit to residents.
 - That a specified Council officer be given overall responsibility for leading on this issue, developing a corporate approach and initiating detailed discussions on behalf of the Council with the Pension Service on the options available.
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APPENDIX A

LIST OF INDIVIDUALS INTERVIEWED:

Matthew Pelling and Marcus Power - Social Services
Helen Tsentides - Benefits and Local Taxation
Jane Waterhouse - Customer Services
Susan Humphries - Voluntary Sector Team, Chief Executives Service
Helen Dimmock and Ms. Y. Alexander - The Pension Service
Markos Chrysostomou - Haringey CABx
Victor Diassona - Angolan Community Association
Robert Edmonds and Imelda Mullins - Age Concern Haringey
Mark Brangwyn - Association of London Government
Neil Bateman - Welfare rights, social policy and performance management consultant
Shodeyi Bunmi - Waltham Forest Joint Visiting Team
Celia Minoughan - London Borough of Newham