



Brighton Unemployed Centre Families Project
6 Tilbury Place
Brighton
East Sussex
BN2 0GY

Tel: 01273 601211 or 671213
Email: info@bucfp.org
www.bucfp.org

Brighton Unemployed Centre Families Project provides practical support, education and services for the unemployed and those in poor housing, claimants, pensioners, unwaged people and those on low incomes. The Project was set up in 1981 and is run by Centre volunteers for the benefit of all users.

The Centre's Welfare Rights service offers free, independent advice, help with form filling, advocacy and representation at social security appeal tribunals. The service gets daily referrals from Jobcentre Plus (which is about 100 yards away), and frequent referrals from BHT, CAB, Mind and the Substance Abuse services. The Centre as a whole is a safe space which is very much appreciated by people who are affected by poor mental health or who are vulnerable for other reasons. Often using the advice service will lead to general Centre use of the crèche, laundry or education opportunities etc. and can lead to greater involvement by volunteering in one or more of the project areas from the allotment to running a creative writing course.

I have been co-ordinating the advice service at the Centre for nearly 12 years, having previously worked for the CAB running advice surgeries in Whitehawk for many years. The Centre's Welfare Rights service is delivered by myself and eleven volunteers, several of whom have been volunteer advisers for over four years.

We are increasingly concerned by the lack of actual help available to deal with increasingly complex benefit matters – many of the people that are referred to us have poor or no literacy or numeracy skills and need support to be able to make a phone call let alone to understand a letter. They generally have budgeting problems and these problems are noticeably more acute for unemployed single people – especially young single people. Families will typically have several sources of income: income support or employment and support allowance, child benefit and child tax credit - plus housing benefit will be paid to them if they live in privately rented accommodation; single people will have only job seeker's allowance or employment and support allowance – plus housing benefit, possibly.

At our weekly work meetings, the Centre's welfare rights group regularly look at how benefit issues are reported in both the local and national press; over the last few years – when unemployment, especially youth unemployment, has become such an issue – there has been a notable increase in “red top” language – “scroungers”, “parasites”, “layabouts”, “spongers” – infiltrating all levels of reporting. Yet anyone, or anyone's child, can now face the issue of unemployment/redundancy.

The examples provided by the consultation process so far – running with the model that every household should pay a “small” amount of Council Tax – do not address the issue of the single claimant.

Only this week, we met with a single claimant in his 40s who had been unemployed since leaving prison four years ago. He had been living in move-on accommodation for two years and had just been offered his own one bedroom flat. Something to celebrate in many ways, but for someone on Jobseeker's Allowance of £71pw a real challenge and worry. £5pw of this claimant's JSA was taken as child maintenance by the CSA, £5pw was also deducted at source to pay an outstanding court fine. He has £61pw to pay for fuel, water charges and to feed and clothe himself and to look for work. Taking any “small amount” – even £1 or £2 p.w. – will put him one step back in his establishing a new home with new expenses to budget for.

Now take a graduate, 23-24 years old perhaps, made recently redundant by a bank or IT company who are “slimming down” operations. When this graduate signs on to claim JS, they will receive only £56.25pw – again to pay everything, including work search costs.

The irony in all of this is that if either of these two claimants try to improve their lot by doing some part time work, if they earn more than £5 it is deducted pound for pound from their Jobseeker's Allowance.

It seems to us that benefit levels for single people are so low – particularly when you think about surviving on benefit for months or years - they are actually an incitement to crime.

The new proposal seems reasonable and not harsh – BUT – please consider the effect on single people, who will be the hardest to track down, should they default on payment because, unlike families, they can – and need to – move around, not only in the city, but also within the country as a whole. These claimants at the moment enjoy full Council Tax Benefit, the changes as proposed so far in this consultative process could well have serious social effects.

The other major area of concern for all of the staff at BUCFP is the lack of understanding around Council Tax that exists within the community that uses the Centre as a whole. Most Centre users regard themselves as “exempt” – their term – from the need to pay Council Tax. There has been such a lack of information about Council Tax per se and little or no information about the rebate consultation process. The Welfare Rights Group has seen articles in the Sussex Express and the West Sussex Gazette both of which alert residents of those areas served to the fact that consultation is taking place – and the fact that the consultation process appears to longer than that which is being used locally in Brighton & Hove.

Many Centre users have such learning problems that budgeting for, as well as actually sustaining, regular payment of “small” Council Tax payments will – we know – give rise to collection problems. To this end we believe that it is very much in certain resident’s interests – as well as that of the local authority - that exemption from payment on grounds of lack of mental capacity be drafted into the rebate provisions.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge that the local authority have been passed an unprecedentedly difficult task by central government – probably under the auspices of “localism” – and all those involved have our every sympathy in the struggle with the task ahead of them both in respect to Council Tax and also the Social Fund.

Yours sincerely

Julie O'Hara

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Julie O'Hara', written in a cursive style.