

CHANGES TO LEGAL AID

Most organisations that provide free advice to the public on social welfare law rely on Legal Aid for at least part of their funding. Some solicitor firms and law centres rely heavily on Legal Aid for their income whilst other front line agencies, such as CAB may have a variety of income sources, including Legal Aid.

There have been lots of changes to the way Legal Aid works over the past few years, resulting in fewer organisations delivering free advice under Legal Aid funding. The amount these organisations were paid per case changed to a "fixed fee" based on how long the government thinks it takes to deal with a typical case. So, for example, if an organisation helps a client with a housing case, they will be paid for 3 hours work, regardless of how long it takes to resolve the client's case.

Network spoke to a representative of Tower Hamlets Law Centre who said: "Organisations taking on more challenging cases, or clients with mental health problems or language difficulties found it increasingly difficult to make ends meet as they were, effectively working for free after 3 hours work. But these changes pale into insignificance when compared with the government's plans for Legal Aid after 2013. The government is proposing to scrap Legal Aid altogether for advice and representation in immigration, welfare benefits, debt, education, employment, divorce, child custody and most housing cases."

There will be some exceptions – mainly to deal with obligations under European Law or other international conventions. So advice and representation in asylum cases, or welfare rights cases with an EU treaty angle will be covered. Advice and representation for people facing imminent loss of their home will be covered. But earlier intervention to deal with rent arrears or anti social behaviour to prevent possession proceedings will not be covered. Nor will disrepair, unlawful eviction or allocations cases.

The proposals are currently going through parliament. "One of the most worrying proposals is that access to what is left of Legal Aid provision will be via a single telephone advice line. You will only be able to access advice from them if referred by the government's telephone advice line, instead of being able to directly approach your local advice centre. This is going to cause enormous difficulties for people in a borough like Tower Hamlets where many do not speak English and will find it hard to explain their problems over the phone." The Law Centre spokesperson continued. "The indications are that the bill will go ahead, mainly unchanged. If they do, it is likely that specialist advice agencies and many private solicitor firms will close down. Local authorities are not going to be in a position to fill this vacuum.

This will leave some of the most vulnerable people in our society without effective access to their civil rights" she said.

We want to hear from you!

Please send us your letters and ideas – all welcome.

Housing Options Services

Contact details

Jamie Jackson
Quality Performance Officer
Quality Team
Housing Options Services
Development & Renewal
Albert Jacob House,
62 Roman Road,
Bethnal Green,
London E2 OPG

telephone:
020 7364 7262

fax:
020 7364 7222

e-mail:
jamie.jackson@
towerhamlets.gov.uk

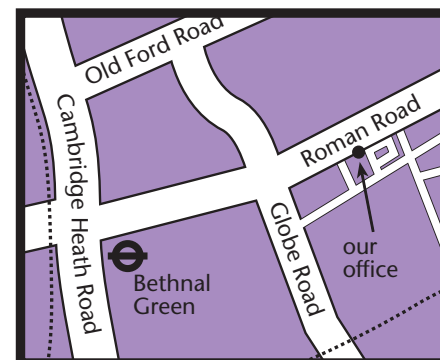
web site:
www.towerhamlets.gov.uk

How to find us

Bus Stops:

Roman Road: 8, D6
Cambridge Heath Road:
106, 254

London Underground:
Bethnal Green



Tower Hamlets
Housing Options
Services

NETWORK The Partner's Newsletter

Volume 1, Issue 9, May 2011

Homeless Partnership Board

I do not normally contribute to our Partner Newsletter - I'm told I talk too much as it is. However, I did want to take this opportunity to advise that the Homeless Partnership Board has now reconvened. Meeting every 2 months, the Board's key role is to be informed of the delivery of the Homeless Strategy and, from that, to influence the Strategy's annual action plans.

The current strategy spans 2008 - 13, and its strength is in its focus on homeless prevention and the drive to secure support for vulnerable homeless people/households. What the strategy could not anticipate is some of the new government's mooted changes around welfare reform, "affordable" housing (which risks being anything but affordable) and the fundamental amendments to statutory homeless duties.

It is obvious then that the Homeless Strategy requires remodelling, with the annual action plans needing to reflect contemporary influences and pressures. The Partnership Board's strength comes from its mix of participants; statutory and non-statutory, public and voluntary, preventative or supportive (but often both).



If you would want to participate in the work of the Board, please email me - colin.cormack@towerhamlets.gov.uk

Thank you.

Colin Cormack
Service Head,
Housing Options

Housing Benefit Changes – What are the impacts?

Existing Claims – Those whose entitlement started before 4th April 2011 will initially be protected from the caps. The maximum protection period is 9 months from the anniversary of the claim. However, protection will end sooner if the tenant has a break in claim

after 4th April, changes address, or the number of people living in the household changes.
April 2011 – New Claims - For HB where entitlement starts on or after 4th April 2011 - will be capped from start of their entitlement.

Accommodation size	LHA March 2011	Lower of Cap and 30th Percentile March 2011	Difference
Shared	£100.58	£91.15	£9.43
1 Bedroom	£250.00	£225.00	£25.00
2 Bedroom	£310.00	£280.00	£30.00
3 Bedroom	£365.00	£330.00	£35.00
4 Bedroom	£460.00	£400.00	£60.00
5 Bedroom and above	£560.00	£400.00	£160.00

Increase in non-dependant deductions

- Adults who live with the claimant (other than their partner) will receive less housing and council tax benefit.
- Households with large families and non-dependants will be hit by both the local housing allowance caps and the increase in the non-dependant deductions.

Non-dependant Circumstances	April 2010	April 2011
Aged 25 or over and on Income Support/Jobseekers Allowance (Income Based), or aged 18 or over and not in remunerative work	7.40	9.40
In receipt of main phase Employment Support Allowance (Income Related)	7.40	9.40
In receipt of Pension Credit	Nil	Nil
Not in receipt of main phase ESA(IR) rate	Nil	Nil
Aged 18 or over and in remunerative work:		
Gross income less than £122.00 per month	7.40	9.40
Gross income £122.00 to £180.00 per month	17.00	21.55
Gross income £180.00 to £234.00 per month	23.35	29.60
Gross income £234.00 to £310.00 per month	38.20	48.45
Gross income £310.00 to £387.00 per month	43.50	55.20
Gross income more than £387.00 per month	47.75	60.60

- Direct Payment to Landlords will remain for tenants with 8 weeks in arrears, or if the tenant is unlikely or unable to pay rent.
- The existing criteria will extend from April 2011 in circumstances where payment to the landlord helps the tenant to secure or retain a tenancy. However, the new criteria will apply only when the landlord agrees to reduce the rent to a level affordable to the tenant.



MARCH 2011

LOCAL HOUSING ALLOWANCE CHANGES

WHEN	WHAT'S CHANGING	DETAILS OF THE CHANGE	PEOPLE AFFECTED
April 2011	Local Housing Allowance (LHA) capped for: <ul style="list-style-type: none">All new tenancies from April 2011Existing tenancies 9 months after review date	Capping of local housing allowance (LHA) rates at: <ul style="list-style-type: none">£250 p.w for a 1-bedroom property£290 p.w for a 2-bedroom property£340 p.w for a 3-bedroom property£400 p.w for a 4 (or more) bedroom property	Private Rented Sector (PRS) tenants claiming LHA, particularly in more expensive areas
	5+ bedroom rate ends	Ending of 5-bedroom rate - 4-bedroom rate will apply to all larger properties	All households currently claiming the 5-bedroom rate of LHA
	Non-dependant deductions increase	All non-dependants will have to contribute a larger share of the rent	All households claiming LHA that include other adults such as grown-up children, elderly parents or siblings
	£15 weekly excess ends	Housing benefit claimants no longer entitled to keep up to £15 weekly 'excess' above actual rent	LHA claimants whose rent is below the current LHA rate
	LHA set on 30th percentile	Basis for setting LHA rates to reduce from the average to the lowest third of local market rents	All PRS tenants claiming LHA
	More flexible direct payments to landlords	Increased flexibility to have rents paid direct to landlords	PRS tenants whose landlords reduce their rent to the new LHA rates
April 2012	Shared room rate applies to under 35's	The threshold for the shared room rate will rise from 25 to 35 years of age	All single adult PRS tenants up to the age of 35, without children, living in 1-bedroom properties
April 2013 (planned)	Maximum cap to all benefits	A maximum cap will be imposed on the amount of benefits a household can claim. This is expected to be around: <ul style="list-style-type: none">£500 p.w. for couples and lone parents£350 p.w. for single people	Larger families, and families living in more expensive areas in the private rented sector
	LHA linked to Consumer Price Index (CPI)	LHA rates to rise by the CPI rate of inflation rather than in line with local rent rises	All LHA claimants



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HB CHANGES ADVICE HOTLINE

Call: **020 7364 1416**

or email

hbchanges@towerhamlets.gov.uk

Open Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm



Welfare Project Team

Many of you will already be aware that the government has announced a number of significant changes to Housing Benefit rules which begin to impact on 1 April 2011. These changes will mean that many private sector households in Tower Hamlets, including many who were housed by us, may no longer receive enough housing benefit to cover their rent and may be at serious risk of homelessness.

Additional grant funding has been made available to local authorities by the government for a limited period of time to enable them to prevent homelessness in as many cases as possible. Using that funding we have set up a small, temporary team to deal with this important work over the next three months. The project team has been resourced from experienced Options and Advice staff as these officers already understand the changes, appreciate their potential impact and are in possession of relevant knowledge on alternative options available to prevent homelessness. Fiona Wellington is the Project's Team Principal and Lynne Duval, in her capacity as DCLG Specialist Advisor, has been asked to help set up and direct the focus of the Team. In summary though,

the Team will be relying on data from Housing Benefits to identify and talk to landlords – that's a new departure for us where, normally, we wait until people facing eviction come to us.



Members of the team are Brian Ayivor, Jelifa Begum, Carla Spence and Sunday Makinde.

Contact info:
Tenants: 020 7364 1413
Landlords: 020 7364 1416

Partnership News

- **Paddington Churches HA** and **Springboard HA** no longer exist they have been replaced by **Genesis Housing Association** (who are automatically a CHR partner).
- **Guinness Trust** changed its name to **Guinness South**.
- **Circle 33 Housing Association** joins the CHR this month, (actual date to be confirmed).

Landlords Forum

Building a better place for both landlords and tenants

Thirty private landlords attended a meeting of the Landlord Forum on 23rd February at 62 Roman Road. The council welcomes the feedback from our landlord partners who have confirmed they find the meetings useful and are proud of their role in housing people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.



A number of presentations were made at the meeting:

Katie Thompson & Gary Norris from the London Fire Brigade talked about how to reduce accidental fires in the homes and associated injuries and fire deaths.

Steve Hill, Lee Fearon and Clive Buckman informed the Forum about the significant changes to Housing Benefit rules 2011 will start to be implemented from April 2011 and which will affect many households in the private rented sector where Local Housing Allowance is in payment (see the article elsewhere in this newsletter).

If you have or know of any Landlords or Agents that may be interested in attending our Forum please contact Jamie Jackson or Noella Ling with their details and we can get in touch with them.

The next Landlords Forum takes place on:

Wednesday 15th June 2011
in Room 101,
Albert Jacob House,
62 Roman Road,
London E2 0PG.

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Rough Sleeping

Kath Dane,
Street Population Co-ordinator



Jon Faxen, Complex Needs Outreach Worker from TH SORT, meeting someone rough sleeping in Tower Hamlets

Last year (09/10), 154 people were found sleeping rough in Tower Hamlets. 50% were new to the street, while others either had a long history of sleeping out or had returned to the street following a period in accommodation. At the last street count, which is just a snap shot of those rough sleeping on one night in the borough, we found 11 individuals.

Sleeping rough is dangerous and harmful. Most of the people we meet have a set of complex problems: poor physical or mental health, drug or alcohol misuse, very low self esteem, lack of employment opportunities, low aspirations. In addition to all of these, many have no recourse to public funds which means that their access to accommodation is limited.

As the Tower Hamlet's Street Population Co-ordinator, my role is to identify appropriate and effective responses to tackle rough sleeping. I have a specific role to coordinate the services by bringing together a wide

range of statutory and voluntary sector partners who are all working to reduce rough sleeping in the borough. Tower Hamlets has had much success in finding lasting solutions for those who have been sleeping out for a long time. We have also commissioned specialist projects to support destitute EU nationals with no recourse to public funds to gain employment or voluntarily return to their home countries.

In the year ahead, we will be piloting new ways of assisting new arrivals onto the streets, to ensure that we respond rapidly and prevent people from having to sleep out for a second night, this is part of the London Mayor's overall strategy to end rough sleeping in London by the end of 2012.

Feel free to discuss any ideas or issues you may have regarding rough sleeping in the borough.

If you encounter someone sleeping out, you can also call TH SORT on 0870 3833 333.



The London Fire Brigade are looking to work in partnership with letting agencies and landlords within Tower Hamlets to increase fire safety awareness.

There are a number of ways that a fire can start and the effects can be devastating. For example:

338 fires occurred in the home last year
60% of which started in the kitchen.
These fires resulted in 2 rescues being made, 70 injuries and 4 fatalities.

How we live and the way we use equipment can significantly reduce the risk of a fire starting.

There's no better way of dealing with a fire than preventing it from starting in the first place.

Working together, the London Fire Brigade would like to initiate a scheme, where by Home Fire Safety Visit referrals are generated at the signing stage of a new letting or sale of property. This will reduce fires, helping not only to save lives but will reduce costs to all involved.

For further information above this scheme please contact either:
Station Manager Gary Norris,
Millwall Fire Station
email: gary.norris@london-fire.gov.uk
Watch Manager Paul Hobbs,
Tower Hamlets Team
email: paul.hobbs@london-fire.gov.uk

GREAT 2 EXCELLENCE – LETTINGS TEAM

The Lettings Service is pleased to announce that we are shortly to be assessed for the Customer Service Excellence (CSE) award promoted by the Government. The award is achieved through a formal assessment against a schedule of national, customer service standards. Currently, we are preparing ourselves for the assessment and may well be approaching yourselves for feedback on all or parts of the service we provide. We would appreciate your contribution to this process and welcome all feedback as it helps us to improve our service delivery.

One of the key areas included in the standard is the quality of information provided to our customers and partners and we understand that receiving an offer of a property is the main focus for all our customers. Therefore, we would like to take this opportunity to share some facts with you. Currently there are

over 23,000 individuals/families on the housing register (approximately 3,000 in bands 1 or 2 with high priority need) from whom we receive over 1,000,000 bids each year. As there are only 2,500 vacant properties available each year, once we have addressed the high priority needs of those in bands 1 and 2, those in bands 3 and 4 are likely to have to wait some considerable number of years, if ever, before they receive an offer.

The Lettings Service has now merged with the Homeless Services into an integrated Housing Options Service. This service will continue to offer a comprehensive Housing Advice and Options service, including providing advice and support to people in bands 3 and 4 about how to access housing in the private sector.

The Options Service can be contacted on telephone **020 7364 2826**.