

## **Advice, Advocacy & Support Service Age Concern Kingston January 2008**

A unique, independent service providing vulnerable older people with practical legal and welfare rights help and advice, in their own home, ensuring their right to choice, self determination and control.

### **Highlights:**

- **Our team dealt with nearly 1000 referrals in 2007**
- **60% aged 75 years and over, living alone with significant health issues impeding their ability to seek help and advice**
- **Our team made over 250 home visits in 2007**
- **Only home visiting service providing independent representation at disability benefit appeal tribunals – 2 appeals successfully upheld and 14 statutory decisions superseded and reconsidered, ensuring additional annual income for users in 2007 of £274,375**

### **Key service benefits**

- **Delivery of service choice to vulnerable older people – a key local commitment to older people**
- **Ability to access the most vulnerable and hard to reach older people, often suspicious of statutory services, through our reputation as a trusted and valued, not for profit, independent organisation.**
- **Welfare Benefits only one issue – once a relationship has been established, older people contact the team as issues arise with which they need help and support. Accessing benefits is only a small part of this work and, with many of the individuals they support, is not the most pressing or time consuming area of the team's work.**
- **Contributes to both preventative and crisis management agendas locally.**
- **Provides access management to locality teams.**
- **Maximisation of problem resolution at point of contact, avoiding unnecessary referral to other services, particularly community care services.**
- **Cost effective use of trained and experienced advisors in a Community Legal Service quality marked service.**
- **Service delivery to all adults irrespective of disability or age and across borough boundaries.**
- **Provision of added value through joint delivery of local initiatives such as Single Assessment Process, Mediated Self Assessment and Self Directed Support.**
- **Cost savings across voluntary sector partner organisations through shared back office and management overheads and salary savings (compared to locality teams).**

The Advice and Advocacy Team provides information, advice, advocacy and support on any issue of concern to older people, their family, friends, carers and other professionals. The team dealt with 984 referrals in 2007. The majority of older people contact us themselves. The vast majority live alone and generally have health problems that prevent them from accessing a walk-in advice service.

They can contact the team by phone, letter or email and this is supplemented by home visits as required for any follow up work. 60% of people contacting the team are over 75 and just over half are female.

One-off queries resulting in information giving and/or signposting currently make up 7% of the team's enquiries. These people are sent information and/or signposted to other services and this is delivered mainly through our telephone helpline.

The majority of the team's work goes far beyond this. Many of those accessing the service need a personal visit and ongoing support and help to resolve their query due to physical or mental frailty or impairment. The team carried out 254 visits in 2007. Once this need is identified the service user is allocated an advisor who sees the issue through to its conclusion. This may require more than one home visit. An important aspect of the service is talking service users through the range of options open to them, for example if they are considering moving from owner occupier accommodation into sheltered or residential care. The advisor helps them to make an informed choice, explains the application process and the financial implications of each choice and helps with the completion of any paperwork. It is often necessary for the advisor to take on the role of advocate throughout the process.

The team tailors the level of support provided to the needs of the individual, for example they write letters on clients' behalf or help to construct a letter for a client to send. They assist with the completion of all types of forms and can send the form with a covering or supporting letter. They will make calls with a client, or on their behalf, and/ or write letters and keep the client regularly updated on the progress. The case is not closed until an agreed outcome has been reached in partnership with the client.

Clients approach the team about a wide range of issues. Many issues relate to financial matters, for example a problem with benefit entitlement that requires advocacy with statutory services. The team is careful not to duplicate benefit work done by other agencies. They focus on the resolution of problems and applications for revisions, appeals and tribunals for which there is no equivalent service provider. This is a service the DWP are unable to offer as they are not legally allowed to help appeal their own decisions. The team enhances the work of the local Pension Service by acting as an alternative office for the verification of benefit applications; this prevents duplication of visits and is often preferred by the client seeking support from an impartial and independent service. Social inclusion and transport are other large areas of work and the team encourages and provides practical assistance to apply to schemes that can help clients to remain independent. Advice and information are also offered on a wide range of other issues, such as community care services and how to access them, residential care, charging and consumer issues.

### **Independence**

The team provides a free, confidential service to anyone living in the Borough, their family, friends and carers. As an independent service, the team can advocate on behalf of clients who feel they have been treated unfairly or where inaccurate decisions have been made. Older people often tell us how important it is that they can approach a body other than statutory services. They may need an advocate to challenge a care needs assessment or care charges decision or simply want to have an independent body present to make sure their point of view is heard. For example, Mrs M has recently contacted us because she is being charged a flat rate for a service that she doesn't believe she receives. An advisor has contacted her care manager to discuss this and will be present at an upcoming meeting. Mrs M has felt that at previous meetings, although her family has been present, her view has not been heard. It is an unfortunate truth that often more credence is given to

independent advocates from agencies such as our own than to an older person or their family, irrespective of their ability to put their views across.

### **Timely, Accurate Information Resources**

The cornerstone of any service providing information and advice is accurate, up to date information. The team accesses independent information sources including an electronic information system updated monthly, also used by advisors of the Citizens Advice Bureau, and receive regular updates from Advice UK and the Tribunal Support Unit. The team uses reference materials such as Child Poverty Action Group publications covering detailed legislative and regulatory aspects of welfare benefits, tax credits, debt, fuel rights, council tax, paying for care and disability. The team also regularly access Age Concern England Factsheets and Information Sheets in addition to holding an extensive information database relating to local services and providers.

The service we offer is unique in the Borough. We provide not just assistance with single issues, such as benefits combined with a signposting service, but a full range of support from answering simple queries to case work including advocacy up to the point of resolution across the wide range of issues of relevance to the frail and vulnerable, disabled or socially isolated who would otherwise be unable to reach an advice service. No other home visiting service offers independent representation at benefit appeal tribunals. Two clients in the last 12 months have had decisions regarding disability benefits changed at appeal stage through casework carried out by the team. 14 decisions have been reconsidered or superseded, contributing to a yearly equivalent of £274,375 in benefit to older people.

With the recent change to eligibility criteria for social care services in the Borough, the team has had a crucial role to play in support of access management to statutory services, encouraging the use of “self service” for queries by providing trusted advisors from an independent agency with a reputation for integrity and value in the local community, who can provide gateway to services such as social activities, transport options and financial arrangements for the future.

### **Partnership working**

The team recently launched “First Contact” in partnership with Age Concern Richmond to provide information and advice across both Boroughs in the form of a dedicated telephone helpline. People from either borough can speak to an advisor and receive information relevant to their area. This has been made possible through additional funding from Richmond and provides a highly cost effective solution to the provision of information and advice through the sharing of back office facilities and management overheads. A caseworker for Richmond has just been employed and will join the team shortly. In the first three and half months, 108 service users have accessed the service, either by calling the service themselves or being referred from other professionals. Preliminary discussions have also taken place with another voluntary sector agency which has expressed interest in offering First Contact to its service users.

Age Concern Kingston is partner to the single assessment process ensuring the streamlining of paperwork and sharing of client information, saving time on unnecessary form filling. We are the designated provider for mediated Occupational Therapy self assessments in the Borough, following the successful delivery of mediated assessments for the original pilot programme. The advice team contribute to the programme using a WiFi enabled laptop to complete assessments during home visits to disabled clients.

The team is piloting a care broking service for individualised budgets on behalf of the local authority. This service will utilise the specialist skills and experience found within the team thereby freeing up local authority care managers to address core tasks. They are currently undergoing training and broking will commence in January 2008.

The team regularly shares information with statutory services including locality teams, community mental health, sensory impairment, occupational health, transport and day services, via information and exchange meetings, which the team hosts and chairs, and referrals.

### **Feedback and Quality**

The team holds the Community Legal Service quality mark as testimony to the standard of its work. The team follows strict procedures that ensure clients receive the best possible service and quality of advice.

Given the wide impact of the team on the lives of older people we feel it is very important to seek feedback from our service users on a regular basis. Our annual feedback survey provides a tool for assessing both the effectiveness of the service and its value and impact on older people. Below are some comments received from the last survey:

- *"I was bowled over by the high standard and courtesy afforded to my 91 year old mother....The information and advice offered proved to be invaluable in every way".*
  - *"...(the advisor) put my mind at rest and I thank her".*
  - *"May you always be here in my time of need".*
  - *"Excellent service".*
  - *"The work (advisor) did to add to my pension has made life a lot easier".*
  - *"You are doing us elderly a very important service, helping us to maintain some independence and dignity".*
  - *"(Advisor)...was able to give us such wonderful advice and support..."*
  - *"I contacted you and you changed my life for much (the) better".*
  - *"I have recommended the service to other people. Many thanks".*
- 

The team maximises problem resolution at the point of contact through the identification of all issues relating to the physical, mental, social and financial well being of service users, then advising the clients on the appropriate action and providing an appropriate level of support and assistance. For example, Mr and Mrs W were referred to us by community care services for help with fuel debts. An advisor visited and contacted their supplier and the DWP and arranged for them to repay the debt in small weekly payments direct from their Pension Credit. They also arranged for a proportion of the debt to be paid by a local charity. The advisor identified Mrs W as Mr W's carer and obtained Carer's Allowance on her behalf. Mr W suffers from breathing problems and finds using public transport too difficult. As neither partner drives, the advisor was able to assist them with an application for a Taxicard and arranged for them to access the local Dial-a-Ride service, thereby helping them to maintain their independence. The advisor was also able to help Mrs W access respite care and discussed with her the range of social activities available locally to provide her with a break from caring. Through the team's intervention Mr and Mrs W were able to deal with requests for services directly and to identify solutions to their difficulties, thus saving time and resources for both the service users and for statutory agencies.

Mrs J contacted us as a result of multiple issues. A principal cause was her unhappiness with her accommodation, which was adversely affecting her health. An advisor visited and as a result liaised with the local authority housing department. Mrs J subsequently moved to new accommodation and the advisor successfully advocated on her behalf with a commercial supplier from whom she had received unsatisfactory service. The advisor successfully applied for a Social Fund grant to purchase a new cooker and facilitated temporary access to the Meals on Wheels service pending its delivery. The advisor also referred Mrs J to the Occupational Therapy service for a full assessment and helped her to obtain a Taxicard, ensuring her ability to remain independent and mobile.

### **Case Management Database**

The team uses a data management system on a daily basis to optimally case record and this allows the team manager to measure demand and produce reports on advisor workload and activity levels and outcomes. The system has been adapted to best capture the information needed by the team, and has made case recording effective and structured.

### **Case studies**

Mrs K (72) is widowed and lives alone. She suffers from arthritis throughout her body. She phoned First Contact because she needs shelves putting up in her home. The advisor referred her to a Handyperson project that will do the work free of charge. The advisor ascertained that the client is not in receipt of any disability benefits and referred the client for a benefit check, in particular to apply for Attendance Allowance. The advisor also recognised that Mrs K would benefit from an assessment from Occupational Therapy, when Mrs K told her that she struggles to use the bath or shower, and referred her for a Social Services assessment. Before contacting First Contact, Mrs K was completely unaware of the services available to her. She knows and trusts the name of Age Concern and felt assured that the advice and information would be impartial.

Mrs A (86) is frail and has severe breathing difficulties caused by heart disease. Her daughter took advantage of the Department of Work and Pension's (DWP) online application process for Attendance Allowance, a disability benefit awarded to those with care needs. The benefit was not awarded and Mrs A's daughter sought advice from the team, who agreed that the decision was not fair. An advisor took on the case, visiting Mrs A and her daughter at home to gather information to write to her hospital specialist and GP. The advisor wrote to the DWP with the evidence obtained from medical professionals and the decision was changed, leading to the award of benefit at the higher rate and the associated increase in financial support that this brings.

### **Resources and Funding**

The Advice and Advocacy service, including the First is delivered by 2.75 FTE staff members, supported by volunteers. The team is partially funded by RBK and partially by voluntary income generated by Age Concern Kingston.