

RICHMOND ADVICE FORUM

Thursday 4 June 2020

Notes

1. Introductions and apologies

Present: Simon Lawson (chair), Bradley Johnson, Mark Weston, Mike Haran & David Abel (Citizens Advice Richmond); Mike Derry (Healthwatch Richmond); Abiba Kone (PA Housing); Alison Wrein (Richmond Carers Centre); Andy Barling (Grace Advocacy); Peter Forde, Harmeet Bhundia, Harriet Steele & Steve Shaffelburg (LBRuT); Robin Chapman & Kumal Rajpaul (Hounslow and Richmond Community Healthcare NHS Trust); Colin Morris (DWP); Paula Buckton & Emily John (Ruils); Ravi Arora (Multicultural Richmond); Heather Mathew (RCVS), Julie Dacosta (Crossroads Richmond); Esther Mmbago & Lucy Byrne (RAID); Sharon La Ronde (RPLC); Tamas Tatai (Alzheimer's Society); Karen Pitchford (Crossway Pregnancy Centre); Alison & Kevin Sears (National Autistic Society Richmond).

2. Membership update

No new organisations represented, but some new people; list of organisations circulated – if there are any others that might be interested, let Simon know.

3. Covid-19 restrictions – current advice provision and emerging issues

All to briefly summarise current service delivery

Simon said that Citizens Advice Richmond (CAR) has closed all offices and suspended all face to face services. All advice is currently being delivered by phone and email; 60 staff and volunteers have been enabled to work from home, in a variety of roles. Phone hours have been increased by 50% and there are more advisers available to take calls. There is now a form on the website (www.citizensadvice-richmond.org/referral-page) that allows direct referrals from other organisations. There is also voicemail facility for clients that is open 24 hours a day. The Manage Your Money (financial capability) team has capacity to help people with budgeting and saving money. Since early March, the research & campaigns team is collating issues around Covid-19 and passing these to colleagues in the national service; some issues are about employment and about lodgers, who can still be evicted.

Alison reported that the Carers Centre is providing support by email and phone and there is an increase in the need for emotional support. They are establishing some online workshops.

Colin said that all the Jobcentres are closed and there is no date yet when they will re-open – he now produced a weekly newsletter and several members asked him to include them on the distribution list. Many staff have been transferred to dealing with new UC claims, but the demand has now lessened.

Esther said that RAID's helpline is open five days a week from 9 to 5. Advice queries are picking up and they have started an online counselling service via zoom – details are on their website.

Paula said that Ruils now provide befriending services exclusively by phone. They have recruited 100 new volunteers over the first few weeks of the lockdown and are continuing to recruit them. They have a new pilot project helping clients with assistive technology, to reduce isolation. Ruils also run the local foodbank with RAID and have a prescription pick-up service.

Heather reported that RCVS have an additional 3,000 volunteers on their books who are keen to help, though some may have to return to work; they aim to retain 50% of them and are trying to manage expectations. Of the 750K NHS volunteers recruited, 3,000 are in Richmond, but only a few score have been allocated any tasks. Ruils have also recruited 200 new volunteers, but mostly to unskilled work.

Tamas said the Alzheimer's Society are doing befriending calls in Richmond.

4. Universal Credit issues

Car R&C team has produced a report on a project to follow up people making UC claims – a summary was circulated to members recently. Mark said that about 60 clients were contacted and the team concentrated on financial issues, the benefit cap, people having their claims closed down without warning and hold ups caused by habitual residence checks being carried out on EU citizens. We can send out the full report which includes several case studies. Lucy said that RAID had seen cases of people being wrongly put onto UC and then being unable to go back to the legacy benefits. Colin said that claims should not be closed down without at least one warning.

5. Richmond Council hardship fund

Peter Forde outlined two new hardship fund that Richmond Council is setting up this week. The first can help households with groceries in the form of three to five weekly payments in the form of supermarket vouchers and to be eligible for support the following criteria must be met:

- Be a couple or lone parent with at least 1 dependent child
- Have lost employment or income due to Covid-19
- Have claimed Universal Credit due to Covid-19 income change (i.e. since 15 March 2020)
- Live in Richmond borough

There is more information and a link to the online application form on the [council's website](#).

The second element supports people with 'no recourse to public funds' and Peter is keen to work with any organisations who have people in this category as clients – the council will send a link that isn't publically available, to these organisations. The offer is similar to that available to families. Organisations can assist people to make a claim and should state why the client has no recourse to public funds. The council makes the final decision on who gets access to the fund. The council hasn't yet decided how they will promote this scheme. Peter said that payments don't count as public funds.

6. CAR EU nationals project

CAR offers a specialist casework service for EU citizens who live, work or study in the borough – Mike is the caseworker. Richmond council funds the project. Mike summarised the Home Office settled status scheme, which ends in June 2021. CAR and Richmond council can assist with scanning relevant documents. It is estimated that about 90% of eligible people have already applied and the remainder are likely to be hard to reach. Most eligible clients we are helping now

are seeking advice for other matters – Mike asked members to look out for people who haven't yet applied and to refer them to CAR. Use the contact form on the CAR website or the referral form if there are any questions or referrals.

7. Welfare reform stakeholders group

At the last meeting we reported that the WRSG is considering its future, as the govt.'s welfare reforms are now mostly bedded in. We agreed that the advice forum could take on the group's work. However given the current pandemic situation, the latest meeting of the group decided it is needed for the time being.

8. Any other business

Bradley asked about the level of applications for RPLC grants – Sharon said the increase had come mainly from schools.

Alison said that they have access to grants from the Carers Trust for carers in need of emergency financial support.

9. Date of next meeting

Normally hold these meetings every three months, which takes us to September. It's likely that this will be another virtual meeting and we will send out the date in due course, probably a Tuesday.