Advice:

Responses to Social Exclusion in London
“Social exclusion is the cumulative marginalisation from production (employment), from consumption (income poverty), from social networks (community, family, neighbours), from decision making and from an adequate quality of life. As a result of social exclusion people are unable to exercise their full economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights and experience a loss of social status.”

UK Coalition Against Poverty
Understanding and tackling social exclusion

The dimensions of social exclusion

Social exclusion is not simply about being poor. It describes a process, rather than merely a state of affairs. The concept of social exclusion focuses not just on measures of deprivation, but on the complex network of ways by which individuals and communities find themselves unable to participate in society. This way of thinking creates an opportunity to understand the complexity of experience that leads to social exclusion, and an opportunity to develop solutions. In Britain, we are now seeing more analysis that takes account of the multi-faceted nature of social exclusion.

Opportunity for All, the first annual Government poverty audit, summarises the key dimensions of social exclusion, including barriers facing older people, inequalities in health, childhood deprivation, poor housing and neighbourhoods, a lack of opportunity in employment and education, and disadvantage through discrimination. This report on the work of advice services in London shows the vital role advice plays in developing thorough-going responses to social exclusion – from work at the grassroots to influencing national policy.

The Social Exclusion Unit, set up in 1997, has provided a welcome focus and encouragement in tackling social exclusion. The evidence it has gathered, together with other data, reinforces how important it is to find imaginative, effective solutions. One in ten households in the UK does not have a bank account. The number of households on a low income doubled between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1990s. Some groups of people are particularly vulnerable: Pensioners are the largest single group on means-tested benefits. Meanwhile, the unemployment rate among 16–17 year olds is three times the rate for all working-age adults. And 6.4 million working age adults in the UK have a limiting long-term disability.

London

The case studies in this report are drawn from advice services working with people in London. London has particular problems. It is a city of extremes where deprivation and affluence exist side by side. Unemployment in London is around twice the national average. Thirteen of the 20 most deprived local authority areas are in London, with 64% of England’s most deprived council estates. These statistics give a glimpse of the deprivation in some of London’s communities, where poor housing, poverty, ill health and unemployment are part of the landscape of daily life. Complex, combined problems require sophisticated solutions. Policy makers, funders, professionals, communities and individuals are now beginning to work out solutions together. The case studies in this report show how advice services tackle the experience of social exclusion.

Responding to social exclusion

Where do people go when they have no work, money problems, or poor quality housing? They need help and advice: advice about rights and entitlements, and about the opportunities that exist to tackle their disadvantage. Providing this help and advice is the work of the advice sector. The advice sector is made up of voluntary organisations that provide free, confidential, independent, impartial advice on social welfare issues: issues that disproportionately affect people who experience social exclusion. These case studies show how, through the work of advice services, people experiencing multiple deprivation are advised of their rights and entitlements, and are helped to manage debt, improve their housing or maximise their income. The examples also show ways in which advice services have adapted to meet the needs of the most socially excluded communities in the Capital. Access to advice is the starting point – people knowing where they can turn, and confident that they’ll find an appropriate service. Advice services act on behalf of individuals and groups. Many organisations also provide a focus for community activity and campaigns. At local and/or national level advice services successfully influence policy – providing evidence of the consequences of legislative change and suggesting improvements.

Access to advice

The results of advice work have a dramatic benefit in the lives of people experiencing social exclusion. Benefit take-up work, for example, raises awareness of rights and brings money into deprived neighbourhoods. Individual and group legal challenges benefit individuals and communities and have far reaching implications for future cases and government policy. However, some of the benefits of advice work are harder to capture. Accurate and appropriate advice doesn’t always lead to material gain if the law is not in someone’s favour. The benefits of preventative advice are also hard to measure, as success means stopping the problem before it starts. The advice sector believes that access to advice is a fundamental and essential way of giving people the chance to tackle disadvantage and discrimination. Central Government shares this belief, stating that an effective justice system contributes to tackling social exclusion by “enabling people to uphold their rights and defend their interests when they need to do so.” This report profiles organisations whose day-to-day work combats social exclusion in communities: it is an

4. NPI (1999): as above

Advice: Responses to Social Exclusion in London • A Lasa report
attempt to capture the multi-faceted approach of advice services.

**Planning for the future**

Starting in 2000, the Community Legal Service will bring together Government and advice services in the voluntary, private and public sector to try to meet the public’s need for advice. This is an enormous task. It will involve bringing together large and small organisations, and many different ways of working. The model of partnership is one that we are seeing in many other strategies to tackle social exclusion. It is one that can work. The kind of core services and responsive, creative solutions described in this report can play a major part in ensuring that these partnerships have an impact in socially excluded communities. Advice providers must work alongside funders and policy makers. They need to be included as equal partners in planning for an inclusive Community Legal Service that makes a difference in people’s lives. The work of advice services begins at the grassroots – with the problems and opportunities in the daily lives of excluded individuals and communities. This report highlights the breadth of experience advice services bring in responding to social exclusion. Advice services need to be integrated onto the fabric of a strategy for London – part of the solution to social exclusion.

The organisations profiled here share a common aim of tackling social exclusion in the communities they serve, by providing accessible, confidential, quality advice services. In addition to the essential core service of each organisation, there are examples of creative ventures, developed in response to community need.

**Off Centre** have developed holistic, seamless services on one site as the best way of dealing with the problems faced by young people. The supervision project between **Blackfriars Advice Centre** and community organisations in Southwark is another example providing a seamless service for clients, via strong interagency links. Making sure disabled people, the gay and lesbian community and older people have the best possible opportunities for access to advice is the business of **DIAL Waltham Forest**, **LAGER**, and **Age Concern Hounslow** respectively.

Each of these organisations has used their daily experience of advice work to design services tailored to the needs of their community. New technology is being used to create new channels of access by the **Multilingual Website Project** – a collaborative venture between Haringey CAB and community organisations with Lasa, to make advice topics available on the web in different languages. The **Refugee and Training Advisory Services** is an opportunity for advice services themselves to combat the social exclusion of unemployment by providing training and placements in advice work for refugees. Often trainees subsequently work in their own community organisations, creating a sustainable strategy for helping excluded communities. Lastly, **Disability Alliance** and **Plumstead Law Centre** show how advice work can have a constructive and powerful influence on both national and local policies that affect social exclusion.
Off Centre

Taking a holistic approach to the advice needs of young people

Breaking the cycle of disadvantage is central to the Government’s strategy for tackling social exclusion affecting young people.1

In Inner London, more than one in five 16–18 year olds do not participate in education, employment or training. At age 21, these young people are far more likely than their peers to be unemployed, unqualified, untrained, and at risk of depression and poor physical health.2

Young people living in inner-city areas can find themselves facing many difficult and testing circumstances, from unemployment and homelessness through to family disputes, mental health problems and self-harming. Having a place to go where they can talk, in confidence, to someone about any of these issues, and how to move on from them, is the key to Off Centre’s existence.

Established in 1975 in Hackney, Off Centre is the only service of its kind in the borough, providing a holistic service of one-to-one counselling, support and therapy groups, and with a covering letter setting out the main issues. As well as developing skills in dealing with situations that directly affect their health and wellbeing, these clients often report a real sense of achievement at having dealt with the situation themselves and bringing about a positive outcome.

Where the young person’s problem cannot be resolved in this way, Off Centre staff will make a referral to an appropriate advice agency. However, staff noticed a drop-off between referrals being made and the person actually attending another agency. Off Centre are successfully tackling the drop off by inviting in other services for young people. Services involved so far include the Enterprise Careers Service, Addaction – a drug agency, and The Kipper Project’s East End Focus – a resettlement project for homeless young people. Young people are thus more likely to make use of these other agencies who can help them, whilst allowing Off Centre staff to concentrate on the counselling and therapy services they provide.

Being part of a network of services that can offer support to young people is a crucial part of Off Centre’s work and helps to ensure that young people do not fall through the net. Off Centre start from the experiences of their users, and tackle their combination of problems together.

“At Off Centre, they are on your level. They are not there to judge, they are there to help.”

said one user. Off Centre have certainly found their approach successful in combating the multiple exclusion of many young people.
The Southwark Supervision Pilot Project

- Pooling expertise, creating seamless services

Some of the most common experiences of workers in small advice agencies are feelings of isolation, a lack of confidence in the quality of advice being given and difficulties in setting realistic boundaries of what can be achieved for clients. The Supervision Pilot Project (SPP) is an initiative to ensure the provision of quality advice in the London Borough of Southwark, involving Blackfriars Advice Centre (BAC) and the Federation of Independent Advice Centres working with smaller community-based agencies in the borough.

Community-based agencies work with some of the most socially excluded groups in society: people who, when they try to seek help, frequently experience a lack of understanding about their particular concerns, and how these concerns interrelate. Trusted community organisations play a vital role in helping people to understand their rights and entitlements, and to gain access to services. They provide a voice and a focus for their community. Often their very existence uncovers an unmet need for advice among people who would not readily approach other organisations. But community organisations are often small, and providing a comprehensive advice service can be very difficult. In Southwark, seven community-based organisations took part in the SPP. Between them, the organisations work specifically with disabled people, older people, the Chinese and Vietnamese community, young people, the Bengali community and Muslim women.

Blackfriars Advice Centre, on the other hand, is a well-established advice centre, employing 19 workers and providing a wide variety of services, from drop-in generalist advice to outreach advice for Bengali women, families with children and a county court project. They have experience of measuring the quality of their own advice work through being one of the first agencies to take part in the Legal Aid Board franchising scheme and were very keen to become involved in the SPP.

To start with, the seven community-based agencies were visited to decide on an action plan for the type of supervision and support needed. This covered both policy and organisational issues, as well as more technical, advice-giving issues. BAC visited the agencies quarterly for organisational supervision, on internal policies and procedures and identifying training needs. Monthly visits supported workers with technical supervision on casework issues. On the whole, they found that the agencies were receptive to suggestions of ways in which they could improve or alter working practices for the better.

BAC feel that they have benefited enormously from the SPP by forging strong links with local agencies, leading to more client referrals being made between agencies. It has emphasised the essential role of small, dedicated agencies, working with specific client groups as the first point of contact for many people seeking advice. People often feel more comfortable going to an agency that they think will understand their specific issues and concerns. They are then more prepared to be referred onto another agency better equipped to meet their need for advice, if necessary.

Guy Dennis, of Southwark Disablement Association (SDA), found the SPP to be invaluable to him in his daily working. SDA are a small association offering advice and information to people with physical and sensory disablement and are located in a Social Services daycentre. Guy had been employed as the information officer for SDA, before also taking on the advice worker role and he was working on his own without any direct supervision. He was keen to take part in the SPP as he was worried that he might be missing things when advising clients and was finding his work extremely stressful.

Through the monthly supervision sessions, case recording was improved; the case-files were better organised; standard letters were drafted; and Guy was guided in the use of complex advice handbooks.

As a result of these developments, Guy found that he was more confident in advising clients, knowing what he could manage to do for them and when he needed to refer them on, or when to advise clients that they did not have a case worth pursuing. Examining his workload, it became apparent that the home visits he had been doing were unmanageable, and SDA employed another worker to cover these, freeing up more of his time.

“I feel like they [BAC] are now my work colleagues rather than my supervisors. This has been a great experience and I am now seeing the fruits of this collaboration.”

The SPP should help to ensure that Southwark residents continue to enjoy access to high quality information and advice, whilst also building links between advice providers, and improving and validating the work of smaller, community-based organisations.

I. Lord Chancellor’s Department (1999): The Community Legal Service: a consultation paper
Increasing access to advice for disabled people

People coming for advice don’t always know what they need to know. They may arrive asking for advice on a parking permit, which leads to a discussion about mobility problems, which could lead to an orange badge application, a claim for Disability Living Allowance and a referral to Social Services for home adaptations to allow easier access. Providing a service by disabled people for disabled people means DIAL Waltham Forest’s advisers have personal experience of the needs of disabled people, and they are aware of how issues affecting their users interrelate.

In addition to their Legal Aid franchise in welfare rights advice, DIAL provide advice and information on issues that affect disabled people such as disability discrimination, housing, employment, education and transport. A specialist agency like DIAL is able to assess each client’s circumstances and make them aware of all of their options. This is a strength that may not be present at more generalist advice agencies.

A good example of this can be seen in the British Sign Language (BSL) signer advice service that DIAL have been offering for over 5 years. With their location next to a Disability Resource Centre, which serves as a focal point for the local deaf community, DIAL noticed that they were seeing a large number of deaf clients. They started the service by providing BSL interpretation between client and adviser, but this was not ideal, and they came up with the idea of a single person combining the roles of signer and adviser.

DIAL Waltham Forest then happened to be contacted by a trainee BSL signer who had to gain some experience of fieldwork and wanted to learn about advice work. This led to setting up a one-to-one service, offering welfare benefits advice, which was more suitable to the needs of the deaf clients. The clients could build up a rapport with the advisor, who in turn developed a good understanding of the specific issues that surround deaf clients.

Particularly for benefits such as Disability Living Allowance, awareness of deaf issues is essential when completing the claim forms — many of the difficulties faced by deaf people do not obviously fit within the scope of the claim form questions. It is not widely known, for example, that BSL is the first language for most profoundly deaf people, meaning that communication in other languages can be problematic. In turn, increased awareness of the issues leads to a good success rate on initial applications, which is less stressful for the clients and less time consuming for the adviser.

The feedback from the clients of the service has been very positive and DIAL are now getting clients travelling from outside their local borough to make use of the service as news has spread within the deaf community. Clients have been delighted to find that they have a central point of reference that they can trust and access when needed, and where they feel comfortable in discussing personal issues.

However, the service is run on a voluntary basis, and until more resources are secured, DIAL is unable to publicise the service as demand is already very high. They are hoping to attract funding, possibly in partnership with another disability organisation in a neighbouring borough, so that they can provide the certainty of service provision that local deaf people need.

---

1. DIAL UK factsheet (1999)
2. RNID (1999): Breaking the Sound Barrier
The elderly population of Brentford is some £250,000 better off annually because of the work of the outreach service being provided by Age Concern Hounslow. However, the advantages of this welfare benefits advice service to older people stretch far beyond the help with maximising income. Charlie Warshawski, the outreach worker, says that many older people have a distrust of becoming involved with the system due to a mixture of pride, misinformation, low expectation and the feeling that no-one has time for them. One client said of the service:  

“I wouldn’t have known where to start finding out about my benefits.”

Since February 1999, an outreach network has been established between Age Concern Hounslow and other local agencies. Funded by Brentford Regeneration Partnership as part of an anti-poverty and social inclusion strategy, it is an attempt to ensure that services are targeted appropriately and that older people are aware of the full range of options open to them. Charlie has promoted the outreach service in a number of ways, including talks to sheltered housing schemes, residents and carers groups, leafleting door-to-door and in local shops. People who use the outreach service are offered a benefit check to ensure that they are claiming all the benefits to which they are entitled. They are given assistance with the claim procedure and also referred on to any other services that may help them. This could be to social services or occupational therapy, but might also be encouragement to attend the lunch club or make use of the library at home service, to lessen the effects of social isolation.

Claims for benefits such as Attendance Allowance involve the client divulging a lot of personal information, which can feel upsetting or embarrassing. Charlie makes sure that after the claim form has been filled in, he spends time talking to the client about any issues that may have arisen as a result and stresses that they can contact him for any follow-up work that may arise. These informal chats often result in the client opening up to him in a way that they may not have felt able to do previously. Users say they particularly appreciate that someone is willing to spend time listening to experiences from their perspective, beyond the scope of the immediate matter in hand.

The cross-agency network reduces the feeling of the elderly clients that they are being shunted from pillar to post. The advantages of this networking are important to users, who can be dealt with by the most appropriate service, and to the organisations who can avoid duplication of efforts and offer a comprehensive service to more people.

“No-one has made such an effort to help me,” said one Brentford resident.

Future plans to promote the service include a weekly session at the local health centre and more work with GPs to educate them on welfare benefits and encourage referrals. Given the impact of ill-health on the lives of many older people, Charlie expects this will reach a lot more people who need advice. There are also plans to start door-to-door leafleting to try to reach out to those individuals still not aware of or using the services available.

The success of this project in Brentford can be viewed as a snapshot of unmet need both locally and nationally, and there are bids in to fund two further workers, including one with Asian community language skills.

---

1. DSS (1998): The Pensioner Income Series
2. NPI (1999): Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion
After years of campaigns and lobbying, many lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men now feel that they can be more confident of being open about their sexuality in and out of their workplace. However, there remain many others who continue to experience prejudice, discrimination and harassment because of their sexuality and who experience little, if any, protection from the law. Rights for lesbians and gay men are excluded from many areas of law. The Government identifies disadvantage through discrimination as a key dimension of social exclusion.2 The example of discrimination quoted above makes it easy to see how homophobic discrimination excludes people from social networks, and can compound exclusion by cutting off people from employment networks, with likely knock-on effects on income.

Lesbian And Gay Employment Rights (LAGER) have been around for over 16 years helping thousands of lesbians and gay men in their personal battles against various forms of discrimination, including refusal of jobs, unequal treatment at work, dismissal or forced resignations. As well as advising on discrimination due to sexuality, LAGER advises clients on discrimination because of race, sex, disability, age, HIV or marital status. For many of their clients, their experience of discrimination and ignorance means that they would not seek advice elsewhere if organisations like LAGER, with which they can identify, did not exist.

The vast majority of initial enquiries come from the helplines, one for lesbians and one for gay men. If the case requires more thorough advice, an appointment will usually be set up with the caller to discuss the case in more depth. As there is no specific legislation within employment law relating to discrimination on the grounds of sexuality, the adviser needs to assess a wide range of law relating to each individual case, and decide what the best course of action will be.

Sometimes this involves liaising with the employer, as in the case of a lesbian employed in a pub. The landlord sacked her after her co-workers “outed” her at work. LAGER was able to intervene with the brewery that owned the pub.

On other occasions, LAGER may advise that the client has a case that should go to an Industrial Tribunal. One client, a black gay man, had been subject to sustained verbal abuse from his manager for over two years, leading to an adverse effect on his mental health. A complaint to the company had no effect and so the client was advised to resign and claim constructive dismissal. At his Industrial Tribunal hearing, the tribunal chair found the language involved so distasteful that he asked that it be written down rather than spoken! After a hearing lasting four days, the tribunal found in favour of the client and awarded a lump sum.

These cases again highlight how discrimination can lead to multiple disadvantage, affecting work, health, social networks and income.

In addition to advice work, LAGER is now able to offer representation at some Industrial Tribunals. They have a website that provides information on their services and training is provided on issues surrounding employment law and sexuality. LAGER has links with many other organisations, and they also work with larger companies to provide advice on good employment practice.

Partly because of discrimination and fear of discrimination, evidence about homophobia and its effects is not always readily available. In the future, LAGER hope to employ a Publicity and Information Officer so they can use their knowledge on the ground in influencing policy makers. LAGER believe that continued profile raising will mean that more people who suffer discrimination will feel able to seek advice.
Refugee Education and Training Advisory Service

Training refugees, developing advice skills

For many refugees, the act of seeking asylum means much more than just losing their ties with their country of birth. It can mean profound social exclusion: a loss of status, dignity, income and a loss of opportunities to contribute to the society they find themselves living in. The Refugee Education and Training Advisory Service (RETAS) aims to combat these disadvantages by offering a comprehensive range of services, including training, advice and mentoring, in many areas such as educational opportunities, employment support, and welfare rights and housing advice.

The need for an advice and information service on education and employment issues is clearly an integral part of promoting social inclusion for refugees. Many refugees have had their education interrupted or denied in their country of origin, or they may have qualifications that are not recognised in this country. Further, barriers to employment in the UK and high levels of unemployment in London increase their isolation and prevent them from improving their life.

The RETAS employment support program assists individuals to obtain worthwhile and fulfilling work. It offers individual advice and a tailor-made job search course that teaches the different ways of looking for work in the UK, how to transfer skills and experience already held, as well as having a counselling element that allows participants to talk about their life experiences and expectations. The course content is continually assessed through evaluation workshops to ensure its relevance to the needs of the participants.

Some trainees go on to work in small refugee organisations that provide support to other refugees from similar backgrounds and cultures. A need was identified for such people to formalise their skills in advice work and an NVQ3 program in advice work was set up in partnership with Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, University of North London and Central London Advisory Service. The course provides training on advice in education, employment, immigration, housing and welfare rights and has been successful in moving trainees on to paid advice work.

Course participants can choose the type of advice work in which they wish to specialise and are offered placements in various statutory and voluntary bodies. This builds knowledge of work skills, provides work references and informs of suitable job vacancies.

A distance learning structure for this course is being developed that will use a CD-ROM to allow study of the course by people from all around the UK. It is inspired by a similar system run by the German Red Cross, and is funded in partnership with them. In light of the Government program to disperse refugees around the UK, this type of project will become a vital part of ensuring that refugees are given the opportunity to combat social exclusion and reduce their barriers to employment.

Unemployment in inner London is about twice the national average. Unemployment levels for newer refugee communities can be anywhere between 75% and 95%, despite having a higher overall level of qualifications than in the UK population as a whole.

2. London Development Partnership (1999): From the Margins to the Mainstream
Multi-lingual Website

Targeted, accessible information using IT

The internet clearly has the potential to provide enormous amounts of up-to-date information. It also has the potential to compound the exclusion of many people, by being yet another network from which people are cut off, perhaps because of physical access, economic access, knowledge or understanding.

If you are not fluent in English, many websites will be at best confusing, at worst, incomprehensible. The idea of a multi-lingual website came about as the result of a chance meeting between workers from Lasa’s Information Systems Team, and Haringey CAB. The CAB does a lot of work with local community organisations, such as the Haringey Refugee Action Group, and they provide various outreach services, including a refugee telephone advice line. They were very interested in the potential of the internet to provide additional services aimed at their local communities, but were unsure how to proceed.

The meeting sparked the idea of a website that would provide high-quality, up-to-date information in a variety of languages. Before the technology was available, leaflets provided in various languages proved inadequate because it was impossible to keep them updated. Furthermore, official translations were often culturally inappropriate and confusing. The new website would keep pace with change, and attempt to unite the needs of communities with relevant, appropriate translations.

The multi-lingual website project is still in development stages. In planning to meet an identified need, those involved have been careful to plan an inclusive, useful service. This has meant a great deal of collaboration – pooling skills and knowledge from diverse organisations. The project is taking shape and seeking funding, whilst those involved continue to work towards their vision.

Haringey CAB has used its contacts within the local community groups to define the type of information required and how it should be presented, whilst Lasa has offered its information technology expertise. An editorial group made up of representatives of local organisations has formed. Initially, the plan is to produce information on 20 key topics in 12 to 14 different languages, with scope for expansion.

Most of the agencies taking part in the project already have the basic IT equipment necessary to be able to use the service effectively, and the software needed to allow complex translations to be downloaded is freely available and can deal with the varied characters found in different languages. Advice organisations interpret the complex law and systems that are relevant to their clients’ circumstances. The information on the multi-lingual website will need to be similarly relevant, accessible and useful for people who need advice. People with an understanding of both the cultural issues and the advice issues are carrying out the translations. This helps to ensure that advice on the site is correct and appropriate to the target audience. Community organisations will also be able to customise downloaded information, adding details of their own services for example.

Empowering individuals is key to this project. People will have access to information in their own language, and the advice they need to use the information. The project should also give a basic understanding of computers and the world wide web. Basic information will be provided on immigration, welfare rights, housing and consumer issues, for example. There will then be links to other websites, organisations and services that may be able to assist the enquirer.

Local organisations will also benefit as they will be able to access up-to-the-minute information affecting their particular client groups and to share information between themselves. Further, the site will raise the profile of agencies taking part in the project with the added ability to signpost clients to other relevant services that may be of use. Piloting the website will highlight ways access could be expanded. Hopes for the future include perhaps using sound and video technology, so that the service can be used by people without literacy skills. Collaboration and joint-working underpin this innovative project which uses IT to tackle social exclusion.

---

1. CRE factsheet (1999)
This is just one example of the way in which community-based advice and Law Centres can affect local authority policy in a positive way, for the benefit of both residents and the authority. The Social Exclusion Unit has identified the effectiveness of public services as a key issue in tackling deprivation. Ineffective local services or ill-thought out policies can exacerbate the exclusion of people who are already marginalised by poverty and deprivation. In their day-to-day work with the local community, advice workers are very well placed to spot problems with policy implementation at an early stage.

The Housing Team at PLC give advice on rent arrears and summons, housing benefit and council tax problems, mortgage arrears and repossessions, rehousing, disrepair and homelessness. Casework on individual problems is combined with local policy and campaign work, based on evidence drawn from their clients’ experiences. By looking at the types of queries coming into the centre, the team uses both individual cases and common areas of concern to negotiate with Greenwich Council for changes to their policies. As a result of the rent arrears policy, tenants were saved the stress and expense of attending court, whilst the council saved money through a reduction in the number of possessions summons issued and an improved repayment rate of arrears. PLC is continuing to press for improvements to the Housing Benefit department to ensure that housing benefit claims are assessed correctly and on time. This would mean that fewer tenants will find themselves in arrears and the Council would avoid losing local government subsidies available to them.

PLC also campaigned successfully for changes to the collection of council tax arrears. The team noticed that there were a regular number of complaints coming to them about the methods used by bailiffs employed by the council to collect council tax debts. They presented to the Council a number of case studies clearly showing how the bailiffs were making threats and illegal charges against both tenants and the Council. As a result, the council sacked one firm of bailiffs and issued a clear set of guidelines to the other firms setting out terms of how they should conduct themselves and their legal responsibilities.

Responding to local need, PLC have expanded to open another office that serves Thamesmead and north Bexley – with about 80,000 residents. Through its work providing free and accessible legal advice to the residents and workers in Greenwich, north Bexley and Thamesmead, Plumstead Law Centre can directly influence and inform the policies and procedures of local councils.
Disability Alliance

Campaigning to change policies that exclude disabled people

Since its beginnings in 1974, Disability Alliance (DA) has a long tradition of lobbying on behalf of, and providing information to, disabled people. It has an aim to break the link between disability and poverty through a mixture of advice and social policy work, with the latter activity being informed by the feedback from the advice work on the ground.

Through the Disability Benefits Consortium – a group of agencies working together in assisting disabled people – and its own research on poverty and social exclusion, DA is in a strong position to lobby government for positive changes to the benefits system. A recent example of this work is the campaign against the Benefits Integrity Project (BIP), introduced in 1997.

Some 425,000 severely disabled people in receipt of Disability Living Allowance (DLA) were told that they were having their entitlement checked to make sure that they were receiving the correct level of benefit. Claimants of the highest levels of DLA are some of the most disabled in society. BIP led to many people being confused and worried about reductions in their income, which could lead to increased social isolation and poverty. In the words of one man with severe osteoarthritis who sought advice:

“My condition cannot be seen but the pain is with me seven days a week. How can I tell and show someone who is not a doctor?”

Through feedback from clients who had been assessed, it became apparent to DA that disabled people were very unhappy and upset with the administration and application of BIP.

DA worked with other organisations in compiling evidence that showed how the project was causing distress and failing to meet the needs of claimants, and this was highlighted in the media. Certain medical conditions were identified, in which a lessening in the level of disability was unlikely to occur, and exemptions for these conditions proposed and accepted by Government. Information was gathered and case studies and statistics prepared clearly showing the hardship that was occurring as a result of BIP. The harsh reality was that over 14% of people assessed by BIP had their benefit reduced. The fact that 59% of people who appealed then had their benefit restored shows the unnecessary suffering BIP was causing. A Social Security Select Committee undertook an enquiry and written evidence was presented, along with oral evidence from clients who had been assessed under BIP. The Committee members were shocked to hear how BIP was being carried out and how claimants had been badly affected.

Eventually, the Government decided to abandon the project and replace it with a periodic enquiry system that would look at all claimants’ entitlement in a more appropriate way, taking on board some of the suggested improvements raised during the enquiry.

DA is now working on a campaign to improve the Benefits Agency Medical Services (BAMS) due to ongoing complaints over the medical examinations, doctors’ attitudes and BAMS’ poor complaints system. DA’s continued campaigning helps to improve the quality of the lives of countless disabled people throughout London and the UK.

“Day to day living is more expensive if you are disabled. Extra money is often needed for help with cleaning, cooking and personal care, non-prescription medicines, special equipment, wheelchairs, incontinence pads, home adaptations, heating and hot water, special clothing and shoes, extra laundry, special diets and travel.”

1. Disability Alliance, Annual Review 1998/9
4. DSS statistics, April 1998

1. Disability Alliance, Annual Review 1998/9
4. DSS statistics, April 1998

Advice: Responses to Social Exclusion in London • A Lasa report
**For further information about the work of advice services contact:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Las</strong>a</th>
<th><strong>DIAL UK</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Universal House, 88–94 Wentworth Street, London, E1 7SA</td>
<td>Park Lodge, St. Catherine's Hospital, Tickhill Road, Balby, Doncaster, DN4 8QN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tel: 020 7377 2798</td>
<td>Tel: 01302 310 123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email: <a href="mailto:info@lasa.org.uk">info@lasa.org.uk</a></td>
<td>Email: <a href="mailto:dialuk@aol.com">dialuk@aol.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website: <a href="http://www.lasa.org.uk">www.lasa.org.uk</a></td>
<td>Website: members.aol.com/dialuk</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Federation of Independent Advice Centres – London Region</strong></th>
<th><strong>Age Concern London</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4 Deans Court, St. Paul’s Churchyard, London, EC4V 5AA</td>
<td>54 Knatchbull Road, London, SE5 9QY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tel: 020 7489 7920</td>
<td>Tel: 020 7737 3456</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email: <a href="mailto:london@fiac.org.uk">london@fiac.org.uk</a></td>
<td>Email: <a href="mailto:hburley@aclondon.org.uk">hburley@aclondon.org.uk</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website: <a href="http://www.fiac.org.uk">www.fiac.org.uk</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux – London Region</strong></th>
<th><strong>Youth Access</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>136–144 City Road, London, EC1V 2RL</td>
<td>1a Taylor’s Yard, 67 Alderbrook Road, London, SW12 8AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tel: 020 7549 0800</td>
<td>Tel: 020 8772 9900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email: <a href="mailto:london.region@nacab.org.uk">london.region@nacab.org.uk</a></td>
<td>Email: <a href="mailto:yaccess@dircon.co.uk">yaccess@dircon.co.uk</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website: <a href="http://www.nacab.org.uk">www.nacab.org.uk</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Law Centres Federation</strong></th>
<th><strong>Shelter South and London Region</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tel: 020 7387 8570</td>
<td>Tel: 020 7404 6939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email: <a href="mailto:info@lawcentres.org.uk">info@lawcentres.org.uk</a></td>
<td>Website: <a href="http://www.shelter.org.uk">www.shelter.org.uk</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website: <a href="http://www.lawcentres.org.uk">www.lawcentres.org.uk</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>