

CITIZENS' RIGHTS OFFICE

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Director Stuart Weir

your ref
our ref

6th March 1975

Dear Geoff;

I enclose a brief summary of our first welfare rights officers' meeting which I won't dignify by describing as minutes. As agreed, the next meeting will be on Friday, April 11, at Manchester. We will meet at 11 am at Solway House, 8 Aytoun Street, Manchester 1. Arrangements for the meeting are in the hands of Sandy Berman (061 228 2111) and she has promised us lunch.

Together with the note of the last meeting I am circulating the following material:

- 1) Correspondence with the NACAB
- 2) Jack Tatham's annual report (Nottinghamshire SSD)
- 3) Manchester's publicity material
- 4) Photocopy of Paul Burgess's article in New Society
- 5) Nottinghamshire's complaints procedure
- 6) Rent rebate/allowance and rate rebate forms from Wandsworth
- 7) Addresses and telephone numbers of group members
- 8) SB/rent questionnaire (further copies available)
- 9) S1/S12 questionnaire - *already sent*
- 10) Note on CRO bulletin service.

We have not so far drawn up an agenda for the April meeting. Among suggestions for the agenda are (a) description of the Manchester team's work; (b) discussion of relationship of WROs with social workers; (c) Wandsworth's experience in abolishing means tests; (d) fuel debts; (e) election of officers (if any). Please would anyone with any comments on these suggestions, or further suggestions, inform Sandy or me as soon as possible? We would like to draw up an agenda by March 20 for circulation immediately afterwards.

Yours sincerely,

Stuart

STUART WEIR

*P.S. Thanks for comment
on NWBH. Will do in
revised (ie December) issue.*

PTG

WELFARE RIGHTS OFFICERS' GROUP

Inaugural meeting, January 17th, at the Adams Room, National Council of Social Service.

Present: Sheila Alcock, Geoff Alltimes, Sandy Berman, Jan Brunwin, John Casserly, Margaret Constable, Jim Cowan, Tim Dimmock, Geoff Fimister, Jim Fletcher, Pam Hamed, D.B. Hicks, Helen Hughson, David Lipson, Ruth Lister, Jill Miller, Beryl Morgan, John Murray, Linda Ring, David Robinson, Fran Shields, Jeff Silverstein, Robin Stonebridge, Jane Streather, Martha Street, Jack Tatham, John Ward. Acting Chairman: Stuart Weir.

1. The meeting began with a description of the terms of reference and general intentions of the welfare rights officers present. The majority of WROs had a brief which involved working within the community and not simply within a LA department. Topics mentioned included grades of appointment, funding, the department (or section) to which WROs are "attached", and their position vis-a-vis their authorities, particularly when it came to criticising policy or practices.

It was suggested that the WRO's community role could run to coordinating the agencies and council departments which gave advice and assistance, but it was felt that this may be resented by independent agencies. The difficulties of demarcation disputes was also raised. Some departments resented the interference of WROs.

2. WROs had varying budgets for information and reference works. It was said that the CRO issued a two-monthly bulletin on welfare rights, and this plus CPAG publications and rights guides, was available on a £35 annual subscription. CHECK also produced a vastly cheaper bulletin. It was agreed that Jack Tatham and Geoff Fimister should write to the National CABx Council to encourage them to make the CAB information service available. (Note:- This was done, and the CABx have decided in principle to give the service to LAs which support CABx in their areas; the exact terms and costing have not yet been determined). Mrs Hughson mentioned the importance of having access to a full set of NI Commissioners decisions, which were prohibitively expensive.

3. It was agreed that the group should circulate material between meetings, and the CRO volunteered to take on this role to begin with. Among material which would be circulated was the CHECK report on education benefits; tribunal submissions; extracts from the A code, when available; Manchester's publicity material; Nottingham's appeals procedures; Edinburgh's 'child's guide' to benefits.

It was also agreed that the group could exchange and collect information on issues of common interest. Martha Street agreed to collect information and coordinate activities on fuel debts (she is on a BAS working party on same issue). Ruth Lister asked for cases involving SB/rent and would circulate a questionnaire. Jane Streather suggested that the varying use

4. Several WROs described work in hand. Several are seeking to simplify and amalgamate forms, and in Manchester and Lanarkshire work is in progress on unifying LA services and benefits. Nottingham has an appeals system for applicants refused SSD benefits. Manchester has produced leaflets etc on benefits and Edinburgh is preparing a "child's guide" to benefits.

There was some discussion of training and courses for social workers, LA employees and "non-professionals". The experience of Nottingham and Knowsley in training social workers and others was described, and CHECK and CRO discussed their welfare rights courses and use of video film. CRO also runs seminars for London SSDs.

It was agreed that after further discussion it may be useful to circulate teaching materials.

5. Among other items it was said that the regional DHSS offices were showing an interest in WROs and their roles. It was said that the DHSS and SBC were concerned about the danger of conflict between local offices and SSDs.

6. The group agreed that the day's debate had been useful and agreed to meet quarterly. The next meeting was fixed for April 11th in Manchester (subject to confirmation). Stuart Weir explained that the group had so far just "grewed", and that several WROs consulted had felt the value of an interchange with workers in rights agencies. It was agreed that Steve Burkeman should be invited to join the group and that further applicants would be considered at the next meeting. In general, membership would be confined to WROs in local authority posts, plus some workers in rights agencies and others with relevant experience.

Paul Burgess was nominated (in his absence) as chairman for the Manchester meeting.

[17/1/75] ~~///~~ [Adv. serv.]

WELFARE RIGHTS OFFICERS GROUP

1st meeting, January 17th, 1975, at the National Council of Social Service, 99 Great Russell Street, WC1

Provisional agenda

1. Introduction: terms of reference and job descriptions, primary and responsibilities. How the authority and officer view the role? Is this role with the public or departmental only? What place is there for cooperation with community groups?
2. Information back-up, services and sharing. Is there an information gathering role for such a group? What information services would be useful? Would such a group pass on information for use, say BASW, CPAG, Age Concern, etc?
3. Discussion of projects currently underway and initial reports and reactions to the work. In particular, what training responsibilities have WROs adopted? Does their brief run to rationalising the structure of LA administered benefits, recommending the ending of means-testing where appropriate, studying application forms and procedures, etc?
4. What sort of issues are of concern? Would the group be interested, for example, in examining the use of Section 1 payments? What issues may repay joint discussion and examination?
5. Any other business
6. Does such a group have a viable role? If so, what arrangements should we make? In particular, what should be the criteria for membership? Date of next meeting?

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WELFARE RIGHTS OFFICERS' GROUP MEETING
N.C.S.S., Great Russell Street, London.
17.1.75

About 24 people attended. W.R.O.'s and related posts, plus some people from voluntary organisations.

Generally felt that the meeting was a constructive exercise in finding out what each other was doing, and exchanging ideas on matters of common interest.

Various different strategies were discussed, along with different positions in the structure and degrees of leverage. There is quite a bit of variation.

Publicity campaigns: it was generally agreed that a marginal increase in take-up could be expected.

The possible influence of W.R.O's on local benefits was discussed - clearly the W.R.O. has an immediate point of access here, or a least he/she should have.

Training: the 'across the board' approach received some criticism, apparently on the grounds that Social Workers would dominate the proceedings. I cannot really see that. I feel the distinction is between people who advise people and others.

Decisions

The Group will continue to meet. Next meeting in Manchester in April.

C.P.A.G. prepared to receive and distribute material on heating allowances.

Stuart Weir will write a bit on the meeting for New Society.

John Murray and Jill Miller will be available for phone interview by Community Care.

Jack Tatham and myself will draft a letter to N.A.C.A.B. encouraging them to make their information service available.

I will see if John Cassidy is still interested in a W.R. Component in the Dunbarton Quality of Life Project. If so, I will put him in touch with John Casserley.

2/25/81
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