

Enfield Council

Responding to the benefit cap: intensive support to prevent homelessness and remove barriers to work

Key facts and figures

- 1,713 - households affected by the benefit cap
- 838 – households still capped in May 2014
- High rents were the main driver for the benefit cap:
 - Two thirds of affected households had fewer than three children
 - Two thirds of affected households lived in private rented accommodation
- 60 per cent of affected households lost over £50 per week
- 27 per cent of affected households lost over £100 per week

Summary

“The taskforce strengthened working relationships and mutual understanding across the council, Jobcentre Plus and voluntary organisations. By working towards shared aims with pragmatism, we were able to overcome data sharing barriers and maximise the skills and knowledge of the multi-agency staff. Despite funding cuts, the Council is determined to maintain a focus on partnership working and addressing poverty in the borough and taskforce is now supporting a range of other vulnerable people.”

Kate Robertson, Assistant Director – Customer Services and Information, Enfield Council

The London Borough of Enfield was one of four benefit cap pilot areas, which implemented the benefit cap in April 2013. In Enfield, a strong partnership between the council, Jobcentre Plus and the CAB focussed on increasing employment, reducing debt and preventing homelessness. The project achieved positive outcomes for the families affected by focusing significant resources on providing them with tailored support. By May 2014, around half of Enfield’s initially capped households were no longer subject to the cap. 560 of these had found work and a further 142 had moved to more affordable accommodation of their choice.

Establishing a multi-agency steering group and operational task force

Making welfare work locally

“It was a pleasure to work with Enfield council on the welfare reform agenda. It felt from the CAB perspective like a genuine partnership, in which we were working together to try and resolve the very real issues that confronted residents. The partnership has gone from strength to strength and together we have achieved some remarkable results for clients.”

Jill Harrison, Chief Executive, Enfield Citizens Advice Bureau

In April 2012, staff in the Customer Services and Information team at Enfield Council started to build the business case for establishing a work program to respond to welfare reform. In October 2012, the council set up a steering group and a task force to respond to the implementation of the benefit cap. The steering group involved teams from across Enfield Council, including Housing, Children's Services and Revenues and Benefits as well as Jobcentre Plus and Enfield Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB).

The task force was a co-located, multi-agency team, made up of four members of the council's Revenues and Benefits Team, two Jobcentre Plus work coaches and a debt adviser from Enfield CAB. The task force was based in the offices of the council's Revenues and Benefits Team, and they co-ordinated the delivery of support to benefit cap affected households as well as working directly with families that were losing over £100 a week. For families losing less than that amount, the taskforce matched their data against existing council records, and where there was an existing relationship with another team, such as the Troubled Families Team, Children's Services or Housing, they passed on information about the benefit cap. This enabled those families to receive support from one key worker who was already involved in providing them with support. Families with young children were referred for events at children's centres and those in social housing passed to the housing provider. For households losing less than £100, but not already involved with other services or able to access support elsewhere, the task force sent letters containing information about the impact of the changes and about sources of support, including the option of a face-to-face visit.

Sally Sanders, Welfare Advice and Support Team Leader at Enfield Council, said:

“Having a co-located, multi-agency task force meant that relationships between the council, Jobcentre Plus and Enfield CAB were strengthened and this helped us to overcome barriers around data sharing and helped workers to respond quickly to challenges as they arose. The work of the taskforce has been reinforced by the steering group on which representatives of all partners and all relevant council services sit, which is able to find practical solutions to issues as they arise.”

A customer focused approach to getting the message out

Enfield Council took care to ensure that the taskforce was seen as a positive source of help. The task force designed letters to tell people about the changes and to encourage them to come in for tailored support, and for those losing more than £100 per week, they followed these up with telephone calls and home visits to encourage them to take up support. They also worked with community groups to host events for

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people who they found it more difficult to reach directly, for example the Congolese, Somali and Turkish communities.

In the one to one meetings support workers talked through the best options and encouraged people to agree a plan of action to address their income loss. Most appointments took place in the council offices as the Jobcentre Plus office was perceived to be a less supportive environment for their residents. They used their discretionary housing payments to help encourage action, making payments conditional on residents agreeing their action plan.

The task force was able to provide a much wider package of support to help people get work, than would be normally provided by Jobcentre Plus for this group of claimants, and through the work of the taskforce, a total of 560 households found employment. The Jobcentre Plus work coaches based on the task force provided one-to-one support, including, for example, help with childcare costs and industry specific training such as Security Industry Authority certification. The Council set up a traineeship recruitment programme which aimed to address people's barriers to work through improving their basic skills, confidence and motivation. From this programme, 17 candidates were offered an apprenticeship for a year, which provided enough working hours to exempt them from the benefit cap. Some apprentices have since been offered full time employment.

Where work wasn't an option due to health or disability, the task force looked at potential entitlement to disability benefits that would create an exemption. 134 households were awarded an exempting benefit. In other cases, the Housing options team provided support for people to move to cheaper accommodation and in some cases discretionary housing payments were used to cover the cost of the move and the first month's rent. 142 capped households have now moved house.

Families were also referred for group money management sessions but the take-up of these sessions was low and so the task force changed the offer, to provide one-to-one advice instead. Although, this meant fewer people could be offered support, it made the support on offer more attractive, which meant that more people actually received support.

Looking forward

The steering group continues to meet regularly and will become the forum through which members can work together to steer work on the introduction of Universal Credit. The work of the taskforce has been embedded into a new Welfare Advice and Support Hub (WASH), which provides support to households affected by the benefit cap as well as administering Enfield's local social welfare scheme. The WASH also works on specific welfare projects, including providing support to households with multiple, complex needs and working with the 200 people in the borough who have been unemployed for the longest time. Money management courses are also now provided under the WASH banner.