

WHERE DO OLDER PEOPLE GO FOR FINANCIAL ADVICE AND EDUCATION?

Report

September 2007

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SECTION 1

1.1 SUMMARY

Life is never static and, while we may pride ourselves on the way we have conducted our finances over the years, it is never too late to have problems. When difficulties are encountered in later life, our skills may be found wanting because benefits, organisational procedures and ways of doing things have changed. How do I get information about that? What does that mean? Who should I get in contact with? Questions we have asked all our adult lives may now be less easy to answer because of social, technical or personal transitions that occur in our old age.

- Vignettes of difficult situations gathered for this project reveal the complex interplay of individuals and institutions that needs to be recognised in any amelioration.
- Research on dealing with the financial problems of old age is fragmented but a number of themes emerge and underpin this report.
- Making do and cutting back are common responses to financial difficulty for older people.
- Apart from friends and family, tried and trusted organisations – Citizens' Advice, The Post Office, Age Concern – are the key sources for help.
- Easy access to help is important. For current cohorts of older people, new technology is often a barrier to communication although commercial and public sector organisations see it as a cost effective solution for information, security and redress.
- There is no single answer to improving advice and help for people with financial problems in old age. However, there are four recommendations for strategic action.
 - Maintain easily accessible face-to-face support
 - Design remote access systems with older people in mind
 - Reduce problems at source
 - Promote financial planning

1.2 INTRODUCTION

This is a report by Queen Margaret University/Royal Bank of Scotland Centre for the Older Person's Agenda. As outlined in the interim progress report (Welsh, 2006, attached as Appendix A to this report), there are a number of later life contingencies – ordinary and exceptional – to challenge even people who have been competently looking after their domestic financial matters for years. Central to their experiences are life transitions. From retirement to bereavement and from physical difficulties to cognitive decline, there are new events and processes to come to terms with whilst managing economic resources. Such transitions are made more difficult if there has been a failure to plan ahead.

In reality, planning ahead might not have been characteristic of earlier years for those who had lived on low or intermittent incomes. Even where plans have been made, they are not always going to be sufficiently robust to accommodate the policy changes and bureaucratic practices of various agencies over the years. For most, old age can extend to 20 or 30 years at a period of life when, for various reasons, there is reduced control over income in relation to costs (see for example Foster, 2007). Also, over such an extended time period, new technologies, new financial products and new marketing methods may catch older people unawares (DTI 2005; Help the Aged, 2006a; BT, 2007). Equally, because of this, older people do not always avail themselves of the best financial options and, for example, are less likely to switch to cheaper providers for insurance and utilities (National Consumer Council, 2005). Consequently, various problems occur and, from the vignettes, Welsh (2006) identified a spectrum of difficulties that befell even those who had prided themselves on financial competence.

SECTION 2

2.1 VIGNETTES OF FINANCIAL DIFFICULTY

On the face of it, asking for help seems straightforward enough but there are barriers. Some of these are located within the individual by virtue of experience or inexperience. People who are currently old have personal biographies that include eras of economic austerity and limited - even stigmatised - help from state or voluntary sources. Undoubtedly such experiences shape current perceptions (Terkel, 1970; 1985). Several vignettes (Welsh, 2006) describe older people struggling to avoid debt or choosing not to claim benefits as a matter of pride. To them, asking for financial help would run counter to the principles on which they have long organised their adult lives.

Mr A (mid 80s) would be entitled to Attendance Allowance as he suffers from a form of leukaemia.... However, he chooses not to claim, through pride. 'He would see this as an old person's thing'.

Mr and Mrs E (late 70s) had been aware that they might be entitled to some benefits but didn't want to seem money grabbing, and were also put off by the potential embarrassment of being means-tested.

Mrs B's sister was a 'non-claimer' on principle. She would have been eligible for benefits but wouldn't claim them.

For others, such reticence was either occasioned or augmented by lack of confidence. For some this was related to problems such as being hard of hearing, for others a simple – yet profound – lack of financial experience over the years.

Miss G was afraid of meeting people and being unable to understand them or communicate on her own behalf. Unable to work, she did not have access to information regarding benefits to which she was entitled and was scraping by on a minimum income.

Mr V had separated from his wife who, he said, had taken care of the financial side of the business and of their domestic lives.....He had some difficulty initially with remembering his PIN, and also in understanding the direct payment, so was not always clear on how to get access to his money.

Asking for help is also restricted by the facilities and procedures of financial organisations. Closure of local offices and an increasing reliance on telephone helpline systems designed to give callers pre-recorded information rather than easy direct interaction with a company representative are barriers for older people, in terms of cost and convenience and may challenge independence.

Mr D's local bank was not accessible by wheelchair and he was offered telephone and online options for carrying out his business. However, telephone banking proved to be beyond him partly because of his memory problems ... he couldn't remember the different options and found himself in an endless loop on the phone.

Mrs Q tried other local banks but was unable to open a basic account elsewhere (partly because she lives in a rural area) and eventually opened a Post Office account. This account does not allow her to pay bills by direct debit and so she is unable to take advantage of deals with the utility companies which offer preferential rates to customers paying by this method. Accordingly, she is now using power cards which are much less convenient. For another bill, she has negotiated an annual payment by postal order, for which there is an extra charge.

Transactions that are mundane for the young can prove a severe challenge to the old when they rely on sharp memories and good eyesight. In the following vignette, a misremembered PIN number gave financial problems that could not be righted, even with the helpfulness of local Post Office counter staff.

Miss S tried to collect her Attendance Allowance from her Post Office account. However, she could not remember her PIN number and having entered it wrongly three times, was rejected. An assistant at the Post Office took Miss S into the back office and helped her phone the Customer Service helpline. Miss S found the lady at the helpline very unhelpful; all she was able to offer was that a new PIN number would be sent out within four working days. Miss S didn't have enough money to survive for four working days without her Attendance Allowance and the Post Office suggested she go to the CAB. The CAB gave Miss S information on crisis loans and advised her to go to the Benefits Agency.

The vignettes were gathered in collaboration with a wide range of community organisations and voluntary groups. At some point, individual old people had, with some measure of desperation, turned to them for help. Specific crisis points in what were often long-standing difficulties were not systematically recorded. In some cases problems had come to their attention of obliquely; some other problem had brought them into contact with the organisation or group and a financial problem was recognised. Intercession by such organisations or groups had been necessary to ameliorate problems. While many people may be able to get matters put right by their own efforts, others need advice, information and/or advocacy. What are the options for older people?

2.2 WHERE CAN PEOPLE TURN FOR INFORMATION AND EDUCATION?

The National Institute of Continuing Education (NIACE) report, *Old Money*, used mixed data collection methods with purposive samples to gauge ... 'levels of financial knowledge, understanding and consequential learning needs of older people' (Carlton, Soulsby and Whitelegg, 2002, 25). It concluded that there were five basic financial coping strategies commonly used by older people although the final one being far more specific than the others, is arguably better seen as a subset of 'hiding the problem'.

- Seeking the advice of someone trusted, often a close friend or family member.
- Use of advice organisations – mostly their local Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB) or Age Concern.
- Hiding the problem
- Thrift – including economising on food and heat.
- Tried and trusted methods of getting around calculation problems.

Of the four mainstream strategies for coping with money worries, two involved an engagement with others (*talking to individuals or organisations*) to address problems; one meant a reduction in expenditure (*thrift*); and one was a circumvention (*hiding the problem*) both of which probably pose a risk to health and well-being in the longer term.

Assuming that these coping strategies are reasonably representative for older people five years on, improving awareness of advice organisations - and destigmatising the process of actually seeking advice - remain the targets for supported redress. For individuals – and for the family and friends who may be called on to help - this is important. Improved awareness and access was recognised as a core objective in the Citizens' Advice strategic plan for 2004-2008 (CA, 2004). This was reflected in the different ways of making people aware of Citizens' Advice financial advice – including CAB advisors in GP surgeries and special training for 'intermediaries' who might be able to help directly, or to point vulnerable debtors to CAB offices (CA, 2006a). Citizens' Advice also acknowledged... 'the incredibly important roles for CAB clients' (CAS, 2007a, 1)... played by Post Offices generally as a 'one-stop shop' for collecting pensions and paying bills. The latter facility was used by ... '60% of those over 75' (CAS 2007a, 7). The West of Scotland CAB indicated that...

'...many elderly clients use the Post Office as a one stop shop to collect benefits, pay utility bills, obtain stamps etc. Clients feel safer collecting money and paying bills in one venue, than carrying their money from place to place to pay accounts. This is particularly the case with the elderly and/or disabled' (CAS, 2007a, 8).

Central to this was the helpfulness of Post Office staff in sorting out payments for elderly customers and advising who to contact with queries. Routine face-to-face interaction helps and, in this survey, 50% of respondents over 65 years, visited the Post Office several times a week. The East of Scotland CAB, for example, commented that ... 'clients not used to having contact with banks can find them intimidating, whilst everyone has contact with a Post Office at some time and the service is seen as more accessible' (CAS, 2007a, 10).

However, capacity building for individual redress is also essential. NIACE had seen potential in education to highlight problems and solutions even if that was not ... 'necessarily [offered] in a formal adult education/basic skills setting' (Carlton, Soulsby and Whitelegg, 2002, 45). There was acknowledgement that a variety of education/support formats should be

considered to reflect different situations but that tutor-led approaches to developing 'financial literacy' were preferred by many older people and, in support, there was a need for generic learning materials even if a specific problem had brought them into contact with such learning opportunities.

For individual and supported redress, straightforward access to the mechanisms of consumer information and complaint – of product/service suppliers and advice organisations alike - is fundamental. Herein lays another major short to medium term problem for solving financial problems in old age. Product/service providers and advice organisations have increasingly turned to internet access for information and communication (National Audit Office 2003). There are potential advantages in this for older people – for example, reducing the problems of mobility and maintaining independence – but there are also significant barriers to fully realising the benefits. Older people (65 years +) are least likely to be personal computer owners, least likely to have access to internet services and, of those who do, least likely to have broadband access (Ofcom, 2006a; Ofcom 2007a). The latest figures suggest that only 16% of over-65s are using the internet (Ofcom 2007b). This digital divide – the relative disadvantage of older people as internet technology users – will diminish over time but the changes will probably be slow and partial. As a consequence, current use of the internet for information and redress is problematic. In 2003, there were only ... 'limited signs that older people are taking advantage of government initiatives to increase access to e-services' (National Audit Office, 2003, 5) and this probably remains an accurate picture of digital 'engagement'. Meantime, the existence of a website for financial information or redress is a matter of greater salience to younger sections of the population.

SECTION 3

3.1 RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations are necessarily limited by the nature of the data collected for this project. Vignettes are useful to illustrate older people's financial problems as they are encountered by voluntary organisations/groups but whether they are representative – of older people generally or financial problems generally - is difficult to judge. However, rather more weight can be placed on them as part of the cumulative picture that has emerged from national reports concerning financial difficulties, older people and infrastructural changes that have emerged over the last few years. Recommendations centre on strategies to promote inclusion and reduce the exclusion of older people – an important national objective (Scottish Executive, 2007).

3.2 MAINTAIN EASILY ACCESSIBLE FACE-TO-FACE SUPPORT

For older people, there is good reason to believe that easily accessible face-to-face contact is not only valued but is important to reduce problem escalation. While this is probably appreciated by people of all ages, the incidence of eyesight and hearing difficulties in later life, give it far greater significance. According to the Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID), of the 9 million deaf and hard of hearing people across the United Kingdom, 60 per cent of 70 to 80 year olds and 93 per cent of those over 80 suffer from age-related hearing loss (RNID, 2007). Equally, of registered visually impaired people in Scotland, 78.9% of blind people and 77.6% partially sighted were 65 years or over (Scottish Executive Statistics, 2006).

The Post Office and Citizens' Advice Bureaux, as frontline organisations with tried and trusted reputations, have particular relevance for routine financial transactions and accessible advice respectively. Threats to the current network of Post Offices and their locally available services (Help the Aged, 2004; Sinclair et al, 2006; CAS 2007b) will most probably disadvantage older people disproportionately. Citizens' Advice maintains a network of offices in various public locations, including libraries and health centres and makes home visits for housebound clients. Other organisations – banks, charities, local authorities – might also consider the importance of easily accessible face-to-face interaction for older people.

3.3 DESIGN REMOTE ACCESS SYSTEMS WITH OLDER PEOPLE IN MIND

The use of telephone and internet based customer contact systems currently presents as many barriers for older people as advantages. Commercial and public sector organisations may argue the latter but, in the short-to-medium term, the former exacerbate problems. There are a number of reasons for this not least of which are the costs of computer equipment and of time to learn about technologies that were less widely used in the workplace, even ten years ago and may not be familiar (Ofcom, 2006b). In the longer term, cohort effects are likely to improve the situation in relation to internet use but this does not obviate the need for practical measures to reduce exclusion. Good – simple – web design and avoidance of ‘overly formal or technical’ (National Audit Office, 2003, 4) language and style would minimise the deterrence effect. Although older people do vary in their use of computers and the internet (Ofcom, 2007c) training interventions are necessary to rectify general learning needs and thereby promote inclusion. Innovations include the use of mobile tuition arrangements (NIACE, 2005). Focus group research has suggested that courses for absolute beginners run by older people and supported by mentors ... ‘based locally that could assist face-to-face or at least over the telephone’ (Ofcom, 2006c, 4) would be important for the older people.

3.4 Reduce problems at source

How many financial products and services are designed with the active participation of older people? Despite increasing numbers, older people struggle for status and commercial relevance (Lyon, 2007). As with other consumer products and services (Kinney and Lyon, 1999; Lyon, Kinney and Colquhoun, 2002), financial products and services are routinely designed for users with capacities and skill profiles at variance with those of the older UK population. At the design stage, it may be that the primary market is thought to be younger consumers so resources are committed to particular forms of promotion that older people would probably never see or – if they did – the marketing message would not be tailored to their needs. In this way, older consumers are excluded, not only in terms of the initial product/service design but also in the subsequent information. Certain products/services are logically designed for and marketed to specific age groups. However, on the vast majority of products/services, there is more ‘bandwidth’ than simple age divisions would suggest. These are particularly interesting in that a failure to consider both the product/service and related

marketing across the age-spectrum simultaneously, represents unreflective exclusion of older people and lost commercial opportunity. The needs of older people should not be an afterthought and, ideally, product/service testing to ensure 'fitness for purpose' for older consumers should be undertaken at the initial design stage.

3.5 PROMOTE FINANCIAL PLANNING

Some – but not all – financial problems in old age are the result of inadequate planning. Faced with future uncertainties, people of all ages often avoid decisions, or decide to take no action. Financial Services Authority (FSA) research indicated that when faced with questions concerning financial security in old age, many people are unable, or refuse to look for answers. For example, an FSA survey (FSA, 2006) found that 81% of pre-retired respondents were aware of the inadequacy of the basic state pension, yet of the same group only 37% had made any plans to supplement their income. Moreover ... '21% of people already retired do not find their income sufficient to give them the standard of living they hoped to have' (FSA, 2006, 16). The Chief Executive of the FSA (Everitt, 2006) has argued that statistics such as these, highlight a deeper cultural malaise to blight the future. Not only are older respondents more likely to have additional pensions from defined benefit schemes than future cohorts, the over 40s scored much better on financial capability scores than the under 40s (FSA, 2006). This hard won financial experience does not preclude problems but probably explains why the financial literacy of older people is not given specific priority status in FSA strategy (Help the Aged, 2006b).

The Scottish Executive has recognised the problem of debt and adverse borrowing conditions for the vulnerable generally with the objective of improving financial inclusion and includes people having the skills, knowledge and understanding to make best use of financial products and services (Scottish Executive, 2005). Yet there are paradoxes. While ... 'money and debt problems remain the biggest single concern that people bring to their local bureau' (CAS, 2005, 10) the UK Department of Trade and Industry cut 10% from the Citizens' Advice Scotland core funding for 2005-2006 (CAS, 2006). Nonetheless, financial education projects have been initiated in Scotland, England and Wales (CAS 2005; CA 2006b).

SECTION 4

4.1 A GLIMPSE OF THE FUTURE

The financing of our old age is increasingly uncertain. Occupational pension schemes - long the pride of responsible employers – are increasingly viewed as corporate liabilities as more former employees enjoy extended life in retirement (see for example Buckley 2007). Some schemes have collapsed dramatically and others only partially honoured (see for example Bannerman, 2007). For new employees, defined benefit occupational pension schemes are increasingly displaced by those with defined contributions that – in the years to come – will make retirement income prediction difficult. In terms of state pensions, improved longevity has had the effect of making the UK government promote increased personal saving and suggest the extension of working lives (Department of Work and Pensions, 2006) but, for many, neither solves the problem of financial security in old age.

Older people often need new skills for the financial terrain of retirement. Some are needed immediately in response to specific problems of income and expenditure. Face-to-face advice, internet pages, telephone helplines, fact sheets and advocacy can help to mitigate or avoid debt and strengthen financial prospects. A diversity of approach by Citizens' Advice Bureaux and charities, such as Help the Aged and Age Concern, is inevitable and perhaps desirable to test ideas and to benchmark good practice. However, that should not overshadow the need for easily accessible financial support across the UK – in rural communities as well as towns. National consumer organisations and charities can help circumvent the problems of fragmentation and post code variance, but that requires stable and adequate funding to provide access to help on a continuing basis. In parallel with this, financial services and product advice need to be made available locally. The recent trend to close small bank branches and post offices in rural - and even suburban areas - makes this harder to achieve and disproportionately affects older people. There is also a need for local opportunities to acquire financial education and IT competence. The former needs a long-term commitment, not only for older people but for all stages of the life-course. By contrast, computer skills – and user confidence - will become less of a problem with successive cohorts but remains a significant problem in the short-to-medium term.

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WHERE DO OLDER PEOPLE GO FOR FINANCIAL ADVICE AND EDUCATION?

THE VIGNETTES

Progress Report

Helen Welsh
March 2006

1. Introduction

This project is being carried out as a Pro Bono initiative by QMU/RBSCOPA. Helen Welsh joined the project as fieldworker after two or three initial meetings had taken place and methodology agreed. Minutes of previous meetings were made available and Helen was briefed to carry out 20 interviews with a purposive sample of key informants, to be nominated by the steering group. This sample would contribute to an investigation of a range of themes:

- Government policy and intention – the citizenship agenda
- Current and seminal research on financial capability and inclusion of older people
- Educational possibilities and opportunities
- Advantages and threats of technology for older people
- Views of older people and their actual experiences and practices

2. Methodology

It had been agreed that ‘stories’ would be sought regarding real-life experiences of older people across the UK. Each informant was to be invited to provide an example of ‘social inclusion’ and ‘social exclusion’.

Some weeks after the start of the interviews, the steering group met and discussed the findings to date. At this point it was said that inclusion/exclusion were not what was required, but rather ‘capability’ – people’s skills and knowledge, or lack of them, which enabled them to address any difficulties that came their way. Some further leads were given for potential interviewees. The idea of ‘positive and negative’ experiences as in the original model, now seemed a little tactless.

Helen followed up these leads although not all responded; and gradually it became more difficult to find stories that introduced different themes from those already presented. Helen also drew up a spreadsheet to track all themes. This identified a number of gaps. She met with Maureen O’Neill and they agreed that some issues were likely to prove difficult for us to access, notably Financial Service Industry examples. Other issues could be ‘collapsed’ and some personal leads followed up to seek relevant stories for the missing themes. Helen at this stage redrafted the spreadsheet: see attached.

3. Contacts

These were suggested by the steering group and, in some cases, the contacts suggested further people to contact. It had been intended to interview some people who had a policy overview; but it was found that these people didn't have access to individual stories; and so it turned out that most respondents were those who were working in a direct advice/information role with clients. However, care was taken to reach people from a range of agencies and these have, to date, included Age Concern; CAB; a City Council; a rural community care project; Communities Scotland; an association for Deaf people; a Direct Payments scheme (i.e. care direct payments); Alzheimers Scotland; an HTA project for a Somali refugee community; and SAFE.

4. Findings

These can be seen (a) on the spreadsheets and (b) in the narrative report of the interviews. Noteworthy themes include:

Life transitions are significant in that people who were managing their lives quite happily were often suddenly plunged into serious difficulties. These transitions included retirement; the onset of illness or disability; bereavement, especially of a spouse; separation from one's partner; the onset of cognitive decline – not necessarily dementia - but sometimes just memory loss, or difficulty in understanding new systems. (e.g. Mr I; Mr and Mrs B)

Underlying this theme is the apparent fact that people do not, on the whole, **plan ahead** very effectively. Those who recognise the inevitability of increasing frailty through age and plan effectively for this, are in a much more comfortable position as the years go by (Mr and Mrs A). One lady (Mrs F, aged 80) was living in a large house which had been re-banded upwards by the local authority by two bands, and could not afford to buy fresh fruit. Clearly, had she moved to a more suitable home many years previously, her present living conditions would be much happier. But it's harder to make that kind of decision at the age of 80.

In some examples, people were badly affected by **policy changes and/or bureaucratic blockages** on the part of various agencies. 90 year old Mrs H, for example, was quite confused by the split in rent/care introduced in relation to her sheltered housing charges, and ran up debt without realising it. The way in which her local council then set about communicating with her was incredibly unhelpful. Mr P, with learning difficulties, is

independent as a result of community care policy, but has predictable problems in finding his way through the money maze. And Mrs Q found herself very inconvenienced because of a rigid policy held by her bank. Mr X's situation was caused, not by a bureaucratic blockage, but by his wife's fear of bureaucracy and its possible impact on her citizen status.

Educational possibilities seemed on the whole to be provided, if at all, as part of a one-to-one advice service, as far as older people were concerned. This is no doubt related to the size of this sample; however it is striking that the one formally *educational*, as opposed to personal advice, service represented here, normally deals with younger people, and had to search to find a couple of examples of people in their 50s.

Many of the issues raised in these stories relate to **care**, and for some people, such as Mr L or Mrs J, the wranglings over different aspects of care payments on the part of local authorities and other bodies, made their presence in the community very precarious. Care policy is all about promoting independence, but here we have some examples of people who are trying very hard to be independent, but having their efforts undermined by bureaucracy. Others, such as Mr and Mrs N, have had their income hacked back in a very arbitrary way so that home caring efforts must be seriously prejudiced. So financial capability very firmly underpins social inclusion.

The issue of **debt** came up quite frequently, with many older people choosing to go without basic necessities, such as food or heating, rather than get into debt. Those who did fall into debt had to search around various agencies to find help in getting back into a good budgeting routine. Also, it seemed that only the Post Office would offer an account to Mrs Q after she was declared bankrupt; yet the PO was not able to offer her some basic budgeting services, such as standing orders and direct debits, which would protect her from falling into further debt in future.

Disability and **sensory impairment** cause frequent and considerable difficulties to many people, with Mr D's story giving a graphic example of the way things ought not to be. This is a quite shocking story of disability discrimination on the part of the banks. Also it is quite striking how many stories concern deafness and the resultant difficulties people have in communicating with agencies of all kinds. The examples of Miss G and Mrs H are obvious examples, coming as they do from a Deaf people's organisation; but there are others also. Again, these issues are strongly associated with social inclusion.

Stories about people from **black and minority ethnic communities** may be under-represented here but, as before, these people (Mrs K, Mr L, Mrs W, Mr X), are at increased risk of isolation and are likely to find it all the more challenging to access good money advice.

And finally, perhaps just by chance, it is surprising that this small sample has included three instances of people with **drinking problems**, all with additional difficulties in seeking advice, and finding the motivation to take it.

5. Conclusions

The introduction to this report lists the issues that this project aims to address. Of these, the interviews carried out to date have addressed reasonably well the issues of citizenship and educational opportunities. The ICT agenda has only been addressed insofar as a number of respondents reported difficulties on the part of their clients in using ATMs and remembering PINs. The wider ICT agenda not been addressed at all, in that none of the respondents had anything to say about older people and the use of PCs, e.g. in home banking.

Neither the second nor the fifth bullet point can be addressed by the ‘stories’ methodology and will have to be addressed by a different means.

It is hoped that this report provides a useful focus for assessing progress to date.

Helen Welsh

30th March 2006

Appendix 1 – The Vignettes

Appendix 2 – The Spreadsheet – Issues Covered

APPENDIX 1

Age Concern, Northern Ireland

INCLUSION VIGNETTE:

Mr and Mrs A are a couple in their mid-eighties. They are home-owners; he has a good occupational pension, she less so because of a broken pattern of pension contributions, (relating to caring for others).

They live comfortably within their means, and can run a car, though probably don't have 'mad holidays or big binges', and are outside the pension credit system and rates rebate system. They have no debt. Mr A would be entitled to Attendance Allowance as he suffers from a form of leukaemia, which is treated by medication, and is prone to depression. However he chooses not to claim, through pride – 'he would see this as an old person's thing'. Mrs A's health is good now although, at one point, she nearly died from a severe illness. They do not see themselves as having chronic health problems or crises.

Their house is suitable for their needs; some time back they moved into a bungalow as they were planning ahead for possible mobility problems. There is a steep path from the road and they have created a separate path to avoid this. Social Services have put in a handrail at the door.

Mr A is an 'indoors' type whereas Mrs A is very socially involved – a 'committee lady' – and is out and about a lot. She sees herself as 'young' and they are both 'switched on', 'on the ball' – they have a degree of worldly awareness which has enabled them to manage their finances to good effect. They have a positive attitude to change and being prepared for it.

EXCLUSION VIGNETTE:

Mr and Mrs B are a couple in their mid-seventies. Caryl came across them because Mrs B had gone into a charity shop looking for a television; the shop assistant had explained that they don't sell televisions, and had referred her to Age Concern. In asking about the television need, Caryl uncovered a fuller story of chronic need.

Mr and Mrs B had been living with her sister, the three of them scraping by materially. Mrs B's sister was a 'non-claimer' on principle – she would have been eligible for benefits but wouldn't claim. They had generally pooled their resources and Mr and Mrs B hadn't realised that benefits were available; they were fairly isolated from the mainstream. They had no savings and claimed no benefits. Mr B had a small occupational system, but had sold this on at some point in the past.

However, Mr B suffered a stroke, and at the time of Caryl's meeting with Mrs B, he was in hospital awaiting discharge (having also been found to be in the early stages of dementia). The sister's house was no longer suitable for him and they were moving into sheltered accommodation. However, they had no furniture and understandably, Mrs B was distraught. She and her husband were devoted to each other, but she couldn't bring him home from hospital because there was nothing in the flat. Somehow, the hospital social services had not picked up Mr B's situation.

Caryl helped Mrs B to apply, successfully, for Pension Credit; grants from the Social Fund; Attendance Allowance; help with rent; and removal costs. The flat was furnished and Mr B was able to return to a financially and materially sustainable environment.

Sadly, Mr B died recently. However, Mrs B is coping well financially, with a better understanding of her rights, and has subsequently come back to see Caryl in relation to consumer issues.

INCLUSION VIGNETTE:

[Lyn found it difficult to find an example of inclusion, given the line of work she's in, but offered this as an example of 'success' for the project she works in, in that they eventually found a way round this specific problem – even though Mrs C didn't benefit all that much.]

Mrs C, a 55 year-old single parent, works as a cleaner for a range of different employers. For one job (ironically, working for the Royal Bank of Scotland), she had difficulty getting paid because her employers would only pay her wages into a bank account, and Mrs. C didn't have one. She approached Lyn's project for advice.

Initially, Lyn challenged the employer on the basis that it was illegal for them to insist on a bank account, that it was their duty to pay wages and that conditions should not apply. However, the challenge was not successful. After two weeks, this issue still not being resolved, Mrs. C left the job as she was so annoyed – although she really needed the work. She had been reluctant to open a bank account because (a) she didn't have the commonly-required means of identity (passport or driving licence) available, and (b) she thought she would need to deposit a fairly large sum of money to open the account, and didn't have any money available for this.

A solution was provided by Halifax Bank of Scotland in the form of a 'basic bank account', which could be opened with a deposit of £1, and using identification such as a rent book or child benefit book. The general principle behind these accounts is that overdrafts are not allowed; however it met Mrs C's immediate need in that she was able to have her wages paid into this account. Lyn doesn't know whether the bank account has proved to be of ongoing value to Mrs C. as she hasn't seen her since then.

EXCLUSION VIGNETTE:

Mr D, aged 75, lived alone. Apart from being Deaf, he was fit and healthy. His income was adequate, he had no financial difficulties, and he transacted his business at the local branch of the Clydesdale Bank, where his benefits were paid in. He suffered a stroke however, and this affected his memory, his speech, and his mobility, to the extent that he was unable to leave the house without a wheelchair.

His local bank was not accessible by wheelchair and he was offered telephone and online options for carrying out his business. However, telephone banking proved to be beyond him, partly because of his memory problems – he couldn't remember the different options ('press button 1 for this, button 2 for that etc') and found himself in an endless loop on the phone. Also, of course, his deafness was a barrier, and his speech was slurred, so he found it difficult and frustrating to try to make himself understood on the phone if he ever managed to speak to a 'real person'. Online banking was not an option because he didn't have a PC, or skills in using one.

Lyn's project became involved and set about trying to find a way of enabling Mr D to keep control of his own finances. She tried to investigate telephone banking on his behalf but found that the staff would not deal with a third party – no doubt correctly, as a way of protecting clients from potential fraud. When Lyn sat by him when he was on the phone, to assist him, she found that staff became suspicious at his slurred speech, not convinced they were dealing with a genuine client; and one occasion, when asked for his date of birth, he couldn't remember. Lyn tried to prompt him, but the bank clerk did not appreciate this, again no doubt trying to protect Mr D.

It seemed impossible for Mr D to withdraw money to pay for his daily needs. Eventually however, Lyn found that the local Halifax bank would allow a form of mandate to be put into place whereby a member of staff at Lyn's project is authorised to take a form, signed by Mr D, to the bank to withdraw money on his behalf. This system is now used on a monthly basis to withdraw cash and pay bills; Mr D has arranged with the project to hold money in their safe on his behalf so that the banking only has to be done once a month, yet he only has to budget one week's money at a time.

In setting this up, it was necessary to close the Clydesdale account; and the only way Lyn found this possible, was to recruit two willing and strong volunteers to push Mr D, in his wheelchair, to the nearest wheelchair-accessible branch, three miles away.

By arranging this mandate, Mr D has been able to retain financial independence – perhaps the only alternative to this would have been power of attorney? (my question – is this right?). Lyn's project is now using the same system to help three further clients.

Age Concern, Cymru

INCLUSION:

Mr and Mrs E are in their mid to late 70s and live in a council house which is in poor repair and has some dampness. Until recently they were living on the basic retirement pension and some modest savings, which were being steadily depleted. Mr E has two very bad hips, and Mrs E suffers from diabetes and regular dizzy spells; they look after each other. They had been aware that they might be entitled to some benefits, but didn't want to seem money-grabbing, and were also put off by the potential embarrassment of being means-tested.

Council workers looking into the dampness issue, referred Mr and Mrs E to Age Concern. After three visits over the course of three weeks, applications for various benefits have resulted in Mr and Mrs E being £12,000 per year better off. They can't quite believe it; they are now able to take taxis to the doctors, or to go for groceries, and are generally able to enjoy a substantially improved standard of living, which has a positive impact on their physical health and general morale. The difference between financial inclusion and exclusion in this case has been wrought by simply receiving benefits to which they are entitled.

EXCLUSION:

Mrs F is a widow, aged about 80 years old, and lives alone. The feature of this lady's situation that most struck Julia was her comment, 'I can't afford to buy fruit.' She owns her home, which is 'quite big', and is 'asset rich and income poor'. Local council taxes have taken a recent hike so that many homes have upwardly reclassified by two or three bands, and this has posed a problem for many people living in the Cardiff area, including Mrs. F. She has not fallen into debt and has managed to pay all her bills, but this is at the expense of basic needs such as food and heating. Her home does not have central heating and is inefficiently and expensively heated, in some rooms only, by individual gas fires.

Julia felt that Mrs F's inability to pay for the basic needs of heating and an appropriate diet had affected both her physical and mental health.

Mrs F came to Julia's attention having been hospitalised after a fall; a hospital social worker referred Mrs F to Age Concern's welfare benefits advice workers, who are based in each of the local hospitals. Applications have been lodged for Attendance Allowance and Council Tax benefit. Also, under a scheme introduced by the Welsh Assembly, an application has been made to the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme, so it is hoped that a grant for the provision and installation of central heating will be made.

Tayside Deaf Association

INCLUSION:

Miss G suffered an illness in her late 50s which rendered her profoundly Deaf. She was offered cochlear implants and given appropriate advice and counselling, and decided to go ahead with this irreversible operation. However, cochlear implants only provide an electronic sensation of some sounds. At present the most up-to-date produces 24, whereas the human ear produces millions when working correctly. Therefore, for the person with the cochlear implant many words and tones are lost, and the sound received is very monotone and mechanical, which can be difficult to cope with.

This led to enormous loss of confidence; Miss G was afraid of meeting people and being unable to understand them or communicate on her own behalf. She became almost a prisoner in her own home, rushing out first thing in the morning when the shops were quiet to get basic provisions then spending the rest of the day alone. Unable to work, she did not have access to information regarding benefits to which she was entitled, and was scraping by on a minimum income.

TDA matched her with a volunteer befriender who, as part of their befriending scheme, had been given full training in Deaf awareness and other relevant issues. This lady has helped Miss G to regain access to areas of her life that had otherwise been lost to her. In particular, she helped her to claim appropriate benefits; she encouraged her to enrol in FE classes, so that Miss G is now undertaking ECDL; she has helped her understand and attend health appointments; and with increased confidence, Miss G is now attending lip-reading classes. The befriender has also helped Miss G to access various leisure opportunities; e.g. next Tuesday the TDA has managed to get tickets for the single signed performance of the local panto; clients and their bendifenders are making this their Christmas night out, going first to the Chinese buffet and generally having an opportunity to widen their experiences and their friendship circles. The experience has been very rewarding also for the befriender, who has by her own efforts enabled a huge transformation in Miss G and her life.

EXCLUSION:

Alana explained that financial exclusion is the norm for the Deaf community. There is a very high unemployment rate – apparently surveys of employers have shown that they are more likely to employ someone with a criminal record than a Deaf person; and when jobs are found, they tend to be of a menial nature since employers tend to treat Deaf people as if they had learning difficulties. Deaf people are also generally passed over for promotion. Even within the benefits system, it is difficult for Deaf people to understand their entitlements, since information is not made available to them in any format they can understand, since English is a second language, after BSL (British Sign Language). The new Benefits Agency policy, of transacting as much business as possible over the phone, automatically excludes Deaf people; Alana has found that in general, BA officers have been unwilling to make exceptions to the new ruling, irrespective of someone's hearing status.

The scale of the problem is exacerbated for older people in that there are 6.5 million people in the UK, aged over 65, who are hard of hearing – this represents 1 in 3 of the over 65 population. For those over 70, 75% are hard of hearing. (Source: Council for the Advancement of Communication between Deaf and Hearing People (CACDP) Deaf Awareness Manual, derived from nationally accepted figures collated from RNID and British Medical Council). Generic disability awareness training, delivered to most public sector workers in response to the DDA, does not cover deafness in any meaningful way, if at all.

Within this context, Mrs H, a 90 year old lady, who lives in a sheltered housing complex, is very hard of hearing. In addition to her deafness, she has memory problems. About a year ago, the Council changed its charging policy, and split warden costs from housing costs. Mrs H did not understand this and continued to have her rent paid directly by the bank as before. However, she then received a bill for £200 for unpaid warden costs and was very upset by this. Alana went with her to the Council offices to help interpret (public services in general being very non-Deaf-aware), and with some difficulty managed to agree with the Council staff on a solution which again meant that the bill of £330 was being paid, correctly, by the bank.

However, after this, the Council started sending what looked like invoices – forms stating how much was owed, with a giro credit slip at the bottom. Mrs H was confused by this, and nearly paid the bill twice, but fortunately, took it to TDA instead. Alana contacted the Council who said it was to be disregarded, as the bill was being paid via the bank; and after lengthy discussion agreed that their system was very confusing for older people, and that they could

in fact find a way of clarifying the situation for tenants. Months passed and nothing had changed so Alana reminded the Council of this situation. The next bill that came in had a sticker on it marked 'for information only' and this was a distinct improvement. However, the next bill after that reverted to the previous system, with ongoing confusion for Mrs H, and the situation remains currently unresolved in that Alana has little confidence that the situation will be resolved any time soon.

Mrs H hates to be in arrears or have debt of any kind, and goes without basic necessities rather than incur debt. So this ongoing confusion re billing, considerably undermines her morale.

Queensferry Churches Care in the Community Project

INCLUSION:

Mr I, a man in his early sixties, had always been a heavy drinker but when his wife died, he found many aspects of his life spiralling out of his control, including his drinking. He had retired but didn't understand the pension situation, and couldn't manage his finances; in particular, the form-filling was beyond him. His family had lost sympathy with him due to the heavy drinking, and did not keep in touch.

QCCCP have a Housing Support Service, funded through Supporting People; this is a means-tested service which supports people in living independently. Personal care is not provided but other support such as domestic, transport and budgeting help is available. With this assistance, Mr I was supported in claiming for relevant benefits, and his income has improved considerably. As a result, he now has a warm home and is able to afford better quality food, and at last is well motivated to address his problem drinking. His family is now back in touch and Mr I's main concern is that he will not use his higher income just to fund his old habits. However, he is in a much stronger position to change now than at any time since his wife died.

EXCLUSION:

Mrs J is over 80 and suffers from dementia. She lives in her own home with her daughter, who is trying to hold down her full-time job as well as see to her mother's needs. QCCCP provides day care two days a week, paid for from Mrs J's attendance allowance; and on the other three weekdays, Mrs J is supported to join in other aspects of community life via QCCCP's Housing Support service – e.g. doing her shopping or getting out to see friends. Mrs J's daughter cares for her in the evenings and weekends.

The cost to the local authority in maintaining Mrs J at home is very high and the Council have currently ruled that they will not pay for her Housing Support because this is not designed to

cover personal care. Yet Mrs J clearly has personal care needs – e.g. she needs to be reminded to eat her lunch – if not reminded, she would forget and this would obviously have an adverse impact on her health. This leaves the family struggling financially and Mrs J's savings are now spent. Mrs J's daughter would have to give up her job if QCCCP were not available; and the Council would have to pay for Mrs J to stay in residential care if staying at home proved to be no longer an option. This being a rural area, there would be no choice of a care home locally which would be fully funded by the Council, so Mrs J would need to move away from all that is familiar to her. Both Mrs J and her daughter are committed to keeping her at home; yet it seems that the Council's policy (against which Winnie is currently appealing), is undermining Mrs J's frail grip on living at home and, in fact, running counter to the government's policy regarding care in the community. Winnie feels the appeal is likely to be successful, but that the bureaucratic process involved in this would be impossible for the family to manage alone, and that the worry of this eats away at the family's resolve to preserve Mrs J's independence.

Alzheimers Scotland Polish and Ukrainian Support Services Project

INCLUSION:

Mrs K, a widow aged 72, came to Scotland recently to join her daughter and son-in-law and their children, who had previously come here for work. Currently she is living with her family, but will be applying for a Council house in due course.

Mrs K's Polish pension is payable here, but is at a rate lower than the UK minimum pension. On her behalf, TS applied for pension credit; and to her surprise, since this is the first time she has tried this, the application was successful. This brings Mrs K to the same income level as others living in this country on the minimum pension, and also makes her eligible for other benefits such as winter fuel payments or, should need arise in future, attendance allowance.

In TS's opinion it is likely that Mrs K will find it quite difficult to integrate into life in Scotland; while there is a sizeable Polish population, most of the older people came here after the war and have had different life experiences. Also Mrs K doesn't speak English and may find it difficult to learn now. However, the award of pension rights puts at least some of the conditions in place for Mrs K to enjoy her older years with her family.

EXCLUSION:

Mr L, a Polish gentleman of 84, lives alone and over the last two years has suffered a number of health problems. He has a heart condition; macular degeneration; has suffered two minor strokes leaving him with a weakened leg which he sometimes drags; he is catheterised; his memory is beginning to deteriorate; and perhaps as a combination of all these things, his English is deteriorating, so that he now only opens his front door to people who he knows speak Polish. In fact he has many Polish visitors of his own age, men who like him settled in Scotland after the war.

A social worker assessed him as needing 16 hours care per day; and since it was clearly preferable for him to have a carer from his own community, TS assisted Mr L in an application for Direct Payments (as this would allow him to employ someone himself rather than have general carers, with or without Polish language, sent by the Social Work Dept).

Mr L went ahead and employed a live-in carer, a young Polish woman who carries out all care tasks, both domestic and personal. Unfortunately, however, there have been difficulties with the funding coming through, in that the SW Dept had agreed to pay for 5 of the required 16 hours, this being the assessed amount of personal care allowed; the remaining 11 hours to be paid by Supporting People funding. The local arrangements for Supporting People have said they have not budgeted for Direct Payments and so have no money available to pay for the 11 hours to which Mr L is entitled. So he is receiving only 5 hours' worth of payment per week, and the live-in carer is being underpaid. TS has sent a complaint in regarding the funding situation but it is not clear when this complaint will be dealt with, or whether it will go in Mr L's favour.

Not surprisingly this situation has caused tensions and the carer is resentful that she's not being paid appropriately. This makes for difficulties in her relationship with Mr L, who is very dependent on her. Should the situation break down, Mr L might have to go into residential care where it is likely he would be very isolated indeed – TS thinks his friends would be less likely to visit Mr L in care than in his own home. This difficulty appears to be a purely bureaucratic (and probably transitional) issue, relating to Supporting People funding not being payable as a Direct Payment.

Fife Direct Payments Project

INCLUSION:

Mr M worked all his life as a civil engineer and retired with a substantial lump sum from his pension fund, plus a good monthly income. He had planned for his retirement but unfortunately health problems in conjunction with a heavy drinking habit have meant that recently he has been admitted to a nursing home.

His savings have continued to fall, partly due to the fact that he buys three bottles of whisky a week for his habit. Now that his savings have fallen below the care threshold however, the local authority is contributing £6 a week to his care; his monthly pension makes up the rest; and he receives a weekly allowance of only £14.10, the same as for those residents who have only the basic retirement pension, and certainly not enough to fund his drinking habit.

EXCLUSION:

Mr and Mrs N are in their early sixties. Mrs N had a brain haemorrhage a year ago and Mr N has become her carer. It was assessed that Mrs N needed 50 hours care per week, costing approximately £600, and this was paid through the Independent Living Fund (an independent trust set up by central government). ILF is intended to allow people to pay for support, either at home or at work, which will enable them to remain independent in the community, and the maximum payment is £415 per week. This is a means-tested benefit, but wages are not taken into account because part of the philosophy of ILF is that people are to be encouraged to participate in normal social life including work. So the couple were only paying £30 per week towards the cost of her care.

In due course, Mr N decided to take early retirement. However, he has discovered to his cost that while wages are not taken into account in the means test for ILF, pensions are. So now Mr and Mrs are having to pay an additional £100 per week towards Mrs N's care, and since their pensions were not all that sizeable, this has made a considerable impact on their standard of living.

This situation will not change until, and if, the ILF change their trust deed. They have acknowledged that the pensions means test is an oversight but had already changed their trust deeds to account for wages not being included. Consideration is being given to this issue, but it could take some time to be resolved.

INCLUSION:

Mrs O was brought up in a middle-class family and attended private school. She married and had children and worked mainly at home. Financially the family were comfortably off. In her fifties however, her husband died, leaving her well provided for; but, despite being very articulate, she found herself unable to deal with a wide range of financial practicalities, which her husband had always handled. She found out about the 'Number Shop' and registered for classes there.

The root of Mrs O's difficulties was that, as a child, she had been ill and missed a lot of school. She was a well-behaved child and sat quietly at the back of the class and her difficulties in understanding arithmetic went unnoticed. Through most of her life, she managed to get by, by dint of allowing other people to do any necessary calculations. However, when her husband died she found herself in major difficulties in that she had never written a cheque; she didn't know how to read a bank statement; she couldn't check her change in shops to see if it was correct. A further example of her difficulties is that she was unable to make fairly simple calculations under pressure – since she had a slight disability, she had a mobility allowance which paid in part for her taxi fares – the first £3 would be paid and then she had to pay the rest herself. If the fare came to, say, £6.20, she got flustered trying to calculate what she owed, while the taxi driver was waiting, and usually ended up paying extra out of embarrassment.

Fortunately, Mrs O didn't delay in seeking help and since she had no learning difficulty, was quickly able to benefit from basic numeracy classes. She achieved an externally accredited certificate in arithmetic and this boosted her confidence enormously.

The Number Shop

[It was pointed out that the Number Shop only knows what Mr P has told them; and because his understanding is incomplete, so is theirs]

EXCLUSION:

Mr P, in his early 50s, has learning difficulties and lives in Independent Living accommodation with some support from a care worker. He is fairly independent and is responsible for his own budgeting, although has some support. He cannot read, but pretends that he can; and he doesn't understand some issues, and has no real insight into his lack of understanding. Maria feels that part of his confusion may also be due to his age.

Mr P has a current account into which his benefits are paid, and from which his standard bills, such as rent and fuel are paid out. The bank gave him an automatic overdraft facility, assuming that he would understand what this meant. However, Mr P simply took it that if money was coming from his account, then it was his own money and, as a result, ran up an overdraft.

He has been prey to companies which have sold him cable television and mobile phone packages, each time with the maximum package including insurance; he thought the insurance element was compulsory. Naturally, the monthly payments were very high, and he was unable to meet all his commitments. In both cases, he has been assisted to downgrade the packages.

Recently, he bought a mobility scooter, having apparently been advised by the bank that he could afford the monthly payments on this; however it has turned out that he can't afford the payments and is now in arrears.

It appears that, at 50+, Mr P is offered various 'deals', such as reduced cost train tickets, and this adds to his confusion.

Recently, his benefits were reviewed, resulting in a drop in payments to his account; and accordingly, not enough to pay for the various direct debits and standing orders he had set

up. An appeal process is under way, and during this appeal, his account has been frozen, causing further (hopefully short-term) problems. Someone (Maria is not sure who) has suggested to Mr P that he transfer his account to another bank and he has been making enquiries as to how to go about this; and is daunted by the apparent complications.

Meantime, as a result of all this, Mr P is depressed and anxious, and frightened to leave the house in case someone tries to force him to give back the money he owes. Maria's view is that he needs more help, and that this should come from a single source.

CAB Dumfries and Galloway

Mrs Q is a widow in her 60s, whose only income is derived from benefits. She had a basic bank account, which was in credit; however Mrs Q became bankrupt as a result of incurring debts which she could not pay back within three years. At this, her bank (where she held her basic account) wrote to her telling her that they were closing her account, presumably as a matter of policy.

Mrs Q tried other local banks but was unable to open a basic account elsewhere (partly because she lives in a rural area) and eventually opened a Post Office account. This account does not allow her to pay bills by direct debit and so she is unable to take advantage of deals with the utility companies which offer preferential rates to customers paying by this method. Accordingly, she is now using power cards which are much less convenient. For another bill, she has negotiated an annual payment by postal order, for which there is an extra charge.

In summary, her original bank's policy in not providing banking services for bankrupt people, despite there being no money owed to them, has cost Mrs Q extra charges and a fair bit of inconvenience.

Mr R, aged 78, was referred to CAB by the 'Eleven Million Group' – a local initiative in Dumfries and Galloway to target the £11m unclaimed benefit for people over 60. Mr R lives alone and has poor health, suffering in particular from back and hip problems. He was supported in applying for Attendance Allowance at the higher rate and as a result, now receives an additional £60.60 per week. He can now keep a car on the road, save for a holiday, and go to the bingo.

Miss S, aged 85, tried to collect her Attendance Allowance from her Post Office account. However, she could not remember her PIN number and having entered it wrongly three times, was rejected. An assistant at the Post Office took Miss S into the back office and helped her phone the Customer Service helpline. Miss S found the lady at the helpline very

unhelpful; all she was able to offer was that a new pin number would be sent out within four working days. Miss S didn't have enough money to survive for four working days without her Attendance Allowance and the Post Office assistant suggested she go to the CAB. The CAB gave Miss S info on crisis loans, and advised her to go to the Benefits Agency.

Eventually Miss S got a crisis loan but the whole process was extremely stressful for her, and furthermore is likely to happen again unless she goes against advice and writes her PIN number down somewhere.

Tenants Participation Development Co-ordinator

(not sure these are relevant)

Mr T, aged 55, lives in a remote island community and is a member of the Residents' Forum, which accounts for people living across ten small islands. Otherwise, he is unemployed. Having become very knowledgeable, he is also Chair of the Tenant Participation Advisory Service, working with landlords and tenants, and is on the shadow board of a local housing association.

There is a fair bit of travel involved in all of this and he would be unable to participate if costs were not met for this, or if he had to pay out up front and reclaim later. However, the National Engagement Working Group pays for his travel and where necessary, overnight stays, so that Mr T is able to take an active leadership role in the life of his community.

Mrs U, aged 55, lives in the far north of Scotland and cares for her elderly mother. She is unemployed and suffers from a debilitating medical condition. She is active on a community group and on a related national working group. Her costs are paid upfront including travel, overnight accommodation where required, carer's costs for her mother, and subsistence. Mrs U brings huge value and experience to the development of policies; without the enabling means of paying expenses, this value would be lost to the local and the wider community, and she herself would be denied the satisfaction of an important and fulfilling community role.

SAFE (Services Against Financial Exclusion), Toynbee Hall, London

Mr V is a single man aged 61, of Irish descent. Although entitled to pension credit, he was actually signing on; when he was referred to support for Direct Payment, this was picked up. Mr V is living in a rented flat above a pub and not claiming Housing Benefit, but was paying rent and bills from his jobseekers allowance. In his earlier life, he had run a construction business but had sustained an accident that left him unable to work. He had separated from his wife who, he said, had taken care of the financial side of the business and of their domestic lives. At this time Mr V has an alcohol dependency problem.

A SAFE project worker helped Mr V apply for pension credit and housing benefit, and to open a Post Office card account, so that he didn't have to carry cash around with him all the time. He had some difficulty initially with remembering his PIN, and also in understanding the direct payment, so was not always clear on how to get access to his money. The project worker accompanied him to the Post Office on several occasions to support him, till he got used to the system and was able to continue unsupported.

Mrs W is a Bangladeshi lady, aged 70. She sought help with SAFE's debt support project after falling into debt with her rent arrears with a Housing Association. She had already approached three other local organisations who had been unable to help her as they did not deal with debt; SAFE was able to see her closer to her home.

She wanted help with negotiating her repayments with the landlord. SAFE helped her create a realistic financial statement, taking her income and expenditure into account, with a plan for repayment of debts. The landlord accepted this (it seems he would have been unlikely not to, given Mrs W's pensioner status), and Mrs W was greatly relieved and comforted. The repayments are now under way.

Help the Aged, Manchester

Project for Somali people aged >45

Fatima explained the context of her project in that most members of the Somali community came to England as refugees. Older people, especially women, do not read or write even in their own language as their culture did not require or expect them to attend school. Very few speak English. Many have health problems or disabilities. Most live with their extended families. Culturally, they neither smoke nor drink, and don't go out socially – so, although they are usually not receiving all they are entitled to in benefits, they often nevertheless feel very satisfied with basic benefits.

Younger Somalis have of course had an opportunity to adapt to British ways and the children learn English at school; however for older people just arriving from Somalia, it is easier to relate to Fatima, who is herself 49 and came here as a refugee, knows the English and Somali cultures, speaks English, can read and write, and can empathise with them and help them find their way round the benefits system. As well as providing benefits advice, she also gives practical support like helping people open a bank account or use a bank card; and always, she finds that it is necessary to encourage people and help them build confidence in their new lives.

Although the HtA project is about giving benefits advice, Fatima gets involved in wider issues because the financial aspects of people's lives reach out to other issues too. So for example she has found herself advising people about community care grants because someone might be hand-washing soiled sheets several times a day for someone with an incontinence problem. Most Somalis, in her experience, don't have any problem with hand-washing and are astonished and delighted that they might be given a grant for a washing machine.

The project has been enormously successful although threatened by temporary funding; it has become well known by word of mouth, and Fatima encourages people to tell others about the benefits they might be entitled to.

Mr X came to England two years after his wife, who had been granted citizenship in her own right. She had then applied for him to join her, and completed his details, but made a mistake in writing down his date of birth. Accordingly, although he was over 60, he was represented as a younger man and required to sign on and seek work. Mr X's wife urged him just to go along with the mistake, as she was anxious that her citizenship might be revoked if the immigration authorities thought she had been telling lies.

They applied for Income Support as a couple, although in reality, Mr X was entitled to Pension Credit; and Mr X signed every fortnight for work and went through the motions of trying to find work. This was difficult as he had a severe back problem.

However the couple split up, and Mr X's financial situation became untenable. He got a council flat but was unable to furnish it; and he became increasingly distressed at his inability to work. He explained the situation to Fatima, who helped him write to the Immigration Service with his real date of birth, and to explain the mistake. As a result, his benefit situation has now been ratified, and he has been awarded £2,843 in back payments. He also no longer has to sign on, so has been relieved of that stress. His life has been transformed; he has bought furniture suitable for his back problem and has made his home comfortable; and has started going to the Adult Education Centre three times a week, to learn new skills and become involved with his community.