



What if...?: Incapacity Benefit

A report submitted to the Newham Benefits Agency by the Social Enterprise Zone presenting ideas from people claiming Incapacity Benefit on how to improve the delivery of Incapacity Benefit in Newham

**Produced by the
Social Enterprise Zone
June 2001**

Based in one of the most intense areas of urban deprivation in Europe Community Links is an east London charity founded in 1977 which runs a wide range of projects for children, teenagers, parents, older and disabled people. Last year 27,000 people benefited from Community Links' projects run by over 450 volunteers in 60 key sites.

We share the lessons of our experience in east London across the UK through training and publications of which this evidence paper series forms a part. A list of current publications is shown inside the back cover.

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The Social Enterprise Zone

Community Links is founded on the principle that those who experience a problem know best how to solve it. In the past, this experience has largely gone untapped by policy makers and public sector practitioners resulting in mainstream services that fail to meet needs effectively. The Social Enterprise Zone (SEZ) is a project pioneered by Community Links to reconnect people, policy and practice through generating and testing ideas for making more effective use of mainstream spending programmes. Through an innovative tool called 'what if...?' the SEZ works with people who live and work in our community to gather their ideas for changes to the way mainstream resources are spent. These ideas are then shared with Government and local public sector agencies in order to secure licence to test them in the SEZ where ideas have originated and where new ways of working can make most impact.

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The Community Links Evidence Paper series and other publications

Background

The Social Enterprise Zone (SEZ) works to generate and test ideas for using public sector resources, such as the benefits budget, more effectively. People who live and work locally generate all the ideas through an outreach programme called *'what if...?'*. This is where we speak to individuals to identify:

- future goals;
- barriers to these goals;
- ideas for tackling these barriers and;
- the nature of support that is needed.

We feel that because the *'what if...?'* exercise is confidential and one-to-one, and because we are independent and impartial, it offers the ideal environment for people to consider options, gain confidence and raise concerns and practical suggestions for ways forward.

Relevant information coming out of these exercises is referred on to the appropriate agencies through e.g. the Benefits Liaison Forum. We also make submissions to central and local government when ideas call for changes to current benefit rules that would help people make more effective use of support e.g. in helping them to return to work. We are also developing our capacity to work in partnership with local agencies on improving the delivery of these resources.

The *'what if...?'* programme also runs workshops for organisations whether statutory or voluntary to generate further ideas for the Social Enterprise Zone as well as to take ideas from *'what if...?'* forward. For example, we have worked with local organisations to raise awareness of the options available for people currently on particular benefits.

Recently we held an IB claimants focus group for *'what if...?'* participants, which explored in greater depth ideas for tackling barriers to taking up volunteering, training or employment opportunities and how to make better use of flexibility that is permitted through current IB rules.

Through this programme of activities, the project has identified issues that prevent people on benefits from easily accomplishing their goals. This can result in people becoming stuck in the poverty trap and not reaching their full potential. Here we focus on some of the issues raised in relation to IB.

Issues regarding IB raised by 'what if...?' participants

1. *Lack of information on flexibility in the current rules*

The majority of IB claimants we speak to have not been told about the therapeutic earnings and the 52-week linking rules by either their benefits advisors or their doctors. Some people would have taken up this opportunity if they had been aware of its existence but their condition has deteriorated in the meantime and they have missed this opportunity. Those who know about these rules and are able to make use of them often demonstrate a...

2. *Lack of confidence to use the information*

This lack of confidence is caused by several factors:

Claimants have **concerns over delays in completing the administration** associated with taking up an existing flexibility. This can result in a loss of income. First Line Supported Employment Agency, a project run by Social Services, told us:

Some service users are missing employment opportunities due to the delays in getting appropriate paperwork to the employers, which results in the job being offered to other applicants.

We have come across several cases where someone has taken up the 52-week linking rule only to suffer when they have sought to return to IB, as the conditions of this linking rule permit. Again, First Line told us:

A service user with severe learning difficulties tried employment under the 52-week linking rule. The job collapsed within 52 weeks yet, due to administration problems, he had to wait nearly three months before returning to benefits.

We have also met **claimants who are being returned to Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) instead of IB**, if they leave their job because their condition worsens. Firstly, this does not comply with the rules of the scheme. Secondly, claimants with mental health issues or learning disabilities are finding JSA to be a hard regime to cope with. There have been situations where support staff have tried to advocate for users, but feel they are not listened to despite their specialist training and knowledge of what is appropriate for this client group. In some instances, without an advocate to support them, claimants will give the impression to strangers that they can cope yet staff know they could not possibly complete certain tasks or training that are required under JSA rules.

One woman we spoke to said that although she could not work, she felt as if her brain was going rotten sitting at home all day. We encouraged her to undertake some light and infrequent voluntary work but she voiced a common concern amongst 'what if...?'

participants **that by undertaking voluntary work, they would be found fit for work and lose their right to IB**. One woman told us:

The doctor asked where in the building the voluntary organisation's office was and when I said it was on the first floor he said, 'Oh so you can climb stairs then? Well in that case you're fit for work'.

Another woman told us:

I phoned the BA to find out if I could do voluntary work and they immediately asked for my name and NI number. I was scared that they were thinking that because I'd been asking about voluntary work that I was fit for work and that if I gave my name, they would stop my IB so I put the phone down.

Not only are the demands made on volunteers significantly less than the demands made on paid employees, this highlights an issue that claimants feel there is a general...

3. *Lack of understanding on the part of some BA staff and doctors about the needs and circumstances of people who apply for and receive IB*

In particular, Benefits Agency staff and assessment doctors need to acknowledge that IB claimants have 'good and bad days'. The IB assessment is made on the basis of what tasks a person is capable of doing on a **bad** day and claimants should not be penalised for using the good days as usefully as possible.

Recommendations

'What if...?' exercises have generated the following ideas that we are keen to get your feedback on.

Named Officer for all queries regarding flexibility schemes

Assign anyone who takes up the therapeutic earnings rule or the 52-week linking rule to a named contact in the BA who could trouble shoot any problems associated with making use of these flexibilities e.g. administrative delays and problems with returning to IB from work.

Lunchtime workshops (or the opportunity to contribute to existing staff training programmes) for BA staff on dealing with IB claimants and the value of supporting claimants to make use of current flexibility where appropriate

We would be keen to know what training staff currently receive for dealing specifically with IB claimants. In particular how training raises awareness of the effects of stress on claimants and how to acknowledge and deal appropriately with the issues of 'good days and bad days'. If appropriate, we would be keen to explore how we, or our partners, could contribute to this training.

Pilot a change in IB rules that permits claimants to undertake voluntary work without notifying their benefits adviser

This change could be tested in a pilot area to see whether more people would be encouraged to try voluntary work. This change would help to counter fears amongst claimants that undertaking any degree of voluntary work would be seen by benefits advisers as evidence that a claimant was fit for work when this may not be the case. Having felt safe with taking this step, claimants may then find they **are** able to cope with voluntary work and use it as a stepping stone back into work and off IB. They may not have felt able to investigate this without the assurances provided by this rule change. For others who find that the demands are in fact too much, they have at least explored this as an option, again, from within the safety of this scheme.

Campaign to recruit people aged over 50 years old to administer benefits

This is suggested as a way of finding staff who are likely to remain in post until retirement. This would help to reduce the turnover of staff. Where they are willing to face the tough challenges of front-line work with claimants, this age group would bring to their work self-confidence and a broad experience of life.

Independent freephone information service

A confidential and free telephone service staffed by volunteers that would be a first port of call for IB claimants wanting more information on what they 'can do' whilst claiming IB.

Volunteers, would be trained to:

Deal with callers in an appropriate way;

State the current rules on undertaking voluntary work, the therapeutic earnings rule and the 52-week linking rule;

Advise on what the caller needs to do to proceed from here i.e. visit a qualified advice agency, visit their GP;

Send out written information if requested.

The service could be staffed by current IB claimants over a phone line routed from a central location into their own homes so they would not necessarily have to travel to work and cope with the physical and emotional demands of attending an office. Another benefit would be that callers would receive personal support from people in a similar position.

Crucial to this service is that it would be a source of impartial and confidential advice and that enquiries could be made without fear of benefits being jeopardised. The service could be advertised on posters in surgery waiting rooms and through informal networks.

Produce and disseminate standard letters for applying to make use of flexibility

The Social Regeneration Unit (SRU), LB Newham, came across an information pack developed by Salford Council and Disability Alliance that consists of standard letters to the BA and doctors regarding taking up therapeutic work or voluntary work. SRU are keen to explore producing a similar pack for claimants in Newham, with the agreement of the BA. This pack could be part of the information sent out following an enquiry to the freephone service. Again, we would stress that this information would have clearly to be independent of the authorities to counter claimants' concerns that it was a way of gathering information to justify a reduction or the removal of benefit entitlement.

We would like to restate that the SEZ approaches these issues and challenges from a positive perspective, collaboratively and in partnership.

**For more information on any of the above, please contact
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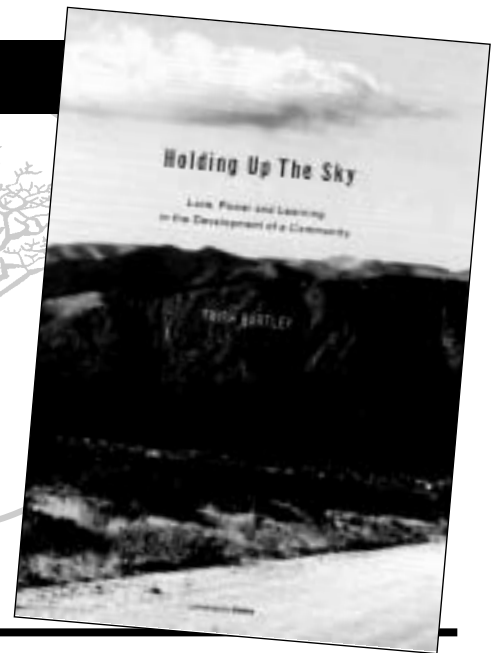
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New book from Community Links

'Holding Up The Sky' Author Trish Bartley

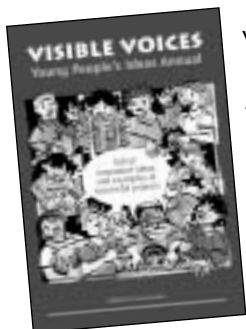
This book explores the core principles at the heart of community development work through the story of a grass roots intervention in a former South African 'homeland' village. Trish Bartley an experienced Community Worker from the UK, explores the essence of development practice. The book celebrates the skills, qualities, knowledge and potential of local people, who are the experts in their own lives. It examines qualities in the development relationship (such as openness and respect) and has a powerful message for anyone interested in development work with local people in communities – wherever their context.

Size 172 x 235 mm 216 pages ISBN 0 9544047 0 X
Price £9.95 including postage



Community Links Ideas Annuals

The Ideas Annual series grew out of the recognition that across the country bright ideas are being generated, particularly within some of the most disadvantaged local communities. Ideas Annuals report on innovative practical projects that have been undertaken by local communities and enable groups to share project ideas with each other.



Young Peoples Ideas Annual **Visible Voices**

A collection of innovative projects from across the UK that have involved young people in their communities. By including young people we make our communities more inclusive, more functional and more effective. The Ideas in this Annual illustrate the creative often risk taking ideas from young people that are bringing about change in their neighbourhoods.

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Family Poverty Ideas Annual **Ground Up**

This Ideas Annual features exceptional role models and inspirational projects already making a difference to vulnerable families, in some of our most disadvantaged communities. We believe that those people who have experienced a problem, and have come up with a way to tackle it, are best placed to pass on their knowledge and understanding to others working on the same issues. By sharing experiences we can contribute to sustainable solutions. This Ideas Annual presents the experiences of communities already tackling child poverty... from the ground up.

Size A4 58 Pages ISBN 0 9537748 1 3
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Evidence Papers

As part of our ongoing work we are constantly in touch with communities who are experiencing difficulties and many who have come up with ways to tackle them. Through drawing together the learning from these experiences with an analysis and recommendations, Community Links have produced a series of 'Evidence Papers' to provide an overview that many practitioners, academics and policy makers will find invaluable. For full details of our current Evidence Papers see order form over the page.

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Evidence Paper 5: <i>The Uncounted</i> An investigation into the permanent residents of east London not officially recorded as living here in official statistics.	£5:00			£
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