

Our final farewell edition!

Goodbye to GMPERAS – a service needed more now than ever!

At a time when vulnerable low paid workers need advice and a campaigning voice more than ever, GMPERAS (formerly the Low Pay Unit) has been forced to close following 27 years of providing valuable support to this group.



Speakers at GMPERAS Farewell Event, 10th January 2013.
Left to right: Yvonne Forvague, MP Makerfield, Gerry White, Chair, GMPERAS, Robin Serjeant, Access to Advice Campaign, Kate Green, MP Stretford. See report in the final article below.

It is a very difficult time for the advice sector and cuts to public funding have impacted negatively on organisations in a number of ways. For GMPERAS, the axing of our AGMA funding was fatal. Despite our greatest efforts, alternative funding could not be secured. But fortunately we have had time to plan a graceful exit. Due to healthy reserves we have withdrawn our services gradually and developed work with partners who plan to deliver some of the work that we have delivered.

In this last edition of Bottomline we share our reflections and

celebrate some of our key achievements over the years. The organisation has done so very much over so many years and it is an impressive body of work to stand upon. The impact of the work has benefitted so many low paid and vulnerable workers.

We also report on the legacy work that we have developed with partner organisations; a report of our farewell event which celebrated our work and rallied to support the Access to Advice Campaign for publicly funded advice services.

We could not have carried out our work without our partners, funders and donors. Many thanks for all your support over the years. I would also like to give a very special thanks to staff past and present for their wealth of knowledge, commitment and dedication, and to the Management Committee members who have served the organisation so well over the years.

Gerry White, Chair, GMPERAS.

Reflections on a remarkable body of work

As GMPERAS closes its doors, Allison Foreman, Coordinator and Gay Cox, Coordinator from 1988 to 2001 highlight some of the organisation's key achievements...

The strength of the organisation, over many years, was its combination of advice work, research, and campaigning. These strands of activity complemented each other, and gave the organisation its unique profile and perspective

Supporting workers achieve fairness at work

At the heart of the organisation's work was always its day-to-day work advising workers about their rights.

The telephone advice line was always busy, with callers from throughout Greater Manchester and beyond. Whilst most callers were employees, often with significant problems, others included employers and other agencies who wanted information about particular issues. We also promoted awareness of rights and advised people on stalls at markets, shopping centres, community events and libraries.

The focus of our work was to enable workers to secure their rights and protect their job security. We did this by advising, supporting and coaching them on negotiation skills. We also ensured that workers understood grievance, disciplinary and employment tribunal and county court proceedings.

Our factsheets were always in demand and renowned for providing clear, accurate and straightforward advice. One highlight was a Crystal Award in December 1998 from the Plain English Campaign for the organisation's maternity rights booklet. At a time when maternity rights was even more complex than today, this was a real tribute to our advice team!

Supporting our partners to deliver quality advice

Over the years the organisation built up a solid reputation for excellence and reliability.

Thus, for example, workers from other more generalist advice agencies such as the CAB would turn to us for advice and help with their own cases. Indeed, even ACAS, the government's own employment rights service for employees and employers, asked us to do a number of training sessions for its advice staff. We provided training to a range of organisations, including Connexions/ Careers Officers so that they could identify employment issues for their young clients, and Welfare Rights Officers so that they could identify employment rights as part of their work with claimants.

Providing a voice for low paid and vulnerable workers

A key element of the organisation has involved evidence gathering to support our campaigning work. This took the form of reports, submissions to policy makers, and publication of articles in the local and national media.

- Submissions which influenced The Low Pay Commission's decisions concerning minimum wage rates.
- Calls for the establishment of a fair employment inspectorate through our research including, 'Easier Said than done' which looked at the problems workers have asserting individual employment rights and 'A Difficult Delivery' which informed policy debate and improvements for maternity rights and protection for pregnant women.

- Reports focussing on the need for employers to develop policies to support women who experience domestic abuse stay in employment, 'Work was an Escape for Me'.

- 'Settling In' 2010, looked at the important role that the advice sector plays in enabling migrant workers to settle in the UK.

Producing unique and reliable research to influence policy and affect change

A key feature of our research was the detailed studies we undertook of local labour markets, particularly through the laborious process of annual Jobcentre surveys.

These were an early and continuing feature of the organisation's work in Greater Manchester, and we were regularly commissioned to produce annual Jobcentre reports for local authorities in the North West. This detailed information underpinned a lot of the critique which we were able to make of both official statistics and policy proposals.

Some examples of our detailed work were:

- A critique of the reliability of Jobcentre vacancy statistics, involving three papers which informed select committees decisions concerning pay and the labour market.
- Research on the fiscal and other impacts of the changing labour market which we presented to a hearing of the Social Security Committee as part of a joint presentation with Child Poverty Action Group and London School of Economics. This research was also referred to in the report of the Social Justice Commission as "the Stirling problem".
- We were specially commissioned by the Low Pay Commission to undertake research on young people and the minimum wage and this influenced policy to benefit young workers.



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GREATER MANCHESTER PAY AND EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS ADVICE SERVICE

Spring/Summer 2011

Special issue on
Migrant Workers

Campaigning for improvements to pay and employment rights

Our campaigning work involved making presentations to MPs and policy makers on the findings of our research and the experiences of our clients.

We also undertook joint research with the local Social Policy Group of NACAB on a number of occasions. This enabled us to add their experience in advice work to our own advice experience, and then to use our research expertise to produce reports on a variety of subjects, e.g. on the unfair dismissal threshold. We also liaised with NACAB nationally and on a number of occasions we were invited to contribute to the production of their employment rights publications.

We undertook a range of media work. The reception desk at our offices became used to a television crew arriving to film a contribution about a current issue, and in addition we received national media coverage (e.g. Contributing to BBC Radio 4's The World Today and PM programmes in relation to one of the Chancellor's Spending Reviews, participating in The Moral Maze on the subject of poverty, and speaking on Woman's Hour in 2009 about our DAWES project).

Providing our expertise and sharing our knowledge

Our research and practical expertise was recognised widely.

We were invited to serve on a variety of groups including for example the Institute of Employment Research at Warwick University, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation which was set up to oversee research on flexible work, the Equal Opportunities Commission to oversee work on the national insurance threshold.

More recently, we served on the Greater Manchester Poverty Commission's whose report published in 2013 focussed on tackling issues of poverty in the region including in-work poverty. We spoke at many local, national and international events organised by academics, pressure groups and trade unions on labour market and poverty issues.

Employers and their organisations would also turn to us for guidance especially on new legislation. For example when the Parental Leave Regulations were introduced we produced a factsheet for employees and employers within a very short period of time, along with a model agreement for small businesses to adopt. This featured in the Financial Times and was subsequently widely sought by employers and distributed by a national personnel institution. We also worked with the Forum for Small Business on developing and producing a "Good Employers Guide".

The organisation's rigorous approach enabled us to effectively challenge interpretations of employment regulations.

For example, we questioned ACAS's interpretation of the Working Time Regulations which worked to limit the amount of holiday entitlement.

The future for low paid workers?

Whilst the introduction of a minimum wage and a number of statutory employment rights has improved the situation for low-paid workers, more needs to be done.

This government has turned back the clock on unfair dismissal legislation and access to justice is threatened by incoming changes to employment tribunals. Unemployment and under-employment is a growing feature of the economy, and many jobs on offer still do not pay enough to take people off benefits. Nor do they pay enough to make a contribution to the Exchequer, an issue of significance in the current climate of austerity. There is much in today's economic situation which resembles the 1980s and 1990s, when poverty grew rapidly and work was often insecure, part-time and poorly paid. We still need organisations which can support employees at work, research the issues, and campaign for improvements to pay and conditions. It is therefore a matter of great sadness that the work started by the Low Pay Unit and carried forward under the GM Employment Rights banner is now ending.

As a result, the Department of Trade and Industry acknowledged our understanding was correct and amended the guidance accordingly. Thus resulting in an improvement to the amount of holidays workers received in the first year of the regulations.

Developing unique projects to support vulnerable worker

Over the years we have developed specialist projects to support particular vulnerable groups of workers.

In recent years, the DAWES: Domestic Abuse Women's Employment Support Project which was established in 2007 was the first project of its kind. It was very successful in supporting survivors of domestic abuse retain their employment, by negotiating domestic abuse policies with employers, developing health and safety plans, securing adjustments such as flexible working, and protecting them from dismissal due to ill-health.

Our Migrant Workers' Project provided extensive language support services to workers whose language or cultural understanding was a barrier to justice. The findings of the research that we conducted amongst our clients found that the advice that they received was also critical in supporting them to settle in Greater Manchester.



Leaving a legacy to build upon

When the organisation was confronted with the prospect that it would close we wanted to look at how we could help leave a legacy. Something that could be useful to agencies and their beneficiaries.

In consultation with partners, we recognised that GMPERAS has some very valuable resources to pass on. We identified elements of our project and looked at how we could share tools, knowledge and ideas.

Our employment rights factsheets have been regarded as a brilliant aid for workers and advice agencies. It was our desire to find a way of keeping them alive. We have been working with Salford Unemployed and Community Resources Centre who will obtain ownership of the factsheets and website. This move will bolster their current employment rights project and increase their profile to raise funding and expand their service.

We are currently working with other organisations to develop areas of work and we are really pleased to announce that Independent Choices (GM

Domestic Abuse Helpline) has agreed to develop the DAWES project with our support. This will involve training and mentoring staff and volunteers to provide support to women, casework support and fundraising to establish the DAWES project at Independent Choices.

We are also working with other agencies interested in providing support to migrant workers and with agencies supporting working parents. These two areas have been in huge demand over the years and it would be great to see provision in this area continue.

We also plan to archive our research reports and visual information to local specialist libraries and museums.

Whilst GMPERAS is no more we hope that these small seeds will enable employment rights advice and campaigning to flourish elsewhere. Hopefully one day the employment rights advice phoenix will rise out of the ashes!

As we say goodbye to GMPERAS, the fight for advice services goes on!

In January, representatives from a range of advice and support organisations came together to for a celebratory event marking the closure of GMPERAS.

Chaired by Gerry White, Alan Manning (Vice Chair of GMPERAS) reflected on the work of the organisation. Co-ordinator, Allison Foreman reported on plans to transfer areas of GMPERAS work to other agencies.

The event also featured contributions from Yvonne Forvague, MP for Makerfield, Robin Serjeant,

plundered GMPERAS resources and were confident that their clients would be quickly supported by the advice service.'

'As organisations like GMPERAS close down, their campaigning role will be sadly missed by MPs who use the voices and stories of people to inform their work' said Yvonne.

Deep concern for the future advice services

'There has never been enough employment rights advice; with the introduction of cuts there will now be a lack of provision in all areas of welfare advice especially in areas of greatest need', said Yvonne.

Uncertainty about how the gap will be filled was highlighted by Robin. 'As cuts close or dramatically reduce services, MPs and councillors will experience increased demand from people seeking their advice on complex and difficult problems. They will no longer be able to get the level of support they need from advice agencies because of the cuts.'

Yvonne alerted to how the cuts will have an impact upon the long term future of the sector. 'Closure of services will mean loss of advice work skills and specialists which will make it more difficult when we are in a position to start rebuilding advice services'.

Responses to the cuts

Robin talked about the way in which many agencies in Greater Manchester are being forced to restructure and dramatically cut services or close. It was recognised that agencies were developing very creative responses to the cuts. Speakers commended GMPERAS plans to move areas of their work into other agencies as a positive and constructive strategy.

Yvonne stated that there should be a statutory duty to fund advice and for a more comprehensive approach, 'We need a coordinated approach to advice services, no government has done this, advice should be a priority for the future.'

Building opposition to the cuts to advice services

'As funding is being withdrawn resistance to cuts is building', said Robin. Access to Advice call upon organisations to, 'monitor and share their experiences of the cuts, find ways to enable people to speak out about the impact of the cuts, and support each other with anti-cuts campaigns.'

Kate said, 'we have a lot to be worried about, a lot to be angry about and to fight for and I am encouraged by different models for activism such as social media campaigns. The work of organisations like GMPERAS leaves behind a base for the next generation of campaigners'.



For more details about the Access to Advice Campaign contact accesstoAdvice2013@gmail.com