

FREEMASONRY AND THE 'CREDIT CRUNCH'

At the moment it is difficult to pick up a newspaper without some comment being made on the downturn in financial markets both in this country and abroad with those suffering financially from the recession being described as victims of the 'credit crunch'.

The impact of this financial downturn on the public is being felt by all sectors of the community, young and old, employed and unemployed including the well off as well as the poor. Stories of financial hardship are common as people find it difficult to re-mortgage their homes and keep control of their credit debts.

Being in employment with manageable debts is an obvious answer to the problem. Many, however, have found that loss of employment can soon lead to uncontrolled debts when the fall in income can leave the borrower struggling to service a mortgage and other unsecured debts.

At first it can seem manageable but where there is not an early return to employment the manageable debts now take on a different priority, which if not dealt with speedily, can soon lead to the situation getting out of control.

Indeed, when debt becomes unmanageable this can often lead to feelings of despair and an acceptance that matters have got so much out of control that many are barely unable to help themselves. Situations such as this can lead to embarrassment and those who find themselves in this position are often unwilling to share their problems with others as this can be interpreted as failure.

Unfortunately Freemasons, like all other members of the community, are not exempt from these financial pressures and it is not unknown for the West Lancashire Freemasons Care Team to provide help to brethren and dependants who have found themselves trapped in a sea of debt with little hope of relief from the credit agencies involved.

In cases that have been brought to notice there is a common thread that runs through each, namely, that those in debt have hoped against hope that matters would get better rather than worse - it usually doesn't – and that contact with the Lodge Almoner or care team is an act of last resort. In some cases imminent eviction from the family home is just around the corner.

The reasons as to how brethren find themselves in this position are many and varied and no judgement is made on the reasons why. In all such cases absolute confidentiality is afforded as it is in all cases of assistance dealt with by the care team.

One thing that the care team is unable to provide is financial advice to those in need. This is a matter for professional advisors well skilled and trained for that purpose. Equally important Masonic charities do not, as a matter of policy, pay off petitioners' debts but may on occasion be in a position to assist with emergency financial assistance where there is related living expenditure problems.

It has therefore become necessary to identify a nationally recognised organisation that can provide free at the point of delivery confidential independent advice either by telephone or on-line thereby providing a free service to all

National Debt Line (NDL) has been identified as such a major debt-counselling agency which covers all these points.

National Debtline identifies four key elements in providing necessary and adequate support in cases such as this. They are:

1. Early intervention
2. Total anonymity
3. Professional advice
4. Personal supports free from charges and fees.

It provides one-to-one advice over the telephone or on-line and supply a 67-page free booklet 'Dealing with your Debts'.

NDL also provides 22 samples of pro-forma letters that can be edited to suit each user's need for sending to the debt agency with a view to easing or removing outstanding debts.

National Debtline is part of the Money Advice Trust and is supported by all the major banks, building societies, council of mortgage lenders and certain charitable trusts.

The Province of West Lancashire being aware of the financial pressures now being felt by many people in the community, including a number of our fellow brethren, in recognition of the need for early intervention National Debtline posters are now displayed on Masonic Hall notice boards throughout the Province giving contact details with NDL in the hope that those in need of such assistance will take the opportunity of contacting a debt adviser as soon as possible as a first step in regaining control of the situation.

It is important to emphasise that where a brother does wish to contact his Lodge Almoner, Local Care Officer or Regional Care Officer in the first instance then these Officers will always be available to him.

Where brethren wish to remain anonymous but still wish to speak to someone who can provide more detailed information on how National Debtline operates prior to initial contact with that organisation then Keith Fletcher, Regional Care Officer for the Chorley, Wigan and Leigh Groups of Lodges can be contacted either by telephone on 01024 412236 or by e mail at k.fletcher7@ntlworld.com

National Debtline can be contacted directly either by telephone on **0808 808 4000** or on their website: www.nationaldebtline.co.uk