

Hanging on to a good neighbour

Was it British rock band The Small Faces who sang *Lazy Sunday Afternoon*, about not getting on “wiv me neighbours...they stop me from ravin’, they bang onna wall”?

We have more space in NZ, although loud music, dog barking and cigarette smoke still carry. When one of our neighbours moved in, it was obvious he smoked. I asked if he’d mind doing it round the front. He obliged. I responded with a bottle of wine. Good neighbour.

Except we nearly lost him recently. After being on ACC for a month and unable to work, he asked the Ministry of Social Development for a benefit until he gets himself right. They said he qualified, and it wouldn’t take long to get him sorted.

Except it did. Nothing happened for three weeks. He ran out of food, so some of us helped out. He couldn’t pay the rent so a friend assisted, but after a while the landlord got concerned and talked eviction.

He’d heard nothing by Monday of the fourth week, so went to MSD again to inquire. He didn’t get past the receptionist: Still processing. We’ll phone you.

Except they didn’t. After three days of waiting, he was desperate. So I offered to help: Let’s go in again tomorrow and I’ll be your support person.

Next morning, up we front to the Devon St entrance to the ministry’s flash new building on the corner of Dawson St. A security guard asked my neighbour to remove his cap for the camera, so I hope it wasn’t blinded by my bald pate.

We went to the desk. The receptionist said she would inquire with something called the “processing team”, which turned out to be a woman sitting further along the counters. After a few minutes, she came back and said he was being processed now.

But there was no indication of what “now” might mean. My neighbour said he was told the same thing on Monday. I asked if we could see a manager.

After a short wait, a pleasant woman came over to us. When I introduced myself as a journalist, she said she wasn’t able to speak with the media and would give me someone to call.

After another wait, she returned and took my neighbour to an office. When he emerged about 15 minutes later he was able to assure me everything was finally fixed. He would be paid the benefit and arrears now, like “immediately”. Well, that day, anyway. His power bill, phone bill and rent arrears would be paid directly by MSD.

After another wait, the manager returned with a note setting out what he was entitled to and her phone number should he have any questions. She gave me the name and contact number for the person I could speak to in another centre.

That number went to answerphone and I was redirected to the national media team in Wellington. I spoke with someone who wanted my query emailed. She asked for specific questions and that the neighbour sign a broad waiver allowing MSD to disclose his information publicly.

He said no way, and I don’t blame him. Why should his name hit headlines because of something he had no control over? I said so to MSD’s media person and he assured me they would never disclose someone’s name. I advised him to rewrite his waiver form.

He said if the waiver wasn't signed, he couldn't give us a detailed response on what went wrong. I said I already knew what went wrong, and my interest was not in pursuing an individual case (any columnist who did that with bureaucracies would be writing a column every 10 minutes).

I wanted to know how many other Taranaki people had the same experience. It took us five minutes to drive to the MSD office, but what if you lived out of the city and had no way to travel? My neighbour says the phone waits seemed endless.

MSD's final response said in part: "...we have reminded staff that when they pick up a colleague's work who is away, they need to make sure all relevant emails and other communications addressed to an absent colleague are forwarded to them."

The number affected? "We are not aware of a widespread issue with our systems. If clients believe they have not received a good service...we ask that they contact us."

Thanks to public relations, we're never likely to know.