

Council
23rd April 2014



Business of External Organisations	Agenda No: 16a
Annual Report on the Citizens Advice Bureau	
Corporate Priority: Supporting vulnerable people in our community. Report presented by: Cllr Jennie Sutton Report prepared by: Cllr Jennie Sutton	
Background Papers:	Public Report
	Key Decision: No
<p>Executive Summary: Report on the Citizens Advice Bureau April 2013 - Feb /March 2014.</p> <p>Citizens Advice – which I must stress is a charity – is one of the few industries in recent years where demand for its help has increased greatly. What with all the changes in benefits etc and debt (from all walks of life) being an increasing problem, demand has been high.</p> <p>Generalist Advice - the total number of clients seen by CAB between April and Sept 2013 (6 month period) can be broken down into months (as yet we do not have the figures for Oct, Nov, Dec 2103 and Jan Feb March) 2014 :-</p> <p>April/May/June 2013 was 1,033 July/Aug/Sept 2013 was 1,059 making a total of 2,092</p> <p>Total number of Client Activities (Telephone calls, letters, referrals etc)</p> <p>April/May/June 2013 was 4,527 July/Aug/Sept 2013 was 4,674 making a total of 9,174</p> <p>These covered enquiries in many different categories – Consumer. Welfare, Housing, Taxes, Health, Money Advice, Employment, Family & Personal, Immigration, Education, etc</p> <p>All these problems are dealt with by trained Volunteers and Supervisors, who work at the three centres. Between April and Sept 2013 there has been 60 volunteers, 13 clerical, 28 trained advisers, 11 trustees and 8 trainees. Over the 6 month period the trainees work on average a 10 hour week, giving a weekly total of 80 hours. So in 6 months they give a total of 1,840 hours. In addition the trained advisers continually monitor updates to the information system and engage periodically in more formal refresher training. They on average work a 6 hour week and over a period of 6</p>	

months this gives approximately 8,280 hours voluntary work. This is just one CAB office in the country, I wonder what the total would be for the whole country!

One of the aims of the Citizens Advice Service is – To improve the policies and practices that affect people's lives. The bureau network gathers evidence on issues with policies and practices that impact clients and we call these - Social Policy Issues. These are then reported to the Social Policy Unit within Citizens Advice who compile reports and inform their campaign work team. It must be said that issues around decisions and administration within the benefits system still dominate. Unethical employment practices and over zealous debt collection agencies have also been identified and reported on.

CAB has been very active in pushing for change in various employment areas – the Government has now agreed that there will no longer be sanctions against job seekers for refusing to attend interviews or to apply for jobs with zero hours contracts. This is called the Claimant Commitment which started in October 2013 with high hope that it would greatly reduce misunderstandings between DWP and claimants that lead to sanctions. This formal signed agreement between two parties is about their joint responsibilities, and is built around the work plan that claimants will agree with the Jobcentre. Whilst there is sense in making everything clearer for both sides – it could cause an influx of worried claimants to the CAB.

The DWP have also been asked to change their approach to the jobs it offers and expects people to take, to one of offering jobs that are paid at a reasonable level and which offer some protection such as sick pay – paid leave and a stated number of minimum weekly hours. In this way jobseekers will hopefully have a better chance of moving away from the need to rely on benefits.

CAB also had a change of Chairman at its AGM in October last year. Rules state that you can only be chairman of a bureau for 6 years – after that you must hand over to someone new. So great thanks were given to Don Smith for all his efforts in the past 6 years (Don will still be very much involved with CAB, but in many different ways) and Lawrence Duncan is now the new Chairman. I'm sure you will all join me in wishing Lawrence good luck in his new role.

CAB hopes to upgrade all of its Windows XP PCs to Windows 7 and its Microsoft Office suite from 2003 to 2010 as Microsoft will be ending their support of these products in March 2014 – this will be done out of normal office hours.

CAB is still looking for new premises in Braintree, but as a moral booster CAB has given the present office a lick of paint to brighten the surroundings.

CAB engaged with the BIG Energy Saving week at the end of January – this was a national Citizens Advice campaign where CAB also worked locally with the BDVSA – BDC and Village Agents. Survival packs, containing campaign materials were delivered by BDC Community Transport Team to those identified as being in need.