

The impact of Citizens Advice Bureaux in local communities

The Citizens Advice service helps people resolve their legal, money and other problems by providing information and advice and by influencing policymakers. Every Citizens Advice Bureau is an independent charity reliant on funds raised locally and the commitment of trained volunteers from their local communities.

Last year, we helped people deal with over 5.6 million problems covering everything from benefits and housing to asylum and employment. If you need to chase a benefit claim, sort out your money problems or make a complaint about the NHS – a CAB can help.

Our trained advisers can help at all stages of the problem from negotiating with service providers right up to representation at courts and tribunals. Free, confidential and independent advice really makes a difference to the lives of individuals, their families and the communities they live in.

But the contribution Citizens Advice Bureaux make to local communities goes much further than advice.

Contributing to economic development and regeneration

Bureaux raise the income of over one-third of their clients¹

CAB advisers do this in many ways, but most typically by ensuring that people receive the benefits to which they are entitled and by helping with claims for compensation for poor services or products. The income won can be regular – sometimes up to several hundred pounds a month – or a one-off payment. An independent study of Brighton Citizens Advice Bureau in 2003 estimated it had won £676,000 of increased benefits for its clients in one year².

"If it hadn't been for the CAB, we wouldn't have got the incapacity benefit. Fantastic, really efficient." CAB client

Bureaux bring in money which is spent locally

By increasing people's incomes, spending power is increased. This is particularly important to the local economy for two reasons. Firstly, it is likely to stay local. Research in Glasgow found that income gained for the city's poorer residents was more likely to be spent locally³. Secondly, because it is spent it continues circulating in the local economy and has even more impact⁴. The New Economics

Foundation estimates that income of this sort should be trebled to give a measure of its real effect.

"The extra money has made a hell of a difference to us. I'm only glad they had a CAB adviser at the doctor's surgery the day I went in." CAB client

Bureaux bring additional income to the local economy via funders

As independent charities and local businesses, bureaux need to raise funds locally, regionally and nationally. On average, less than half a bureau's income will come from its local authority (47 per cent in 2003/2004). The remainder comes from a range of sources, many of which are regional or national – such as the Big Lottery Fund, the Legal Services Commission and the national Citizens Advice organisation. Bureaux are therefore bringing in national cash to local economies.

"The Legal Services Commission sees Citizens Advice Bureaux as key partners. They deliver quality legal advice and information to the most vulnerable and socially excluded people in society." Clare Dodgson, Chief Executive, Legal Services Commission

Bureaux save the economy money

As well as raising money, bureaux also save it. The Department for Constitutional Affairs recently estimated that it takes people on average eight months to sort out their legal and other problems. The cost to the economy of the time, trouble and ill-health for those involved is up to £12 billion⁵. It is reasonable to believe that without the work of Citizens Advice Bureaux – who help deal with the problems of around 2.75m people each year – that figure would be even higher.

"The anxiety of the debts and the stress was bringing on my angina. I felt like I was drowning. It was only when we saw the judge in court that I realised how much the CAB had done on my behalf." CAB client

¹ Citizens Advice/MORI 2004/05
² University of Brighton, 2003
³ University of Strathclyde, 2003

⁴ University of Brighton, 2003
⁵ Department for Constitutional Affairs, 2004, unpublished

Bureaux save councils money

Every time a CAB adviser prevents someone from becoming homeless by rent rescheduling or helping them with financial management they save the council the cost of re-housing them. And they save other organisations money too. For example, around one in ten CAB clients say that they experienced less ill health or depression as a result of the bureau's support⁶.

"Without the help of our local CAB, the whole family would have been out on the streets." CAB client

Bureaux also provide a range of services free that are of real value to the local council. At a conservative estimate, the value of the time provided by CAB volunteers in England and Wales is around £70m each year. And in one town – Sevenoaks – the CAB has estimated the annual value of the advice it provides to residents at £250,000.

Every year, the Citizens Advice service provides free training for over 3,000 new volunteers and additional training to thousands more. And since the single biggest reason for volunteers leaving the CAB service is to go into paid employment, bureaux are making a clear contribution to increasing the employability of local people and building skills that the Egan Review has noted are often lacking.

"In three years I've gone from CAB client to volunteer to paid adviser." CAB paid adviser

Contributing to local society

Our advice has an impact that goes beyond the purely economic

Many of the people bureaux are helping, are among the most deprived in their communities, so they are making a real impact on social inclusion. These can be difficult to quantify. How do we measure the effect of a client being able to afford a bus fare or use their telephone more often? How can we show the longer term impacts of improved money management following our financial

capability skills initiatives? And by what standards can we measure the value of additional cash to the CAB client who told a bureau worker that he was now able to stand his own round in his local pub, once a week, rather than rely on handouts from his friends? Nearly half of CAB clients say that our advice helped them feel more confident in dealing with their problem, while over a quarter say that the information they gained was useful in other situations⁷.

"I was about to borrow even more money but now I feel in control of my money for the first time." CAB client

A community-led agency run by and for local people

Since over 20,000 of the 25,000 people in the Citizens Advice service are volunteers, it is a classic example of what the Government calls active citizenship. There are real benefits of volunteering too. One recent survey showed strong health benefits, including the fact that 9 per cent of male volunteers and 8 per cent of female volunteers said it had improved their sex lives⁸.

"You can actually make a difference for people, and you are valued for who you are." CAB volunteer adviser

Playing a part in increasing social cohesion

Many bureaux also target their advice services at particular minority groups, and play active roles in Race Equality Councils, contributing to the social cohesion agenda and helping councils deliver on their commitments to promote race equality.

Contributing to the policy agenda

Citizens Advice Bureaux are also helping millions of people who have never set foot in a bureaux, telephoned or emailed one of our advisers or visited www.adviceguide.org.uk, our online advice site.

By spotting trends in problems that people bring to them, bureaux identify areas in which law or

⁶ Citizens Advice/MORI 2004/05

⁷ Citizens Advice/MORI 2004/05
⁸ ICM/CSV 2004

policy is ineffective or unfair and help Citizens Advice nationally to campaign for changes, as well as campaigning locally and regionally themselves.

Private tenants won't lose their rental deposits in future thanks to a successful CAB campaign

1.5m people may benefit from the amendment to the Housing Act 2004 that establishes an independent statutory scheme for administering the deposits of tenants in the private rented sector. Thousands of such tenants have visited bureaux in recent years to complain that their landlord had unfairly withheld their deposit at the end of the tenancy – and bureaux were forced to advise that there was relatively little the client could do about it.

The new, legally binding scheme will place the deposits in a trust fund (the costs of which are paid for by the interest on the deposit) and there will be independent arbitration in the event of a dispute between landlord and tenant. A far fairer system – and brought about by the policy work of Citizens Advice (with its partner, Shelter) after a campaign lasting more than a decade.

Contributing to local planning and participation

Bureau have a huge bank of local knowledge

Advice has a lot more to offer than it is often given credit for, particularly when it comes to the input required to make local schemes work and ensure that citizens feel they have been properly consulted. Bureaux have tremendous knowledge and information about what is going on in their local communities – what's working, and what isn't. Two-thirds of Citizens Advice Bureaux are already involved in their Local Strategic Partnerships and many are also involved in other formal and

informal consultation and planning mechanisms. Some participate in helping to judge council performance through the Comprehensive Performance Assessment process.

Bureaux hold detailed data on local problems

The current level of information and knowledge held by bureaux about local communities will be transformed in the next few years by the 'Citizens Connect' programme.

This IT network links all bureaux to the national Citizens Advice organisation and allows use, for the first time, of an electronic client case management system. This in turn means that bureaux increasingly have much more detailed analysis of the types of problems they are dealing with available virtually instantaneously. This data promises to revolutionise our understanding of the incidence of social problems in England and Wales, and it will be a vital resource for local councils and other agencies to help them understand what's going on locally and to plan their services. Additionally, the secure IT network offers a means for bureaux to help deliver e-government services to local people in partnership with local authorities.

"Citizens Advice Bureaux have much to contribute towards the development of effective e-government services."

***Brian Briscoe, Chief Executive,
Local Government Association***

- For more about the Citizens Advice service and its campaigning work see www.citizensadvice.org.uk
- For online CAB advice www.adviceguide.org.uk
- Volunteer hotline 08451 264 264 (local rate)