

households. CASE promises to revolutionise our understanding of the incidence of social problems in England and Wales, and it can be a vital resource for local councils and other agencies to help understand their areas and plan their services. Additionally, it offers a network through which the bureaux can help deliver local e-government services in partnership with local authorities.

Conclusion

We now know that advice can play a critical role in regenerating communities, but what should we do with that knowledge? There are a number of immediate recommendations for regeneration agencies, funders and advice agencies themselves.

An understanding of the role of advice should lead to greater coordination between regeneration agencies and advice agencies, particularly in planning regeneration schemes. For example, the potential of the CASE recording data to be used in regeneration planning should be fully investigated.

Funders of advice services should consider the full contribution of advice agencies to regeneration and other social issues. They should consider how they can work with providers to resolve the problems of unmet need established in the Citizens Advice research, recognising the economic, social, policy and planning benefits that wider advice provision could bring.

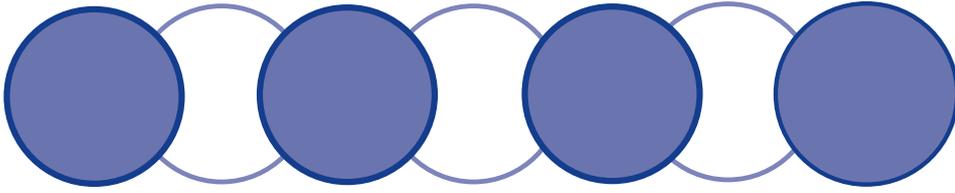
Advice agencies themselves should see themselves as part of holistic problem-solving within the community, not simply as providers of advice, and as a result should seek to develop links with a wider range of community organisations.

Endnotes

- 1 Social grade classifies everybody on the basis of the chief income earner in their household, into one of six categories, A, B C1, C2, D or E. For more information see <http://www.mori.com/mrr/2002/c020816.shtml>
- 2 Unmet demand for Citizens Advice Bureaux, MORI/Citizens Advice, 2003/04
- 3 Unmet demand for Citizens Advice Bureaux, MORI/Citizens Advice, 2003/04
- 4 University of Brighton, 2003
- 5 University of Strathclyde, 2003
- 6 University of Brighton, 2003
- 7 See CLES Local Work No LW49 – Turning economic deserts into enterprising communities, www.cles.org.uk
- 8 Department for Constitutional Affairs, 2004, unpublished
- 9 RE Lane, The Loss of Happiness in Market Economies, p329
- 10 Egan Review of Skills, ODPM, http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_control/documents/contentservertemplate/odpm_index.hcst?n=3933&l=2
- 11 Citizens Advice/MORI 2004/05



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Introduction

Advice services have often struggled to define the contribution that they make to the economic and social welfare of communities. This has sometimes been because advice is such a broad concept that generalisation has proved a problem but more often because it has been difficult to show the outcomes of advice work.

At Citizens Advice we have dealt with this problem in two ways: by pulling together some of the existing evidence and by carrying out new research where there has been a gap in knowledge. Our work to date should be seen as introductory rather than definitive and, of course, it focuses on Citizens Advice Bureaux, rather than other advice agencies. Nonetheless it does start to paint a picture of the role of advice and its contribution in a number of key areas relating to regeneration.

What Citizens Advice Bureaux do

The Citizens Advice service is a network of charities that exists to help people resolve their financial, legal and other problems. Advice is free, impartial, confidential and is available to everyone regardless of race, sex, disability, sexuality or nationality. The Citizens Advice service is one of the best known organisations in the country – 95% of the public has heard of it, and over 40% say that they or their family has used the service at some stage in their lives.

There are currently 482 member Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB) across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Every CAB belongs to the national association, Citizens Advice, which is also a charity. CAB advice is provided from over 3,200 locations, including community venues such as GP surgeries and within courts, prisons, schools and leisure centres. The majority of bureaux also provide home visits and nearly

one-third provide email advice. Citizens Advice Bureaux rely on volunteers. There are nearly 21,000 in a number of roles - as trained advisors, trustees, social policy campaigners and administrators.

Feedback from bureaux about the problems their clients' experience is used in our evidence reports, parliamentary consultations and briefings to MPs and policy makers. By campaigning to change policies and services which aren't working, the service aims to improve the lives of those who may never have used a Citizens Advice Bureau.

Campaign work benefits from the £20m Citizens Connect project, which established a virtual private network linking all bureaux with the national Citizens Advice organisation. This network allows bureaux to use a secure case management system that in turn allows Citizens Advice real-time access and analysis of the types of problems being brought into bureaux. Provision of e-government services will also be possible.

Types of problems and unmet need

The top five issues on which clients sought CAB advice in 2003/04 were:

- o benefits (1,723,000 new problems)
- o consumer and debt (1,444,000 new problems)
- o housing (549,000 new problems)
- o employment (510,000 new problems)
- o legal (433,000 new problems)

In total, bureaux dealt with around 5.6m new problems in 2003/04. Bureaux clients are more likely to be social grade C2DE¹, have a disability or long-term limiting illness and live in social housing².

Local Positive Change: Advice services & regeneration

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Despite the scale of the service offered by bureaux, there remains a huge unmet demand for advice services. In research by MORI for Citizens Advice in 2003³, roughly two in five respondents (44%) said they had a problem in the last year on which they would have liked advice. However only six in ten of those with problems (61%) sought help. This suggests that there were at least seven and a quarter million people with problems who had no help at all. Of these, at least two million people are in the DE social grade. People who consider but then decide not to use a bureaux, cite many reasons for their decision. Around two in five say they solved their problem themselves or with the help of friends but many of the remaining reasons relate to access. People are dissuaded from using bureaux because of waiting times, not being able to get through on the phone or to visit at a suitable time, or because there is not an advice location close to them.

Of those who did seek help, 24% approached bureaux – more than any other organisation. This represents at least two and three quarter million people.

Advice and regeneration

From our research, there is clear evidence that Citizens Advice Bureaux and other advice agencies contribute to regeneration in at least four ways:

- o Economic development and regeneration, by bringing new money into communities and by developing the skills and capacity of local people;
- o Social cohesion and development, by ensuring that some of the most deprived individuals and communities are able to play a full part in their local community;
- o Policy change locally, regionally and nationally, by using the experience of clients to bring about policy change at the local and national level;
- o Information and knowledge about local communities that can be used by regeneration agencies to plan and deliver sustainable improvements.

Economic development and regeneration

Our most recent research by MORI shows that bureaux put money into the pockets of over one third of their clients^{iv}. Almost four in 10 (37%) people who use a Citizens Advice Bureau are financially better off as a result, half (51%) of these receive one-off payments but a quarter (26%) gain regular weekly or monthly income. Of those who gain a one off amount, three in five (60%) receive more than £100 and 25% of these gain more than £1,000.

Bureaux achieve this in many ways but most typically by ensuring that people receive the benefits to which they are entitled and claim compensation for poor services or products. An independent study of Brighton Citizens Advice Bureau in 2003, for example, estimated it had won £676,000 of increased benefits for its clients in one year⁴. Again, the income won can be regular – sometimes up to several hundred pounds a month – or a one-off payment.

This spending power is particularly important to the local economy for two reasons. First 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 locally⁵. Second, because it is spent, it *circulates* in the local economy and has even more impact⁶. The New Economics Foundations estimates that income of this sort should be trebled to give a measure of its real effect⁷

Bureaux themselves also bring additional income to the local economy. On average, only half a bureau's income will come from its local authority. The other half 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 and the same is likely to be true of other advice agencies.

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 and that the cost to the economy of the time, trouble and ill-health of those involved is up to £12 billion⁸. 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.

There is some evidence of this, the 2004/05 MORI research shows that a third of CAB clients (33%) felt less anxious or stressed after using the bureau, while 14% had fewer health problems or were less depressed. Since both ill health and depression have an impact on work attendance (mildly-depressed individuals are off work 1.5 times as much as the non-depressed, and severely depressed individuals miss five times as much work⁹) there is a clear link between advice and economic performance. Moreover, it seems reasonable to link reduced costs to the health service and advice; since advice leads to better mental and physical health, there is surely a saving to the national health service, both in clinical time and in prescription drugs.

It is not just the health service that sees financial savings however - bureaux also save councils money. Every time they prevent someone from becoming homeless by rent rescheduling or helping with financial management they

save the council the cost of rehousing them. This preventative work also extends well beyond housing. Citizens Advice and bureaux, supported by the Prudential, have been piloting a range of training and other measures to help people manage their finances more effectively and avoid getting into difficulties in the first place.

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 bureaux in England and Wales is around £70m each year. And in just one town - Sevenoaks - the Citizens Advice has estimated the annual value of the advice it provides to residents at £250,000.

Bureaux also provide free training. Every year they train over 3000 new volunteers and provide additional training to many of the other 8000. And since the single biggest reason for leaving the CAB is to go into paid employment, they are making a clear contribution to the employability of local people, and building skills that the Egan Review¹⁰ has noted are often lacking.

Social cohesion and development

The advice provided by local bureaux has an impact that goes beyond the purely economic, important though they are. Many of the people bureaux help are among the most deprived in their communities, so they make a real difference to the socially excluded within the community. This impact 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? And by what standards can we measure the value of additional cash to the Citizens Advice 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 friends?

Whilst it is difficult to quantify, it is evident that nearly half of CAB clients say that they feel more confident in dealing with their problem, while over a quarter say that the information they gained was useful in other situations¹¹. This is clear evidence of the empowering effects of advice, helping to develop, in individuals and communities, what has been called a sense of 'agency'. That is a sense that they can affect positive change.

But the benefits to individuals and communities do not stop there. As politicians worry over declining participation in elections, other forms of civic engagement are increasingly critical. Surely, then, it is also important that each Citizens Advice is a community-led agency, run by local people for local people. And since 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'.

Many bureaux also target their advice services at black and minority ethnic groups, contributing to the social cohesion agenda and helping councils deliver their commitments to promote race equality; critical for councils, individuals and communities alike.

Using local experience to bring about policy change

Bureaux are also helping millions of people who have never set foot in bureaux and may not even know that we exist. They do this by identifying areas in which law or policy is ineffective or unfair, and by helping Citizens Advice nationally to campaign for change. For example, 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, brought about by the policy work of Citizens Advice (with its partner Shelter) who have been campaigning for over a decade.

Planning and participation

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. Most make use of this already. 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 play a formal part in helping judge council performance through the Comprehensive Performance Assessment process.

Yet the current level of information and knowledge, important though it is, will be transformed in the next few years by the 'Citizens Connect' programme. This is a technological network linking all bureaux to the national Citizens Advice organisation and allowing use, for the first time, of an electronic case management system called 'CASE'. This in turn, will mean that bureaux have much more detailed, ward-level analysis of the types of problems they are dealing with, available virtually instantaneously. Citizens Advice is already discussing the use of CASE data with the Office of National Statistics and it has the potential to be developed to provide data at output level – that is, for areas as small as 150