

Citizens Advice proposals to the **Government**

Using the Spending Review to make
life simpler and fairer for people

Introduction

For Citizens Advice, like the Government, problem solving is at the heart of what we do. Whether it is in our one-to-one advice work with millions of people in local communities, or in the analysis of our client evidence at a national level, our job is to find workable solutions to the difficulties people face in their everyday lives.

That is why we really welcome the opportunity to submit proposals to the Government for this Spending Review. Our proposals are set out in this briefing and in detailed submissions we have addressed to the following government departments:

- Ministry of Justice (MOJ)
- Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS)
- Department for Energy and Climate Change (DECC)
- Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG)
- Home Office (HO) and Government Equalities Office (GEO)
- Department of Health (DOH)
- Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC).

Drawing on our extensive evidence from advising the public we outline some key policy problems we hope the Government will address through future service delivery and policy formulation. We have taken account of the Government's priorities and concerns – to promote fairness and responsibility, to reduce costs, to find simpler more efficient ways of doing things, and to give priority to supporting those most in need. We have identified a number of ways that those most in need could receive better public services by making systems and rules simpler, and reducing errors saving public money in the process.

We are also inspired by the Spending Review's questions as to whether more government activities could be provided by the voluntary sector, and how more citizens can become involved in social action. Our briefings give examples of practical and innovative ways that we believe we could help, working with the Government, and with the Government's continued support for our service.

Why work with the Citizens Advice service?

Our track record is impressive. Citizens Advice Bureaux are local charities working with, and trusted by, some of the most vulnerable people in society. They provide free, confidential and impartial advice from over 3,500 community locations and give clients, and others like them, a voice by spotting failures in the system and responding with policy proposals.

Citizens Advice Bureaux deliver impressive results. During 2009/10 they:

- advised 2.1 million people on 7.1 million problems
- enabled 12.7 million queries to be researched independently on Adviceguide.org.uk
- improved the situation of 6.4 million people by influencing policy.

Citizens Advice Bureaux are organised to deliver value for money. They:

- mobilise 21,500 volunteers, saving a market rate of £106 million and creating vibrant communities
- develop skills and encourage progression – 40 per cent of volunteers who leave go into paid employment or higher education
- boost local economies by helping people to avoid debt, manage it, and maximise their incomes
- reduce the strain on local authority, health and legal services.

In our proposals for the Spending Review we identify how our services could be harnessed and developed to support the Government to improve services for the public.

Citizens Advice would welcome an early opportunity to have a conversation with the Government about our ideas, and to hear how the Government thinks the Citizens Advice service can help to make life simpler and fairer for people who rely on public services.

For more information please contact [Laura van der Hoeven](mailto:laura.vanderhoeven@citizensadvice.org.uk) in the first instance (laura.vanderhoeven@citizensadvice.org.uk).

Summary of proposals for Government departments

1 Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS)

We recommend that BIS:

- simplifies the system for securing fairness in the workplace
- makes our system of consumer protection more effective
- offers more suitable debt management solutions
- improves the sustainability of funding for free debt advice (working with DCLG, MOJ and HMT).

We could support the delivery of these recommendations by:

- providing a single first point of contact for consumer and employment advice
- offering an early intervention dispute resolution service
- collecting and analysing evidence to inform policy development
- developing a holistic approach to money advice.

2 Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG)

We recommend that DCLG:

- invests in more social housing
- stimulates improvements in the standard of private rented accommodation
- supports councils to improve their housing options services
- offers greater support to homeowners
- improves the sustainability of funding for free debt advice (working with BIS, MOJ and HMT).

We could support the delivery of these recommendations by:

- establishing a tenants and homeowners advice service
- offering housing options services designed to explore alternatives to homelessness
- providing access to client data to ensure local public services meet their intended aims
- acting as a community anchor for the 'Big Society'
- offering civil service staff regular volunteering opportunities
- developing a holistic approach to money advice.

3 Department for Energy and Climate Change (DECC)

We recommend that DECC:

- develops a new strategy for eradicating fuel poverty that is rooted in energy efficiency
- expects improved benefit take-up and helps people manage their bills
- simplifies social tariffs
- urges better support to those in debt.

We could support the delivery of these recommendations by:

- building awareness and understanding of the Green Deal
- enhancing and simplifying energy advice.

4 Department of Health (DOH)

We recommend that DOH:

- prevents poor administration of sickness benefits from exacerbating health inequalities
- improves the sustainability of debt advice funding to reduce the cost of mental health problems (with BIS, MOJ, DCLG and HMT)
- cuts the cost of accessing healthcare
- maintains or extends eligibility for adult social care.

We could support the delivery of these recommendations by:

- providing a health setting-based advice service
- establishing a partnership between Adviceline and the Government's Improving Access to Psychological Therapies programme
- developing links between the online services offered by NHS Direct, Directgov and Citizens Advice
- providing access to client data to ensure local services meet their intended aims.

5

Department for Work (DWP) and Pensions and HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC)

We recommend that DWP and HMRC:

- simplify the benefits system making it fairer as well as easier for people to understand their entitlement and how to claim it
- improve the quality of service, advice and decision making
- offer greater support to homeowners (with DCLG).

We could support the delivery of these recommendations by:

- facilitating public internet access
- acting as a trusted intermediary for benefit claims
- encouraging effective take-up of benefits and tax credits
- improving public understanding of benefits with a view to preventing errors
- using client evidence to inform the development of benefits administration systems.

6

Home Office (HO) and Government Equalities Office (GEO)

We have identified a clear need for:

- improved understanding of what is and is not acceptable behaviour in our society
- greater knowledge of what action can be taken against perpetrators of unacceptable behaviour
- easier access to support
- earlier intervention
- more appropriate resolution systems.

We could support HO and GEO to take action in these areas by:

- establishing an independent hate crime reporting and awareness raising service
- offering an early intervention dispute resolution service (with BIS)
- providing a health setting-based advice service (with DCLG and MOJ).

7 Ministry of Justice (MOJ)

We recommend that MOJ:

- makes the civil legal aid system more customer-driven
- supports and advises prisoners to reduce re-offending rates
- provides alternatives to court buildings which offer local access to justice
- stops the criminalisation of people with public service debts
- offers more suitable debt management solutions (with BIS)
- regulates bailiffs.

We could support the delivery of these recommendations by:

- providing a pre-legal aid advice service
- offering a legal aid assessment and appointment making service
- developing the public's 'legal capability'
- establishing a pre-release advice service for those leaving custody.

Contact us

To discuss the contents of this submission,
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Registered charity number 279057