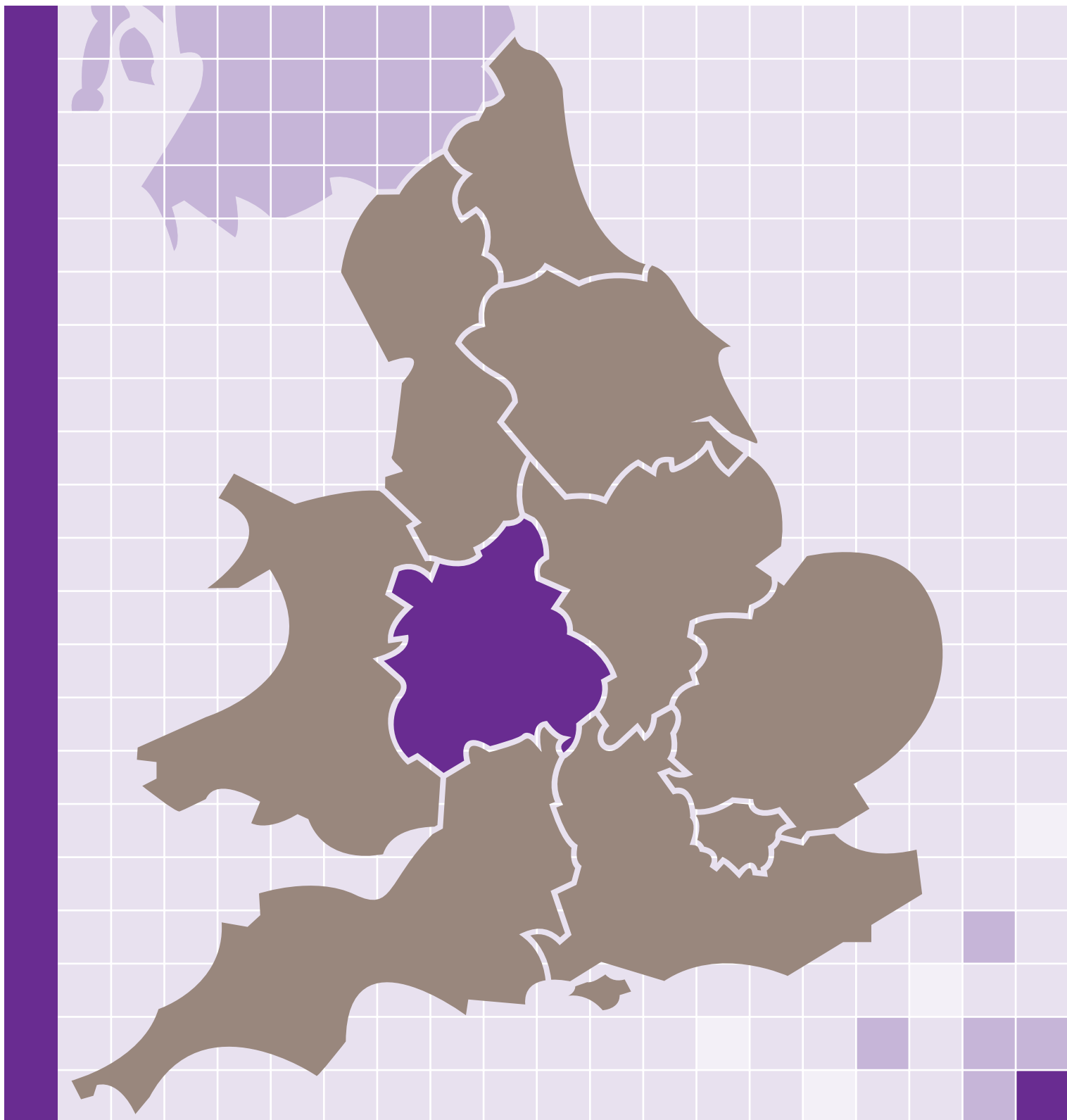


Developing partnerships, enhancing services

Citizens Advice in the West Midlands



Introduction

The Citizens Advice service is one of the best known organisations in England and Wales. We score highly on trust and recognition in public polls, with 96 per cent of the population having heard of us.

We provide free, independent, confidential and impartial advice to everyone on their rights and responsibilities. We value diversity and challenge discrimination. Our aims are two-fold; to provide the advice people need for the problems they face, and to improve the policies and practices that affect their lives.

Partnership

The Citizens Advice service works in partnership with agencies from all sectors, at local, regional and national level. We are always striving to achieve more and recognise this is often best done by partnering with others. This briefing sets out the benefits of working with the Citizens Advice service for regional agencies and the local communities they support.

Comprehensive coverage in the West Midlands

In the West Midlands the Citizens Advice service is one of the largest third sector providers of advice, operating from 56 high street premises in the region, and providing regular outreach services from a further 267 outlets.

During 2008/09 over 200,000 people in the West Midlands were able to turn to the Citizens Advice service for help to resolve their money, legal, employment or other problems.

High quality advice

Every Citizens Advice Bureau is an independent charity and a member of Citizens Advice, the national body that:

- provides bureaux with training and specialist support
- audits the operational efficiency of bureaux and the quality of their advice
- coordinates national policy and campaigning work.

Together we are the Citizens Advice service, combining the resource and experience of a national organisation with the intimate local knowledge of frontline agencies.

All issues, all people

In 2008/09 the bureaux in the West Midlands region advised on 402,128 issues. Many clients are advised on multiple issues as their problems are dealt with holistically.

The most common issues in the West Midlands region are:

- debt **35%**
- benefits and tax credits **29%**
- employment **9%**
- consumer and utilities **6%**
- housing **6%**
- legal **4%**.

Twenty three bureaux in the West Midlands region are able to provide civil legal advice through contracts with the Legal Services Commission.

The Citizens Advice service is also a leader in equality and diversity best practice. We aim to develop and deliver discrimination advice, from first point of contact to resolution, in partnership with others.

Eighteen per cent of clients using the service in the region are from black, Asian or minority ethnic communities; 22 per cent are disabled; 12 per cent are below the age of 25 and 10 per cent are over 65 years.

We achieved

96%

in public polls for trust and recognition

We helped

200

thousand people during 2008/09

We advised on

683

thousand different issues during 2008/09

We operate

56

high street premises in the West Midlands

We provide a further

267

outreach services across the West Midlands

Informing policy

Bureaux record all enquiries in a central database, providing a unique picture of the problems faced by residents in the region. This service data can be analysed at national or local level, and allows for tracking trends year on year.

This intelligence informs the development of local services as well as the setting of policy objectives for the West Midlands.

In addition to statistical data on enquiries, bureaux record detailed, anonymous descriptions of cases. These provide rich, qualitative information which demonstrates unquestionably to policy makers and service providers, the impact of their decisions on individuals' lives.

Partnership working for client-centred services

Bureaux belong to networks of statutory and third sector community agencies. They frequently identify common goals and separate strengths, leading to partnership work that delivers more joined up, client-centred services for people throughout the West Midlands.

As a service, we recognise that it is only by working with a range of partners that we can improve the lives of some of the most vulnerable groups in society.

We currently work with partners from the public, private and third sectors to ensure our experience, and that of our clients, is used proactively to inform policy and practice for the better. Our existing partnerships include the sharing of statistical information to facilitate advice needs assessment, as well as the development of new and existing services.

The service also works to promote the interests of those most marginalised in our communities. For example Stoke CAB held an EU migrant workers event, which was attended by representatives from a wide range of partner organisations including the unitary, county and district councils, the police, the NHS, ACAS, the TUC, Jobcentre Plus and the local racial equality council.

Other partnership examples include:

- Anti poverty coalitions, for example on social policy work around rent arrears.
- Working with partners in delivering new financial capability services in schools.
- Promoting advice services and support to employers around pre-retirement, health and absenteeism.

Case studies

In 2006 Staffordshire Probation Area commissioned a county-wide finance, benefit and debt advice service from a single provider to deliver an appointment based outreach advice service at six key locations across the county. This replaced previous arrangements which had seen them funding three separate bureaux and then a single telephone based service. The successful bid was submitted by Stafford CAB working in partnership with Stoke on Trent and West Staffordshire Citizens Advice Bureaux. The Staffordshire Probation Area Partnership service has run since October 2007. Each bureau is responsible for providing the service at two local probation offices in their area and is responsible for local liaison and project management.

Commissioned by Stoke on Trent City Council's Children and Young People's Directorate from April 2009, the Stoke on Trent Family Support Network provides intensive multi-agency support to families with level 3 needs where there is a risk of the child(ren) being admitted to care and lower levels of support have failed to work. The network consists of a core group of seven voluntary organisations, each offering a specialised support or counselling service, and several others who are spot-purchased where necessary. Families' needs are assessed by core team members who then co-ordinate the various services according to the family's needs. Stoke CAB has a staff member seconded to the network for 18 hours a week to provide advice mainly in debt and welfare benefits issues, but also across the full range of subject categories.

We have

23

bureaux in the West Midlands providing civil legal advice

18%

of our clients are from BAME communities

22%

are disabled

12%

are below the age of 25

10%

are over 65 years

Developing the economy in the West Midlands

- Citizens Advice bureaux in the West Midlands are both small businesses and training agencies, employing and training 752 local staff. In addition we train and rely on over 1,500 volunteers each year.
- Based on current rates of pay for employed staff, the value of the contribution made by volunteers in the West Midlands region is estimated at almost £8.7 million.
- Almost a quarter of volunteers go into paid employment following training and support in bureaux.
- Across the West Midlands region the Citizens Advice service brings money into the pockets of families and individuals through benefit take-up, management of debt, and advice on employment and housing. This extra wealth often stays in the community, boosting the local economy.
- In the course of delivering projects to improve financial inclusion, 13,385 clients were helped in the region during 2008/09 through our successful national programme – funded by the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills.
- The Citizens Advice service hosts a financial capability forum across the West Midlands and is expanding its work in money advice.

Our strategic priorities

Across the West Midlands bureaux are making an important contribution to regional priorities and the service is actively seeking to develop partnerships to deliver on our ambitious 2008-11 strategy, of which the key priorities are:

- Easier and faster access to advice and information for more people.
- To strengthen our voice in social policy.
- To develop the Citizens Advice Bureaux network.
- To develop new initiatives in advice.
- A commitment to equality.

We recognise that it is only by working in partnership that we can achieve more and we welcome contact from other agencies and stakeholders as to how we can work with them on these shared agendas.

If you want to talk about working with Citizens Advice in the West Midlands please contact:

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We train

1,500

volunteers each year

We employ

752

local staff

8.7

million pounds
contributed in the
West Midlands region