

A map of the United Kingdom is shown, with various regions highlighted in different colors. Overlaid on the map is a target graphic with concentric circles and a central green dot, symbolizing focus and partnership.

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 95 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 over 35 high street premises in the region and providing outreach services from 350 outlets.

During 2007/08, 230,000 people in the West Midlands region were able to turn to Citizens Advice 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 2007/08 the bureaux in the West Midlands advised on 684,926 issues. Many clients are advised on multiple issues as their problems are dealt with holistically.

The most common issues dealt with in the West Midlands are:

- debt 35%
- benefits and tax credits 29%
- employment 7%
- housing 7%
- consumer and utilities 6%;
- family and relationships 4%.

Twenty three bureaux in the West Midlands 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.

Twenty one per cent of clients using the service in the West Midlands are from black or minority ethnic communities; 18 per cent are disabled; 12 per cent are below the age of 25 and 11 per cent are over 65 years.

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 region.

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.

Examples include:

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

Case studies

Bedworth, Rugby and Nuneaton CAB has recently started a pilot project working in partnership with LDJ Solicitors and Warwickshire Employment Rights to develop seamless legal advice services for those eligible for Legal Aid in the areas of family, debt, housing, welfare benefits and employment law.

The partnership has also developed an electronic referral system and protocols to ensure clients receive the most appropriate level of legal advice and information quickly and efficiently. Referral links to other organisations such as Children's Centres and Community groups are being developed.

Wolverhampton Citizens Advice Bureau works in partnership with the local Voluntary Sector Council to provide the new Local Involvement Network (LINKs). LINKs will provide an opportunity for local people to have a chance to say what they think about their local health services, check how care services are planned and provide feedback to shape services for the better.

Developing the regional and local economy in the West Midlands

- Citizens Advice bureaux in the West Midlands are both small businesses and training agencies, employing and training 720 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 £9 million.
- Almost a third of volunteers go into paid employment following training and support in bureaux.
- Across the West Midlands 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, 57.5 new financial inclusion advisers have been brought into the region through our successful national programme – funded by the Department of Business, Employment and Regulatory Reform.
- 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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