



Between 8-10 September just over 1,000 delegates travelled to York for the Citizens Advice service annual conference and AGM.

The conference opened with a session dedicated to celebrating our many thousands of volunteers, that culminated in the presentation of our annual Volunteer of the year awards. In buoyant spirits delegates then heard and voted on various motions during the AGM, which saw the election of a new Chair, the appointment of a further two trustees and a lively discussion on mergers.

Later in the conference delegates had the chance to debate issues surrounding both human rights and the recession with Ministers, union leaders, well-known academics and CEOs of major corporations. Delegates were also privileged to hear eminent figures from within the sector share their insight into the external forces that are affecting us all, and their thoughts on how bureaux can and should respond.



L-R: David Harker; Louise Studd, Camden CAB - Campaigner of the year; Shelagh West, Esher and District CAB - Bureau support of the year; Gerry Beldon, Chester-le Street CAB - Trustee Board of the year; Hilary Watkins



Amy Slater, Youth forum young volunteer, gave a young volunteer's perspective and introduced *Scooby's story* a youth forum film, before the Volunteer of the year awards

The plenary programme was supplemented by a series of optional sessions, which looked at some of the major themes occupying many of our thoughts at present: the structure of the network, equality and diversity, volunteering and access. In addition there was a vast selection of drop-in fringe meetings, covering everything from child maintenance to pension liabilities to Legal Aid hitting 60.

Busy days extended late into the evenings, with a packed social programme that gave delegates the chance to network at Area dinners, strut their stuff to Tom Jones (admittedly not the real one) and show off their general knowledge at Steve Brooks' now infamous quiz. The Citizens Advice policy team also performed a magnificently acted and costumed *This is Your Life* of policy work at Citizens Advice. (See page 8 for the photographic evidence).

This special edition of the mid month newsletter delivers a round up of the conference to those who couldn't be there. The outcomes and learnings of the main sessions are summarised to give, as best as possible, a reflection of what 'we' think as a service; always an interesting comparison to our own individual thoughts.



The AGM

Tuesday afternoon's well attended Annual General Meeting (AGM) of Citizen Advice, marked the end of Hilary Watkins' five years as Chair of the Citizens Advice Trustee Board. She was thanked for her wisdom and leadership.

The meeting agreed the appointment of John Gladwin, former Bishop of Chelmsford, as the new Chair and Sheila Hendrickson-Brown, Director of Torfaen CAB, and Paul Nicholls, Chief Executive of Cheshire West CAB as members of the Trustee Board of Citizens Advice for three year terms. All had been through a selection process and were recommended on the basis of their skills, experience and a passionate commitment to the service. Whilst not objecting to the candidates for the two trustee vacancies, some members did voice concerns over not being given more choice as part of the process. Small changes were made to the Articles of Association to remove the requirement to have regional or Area committees, allow proxy votes to count towards the quorum and provide for electronic general meetings in the future.

There was a lively debate with spirited defences of the viability of small bureaux and passionate advocacy of the value of merging during a motion on mergers proposed by Rossendale CAB, which challenged whether they were always beneficial. The motion was narrowly defeated.



New members of the Trustee Board: Sheila Hendrickson-Brown and Paul Nicholls

John Gladwin appointed Chair



John Gladwin is appointed Chair of Citizens Advice Trustee Board

Jonathan Tross, Treasurer, who proposed John said "John Gladwin was the best fit for the values we promote and the challenges we face. He has a strong focus on clients, understands our membership structure, values volunteers, has an excellent grasp of the context we operate in, was positive about the challenges we face and is excited by the role."

John said about the service: "I got a real sense of it's commitment to social justice, a passion to do something for those who might be marginalised and driven to the edges by what's going on in our society. I also feel that at this time of recession and economic difficulty this service is right on the frontline of how society is providing help and support to people."



Responding to the recession

Theresa May MP - Shadow Minister for Work and Pensions; Angela Knight - CEO, British Bankers Association; Matthew Taylor - CEO, Royal Society Of Arts; Otto Thoresen - CEO Aegon; Julia Unwin - Director, Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Liz Barclay opened up the debate by saying that we need to celebrate the passion that exists in the service because it is this passion that will see us through the recession. And see us through having to work harder and smarter to deal with rising demand in a climate of spending cuts and stretched resources.

Theresa May MP considered “one of the key responses to the recession must be to tackle worklessness” and the devastation this causes individuals, families and communities. Many people, who have never before had contact with the benefit system, are now finding themselves dependent on state support which has highlighted the complexity of the benefit system. Her solution would be to simplify the system. Delegates raised concerns that simplification would mean cuts and there was a timely reminder that many people suffering from poverty are in work.

Julia Unwin was clear that we need a flexible system that is responsive to the complexities of people’s lives and the realities of a post recession labour market. It needs to be easier for people to take up opportunities



Liz Barclay, BBC journalist, introduced the session



Theresa May MP

for training, volunteering or working for a few hours or weeks without worrying about the impact on their benefits.

Theresa May pointed out that “Government doesn’t have all the answers and needs to listen to those who do.” The vast knowledge that Citizens Advice holds was held up as an example of information that needs to be tapped into and Julia Unwin praised Citizens Advice for the way in which it uses this information to influence policy.

Matthew Taylor raised the damaging impacts of inequality and the need for governments to build capacity for individuals and communities to enable them to solve their own problems in an uncertain future. A sentiment echoed by Otto Thoresen who added that in order to be resilient in the future, we need to find ways of joining up financial education and financial capability to prepare people for life changes throughout their lives.

Julia Unwin was keen that we mustn’t forget that the social recession will go on long after the economy has started to recover. A representative from Stoke CAB cited Stoke as an example of a broken society still suffering the effects of the last recession with a number of industries closed and nothing brought in to replace it. Angela Knight picked up this theme stating that as well as making sure that young people are trained in the right skills, we need to let the private sector create businesses and jobs as a way out of the recession.



Overall panellists were optimistic that by facing up to these challenges and learning from previous recessions a new, different and better society would emerge from the current recession.

Julia Unwin summed up "It's a cliché to say it's 'too good a crisis to waste' – climate change, changing demography and the economic crisis will force us to think differently about the economy. The routes out will be a green economy, a community economy, a caring economy for a better and different society."

Otto Thoresen added "Citizens Advice will have a huge part to play in the new society".

Theme meeting

Responding to the recession was also the subject of a popular theme meeting attracting around 250 delegates. One aim of the meeting was to use the knowledge of bureaux to create a profile of clients, their needs and how these have changed. The meeting took the form of a facilitated discussion allowing bureaux to share good practice and examples of projects that had worked in their areas.

The fact that bureaux are having to work harder and smarter to meet rising demand was picked up by a theme meeting which examined how the Access programme could be used to respond to changes in demand. The overall mood of the 200+ participants was very positive with bureaux sharing their success stories. These included Sutton CAB positioning itself as the partner of choice for its local authority's commissioning agenda and West Wiltshire CAB establishing a telephone service in less than three months. Support is available to bureaux that want to create virtual call centres as part of the infrastructure of the national telephone service – Adviceline.

A fairer society and the human rights agenda

Gerard Lemos - Director, Lemos & Crane; Sir Geoffrey Bindman - Chair, British Institute of Human Rights; Francesca Klug - Professor, London School of Economics; Simon Woolley - Director, Operation Black Vote; Fosuah Poku - Chief Executive, Merton and Lambeth CAB.

In this key plenary session Gerard Lemos began by highlighting the greater transparency and accountability in the way many human rights-related decisions are now taken across the public and private sectors, but questioned whether equality of opportunity could ever be fully realisable whilst our society continues to define success in purely financial terms.

He felt, too, that substantive measures such as child poverty, unemployment and housing presented a mixed picture and that more should have been achieved by now in closing the gap between rich and poor – with the increasingly shared view that the most unequal societies experience the greatest social fracturing. He concluded that whilst the UK is a fairer society in some ways – as well as a much more prosperous one – it is still a 'long way from being fair enough'.

Sir Geoffrey Bindman felt that the Government had to lead on human rights and that constant pressure therefore needed to be applied to achieve this. Whilst Professor Francesca Klug outlined that "it is the voluntary sector that must and will drive" the agenda



Gerard Lemos



forward, with the CAB service being in a unique position to achieve this through its policy work.

Fosuah Poku reminded us that “if we were conscious of the rights of everyone around us, we wouldn’t need legislation”, but that it was those of us who understand what ordinary people go through every day of their lives, who should be in the driving seat. At the same time, this could only be fully achieved if we were well informed and we reflected the communities we worked in.

As the session went on, audience members highlighted a number of important issues back to the panellists, including the proposed Bill of Rights and whether to focus back on social and economic constitutional rights, Gypsies and Travellers and whether they had been forgotten, the negative role of some sections of the media, discrimination of migrant workers and the basic issue of poverty and economic inequality.

Throughout, one message was clear - that the evidence base of the CAB service puts the organisation in a unique position to be a key driver in the area of human rights. And it was Simon Woolley who then motivated us in this task by reminding us that by being involved in the service we were all ‘warriors for social justice’, whatever our role.



Simon Woolley

Theme meeting

So what better way to remind us how to do our bit than by attending the theme meeting that took place afterwards on ‘Implementing FAIR: hints and tips’ where three speakers (Gill Tisher, Plymouth CAB, Llion Parry, Flintshire CAB and Gwyneth Morgan, Conwy and district CAB) addressed delegates on the practical steps they had taken to implement the FAIR strategy to benefit their clients directly. The three key areas that discussions centred around were developing discrimination advice, helping those in greatest need and improving trustee diversity.

Positioning the service for the future

David Harker - Chief Executive, Citizens Advice;
Stuart Etherington - Chief Executive, NCVO;
Angela Smith MP - Minister for the Third Sector.

On Thursday morning three sector leaders shared their insight into the external forces that are affecting the sector, as well as their thoughts on how bureaux can and should respond.

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” quoted David Harker to describe the exceptional circumstances that we find ourselves in. The service is enjoying the highest profile it has ever had as we celebrate our 70th, but the reasons are inevitably unhappy ones; it is the human cost of the recession that has dramatically increased the need for our services and, with it, the understanding and acknowledgement of our work.

While there has been much talk of green shoots, the recovery could be tougher than the recession itself as we face the dual challenge of meeting increased need with diminishing resources. Angela Smith indicated that the Government is moving towards devolving increasing levels of power, so a good local authority relationship is more vital than ever to survive and prosper during a series of public funding cuts.

**David Harker**

David Harker reminded delegates that it is as times get harder that we can expect commissioning, which has so far been slow, to really take off. Reassuring news came from Angela Smith, though, who revealed that the Government is setting up a national training programme for third sector commissioners in recognition of the sector's uniqueness.

With this revived emphasis on commissioning, David Harker spoke of how we must demonstrate not only our professionalism, but also our unrivalled passion for what we do. Of course this means documenting and validating our impact, and indeed we are among the leaders in the sector of outcome measurement. But it also means using that data effectively to influence decision makers. "As well as working to maintain an adequate funding level for our own services," said David Harker, "we must use our evidence to protect those who need us from the potential degradation of other services they rely on. Speaking truth to power is one of our sacred duties."

Second to local authorities, the largest funder of bureaux is currently the Legal Services Commission. Their large procurement areas and the requirement to offer at least three areas of social welfare law, reflected David Harker, are a clear example of funders increasingly seeking scale as well as professionalism.

Despite the number of legal entities falling from 426 to 416 last year, the number of volunteers, advice outlets and clients supported actually grew. Bureaux

CEOs speaking from experience in the mergers theme meeting all agreed that, while their mergers had not offered cost savings, they had resulted in more robust services with increased capacity for growth.

Stuart Etherington presented the act of managing increased need with diminishing resources as an opportunity, because it places voluntary action centre stage. Aside from the end results, he says, volunteering is a good in itself; it brings people together, reduces social tension and builds cohesion. Over the coming months NCVO will be lobbying to give it greater public prominence and our new Volunteer Development Manager, Julia Dennis, pledged to do the same within Citizens Advice at the theme meeting she ran. It was an opportunity for bureaux to help shape a new five year volunteering strategy, which will centre on management, recognition and sustainability.

Overall the feeling was that we must act rather than worry, and use our elevated profile to protect our clients. We must be vocal with our evidence to demonstrate our own impact and secure our own funding, as well to prevent the deterioration of other services. We must consider which structures and working practices ultimately serve our clients best. And we must use the increased need for volunteers as a timely prompt to consider how best we can serve those individuals who serve our clients so well.

**Angela Smith MP**



This is Your Life and Social Policy Oscars

Members of the Social Policy Department enjoyed themselves almost as much as the audience on the Wednesday evening in Central hall, performing sketches celebrating 70 years of policy work.

The evening began with music, singing and audience participation from 'Antigua Joe' and culminated in the Social Policy Oscars. The winners and runners up were:

Best campaigning bureau

Winner: Leeds CAB
Runners up: Rossendale CAB, West Wiltshire CAB

Best media work

Winner: Birmingham CAB
Runners up: Chorley CAB, Rhondda Taff CAB

Best eBEF

Winner: Swansea CAB
Runners up: Broxbourne CAB, West Berkshire CAB

