



NORTH EAST SOMERSET

IMPACT REPORT 2008

"BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS"

Community
Legal Service



Specialist Help
Debt



THE BUREAU'S PATRON

The Right Reverend Peter Price,
Bishop of Bath & Wells



(photograph: Tim Baker)

The Bureau's Primary Aims:

- * to provide the advice people need for the problems they face
- * to improve the policies and practices that affect people's lives.

Reception



Rob Edwards writes:

I am privileged to be a volunteer at North East Somerset Citizens Advice Bureau at Midsomer Norton & to be one of the many trusted & dedicated team members within the Bureau. In the two years that I have been here I have realised how important & valued the volunteer staff are to the Organisation. Staff & volunteers are highly motivated & dedicated people that work very hard to provide the services for the people of Norton Radstock & surrounding areas.

As a receptionist I am the first point of contact who all clients & visitors will see upon arrival. It is important to be well prepared before the doors open; for example, printers & computers switched on, staplers, pens & paper are available, interviews & waiting area are ready &, because of health & safety, it is important that I check chairs to make sure that they are not damaged or faulty. I also check flooring & toilets. With the appointment diary checked we are ready for our first customer.

Clients are welcomed, given my full attention & made to feel at ease because I know how difficult it is for some of them to come through our door. I will advise them that everything that is said & done in the bureau is confidential & ask them to complete a registration form, whilst I check for any conflict of interest there might be. I then further clarify their query so that I can accurately advise the advice session supervisor of an outline of the issue(s). Whilst clients wait to be seen I update them of the possible waiting time (if any).

As occasionally clients become distressed, the role calls for courtesy, empathy, tact & diplomacy at all times.

Our Chairman writes ...

Since writing my report for last year's AGM there has been so much activity within NES CAB that I hardly know where to begin.

Last November we had just begun to have contact with Bath CAB over achieving closer co-operation in the light of BANES' plans for commissioning. During the year we have formed several working groups in key areas for co-operation ie training, service delivery, staff sharing and social policy. Starting in an atmosphere of uncertainty and some apprehension these groups have made considerable progress especially in the area of service delivery. However, it was not until September that BANES finally produced the commissioning document with a very tight timescale for our joint bid to be made, ie by November, with a view to start the new service in April 2009. A great deal remains to be decided, not least how the finances will be apportioned, and much hard work awaits the Bureau Managers who are largely responsible for making the bid, with some assistance from Citizens Advice.

Another area of huge activity centred on the Citizens Advice Audits which were completed this year, ie the Quality of Advice Audit and the Organisational Audit. The terms under which these take place are stringent and both the Bureau Manager, Tony Cutmore, and his deputy, Stephen Lloyd Cook, deserve our congratulations and thanks for achieving such a successful outcome. Thanks and congratulations are also due to all the volunteer advisers and paid staff who in no small way helped to achieve such a high standard for this bureau. They are the people who deliver the face-to-face service to the client and on their skill and dedication the service depends. Another new development has been the delivery of the much revised LSC Contract and its very demanding targets. Sue Perkins deserves our congratulations for managing this.

Finally, I should like to thank my fellow members of the Trustee Board who have had to support and advise on all this activity. In particular, an enormous debt of thanks is due to Suzy Matthews, our Treasurer, who has kept the accounts so expertly and has played a crucial role in our negotiations with Bath CAB. Suzy has unfortunately had to resign due to greater commitments in her professional career. More changes await us in the coming year, some of which are likely to be quite dramatic.

We are pleased to welcome Grahame Macaulay onto the Board and sorry to lose June Bushill and Roy Staddon, both of whom were with us for a very short time. We also mark the passing of Raymond Honeybourne, a former Trustee who sadly died in April this year.

A very challenging year lies ahead. We are hopeful of achieving the Council's tender to continue providing the service which we have faithfully undertaken, and perhaps to expand into new areas.

Ann Simnett
Chairman, NES CAB



ERIKO JAMES writes:

Now that the current credit crunch is upon us, more & more people are finding themselves with financial problems. We have clients who are on a reasonable income but fall into debt problems because their mortgage repayments rise steeply & because it is becoming far more difficult to borrow. Because their income is too high, some clients are not eligible for legal aid so I work with them under the auspices of our core service. I also help with clients with their benefit or housing problems on an appointment basis.

Successful Social Policy Work



HMRC agrees not to pursue pensioners for tax arrears on small occupational pensions

- **What was the issue?**

Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) announced plans that would have seen low income pensioners having to repay a tax debt they knew nothing about. A mistake by HMRC meant that certain pensioners, who get a small occupational pension, had been under-taxed for some time, and HMRC intended to reclaim that money.

Citizens Advice understood the need to remedy the situation going forward, but believed that the plans to collect past liabilities back to April 2007 were both impracticable and completely at odds with the Government's wider agenda of tackling pensioner poverty.

Many of the older people affected were likely to be careful budgeters, who pride themselves on not being in debt. The debt was likely to cause them great worry and stress, and for some, may have been enough to tip them into poverty for 2008/9 and 2009/10.

The other great problem with a policy that would apply tax retrospectively is the interaction with the means-tested benefit system. People may need to be assessed or re-assessed for income related benefits over a period of three years. Government could be faced with carrying out many thousand of benefits checks and of great administrative complexity, all of which could be very costly, for very little monetary return.

- **What action was taken?**

Together with Age Concern, Help the Aged, the Low Income Tax Reform Group and Tax Help for Older People, Citizens Advice wrote to Jane Kennedy, MP, Financial Secretary to the Treasury, and subsequently met with her and HMRC officials on a number of occasions.

We highlighted the unfairness of asking people on a low income to repay a tax debt that they had no idea they were accruing, because HMRC had failed to collect it on small occupational pensions. We also pointed out the absurdity of one Government department (DWP) launching a benefit take up campaign aimed at older people whilst another Government department (HMRC) potentially pushes older people into poverty.

We also raised the issue in our evidence to the Treasury Select Committee inquiry on the budget and help for low income households, in the wake of the abolition of the 10p tax rate.

- **What were the results?**

The Government agreed not to collect these arrears of tax on small pensions for the tax year 2007-08. HMRC initially told us that they had no discretion to write off tax debts arising after 6 April 2007. However, a leading tax and human rights barrister advised that HMRC did have discretion to write off arrears that arose before the under-taxed pensioners were informed of their position. He also advised that, if HMRC insisted on collecting the arrears, there were good grounds for a judicial review. We showed the opinion to the Minister and HMRC, who subsequently confirmed that arrears for 2007-08 will be written off.

This campaign to influence Government has benefitted around 420,000 people.

- **What still needs to be done?**

This still leaves some arrears for the current year, 2008-09; but HMRC say that they will be able to communicate quickly with pensioners likely to be affected, and spread repayment of the arrears if there is hardship. We will be watching closely.

Guidance Tutor's Report 2008

The training programme at NES CAB has continued to develop this year and we are delighted with the continued commitment and enthusiasm of our staff and volunteers, both old and new, to improving their knowledge and skills and keeping up with the fast pace of change in the legislation and policies which affect our work. This ensures that the service we provide to our clients is up-to-date, comprehensive and well-informed.

We congratulate the following advisers who have been awarded the Certificate in Generalist Advice Work: Trisha Jordan, Jacquie McLaughlin, Hugh Weeks, Sophie Hill and Mee Choo Kelly. This achievement reflects a great deal of hard work by these people who have all given their time and energy on a regular basis to ensure that we can continue to offer a quality assured standard of advice to our local community.

We have continued to recruit new trainees. At present we have twelve people who are at various stages of their training to become fully-fledged advisers, and we are currently recruiting another group to start before the end of the year. The training they receive is a mixture of tutor-led sessions, self-study, e-learning modules and practical on-the-job experience which begins with observing experienced advisers working with clients and builds through supported work to achieving the competences required of a qualified generalist adviser. The commitment shown by our volunteers is second to none.

Several very useful meetings have taken place with colleagues from Bath CAB as part of the Joint Working Group, enabling us to share ideas and good practice. We have been able to share some training opportunities between the two bureaux, not least our training 'away-days' at the Wessex Water Headquarters in Claverton Down. These have become regular and deservedly popular events, featuring a variety of interesting speakers. We are grateful to Sue Lindsay and her team for allowing us to use the venue, and to Elizabeth Farrow for organising the programme.

We have also run several in-bureau training sessions, which have been attended by our own staff and volunteers, trustees and members of other organisations such as SWAN and the local Credit Union. Volunteers and paid staff have attended numerous courses run by Citizens Advice and other providers to expand and update their skills.

Our audit by Citizens Advice confirmed that we are providing good quality advice to our clients, underpinned by a sound training programme. This is made possible by the hard work put in by our excellent team of volunteers, who are all dedicated to providing a professional level of service.

Gillian Whitehead

A report for AGM from Chair of Social Policy Working Group.

The purpose of our group is to 'Campaign for Change, to effect Change for the Better and Improve the Quality of Life for our Residents'.

Under our Membership agreement with Citizens Advice we are required to:

- see that responsibility for Social Policy is clearly defined in staff roles.
- take action locally or regionally on Social Policy issues identified from submitting evidence gained from the meetings with our clients.
- ensure that members of the group attend relevant local and regional meetings of other Social Policy groups to forward our joint aims.
- communicate with elected representatives both local and national on Social Policy issues affecting clients.
- have contact with and attend meetings with local authority and central government departments and agencies.
- make use of the media to raise local policy issues and ensure local community and local organisations are aware of our role and activities.

We have achieved these goals and passed the recent audit examination which is an achievement to be celebrated!

An integral part of Social Policy is F.A.I.R. Strategy - Fair, Accessible, Inclusive and Relevant. If any concerns are felt around these issues it is the role of the Social Policy group to look into these issues and make recommendations to the Trustee Board.

The Partnership with Bath CAB is presently very much in all our minds as a pressing and ongoing concern.

Social Policy is an important area and it is recognised that in collaboration –in time– there are clear advantages in pooling efforts across Bath & North East Somerset to strengthen our campaigns.

We must always – as North East Somerset representatives on any new Trustee Board – ensure the particular concerns of the rural areas are at all times to the forefront.

Pat Hogg
Chair of Bureau Social Policy Sub Committee.



Gill Whitehead, Hugh Weeks, Trish Jordan
Staffing the telephones.

Volunteer Administrators

Helen Edgell and Rob Edwards.

Honorary Legal Advice Rota in Bureau

Will Rolt – Housing Solicitor (LSC)

Ollie Le Cluse – Housing Caseworker (LSC)

W L Edwards – Family Solicitor, Thatcher Hallam (pro bono)

Elizabeth Neame – Wills, Probate, Estates Solicitor Thatcher Hallam (pro bono)

William Weller – Personal Injury Solicitor Thatcher Hallam (pro bono)

Volunteer Advisors

Pam Walker, Pat Roderick, Peter Rudge, Ann Brown, Celia Bryan, John Beyer, John James, Jacqui McLaughlin, Sophie Hill, Mee Choo Kelly, Karen Clark, Tricia Jordan, Hugh Weeks, Gillian Whitehead, Izzie Oldfield, Jane Batten, Jane Ballantyne, Libby Davison, Sue Derrick, Pauline Gillett, Dale Grove, Stella Page, Chris Ryan, Sally Verrechia, Jitu Shah.



Karen Clark and Sue Derrick, Volunteer Advisors



Working Together to Improve Services

This year our organisation has focused on developing and maintaining effective working relationships with key partners with the aims of:

- Increasing access to our advice and specialist services
- Targeting help and managing demand and helping the local authority deliver services to those most in need
- Enhancing the quality of advice and being client focused
- Demonstrating to our main funders the value of the advice
- Efficiency Improvements in everything we do
- Building capacity across the advisor sector within Bath and North East Somerset.

The management team and paid staff have all been involved in working more closely with Bath & District CAB to provide seamless referrals to each other and some important work has been done on the planning of a single unitary authority-wide telephone number, which will become a reality in April 2009.

Partnership working is high on our agenda as well as every other agency in the not-for-profit sector and therefore features prominently in our business planning and strategic thinking. The local authority who is the main commissioner of advice services can now see the CAB service working together to improve provision across the unitary authority which means that services are targeted and not duplicated.

We have retained our Legal Services Commission Quality mark at

General Help level and at Specialist Quality Mark level. Our quality of advice audit was very successful in raising standards and our task now is to make even more improvements and not rest on our laurels. The operational audit which examines the management of the bureau was also very successful and I would like to thank everybody for making the two audit outcomes such a success.

Outcomes are very important in terms of assessing our effectiveness and our management reporting system is a powerful tool that collates our statistics and these make for interesting reading.

This last year we:

- Prevented 49 evictions and kept families together
- Defended 139 re-possession actions in the county courts helping families keep a roof over their head
- Stopped bailiff action and the removal of goods in 62 cases
- Positively managed £4,000,600 of debt
- Helped people claim £258,736 tax credits
- Helped people claim £804,328 Housing and Council tax credits including back dating afterwards
- 21 Employment Tribunal awards for unfair dismissals and discrimination cases totalled £126,558
- Helped older people claim £962,349 in Pension Credit
- Helped 84 people with successful appeals for Disability Benefits totalling £546,600
- Helped carers claim £42,440 in carers allowance.

There are many other statistics too numerous to mention here and some of the outcomes are not quantifiable in terms of financial values. The value of CAB Services are evidenced by us:

- Keeping people in their homes,
- Helping older people remain independent,
- Helping people manage crushing debt levels,
- Improving the health and well being of people with disabilities and their carers,
- Improving peoples' housing conditions,
- Improving and asserting their employment terms and conditions and statutory rights,
- Protecting consumers,
- Protecting the vulnerable,
- Being agents of positive change where policies and practices fail or impact unfairly.

The CAB Service in Bath & North East Somerset is clearly value for

money by using skilled and well-trained volunteers supported by specialist professional staff using the latest information technology and delivering integrated services from three main centres across the Local Authority at Keynsham, Bath and Midsomer Norton. Our online services are available at www.adviceguide.org.uk 365 days a year 24 hours a day.

With the continued support of our local authority we aim to achieve our goals of increased access and improved efficiency and value for money. With the commissioning of advice services on the horizon, we have to compete, and if successful, deliver even better services to our community. The CAB Service as a whole in Bath & North East Somerset is fully committed to achieving increased access and fully integrated seamless services. The two Citizens Advice Bureau now work closely together and together we are already achieving great results.

Stephen Lloyd-Cook
Advice Services Manager
Keynsham and Midsomer Norton
2008



Pauline Gillett writes:

Having 'retired from the day job' after a car accident, I decided to concentrate on something that I have always wanted to do – to join the Citizens Advice Bureau.

In December 2007, I applied to my local CAB, was subsequently interviewed and, to my joy, was selected.

Wednesday, 9th January 2008, was the day I started with NES CAB. The staff and volunteers immediately made me very welcome and in no time at all I felt at home – and enjoying myself!

I completed my four-day training course in June and was immediately 'thrown in the deep end' when I returned to NES CAB – an experience I would like to forget! After careful nurturing and lots of encouragement and praise I have now settled in to advising with a lot more confidence.

The studying has been endless but so worthwhile and I am now beginning my Record of Learning 4 – is there light at the end of the tunnel I ask myself?

This has been one of the best decisions of my life – thanks to everybody for helping me achieve one of my dreams.

BUREAU DIRECTOR'S REPORT



After a very successful, independent audit which showed how much the Bureau has progressed in the last three years the thought that this could be the Bureau's final annual report is the last thing we should be contemplating. However, it is the way of the world that change happens & it's happening for us right here, right now.

Not that the Bureau is not used to or averse to change. Nine years ago the Bureau had three not very good & therefore not very well used computers, shelves of advice books groaning under the weight & a valued volunteer who used to attend the Bureau once a week to update those books! Our Keynsham office was a health & safety accident waiting to happen & staff retention of over 50% was as likely as Midsomer Norton being twinned with the Moon!

We have moved, with a vengeance, into the computer age. With over 40 flat screen computers & laptops, a small business server, remote systems regulation & trouble-shooting, well-trained staff, up-to-date software & advice, a website & e-mail advice facilities, the Bureau's resources are formidable. In addition we are looking to add a Bath & North East Somerset single telephone line with electronic appointments system to our list of innovations & improvements. All this has been achieved whilst we have managed to build up the Bureau's reserves. But it still may not be enough to save the Bureau. We will have to wait & see. Perhaps I will be writing an annual report this time next year – perhaps not?

On a more positive note, the number of advisers completing their accredited training has risen dramatically in the past year due mainly to Gillian Whitehead's professional implementation of the Bureau's training & development programme

Elizabeth Farrow's recruitment regime which has made such a difference to the Bureau's retention levels & excellent team spirit was one of the positive comments made by the auditor. Training days, also organised by Elizabeth Farrow, have been extremely successful in the content, attendance numbers & bringing together volunteers from both our offices.

Stephen Lloyd-Cook, our senior caseworker, advice sessions supervisor & Deputy Bureau Director presided over a quality of advice audit which clearly showed a distinct continuing improvement in the quality of the advice given, despite the number of new advisors coming into the service. Stephen continues to provide invaluable support to all our staff & not least to me.

Susan Perkins & her administrator, Kay Southgate, have continued to maintain the viability of the Community Legal Services debt franchise despite the regulatory minefield these contracts tend to throw up. Susan's work with our partners at Wessex Water has been well documented but, nevertheless, is an excellent example of our social policy role in action.

Teri Densley goes from strength to strength & recently showed her versatility providing much needed administrative support on the LSC franchise at a difficult time.

Eriko James has provided much needed casework backup & Carol Burgess continues to provide an excellent book-keeping & accounting service.

Next year we have much to achieve. Foremost in my mind is the development of our Keynsham office. Fran Griffiths & the senior volunteers at Keynsham who have given many years of loyal service to the community need more support, resources & encouragement. After many years they have actually had a kitchen installed but much more needs to be done, despite the lack of space, which has often been used as an excuse for no action over the years.

As a rural Bureau, outreach services need to be improved & this has to be a priority. We will be proactive in seeking out resources to make this happen.

As I stated at the beginning of this report, we have a real challenge as to the Bureau's survival. Not because we are failing in the work we do but because we have to live with the reality of an open tendering process advertised throughout Europe for this local service. Some will

not realise that there is no duty on national or local Government to provide advice services so we constantly have to prove our worth. This is a real challenge especially when some funders don't always realise such truisms as a stitch in time.... Help someone work out a budget & gain a welfare benefit can, further down the line, save them from eviction & all the costs & misery associated with that.

Lastly, but most importantly, I would like to thank the many volunteers (& I include trustees who are also volunteers) who have helped to make this current year the most pleasurable in my eight years at the Bureau. Your hard work, commitment & dedication to the Bureau & the clients, your phenomenal work rate, your attention to detail, your patience with me as I continue to hammer home the importance of outcomes does make this job worthwhile & is always an inspiration to me.

Anthony Cutmore

Paid Staff	Position
Anthony Cutmore	Bureau Director
Stephen Lloyd-Cook	Deputy Director (Quality of Advice) Senior Supervisor Specialist Caseworker Social Policy Coordinator
Susan Perkins	Franchise Supervisor LSC Specialist Caseworker Advice Session Supervisor
Elizabeth Farrow	Volunteer Development Worker Recruitment Officer Disability Advice Worker
Gillian Whitehead	Guidance Tutor Advice Session Supervisor
Carol Burgess	Finance Officer
Teri Densley	Casework Support Worker Trainee Advisor
Fran Griffiths	Administrator (Keynsham)
Eriko James	Caseworker
Kay Southgate	Administrator LSC

THE WORLD OF DEBT



Since the Money Advice Conference in Leeds 2003 money advisors throughout the country have been warned that the level of credit and the amount of debt is spiralling out of control. This is confirmed by the number of clients and the amount of debt that has passed through North East Somerset in the last year.

Between April 2007 and April 2008, 205 clients were seen under the Legal Aid Contract. Of those clients, 36 have petitioned for bankruptcy wiping off £691,759 of debt. Not only does this show the extent of the problem in a rural area alone, but highlights just some of the money owed to creditors. With clients having to pay £495 to petition for bankruptcy, more and more are being assisted with the fees by occupational or service charities without which our clients would be accruing more debt as interest and charges are added to client's debts.

However, the profile of our clients is changing. We are now seeing an increasing number of people, in particular homeowners who are working full time, on a high income, who are facing repossession due to increased mortgage rates. Likewise, a mortgage based on two incomes, is not sustainable after a relationship breakdown when one party is faced with keeping up repayments. Selling up and downsizing is no longer an option and older people, many of whom are in their 70s are finding themselves stuck with a mortgage they cannot afford, but also with a house they cannot sell. In addition the number of pensioners in debt is increasing as they find, when they reach retirement, that their income is insufficient to meet their outgoings. Furthermore, we are seeing an increasing number of bereaved clients who did not know about their financial difficulties until their partner had died: either because the partner dealt with all the finances or the partner had loans and credit cards of which the spouse was unaware.

Repossessions are increasing, many of which have arisen due to clients becoming ill and being ineligible for help with their mortgage until they have been eligible for Income Support for 39 weeks. By this time the client will have nine months of arrears. Not only is their health being affected, but the stress and worry exasperates the problem. We can no longer stop repossessions where clients have a deficit, we can only prepare them for what will happen.

Similarly creditors are taking a much firmer hand with their customers. Charging Orders, what are they? We never used to see them but creditors are issuing clients with County Court Claims for often small amounts, of a few hundred or few thousand pounds and then applying for a charge to be placed on the house. Likewise, the local authority are taking a harder approach towards home owners who have Council Tax arrears. Rather than applying for Attachment of Earnings they are issuing clients with Statutory Demands and making client's bankrupt. One client was even arrested and taken before the magistrates who were prepared to issue a custodial sentence for failing to pay her Council Tax. However, we have been working closely with the local authority bailiffs, head office and have developed an excellent working relationship to the benefit of our clients, who are now paying what they can afford rather than what was being demanded.

In comparison, the number of clients having help via Wessex Water has increased dramatically. The last figures we had stated that around 74% of those people who had been placed on Restart and who completed the two years scheme, have their old debt written off and then continue to pay regularly and well. Bearing in mind these customers were non-payers at the start of the scheme and had built up at least two years' worth of arrears, the scheme proves the point that getting into a regular payment habit continues.

In addition, at the end of May 2008 Wessex Water had over 1600 customers on the Assist scheme, of which just under half are on level one the lowest payment that can be set. Around half of the customers, many of whom are our clients, had not paid anything in the year prior to entering the scheme. Not only does the scheme help those most vulnerable but led to Wessex Water being awarded the Best Creditor of the year by Citizens Advice. In addition it led them to be awarded the Utility Weeks Customer Care Award 2007 for the work the company had undertaken in developing and promoting the Assist Scheme for customers having problems paying their water bills. This shows that organisations that are prepared to help their customers are repaid by customers paying their bills. A win-win situation all round.

Throughout the years I have been providing Money Advice, the last year has seen increasing numbers of people struggling to manage on their income. Where clients were able to offer pro rata payments, they often have a deficit budget which highlights the huge increases in fuel and food costs that have led to many people now having to choose

between heating and eating.

Whilst the bureau continues to receive help with food vouchers through a local church, the situation is only going to get worse as more and more people find that circumstances, often beyond their control, lead to ever increasing indebtedness. Faced with large amounts of non-priority debt, in addition to a mortgage, Council Tax and utility arrears, people can no longer expect to sell their home to pay off their debts and down size or rent. Ultimately their home will be repossessed and faced with mortgage shortfalls in addition to debts the numbers of bankruptcies will continue to rise.

Faced with the Credit Crunch we can only wait and see what the next year will bring.

Susan Perkins
Specialist Caseworker Supervisor.

RAY HONEYBOURNE

This year saw the passing away of a greatly respected trustee. Ray served the Bureau for many years and his calm attitude and objective, positive outlook were great attributes especially in difficult times and he will be sorely missed by all in the service. Ray served the service right up to his death and the success of NES CAB is a testament to the selfless service he gave us.



Trustees

Ann Simnett	Chairman
Councillor Hugh Warren	Vice Chairman, Chairman, Health & Safety sub committee
Suzi Matthews	Hon. Treasurer
Pat Hogg	Chair, Social Policy sub committee
Matthew Livsey	
Michael Gough	
Sue Lindsay	
Grahame Macaulay	

Sub-Committees

Finance – Suzi Matthews, Anthony Cutmore, Carol Burgess, Michael Gough
Health and Safety – Hugh Warren, Teri Densley, Fran Griffiths
Social Policy – Pat Hogg, Sue Lindsay, Hugh Warren
(consultants: Stephen Lloyd-Cook, Susan Perkins, Anthony Cutmore)

Successful Social Policy Work



Access to NHS dentists

What was the issue?

The Citizens Advice Service has been concerned about access to NHS dentistry for a long time. Bureaux consistently report that people face difficulties in finding an NHS dentist as more and more transfer to private practice. Some bureaux have monitored access for a number of years and can map the trend.

Following a commitment from the Prime Minister to improve access, the contract between dentists and the NHS was reformed in April 2006 with a key objective of improving access. The opportunity to target additional funding on those PCTs* where access was especially poor was not taken however. In the first 18 months of the dentistry reforms there was no growth but a small reduction in the number of patients seen.

What action was taken?

Following the reforms to dentists' contracts, Citizens Advice was invited to join the Department of Health Key Stakeholder Group to help monitor the impact they had. Evidence from bureaux suggested that the problem was getting worse, not better, so Citizens Advice commissioned MaRI to conduct some research on the number of people who had not had NHS dental treatment since April 2006. Nearly a third of respondents, approximately 7.4 million people, had not had NHS treatment because they could not find a dentist to provide it. Of these, approximately 4.7 million people had sought private treatment instead, and around 2.7 million had gone without any dental treatment. The research revealed that problems in finding an NHS dentist were particularly acute in parts of the South West, North West, East Midlands and Wales.

As always, evidence from bureaux provided the human stories that reveal the true impact of service provision in a way that statistics cannot. This evidence from around the country demonstrated serious access problems at the local level. Many people were going without regular treatment, instead relying on emergency services when they were in pain. Others felt they have no option but to seek private treatment even when this is not what they want or can afford. Some people even resorted to attempting to treat themselves. The research findings were published along with a press release highlighting the problem.

Citizens Advice was invited to give written and oral evidence to the Health Select Committee and the key recommendation was for a real increase in funding, with resources targeted on those areas where access was the poorest in order to tackle what had become a postcode lottery.

Other lobbying work included giving conference speeches to people working in the NHS, dentists and other health professionals.

What were the results?

The Department of Health made two important decisions – firstly they announced a real increase of 11% in budgets for commissioning dental services in 2008/9 in England.

Secondly, they announced that the allocation of this funding to PCTs would be based on population rather than on the current size of the PCT's dentistry budget. This should go some way to reducing the existing inequalities in access across the country, as those PCTs which inherited relatively small dentistry budgets in April 2006 because existing dental provision was poor, will benefit most.

This campaign to influence Government could help the 2.7 million people who have not had dental treatment since April 2006.

The announcement was part of the NHS Operating Framework which sets priorities for the NHS for the period up to and including 2011. This framework commits the NHS to "year on year increases in the numbers of patients receiving care or treatment from an NHS dentist".

What still needs to be done?

Bureaux in England need to urge their PCTs to target these new resources on areas where there are serious access problems. It would also be good to call on PCTs to start planning early so that services can be delivered as soon as possible after the money becomes available in April 09.

Citizens Advice is currently conducting a 'mystery shopping' exercise on dental helplines, asking bureaux to test the availability and accuracy of advice from this source (Autumn 08).

Meanwhile, Citizens Advice has called for additional funding to be made available in Wales.

*PCTs = Primary Care Trusts.

**Training Days at Wessex Water Offices,
Claverton Down, Bath**



With grateful thanks to the Bureau's Supporters and Funders many of whom are anonymous:

Bath & North East Somerset Unitary Authority

Bristol Wessex Water Billing Services Limited

The Legal Services Commission

Thatcher Hallam Solicitors

William Rolt & Ollie Le Cluse, Solicitor / Caseworker

Richmond Solicitors

Keynsham Town Council

Norton Radstock Town Council

Norman Voake, Midsomer Norton Methodist Church

Rotary Club of Midsomer Norton & Radstock

Grass Roots

The Parish Councils of:

Clutton

Paulton

Camerton



Elizabeth Farrow writes:

The last twelve months have been very exciting ones for NES CAB. We have expanded our team of volunteers by nine of whom 4 are now back from the 4-day certificate programme (an exciting milestone in every volunteer's work at the bureau) and they have all completed their supervised interviews and are now advising in their own right. We are also extremely fortunate to have welcomed two new trustees on to the Board, Grahame Macaulay and Norman Voake. Their wealth of experience will be greatly appreciated.

When I look round the team briefings held at Midsomer Norton I feel a real sense of achievement when I realise that I have recruited every single volunteer there, including three who are now on the pay role, over a 3 and a half year period. We are very lucky - each and every one of our volunteers brings with them outstanding skills and qualities. We value them highly.

When we were recently audited, the auditor commented on the team spirit and camaraderie and she asked me why our retention rate was so high. I only had to think for a second or two - it is high because although we work very hard, we also have a lot of fun and we are determined to keep it that way! NES CAB is a very special bureau, run by far-sighted managers who are keen to encourage and empower volunteers to realise their potential.

Elizabeth Farrow
Volunteer Development Officer

North East Somerset Citizens Advice Bureau is a registered charity and
a company limited by guarantee.

Company Registration No.: 2699877

Registered Charity No.: 1011064

Registered Office: The Town Hall, The Island, Midsomer Norton,
Radstock BA3 2HQ

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