

Tunbridge Wells & District CAB Annual Report 2010/11



The service aims:

To provide the advice people need for the problems they face
To improve the policies and practices that affect people's lives

Continuity and change' is a theme throughout life and so it is with the Tunbridge Wells and District CAB.

This year has seen much change within the trustee board and the opportunity to recruit new trustees who bring skills and knowledge to ensure the continuity of good governance.

The new LSC contract has enabled the team to expand their expertise to raise the quality of the work delivered. Many other projects and initiatives continue to be delivered, bringing support to those in need in these economically challenging times.

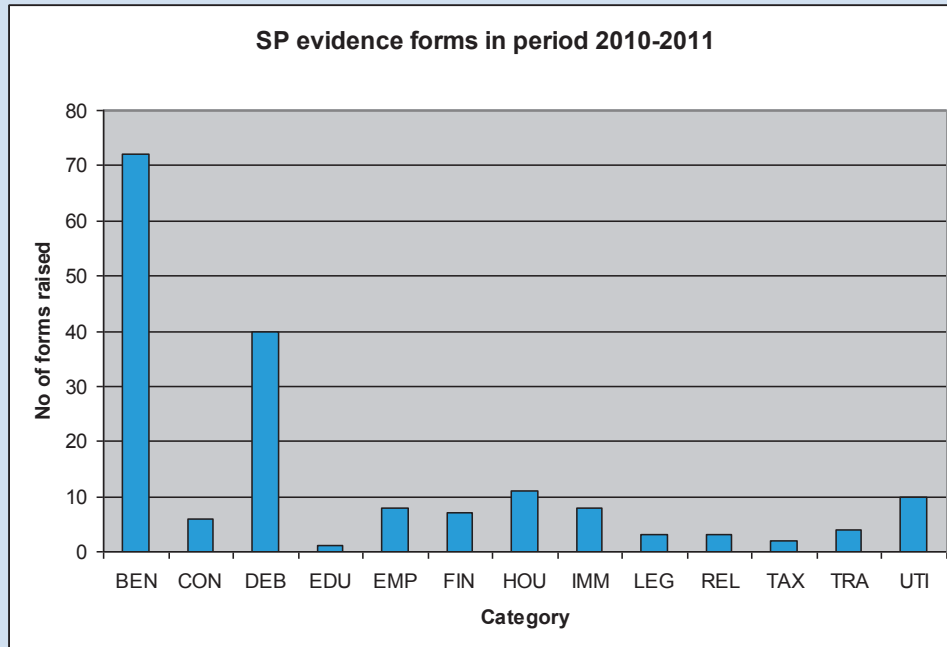
During the past year we have also significantly improved our efforts in Social Policy. A new and enthusiastic team of volunteers and the drawing up of an action plan have combined to reinvigorate this important aspect of our work.

The delivery of bureau business and the service to residents of the borough is a testament to the dedication of paid staff and volunteers. A particular thanks is due to our 140 volunteers who contributed 33,764 hours and were instrumental in helping us to achieve over £1million of benefits and other settlements during the last financial year.

With a changing budgetary landscape we continue to value the dedication of our staff and volunteers.

*Linda Mortley
Chair
TWCAB Trustee Board*





THE COMBINED SERVICE

Not many people know this....

Citizens Advice Bureaux are well known as providers of information, advice and assistance to individuals, but you may not be aware of the Social Policy work that we undertake.

What is Social Policy?

Social Policy is the set of rules, guidelines and principles that shape the public services and welfare on which we all rely. These are evident in legislation, regulations, codes of practice, administrative guidelines and policies of service providers.



Why do we do Social Policy work?

Whilst advice may benefit an individual client, it is far more effective in the long run to help many clients, by tackling the root cause of a problem and persuading the policy maker to make a change.

For example, if there are long delays in processing housing benefit locally, this is likely to lead to many clients contacting the bureau. If the bureau is able to raise awareness of this through social policy work and persuade the local authority to identify the problems and find solutions this will lead to an improved service. Social policy work can, therefore, benefit many people:

- Existing clients will benefit from reduced delays.
- Bureau staff will have fewer clients with housing benefit delay problems to deal with, allowing them to concentrate on other areas.
- The Local Authority will benefit by having fewer complaints and an improved service.

People who have not used the CAB service will experience this improved service, unaware that CAB Social Policy work has been undertaken on their behalf.

At a national level, Bureaux work together to collect evidence and statistics, which is then collated by Citizens Advice and used to campaign for change in existing policies that are impacting clients in a negative way.

Presently TW & District CAB is involved in collecting evidence with regard to the proposed changes in welfare benefits; this evidence will contribute to the government's proposed Bill as it makes its way through the Parliamentary process.



The Social Policy work of TW & District CAB 2010-11

All members of the bureau can contribute to the Social Policy work, be they gateway assessors, generalist advisers or specialists, volunteers or paid staff.

Our debt advice team responded to the call by Citizens Advice for evidence on the unfair eligibility criteria for Debt Relief Orders, with regard to inaccessible pension funds which automatically precluded clients from an application. This evidence was used as part of a national campaign for recent legislative change to the criteria, which has resulted in many more people being able to access this solution to their debt issues.

Ann Valentine, a specialist debt adviser, helped BBC Radio Kent to co-ordinate a local “Debt Day” and has also made appearances on BBC South East News, highlighting the issue of debt in our local community and raising awareness of the help that is available at TW & District CAB.

Both general and specialist advisers have contributed evidence to the Citizens Advice national campaign on poor access to HMRC’s Tax Credit Helpline, where repeated calls to an 0845 number result in a recorded message that no staff are available, followed by an automatic termination of the call.

As a result of the evidence collected from many bureaux on this issue, Citizens Advice have a scheduled meeting with HMRC to discuss their service delivery.



Training and education is also a large part of our Social Policy work at TW & District CAB.

A Social Policy training session took place in June 2010, attended by staff from all the Bureaux, local council staff and Housing Association to highlight the benefits of this work.

A 'Social Policy Focus' newsletter is distributed to staff on a weekly basis. This is generally a 'call for evidence' highlighting a particular issue.

A Bi-Monthly Newsletter is distributed to Councillors and relevant external parties.

Legal Services Contract

We were pleased to be successful in our tender for the Legal Services Commission 2010 contract and our four caseworkers are now delivering legal help in employment, debt, welfare benefits and full legal aid in housing. This means that over 700 eligible clients (i.e their income is sufficiently low to qualify) receive this service from our specialist caseworkers. Our highly qualified team help clients to keep their home; negotiate with landlords; help with disrepair issues; negotiate with creditors to stop them harassing them; negotiate debt relief orders or bankruptcies; sort out benefit problems; appeal benefit decisions; take unscrupulous employers to Employment Tribunal on issues such as unfair dismissal or discrimination.

Housing

Over the past year, the housing contract has had the added dimension of being able to undertake licensed work a full legal aid certificate. This has meant tenants have been able to defend possession cases or pursue landlords for disrepair in cases where hitherto, the potential cost consequences would have made this prohibitive.



There has been a marked increase in landlords and mortgage lenders seeking repossession. With more people now claiming housing benefit, the processing of applications is taking longer which means that rent arrears accrue and landlords take action. For home owners, measures such as Mortgage Rescue and restructuring monthly instalments have helped troubled borrowers temporarily but now lenders want their money.

We have succeeded in challenging homelessness decisions of the Council as well as helping tenants with issues concerning succession to tenancies, anti-social behaviour and disrepair.

The need for housing advice continues and will need to rise to even greater challenges to safeguard the local residents in their homes in the future if the government's proposals to limit the lifetime of the social tenancy and increase the rent that can be charged to 80% of market value take effect.

Unfortunately, in order to save money, the government is proposing that legal help will no longer be available for the areas of law we do, apart from where a person is in imminent danger of losing their home. The Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Bill is currently going through Parliament and is expected to become law in spring 2011.

We aim to continue delivering this contract as long as it is viably possible and depending on what the government decides and its timetable.

The Future

The year ended on a note of optimism. A second hand Advice Bus came onto the market, and with help from 'The Friends' and some councillors, we were able to purchase it, thus allowing us to provide a regular service across the rural parts of the borough. All we need now is the money to run it!



Tunbridge Wells & District CAB

31 Monson Road
Tunbridge Wells
Kent TN1 1LS

Advice 0844 499 4140
Admin 01892 617 256
www.twcab.org.uk
advice@twcacabnet.org.uk

Opening hours
Mon 9.30am-6.30pm
Tues-Fri 9.30am-4pm
Sat 9.30am-11.30am
Appointments available

The Gateway
10am-3pm Monday-Friday

The Friends of Tunbridge Wells CAB

The Friends of Tunbridge Wells CAB was set up as a separate registered charity with the specific role of providing additional funding to support and extend the work of the CAB.

They arrange a programme of interesting events throughout the year. If you are interested in learning more about their work www.friendsof

Cranbrook

Association House
St David's Bridge
Cranbrook
TN17 3HL

Admin 01580 713 989

Opening hours
Mon-Wed 9.30am-3.30pm
Thurs, Fri 9.30am-12.30pm

Appointments available

Paddock Wood

The Wesley Centre
Commercial Road
Paddock Wood
TN12 6DS

Admin 01892 834 533

Opening hours
Mon 1pm-7pm
Tues, - Fri 10am-2pm

Appointments available

Outreach

Pembury library & Bliss Cafe
Tuesdays 9.30-11.30
Mayfield London House
Wednesday 9.30-11.30

With thanks
to Dulverton Trust,
and all our supporters

