

Unlocking advice

CAB partnerships in prisons,
probation services and courts



Summer 2001

Directory

More than 200 CABx in England and Wales are operating court initiatives. Just over a third of these are working in conjunction with magistrates' courts. Many CABx have also developed initiatives with local prisons and partnerships of one kind or another with the National Probation Service.

Developing partnerships

Key contacts in the CAB Service for dialogue about partnerships:

Celia Pyke-Lees

Director of Services

☎ 020 7833 7125

celia.pyke-lees@nacab.org.uk

Chris Bates

General Manager, Development

☎ 0115 9418315

chris.bates@nacab.org.uk

Fran Targett

Director, NACAB Wales /NACAB Cymru

☎ 01745 586 400

fran.targett@nacab.org.uk

Or contact one of our Regional Managers:

East Field Office

Simon Rice

simon.rice@nacab.org.uk

☎ 01223 356322

London Field Office

Bobbie Pote

bobbie.pote@nacab.org.uk

☎ 020 7549 0800

Midlands Field Office

Kamaljit Sandhu

kamaljit.sandhu@nacab.org.uk

☎ 0115 941 8315

North Field Office

Peter Rickard

peter.rickard@nacab.org.uk

☎ 0191 233 0700

North West Field Office

Paul Allen

paul.allen@nacab.org.uk

☎ 0151 282 9000

South Field Office

Paula Rudgard

paula.rudgard@nacab.org.uk

☎ 023 8027 3355

West Field Office

Pamela Woods

pamela.woods@nacab.org.uk

☎ 01392 425517

Contacts for the projects featured in this publication:

Bangor CAB: Fred Owen, 01248 351172 fred@cabgwynedd.co.uk

Basingstoke CAB: Linda Fox, 01256 329984

Bedford CAB: 01234 3554384 madbedfordcab@btconnect.com

Birmingham CAB: County Court Welfare Office 0121 681 3125

Bournemouth CAB: Catherine O'Sullivan, 01202 290967

admin@bournemouthcab.co.uk

Bracknell CAB: 01344 483439 bracknell.cab@virgin.net

Buckingham CAB: Hazel Morrison, 01280 816787

buckingham-cab1@ic24.net

Cardiff CAB: 029 20 220774, cardiffcab@btinternet.com

NACAB Kent Probation Project: Carol Buckland, 01892 527717

carol.buckland@nacab.org.uk

Gloucester CAB: 01452 385617 bureau@gloucestercab.cabnet.org.uk

Gosport CAB: Sara Penells, 0870 126 4074 gosportcab@lineone.net

Lichfield CAB: 01543 252730 bureau@lichfieldcab.cabnet.org.uk

Luton CAB: 01582 486632 luton_cab@msn.com

Middlesbrough CAB: Anne Pritchard or Paula Elder, 01642 802280

The Royal Courts of Justice CAB: Joy Julien, 020 7947 7118/9

rcj.cab@dial.pipex.com

Wandsworth CAB: Sally Causer, 020 8378 5959

tootingcab@btinternet.com

Woking CAB: Chris Eele, 01483 776350 chris.eele@btinternet.com

Wormwood Scrubs CAB: 020 8743 0311 ext 560/1/2

wormwoodscrubscab@dial.pipex.com

Partnerships for solutions



Whether it's working with offenders in prison, people on probation or fighting cases in the courts, Citizens Advice Bureaux are finding ways to give help and support to those people who are having real difficulty negotiating the criminal and civil justice systems.

Unlocking advice looks at a range of initiatives that are providing advice specifically targeted at this group of clients, often in conjunction with other statutory agencies. Effective partnerships are delivering 'win-win' outcomes. Advice on issues such as debt, income maximisation, housing or family crises can often break a vicious circle for both offenders and the professionals working with them. By tackling the underlying factors of offending behaviour, CABx are helping to reduce recidivism.

On a wider front, CAB partnerships are helping to free up court time and reduce the number of cases that have to return to court. Probation officers, prison officers and court officials are finding that the existence of advice partnerships are giving them more time to focus on their core roles of crime prevention, security and justice.

Breaking a vicious circle

There is much to build on. There is also a long way to go in spreading good practice. While there are many innovative and effective initiatives, the provision of projects remains something of a lottery. A court, prison or probation office in one area may have excellent provision while thirty miles up the road there is an advice vacuum. Too often the delivery of good advice partnerships relies on the personal commitment of individual officers rather than a true strategic partnership.

That is a challenge for us in the CAB Service as much as a challenge for our counterparts in the Home Office, the Lord Chancellor's Department and the prison and probation professions. Our goal must be to take the best of what works well from the various initiatives that already exist and find ways of implementing it strategically across the whole of the UK.

David Harker
Chief Executive
National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux

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CABx are forging effective partnerships with many prisons, from the full-time CAB inside Wormwood Scrubs to part-time visiting initiatives and pioneering prisoner-delivered advice.



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Working with offenders in the community is the focus of many CAB partnership projects with the National Probation Service. Statistics show these projects are helping to reduce recidivism. So why has funding been cut?



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From the Royal Courts of Justice to the local county and magistrates courts, advice provision is helping people gain access to justice and saving court time.



"Advice work is not just about accessing rights, but about people taking responsibility themselves. Making people realise what they can do and what their own potential for changing is. That's a very positive way of rebuilding and rehabilitating."

Dame Ruth Runciman, Deputy Chair of the Prison Reform Trust and founder adviser at Wormwood Scrubs Prison CAB

Stopping crime while serving time



D Wing, Wormwood Scrubs

PHOTO: © CROWN COPYRIGHT/MAR

HM Prison Wormwood Scrubs is one of Britain's largest jails, holding nearly 1,000 prisoners, and is also one of the most complex. It is like having four jails rolled into one. It serves as a local prison, holding remand prisoners awaiting court appearances. It also holds short and long term sentenced prisoners, as well as lifers and immigration detainees. It has its own hospital and mental health wing and a segregated area for vulnerable prisoners such as sex offenders and informers. Turnover is enormously high with around fifty prisoners entering or leaving the prison each day.

"A prison sentence is meant to be the loss of your liberty. The trouble is that for many it means the loss of a home, the loss of a job, the loss of a family even and the loss of a reputation sometimes despite possibly being found not guilty."

Marjorie Popper, an adviser at the CAB at Wormwood Scrubs prison, is acutely aware of how easily the problems faced by prisoners can multiply. The CAB operates on a full-time basis inside the prison, staffed by two paid advisers and an administrative assistant. "Initially the project was entirely funded by the City Parochial Foundation," explains Popper, "But the prison were so keen on what we are doing that they agreed to half fund it for three years. Now the rest comes from a mix of charitable and corporate funders." The project plays an important role in giving prisoners a chance to take practical steps to prevent problems escalating. In this sense, it helps them to work towards rehabilitation.

Freeing up resources

The CAB is also doing its bit to make scarce resources in prison go further. "We save probation staff and landing officers a lot of time and they can get on with their core roles of risk assessment and running the prison," says Popper. "Prisoners have very limited access to the means of sorting

problems out. They have limited access to a telephone. They might be locked in a cell for a long time. They have no access to things like telephone directories."

In addition to funding, the prison provides facilities so that the CAB advisers can offer a rolling programme of advice appointments on every wing. Prisoners make appointments to see the adviser. "We have our own office on every wing," says Marjorie Popper. "There isn't a prison officer lurking outside so it is completely confidential. We also have a secure office where we keep all our records, reference books and equipment."

Bridging cultures

The CAB principles of confidentiality, impartiality and independence are obviously important in building trust with prisoners. The CAB ethos, though, also has to work harmoniously within the prison service culture. "It was quite difficult when we first started because they were quite suspicious of outside agencies. There was also the issue of what is the interface between confidentiality and prison security. What if someone told you about an escape or that they were thinking of suicide? A detailed and clear protocol was essential."

"There is an issue of the interface between confidentiality and prison security? What if someone told you about an escape or that they were thinking of suicide?"

Marjorie Popper, CAB adviser

PHOTO: © CROWN COPYRIGHT/MAR



Inside D Wing, Wormwood Scrubs

Implementing services strategically

Dame Ruth Runciman, deputy Chair of the Prison Reform Trust, was a founder CAB adviser at Wormwood Scrubs. She remembers the initial challenge of “trying to persuade prison officers to believe in us and not regard us as some sort of ‘pinkos’. Early on we had our advocates among the staff, but a fair amount of sceptics. I believe there has been a genuine cultural change.”

Runciman is less impressed by the lack of a strategic approach to advice work across the prison service.

“There is some terribly good work going on but it is a pig in a poke really.” She became aware of this as Chair of the Mental Health Act Commission. “The Commission visits every hospital that holds detained prisoners, some of whom, especially in medium and high security units, have been transferred from prison. What was striking was how fortuitous it was whether they had had access to advice in prison, though it must be said the same applies to hospitals.”

Dame Ruth Runciman gives a cautious welcome to the decision of the prison to half-fund the Wormwood Scrubs CAB service. “It’s a great breakthrough but it still leaves the CAB having to raise the rest of the money each year.”



“Too often I hear of good projects in one prison rejected by another; of inconsistency of funding and a lack of coordination... I want to see some strategic developments...”

Paul Boateng MP, then Minister of State, Home Office, quoted in HM Prison Service Briefing, June 2000



“[The Prison Service] must work more closely with other statutory and voluntary agencies. The wider community has a wealth of experience and skills to assist in resettling former offenders. Local voluntary and community organisations have shown that they can play an extremely effective role...”

Jack Straw MP, then Home Secretary, Prison Service Conference speech, February 2001



“A clear protocol is essential for both sides and particularly important in building trust and confidence.”

“We have a steering committee that is chaired by the senior governor with representation from various wings. It gives everyone a chance to give feedback. It’s a two-way forum and that’s very important.”

Marjorie Popper, advice worker, Wormwood Scrubs CAB



“At first we tried giving advice training to prison officers but that was really a non-starter. They don’t have the time or availability and there is a conflict between being on duty and working on advice.”

“Negotiate clear boundaries with the prison. They have to be established in writing and understood and respected by both parties.”

“Flexibility is key. We had to accept that things could not always happen as fast as we possibly expected. You have to be sensitive to pressures within the prison. Everything stops if there is a lockdown.”

Chris Eele, Manager, Woking CAB

Prisoner cell block CAB . . .

'He's lost. He feels he can't help his family. If a guy is in prison the problems faced by the family outside still go on. The CAB project actually gave them some power, gave them something where they could feel they were doing something . . .'

Rob Doubtfire was serving 20 years for drug offences. When he approached prison officers with the idea of starting a CAB inside HMP Coldingley in Surrey, few people could have expected that it might evolve into a new model not just for prison advice but for resettlement.

Together with Woking CAB and with the support of the prison governors, Doubtfire established a CAB inside the

authorities and now believe that the prisoner-adviser model has significant potential."

Eele is careful to emphasise that this approach is only suitable in certain types of prison. "If you've got a large prison with a mobile population then a paid professional advice service is necessary and certainly with remand prisoners it is essential. Coldingley, though, is a working prison with a fairly static population. Most of these guys are on long sentences and are likely to be serving ten or twelve years minimum."

Rights and responsibilities

Advice helps prisoners focus on the positive and practical steps they can take to help rebuild their lives. "When you are in prison there is a sense that all responsibility is lifted off you for a time," says Rob Doubtfire. "In a sense, advice gives back responsibility by saying there are things you can get involved with and help with."

From a rolling population of around 300 prisoners and some 100 staff and civilian workers, the CAB averaged 35 enquiries each month in the first seven months. Enquiries cover all kinds of issues, with an emphasis on housing and employment on release from prison.

"The advice service can help prisoners become integrated into society and we gave advice talks that supplemented the prison's core offending behaviour courses," explains Doubtfire. Indeed, he was able to take this a step further in voluntary work outside the prison with a local pupil referral unit. "These youngsters were at a critical time

in their lives and there was immediate credibility in getting serving prisoners to work with them. It also helped bring more young people into the CAB."

Long term prisoners need advice about the realities of the world they are to be released into. "They are isolated from society," says Chris Eele, "And often have a naive view of what it will be like when they leave. They don't realise that they will no longer be able to easily get a council house, for example. Real, pragmatic advice about how to cope is important." According to Doubtfire, "Guys preferred to talk to another prisoner. It helped that I was doing a long sentence. Most guys in the prison trusted me and we always offered the option to see an outside adviser who would visit from Woking CAB if anyone preferred to do that."

Maintaining quality

Prisoner-delivered advice raised many issues which Woking CAB was careful to address. There were worries about the vulnerability of a prisoner having

"The prison wins by having independent advice available. . .the prisoner wins by learning skills, being exposed to a work ethos of doing things for other people . . . and giving them skills that they can use when they leave."

Chris Eele, Manager, Woking CAB



PHOTO: © CROWN COPYRIGHT/MAR

prison with prisoners themselves undergoing CAB training and running the advice service. "A big difference with this prisoner-delivered approach is that it provides a resettlement opportunity for the individuals involved," says Chris Eele, Manager of Woking CAB. "To be honest we were suspicious at first but Rob proved himself time and time again. We built up trust with the prison



Advice helps prisoners focus on the positive and practical steps they can take to help rebuild their lives.

information about other prisoners or, equally, a manipulative prisoner using such information for his own gain. Chris Eele feels that these have to be addressed through the processes of selection, training and ongoing supervision. "We are very careful not just in initial selection and training but in quality control through case sheet monitoring, weekly meetings in the early stages and careful checking," says Eele.

Doubtfire stresses the vital importance of ensuring the key principles come through. "It's a service that's non-judgemental. That's so important in a prison culture where you feel that everything you do in prison you are judged on and reminded of it on a regular basis. It's independent and that was important. It's confidential. It doesn't go to the governor or the prison officer. That was a big thing for prisoners. Sticking to the principles, being up front, honest and clear about what the service does and doesn't do was vital in winning trust."

"It's a service that's non-judgemental. That's so important in a prison culture where you feel that everything you do in prison you are judged on and reminded of it on a regular basis."

Rob Doubtfire, ex-prisoner and CAB adviser

Contributing to resettlement

Rob Doubtfire has since been acquitted and has returned to his old job, leaving Woking CAB the task of training two new prisoners to take his place. The Prison Service now sees this as a progressive programme. Potential advice volunteers can be identified fairly early in their term before they come to a working prison and Woking CAB can then interview, select and train them. Chris Eele believes the scheme offers an innovative way of developing resettlement programmes. "It's a win-win situation. The prison wins by having independent advice available for its prisoners that is quality controlled. The prisoner wins by learning skills, being exposed to a work ethos of doing things for other people rather than for their own gain, and giving them skills that they can use in the job marketplace when they leave."

Prisons round-up

CABx are delivering advice at 25 out of 143 prisons in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

- Bracknell CAB broke new ground in 1992 by being the first CAB to provide an advice service inside a special hospital when it began an advice project at Broadmoor. More recently, Knowsley District CAB secured a contract to provide a patient advocacy service at Ashworth high security hospital.
- As well as delivering advice inside prisons, CABx are also an integral part of some prison visitors' centres. At Whitemoor Prison in Cambridgeshire, CAB advice is on hand at the visitors' centre and also inside the prison on the wings.



HMP Whitemoor

- Lichfield CAB runs a half-day workshop every 4-6 weeks as part of a two week pre-release scheme in a young offenders institution.
- Cardiff CAB participates in a rota of local law centres and solicitors offering specialist advice to asylum seekers detained in Cardiff prison.
- Gosport CAB provides advice to immigration detainees at nearby Haslar Holding Centre. The once-fortnightly service is entering its fourth year of operation.

Removing barriers to rehabilitation

“Our task is to focus on offending behaviour and to try to alter that. This is no easy task on its own but if the offender can’t feed their children and get their benefits and debts sorted out then it is very difficult to stop the offending.”

Probation officer Bridget Myles is in no doubt as to the importance of the advice consultancy provided to probation officers throughout Kent by the NACAB Kent Probation Project. “It sits very well with probation good practice, allowing us to focus on offending. We work on the criminogenic factors in the knowledge that the social issues are being addressed. For people who used to re-offend, it was all about financial issues and threats of eviction. Their way of dealing with it would either be to get angry and go and smash something up or steal something. We are getting less of that.”

Indeed, Bridget's view is confirmed by recent figures which show that in the Kent area, reoffending rates of those referred to the Project in 1997/8 were down to 38% against the national reconviction rate of 57% - and as low as 20% for those receiving in-depth casework support.”

Taking away the excuses

The NACAB project started in April 1995. While the Probation Service saw the value of the approach, the weekly or fortnightly sessions were found to be too infrequent. The project now provides a telephone consultancy service on welfare

benefits and money management to all Kent probation officers so that advice can be given on the spot as soon as an officer identifies that an offender needs to sort out a problem. An in-depth casework service is provided for the majority of referrals. Through this process, support from both probation and the specialist adviser encourages and strengthens the necessary motivation in the offender.

Carol Buckland, manager of the NACAB Kent Probation Project, is convinced of the benefits of this direct approach: “The probation officer can phone us up, we can immediately speak to the client and within a day sometimes we have taken action that starts the process of making things better.”

Her counterpart Marjorie Darby, recently retired but for five years Contracts and Partnerships Manager for the National Probation Service, Kent Area, agrees that the immediacy of the service is “incredibly valuable”. She believes that “it takes away people's excuses” for re-offending.

The project's three full-time consultants and one part-time money advice worker handled over 4,800 enquiries in 2000/2001 and its funding has been increased in recognition of its success.

What works?

Advice given through the project often helps offenders to realise that they can behave and act in ways that have positive rather than destructive outcomes. As Carol Buckland explains, “Some of them feel bottom of the pile and many are treated as bottom of the pile by the Benefits Agency, by creditors



Marjorie Darby (left) of the National Probation Service and Carol Buckland (right) manager of NACAB Kent Probation Project

and by statutory bodies. Their tempers can be short and it can sometimes start a cycle of violent and angry reaction. We break that cycle by acting as a go-between to diffuse the situation. There is often complete and utter surprise in their voices at our willingness to help. They are not used to people responding to them in such a positive way and this helps in getting their financial problems sorted out.”

This knock-on effect of empowering offenders is especially pertinent to the Home Office's ‘What Works’ initiative. This places an emphasis on making ‘a systematic attempt to help people acquire the skills and attitudes they need for more effective problem solving’ (*What Works - reducing re-offending: evidence based practice, Home Office, 1999*).

Carol Buckland believes the model has many advantages: “Because it is county-wide it is open to every probation client in Kent. It complements the Home Office's ‘What Works’ focus and there are strong arguments for initiating this type of partnership throughout the National Probation Service as part of a strategy for protecting the public and reducing offending.”

Partnerships are in demand: but so is funding . . .

"We're finding answers to problems that previously seemed unsolvable, resulting in offenders having a much better chance of fitting back into society and not reoffending."

Bournemouth CAB manager Catherine O'Sullivan's partnership project with the National Probation Service delivered light at the end of the tunnel to drug offenders, alcohol-related criminals and a range of other offenders in the south coast seaside town, until its funding was stopped in April 2001. Recent changes mean that National Probation Service Areas are no longer required to spend seven per cent of their income on partnerships. The rationale for this this was to increase flexibility of partnerships but early indications suggest that, as Bournemouth has discovered, some probation area offices are using it as a justification for ceasing to fund advice work. "We were very disappointed," says Catherine. "It certainly wasn't a reflection on the work we were doing - we met all our targets. Apparently they had budgetary restrictions and had to re-prioritise their funding."

But there is no doubting the need for advice for offenders. At the other end of the country, Middlesbrough CAB is meeting

the demand for advice sessions in bail hostels, probation hostels and Probation Service offices. Paula Elder, CAB probation adviser at Middlesbrough, says, "The project is so successful that many probation officers believe a further advice worker should be employed to deal with the urgent problems. Appointments are being booked two to three weeks in advance and probation officers often telephone me direct for advice."

The Middlesbrough project handles an annual caseload of more than 3,500 enquiries, helping hundreds of offenders to maximise benefits and make successful applications to the Social Fund.

Managing their own affairs

Bournemouth CAB caseworker Arthur Livingstone stresses the need for offenders themselves to get in control of the process. "My main challenge is to gain the ongoing cooperation of the offender and for them to become involved. Often they find it difficult to manage their own affairs. Many are undergoing alcohol or drug rehabilitation and it is too much for them to cope with if they are facing, for example, a multiplicity of debts, threats of eviction or distress on their goods."

In Middlesbrough, CAB Manager Anne Pritchard says the advice given to help offenders set up home is vital to reducing reoffending. "Securing community care grants to enable people to move out of a hostel is a really important step in moving away from crime and being rehabilitated back into the community." She is also encouraged to see many of the offenders beginning to use the CAB. "The majority did not previously think the CAB was for them so that is heartening."

"We tried a pilot appointments system. The probation officer would say 'come back in a fortnight's time and the CAB adviser will be here in the office' but the appointments would be broken and it didn't work."

"One approach was to train probation service assistants and support officers to deal with money issues, benefits and so on. They just didn't have the time on top of their main role."

Carol Buckland,
NACAB Kent Probation Project

"What used to happen was that we would spend an awful lot of time trying to muddle these things through ourselves. Now I don't do any of that. The CAB advisers can deliver good advice and I can concentrate on what I've got to deal with."

Bridget Myles, Probation
Officer, Faversham in Kent

"...housing, social security, training, employment etc and general social factors in the community will also influence re-offending. Effective supervision must take into account these factors and strive to co-ordinate and organise other agencies..."

Evidence Based Practice, A guide to Effective Practice, by Tim Chapman and Michael Hough, on behalf of HM Inspectorate of Probation, 1999

PHOTO: SIOCHA LEHRER/IMM/FOURAT

CAB advice can help offenders to maximise benefits, move out of hostels and re-establish lives in the community

Self-representing advice in court

“The assumption of the whole legal process is that people will be represented, but the reality is that more and more are not able to be. They find themselves having to comply with rules and procedures that the ordinary person with few funds is unable to cope with.”

At the Royal Courts of Justice in London, CAB Director Joy Julien is helping to deliver a unique service to people who are representing themselves at court. An open door service is operated five days a week from 10 am to 5 pm. “It’s almost like a legal casualty department. They see a receptionist in the same way that they would in a clinic and she has various routes of referral depending on need, a bit like a triage service,” says Julien. “Most clients will be filtered through either a generalist adviser or a duty solicitor. If the matter needs drafting on the spot or is quite specialist the client will be seen by a honorary legal adviser.”

The litigants-in-person service helps people appearing before the High Court of the Court of Appeal. “We see people from all walks of life,” says Julien. “It’s pretty much across the board in terms of ethnicity, social class, age and different parts of the country. There are slightly more claimants but we help a lot of defendants as well. Cases are typically appeals from county courts. Quite a few people are being sued for debt or facing a house repossession.”

In many cases, the client may have had legal representation at the lower court but they have lost the case and found that legal aid was withdrawn.

Increasing numbers

The narrowing of scope of legal aid has contributed to a steady increase in cases. The incorporation of human

rights legislation into UK law is also expected to produce more cases. The project already helps about 4,000 people a year. In addition to the litigants-in-person service the CAB has also started a general advice service in the courts and a specialist family law project in the Family Division. In total, the CAB handles more than 7,000 enquiries. The nine paid staff include three duty solicitors; they are supplemented by a pool of volunteer honorary legal advisers from City law firms as well as CAB volunteer advisers. Main funding comes from the Lord Chancellor’s Department and from Association of London Government, Social Policy and Grants Division.

Making legal process possible

The project makes an enormous difference to the operation of the courts. Saving court time is one result, but Julien also believes that the CAB project has become an essential part of the functioning of the legal process. “The way in which the legal service has evolved means that more people are forced to be litigants in person, and they need to know how to do that. Judges often halt proceedings and ask the litigant to go down to the CAB and get advice.”

The CAB also makes a practical difference by preparing document bundles, which can help clients enormously. “If the bundling is not done correctly the client faces the prospect of having the case dismissed,” says Julien. “Even where



The CAB makes a practical difference by preparing document bundles, which can mean the difference between having a case heard or dismissed.



PHOTOS: JUSTIN PFEFFER



Joy Julien at the Royal Courts of Justice

learning curve

“Until the CAB received funding the courts were clogged up with cases that were either unmeritorious or poorly prepared.... with court staff spending a lot of time trying to sort them out.”

“Less financial support from legal aid means that we are now dealing with more very detailed, complex self litigant cases that previously would have stayed with a client’s solicitor.”

“No win, no fee provision for personal injury is only helping those with straightforward cases. It is awfully difficult for some people to persuade solicitors to take on less obvious cases and they are turning to self litigation.”

Joy Julien, CAB director, Royal Courts of Justice

“I am keen to see a significant improvement in CAB/legal advice presence at all county courts, not just at Wandsworth and not solely confined to the area of housing.”

Michael J. Walker, District Judge, Wandsworth County Court

the case is not necessarily the strongest or the client is not able to articulate it very well, the fact that the court is able to see properly prepared documents goes a long way to explaining the case.” At all times the aim of the project is to empower the client to represent themselves.

Taking the service further

The general advice service is still integral, according to Julien. “If people don’t get advice on wider matters there is a danger that they will just end up back in court in arrears, debt or whatever it might be. We can look at the root of the problem and help prevent history repeat itself.”

The immediate next priority for Joy Julien and the CAB at the Royal Courts of Justice is to address the special needs of people with mental health problems. “A lot of our clients have mental health issues and, having been through the court process whether successfully or unsuccessfully, they find it difficult to let go,” explains Julien. “We find them coming back and making any excuse to try to revive the case. It becomes really difficult for us because our role has ended, so we are starting a counselling and practical support drop-in service for this group of people.”

“You’ve got to see people on the spot. At first we tried publicising an appointments system. Well I don’t think any fine defaulters ever rang up to make an appointment.”

“It’s proven to work extremely well once you have the fine defaulters in front of you. The magistrates like it and it saves their time and enables the court process to work much faster.”

“It’s better to be there at the time of the original sentencing rather than trying to plug a gap at the end. Having a stand alone advice unit in courts for all defendants would prevent much of the need for return visits to court.”

Linda Fox, Manager of Basingstoke CAB, on the CAB fine defaulters service in the local magistrates court

“The District Judges are now provided with better quality information and affordable offers of repayment that results in fewer defendants returning to court.”

Buckingham CAB on the impact of the CAB court desk at Aylesbury County Court

Court success

“It has been a great advantage to the defendants attending the court and to the judiciary.”

District Judge Rhodes is in no doubt that court-based CAB advice improves court services. He presides over hearings at Aylesbury County Court where Buckingham CAB operates an advice desk linked to housing possession cases.

“Those attending are often frightened and bewildered,” Judge Rhodes points out. “They can be helped to know the procedure and what is involved. The advantage for the judiciary is that often arrangements can be made with landlords and mortgagees. I hope it will be a permanent feature of our court.”



PHOTO: JUSTIN PIPERGER

The project is operated jointly by the CAB with the local authority, with CAB funding supplied by the local Round Table. It is one of a number of county court initiatives around the country but, despite clear advantages for the courts, funding is often patchy and uncertain.

Sally Causer manages the court services operated from Wandsworth CAB's Money Advice Project and is baffled by the lack of statutory resources for court advice. “The funding shouldn't be reliant on us approaching charities: it's a much-needed service and should be in every court.”

Wandsworth Money Advice runs an advice desk at the local magistrates' court. Advisers are not allowed to speak in magistrates' courts, unlike in the county court where contributions are welcomed - an inconsistency which can be especially frustrating for advisers in council tax debt cases, which go to the magistrates court.

The advantages for magistrates' and county courts are evident: “District judges find that it saves court time,” says Sally Causer. “It helps them get through the list. Indeed, if we haven't had the chance to speak to defendants before they get into court, the judge will often send them out to us.”

Preventing prison sentences

Access to good and timely advice is increasingly being recognised as a vital adjunct to enabling judges and magistrates deliver appropriate penalties.

Linda Fox manages Basingstoke CAB: “We were approached because the courts were getting really quite concerned about the number of people being given custodial sentences,” she says.

The CAB works in the local magistrates courts seeing defendants before the court appearance, giving “short, sharp, money advice” and completing a comprehensive means assessment. Custodial sentences have been reduced, although Fox is cautious about the exact reasons for this trend.

What is clear is the help it gives to the court. “The magistrates love it since it gives them a much clearer picture of the defendant's position and it saves court officials' time because often they would be tied up in having to negotiate payments with the clients.”

Courts round-up

CABx deliver advice in county courts and magistrates' courts throughout England and Wales.

- In Staffordshire, for example, Tamworth CAB works in partnership with the National Probation Service to advise fine defaulters appearing before the magistrates' court. All fine defaulters receive leaflets informing them of the CAB service.
- Birmingham City CAB operates one of the longest established CAB court initiatives in the country at Birmingham County Court.
- In Greater Manchester, Irlam and Caudishead has outlets in both the county court and the magistrates' court in Salford.
- Luton and Bedford CABx report that their magistrates' court initiatives have resulted in a marked increase in fine repayment and a corresponding decrease in imprisonment for default.
- Severn Trent Water gives Gloucester CAB £30,000 to provide a helpdesk in the magistrates' court.
- The scope of projects varies from housing possession cases and fine defaulting sessions to wider advice and representation. There is no single consistent funding source for this work.
- Funders includes local authorities, the National Lottery Charities Board, private charitable foundations and local charitable sources, and the National Probation Service.

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☎ 020 7833 2181
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Researched and written by Dominic Byrne
Produced by Sally O'Connell

To order extra copies of this publication please contact
Darren Babidge on 020 7833 7078
darren.babidge@nacab.org.uk