



Citizens Advice Bureaux: tackling the cost of inequality

ADVICE PREVENTS DISCRIMINATION AND REDUCES INEQUALITY

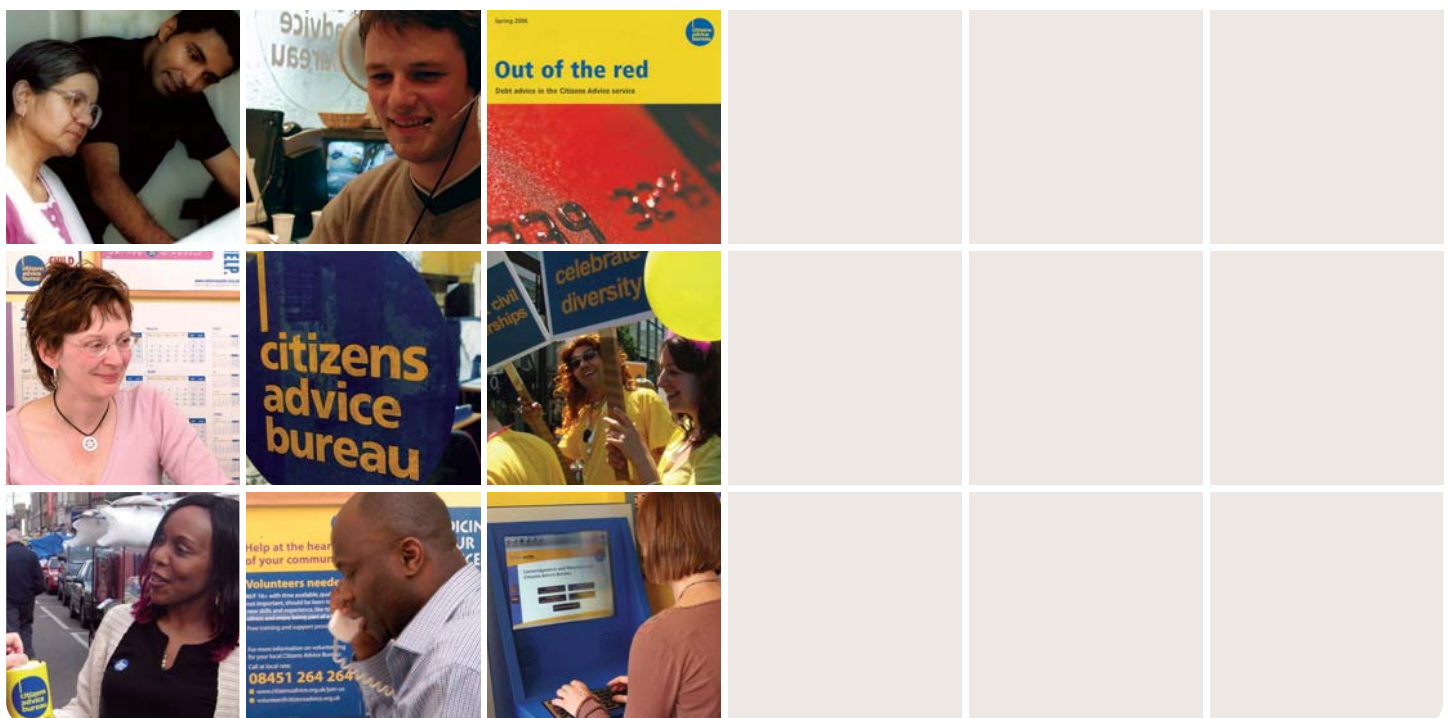
Citizens Advice Bureaux and the wider advice sector have an important part to play in social change, by promoting a culture of equality and human rights, preventing discrimination, and resolving individual problems.

Community awareness-raising and education

- promotes good practice among employers and service providers at the local level
- ensures people know about their rights and responsibilities, and where to get help
- strengthens ties between marginalised communities and the services they should be able to use, increasing community confidence and engagement.

Discrimination and human rights advice

- empowers people through a range of solutions
- avoids the distress of court action whenever possible, but makes use of the courts where necessary
- makes recalcitrant employers and service providers clean up their act
- prevents future abuses
- adds value to the UK economy.



Discrimination facts and figures

- Discrimination is the eighth most common problem people would like advice on.
- Discrimination is in the top three problems that people are not able to get help with.
- Over 50% of people think asylum seekers are among the two or three groups most likely to experience prejudice and discrimination in the UK. 29% say the same for gay and lesbian people.
- 29% of adults say they have experienced age discrimination.
- Only 3% of women who could take action about pregnancy discrimination do so.

The costs of inequality and discrimination

- Age discrimination alone costs the UK economy £31 billion a year. Add in the costs of all other forms of discrimination, and that's a significant drain on the economy.
- Alienation, economic inequality, and prejudice can lead to communities living parallel lives, where the lack of a shared sense of belonging creates the conditions for fear, hate and extremism on all sides.
- CAB clients who've experienced discrimination tell us how devastating it is. And often a discrimination problem can lead to a complex web of problems including debt, homelessness, and relationship and family breakdown.

A CAB in Hampshire advised a client who has learning difficulties and walked out of his job as a kitchen porter because of constant bullying. Although his situation was tantamount to constructive dismissal, Job Centre Plus failed to take his circumstances into account and sanctioned him for leaving his job, leaving him with £33.70 a week to live on. He has been unable to find another job because of employers' reaction to his learning difficulties. In addition, Job Centre Plus kept sending him to interviews in distant cities difficult to reach by public transport (he cannot drive). The client is now on anti-depressants.

A senior practice nurse in South London sought help from her local bureau. She had been working in this position for over 40 years when she was sent on secondment to another surgery. She was the only black worker at the new surgery and felt that the other staff wanted her to leave. There were repeated instances of them excluding her. She felt victimised and undermined.

In Yorkshire, a CAB advised a gay client who was subjected to numerous difficulties and emotional trauma when arranging the burial of his partner because the Coroner's office and undertakers believed his partner was HIV positive. The disrespectful treatment he received significantly increased the distress of his bereavement.



What are we already doing?

“The Citizens Advice service does a fantastic job in providing advice, information and support to some of our most vulnerable citizens. From people living in debt to those being unfairly evicted from their home or dismissed at work, the Citizens Advice service is often the first port of call. The campaigning work they lead nationally is based on the experiences of their clients which is how they know when the system needs changing.”

Lord (Bill) Morris of Handsworth

The Citizens Advice service is a network of over 500 bureaux providing quality assured services throughout England, Scotland and Wales.

The Citizens Advice service has a strong track record in providing services to disadvantaged communities. In parts of London, some 70 per cent of bureaux' clients are from black and minority ethnic groups; in areas such as Birmingham, Coventry and Oldham the figure is over 40 per cent. In 2005/06, bureaux dealt with over 500,000 enquiries about disability benefits. Around 100 bureaux run projects to provide advice to people with mental health problems, and over 100 are racist incident reporting centres.

Bureaux handle over 32,000 discrimination advice enquiries every year. The majority are for sex, disability and race discrimination. The numbers of discrimination enquiries relating to age, religion and belief, and sexual orientation are growing.

Our national specialist support team provide expert second-tier consultancy to bureaux, solicitors, and other advisers on over 600 discrimination cases a year.

In response to new laws, Citizens Advice has piloted training materials, community education, outreach, and casework services for employment discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, religion and belief, and age. This work is in partnership with the Muslim Council of Britain, the Village CAB, and The Age and Employment Network. It is funded by the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department for Communities and Local Government until March 2007.

The Disability Rights Commission is funding bureaux in Wales to pilot awareness raising and casework to prevent and resolve disability discrimination.

Citizens Advice Scotland is working in partnership with the Scottish Legal Aid Board to pilot new discrimination legal advice services. This includes the provision of training and capacity building to bureaux in issues of disability, race and mental health discrimination, as well as provision of consultancy to bureaux to support these services. In addition, bureaux are preparing to meet the challenges set out by Scotland's Human Rights Commission.



The opportunity ahead

“Citizens Advice Bureaux provide a unique service for local communities and I work very closely with the CAB in Aberdeen. As Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Equalities, I envisage a significant role for the Citizens Advice service in delivering the goals of the Equality Act. I hope that in the future the Citizens Advice service will be able to develop its work in providing advice and casework services in these areas to become a local face of the new Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR).”

Ann Begg MP, Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Equalities

We have the opportunity to create a step-change in how society views and lives equality and human rights. To take full advantage of the opportunity, effective communication and education need to go hand-in-hand with effective remedies.

Recent equality and anti-discrimination laws, the opening of the CEHR, and new trends in society are increasing demand in this vital but under-resourced area, for which there is already considerable unmet need for community education, advice and casework.

With 95 per cent brand recognition and outstanding levels of public trust, the Citizens Advice service has the potential to develop sustainable equality and human rights capacity.

Three key steps to make this happen are:

1. training all our 19,000 advisers to identify and advise on discrimination and human rights issues
2. building a national network of caseworkers supported by second tier advice
3. establishing regional hubs, in close partnership with others, to promote equality and human rights, provide specialist casework, and develop local capacity.

A partnership between the CEHR, bureaux, advice and equality organisations, would bring benefits for all, improving outcomes for individuals, communities, and society.

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