



Response to Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee Inquiry into Poverty: Strand 4 - community-based approaches to tackling poverty

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About Citizens Advice Cymru

- 1.1. Citizens Advice is an independent charity covering England and Wales operating as Citizens Advice Cymru in Wales with offices in Cardiff and Rhyl. There are 20 member Citizen Advice Bureaux in Wales, all of whom are members of Citizens Advice Cymru, delivering services from over 375 locations.
The twin aims of the Citizens Advice service are:
 - to provide the advice people need for the problems they face
 - to improve the policies and practices that affect people's lives.
- 1.2. The advice provided by the Citizens Advice service is free, independent, confidential and impartial, and available to everyone regardless of race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion, age or nationality.
- 1.3. The majority of Citizens Advice services staff are trained volunteers. All advice staff, whether paid or volunteer, are trained in advice giving skills and have regular updates on topic-specific training and access to topic-based specialist support.
- 1.4. Local Bureaux, under the terms of membership of Citizens Advice provide core advice based on a certificate of quality standards on welfare benefits/tax credits, debt, housing, financial products and services, consumer issues, employment, health, immigration and asylum, legal issues, and relationships and family matters.
- 1.5. The Citizens Advice Service now has responsibilities for consumer representation in Wales as a result of the UK Government's changes to the consumer landscape¹. From 1st April 2014 this includes statutory functions and responsibilities to represent post and energy consumers.

Summary of Key Points

- 1.6. Citizens Advice Cymru believes that when allocating funds to tackle poverty area-based or people-based programmes should not be viewed as mutually exclusive. The Welsh Government should review its overall approach to allocating resources for tackling poverty and look to adopt a combination of deprivation-based and socio-economic approaches to ensure all those in need of support are able to access help, with greater emphasis being placed on income-related factors.
- 1.7. Citizens Advice's experience is that area-based approaches can work well and we generally support the 'bottom up' approach of programmes such as Communities First as it helps to ensure that service delivery is based on local need. The community focus also helps to facilitate positive relationships and a greater understanding

¹ On 1st April 2013 responsibility for consumer representation was transferred from Consumer Focus to the Citizens Advice Service (including Citizens Advice Cymru) following the UK Government's review of the consumer landscape.

between local organisations of the different services each provide enabling a more seamless journey for the client.

- 1.8 Citizens Advice Cymru also strongly support the use of area-based approaches for the delivery of fuel poverty programmes, such as the Welsh Government's Arbed scheme. We recognise that there are economies of scale to such models and opportunities to reach households who may otherwise be unaware of demand-led schemes. However we are concerned about the availability of data to underpin decisions about which areas should be targeted. We believe the Welsh Government should commission a comprehensive housing survey, comparable to those in England and Scotland, to obtain a more accurate picture of where housing stock is the most energy inefficient in Wales.
- 1.9 One of the main drawbacks of adopting such a specific area-based approach is that people in need living outside of the defined areas are excluded from the support available. This is particularly true for people living in rural areas with more dispersed populations but can also be problematic when boundaries lie within the same towns/cities. We therefore believe more flexibility regarding boundary definitions within the same geographical locations should be built into Welsh Government anti-poverty programmes (where this isn't already the case).
- 1.10 The Welsh Government should ensure that their Rural Development Plan is based on a full analysis of rural poverty in Wales including the location and characteristics of the poorest households. Without this it will be difficult to target measures at those most in need or to develop indicators by which to measure progress.

Our full response is below:

Geographical consistency of anti-poverty initiatives

- 2.1 Citizens Advice's experience is that people living in poverty experience the same type of problems regardless of where they live, notably low incomes, debt, unemployment, a lack of suitable housing, and paying more for many everyday goods and services (frequently referred to as the 'poverty premium'). This situation has become even more acute in recent years due to the economic downturn, cuts in public spending and a whole raft of welfare reforms.
- 2.2 Our own internal analysis has found around two-thirds of Citizens Advice Bureaux clients in Wales are living below the poverty line. Almost three quarters of the problems seen by bureaux during 2013/14 related to problems with benefits/tax credits (42 per cent) or debt (31 per cent)².

² Citizens Advice Cymru Annual Review 2013/14, August 2014

2.3 Table 1 helps to illustrate how the topic areas for which people commonly seek advice, and the corresponding proportion of clients, is fairly consistent across all local authority areas in Wales. For the example below we have selected three local authorities with the highest proportion of Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) in the most deprived 10 per cent of all LSOAs in Wales, namely Blaenau Gwent, Merthyr Tydfil and Rhondda Cynon Taf, along with three with the lowest proportion or no LSOAs in the most deprived 10 per cent, namely Monmouthshire, Powys and Ceredigion³.

Table 1: Citizens Advice Local Authority Dashboard 2013/14⁴

Main problem areas	No. of problems		
	LAs with the highest % of most deprived LSOAs		
	Blaenau Gwent	Merthyr Tydfil	RCT
Benefits/tax credits	3,298 (46%)	6,558 (55%)	21,863 (47%)
Debt	2,434 (34%)	3,987 (33%)	16,045 (35%)
Employment	319 (4%)	289 (2%)	1,399 (3%)
Housing	237 (3%)	204 (2%)	1,256 (3%)
Main problem areas	LAs with the lowest % of most deprived LSOAs		
	Monmouthshire	Powys	Ceredigion
	Benefits/tax credits	2,488 (37%)	7,656 (45%)
Debt	1,330 (20%)	5,736 (34%)	1,786 (27%)
Employment	519 (8%)	830 (5%)	471 (7%)
Housing	506 (8%)	449 (3%)	367 (6%)

³ As detailed in the latest Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, November 2014

⁴ It should be noted that it is not possible to make direct comparisons between local authorities in terms of the number of clients seen and number of problems raised as this can be dependent on local populations as well as the resources/capacity of each bureau.

- 2.4 We believe currently there is geographical *inconsistency* in the delivery of anti-poverty initiatives across Wales. This is largely due to the fact that some of the key Welsh Government anti-poverty programmes, including Communities First, Flying Start, and the Lift Programme adopt an area-based approach, generally targeting small areas with the highest concentrations of multiple deprivation.
- 2.5 We recognise there are a number of advantages of area-based approaches to tackling poverty:-
- targeting specific areas with known high levels of deprivation means the chances of reaching people in greatest need is increased;
 - people living in those areas are able to benefit from a wide range of activity and support;
 - it helps raise awareness of local services to people who may be unaware of available help or reluctant to seek help.
- 2.6 However our statistics help to highlight the fact that people can experience income poverty and struggle financially in any part of Wales. One of the main drawbacks of any anti-poverty initiative that is largely 'place-based' is that people in need living outside defined areas for action are likely to be excluded from such initiatives. In the case of Welsh Government schemes, this is particularly true for people living in rural areas with more dispersed populations. While rural Wales may be, on average, better off than the rest of Wales, there remains significant pockets of deprivation in many rural communities which are unable to access the funding support available through Welsh Government programmes such as Communities First. The impact of living in poverty is also exacerbated in rural areas due to a range of factors including poor physical access to services and higher living costs. We discuss this further in section 4.
- 2.7 We recognise equally however that adopting a purely 'people-based' approach to tackling poverty i.e. targeting particular groups of people, also risks just shifting the problem of reaching all those in need.
- 2.8 An OSCI report in 2012, which examined rural deprivation and the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD), supports our view of the limitations of area based approaches⁵. The report noted that area-based measures are less appropriate to identify dispersed rural disadvantage and that while deprivation indices such as the WIMD may be appropriate as a proxy for 'need', more direct measures of client group needs, such as income, should be used wherever possible and that funding formulae should reflect this.

The report points out that nine rural local authorities in Wales account for 29 per cent of people in Wales receiving income or employment-related benefits, but only 13 per cent of areas in the most deprived quintile. It then goes on to show that if income and employment-related benefits indicators from the WIMD were used to allocate resources

⁵ Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion (OCSI): Getting the measure of rural deprivation in Wales, commissioned by the Local Government Data Unit, Wales on behalf of the WLGA Rural Forum, May 2012, <http://www.ocsi.co.uk/news/wp-content/uploads/OCSI-GettingMeasureRuralDeprivationWales.pdf>

for a particular anti-poverty programme, rural local authorities would potentially receive twice the amount of funding they currently receive.

2.9 Citizens Advice Cymru believes that when allocating funds to tackle poverty area-based or people-based programmes should not be viewed as mutually exclusive.

As such the Welsh Government should:

- **review its overall approach to allocating resources for tackling poverty and look to adopt a combination of deprivation-based and socio-economic approaches to ensure all those in need of support are able to access help, with greater emphasis being placed on income-related factors.**

Effectiveness of area-based anti-poverty programmes such as Communities First

3.1 Communities First is often cited as the Welsh Government's flagship community regeneration programme and currently operates across 52 Cluster areas, largely based on the 10 per cent most deprived areas of Wales. While the programme has undergone a number of reviews and revisions since its inception in 2002, its founding principle, putting citizens at the centre of policy delivery, remains.

3.2 Citizens Advice Cymru generally supports this 'bottom up' approach as it helps to ensure that service delivery is based on local need and that there is community input into the development of projects and activities designed to help local people. It also helps to prevent duplication of services between different providers.

One of the drawbacks however is that it relies heavily on the strength of local leadership and can lead to inconsistency across different areas.

3.3 Since October 2013 Citizens Advice Cymru has managed a Welsh Government Communities First Shared Outcomes Project which supports 38 of the 52 Clusters that previously lacked dedicated, community-based outreach services for particular types of advice including debt, welfare benefits advice (including income maximisation) and financial capability provision. The project funds 12 Citizens Advice bureaux to work in partnership with community organisations, residents and other key agencies, to provide local access to advice until March 2016. It currently operates from over 120 locations within the Cluster areas.

3.4 Feedback from advisers working on this project has shown a number of key benefits of working in this way. These include:

- services are provided locally/going to where people are thereby reducing clients need for potentially costly travel; it also makes it easier for people, especially those with mobility problems, or those who may be concerned about travelling too far, to access the advice they need;

- being community-based, combined with more effective referral mechanisms, means advisers are reaching people in need who previously wouldn't have necessarily used Citizens Advice services;
- it helps to build positive relationships and a greater understanding between local organisations/community groups of the different services each provide enabling a more seamless journey for the client.

On the not so positive side poor communication between organisations and inconsistency due to staff turnover is said to have hindered progress in some areas.

3.5 Citizens Advice Cymru welcome the fact that this is an outcomes-based project which recognises the importance of assessing the impact service provision has on people's lives. Between April and December 2014 advisers had helped around 10,500 clients with more than 36,000 issues. Total income gains for the project during this time were £4.7 million while, the amount of personal debt managed or written off as a consequence of the advice intervention was £6.9 million.

3.6 As mentioned above the project also demonstrates the cross cutting way that organisations are working together to meet the objective of tackling poverty in Wales, with truly integrated working within the Clusters. Bureaux report close working relationships between themselves and other local initiatives/organisations including Sure Start, Families First, Flying Start, organisations working with people experiencing domestic abuse, disability organisations, credit unions and foodbanks.

However currently there isn't a formal mechanism for reporting this added value back to Welsh Government. **Citizens Advice Cymru believe it would be beneficial to promote and share some of these best practice ideas between areas and that Welsh Government could help to facilitate this.**

3.7 While the outcomes of this project are very positive as already stated in section 2, one of the main drawbacks of adopting such a specific area-based approach is that people in need living outside of the defined areas are excluded from the support that is available. This can be particularly problematic when boundaries lie within the same towns/cities. Anecdotal evidence from some of our advisers indicates this could be having a divisive impact within some communities. In terms of the Shared Outcomes Project we have managed to negotiate with Welsh Government that clients living outside the Cluster area can be seen, providing this doesn't have a detrimental impact on the availability of support for those living within the Cluster. **We believe similar flexibility regarding boundary definitions within the same geographical locations should be built into other Welsh Government anti-poverty programmes (where this isn't already the case).**

3.8 Citizens Advice Cymru strongly support the use of area-based approaches for the delivery of fuel poverty / energy efficiency programmes. We recognise that there are economies of scale to such models, and opportunities to reach households in deprived areas who may otherwise go under the radar of demand led schemes (whilst recognising that they also have their place).

The Welsh Government's Arbed scheme represents an example of good practice, however we are concerned about the availability of data to underpin decisions about which areas should be targeted. In order to do this effectively, the Welsh Government need an accurate picture of where energy inefficient homes in Wales are to be found. **We believe a comprehensive housing survey, comparable to the English Housing Survey and Scottish House Condition Survey, would be the most effective means of establishing where housing stock is the most energy inefficient in Wales. It would also enable a link to then be made with data on deprivation or other local eligibility criteria.**

- 3.9 Citizens Advice is currently undertaking research at a GB level exploring the value of area-based approaches to fuel poverty programmes. This will compare evidence across schemes in the three nations, and enable sharing of best practice. We will be happy to share the findings of this research with the Committee and the Welsh Government to inform its future plans for any area-based programmes.

Poverty and deprivation in rural Wales

- 4.1 As noted in section 2 people who live in poverty in rural areas experience problems with the same kind of issues to people living in poverty in urban areas. We welcome the focus on tackling poverty within the final proposals for the Welsh Government's Rural Development Programme (RDP) 2014-2020 and agree there needs to be a joined up approach to rural poverty so that specific interventions under the RDP and wider policy measures, including the Tackling Poverty Action Plan, complement each other⁶.
- 4.2 While there has been some progress, Citizens Advice Cymru believes many of the issues highlighted in the Rural Development Sub-committee's 2008 report 'Poverty and Deprivation in Rural Wales' continue today.
- 4.3 In particular we believe that without adequate research into the extent and nature of rural poverty in Wales it will be difficult to target measures at those most in need or to develop indicators by which to measure progress. This risks undermining the development of both the RDP and the Tackling Poverty Action Plan.
- 4.4 **Citizens Advice Cymru believes that:**

The Welsh Government should:

- **ensure that their Rural Development Plan is based on a full analysis of rural poverty, including the location and characteristics of the poorest households. This should include commissioning new research where data is not currently available;**

⁶ Citizens Advice Cymru Response to the Welsh Government: Wales Rural Development Programme 2014-20 Final Proposals
http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/index/policy/policy_publications/rural_development_plan_wales.htm

- **make tackling poverty a high priority for the Community Rural Development Fund.**

4.5 Income & employment:

4.5.1 Work remains a key route out of poverty however this requires that both work and measures that support it, such as childcare, are available and accessible. Greater levels of seasonal and part-time work, combined with generally lower wages mean in-work poverty is a growing problem in rural areas and people living in rural locations continue to be disadvantaged by a lack of different employment options.

4.5.2 The Welsh Government's Lift Programme aims to find suitable training or employment opportunities for 5,000 workless households in Wales however Lift projects currently only operate in Communities First areas. The final proposals for the RDP are unclear with regards to what arrangements are envisaged for addressing workless-ness in rural areas where the Lift Programme doesn't operate.

4.5.3 A Citizens Advice report on meeting the advice needs of rural areas published in 2010⁷ found a continued lower take-up of benefits compared to urban areas. Therefore indicators based on benefits (for example used in the employment and income domains of the WIMD) will underplay rural deprivation levels. This is particularly relevant in the case of the farming community who can be asset rich and cash poor.

4.5.4 Providing people with support to claim all the benefits they are entitled to, can make a significant difference to their income. The 'Better Advice Better Lives' (BABL) project, has been funded by Welsh Government and managed by Citizens Advice Cymru since January 2012 (having originated in 2001 as Better Advice Better Health). This project is an income maximisation programme aimed at reducing poverty and operates in every local authority area. In 2013/14 the total benefit/financial gains identified through the project for clients across all nine **rural** local authority areas in Wales amounted to £7.6 million.

4.5.5 **Citizens Advice Cymru believes that:**

The Welsh Government should:

- **consider ways in which the Lift programme or similar provision could be extended to all rural areas in Wales**
- **identify specific rural job creation targets within the RDP**
- **continue its commitment to funding income maximisation programmes such as Better Advice Better Lives.**

⁷ 'Meeting the advice needs of rural areas', Citizens Advice Rural Issues Group (2010)

4.6 Transport:

- 4.6.1 Employment opportunities in rural areas can be further impaired by infrequent and costly public transport and a heavy reliance on private transport leading to higher costs to travel to work, job interviews or other employment support, as well as other essential services.
- 4.6.2 Research commissioned by Citizens Advice Cymru in March 2014⁸ found over three-quarters of workers living in rural areas of Wales travel to work by car (76 per cent), compared to 68 per cent of those living in urban areas. According to that survey average estimated weekly travel costs (across all modes of transport) were £19.24/week in rural areas compared to £18.34/week in urban areas (a difference of around £47 a year).
- 4.6.3 For those without access to a car access to a reliable and affordable bus service can mean the difference between being able to work and welfare dependency. Research by Citizens Advice and Citizens Advice Scotland in 2010 found that the top barrier to finding work for people on jobseeker's allowance was the need to find a job near to where they lived⁹.
- 4.6.4 Citizens Advice Cymru believes that:**

- **Local Action Groups (as described in the RDP) should work with local transport service providers to develop flexible and responsive solutions to rural isolation, as well as raising awareness of existing and new travel options.**

4.7 Housing:

- 4.7.1 The Welsh Government's Dwelling Stock Estimates for 2012-13 note that the proportion of socially rented housing stock is lower in rural authorities than for other local authorities in Wales, with the lowest proportion in Ceredigion at 9% being little more than half the Wales average of 16%.¹⁰ Therefore the lack of affordable social housing remains a serious concern in rural areas.
- 4.7.2 For people unable to afford to buy their own home this will mean a heavier reliance on the private rented sector to meet their housing needs. Across Wales Citizens Advice consistently see double the amount of clients experiencing issues with their privately rented housing than clients living in the social housing sector. This is particularly true for bureaux based in the nine rural local authority areas. Since April 2014 they have seen nearly 1,200 clients seeking assistance with their PRS issues, compared to around 550 clients from the social rental sector. The type of issues for which PRS tenants seek help are generally consistent across Wales, the top 3 issues being: repairs and maintenance; rent and other charges and tenancy deposit protection.

⁸ The research was commissioned as part of the Wales Omnibus Survey undertaken by Beaufort Research Ltd. The survey is representative of the population resident in Wales aged 16 and over. A total of 1,012 interviews were conducted between 3rd and 21st March 2014

⁹ Fair welfare: supporting claimants into work, Citizens Advice and Citizens Advice Scotland, September 2010, <http://www.cas.org.uk/fairwelfaresupportingclaimantsbackintowork.aspx>

¹⁰ Welsh Government: Dwelling stock estimates for Wales, 2012-13, p6

4.7.3 We therefore welcomed the Welsh Government's steps to address the growth in the private rented sector through the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 with mandatory registration, licensing and training for PRS landlords.

The proposed Renting Homes Bill also offers a welcomed move to help clarify relationships between landlords and tenants; promote understanding and ensure consistency of practice. We particularly applaud the principle and the indication made by Welsh Government officials that retaliatory eviction will begin to be addressed by the Bill. It will be important for Welsh Government to monitor the impact of these changes on the private rented sector and in rural areas in particular, as part of this.

4.7.4 The nature of the housing stock in many rural areas combined with higher costs associated with non-gas fuels means that fuel poverty is proportionally higher amongst rural households. In Wales 45 per cent of households living off the mains gas grid are fuel poor, compared to 23 per cent of households on mains gas¹¹. The age and construction of many rural properties also makes them much more expensive to treat with energy efficiency measures.

In 2013 the Welsh Government's Tackling Poverty Action Plan update included a commitment to undertake a study 'to improve our understanding of the issues around housing and fuel poverty in rural areas and what might be done to reduce fuel poverty in these areas'¹². So far as we are aware this study has yet to be carried out. If this is the case, we believe this should be prioritised.

4.7.5 Citizen's Advice Cymru believes that:

The Welsh Government should:

- **proceed urgently with its proposed study of housing and fuel poverty in rural areas, if this has not yet been carried out.**
- **This study should also include an analysis of, and proposals for addressing the whole issue of affordable homes in rural Wales.**

4.8 Access to services:

4.8.1 The impact of living in poverty is frequently exacerbated in rural areas not only by higher living costs but also by poor physical access to services.

4.8.2 Recent research commissioned by Citizens Advice Cymru in March 2014¹³ found almost twice the proportion of people living in rural areas (11%) find it difficult to access a free-to-use cashpoint machine, compared to those living in urban areas

¹¹ 'Off-gas consumers: information on households without mains gas heating – Technical annex', Consumer Focus (September 2011)

¹² Welsh Government: Building Resilient Communities: taking forward the Tackling Poverty Action Plan, July 2013, p24.

¹³ Fieldwork for this research was subcontracted to Beaufort Research Ltd, Cardiff as part of the Quarterly Wales Omnibus Survey. The Survey is designed to be representative of the adult population in Wales aged 16 and over. A total of 1,012 interviews were conducted between 3rd and 21st March 2014.

(6%). Whilst over 1 in 7 people living in rural areas (15%) find it difficult to access a bank/building society, compared to 1 in 10 (10%) of those living in urban areas. Inaccessibility of physical banking and payment services, such as Post Offices and banks, can lead to difficulty in paying bills, accessing cash and accessing free bill payment services.

- 4.8.3 The continued roll-out of universal credit (UC), which will replace six existing in and out of work welfare benefits, will have major implications for claimants and their need to access financial services. With payments being paid directly into a bank account, claimants will need easy access to banking services in order to withdraw their money and pay bills (including rent). A study of more than 1,700 'UC relevant' clients in three Citizens Advice Bureaux (including Ynys Môn) found that more than half (52 per cent) would need help with banking services. For example, many people did not know how to set up payment arrangements for priority bills or monitor their banking transactions¹⁴.
- 4.8.4 Post Offices provide key services within rural communities in Wales. They are not only 'counters' for Royal Mail products but also have the potential to overcome many of the problems that people face with rural isolation by playing an integral role in the provision of essential services, such as cash and banking services, Government services, and shopping¹⁵. Previous work by Consumer Focus Wales shows just how much of a 'hub' the local Post Office can be in rural areas¹⁶. Post Office provision in rural areas is also provided through a range of outreach services, such as mobile vans or provision through a 'hosted outreach' such as in a pub or community centre.
- 4.8.5 The Post Office network is currently undergoing a large scale transformation programme which will see a large number of branches in rural areas becoming 'Post Office Locals'¹⁷. Consumer Futures raised concerns about consumer access to Post Office services and products through Post Office Locals in rural areas and now a variation of the Post Office Local model, the Local Plus¹⁸ is also being rolled out. Local Plus branches are typically located in deep rural areas.

Throughout this transformation process it will be important to ensure that the Post Office can continue to meet the needs of the rural communities they serve. We welcome the investment that the Welsh Government has made to support the sustainability of the post office network through initiatives such as the Post Office Diversification Fund. We believe such initiatives are particularly key in rural areas and would like to see these continue. We believe at a time of significant network change,

¹⁴ Citizens Advice: Universal credit managing migration pilot - Final results, December 2013; http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/index/policy/policy_publications/managing_migration_pilot_final_results.htm

¹⁵ Consumer Focus (2011) Rural Consumers in the UK

¹⁶ Consumer Focus Wales (2011) Post Office Briefing

¹⁷ Unlike traditional sub-post offices, Post Office Locals provide post office services as a secondary offer over a main retail counter, with transactions performed by general retail staff, rather than by dedicated Post Office staff at a separate counter. Post Office Locals are situated in a wide variety of outlets, which can include convenience stores, petrol stations, gardens centres and veterinary surgeries. They have extended opening hours but provide a more restricted range of post office products and services than is available at sub-post offices.

¹⁸ Local Plus branches provide the same range of products and services as Post Office Locals but with manual banking and bill payment services, and other complex transactions not provided at Locals.

being able to offer individual businesses support to retain accessible and appropriate post office services in local communities is particularly important.

- 4.8.6 Access to digital services is becoming increasingly critical for everyday living. In areas where physical services are being reduced, efficient on-line access is even more critical.

Superfast broadband (SFBB) coverage and access to a 3G mobile phone service varies considerably across Wales with many rural areas disproportionately affected by poor coverage. This not only adds to social exclusion it can also result in an inability to access the cheapest options through internet shopping, use price comparison or advice websites, and an inability to access the full range of financial services, including online banking and bill payment services. As already stated in paragraph 4.8.3 inadequate broadband coverage could also have considerable implications for benefit claimants as universal credit is rolled out. The majority of claimants will be expected to make and manage their benefits claim on-line. Job searches and applications are also increasingly dependent on access to the internet.

Some people are also digitally excluded because they lack the necessary skills and confidence therefore supporting the development of IT skills is also important. Our recent study among 'UC relevant' clients found two thirds of them (66 per cent) were unable to get on-line to manage a claim at the initial assessment stage. Following support from bureaux, 62 per cent had improved skills and abilities¹⁹.

- 4.8.7 According to Ofcom's latest communications infrastructure report there is currently a significant disparity in the availability of SFBB services between rural and urban areas. Whereas 83 per cent of urban premises have access to SFBB in the UK, the figure is just 22 per cent in rural areas²⁰. Wales currently has the lowest coverage of SFBB services of all the UK nations at 55 per cent (58 per cent NGA coverage²¹), although it has seen increased coverage in the last year²². Powys, Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire and Conwy have the lowest SFBB coverage at between 0-20 per cent.
- 4.8.8 Citizens Advice Cymru welcomes the Superfast Cymru partnership between the Welsh Government and BT (which aims to achieve 96 per cent coverage of fast fibre broadband in Wales by 2016), and the Superfast Cymru Infill Project for premises not covered by other schemes.

We would urge that efforts continue to extend coverage to rural areas as a priority, and local communities are made aware of the availability and advantages of fast fibre broadband at the earliest opportunity.

- 4.8.9 Advice and capability services achieve more than mitigation of the effects of poverty on individuals and families. Timely, high-quality advice can help people fight discrimination and retain paid employment. Financial capability-building services

¹⁹ Op cit 14

²⁰ Ofcom: 2014 Communications Infrastructure Report, p3

²¹ Most but not all 'next generation access' (NGA) technologies (eg. cable) provide SFBB

²² Op cit 20, p21

such as the Money Advice Service, delivered in Wales by Citizens Advice Cymru, help people to acquire skills in budgeting and money management.

- 4.8.10 There are however specific challenges around both access to advice and service delivery in rural areas. These include the need to travel long distances, increased staff costs, greater difficulty in promoting services and recruiting volunteers, and a lack of other local referral partners.
- 4.8.11 Improving telephone access, as well as on-line and e-mail provision can help to address this problem and improved broadband coverage should also help with this. However, for some purposes face-to-face advice will always be necessary, such as where numerous or complex documents need to be examined, when people lack suitable access to a telephone or the internet, or where home visits are required (e.g. because of health or mobility problems).
- 4.8.12 Facilitating arrangements for local outreach, such as mobile advice services or advice sessions in community buildings, is one way to enable better access to face-to-face advice in rural Wales. One such example is the Gwynedd CAB mobile unit. Funded by the Big Lottery fund it takes trained volunteers to rural locations where they offer advice with access via webcam to generalist advisers and specialist caseworkers based in the area office in Caernarfon.

4.8.13 Citizen's Advice Cymru believes that:

The Welsh Government should ensure local development strategies (as referenced in the RDP):

- **include plans to liaise with banks and other mainstream financial service providers, as well as credit unions, to ensure that people in rural areas have access to the range of services that they need**
- **develop people's financial skills through engagement with financial capability programmes, and ensure that they get problem-solving support from generalist advice services**
- **ensure that digital access is a high priority for local interventions, and explore innovative ways to achieve access such as using shops, community groups or mobile services such as mobile advice provision**
- **identify and facilitate learning channels for developing people's IT skills**
- **engage with the Superfast Cymru partnership and the Superfast Cymru Infill Project scheme to maximise access to fibre broadband and play a role in ensuring that rural communities are made aware of the availability and potential of improved access at the earliest opportunity.**

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