

REPORT OF HOUSING, HEALTH & SOCIAL EXCLUSION REVIEW PANEL

(Meeting held 19 June 2002)

1. CITIZENS' ADVICE BUREAUX AND THE NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA (REPORT B) (MINUTE 7)

The Panel has received a most interesting and detailed presentation from the Joint Leadership Group of the New Forest Citizens' Advice Bureaux (CABx) which contained details of the work undertaken by CABx in the District; funding issues, quality matters; problems experienced and the various conclusions drawn from their experiences.

Generally, the work undertaken by the CABx covers advice in the following areas:-

Consumer	Money Advice
Welfare Benefits	Employment
Housing	Family and Personal Matters
Income Tax	Immigration and Nationality
Health	Social Care
Education	Legal Issues and Processes

There has been a steady rise in the number of cases dealt with from a total of just over 10,000 in 1988/99 to the current 32,389 per year, which is partially explicable by increasing indebtedness. In particular, mortgage debt has risen from the recession of the early 1990's. In short, the workload has tripled over fourteen years.

Advice Bureaux Advisors are highly skilled and need to undergo a rigorous programme of training which covers all possible facets of work over the period of a year. This training is closely supervised by a Senior Advisor.

At the moment, the District Council and the CABx have entered the last year of a ten year funding regime which had been established between both parties. Originally, budgets had been set for the entire ten year period and were meant to cover 90% of core funding. However, the Bureaux feel that the funding regime is outdated whilst demand has continued to increase. Other sources of funding are actively sought by the Bureaux but, in many cases, additional joint income can only be secured once core funding is in place.

The Bureaux also feels that they have fallen somewhat behind in terms of computerisation and other office equipment.

Some work has already been done on producing a Service Level Agreement (SLA) jointly between the District Council and the Bureaux to ensure that core funding is maintained. The CABx continue to believe that the ten year funding agreement requires a suitable replacement and renewed impetus is required to finish the work which has already been done. The Joint Leadership Group has produced a draft SLA and are anxious to progress matters.

An independent five year review has concluded that a well funded Citizens' Advice Bureau sector reduces social exclusion; increases benefit take up amongst the entitled; improves physiological and social well-being; reduces homelessness; improves debt management; increases financial literacy; reduces unfair dismissal; encourages return to work and reduces crime generally.

Following the presentation, a number of questions were asked of the Bureaux representatives by members of the Panel. These covered such areas as recruitment and training process; the need for further computerisation; and the extent of financial contributions from town and parish councils.

The Panel has resolved that the Chairman should write on their behalf to the Leader of the Council, requesting that the Cabinet appoints a 'Champion' who can become involved with the final drafting and application of a suitable Service Level Agreement governing the Council's funding of the local Citizens' Advice Bureaux, with a view to its full implementation from April 2003. A further report has also been requested to the September meeting of the Panel to outline progress.

Copies of the presentation made at the Panel meeting are available in the Members' Room.

**Cllr B Rule
CHAIRMAN**

(HS190602)