

Citizens Advice Bureau

A Review of the Year

1 April 2003 to 31 March 2004

Winchester bureau welcomes new project

This has been my first year as Chair of the Trustees and has been a year of consolidation of existing advice services.

The Bureau did however commence one new project during the year, that of Money Advice for tenants of Winchester City Council. This Partnership with our main funder, to provide their vulnerable tenants with independent advice, has proved very worthwhile and quickly brought very significant benefits to a number of tenants.

Most of the objectives of the Bureau's business plan for the year have been achieved. In particular the number of volunteer advisors has increased through successful recruitment and retention. This has helped us to deal with the record number of over 20,000 enquiries in the year.

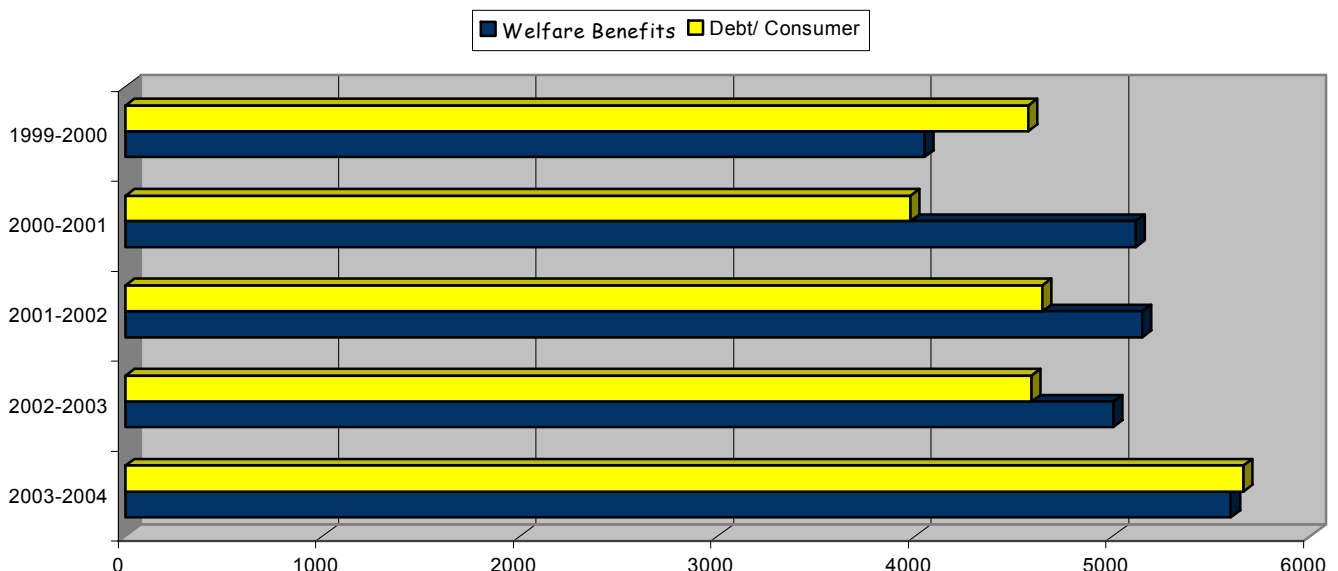
The larger numbers of staff and volunteers have presented accommodation problems and these are now being resolved by the renting of a small amount of additional space and the addition of another interview room.

During the year the Trustees have undertaken and implemented a review of staff roles and pay and addressed issues of accommodation and health and safety.

The Trustees continually grapple with reconciling increased workload of the Bureau with constraints imposed by funders and the budget. They are grateful for the enormous energy of staff and volunteers and for the contributions of our various funders without whom the work of the Bureau would not be possible.

*David Marklew, Chairman
Trustee Board*

Welfare Benefits and Consumer and Debt enquiries compared over last 5 years



Projects/services accommodated within Winchester Citizens Advice Bureau

Mental Health Benefits Adviser - This project in its seventh year, is a contract with Winchester Social Services, and accepts referrals from the Community Mental Health Team and staff at Melbury Lodge Psychiatric Unit at the Royal Hampshire County Hospital. Most of the clients seen suffer from severe and enduring mental health problems. Over the past year it was noticeable that the number of enquiries for debt almost reached the total number of enquiries for benefits. This reflects the greater indebtedness of society in general. There was also an increase in enquiries concerning housing, demonstrating the effect that debt, and problems claiming benefits, can have on a client's security of tenure. *Statistics for the year: 799 client contacts, 31 home visits, and 32 contacts at Connaught House the Mental Health Day Hospital.*

Winchester Housing Association Money Advice Worker - This project takes referrals from WHA Housing Officers. Vulnerable clients are referred when they are in rent arrears and could be facing possession proceedings. When necessary they are represented in Court. Clients commonly have more non-priority (unsecured loans and credit card debts) than priority debts (rent, Council Tax, utilities). Problems arise because clients pay non-priority creditors first. By writing to the non-priority creditors and negotiating with them to accept lower payments, or no payments at all, the adviser can free up money so that the client can pay their rent and avoid eviction. *Statistics for the year: 197 client contacts, 350 debt enquiries, 6 clients had only one contact whereas one client had 30 contacts.*

Citizens Advice Outreach Service - January 2003 marked the beginning of the new Citizens Advice Outreach Service based in the Citizens Advice Bureau, Winchester. The service provides home visits in Winchester city and the northern parishes, a Disability Telephone Advice Line and an outreach service for rural communities. The aim is to offer advice and information to people who would not easily be able to access the Bureau because of transport, mobility, family, health reasons or caring responsibilities. Rural bureaux throughout the country are running successful advice sessions in healthcare settings and research has shown that there is a direct link between ill health and financial problems. In November 2003 we started a weekly advice session on Mondays, in the Alresford Doctors' Surgery, on a drop-in basis. We are available to all members of the community and will advise clients on a wide range of subjects. In April 2004 we will start a similar service on Wednesdays in South Wonston at the branch surgery of the Sutton Scotney Doctors' Practice. *Statistics for the year: There were a total of 1,236 contacts and 304 home visits, 312 were new cases, an average of 2 people per case were helped.*

Winchester City Council Money Advice Worker - The project worker was recruited in September 2003 to this newly developed project. The Worker takes referrals from Winchester City Council Housing Officers and also provides training and support to the Housing Department around welfare benefits and money advice. Tenants in rent arrears often face possession proceedings and many offer the opinion that they are experiencing a period of mental ill health or a chaotic period of their lives. A thorough review of their financial situation often reveals that they are not receiving benefits to which they are entitled and this is frequently as a result of the complexity of making the claim, rather than their lack of knowledge of their entitlement. Assistance with benefit claims, negotiations with the Housing Department and Court representation, if appropriate, often create the breathing space the client needs to get back on their feet and better able to manage their situation. *Statistics for the 6-month period: 120 client contacts, 455 enquiries, 5 court representations.*

Winchester Citizens Advice Bureau

The Bureau provides an open door policy to provide advice and/or information on any subject to personal callers or on the telephone, by fax or email. Subject areas include: Social Security benefits, sickness/disability benefits, housing, debt counselling/management, employment, legal matters, consumer problems, family and personal issues, health, immigration and nationality, community care, tax, leisure and access to other services.

During 2003/04 Winchester Bureau for the first time received over 20,000 enquiries.

Our main enquiry areas continue to be consumer, debt and welfare benefits totalling approximately 54% of our work.

Prison Four advisers on a rota basis offered a weekly advice session at Winchester prison. We had a 51% increase in client contacts and helped with 415 enquiries, an increase of 38% over last year.

County Court Advice Desk 76 clients were supported by the volunteer team who undertake this service on a rota basis. They maintained their 100% record ensuring clients do not receive outright possession orders.

Volunteers Our retention of volunteers improved dramatically this year. 24 joined and only 2 (14) trained advisers and 2 (13) trainees left, (last year's numbers in brackets). The role of Receptionist continues to be developed with retiring advisers being attracted to the role. Volunteers who possess keyboard and computer skills have been recruited to support advisers in getting information into CASE (see below).

CASE The introduction of CASE, a national computer programme for storage of client details and their interview, was postponed from January 2004 as the programme proved to be unstable for a few weeks. In March the bureau closed for a week enabling staff to complete their training on the programme and then, opened with an appointment only system to personal callers in the short term.

Training Two volunteer advisers achieved their *Certificate in Generalist Advice Work*.

The bureau recruited 12 volunteer advisers in April 2003 and a further 4 in January 2004. Our Training Officer, Ann Gilbertson left us in September 2003 to teach A-level law at a local college and the bureau was lucky to recruit Lizzie Williams to the role. Lizzie is undertaking her own *Generalist Advice Work* training, whilst shadowing Jenny Meadows, Bureau Manager who has taken over the role of training officer until Lizzie is up to speed. The bureau is fortunate to have Mary Barnard, Jean Horn, and Jenny Meadows, all of whom are experienced tutors able to cascade their experience and knowledge, particularly around welfare benefits, debt, and consumer issues to our volunteers.

The Bureau trained Winchester City Council and Winchester Housing Association Officers in basic welfare benefits and debt.

Social Policy We sent 157 bureau evidence forms to our national office.

We worked with our MP, Mark Oaten on the issue of clients receiving an increase in benefit, which then took them off free prescriptions. The government realised their mistake and brought in a "quick fix" to ensure clients on low income are not penalised.

We are delighted to welcome Andrew Sedden as Money Advice caseworker and Lynne Vincent as Administration Officer for the Winchester City Council Money Advice project.

Winchester Citizens Advice Bureau

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The Citizens Advice Bureau is an **independent** service providing, **free**, **confidential** and **impartial** advice.

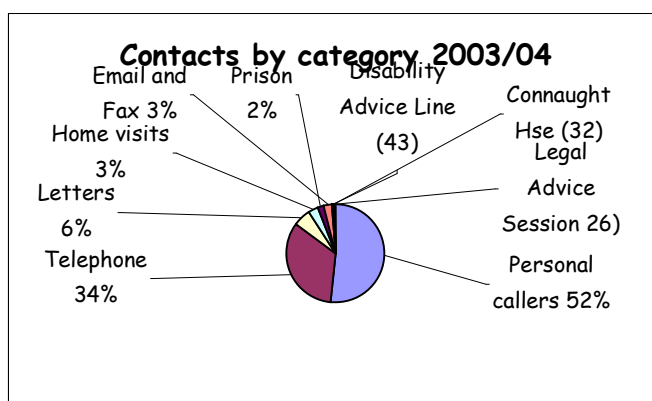
Aims: To ensure that individuals do not suffer through lack of knowledge of their rights and responsibilities or of the services available; or through an inability to express their needs effectively and equally to exercise a responsible influence on the development of social policies and service, both locally and nationally.

OPENING HOURS	
Monday	10 - 4
Tuesday	10 - 1
Wednesday	10 - 4
Thursday	10 - 4
Friday	10 - 1
Alresford GP Surgery	Mon 1.30 - 3.30
South Wonston GP Surgery	Wed 9.30 - 11.30

OTHER SERVICES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outreach at Winchester Prison (Mon pm) • Legal Advice Session (fortnightly) Thurs pm • County Court Desk - lay representation at possession hearings (bi-monthly)

PROJECTS AND STAFF	
1 April 2003 - 31 March 2004	
Bureau Manager	Jenny Meadows
Deputy Manager	Mary Barnard
Training Officer	Ann Gilbertson until Sept 03 Lizzie Williams from Jan 04
Admin Officers	Denise Cox (CAOS) Chris Janson - (WHA) Liz Sladen Ian Tattersall Lynne Vincent (WCC from Jan 04)
Mental Health Benefits Adviser	Jean Horn
WHA Money Advice Worker	Jean Horn
Citizens Advice Outreach Service	Maggie Schofield, Manager Denise Cox/Kate Gedye/ David Ross (job-share), Adviser
WCC Money Advice Worker	Andrew Sedden from Oct 03
25	Volunteer Advisers
21	Vol Trainee/Trainee Advisers
15	Volunteer Admin workers

PROJECTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental Health Welfare Benefits Adviser • Winchester Housing Association Money Advice • Citizens Advice Outreach Service • Winchester City Council Money Advice



We would like to thank our funders Winchester City Council (Community and Housing Departments); Hampshire County Council; H M Prison, Winchester; Winchester Group for Disabled People, and Winchester Housing Association. One-off grants received from Friends of Citizens Advice and Citizens Advice Rural Grants.

PROJECTED FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

- Premises (additional interview room)
- E-government
- Winchester Neighbourhood Mediation Service
- Winchester and District Savers, (Credit Union)