**CITIZEN’S ADVICE BELFAST**

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

**2017**

**INTRODUCTION**

Citizens Advice Belfast (CAB) is an organisation that works within the membership and standards quality framework of the Citizens Advice charity. Operating from six sites in Belfast (plus additional sites located in hospitals), CAB welcomed over 54,000 clients in the year April 2015-March 2016. Over 50% of these issues were benefit related.

## Vision, Mission and Key Principles

### Vision

### Through service excellence, we exist to create positive impacts for individuals and communities by providing clarity and solutions on the issues affecting them.

### Mission

Our mission is:

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

### Key Principles for Advice services

These include:

* Free at the point of use;
* Impartial;
* Confidential; and
* Independent.

## Staff and volunteers

CAB operates currently with 25 staff and over 50 volunteers.

## Range of services

CAB helps people resolve their debt, benefits, housing, legal, discrimination, employment, immigration, consumer and other problems and is available to everyone regardless of race, gender, sexuality, age, nationality, disability or religion.

Under our Membership Agreement with Citizens Advice NI we must

* provide assisted information services in all advice subjects where the client requests this or where the client is capable of taking the issue forward on their own behalf;
* provide generalist advice to clients in welfare benefits, money advice, housing, employment, consumer, immigration and nationality, family and personal matters, taxes, health and education;
* provide generalist advice to clients on discrimination across all subjects.

We also aim to ensure that clients in need of casework in money advice and welfare benefits are able to get this and where it is appropriate provide self-help information services as long as it is clear to clients that they have access to an advisor during specified hours whether by phone or face to face.

A typical “day in the life” of CAB is outlined below:

**Figure 1.1 “A day in the Life”**



There are a number of ways in which CAB advisors can help people to resolve a problem.

Advisors do not tell clients what to do, but explain their options and the possible outcomes of different courses of action. Clients are encouraged to make their own decisions and act on their own behalf. This enables clients to manage their own problems by focusing on their needs as individuals.

CAB Advisors (both paid and volunteer), all of whom are trained to a formal level (known as the “Advisor Training Programme”, or ATP), can:

* Interview clients to find out their problems;
* Access Advisernet for up to the minute information;
* Help clients to negotiate with companies or service providers such as creditors or to appeal against decisions, for example, social security benefit claims;
* Write letters or phone companies and service providers on behalf of clients;
* Help clients to prioritise their problems, for example, to sort out benefit issues and creditors;
* Help clients with form filling, for example, to claim social security benefits;
* Represent clients at tribunals; and
* Refer clients to specialist caseworkers for complex problems or to other agencies when appropriate.

## Location of services

CAB has six advice offices in Belfast, located in the following areas:

* North Belfast – Duncairn Gardens;
* East Belfast – Holywood Arches Medical Centre;
* West Belfast – Springfield Road, Suffolk and Andersonstown and Shankill Road; and
* Central Belfast – Merrion Centre, Howard Street.

## operating model

The current operating model is one which involves the primacy of phone advice. This has had a marked impact on the ability of offices to manage high levels of advice demand. CA Belfast moved all it’s offices onto a single number for the provision of advice - 0300 1 233 233.

We are currenlty expanding our operating channels and whilst retaining face to face services, we are now offering email advice and a webchat facility.

This operating model enables CA to respond better to demand, provide clients with a range of ways in which they can access advice services and deliver a more consistent level of service. It also ensures that the needs of clients match the method of advice they are given, as outlined below:

**Figure 1.3 Tailored model of intervention to meet client need and advice type**

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