**Hamilton Citizens Advice Bureau**

**Background Information**

**The Organisation**

Citizens Advice Bureaux are the major providers of information, advice and assistance, operating from 219 service points that cover Scotland from the islands to the City Centres.

The Bureaux are staffed by trained volunteer advisers, paid support, specialist and management staff, and provide responses to clients' enquiries covering the whole range of social issues. Despite being a generalist service, most enquiries are concerned with matters related to problems of poverty and deprivation.

Bureaux are autonomous bodies under the control of a local or Board of Trustees. All bureaux are members of Citizens Advice Scotland (The Scottish Association of CABx), and as such must meet specific conditions of membership related to standards of service and other matters.

Enquiries are across a wide range of fields, and clients expect high quality advice and assistance (including representation at tribunals and in Court when appropriate) on what are, at times, highly complex matters. The main enquiries at the present time relate to problems with social security and money; utilities; housing; goods and services; employment; and family and personal situations.

**Hamilton Citizens Advice Bureau**

The Bureau has been providing an independent advice service in Hamilton since 1970. It currently operates from two offices: Regent Way in Hamilton Town Centre and Almada Tower in Almada Street which is very close to the Sheriff Court and South Lanarkshire Council Offices. Both offices are close to railway stations and several bus routes. The office within Birnie House at Hamilton Sheriff Court is currently closed.

The Bureau is an incorporated company limited by guarantee in January 2010 and is a charity registered with the OSCR. Our work is regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority.

Hamilton CAB operating area includes Larkhall, Stonehouse, Blantyre, Bothwell & Uddingston. Some of our services have a wider geographical catchment – primarily the In-CourtLay Representation servicewhich covers the Hamilton and Lanark Sheriff Court areas and South Lanarkshire Debt Helpline which operates across South Lanarkshire in partnership with neighbouring CABs.

Pre COVID 19 we operated both a drop-in at the Bureau and a responsive outreach service in 9 health and community settings as well as offering home visits where required. We plan to recover these services during 2022 as pandemic protections permit.

**The People**

Our Board of Trustees provide support for the Chief Officer and ensure the good governance of the organisation.

We currently have 15 volunteer advisers. We participate in the Community Jobs Scotland Scheme offering employment opportunities to young people in advice and customer service. A team of 23 paid staff provide specialist advice and management support across the services. The Chief Officer has day-to-day operational management control within the agreed strategic and policy framework.

**Funding**

The Bureau has service level agreements in place with South Lanarkshire Council for core and money advice services; the Scottish Legal Aid Board for the In-Court Lay Representation service and SL Debt Helpline; SL Health & Social Care Partnership fund the Health Hubs; CAS fund welfare reform and Covid debt recovery work and Cora Foundation fund our Beacons Project. We have other smaller funded projects too. Total Income in 2021/2022 was just over £715,000.

**The Service**

We provide information, advice and representation in a wide range of areas: social security benefits, housing, debt, employment, consumer, family and relationships, legal, health, utilities etc. In 2021-22 we provided advice to more than 3,400 people on just over 15,800 issues across 16 areas of law. Social Security benefits are about 35% of our workload with utilities, legal issues, housing and debt the other key areas.

We achieved re-accreditation to the Scottish National Standards for Information & Advice Providers in 2019 and are again in the process of re-accreditation. We provide advice and representation to Type III level (representation in sheriff court and benefits tribunals) in housing, money and welfare benefits.

We normally operate a mix of drop-in and appointments five days per week with email and web enquiry options offering out of hours contact. The In-Court Lay Representation service provides advice and representation at mortgage repossession, eviction and sequestration court hearings and accepts referrals from four CABs, local authorities and other public and third sector organizations. Our Health & Welfare Advice Hubs operate within health centres and alongside GP surgeries in the Hamilton Area taking referrals from GPs and health practitioners.

However over the last two years we have been primarily offering a triage service by telephone, email and web enquiry. Face to Face appointments have continued to be available as Covid conditions allowed. We have well established video and teleconference systems and try to adapt to individual preferences. Home Visits are offered on a risk assessed basis. All services operate within an organisation-wide rota.

**Strategic Planning & Development**

We have had an ambitious plan in place which is enabling us to transform HCAB service from a reactive service providing advice at times of crisis to proactively providing education, information, advice and support to help with life changes/ transitions and meeting different community needs. We are developing a new strategic plan for 2022-27 which will be recovery focused.

**Generalist Service**

The team consists of volunteer Generalist Advisers with some volunteers working at Type II casework in social security benefits and money advice. We provide Money Talks checks, support for EU Nationals, ASAP, PASS and PensionWise appointments.

We have a part time post linked to a SENSE Scotland project led by Glasgow NW CAB. This member of staff also works part time providing Session Support/ Co-ordination and case checking.

**Money Advice Service**

South Lanarkshire Debt Helpline is a relatively new service which aims to improve the debt advice journey for people. Two Helpline Advisers work on a rota basis across 6 days. A part time co-ordinator provides casework support and liaison with clients.

A money advice caseworker takes referrals from the Helpline.

The team is managed day-to-day by the Lead Money Advice Officer who also carries a part-time equivalent caseload. The LMAO reports to the Team Leader General and Money Advice Services.

The money advice team work closely with the In-Court Advice team and in particular the Money Advice Link Worker. The In-Court Team Leader will provide peer support and technical supervision to the LMAO as required.

**In-Court Advice Lay Representation**

The service has been operating in Hamilton Sheriff Court since 2004 with extension to Lanark Sheriff Court in 2012. Our work is highly regarded by Sheriffs and Sheriff Court staff with excellent working relationships. The well established In-Court Advice Team consists of a Team Leader / Lay Representative, 2 Lay Representatives, and a Money Advice Link Worker. The Service Co-ordinator provides casework and admin support. The Team’s current working arrangements reflect the Covid protections and guidance in place. We currently do not have access to our Birnie House office so working in a blended way across the CAB offices and home working.

Workload is currently not at full capacity due to the emergency measures put in place to protect people’s homes and other mitigations. However civil court work is recovering and in particular we note Simple Procedure and mortgage repossession cases increasing in recent months. Court Hearings are mostly held by tele or video conference with occasional in-person Hearings.

**Health & Welfare Advice Service**

This service has been operation since 2014 where caseworkers provide advice, intensive practical support and representation to people living with long term conditions or experiencing physical/mental ill-health.

People referred to this service often have very complex situations and a mix of health problems, money, housing, relationship and other issues affecting their everyday life.

Caseworkers work alongside people building up confidence and trust, helping them to navigate their way through systems and services and connect them to local support and services as appropriate.