

**citizens
advice
bureau**



- independent - impartial - confidential - free - independent - impartial - confidential - free -

Lancaster Citizens Advice Bureau

70th Annual Report
2008 - 2009

LANCASTER CITIZENS ADVICE BUREAU
Registered Charity Number: 1103704
Company Registration Number: 05093344



Supported by

**LANCASTER
CITY COUNCIL**

Promoting City, Coast & Countryside

For further information about Lancaster Citizens Advice Bureau visit
www.lancastercab.org

Mission Statement

Through a managed approach we aim to provide information, advice and assistance which is:

- accessible
- responsive to need
- empowering for the client
- of a consistently high quality

for which there is a continuing and increasing need. We work within the aims and principles of the CAB Service, to address issues raised by social exclusion.

Aims of the CAB

- to provide the advice people need for the problems they face

and equally

- to improve the policies and practices that affect peoples lives

Principles of the Service

The service which the Citizens Advice Bureau offers is:

- Free** We offer a free service to all our clients.
- Confidential** Nothing about a client is revealed outside of the Bureau without the clients permission.
- Impartial** The service is available to everyone regardless of race, sexuality, gender, religion or disability.
- Independent** We offer our service to all our clients independent of any funding body.

The main thrust of the role of the CAB Service is that of empowerment – either of the individual through access to an understanding of that individual's rights and responsibilities; or of the community by using its direct experience of adverse effects of policy decisions to challenge and change those policies.

Who We Are

31 March 2009

Trustee Board

Richard Brown, Susie Charles, Michelle Collins, Sarah Cross, Peter Gee, John Gilbert, Brian Penney (resigned Jan 2009), Roger Sherlock, Jude Towers, Martin Widden (Chair) David Fatkin (Treasurer)

Volunteers

Adele, Alison, Amy, Anita, Anne H, Anne M, Arthur, Caroline, Chantel, Chris, David, Diana, Ele, Emma, Gordon, Ian, Jack, Jessica, Joan, Joanne J, JoanneN, Jonathan, Liz, Margaret, Marilyn, Marion, Mohassan, Richard, Scott, Sheila, Steven, Fiona, Alex, Nicholas, Giedre, Maritsa, James W, Manolita, Annette, Janelle, Louisa, Jan, Hannah, Lisa, Carole, Gwar, Jenny, Andrew, Genna, Laura, James H, Holly S, Olivia, Chloe, Joanna, Craig

Volunteers who left 2008/2009 –

Amy P, Catherine, Anne A, Charlie, Els, GordonR, Holly T, Julianne, Karen, Kirsty, Lara, Laura, Lauren, Michael, Nicola, Ruth, Thomas, Victor, Francine

Bureau Manager

Rachel Barlow

Paid Staff

Adam, Amy, Caroline, Helen, Hilary, Jane, Jeremy, Janet, Laura, Leoni, Robin, Sue

Paid staff who left in 2008/2009 –

Brenda

What our clients say about us

‘Very impressed with information available and the way explained.’

‘If I had another issue I would come back.’

‘Prompt – pleasant and helpful.’

‘I have confidence in the Citizens Advice Bureau to use again if required.’

‘Very good advice on two previous occasions. Very polite and helpful staff on this occasion.’

70th Annual Report 2008 – 2009

Chairman's Report 2008 – 2009

The year 2009 marks 70 years since Lancaster Citizens Advice Bureau was founded at the start of the Second World War, to provide information and advice to citizens in those difficult times. Over these 70 years the aims and principles of the service have remained essentially unchanged. Advice is free, confidential, impartial and independent, and as well as advice and support the Bureau aims to gather evidence about policies and practices that affect people's lives and to lobby to improve them.

The Bureau's first location in September 1939 was in New Street with just two people, and although it moved from there first to Castle Hill, and then to Church Street, it remained a small operation with only around three volunteer staff. It moved to its present address, 87 King Street, in 1966, where it was commented that there was 'more space and privacy for interviewing.' This consisted of one room divided into three, forming the office and two interview rooms. The Bureau's services were gradually becoming more professional, extending into representation at tribunals and at County Court, and in 1989 the Bureau was 'bursting at the seams.' More space was secured at the premises in King Street in 1996, and since then the Bureau has grown further. It now has 13 paid staff, some full-time and some part-time, 40 volunteer advisers, 26 other volunteer workers, and 10 Trustee Board members, whose time is also given voluntarily.

Currently the Bureau receives funding from two principal sources, Lancaster City Council and the Legal Services Commission (LSC), as well as smaller but very valuable amounts from other sources including the Big Lottery, Surestart, the Financial Inclusion Fund, the National Housing Advisory Service and the Dowager Countess Eleanor Peel Trust. These smaller grants are always time-limited; securing funding for the service requires almost continuous effort by the Trustees and the Bureau staff.

In March this year the Bureau was successful in gaining 12-month funding to provide additional hours of advice, in recognition of the increased demand for the service caused by the recession. This has enabled it to open for an extra 6 hours per week, and to expand into ground-floor areas of the King Street building that were previously occupied by Age Concern. As well as providing welcome extra space for client interviews, this allows the Bureau both to provide a better service to clients who are unable to climb stairs, and also to consider taking on workers with this difficulty.

During the year we have been engaged in discussions with Morecambe CAB about collaboration and joint working. These moves are at an early stage, but both sides recognise that closer collaboration would be to the advantage of clients. The discussions are continuing.

On behalf of the Trustees, I record here our strong appreciation of the major funding the Bureau receives from Lancaster City Council and the Legal Services Commission, and all our other funding, from project grants to individual donations. All of this funding contributes vitally to the services the Bureau provides for the citizens of Lancaster.

Finally, and very far from least, I thank all the staff, both paid and volunteers, for the dedicated work they put into the CAB service.

Martin Widden
Trustee Board Chairman
September 2009

Coping with the Downturn - Welfare Benefits Advice

Welfare Benefit and Tax Credit advice at Lancaster Citizens Advice Bureau is a large and crucial part of our work. It is usually the most vulnerable groups who seek this type of advice – those on the lowest incomes, sick and disabled people, carers and elderly people. Our clients are often people who struggle more than most to understand the complexities of the benefits system – often the only system that provides them with an income, on which they rely completely.

We undertake specialist casework in welfare benefits up to review and appeal tribunal level. We are able to do this as we are fortunate to have funding from the Legal Services Commission for a full time benefits caseworker.

Benefit Entitlement

Checking a client's benefit entitlement is an important and routine part of many enquiries, especially those relating to debt and housing. As more clients experience hardship because of the economic situation, accessing their benefit entitlement can prove to be a lifeline, allowing people to increase income and manage the increases in the cost of living and deal with priority debts.

It is essential where clients have debts because their income has dwindled as a result of job loss or lay-offs to ensure that they receive as much help in benefits as is possible. The benefit rules have been changed this year to try and assist homeowners cope with the downturn.

DWP Housing Costs

- There has been a change to the rules to help the newly unemployed with mortgage costs from the DWP. The government has cut the amount of time a benefit claimant has to wait before getting help with housing costs from 39 weeks to 13. This positive step has been of great assistance to clients in their negotiations with their mortgage lenders.

Employment Support Allowance

- Perhaps not so attuned to the economic situation was the introduction of Employment Support Allowance (ESA) to replace Incapacity Benefit and Income Support claimed on grounds of incapacity for work.

The stated aim of the government strategy behind this change was to move as many incapacity claimants as possible off benefits and back into work. Unfortunately the bottom fell out of the job market just as the new benefit came into being. There is very little feedback on whether this change is meeting its targets. Citizens Advice, along with other welfare rights organisations, was expecting an enormous surge of challenges and appeals against the new benefit – so far this has not been the case.

Welfare Benefits Case Study

Mr X, a disabled client with severe arthritis, had been in receipt of Disability Living Allowance (DLA) for both his care and mobility needs. He had originally been awarded benefit for low mobility needs and middle care needs, with some income support. After he had completed the form for the renewal of the benefit he had his DLA stopped altogether, receiving nothing. This loss of a disability benefit had a detrimental effect on his other benefits, causing the loss of income support, housing benefit and council tax benefit previously awarded because of the care needs acknowledged in his DLA claim.

Mr X came to the Bureau for help with an appeal against the decision that he was no longer entitled to DLA. It seemed to him that his condition had got worse since he first put in his claim, rather than better. It became clear that Mr X had received help with completing his first claim form, but none with the renewal form. In the renewal form he had not been able to give a true picture of all the difficulties he experienced with day-to-day activities including moving around and looking after himself.

The Bureau caseworker asked Mr X's GP for medical evidence of Mr X's condition, which showed that his condition had grown more severe over the past two years. The submission prepared by the caseworker for the appeal hearing, along with the GP's supporting evidence, was strong enough for the Appeals Tribunal not only to restore the original award, but to increase it to reflect Mr X's greater need for care. This higher award had a further knock-on effect on Mr X's other benefits, not only restoring his previous weekly income of £156.00 but increasing it by a further £36.50, as well as reinstating his housing benefit and council tax benefit.

Key Facts in 2008 – 2009

- 25% of Bureau enquiries related to Welfare Benefits
- 502 benefit enquiries were concerned with disability and sickness benefits
- benefit awards achieved on clients' behalf totalled £575,527.00

Coping with the Downturn – Advice on Housing Issues

2008 – 2009 has seen a sharp rise in the number seeking advice for mortgage and rent arrears, with many clients at risk of losing their homes. As people lose their jobs it becomes harder and harder for them to make the single largest payment of their regular commitments – their housing costs.

The Bureau employs a specialist housing caseworker funded by the Legal Services Commission to undertake all aspects of housing work from advice right up to the level of court representation.

Mortgage Rescue Scheme

The introduction of the Mortgage Rescue Scheme is designed to avoid loss of the home for clients who would be in priority need under homelessness law and who would otherwise become homeless. Lancaster Citizens Advice Bureau works closely and in partnership with Lancaster City Council's Strategic Housing team who administer the scheme, to identify clients who might benefit from the scheme and process their applications.

Rent Deposits

Legislation was passed in April 2007 to compel private landlords to place any deposit paid by tenants into an independent 'deposit protection scheme' and to give the tenants full information about the account at the outset. These regulations were intended to halt the bad practice of some landlords of withholding the deposit at the end of the tenancy for no good reason. Despite the length of time since the legislation was passed, and the penalties which can be imposed on landlords if they do not comply, the Bureau is still receiving many complaints from clients that their deposits are being withheld improperly, and that they have received no information about where their deposit is being held. It is clear to us that many landlords are unaware of their legal obligations and the action which can be taken when they fail to comply with this legal requirement.

Private Rented Sector – Landlord Mortgage Arrears

As a result of the downturn many landlords are unable to maintain mortgage payments on properties they rent out. The Bureau has seen an increase of tenants coming to us with a letter from the courts saying they are about to lose their home. Frequently, these clients have paid their rent in full and have not breached their tenancy in any way. There is little the courts can do for tenants in these circumstances and they are likely to lose their home, deposits etc. Tenants in this position mean that they have to be able to pay upfront one months rent in advance, a large deposit. In Lancaster this would cost on average £1,000. Landlord mortgage arrears places an additional burden on the local authority homelessness unit who have a housing duty, for applicants who are in priority need (i.e. with children and/or disabilities). As there is a grave shortage of affordable social housing, clients are often forced back into the private rented sector to start this risky process all over again.

70th Annual Report 2008 – 2009

Housing Case Study

Ms Y had an assured short hold tenancy where the fixed term had come to an end. The landlord wanted the tenancy back and CAB was asked to represent the client in court.

We quickly established that the client had an assured shorthold tenancy, which started after April 07, and that the client had paid a deposit that was not protected in an approved 'deposit protection scheme'.

We successfully defended Ms Y at the possession hearing and:

- The possession order, already made, was set aside
- Ms Y received compensation of three times the amount of deposit actually paid and repayment of the original deposit

This enabled Ms Y to:

- Avoid homelessness
- Take time to find suitable alternative accommodation as the landlord had to start the possession process from the beginning
- Have ready the deposit and rent in advance demanded by a new private landlords
- Be aware of his new landlord's obligation under the 'tenancy deposit protection scheme'.

Key facts in 2008 – 2009

- 11.5% of Bureau enquiries related to housing issues
- 253 of all housing enquiries concerned arrears in the payment of housing costs
- 210 enquiries related to homelessness or the threat of homelessness
- The Bureau assisted 95 clients during the year to avoid the loss of their homes

Coping with the Downturn – Advice on Debt Issues

Seeking advice on debt and money management is one of the main reasons why clients make their contact with the Bureau. Often a client will come into the Bureau, anxious about a single debt, which may not be the only debt and often not the most important debt. The anxiety is caused by the degree of persistence employed by the debt collectors, sending letter after letter, full of vague threats, which are unlikely to be carried out, or phoning the client again and again, sometimes several times a day. These tactics are sometimes so oppressive as to constitute harassment, can force the client into attempting to pay off the most pressing creditors, at the expense of more important commitments, such as rent or mortgage, council tax, or gas, electricity or water charges.

The Bureau employs three people to undertake specialist debt work for clients. Two are funded by the Legal Services Commission and one by the Financial Inclusion Fund. They provide specialist advice, negotiation and representation in all aspects of debt casework.

The debt management work, which the Bureau carries out with clients, therefore, always starts with clarification about priority and non-priority debts, aiming to ensure that all major/priority commitments are met and agreed before payments to non-priority creditors are even considered.

The Bureau finds that the degree of support required by debt clients at present is much greater than previously, with creditors demanding letters from the Bureau to validate the offers which the client has put to them. This practice places an additional demand on Bureau resources and time.

The Bureau is experienced in all aspects of negotiation and representation in the county court including Individual Voluntary Arrangement, bankruptcy and mortgage and rent arrears.

Debt which cannot be repaid can cause stress, depression and relationship breakdown. Good advice enables the clients to understand their own legal rights and obligations and informs the clients of the legal procedures available to different types of creditors. As a result the client is able to manage future budgeting more effectively.

Social Policy liaison work which Citizens Advice Bureau undertakes with the credit industry needs to continue so that realistic proposals made by clients who have sought advice from Citizens Advice Bureau are accepted and reviewed at realistic intervals.

Debt Relief Orders – April 2009

The Bureau is currently training to be the only Debt Relief Order (DRO) intermediaries in Lancaster. This means all Bureau debt caseworkers are being trained and will be approved in the processing of Debt Relief Orders. The criteria for a client to be eligible to apply for DRO however will be quite stringent and clients with debts of more than £15,000.00 will be excluded. This will exclude many Bureau clients who are regularly presenting with debts of £20,000 or £30,000 or more.

However it is an affordable option for all those who are unable to manage debt in the longer term and we anticipate a significant interest in this option as 2009 proceeds.

Debt Case Study

A Bureau caseworker met client M at County Court as he was there due to repossession proceedings on his home (£2,000 in arrears). The hearing was adjourned in order for client M to seek advice, on the very strict terms that he paid the contractual monthly instalments and an amount towards the arrears each month until the next hearing. Client M also had a secured loan (£1,800 in arrears) and the Bureau caseworker spoke to the lenders representative before the hearing and negotiated a reduced monthly payment arrangement to the arrears in addition to an interest only payment to mortgage.

The Bureau helped client M to compile a financial statement that showed that he was able to pay both the mortgage and secured loan; however we identified high spending on gas and electricity, and advised him to call his supplier to provide an up to date meter reading and then reduced the monthly payment rate to a figure that covered usage plus a small amount to arrears.

We advised client M on the importance of prioritising debts as it is important to maintain mortgage and secured loan arrangements, because if they are not maintained the home is at risk of repossession. We explained the difference between priority debts and non-priority debts and that the latter are not as important whilst client M is struggling to keep his home.

We assisted him with multiple non-priority debts, amounting to £10,500, and helped him to make a token £1 per month offer to each of them. Even though these offers were low, because they were supported by a financial statement, they were likely to reflect the amount that would be set by a County Court Judgement if one was made. The offers were realistic and therefore likely to be sustainable in the short term until his financial situation improved.

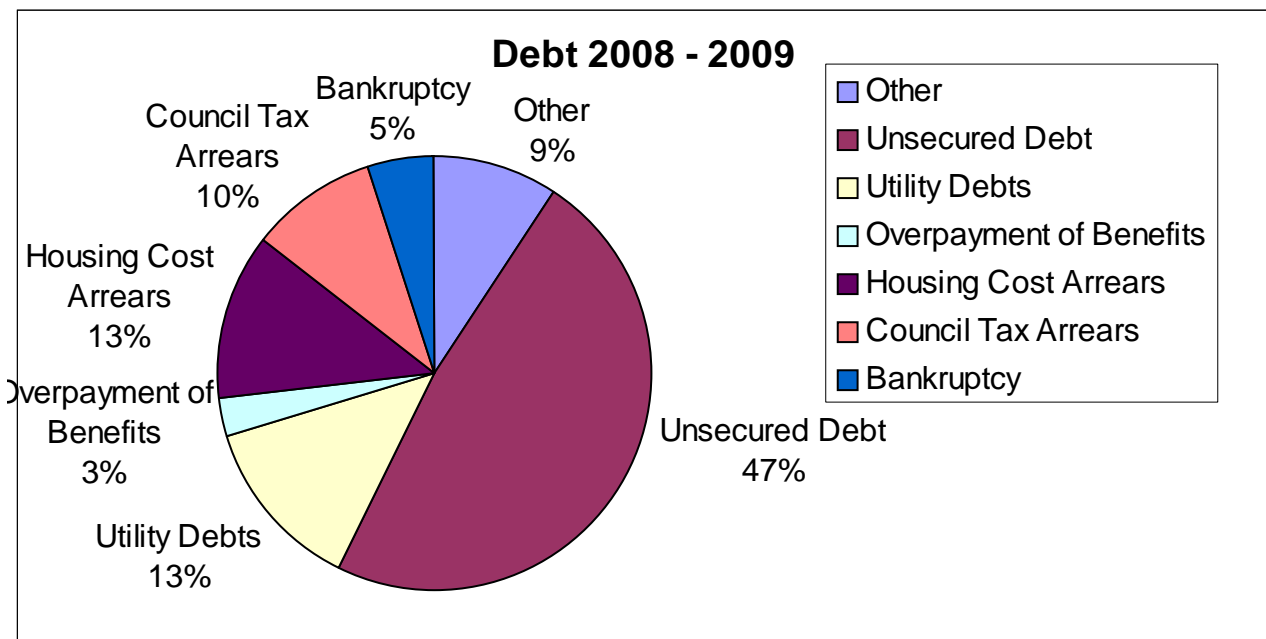
We looked at ways to increase his income and as he lives alone in a three bedroom house and could not claim any benefit we advised client M he could increase his income by letting a room to a lodger.

We returned to the County Court with the client for the new possession hearing and the adjournment continued on the affordable terms already offered. The client's home was saved and affordable payments to non-priority debts meant that client M could avoid further threats to the family home. Client M knew where to seek advice if problems arose again.

70th Annual Report 2008 – 2009

Key facts in 2008 – 2009

- 25% of Bureau enquiries related to debt problems
- The Bureau helped clients manage £9.5m worth of debt



- The Financial Inclusion Fund caseworker assisted clients to manage £2.6m worth of debt

Coping with the Downturn – Advice on Employment Issues

Job losses are one of the more obvious and direct results of an economic downturn and resulting financial hardship and certainly there has been a sharp rise in these types of cases. Employers often try other methods of getting rid of staff, which they hope will prove less expensive than making redundancy payments.

Unfair Dismissal

The Bureau has seen more instances of dismissal of pregnant workers and of staff who have long periods of sick leave. Many cases are potentially discriminatory. The Employment Tribunal can award an unfairly dismissed employee compensation, but cannot give to the employee what they often really want, which is the job back again, along with a wage and their self esteem or a sanction against an employer for acting unfairly. Because of the difficulty in finding another job, many employees will put up with poor working conditions, bullying and harassment, rather than try and enforce their rights and lose their job.

Workplace Closes Down

Several Bureau clients have gone into work as usual one morning and found the workplace shut and nobody there to inform them what is happening. They come to us to raise the following questions

- Whether they have a job or not, now or in the future?
- What will happen about the money they are owed?
- What will they live on now?

Although many clients have rights, which they can pursue through an Employment Tribunal, often with a favourable decision at the end, such a process is lengthy, time-consuming and ultimately unsatisfying, especially if the ex-employer really has no assets left. Since the only award which the Tribunal can make is one of money, it is frequently the case that a successful client is unable to enforce the compensation award against the ex-employer because they have gone out of business. Clients can spend over a year, trying to enforce a Tribunal award.

Employment Case Study

Mr F, a Bureau client, had been dismissed by his employer of twelve years, with no notice or pay in lieu of notice, outstanding holiday pay, no discussion of redundancy or redundancy pay and no indication of where his ex-employer was now to be found. Mr F had turned up for work as usual on a Monday morning to find no trace of his employer, and the factory closed and silent, with his colleagues gathered in the road outside.

Mr F came to the Bureau with a great sense of grievance. He had always been on good terms with his employer, had trusted him and respected him over the years, and now he felt let down, that the employer could just walk away from his responsibilities with no warning to the employees who depended on him. Mr F was also extremely worried about his own survival. He had a partner and two small children, and was buying his house on a mortgage. He had little optimism about finding another job in the short term.

70th Annual Report 2008 – 2009

His caseworker discussed with him

- the remedies for the many breaches of his employment rights, and
- how it might turn out that he was unable to enforce any of these remedies, if he could not trace his ex-employer, and
- his and his family's benefit entitlement, and
- access to the National Insurance Fund for statutory redundancy, notice pay and holiday pay.

Mr F gradually came to a decision that he would spend a lot of time and energy in pursuing these rights for no good outcome, and reluctantly felt that it was better to forget about them and try to move on. His partner was also working but only twelve hours a week. She thought that she would be able to work extra hours for her employer, which would enable the family to claim Working Family Tax Credit, while Mr F looked after the children. His caseworker also explored with him ways of negotiating with his mortgage lender to reduce his mortgage payments, with a short payment holiday until Working Tax Credit was in place, and to reschedule some of his other regular payments.

The Bureau enables clients to

- Make an informed decisions based upon their legal rights and obligations
- Consider the implications of taking such action
- Consider alternative options.

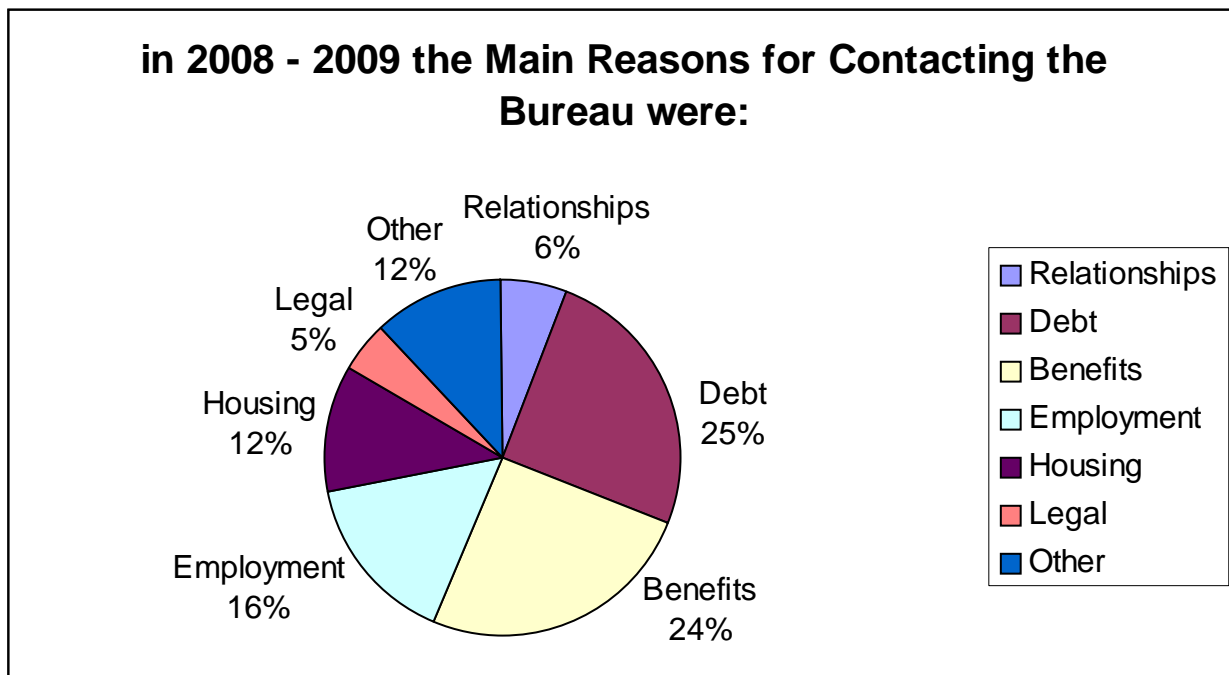
Key facts in 2008 – 2009

- 17% of Bureau enquiries related to employment queries
- 27% of all employment enquiries concerned dismissal or redundancy
- The Bureau worked with 1262 clients to clarify for them how best to pursue their employment rights

70th Annual Report 2008 – 2009

Outcomes 2008 – 2009

- In 2008 – 2009 there were a total of 15,469 client contacts
- The Bureau dealt with 8,478 new issues compared with 6,631 in 2007 - 2008



In 2008/2009 the Bureau:

- Assisted clients to manage £9.5m worth of debt
- Represented 66 clients at court to avoid repossession of their homes
- Helped clients to maximise their income by a total of £575.527 to spend in the local community.

Coping with the Downturn - Equal Opportunities

The Citizens Advice Bureau principle of Equality of Opportunity is an essential tool in the fight against discrimination. People who are already vulnerable because of age or sickness and disability or poverty suffer more from discrimination during the current poor economic situation.

Employment – employers who need to reduce their work force because they themselves are experiencing financial problems often choose the cheapest workers to dismiss, hoping to avoid redundancy payments. The cheapest workers tend to be female or part-time, perhaps because they have disabilities or caring responsibilities in the home. They lose their jobs, not because of what they have done, but because of who they are.

Housing – in the rented sector private landlords practice discrimination by refusing to take as tenants single unemployed people, or families on benefits, or who have children. Because private rented accommodation is one of the least secure forms of housing, tenants consider themselves lucky to find somewhere to live and are reluctant to risk their tenancies by complaining about poor living conditions, illegal rent hikes or landlord harassment.

Debt – people who are already in debt find themselves targeted by unscrupulous organisations who exploit the clients' fears and worries about being in debt. This is particularly the case with elderly people, or with people who have been in work all their lives and have never experienced debt before. Such people can be coerced into offering unrealistic payments towards debt, at levels which they will only be able to afford by cutting back on food, light, heat and housing payments.

Welfare Benefits – clients who are in receipt of benefits often feel that the system deals with them unfairly. People who are on sickness or disability benefits find themselves assessed by medical examiners who have no real understanding of a particular health condition. In addition therefore to having to cope with their health problems, the clients have to endure the stress and anxiety of the appeals process, as well as experiencing a drop in income until the matter is resolved.

In all matters of discrimination the Bureau can inform clients of their rights and help them to secure those rights through support, negotiation, advocacy and representation.

Equality of opportunity as a way of working is essential if the client's full needs are to be met and all Bureau workers are committed to its promotion both within the Bureau team and outside the Bureau on behalf of clients.

Coping with the Downturn - Social Policy

Citizens Advice includes amongst its aims that of that exerting a responsible influence on policy makers locally and nationally. Bureaux are ideally placed to feed through the experiences of their clients and the impact that policies have on people who are disadvantaged, by sending anonymous case studies to Citizens Advice nationally. These case studies are used in reports, recommendations and lobbying in Parliament and frequently are influential in changing policies for the better.

Much of the Bureau's Social Policy work in 2008 – 2009 has been directed to the effects of the combination of social policy issues and severe economic hardship. Indeed many of the social policy issues have arisen as a direct result of the financial difficulties which people are experiencing, ranging from:

- bad practice by banks and creditors
- delays and unhelpful attitudes at Job Centres and other benefit awarding agencies because of lack of resources to cope with the increase in claimant numbers
- deliberate exploitation of people made more vulnerable by the economic downturn.

During the first half of this financial year the Bureau was fortunate to have a large and active Social Policy team drawn from final year law students from Lancaster University. The team worked on the following:

- a report on homelessness in the District
- bad practice among private landlords with our local MP Ben Wallace
- a survey of the impact on those who have to pay full prescription charges because they are just above the income levels where they would receive free or reduced cost medication

A new Social Policy team took post in October 2008 and immediately became drawn into a survey which Northern Area Bureaux were conducting into the difficulties experienced by clients who rely heavily on mobile telephones because they can control the charges much more easily than they can landlines. Increasingly agencies and organisations are setting up telephone contact as their preferred form of initial contact with customers or user groups – the Department for Work and Pensions for instance expects benefit claims to be made by telephone. Such organisations however do not always put the necessary resources into ensuring that the telephone contact is speedy, helpful or affordable, so that many of our clients find themselves unable to maintain a telephone contact which they have made because they are asked to hang on for an unreasonable length of time, or the person to whom they speak is unable to help – and the client runs out of credit. From the evidence of clients the Northern Area produced a Report entitled 'Hanging On'. We have sent a copy to Ben Wallace and asked him to sign an Early Day motion to address these problems.

We have been monitoring for some time the excessive charges which private bailiffs charge when they are collecting council tax arrears. Despite there being a fixed scale of charges which bailiffs can legally charge and collect on top of the council tax bill, we have found many examples of bailiffs adding on hundreds of pounds worth of charges without

70th Annual Report 2008 – 2009

any breakdown for the client so that they can see what the actual arrears are and what the charges are, thus making it very difficult to challenge excessive charges. This of course creates a greater burden for a client who is already struggling to make essential payments, having perhaps just lost a job, or being under threat of eviction. We have been in contact with the City Council about this issue. We meet regularly with them to ensure private bailiffs act within the legislation.

Many clients have turned for help to debt management companies, some of whom represent themselves as being able to get debts written off for clients. This is rarely the case – instead clients have to pay an up-front fee, or a monthly commission for the debt management company to administer payments to creditors. Frequently the debt management company will make payments to non-essential creditors only, leaving the client to cope with mortgage and utility debts, and payments are made late or irregularly. We have monitored many instances of such practices and tried to encourage clients to manage their own non-priority debts themselves, and thereby freeing up extra money to ensure that the essential commitments are met.

Social Policy Case Study

A client searching for the Citizens Advice website using the search engine Google found herself in contact with a debt management company as this was the first link to show up and therefore led the client to a fee paying company instead of the Citizens Advice Bureau. The initial phone call to the debt management company left the client unclear that she was not talking to Citizens Advice until they asked for payment. When the client tried to withdraw, the debt management company used hard selling techniques and persuaded the client to pay their fee of £641.00.

The debt management company faxed through the documentation immediately and wanted the client to sign there and then but she said she wanted time to look it over. The contract said the client could cancel within 14 days, so she phoned the debt management company the next morning and said she wished to withdraw. She received a very aggressive response from the company – “you’ve been wasting our time, we’ve contacted your creditors already” – which made her feel bullied into confirming the contract and sending the completed forms by special delivery. The £641.00 went from her account immediately, taking her over her overdraft limit (creating another creditor) and complicating her direct debits for council tax and housing insurance for two months.

In fact the debt management company did not contact the client’s creditors until late December 2008 and did not start making payments to them until January 2009.

The Bureau advised her to cancel her contract with the company as she felt able to take control of her own debts, and to complain to the Office of Fair Trading via Consumer Direct. We provided the client with free debt advice to stabilise her situation and to reach an agreement with her creditors.

Volunteering

Volunteers at Lancaster CAB continue to be essential in delivering the service to the public. The Board of Trustees, who are all volunteers, have overall responsibility for the good management of the Bureau.

Our generalist advisers are all volunteers. On joining the Bureau they work towards the CAB Certificate in Generalist Advice, a nationally recognised award that is highly regarded for its quality and relevance in a variety of situations (equivalent to NVQ3). Advisers are trained to provide generalist advice by learning interviewing skills, communication skills, subject based knowledge and case recording.

Our Admin support workers assist the volunteer and paid staff and develop skills in administrative procedures including typing, data input, using databases and information systems, telephone and reception.

Other volunteers carry out social policy work, using the evidence of clients experiences to help influence policies and practices locally and nationally. This is an important part of our work and helps to ensure that legislators are aware of the consequences, sometimes unforeseen, of legislation in practice.

Lancaster CAB has a diverse team of volunteers representing various walks of life and sections of the local community. In return for their time and commitment volunteers receive excellent training and support.

They also gain a thorough understanding of confidentiality and equality of opportunity, the ability to work with a wide range of people and experience of working in a busy environment where time management and an awareness of the needs of clients and colleagues are crucial.

In January 09 we ran a pilot extended induction project, which included working alongside different staff and volunteers. This gave volunteers a clearer understanding of the way in which the service operates before embarking on specific training. The initial project was very successful and we plan to introduce it along with a new recruitment procedure starting in April 09.

At the end of March 2009 there were 76 volunteers working at the Bureau contributing approximately 392 hours of work each week to the service. This is the equivalent of 11 full-time employees. The volunteer work force was made up of 17 generalist advisers, 23 trainee advisers, 5 diagnostic interviewers, 1 specialist caseworker, 1 guidance tutor, 17 advice support/admin workers, 2 social policy workers and 10 Trustee Board members.

Over the year 37 new volunteers joined the Bureau, 24 volunteers left (5 to take up paid employment, 8 left to continue their further education, 5 left for personal reasons, 4 moved away from the area, 2 for reasons not known).

The Citizens Advice national formula equates the annual value of these volunteers at £290,586.

70th Annual Report 2008 – 2009

Volunteering Opportunities

- **Advice work** – training to NVQ level 3 to offer advice and assistance on legally based issues. You need to be open minded, a good listener and have 8 hours to commit to the service every week.
- **Trustee Board** – use your skills to participate in quality service provision, business planning, personnel, finance, fundraising for new initiatives, marketing and IT. (bi-monthly meetings)
- **Social Policy** – use clients experiences to help influence policies and practices both locally and nationally. Compiling evidence, writing reports, campaigning for change (3 hours per week)
- **Advice Support** – work as part of a team to assist in the smooth running of the Bureau. The role includes client case management, data input, word processing, reception work and other administrative duties. (3 hours per week)

What our volunteers have to say

‘Working here is one of the best things I’ve done since moving to Lancaster. I’ve learnt a huge amount about how to deal with all sorts of issues – from benefits to debt to employment. I really enjoy getting to know clients and supporting them as they tackle problems. Often clients only need a small amount of information to make a big difference to their situations. It’s rewarding work that has broadened my mind and given me a new perspective on the choices people make in living their lives. In particular, I think I’ve learnt how to make sense of initially confusing amounts of information to find the relevant facts. Sometimes it’s very busy but that’s great because the work is so interesting.’

‘Being a volunteer at Lancaster Citizens Advice Bureau gives me a great deal of job satisfaction. The more I contribute the more interesting the work becomes. Due to the nature of the job there is always more to learn as government changes/legislation is updated, adapted or made obsolete. It is little wonder that clients seek clarity and clear explanations of such policies. Working at the Citizens Advice Bureau has provided me with the opportunity to meet members of the public from all walks of life. This is an extremely rewarding part of my work, many are appreciative that I give my time freely. I feel that it is a humbling and enlightening experience that enriches my life while bringing wider benefits to society.’

Projects

Additional Hours of Advice

In January 2009 Citizens Advice nationally was awarded money by BERR to fund Bureaux to increase access for clients affected by the economic downturn, by offering extra advice sessions. Lancaster CAB applied for a grant from this award to offer one extra drop-in session and one extra telephone session each week. We were fortunate in our application, and with this new funding we have been able to pay for supervision for the new sessions and for rent for the extra space needed to accommodate the extra Bureau work. The extra sessions began at the beginning of March 2009 and proved immediately successful, attracting more clients, especially to the telephone session. The funding runs until 31 March 2010, and we are already planning how we may be able to keep open for these extra sessions once that particular funding stream dries up.

County Court Service

Housing caseworkers from Lancaster CAB attend Lancaster County Court every two weeks. They represent clients who are threatened with possession and in the majority of cases succeed in suspending possession of the clients' homes. After the hearing the Bureau is able to offer additional casework assistance to ensure that the housing payments are maintained – through debt advice, and/or by checking benefit entitlement.

The housing caseworkers use all the government's new pre-court action protocols for the benefit of its clients. The Bureau challenges lenders who fail to take account of the economic down turn and who fail to use and consider the range of initiatives designed to safeguard the right to stay in the home.

These initiatives include

- Mortgage interest only payments,
- Reduced payments or even payment holidays.
- Allowing time to sell

The service provided by Lancaster Citizens Advice Bureau is highly regarded by the County Court. District Judge Forrester comments on Lancaster CAB:

“May I say how much I value the work of the Bureau and the skill displayed by its lay representatives who appear before me?”

In 2008 – 2009 the Bureau represented 66 clients in the County Court to help them maintain their homes.

Rights for ME

Rights for ME is a three year project funded by a grant from the Big Lottery, awarded to a bid made jointly by Lancaster CAB and the Morecambe Bay ME Group. For three years the project has provided individual support, advice and advocacy for people with ME/CFS (myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome). The project is due to end in July 2009, having been very successful both in helping individual clients and in raising general awareness of the condition. To try and continue the service, even at a reduced level,

70th Annual Report 2008 – 2009

volunteers from the Morecambe Bay ME Group have undertaken training to support people with ME/CFS when they are completing disability or sickness benefits claim forms, by providing a home visiting service. This is a pilot scheme and funding from another charity has been found to keep this off-shoot of the original project going for at least one year.

Referrals

Referrals from other local groups assist the local community by making sure that people who might not otherwise be able to access our services or know what we do, get the legal advice they need. Referrals can be formal, using our forms (in the first three months of 2009 we had almost 40 such referrals from about 20 agencies) or more informally, for example, by jobcentre plus staff or GPs recommending that a person seeks advice from us.

Referrals from agencies providing floating support/tenancy support have markedly increased over the last year, following development of our referral system. A number of support workers from these agencies have also recently attended appointments at Lancaster CAB with clients – and we feel that particularly in respect of vulnerable clients, this truly enables the provision of the best all round service for the client – high quality legal advice from CAB, and assistance in following through with this from supporting agencies. We must also recognise the value of workers from other agencies in engaging 'hard to reach' clients who without the referral and support system would be unlikely to access advice.

Council Tax Clinic

Lancaster Citizens Advice Bureau works in partnership with Lancaster City Council to assist people with council tax arrears to address their problems at the earliest opportunity. A council tax clinic runs in Lancaster Town Hall once a fortnight, where people in arrears with their council tax can be referred by the council tax section at the Town hall. At the clinic the Bureau adviser can give independent confidential advice on debt management, benefit entitlements and other options to ensure that the client addresses priority debts such as council tax arrears. This can be followed up with an appointment at the Bureau if necessary.

This provides people with multiple debts including council tax arrears with an opportunity to look at all their issues in a holistic manner.

Financial Inclusion Fund

As a result of the economic downturn we have seen a large increase in higher earning clients approaching the Bureau for money advice. We are consequently seeing an increasing number of clients who do not qualify for specialist help through the Legal Services Commission, which is only able to assist clients on lower incomes. These clients are able to access the advice they need through the Financial Inclusion Fund project. Lancaster CAB has employed a part-time specialist debt caseworker funded by the Financial Inclusion Fund since 2007, who is able to provide face-to-face money advice and assistance to clients regardless of their financial means. This service is currently

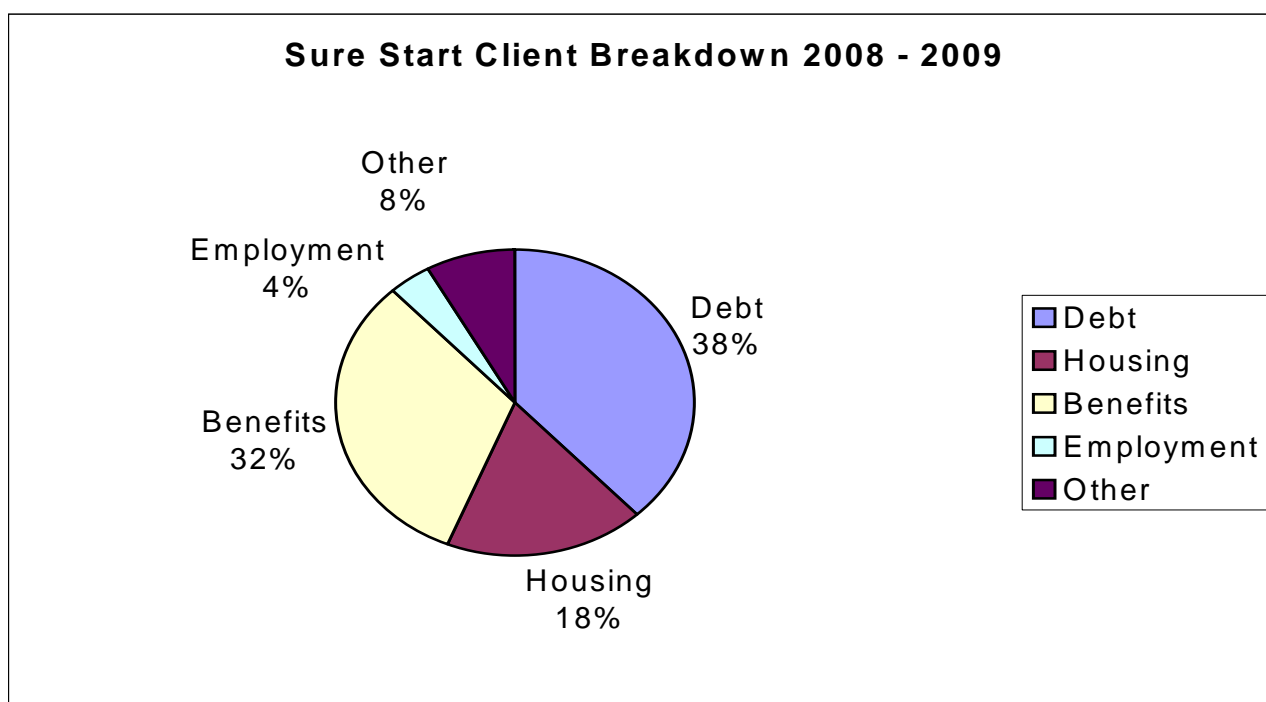
70th Annual Report 2008 – 2009

scheduled to run until 2011, though it is hoped that the project will be extended beyond this date to address the demands of the local community.

In 2008 – 2009 the FIF caseworker assisted clients to manage £2.6m worth of debt.

Sure Start

Lancaster CAB continues to operate a part-time advisory post at the local Sure Start children's centre. With an emphasis on home visits, the position at Lune Park Children's Centre has helped to deliver the CAB service to local parents of young children who may otherwise have found it difficult to access advice due to the commitments of their busy lives. The CAB adviser works with other professionals such as Health Visitors in a multi disciplinary team environment, with an emphasis on inter-agency cooperation and referral to achieve the best results for the client.



Working with Other Agencies

Interagency Forum Meetings – Welfare Benefits

These are held at the Town Hall in Lancaster bi-monthly. All government agency representatives (jobcentre plus, pension service, local authority etc) are invited to give an update. To the community groups attending such as Lancaster Citizens Advice Bureau, it is an invaluable opportunity to keep abreast of forthcoming changes in legislation, to network with other groups, to share common concerns and feed back to the presenting agencies.

Homelessness Forum

The Bureau is an active member of the Homelessness Forum, which consists of members from both statutory and voluntary agencies who deal in any way with homeless or badly housed people in the community.

Strategic Housing Service at Lancaster City Council coordinates the group. The groups meet to discuss and develop strategies for improvement of services to assist the users of our individual services and highlights the diverse and positive work done within the community to alleviate the problems causing and caused by homelessness.

Multi Agency Domestic Abuse Forum

The Lancaster district multi agency domestic abuse forum still maintains a strong focus on establishing and maintaining a system of networking and sharing good practice amongst over 40 agencies in the district. Meeting quarterly, the forums aims to develop services supporting victims of domestic abuse, to ensure examples of good practice are promoted and to raise awareness of domestic abuse within the community. The forum continues to remain an influential factor in determining policy and initiatives and having a strong commitment to partnership working and the development of the domestic abuse strategy.

Strategic Housing Service

We are working closely with Lancaster City Council Strategic Housing Team to raise awareness of the benefits of early advice. We are developing information leaflets and a referral procedure to ensure the most appropriate help and assistance is provided to clients who are threatened with homelessness. We are also developing our partnership with Strategic Housing in preparation for the Mortgage Rescue Scheme due for introduction in January 2009.

Local Strategic Partnership

The Bureau is a member of the Health and Well Being Steering Group of the Local Strategic Partnership. Working in statutory and voluntary agencies to improve the quality of life for everyone in the Lancaster District. This also involves membership of the Financial Inclusion Group tasked to increase the awareness of resources available and access to financial help.

LANCASTER CITIZENS ADVICE BUREAU



70th Annual Report 2008 – 2009

Lancaster Citizens Advice Bureau
87 King Street, Lancaster
Lancashire LA1 1RH

Drop-In Sessions

Monday and Wednesday 10am – 4pm
Tuesday 1pm – 4pm
Thursday and Friday 10am – 1pm

By Telephone

Call the Bureau's enquiry line for our telephone advice session on 01524 66529:
Tuesdays from 10am until 1pm
Thursdays from 1pm until 4pm

By Email

You can email your enquiry to enquiries@lancastercab.org.uk confirming in your email that you live within the Lancaster local authority by supplying your postcode.

By Fax

You can fax your enquiry to 01524 846447.

In Writing

You can write to us with your enquiry to The Bureau Manager and post it to the address above.

On the Internet

You can access advice nationally at www.adviceguide.org.uk and find out more about Lancaster Citizens Advice Bureau at www.lancastercab.org

Surestart

A Bureau adviser is available two days a week to work with clients at Lune Park Children's Centre. **Telephone: 01524 382818**

Rights for ME

A home visiting service providing specialist Welfare Benefits advice for people with CFS/ME living in North Lancashire and South Cumbria.
Telephone: 01942 867797

Charity registration number 1103704 Company registration number 5093344