

Northumbrian Citizens Advice Bureau
Report to the Ebico Trust – July to September 2014

1. Current service delivery

Background information to the project and on service delivery was provided in the first quarterly report.

One-to-one advice

During the reporting period service delivery continued as outlined in the Quarter 1 report with the adviser continuing to deliver the majority of her work on a one-to-one basis with clients, usually through home visits. During the quarter the adviser opened 13 new enquiries on behalf of clients and undertook work on behalf of 34 people including existing clients.

Many of our clients need advice with more than one issue and overall the adviser provided help with 91 different problems. As expected, the majority of the work focused on utilities problems (54%) and consumer services (23%) but the adviser also helped with benefits and debts issues.

Talks, training and group work

In July 2014 the adviser attended the National Energy Action (NEA) North East Fuel Poverty Forum meeting where there were presentations on a range of energy efficiency projects and smart metering. An opportunity for joint working with the Energy Services Advisor at Npower was identified and to date there have been 3 joint home visits to Npower customers with a potential for further collaboration in the future. Technical issues with storage heaters were resolved with the help of the Npower energy advisor, whilst CAB achieved goodwill payments for two of the clients due to late billing issues. Help with benefit entitlement, income maximisation and applying for a grant towards arrears was also provided for one of the clients.

In September 2014 the adviser attended NEA's annual conference and exhibition – 'Turning the tide - a sea change in action on fuel poverty'. This was a valuable training opportunity and a chance for discussion with a wide range of industry professionals. During the event the adviser contributed to the discussion hub 'Engaging with vulnerable householders' and, through the meeting 'Cutting the cost of keeping warm', contributed to the consultation process on preparing for a new Fuel Poverty Strategy for England. In addition she acted as facilitator for one of the round table discussions.

2. Referrals

To help ensure we get the best outcome for clients we work with a range of services and partners both internal and external and over the coming months we will continue to expand our work with other services and agencies in order to maximise the impact of the project.

It is envisaged that the interaction between Npower and the CAB will continue as there is currently an ongoing issue with late billing of Npower customer who live in electricity only properties with complex metering. Northumberland is a rural county and many properties fall into this category and are off-gas.

The fuel adviser is continuing to refer clients to DAWN Advice for additional support in applying for grants to help with arrears.

A system of referrals is taking place with the local housing association ISOS when energy saving measures are required in their properties. Vulnerable clients are also being identified for additional support.

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3. Promotion of the service

Regular publicity and promotion are seen as vital to the success of the service and will take place on an ongoing basis to help ensure that as many people as possible know about the service and can benefit. An example from quarter 2 is:

- September 2014 – the CAB energy adviser's input was requested for the Hexham MP's "How to save money on your energy bills" booklet. This will be updated and circulated to over 8,500 homes in the area. The adviser updated the section on warm homes discount. Contact information for Northumbrian CAB is included in the booklet along with details of the fuel advice project.

4. Outcomes

The work generates a range of outcomes for clients including financial gains such as increased income, practical gains such as the relocation of inaccessible meters and softer outcomes such as increased peace of mind. Examples are provided below and in the case studies at the end.

- The adviser has supported several clients with changing supplier. Many clients, particularly in the older age group, do not have internet access or require support finding the best deals for their utilities. The adviser has helped several clients with changing supplier: helping with meter readings; calculating usage in kilowatt hours to provide the most accurate price comparison; comparing tariffs and prices and guiding clients through the process. This has allowed clients to access fixed price, lower unit price tariffs with considerable annual savings.
- The adviser has liaised with a local housing provider ISOS, supporting some of their tenants to progress repairs. One recent example is of a client who had recently been discharged from hospital and had problems with her heating. The adviser contacted the ISOS financial and social inclusion team with whom she has set up contact, and after a visit from their team the client's boiler was replaced and her central heating updated. Other clients have been supported to speed up the progress of repairs, or to register complaints.
- Warm homes discount broader group payments continue to be an issue as many eligible clients do not realise that they qualify for this discount. The adviser checks eligibility for clients on every home visit and helps them apply by phone, online or by post. The payments will cease for winter 2014/15 when the energy companies' funds are exhausted, so applying early is vital for these vulnerable clients.
- Referrals within the CAB service itself continue, giving clients support in dealing with debt through the CAB Money Advice Service and for income maximisation through the Benefits team.

Project development

The current project is focussed on the west of Northumberland and as part of a second strand of work we are looking at how we can develop the service across a much wider area. During the quarter the following activity took place:

- Discussions with the Berwick and Alnwick office took place to arrange a presentation to advice workers by the fuel adviser at future team meetings.
- Referral relationships were developed between DAWN Advice, Npower and ISOS.
- The adviser began discussions with volunteers interested in learning more about the work. A generalist adviser attended NEA training: 'A Sure Start to a Warm Home' and joint visits are being arranged with the fuel adviser.

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Case Studies:

Case study 1

Ms F is a new CAB client. She moved into a new housing association property in May 2013 which is electricity only, heated by storage heaters on E10. Ms F did not understand the controls on her heaters having previously had a gas central heating system. In addition, Ms F received no statements until August 2014 when she received one for £716.30. This was double what she was led to believe she would pay and she became very anxious. The adviser organised a joint visit with the supplier and Ms F was shown how to operate her storage heaters. The adviser negotiated a goodwill gesture of £100 to be deducted from the arrears due to late billing and the distress caused to the client. A payment plan was organised for manageable payments for usage and the adviser is helping Ms F apply to an energy trust for a grant to help with the arrears. Ms F is a vulnerable customer so an application for Warm Homes discount has been submitted by the adviser on her behalf and her details have been added to the supplier's priority services register.

Ms F feels secure knowing that the CAB is there to support her through the process.

Case study 2

Mrs P is a new CAB client, referred by her daughter. She had recently switched supplier and received a bill from her previous supplier for £4,127.63 which she could not understand and was unable to pay. The adviser visited her at home, checked the serial numbers on the meters and realised Mrs P's meters had been changed and the supplier had billed to the incorrect meter. The adviser contacted the supplier who recalculated the bill, finding only £55.38 was outstanding. As a goodwill gesture this was written off and Mrs P received an apology.

Mrs P was delighted with the outcome and very grateful to CAB for their involvement.

October 2014