

This is the final report relating to a 2 year project which was delivered between April 2014 and March 2016.

1. Background

In February 2014 West Northumberland CAB received funding for a 2 year project to deliver advice in relation to energy and fuel poverty. The funding was transferred to Northumbrian CAB in April 2014 when Alnwick, Berwick and West Northumberland CAB merged.

The charity covers a huge rural area which is made up of market towns, small villages and isolated hamlets. Our Hexham and Berwick offices are 80 miles apart. The challenge facing the organisation is to ensure that people from across this large rural area have access to our information and advice services.

The wider rural area shares many of the problems experienced in west Northumberland associated with fuel problems and, through the project, we have been working with other agencies to address fuel poverty and maximise access to energy advice, particularly in relation to vulnerable clients.

2. Service delivery

During the lifetime of the project, the project worker was based in Hexham and was employed for 14 hours per week. These hours were worked on a flexible basis to help meet the needs of clients. The majority of the work was carried out on a one-to-one basis with clients, usually through home visits, but the project worker also undertook publicity and promotion work and carried out talks and training to help extend the reach of the project.

One-to-one advice

During the 2 year project 155 people were helped through the project with more than 600 different advice issues. The work undertaken covered a range of topics including:

- Maximising income and identifying benefit and grant entitlement.
- Reviewing the best gas/electricity tariffs available.
- Agreeing manageable payment plans / arrangements / payment methods.
- Dealing with fuel arrears.
- Providing fuel energy advice and energy saving tips.

As expected, the majority of the work focused on utilities problems (60%) and consumer services (20%) but the adviser also helped with benefits and debts issues and made referrals, as appropriate to other sources of help.

The project was particularly designed to support more vulnerable clients, those who would struggle to use other services. Although the use of home visits is very resource intensive for many of clients it is the best way to provide help and support.

Client profile

Of the clients the project assisted:

- 50% were over 60
- 74% were female
- 63% had a disability of long term health problem

Talks and group work

During the lifetime of the project the adviser provided talks and training to a range of groups. For example in the last quarter, two group presentations were made, one to a local Community Action Northumberland (CAN) employment group on heating your home and a second to the Hexham cancer support group. Issues such as energy efficiency in the home, best deals for utilities and grants and benefits were presented and discussed, with supporting information provided in the form of handouts and contact details for the fuel advice project.

3. Referrals

To help ensure the best outcome for clients the adviser worked with a range of services and partners both internal and external. Internal referrals were made to specialist workers who could help progress the client's case – referral to a debt worker for example where the client's fuel debts were part of a much bigger debt problem or referral to a benefits worker for help to challenge an incorrect benefits decision.

The fuel adviser regularly referred clients to DAWN Advice for additional support in applying for Charis grants to help with arrears, whilst a system of referrals to and from the Macmillan worker provided additional help for clients with severe health issues. Partnership work with the Energy Services Adviser at Npower provided technical support for Npower customers with complex heating systems.

4. Promotion of the service

Regular publicity and promotion was seen as vital to the success of the service and took place on an ongoing basis to help ensure that as many people as possible knew about the service and how they could benefit. Examples from the project include:

- The fuel adviser's contact details were included in the Hexham MP's "How to save money on your energy bills" booklet, circulated to 8,500 homes.
- Information leaflets and contact details for the fuel energy advice project were provided to Community Action Northumberland for their spring conference of 90 delegates.
- Details of the project were included in the Golden Guide, a North East publication giving guidance on daily living for the over 50s. The guide is widely available in paper form and online.

5. Training and personal development

Ever changing legislation meant that the project worker had to keep her skills up to date through regular training. Training took a variety of forms including reading, on-line courses and training events.

As an example, training within Citizens Advice this quarter covered a range of issues such as hate crime and discrimination. In depth training on Universal Credit was also completed in preparation for the roll out in February 2016.

The adviser monitored updates from national organisations such as The Centre for Sustainable Energy and attended National Energy Action meetings in order to keep up to date with changes in the energy market. Local initiatives such as Northumberland County Council's central heating fund and projects within Community Action Northumberland were also monitored.

6. Research and campaigns

A second and equal aim of the Citizens Advice service is to collect client based evidence and use it in a constructive and effective way to challenge unfair laws and practices and to exert a responsible influence on future decision making. Working closely with local people put the project worker in a strong position to identify trends and highlight these, through Citizens Advice, to policy makers.

For example, in the last quarter the fuel project provided information for a Citizens Advice national off-gas customer survey. Citizens Advice were conducting a survey about how people across Great Britain heat their homes and how satisfied they were with the energy options available to them. The adviser completed questionnaires with off-gas clients and fed the outcomes into the national project.

7. Outcomes

The work has generated a range of improvements and outcomes for clients including financial gains such as increased income, practical gains such as replacement central heating systems and softer outcomes such as increased peace of mind. Examples are provided below and in the case studies at the end.

- The adviser supported clients with fuel debt. This involved various steps such as establishing the level of arrears, setting up affordable payments for the client, exploring benefit entitlement and income maximisation, referring clients for help to apply for grants towards arrears and referral for specialist help.
- The adviser supported clients through the often lengthy process of registering, progressing and finally resolving complaints with utility suppliers. Because of the reputation of the Citizens Advice service complaints were often dealt with more quickly and goodwill payments negotiated for the distress caused without recourse to the ombudsman.

- The adviser supported clients with changing supplier or with changing tariff with the same supplier. This included: taking and submitting meter readings; calculating usage in kilowatt hours to provide the most accurate price comparison; comparing tariffs and prices online for clients with no internet access; contacting suppliers to make the switch. Clients were then able to benefit from fixed price, lower unit price tariffs and could make considerable annual savings.
- The adviser referred clients to Warm Up North, a scheme funded by British Gas and partnered with nine North East local authorities. The aim of the scheme is to help those in need make their homes warmer and more affordable to heat. The adviser supported clients explore their eligibility for the scheme and then helped with the application process. One client is currently awaiting a date for a replacement heating system to be fitted to his off-gas home.
- The adviser checked for warm homes discount broader group payments with every client and helped clients to apply by phone, online or by post. As the payments cease when the energy companies' funds are exhausted, applying quickly was vital for vulnerable clients.

8. Future of the service

As from 1 April 2016 DAWN Advice CAB in Morpeth became part of Northumbrian Citizens Advice Bureau. This is the last in a series of mergers which have combined the six Citizens Advice Bureaux operating in the county into one legal entity.

One of the main drivers of the merger process was a desire to create a single organisation which would deliver consistent, high quality and accessible advice services across the county, whilst continuing to identify and respond to local need.

Following completion of the merger process we are undertaking a review of our services and the way the organisation is structured. This will help to ensure that the organisation is fit for purpose and that, within available resources, we are delivering the services that best meet local need. For the time being we are continuing to deliver the fuel advice project from our Hexham office using unrestricted reserves. Whilst this is not sustainable longer term it will give us time to establish how the project links with other services and consider future funders.

9. Case Studies:

Case study 1

Ms B has complex medical issues including limited mobility and low vision. She originally contacted Citizens Advice about difficulty changing supplier. Following referral to the fuel adviser, it became clear that the meter was registered to the incorrect address. The client had made repeated complaints to her supplier which were finally resolved with the fuel adviser's involvement. Ms B accepted a goodwill payment of £200 from her supplier and is now registered with priority services and for the warm homes discount broader group scheme. She has also changed to the cheapest tariff from her current supplier.

Ms B had arrears on her utility account caused in part by her supplier's lack of swift action to resolve her complaint, but also by high usage of both gas and electricity due to an inefficient 25 year old gas boiler. In order to heat her home to an acceptable level, particularly given her medical condition, she had resorted to using electric heaters and oil filled radiators.

With the fuel adviser's help the client was referred to DAWN CAB for an application to an energy trust for help with both the arrears and for a replacement boiler. If this is successful the client will have a more energy efficient home and will be able to save over £500 a year (based on current consumption) by switching supplier.

Case study 2

Mr F lives in an off gas property and had an ongoing issue with his electricity supplier following a back billing complaint. With the fuel adviser's involvement this was resolved. He accepted a goodwill payment of £100 and affordable monthly payments were arranged for him.

In order to deal with arrears which had arisen because of the back billing issue, an application was made to an energy trust. Alongside this, the adviser identified savings of £90 per year by changing tariff and benefit options which he is now pursuing to maximise his household income. The adviser also liaised with the housing association to address issues of damp within the property.

10. Client Feedback

Extract from a client's email -

'Can I thank you again for all your help? I would like to reiterate what an excellent job you have done for us. You made what seemed like such an arduous task to me so easy. You were very approachable and accommodating which made me feel so much at ease and able to go forward with the complaint with you, with a great outcome. You and your department offer such an excellent service which gives people with a little voice like me the opportunity to complain to large companies with confidence and resolve issues which otherwise would just result in more accumulated debt on our part. Not only were you extremely accommodating re my disability you were also instrumental in changing the attitude of (the energy company) to their customers in fighting this case for us.'

Moira Macfarlane
Chief Executive

April 2016