

PRESS RELEASE

December 2010

the charity for
your community



A Day with Uttlesford CAB

With January around the corner – Uttlesford Citizens Advice Bureau are getting ready for their busiest month of the year. With the area's roots in a more rural background and a large number of prosperous households – it is very easy to assume that everyone is coping with the current economic situation – however requests for help from the charity have spiked over the last two years and they feel that demand will only continue to rise as more people begin to face the hardships of losing employment, adapting to cuts in benefits and coping with rising household expenses.

Although the charity – Citizens Advice Bureau is a well known and established many people have a hazy understanding of what they do – so we asked them to describe a typical day.....

Volunteers and staff start arriving in the offices in Saffron Walden at about 9.00am - computers are switched on, coffee is made, and the appointments system opened. A session in Saffron Walden would run with a receptionist, two advice assistants, 4 generalist advisors and a session supervisor. (A session in Great Dunmow would run with an advice assistant, 3 advisers and a session supervisor).

The first appointment slot is at 9.30 and by now the phones will be ringing. When people phone or drop in for the first time the receptionist will enter correct details on the system and check that there is no conflict of interest. We can only represent one side of a conflict as we have to be impartial, and of course confidentiality is pivotal to anything we do.

The client will have a short talk with an advice assistant who will assess the urgency of the problem and decide whether the CAB is the right place for the client or whether they should be directed elsewhere. We work closely with a variety of other caring agencies and often also take referrals from them as well. In emergency situations we help people find a bed to sleep in, or find funds to buy food. People may also come to us because they have received an eviction order, perhaps they have a bailiff at the door, are struggling to cope with a relative's care needs or they are looking for advice in dealing with domestic violence.

In more routine cases appointments will be made at a convenient time. Gone are the days when people had to wait two hours to see someone. The client will be advised what paperwork might be needed: a tenancy agreement or rent book for a housing problem, a contract for an employment issue. I will have an informal chat with the advice assistants to confirm that the right action was given. The advisor is then given a written overview of the situation before the client is seen.

During an appointment, which normally lasts half an hour, the advisor provides a number of options for the client to decide, it is important for the client themselves to choose what option is right for them. People's needs vary hugely, and it's important to be very flexible and always empathetic. Referrals to other organisations or our own debt, benefit or housing specialists could be suggested, or if the problem is complex a follow-on

appointment could be made. I will always check advice given against our own internal advice systems, the case will be fully written up and again carefully checked. My job is to promote a high levels of accuracy and consistency in the advice we give. We are also always alert to social policy issues, we might on the basis of evidence we have seen raise an issue both locally or on a national level.

By 5.00pm all files are locked up safely and securely. It's a full-on day, but satisfying when clients come back to report that their problems have been resolved and that we did make a difference.

Case Studies

Employment

The Client contacted the bureau after being suspended from work on grounds of alleged misconduct, which the Client denied. The adviser provided advice and support throughout the ensuing disciplinary and dismissal process, including help with preparatory work prior to the disciplinary and appeal hearings. Following notification of dismissal, the adviser helped the Client to prepare a claim of Unfair Dismissal for submission to the Employment Tribunal and encouraged the Client to try conciliation via ACAS, which proved successful, resulting in a negotiated settlement.

Debt

A Client 65+ with serious medical issues was referred to CAB by Uttlesford District Council Housing Department with mortgage arrears, credit card debit and bank overdraft. The Client was helped to complete an Income and Expenditure form. Holding letters were sent to non-priority creditors. It was finally agreed that a Standard Financial Statement should prioritize mortgage arrears to protect the Client against a possession order on his home and offers should be made to pay a minimum contribution to credit card debt. The case will be ongoing as financial circumstances change.

Benefit

After a home visit we assisted the Client with an Attendance Allowance claim form. We provided advice on Lifeline – a free personal alarm system. The advisor discussed options on purchasing or hiring stair lift equipment. A benefit check was completed for both the Client and her daughter who was her Carer. It was suggested that the Client should ask for an Occupational Therapy Assessment. We provided the Carer with details of respite care.

Client Quotes

'The CAB have been fantastic, I have used CAB in other places and none have been as good – they always seem to go that extra mile. They lift a weight off your shoulders and support you through whatever you are going through.'

'It's about peoples' lives and they offer stability when you are at breaking point.'

'Service and staff are very helpful, I could not have done this myself.'

'I have never felt so supported to have someone sitting with you, when I have had no money for credit for my phone they have made the calls with me, with the economy the way it is they have provided me with help every step of the way.'

'Caroline was extremely helpful and enabled me to feel comfortable and confident in explaining my predicament. Thank you very much.'

'I've been on the internet with four branches – however I got through to Uttlesford without a problem.'

Notes to editors:

For more information contact: Kate Robson 01799 526557 (ex directory)

1. The Citizens Advice service helps people resolve their legal, money and other problems by providing information and advice, and by influencing policy makers.
2. The advice provided by the Citizens Advice is free, independent, confidential and impartial, and available to everyone regardless of race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, age or nationality.
3. Uttlesford CAB has offices and outreaches in Saffron Walden, Great Dunmow and Thaxted. Clients can call, drop in or make an appointment. Please visit uttlesfordcab.org.uk for more information.