
EXCERPT FROM THE MINUTES OF THE PEOPLE PANEL HELD ON 14 JULY 2022

PEP.22/22 CITIZENS ADVICE CARLISLE & EDEN - UPDATE PRESENTATION ON WORK AND ISSUES FOR LOCAL RESIDENTS

The Healthy City Team Manager presented the work of Citizens Advice Carlisle and Eden (CAB), as they worked with City Council support, to assist residents of Carlisle and District.

Mr Auld, Chief Executive of Citizens Advice Carlisle and Eden, was in attendance to brief Members on the issues facing local residents.

Mr Auld informed the Panel that the CAB provided an independent, impartial advice service via a mixture of paid and voluntary staff. The CAB received financial support from the Council but it had not received an uplift in support for ten years.

Mr Auld set out the top five enquires for support for 2021/22 adding that there had been an increase in employment advice and utilities advice in the last twelve months. Mr Auld provided the Panel with detailed statistics from the CAB and the changes to the demographics of those who sought advice. He explained there had been an increase in those presenting with mental health issues and he outlined the holistic approach that provided by the CAB and partners.

The increase on demand to the service had resulted in budgetary pressures. The CAB used statistical data to identify the key areas of required support and forward plan potential challenges. Mr Auld highlighted the challenges with staff recruitment and retention, the CAB had excellent staff who were trained to a very high level, this meant they were in demand and the CAB could not match wages being offered elsewhere.

Mr Auld stated that the Local Government Reorganisation created funding uncertainty at a time when all available grants had reduced. He outlined some of the work the CAB were involved in including rural services and projects with the NHS. He reiterated that services were under a tremendous amount of pressure due to debt, energy costs, benefits demand and it was likely to get worse.

In considering the report and Mr Auld's presentation the panel raised the following comments and questions:

- Referring to the increase in energy prices, a Member noted that some companies were offering reduced payments which would not, ultimately, cover the cost of the energy bill. Would this impact the service as debt increased?

Mr Auld was aware of the offers being made by some companies to help with fuel costs but agreed it was moving the problem to a future time as the debt would still be there. The CAB provided advice on switching energy providers but this had become limited and there was now no long term help for people. He was aware of grants being given to eligible households, the money was often needed elsewhere and was not being used on energy costs, it would have been helpful for the grants to go direct to the energy bills.

- The eviction embargo had ended, and cases were being progressed through the court system. Was the potential impact of the evictions being monitored?

Mr Auld confirmed that the CAB had been made aware that social housing providers were beginning to start eviction processes, the situation and potential impact on the service was being monitored closely.

- Was there a change in the demographic of people accessing the CAB services?

Mr Auld responded that there had been an increase in households with up to £30,000 annual income accessing services. There was also an increase in request for advice from women under 35.

- The strength of the CAB were the staff, Members were concerned to hear that there was difficulty in recruitment / retention and asked what could be done to assist with the issue.

Mr Auld explained that the CAB had managed to retain contracts and had applied for additional funding to support the service. The CAB were looking at recruiting people who could maintain the remote service and free up local people to deal with face to face matters. The CAB were trying to be creative in how the services were provided in order to help as many people as possible.

The Healthy City Team Manager added that Age UK were training energy advisers and it was hoped that this would alleviate some of the demand on the CAB.

- How did the CAB support individuals who had mental health issues who did not know where to turn or how to access support.

Mr Auld responded that it was difficult to support people who did not reach out for help. If the CAB were contacted they would provide advice, support and signposting as required. A lot of work was being carried out with other organisations such as Mind to help those with mental health issues.

- Was there a waiting list to access CAB services?

Mr Auld confirmed that there was a 2 - 3 day waiting list for triage, then depending on the service required, there was a 1 to 4 week wait for an appointment.

- The CAB covered areas which would be in both of the new Unitary Authorities, was there anything the new authorities could do to support the work?

Mr Auld did not expect a lot of change for the CAB initially. The Reorganisation presented another challenge for the CAB but collaborative work already took place within Carlisle, Copeland and Allerdale areas and less so in the south of the County.

RESOLVED - 1) That Mr Auld, Chief Executive of Citizens Advice Carlisle and Eden, be thanked for insightful and informative presentation (CS.25/22)

2) That the work of the CAB and the statistical information they hold be incorporated into the work of the Cost of Living Crisis Task and Finish Group;

3) That the Panel asked, in light of the current cost of living crisis and the impact on demand for services, that the Executive give consideration to increasing the Carlisle City Council grant funding to the Citizens Advice Bureau.