

REPORT TO CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

SEDGEFIELD AND DISTRICT ADVICE AND INFORMATION SERVICE

1. SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report examines the Borough Council's relationship with and annual contribution to the Sedgefield and District Advice and Information Service.

2. RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1 That Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2 be requested to undertake a full review of the Service to determine the value for money it provides and makes recommendations to Cabinet regarding the long term funding arrangements.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Sedgefield and District Citizens Advice Bureau was initially established in 1959. In 1986, in partnership with the then Sedgefield District Council, it created the Sedgefield and District Advice and Information Service. The Service provides free, confidential and impartial advice and information to all and is a member of Citizens Advice (formally known as the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureau).
- 3.2 Over the past few years, the Service has grown both in the number of people seeking advice and the funding received. In 1996/1997 the Service received a total income of £183,059 including £135,000 from the Borough Council but by 2002/2003 this had increased by 84% to £336,800 including £156,000 of support from the Borough Council. During that time the total client enquiries rose by 75% from 19,490 to 34,082.
- 3.3 The Service presently operates from offices at the Town Hall, Spennymoor together with a number of outreach offices throughout the Borough. It is managed by a Trustee Board which includes five representatives from Sedgefield Borough Council.
- 3.4 The Service is also represented on the Healthy Borough Policy Group and the Housing and Communities Policy Group of the Sedgefield Local Strategic Partnership.

4. COMMUNITY LEGAL SERVICE

- 4.1 The introduction of Community Legal Services (CLS) and the CLS Quality Mark necessitated all Citizens Advice Bureau being required to meet quality assurance standards in respect of the Citizens Advice Membership agreement and related service quality. The CLS brings together a network of funders and suppliers into

partnerships to provide the widest possible access to legal information and advice and is an important part of the Government's fight against social exclusion.

- 4.2 Service providers who have achieved the minimum standards set by the Quality Mark standards for legal and advice services are able to offer legal advice and advice services and display the logo.
- 4.3 Sedgefield and District Advice and Information Service passed its Citizens Advice audit in March 2002 (effective to June 2005) and was passported to CLS Quality Mark and the General Help level. Following a subsequent audit by the Legal Services Commission, the Service was also awarded the CLS General Help Quality Mark (effective to June 2004) which is ongoing until such time as the next audit takes place which is likely to be in Autumn 2004.
- 4.4 The General Help Quality Mark is awarded to organisations who meet an agreed minimum standard to offer information and advice and help to resolve problems. Some organisations at this level also provide casework i.e. where the organisation takes action on behalf of a client through advocacy or negotiation.
- 4.5 Organisations awarded the General Help Quality Mark cannot provide advice or legal help on complex matters in specific areas of law or representation in court.
- 4.6 By achieving this quality award, the Service has demonstrated its commitment to providing a quality service. Although it does not result in direct funding, it may give organisations an advantage when applying for funding from other sources as it is independently assessed and shows that the service provided is well-managed.
- 4.7 Needs Mapping carried out through the Legal Services Commission allows the Service to access additional funding through Legal Aid Franchises. However, to date (June 2004) the Service does not have any Legal Aid Franchises. Discussions did take place with the Legal Services Commission (LSC) in September, 2003 for a Debt Advice contract from April, 2004 when one of the two debt advice projects was due to end. Unfortunately, this did not progress, the Service being informed that debt in Sedgefield was not an LSC regional priority with the CAB already providing debt advice. Two current debt advice projects are due to end in March 2006.
- 4.8 There is a Community Legal Services Partnership in County Durham which was established in May 2000. The partners include all seven district authorities, the County Council and Legal Services Commission. Sedgefield and District Advice and Information Service is also a partner and active member.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 In 2004/2005, the Borough Council will fund the Service through a direct grant of £150,000 (£63,270 of which is recharged to the Housing Revenue Account). This represents 41% of the Service's annual income.
- 5.2 Additionally the Council bears the costs of accommodation expenses which total £16,980 as follows:

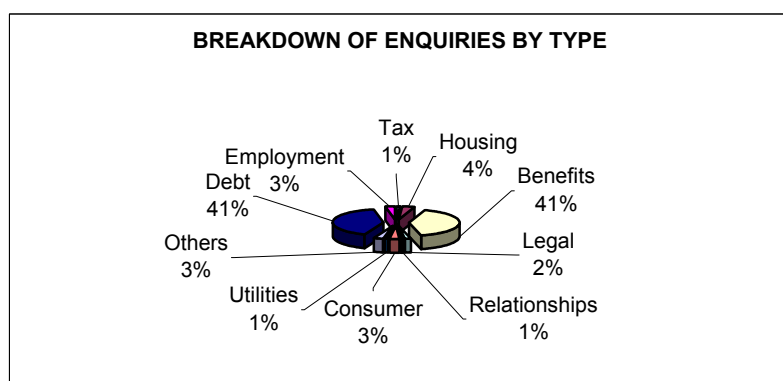
Location	Cost
Sedgefield Advice and Information Centre at Sedgefield	£1,500
Newton Aycliffe Leisure Centre	£13,300
Shildon resource Centre	£2,180

5.3 Project funding accounts for the remainder of the Services annual income and for 2004/2005 the Service will be managing 5 projects – Community Fund Money Advice Project; Sedgefield Primary Care Trust Health Advice Service; The Northern Rock Foundation Money Advice Project; Sure Start Ferryhill and Chilton; and Sure Start Newton Aycliffe West and Shildon. However, succession funding for established projects from such sources is hard to obtain, as they often wish to ‘invest’ in new areas.

5.4 An exercise has been undertaken comparing the financial contribution made by Sedgefield Borough with that of other authorities within the area and the findings are set out at Appendix A. The findings reveal that at £1.91 per head of population the Borough Council contributes significantly more than other authorities within County Durham. If the Council paid only the average per head across the County of £0.98, its total contribution would fall to £85,456. If the Council paid the average amount per head paid by the other councils in the County, its total contribution would fall to £68,016

5.5 Housing Revenue Account

The monies recharged to the Housing Revenue Account are done so on the basis that the Service undertakes advisory work regarding housing issues. However, the breakdown below for 2003/2004 demonstrates that only 4% of enquiries received covered housing issues, such as tenancy agreements, repairs and cases of harassment and no evidence to suggest that these all relate to Council tenants.



5.6 However, many of the other issues covered, such as Benefits and Debt, could well relate to Council tenants, as half of the Borough’s wards are within the most 15% deprived wards in the country.

5.7 Due to the high demand for advice relating to welfare benefits and debt, the Service also has two full time money advice projects which have been running since December 2000. In 1999/2000 the Service dealt with 6532 debt enquiries and in 2001/2002 16,034 – a 145% increase in a 3 year period.

- 5.8 The percentage of enquiries on housing related issues has fallen over the last 6 years despite a 62% increase in the number of enquiries received over the same period.
- 5.9 The Housing Department has expressed concern that there are no service level agreements in place, no clear records of who is using the service and no referral system in place. It is therefore, very difficult to discern whether the Service is providing value for money to that department.
- 5.10 The Service needs to provide more detailed analysis of its information to the Borough Council so that an assessment can be carried out into the long-term sustainability of the funding. Should stock transfer go ahead, it is unlikely that Sunderland Housing Group would continue to fund the service as it is, without a service level agreement or detailed information which demonstrates that it is a service the tenants require and one which offers value for money.

6. CONSULTATION

- 6.1 Not deemed necessary at this stage.

Contact Officer: John Turnbull
Telephone No: (01388) 816166 ext 4392
Email Address: jturnbull@sedgefield.gov.uk

Background Papers

Sedgefield Borough Council Revenue Budgets
Sedgefield and District Advice and Information Service Annual Reports

APPENDIX A

AUTHORITY	TOTAL FINANCIAL SUPPORT	PER HEAD OF POPULATION	ADDITIONAL SUPPORT
Sedgefield Borough	£166,980	£1.91	£16,980 accommodation costs for outreach centres around the Borough area.
City Of Durham	£69,210	£0.79	No additional support is given other than the direct donation.
Teesdale	£19,720	£0.80	The Council has required the CAB to vacate their current council owned premises and re-locate elsewhere. The CAB is looking for a Capital Grant from the Council to smooth this transition. The CAB are also asking for more in the way of revenue support. The Council has stated that due to budgetary constraints only the Capital Grant may be feasible.
Wear Valley	£54,000	£0.88	No other direct support is given.
Derwentside	£50,000	£0.59	This contribution has been made subject to a full assessment of future funding being undertaken.
Easington	£96,000	£1.02	No other information available.
Chester le Street	£29,800	£0.55	No other information available.

Average cost per head of population of County Durham of total contributions is £0.98.
Average cost per head of population of County Durham, excluding Sedgefield Borough, is £0.78.

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