

Thame & District Citizens Advice Bureau Service Overview 2012-13



	2011	2012
Total Clients	1599	1547
	%	%
Benefits	27	32
Consumer	3	3
Debt	22	18
Education	1	1
Employment	13	14
Finance	2	2
Health	2	2
Housing	8	8
Immigration	1	1
Legal	7	6
Other	1	1
Relationships	9	11
Tax	1	1
Travel	1	
Utilities		1

Bureau Opening Hours

	9.30 – 13.00	13.00 – 16.00
Monday	△ ○ □	△ ○ □
Tuesday	△ ○ □	△
Wednesday	△ ○ □	△
Thursday	△ ○ □	△ ○ □
Friday	△ ○ □	△ ○ □

- △ Triage & Emergency Phone Advice
- Triage Drop In
- General Advice in Person and by Phone

Services

All services are free, independent, confidential & available to everyone

- Face to face & telephone advice appointments
- Telephone advice on demand
- Out of hours national helpline
- Debt, employment and benefits casework
- Specialist housing and debt support for SOHA clients
- Referral to specialist partners including Shelter, Relate, RNIB, Pension Advisory Service
- Approved Debt Relief Order (DRO) intermediary
- Mortgage relief scheme support
- Help with form filling and writing letters
- At home service for housebound clients

We experienced an increase in welfare benefits enquiries in 2012 and a decrease in the number of debt enquiries. The increase in benefits work was due mainly to problems with Employment Support Allowance. A breakdown of welfare enquiries is shown in this table.

	%		Change
2 Income Support	6.1	4	-2.1
3 Pension Credit	6.3	3.5	-2.8
4 Social Fund Loans-crisis	0.3	1.4	1.1
5 Social Fund Loans-budgetg	0.3	0.2	-0.1
6 Sf Community Care Grants	0.2	0.6	0.4
7 Housing Benefit	14.7	14	-0.7
8 Child Benefit	2.6	1.9	-0.7
9 Council Tax Benefit	13.9	11.3	-2.6
10 Working+child Tax Credits	9.8	10.6	0.8
11 Jobseekers Allowance	7.5	6.6	-0.9
12 National Insurance	0.6	0.2	-0.4
13 State Retirement Pension	1.9	1.5	-0.4
14 Incapacity Benefit	2.5	2	-0.5
15 Dla-care Component	5.2	4.1	-1.1
16 Dla-mobility Component	1.9	2.8	0.9
17 Attendance Allowance	1.7	3.4	1.7
18 Carers Allowance	3	2.6	-0.4
19 Employment Support Allowance	8.1	13.9	5.8
99 Other Benefits Issues	13.6	15.4	1.8

Staff	2011	2012
Volunteer Staff		
Advisers	19	20
Gateway	9	11
Admin & Reception	10	9
Trustees	7	7
Other	4	2
Paid Staff (Full time equivalent)		
Manager	0.6	0.6
Advice Manager	0.6	0.6
Trainer	0.2	0.2

Looking Ahead

The bureau is aware that it will face a unique set of circumstances in the coming 2-3 years. The government has laid out a programme of changes to the welfare benefits system which starts on the 1st April 2013 and will continue until 2017. These changes have been well publicised with issues such as the "bedroom tax" and the migration of Disability Living Allowance to Personal Independence Payments capturing most of the headlines. More significant new measures will start to be introduced from October 2013 as Universal Credit replaces the current means tested systems.

In addition to benefits changes there will be new local rules on the allocation of social housing and the district council will reduce Council Tax exemptions on some properties. April 2013 also sees the previously announced cuts in legal aid provision coming into effect.

The challenge facing the bureau is threefold:

- An anticipated increase in enquiries
- The need to develop expertise in a rapidly changing environment
- The need to collect impact data in order to inform national and local agencies

This type of challenge would be difficult for any private or public organisation. For the CAB with its mainly voluntary, part-time workforce it is particularly daunting. Our volunteer advisers work 1 day per week but need to be trained in technically complex systems whilst dealing with an increased number of clients.

We are fortunate that our current group of advisers is very capable and experienced. They have started to receive training on the initial benefits changes through a mix of workshops and interactive computer sessions. This will continue for the foreseeable future. Many of our volunteers will donate additional hours of their time in order to complete this training and continue to provide a service to clients. When our resources allow we shall also recruit and train additional gateway staff to ensure that new clients receive triage interviews with the minimum possible delays.

We believe that the major social housing providers in the area and the district council are making good efforts to minimise the disruption to their customers resulting from changes to

national systems. We have been kept up to date by SOHA and SODC on their timetables and actions. The major benefits changes in April are being implemented by the district council and we will adopt a collaborative approach to resolving problems that clients may experience in the coming months.

Oxfordshire South & Vale Citizens Advice Bureau

On 31st March 2013, Thame CAB will merge with Abingdon, Didcot and Henley bureaux to form a new organisation, the Oxfordshire South & Vale Citizens Advice Bureau (OSAVCAB). This merger is a response to the difficulties that all 4 bureaux face as small organisations coping with a tough funding environment combined with enormous challenges in the delivery of advice services.

There will be no disruption to advice services in Thame as a result of this restructuring. Opening hours will remain the same and all advice staff will continue to work out of Market House. The objective of the OSAVCAB is that local advice provision, recruitment of local volunteers and the maintenance of local relationships remain at the heart of our service. The OSAVCAB board will include members from all 4 localities including 2 members from Thame, Rosemary Tansey and Ian Bottomley.

Some small financial savings will be achieved by centralising an admin team in Abingdon CAB. The main thrust of the merger, however, will be to develop a strong core of expertise, located throughout the district, which will be available to support our generalist advisers and be brought to bear on the most complex and intransigent client problems. Our aim is to meet our short term challenges and provide improved services to clients in the medium and long term.

We believe that a larger CAB will be able to play a leading role in developing relationships with other providers that will benefit people throughout the South and Vale including Thame. We are pursuing, for example, opportunities to deliver joint up services with carers organisations and mental health charities.

Tom Fox, March 2013