

Town Clerk
Berwick-upon-Tweed Town Council
5 The Chandlery
Quayside
Berwick-upon-Tweed
TD15 1HE

31 August 2016

Dear Wendy

I am writing to Berwick Town Council on behalf of Citizens Advice Northumberland to ask about continuing financial support for our Berwick office.

As Councillors will know from our regular reports, Citizens Advice Northumberland continues to be one of the main providers of free, quality marked advice in the Berwick area. Demand for our services remains high but we are working hard to increase capacity by using modern technology to improve telephone, email and webchat services. We are also working to integrate these services across the county so that staff and volunteers can work together to deal efficiently with peaks and troughs in demand.

Delivering services through a range of channels enables us to provide alternative means of access in rural communities where transport difficulties, caring responsibilities or health problems can prevent people from travelling to their nearest office. Where people can self-help by using high quality, on-line information we encourage them to do so but we recognise that for many people a lack of digital skills or poor internet access makes this impossible.

We are acutely aware that now more than ever, the complexity of problems and the vulnerability of clients means that many people still rely heavily on our face-to-face advice service. Without this service some of the most vulnerable and 'at risk' people in the community simply wouldn't get the help they need. Staff and volunteers are particularly concerned at the moment about the number of clients experiencing mental health problems and those suffering from additional health problems as a result of low income.

In a large rural area like Northumberland the need to deliver face-to-face services at a local level puts enormous pressure on our resources. In 2016-17 more than 75% of our funding is restricted to the delivery of specific projects and services. Consequently we need to fundraise on an ongoing basis to keep our offices open. Grants and donations from local funders and from town and parish councils are playing an increasingly important role in that funding.

This year we have already faced an unexpected cut in funding from the Money Advice Service which led to a reduction in the number of debt casework hours in offices across the county, including the Berwick office. This will put additional pressure on the volunteer delivered information and advice services as we struggle to find enough capacity to meet the demand for specialist debt advice.

We are conscious that changes in the external environment continue to put enormous pressure on all our resources but I am writing to ask if the Town Council is in a position to maintain financial support to our Berwick office so that we can maintain and develop our advice services. As ever I would be happy to meet with the Town Council or their representatives to discuss the importance of this funding to the upkeep of the Berwick office.

Yours sincerely

Moira Macfarlane
Chief Executive