

Citizens Advice Northumberland

Supporting Statement for Berwick-upon-Tweed Town Council

Background

The Citizens Advice service has been operating in Northumberland through a network of offices for more than 35 years. Last year we provided free, high quality information, advice and practical support to 1,845 people through our Berwick office, delivering a range of services from information and advice through to specialist casework and representation at tribunal.

The services we deliver are available to everyone but they are particularly focussed on those in greatest need. Compared to the general population, the people we help through our local offices are more likely to:

- live on a low income;
- be unemployed;
- be disabled or have a long-term health problem;
- lack basic digital skills
- have limited or no access to the internet.

Demand for our services remains high. Life is complicated and people regularly encounter challenges and problems which they don't know how to overcome. We provide advice on a whole range of subjects including employment, housing and discrimination but, in 2015-16, 47% of all enquiries we dealt in the Berwick office related to problems with benefits and a further 20% to debt and financial problems.

Many of the problems we deal with have their root cause in major changes in society like recession and low growth, deficit reduction and welfare reform.

People's needs are very different and their ability to respond to changing circumstances varies enormously. People using our local, face-to-face advice services tend to be the most disadvantaged, with the greatest need and complexity of problems. In 2015-16, 79% of the people who received advice or casework from the Berwick office did so using face-to-face services. Whilst it is important that we deliver services in a range of ways, including telephone and email, we know from experience that without easy access to face-to-face advice, some of the most vulnerable and hard to reach people in the community simply wouldn't get the help they need.

Funding challenges

The size of Northumberland and the need to deliver local face-to-face services puts enormous pressure on our resources. Our core frontline services – the services which are delivered by our volunteer advisers – are the services which assist the majority of our clients. These core services are funded through a range of sources including the local authority, grant making trusts, contributions from restricted project funding and donations from town and parish councils, individuals and businesses.

In the current financial year almost 75% of our funding is restricted to the delivery of specific projects including our specialist debt and benefits advice services, our work to tackle fuel poverty and a dedicated service which supports parents with young children. In 2017-18 funding for these key projects is due to end. At this stage it is unclear whether continuation or alternative funding will be available, but if these services are lost, this will have the knock on effect of reducing the contribution to core running costs. We are currently anticipating this lost contribution to be at least £133,000 across the organisation.

Currently 18% of all advice enquiries are dealt with at casework level through these projects. Their loss would put added pressure on demand for core services increasing the need to recruit, train and supervise new volunteers and resulting in a further increase in core running costs.

Funding request

The current grant of £20,000 which we receive from the Town Council is helping to fund a 22.5 hours per week paid supervision and training post in the Berwick office. This enables volunteers to provide quality marked information and advice 5 days per week through a mixture of drop-in sessions and face-to-face appointments. To maintain quality of advice volunteers cannot deliver advice sessions without direct access to a supervisor and they must receive appropriate ongoing training. Without this post we would have to reduce our core services by up to 2 days per week.

A further grant of £20,000 would enable us to fund this post for an additional 12 months and maintain the current level of service. It would be used to cover the direct costs of the paid worker and, in particular, would continue to provide capacity in 3 key areas:

1. The supervision of existing volunteer advisers who deliver both drop-in sessions and advice appointments over 5 days per week.
2. The training and support of new volunteers who are recruited on an ongoing basis to replace people who move on to other opportunities.
3. The provision of emergency assessments to clients with complex problems who need immediate help outside normal opening hours.

Breakdown of costs

	£
Salary (including NI and pension)	18,638
Training – course fees / subsistence	675
Travel – meetings / training	850
Line management of post	1,657
Total	21,820

Shortfall in funding will be met from core costs.

Outcome of funding in Berwick

As a result of funding for this key post:

- At least 1,850 individuals would receive correct and timely advice from the Berwick office leading to practical gains and increases in health and well-being.
- At least 10 new volunteers would receive training and work experience leading to positive changes in their skills and knowledge and an increase in their employability.
- At least 235 people would receive emergency assessments leading to early intervention in crisis situations.

Summary

Citizens Advice Northumberland is asking Berwick-upon-Tweed Town Council for a further grant of £20,000 towards the costs of a paid supervision and training post in our Berwick office. This would enable us to continue to deliver core services at existing levels.

The organisation is requesting the funding for a 12 month period but would also ask the Town Council to consider the possibility of a 3 year funding agreement (subject to regular reporting and annual review). Such an agreement would make it significantly easier for the organisation to retain a suitably qualified member of staff and would provide a much higher level of stability and security for free advice services in the Berwick area in the coming 3 years.

Moira Macfarlane
Chief Executive
September 2016