

People and Communities Committee

Future of advice services in Berwick-upon-Tweed

Background

1. Members will remember that there have been a number of debates and discussions with the Trustees of Northumbria Citizens Advice Bureau about the future shape of advice services in Berwick upon Tweed.
2. While the meetings held were well attended, and the matter much debated, the discussions tended to focus upon a binary decision; should we fund Northumbria CAB to provide services in Berwick upon Tweed, or not.
3. A number of councillors have now requested that this matter be re-opened again. There is no issue with regard to the standing orders, since no definitive decision has been taken within the last six months.
4. However, there is a clear need to decide if funding CAB is the correct route to take, and to test whether there are alternative providers of advice services who can address some or all of the needs of residents of Berwick. Young people, for instance, are advised and supported by the Youth Project, veterans by the Royal British Legion, and regimental associations. Debt advice charities like Stepchange provide a nationwide service on line and over the phone, and Shelter North East advertise that they cover all of Northumberland, albeit from an office in Newcastle upon Tyne. These are just examples; it is possible, if not probable, that members will be aware of others.
5. Similarly, representation at tribunals and other hearings may be sourced from pro bono schemes such as the Student Law Office at Northumbria University.
6. It is also worth pointing out that residents of Berwick may be trades union members with access to free legal advice by that route, or have legal advice cover built into their household insurance policies.

Recommendations

1. That staff conduct an audit of local voluntary organizations to better understand the scale and distribution of advice provision in the town, and
2. That council undertake a survey of local residents to better understand which advice services they have used in the last year, and which advice services they have access to.