

REPORT FROM OUTSIDE BODY TO POLICY & FINANCE COMMITTEE
25th January 2011

RIBBLE VALLEY CITIZENS ADVICE BUREAU

The reporting year (at 2010 AGM) saw 1652 clients attending, presenting over 3000 issues. One third of these were about debt, a quarter about benefits, 10% on housing matters and 7% on employment problems.

The value of the work in monetary terms is shown in a recorded financial gain figure of £96,867. This is actual income through additional benefits, compensation or awards, directly into people's pockets, a very considerable contribution to the local economy. The organisation received a grant this year of £57,000 from RVBC.

The contribution of Ribble Valley Borough Council as principal funder is greatly appreciated as the impact of cuts is already affecting the bureau. East Lancashire NHS confirm that the annual £14, 580 funding for the Longridge outreach service will end in March 2011. However the Bureau is determined to find a way to gain sufficient funding to continue this important work and await the outcome of several charity applications.

Additional funding is sought wherever possible. Last year "non-core" income amounted to £55,000 from various other sources including Ribble Valley Homes. This partnership began as a short-term outreach project and has been highly successful. Income gains for clients were recorded at over six times the cost of the original three-month project. As a result, the weekly surgery run from the RV Homes base has now been established on an ongoing basis bringing an annual income of £9,600.

Increasing access to advice is a constant aim, and this year a triage system has been adopted. Because of this, more telephone enquiries are able to be handled directly, and any necessary referrals made promptly.

A fourth interview room was created and refurbished with generous financial help from Rotary clubs, the landlord (Trinity Methodist Church) and individual supporters. This additional accommodation has enabled CAB to host other organisations which also help clients, namely Lancashire County Council Welfare Rights, RV Mental Health Team advisers, a HARV Domestic Violence counsellor and the United Utilities project worker dealing with water tariff rates for vulnerable people. These partnerships make the bureau services even more useful, and often result in spin-off work.

Citizens Advice nationally have been aiming to reduce the number of bureaux over five years through mergers. However, the typically different issues faced by Ribble Valley's rural population have enabled the local CAB to make a strong case against this move, believing that a locally based team is best placed to meet local needs.

Feedback is valued on CAB's work, which in some respects extends and complements council services. The bureau debt team work alongside RVBC Housing Strategy staff to assist people to access the Possession Fund and Mortgage Rescue Scheme. This has proved an effective partnership.

As the Councillors appointed to the CAB Trustee Board, our firm view is that under the skilled and dedicated management of Katy Marshall this Bureau is maximising its potential throughout the Borough. The 8 part time staff (3 full time equivalent posts) supervise and support 16 trained volunteer advisers. The team provides a high-quality, committed service to clients who by the nature of their problems can be under considerable long-term stress.

The provision of weekly sessions at Longridge and the increased availability of telephone consultation have gone a long way towards addressing access issues. Without the work of the CAB, Ribble Valley residents would be much the poorer; many of the difficulties raised by clients would fall on to the Council itself, with resulting cost implications.

RVBC representatives on the Trustee Board are Cllrs Beverley Jones, Lois Rimmer, Noel Walsh.

17th December 2010