

EAST AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE – 19 September 2006

EAST AYRSHIRE CITIZENS ADVICE BUREAU - FUNDING APPRAISAL REPORT

Report by Executive Director of Neighbourhood Services

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1. To provide information to the Council on the work of the East Ayrshire Citizens Advice Bureau and to consider the level of grant assistance for the future.
- 1.2. The report contains detailed information on Bureau finances, evaluates the work of the bureau and includes future projects and expansion plans.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1. The Council undertook a review of information and advice services within East Ayrshire in 1997. The review was carried out by a member/officer working group and encompassed the Citizens Advice Bureau, Kilmarnock and Loudoun Unemployed Workers' Resource Centre and the Stewarton Community Information Project, as well as the Council's in house information and advice service provided through a network of local offices.
- 2.2. The review concluded that whilst there was a comprehensive and wide ranging information and advice service throughout East Ayrshire offering a one door approach to all Council services and major external services, there was duplication and fragmentation in these services provided by the Citizens Advice Bureau, the Kilmarnock and Loudoun Unemployed Workers Resource Centre and the Stewarton Community Information Project.
- 2.3. In January 1998 the recommendations of the working group were considered by the Policy and Resources Committee which agreed to the consolidation of an improved and extended independent voluntary sector information and advice service incorporating the expertise from the various projects mentioned in 2.1 & 2.2 under the auspices of the Citizens Advice Bureau.
- 2.4. East Ayrshire Council has funded the Citizens Advice Bureau of East Ayrshire since 1996. Although the Bureau obtains funds and grants from other external sources for specific initiatives, the majority of funding, and certainly the core funding, is supplied by the Council. The current grant for the year 2006-2007 is £134,561.
- 2.5. A Concordat Group consisting of members from various departments monitors the performance of the Bureau, and ensures that the Bureau receives Council funding timeously. The Group's remit also includes preparing an assessment to the Council when the grant is due for renewal.
- 2.6. All other Citizens Advice Bureau in Scotland are core funded by Local Authorities.

3. HOW THE BUREAU RELATES TO THE COMMUNITY PLAN

3.1 Since the review of the Council's Anti-Poverty section the CAB is the only organisation offering a welfare rights and money advice service to any member of the community. Other organisations including Educational & Social Services are restricted to specific client groups.

3.1.1 The Bureau has also been involved in developing the Council's Financial Inclusion Strategy.

3.2 Promoting Community Learning

Part of the service offered by the Bureau includes advice on opportunities in education and training. The Bureau is committed to training all its employees to a high standard whether they are full time or volunteers. This training involves not only education in the practical skills but also focuses on IT training and the training programme allied with valuable experience can provide valuable grounding for those seeking full time employment. The Bureau also provides information and advice to people moving from benefit to work thus ensuring they are not disadvantaged at this transitional stage in their lives.

3.3 Improving Opportunities

The Bureau employs 9 full-time workers and 2 part-time workers between two offices in Kilmarnock and Cumnock and many local people are trained volunteer advisers. East Ayrshire Council core funding funds five of these full-time workers. Thirty volunteers are currently working in the Bureau and a new adviser training programme is held annually. Volunteer advisers are given a considerable amount of training before taking their place in front of the public and it is this training and experience which often results in the volunteer obtaining full-time employment, should this be desired. Thus the Bureau provides a stepping stone for those seeking full-time employment as well as a source of advice for those in the employment market. In the past year, the Bureau has helped 2 volunteers gain full-time employment in the advice sector. The Bureau also has an Investors in People award.

3.4 Improving Health

The Bureau provides a comprehensive advice service on subject matter varying from money advice to benefits information. By providing this free service the Bureau is relieving some of the strain on those affected by poverty and thus it may be said is contributing to the health & welfare of the residents of East Ayrshire. The Bureau is also in partnership with the East Ayrshire Council's Educational & Social Services and the Housing Service and sits on the Eliminating Poverty Thematic Group and the Rent Arrears Strategy Group. The Bureau is also in partnership with the Advocacy Service, which involves, amongst other things, providing advice to clients with mental health problems.

3.5 Eliminating Poverty

The Bureau is involved in tackling poverty on a number of different fronts.

3.5.1 Consumer debt remains a focal point of the Bureau's work. Over half of all the case work is involved in resolving consumer's debt problems and this work can range from income maximisation, basic money advice and restructuring of consumer's debt through to organising trust deeds for those with serious debt problems.

3.5.2 The Bureau provides a comprehensive representation service, which provides clients with a representation facility at Social Security Appeal Tribunals and Employment Tribunals. The service is available for all residents in East Ayrshire but is particularly relevant to those who are disadvantaged. In the past year 186 clients were represented at social security appeal tribunals, 16 at employment appeals tribunals with a further 18 being settled without going to tribunal.

3.5.3 The Bureau receives £103,000.00 from the Council as part of a grant given to the Council by the Scottish Executive. This grant is specifically targeted towards money advice and the Bureau has used this money to employ 2 full-time and 1 part-time money advisers and a part-time clerical worker. In addition to their normal duties, the money advisers provide ongoing support and training on money advice and income maximisation to the volunteer advisers and other members of staff. Three of the money advisers are DAS approved which allows citizens of East Ayrshire access to the statutory Debt Arrangement Scheme (DAS). The Bureau is currently supporting 680 people with a debt totalling of over £8 million.

3.6 Improving the Environment

The Bureau delivers an independent housing advice service, which caters for a range of housing enquiries including local authority housing and rented accommodation. Subject matter includes tenancy rights, repairs and housing benefits and advice, assistance and representation in repossession issues. The Bureau is working towards accreditation to National Housing Standards. In the past year sheriff court representation was provided to 40 clients appealing against eviction. Repayment arrangements were made for a further 50 clients with rent arrears thus preventing a court appearance.

3.7 Benefits to East Ayrshire Council/Community

The Citizens Advice Bureau provides a unique information and advice service that is free, comprehensive and independent. Whilst the Council provides help and advice on a wide range of topics to the residents of East Ayrshire there is no single Department, which provides the range of advice available to the Bureau. Thus the community benefits from a truly comprehensive 'one stop shop' advice facility. In addition, the Bureau operates a representation service, which involves 9 trained Social Security Tribunal Representatives and 5 Employment Tribunal Representatives. The Bureau has developed its outreach service in line with client demand and operates from outreach locations on a weekly or fortnightly basis. Home visits are offered in the south of East Ayrshire to those unable to access the service for reason of care responsibilities, disability or isolation.

3.7.1 In the past year the confirmed financial gains achieved for clients in increased benefits, tribunal gains and debt write off was £1.3 million.

4. PROJECT VIABILITY

4.1 The Bureau employs 9 full-time employees and 2 part-time employees spread between two offices in Kilmarnock and Cumnock. Withdrawal of core funding would lead to the loss of all posts as it is unlikely that the Bureau would receive substitute core funding.

4.2 The effect on the community would be twofold.

4.2.1 Firstly, the residents of East Ayrshire would lose the only independent advice facility.

- 4.2.2 Secondly, there would be the loss of representation for those who find themselves involved in Social Security and Employment Tribunals.
- 4.3 Both 4.2.1 and 4.2.2 would affect the community as a whole, but in particular, the more vulnerable members of the public such as the elderly, disabled and those in poverty would be particularly affected.
- 4.4 The Bureau has been operating in Kilmarnock for 25 years. It started with one full-time employee supported by volunteers and has now expanded to 10 FTE employees supporting approximately 30 volunteers. It has established systems and processes, and is a technically viable, mature organisation.

5 FUNDING REQUEST

- 5.1 The Bureau has requested a grant of £163,000 from East Ayrshire Council for the year 2007/2008 and appropriate funding for the following two years.
- 5.2 The current Council contribution to the Bureau is £134,561. This core funding, which expires in March 2007, is used to run the Bureau's Kilmarnock and Cumnock offices and the salaries of the 5 core members of staff.
- 5.3 In addition, the Bureau receives £46,000 from the Community Regeneration Fund which is used to employ 2 outreach workers under the auspices of the Coalfields Outreach Project.
- 5.4 As previously stated in Section 3.5.3 of this report the Bureau also receives £103,000 from the Council's Department of Educational and Social Services as part of a grant given to the Council by the Scottish Executive. This grant is specifically targeted towards money advice and the Bureau has used this money to employ 2.5 dedicated money advisers and a part-time clerical assistant and to provide ongoing training and support in money advice to all members of staff.
- 5.5 An inflationary increase grant of 2% would bring the Council's contribution to £137,252 in 2007/2008, £139,997 in 2008/2009 and £142,796 in 2009/2010.

6 MONITORING PROCEDURES

- 6.1 The Bureau is currently monitored by a Concordat Group consisting of officers from various departments and meets biannually. The sponsoring department is the Department of Neighbourhood Services and the current Chair of the Group is Leslie Aitchison. The Manager of the Bureau also attends Concordat meetings.
- 6.2 The Manager of the Bureau will present to the Concordat Group meeting details of financial progress, Bureau statistics and any other information, which would be relevant to the Council.
- 6.3 The Bureau is also audited by Citizens Advice Scotland in terms of quality of advice and organisational structure.

7 MEMBER/OFFICER INVOLVEMENT

- 7.1 The East Ayrshire Citizens Advice Bureau Articles of Association allow for 3 Elected Members of the Council to attend Board Meetings. The Council has opted for these members to act as advisers to the Board as opposed to being full Directors.
- 7.2 There is no officer involvement other than via the Concordat Group although the monitoring officer may be called upon to attend extraordinary meetings with the Manager of the Bureau as required. A representative of the Concordat Group attends the Bureau AGM.

8 LEGAL & POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 The East Ayrshire CAB contributes to the delivery of Council policy by routine involvement with many of the themes laid down in the Community Plan.
- 8.2 A Minute of Agreement between the Council and East Ayrshire Citizens Advice Bureau regulates the current operational arrangements. It is proposed that a new Minute of Agreement with terms and conditions to be determined and agreed by the Solicitor to the Council to ensure that the Council's interests are adequately protected should again regulate any future operational arrangements.

9 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 The final Council grant made to the Bureau for the year 2006-2007 was for £134,561. This is funded from the Policy and Resources budget.

10 FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

- 10.1 Through the Concordat Group, East Ayrshire Citizens Advice Bureau will be encouraged to work to the principles laid down in the Business and Development Plan.

11 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 11.1 The Committee is asked to:-
- a) note that the partnership agreement expires in March 2007 as detailed in paragraph 8.2;
 - b) agree a funding contribution for 2007/2008, 2008/2009 and 2009/2010 of £137,252, £139,997 and £142,796 respectively;
 - c) otherwise note the contents of this report.

William Stafford
Executive Director of Neighbourhood Services

LRA/JM

28th August 2006

LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS

1. East Ayrshire Citizens Advice Bureau Annual Report
2. East Ayrshire Citizens Advice Bureau Business Development Plan 2005 – 2008

Any person wishing further information or to inspect the background papers relative to this report should contact Leslie Aitchison, Assistant Principal Trading Standards Officer, on (01563) 554381.

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