

**INFORMATION  
FOR POTENTIAL  
VOLUNTEERS**

**Reading District Citizens Advice Bureau  
Minster St.  
Reading  
RG1 2JB**

## ***The Citizens Advice Bureau Service***

The CAB Service is an independent organisation with voluntary and paid staff, founded in 1939. The Service provides free, confidential and impartial information and advice on every subject. Since its very early days the service has adhered to the twin ethics of equality and social justice.

Last Year the CAB Service helped with 5.5 million enquires. It draws on its experience of clients' problems to suggest where improvements can be made to the social policy and services of local and national government.

Citizens Advice gives advice at 3000 outlets. These are supported by a Central Office, a Divisional Office in London, and Regional Offices throughout England and Wales, and the Northern Ireland Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux. CABx in Scotland are covered by a separate organisation, Citizens Advice Scotland. There are over 21,000 people and the CAB Service, 90% of whom are volunteers working in bureaux and serving on management committees.

Each member bureau is an entity in its own right, responsible for running its own affairs within the agreed policy and standards of the National Association, with the guidance of the Association's Regional Director.

The Council of Citizens Advice is the policy-making body of the CAB Service nationally and consists of Bureau representatives from each of the regions.

It sets the standards that all CABx have to meet in order to qualify for membership, decides the overall policy of the CAB Service and acts as the national voice of the CABx. The Annual General Meeting provides an additional forum for debating motions on social policy, Association policy or constitutional matters.

To call itself a CAB, a bureau has to meet the current conditions for membership of the National Association. As a member of Citizens Advice the bureau is entitled to all the services provided by the Association, as well as the vote at the National AGM and at the Area Committee.

Bureaux rely primarily on local authorities for their funding and Citizens Advice receives a core grant from the Department of Trade and Industry. The Service also receives donations from the private sector and charitable trust.

The CAB Service has been strongly committed to justice and equality ever since its foundation. In March 1993 Citizens Advice adopted a comprehensive equal opportunities policy with a commitment to positive action to put it into practise.

## ***Aims and Principles***

A Citizens Advice Bureau is more than just an advice giving agency. Besides giving advice, information and assistance to individuals with problems, the service also attempts to tackle the underlying issues which may give rise to these problems. These activities are formally embodied in the ***aims of the service*** and are governed by ***four basic principles***.

<b><i>Aims of the Service</i></b>
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"The Citizens Advice service provides free, independent, confidential and impartial advice to everyone on their rights and responsibilities. It values diversity, promotes equality and challenges discrimination".

To provide the advice people need for the problems they face

*and  
equally...*

To improve the policies and practices that affect people's lives

*In other words...*

*In other words...*

***TO HELP INDIVIDUAL CLIENTS  
MANAGE PROBLEMS:***

This happens when people come with their enquiries to the bureau.

***PREVENTING SIMILAR  
PROBLEMS ARISING FOR  
OTHERS:***

The bureaux use information gained from individual interviews to raise general issues. This allows the experience of bureaux to be used on a national, regional or local level to draw attention to particular problems.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Independent</b></p> <p>The service provided by Citizens Advice Bureaux is completely independent. Bureaux are therefore able to offer impartial advice to all enquirers and to take up any issue with all the appropriate authority on behalf of individuals or groups.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Impartial</b></p> <p>The service provided by Citizens Advice Bureaux is impartial. It is open to everybody, regardless of race, religion, politics or sexual orientation, and advice and help will be given on any subject without any preconceived attitude on the part of the organisation.</p>	
<table border="1" style="margin: 0 auto;"> <tr> <td style="padding: 2px;"><b><i>Four Principles of the Service</i></b></td> </tr> </table>		<b><i>Four Principles of the Service</i></b>
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<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Confidential</b></p> <p>Citizens Advice Bureaux offer confidentiality to clients. Nothing learned by a bureau from a client, including the fact of their visits, will be passed on to anyone outside the service without their express permission.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Free</b></p> <p>The service provided is free. Clients are not expected to pay for any part of the service (including stamps, photocopying, telephone calls and stationery).</p>	

**'WE DON'T TELL, DON'T JUDGE AND DON'T CHARGE'**

## *The Policies of Citizens Advice*

**The Association has a range of policies which underpin the services provided by bureaux. Many are to do with the practicalities of implementing the Aims and Principles of the Service. Outlined below are some of the policies which form the bedrock of the service.**

### *Confidentiality*

- Nothing learned by a bureau from a client, including the fact of their visits, will be passed on to anyone outside the service without their express permission.
- Since clients' approach the bureau rather than an individual worker, cases may be discussed with either colleagues or specialist advisors within bureaux or with the staff of the Citizens Advice.
- Records of Interviews with clients are kept in a safe place.
- In no circumstances are any details publicised that could enable a client to be identified. In order to draw attention to areas where law and practise warrant review, numbers of callers of a particular type – which composite or fabricated case histories (described as such) – may be used. In no circumstances, however, must this involve a breach of confidentiality.
- On the very rare occasions a bureau is under pressure to breach confidentiality, for any reason whatever, the manager first seeks the agreement and support of the senior staff in Citizens Advice.

### *Independence*

- The service provided by Citizens Advice Bureaux is completely independent. Bureaux are therefore able to offer impartial advice to all clients and to take up any issues with the appropriate authority on behalf of individuals or groups.
- The policies and practices of the Citizens Advice Bureaux Service are decided solely by its members, through its democratic structures. No other individual or agency, even one giving financial support or other aid to bureaux, has any right to determine or influence these policies or practices.
- Citizens Advice welcomes outside advice and it is grateful for financial support, but these are acceptable only if they in no way restrict the independence of the bureau and this is understood by all parties.
- Independence should not inhibit the development of working relationships with other agencies, since it is part of the job of the Citizens Advice Bureaux to help individuals to make the best use of all available services. However, these relationships should not lead to merging and bureaux must ensure that their real or perceived independence is not lost.

## ***Impartiality and Objectivity***

- The service provided by Citizens Advice Bureaux is impartial. It is open to everybody, regardless of race, religion, politics or sexual orientation, and advice and help will be given on any subject without any preconceived attitude on the part of the organisation.
- The provision of an impartial and objective service demands that bureau staff must recognise their own prejudices and take action to control their feelings when dealing with a particular enquirer.
- An individual member of bureau's staff who has strong conscientious reservations on the particular subject of an enquiry must nevertheless be willing to help the client. No one who is unwilling to demonstrate such objectivity should be accepted to work in a bureau.
- The information given to clients must be selected purely on the basis of its usefulness to the client, and not because of its support for any particular viewpoint. It should be passed on without preconceived attitudes about the ways in which the client might use it.
- Appropriate action will be taken on behalf of a client regardless of how unpopular or unpalatable it may be with the community or the bureau itself.
- The image of the Citizens Advice Bureau must reflect the impartial nature of the service, so that bureaux are seen to be accessible to all member of the community.

## ***Our commitment to Equal Opportunities Policies***

The CAB Service:

- Recognises that many people experience injustice and inequality in their daily lives due to discrimination and prejudice.
- Resolutely opposes discrimination. It aims to ensure that its employment and service delivery policies and practices are equitable and just.
- Resists and challenges discrimination, and supports staff and clients who are confronted with discriminatory acts.
- Supports positive action programmes aimed at alleviating the effects of discrimination and correcting imbalances that result from it.
- Has adopted policies to combat the institutionalised and individual discrimination faced by:  
Black people and ethnic minorities  
Disabled people  
Lesbians and gay men  
Irish people and travellers  
Woman  
People with HIV/AIDS
- Accepts that there are other groups of people who experience discrimination and it is working to develop policies for these groups.

### ***Impartiality and Equal Opportunities***

Applying the Principle of Impartiality to the whole community leads to thinking about Equal Opportunities. Equal Opportunities is an issue which affects every part of the service. The Equal Opportunities policies of the service are based on the recognition that in our society both groups and individuals experience discrimination. Discrimination is not only unfair and unjust, it is oppressive, and if the CAB is to be 'open to everyone' then it has to take positive steps which are meant to reduce or remove discrimination.

## ***Enabling clients to manage their own problems***

### ***The CAB Service aims...***

***To ensure that individuals do not suffer through lack of knowledge of their rights and responsibilities or of the services available; or through an inability to express their needs effectively.***

The scope of the bureau's work is really determined by clients, both existing and potential. This is because the CAB Service is committed to trying to work with anyone who needs their help.

The Functions of a Citizens Advice Bureau can be summed up as advice, information, referral, action, advocacy and feedback.

Any member of the public can walk into any Citizens Advice Bureau and ask for help, information or advice.

Some problems need urgent action, some may need to be referred to other organisations, some are matters of simple law, while others may require only straightforward information.

Discussion on an apparently simple matter can bring to light a more serious underlying problem. The help provided by a bureau for an individual client may span, for example, the fields of housing, legal aid, benefits, welfare entitlements, relationship breakdown, or problems at work.

Bureaux may offer their services at different bases which are extensions of the main office. Outreach sessions, held in places such as hospitals, prisons, and community centres, enable a broader section of the public to use the bureaux resources. In some cases, home visits and even mobile services are provided.

Many other agencies or services tend to be specific and will deal only with problems relating to their agencies. For example, the Department of Work and Pensions will deal with problems relating to certain benefits, solicitors deal with certain legal problems and Relate with relationship problems.

In Contrast, the CAB service works very effectively as a '**one stop advice shop**' for clients.

The service is increasingly being called on to respond to demands for specialist advice. For example, in the areas of welfare rights, debt or dealing with the needs of particular communities. Some bureaux have developed their ability to respond to the demand for tribunal representation and others have set up free legal sessions using local solicitors.

The development of money advice has been in response to the needs of clients who are in debt. Advice given includes budgeting, negotiating with creditors, coping with family and personal problems plus information on benefits and housing.

The CAB can deal directly with all these needs, linking together information and services as varied as the building society, the court, the electricity board and social workers.

***A Bureau tries to enable clients to understand and manage their problems as a whole. It can do this because it is a generalist agency, focusing on the needs of its clients.***

***Preventing similar problems  
arising for others***

***The CAB Service aims...***

***to exercise a responsible influence on the development of social policies and services, both locally and nationally.***

## **Social Policy Work**

The CAB deals with many millions of enquiries nationally every year. Bureaux make a record of each interview and any action that results from it. By doing this they collect a wealth of information about the different problems experienced by their clients.

The CAB tries to use this evidence wherever possible to highlight the effects of the policies and services upon CAB clients. In this way, the CAB is able to make an impact not only on the lives of the clients who seek our advice, but also on the lives of the public in general.

CAB workers aim to integrate individual advice and social policy work. There are various stages to carrying out a piece of social policy work.

*These are:*

- *Identifying issues, e.g. administrative procedures going wrong.*
- *Collecting evidence, e.g. information on client's experience of a particular problem.*
- *Presenting the evidence: collating, drawing out the implications, making an appropriate suggestion for charge*

A local CAB may be involved in these activities in various ways:

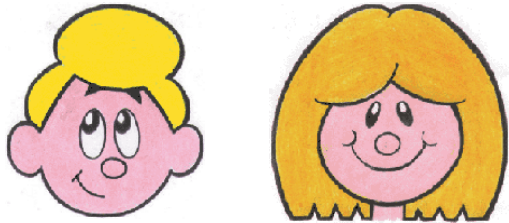
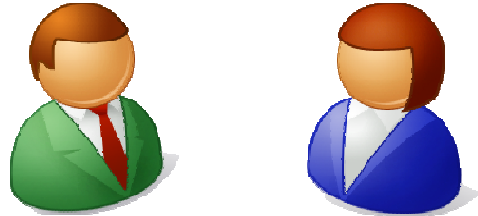
- *By identifying local issues on local services and collecting evidence to put to the policy makers, e.g. press, politicians.*
- *By responding to requests from the National Association Central Office to supply evidence on an issue which the Association is monitoring nationally.*
- *The National Association is frequently asked to comment on proposed changes in legislation or social policy at national level, and also, may initiate evidence gathering exercises when a significant issue is brought to its attention by bureaux. Similarly, the Regional Office can pursue issues on a regional level.*

***Councillors, MPs and Ministers all draw on CAB evidence to gauge public feeling on a wide range of issues.***

## **What we ask from a Bureau Volunteer**

### ***"Are you prepared to honour our commitment to impartiality?"***

Whatever your views are, you will be expected to work with all kinds of clients and any kind of problem they have. You will need to be prepared to examine your own views and feelings to make sure that you are able to give an equally good service to everyone.



### ***"Can you work within our confidentiality requirements?"***

Everything that you see and hear in the course of your work has to be private and every worker has to sign an agreement to observe a strict rule of confidentiality before they begin work in the bureau.

### ***"Will you carry out the CAB's policy of anti-racism?"***

This means an active opposition to all forms of racism and discrimination and to make sure that the service is equally available to all people. All CAB workers are expected to carry out this policy.



### ***"Are you willing to be trained?"***

All new workers have to go through initial training. They will then work under supervision for a period of time. Throughout your involvement with the service all kinds of training courses, sessions and self-study material are available.

### ***"Will you attend the regular workers meetings?"***

Attendance of the meetings is a crucial part of bureau work – for training, case discussion, policy issues, preventative work, as well as mutual support.

### ***"Are you prepared to keep yourself up-to-date with new information?"***

Things are always changing and you will need to spend some time reading relevant material in the bureau.

### ***"Are you available to volunteer for the hours needed each week?"***

The minimum time required will vary according to your role; from a three hour shift for a Customer Support Worker to a day each week for an Adviser.

## ***Volunteering with the Citizens Advice Bureau***

### ***Why do CABx need volunteers?***

90% of the people providing advice in bureaux are volunteers. They come from the communities they serve. Without volunteers there would be no service.

### ***Who are the volunteers?***

Like our clients, they have a wide range of backgrounds. Rather than qualifications or particular work experience, they tend instead to share other qualities. Invariably they are good listeners, both patient and uncritical. They need to be open-minded about other people's lifestyles, values and beliefs and share our commitment to uphold effective Equal Opportunities policy and practise. With a keen interest in researching problems and finding answers, they are also willing to keep up-to-date with changes in practise and procedures as well as legislation.

### ***What do volunteers get out of it?***

Volunteers belong to dedicated, friendly and hardworking teams, getting on with duties that are interesting, varied and worthwhile. By helping members of their community, volunteers know they are doing something both challenging and constructive. By involvement in a caring organisation, with professional expectations, volunteering can provide all the satisfaction, stimulation, challenge and potential for personal growth as a paid vocation – but without the money! The service gives its comprehensive training free, offers the opportunity to develop specialist skills and provides travel and child care expenses to try and ensure that volunteers are not out of pocket getting to the bureau for their sessions. Many volunteers have found this to be an excellent stepping stone back into paid employment.

### ***What do Volunteers do?***

There are many roles which include:

- **Advisers:** working directly with clients to provide help and advice on a wide range of issues. Advisers need to explore the client's problems, identify their options by using out comprehensive information system and agree action plans with the client. The action plan may involve the advisors in writing letters or making calls on behalf of the client
- **Making Life Better coaches:** supporting clients who wish to make positive changes to their lifestyle.
- **Customer support workers:** providing the initial support and help to clients coming into the bureau
- **Admin workers:** carrying our essential office tasks including keeping local information up to date, collecting statistics and producing reports and preparation of training materials
- **Trustee board members:** organising funding and premises and selecting bureau staff.