

Annual Report April 2015 - March 2016

Introduction by Chair of Sandwell Advice Providers Network (SAPN)

I am very pleased to present our first annual report. SAPN is made up of advice providers from both statutory and voluntary organisations and was formally established in September 2013. Our overall aims are to improve the quality of advice in Sandwell by joining up services, improving the knowledge and skills of advisors, and social policy work.

Network meetings are held regularly across Sandwell bringing together all advice providers who share the common goal of tackling tackle poverty.

Everyone in the Network is working hard to make a real difference to the people of Sandwell and in 2015/16 we secured over £28million in benefits for local residents.

I would like to thank all our members and partner organisations including Sandwell MBC for their continuous support to tackle poverty in Sandwell.

Shabud Ullah
Chair

Role of the Sandwell Advice Providers Network

The Network is a forum for discussion about a very wide range of topics that relate to providing high quality, free advice in Sandwell about debt, welfare benefits, housing, consumer matters, employment and other issues. Training, referrals, social policy and information about changes in the law are discussed on a regular basis.

Over 15 independent advice providers belong to the Network including: Citizens Advice, members of Sandwell Consortium, AgeUK, CARES, IRIS, Centrepont Christian Church and the council's welfare rights unit. Meetings are chaired by Shabud Ullah from CBO and partners from other services are invited to ensure that links are made. Any organisation that provides free advice in Sandwell is able to attend meetings which take place every 2 months.

Most but not all members of the network receive funding from Sandwell Council specifically to enable them to deliver free advice on welfare benefits, debt and other matters.

Outputs delivered as a result of council funding

Numbers of unique clients supported

Organisation	2015/16
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Citizens Advice *	10,811
Sandwell Consortium open door *	2,819
Sandwell Consortium children's centres *	727
SPMA*	390
Welfare rights team	9,691
Total	24,438

Welfare rights advice April 2015 - March 2016

Organisation	Level of funding	Confirmed gains	Leverage
Citizens Advice *	583,946	3,174,057	5.43
Sandwell Consortium open door *	232,571	2,895,361	12.45
Sandwell Consortium children's centres *	97,059	1,195,233	12.31
SPMA *	30,445	632,042	20.76
Welfare rights team	976,917	20,527,580	21.01
Total	1,920,938	28,424,273	14.80

* funded to carry out generalist advice. Welfare rights forms part of the work that they do. Members of Sandwell Consortium are listed at the end of the annual report.

Debt outputs April 2015 - March 2016

In 2015/16 Citizens Advice debt advice service supported clients dealing with debt totalling £4,085,592 and helped to write off £570,381 of it.

Continuous improvement

Members of the network are all committed to service improvements. These include:

- Continuous training programme in place. Priority has been given to welfare rights training. 34 advice workers attended a series of intensive welfare rights courses delivered by the welfare rights team and 11 are now good or excellent. Overall there has been an increase in the skills and confidence of vcs advice workers
- A range of initiatives to increase capacity to deliver debt advice which include recruitment and training of 8 specialised volunteers by Citizens Advice and CBO and SPMA now have debt licences and are able to deliver debt advice.
- Effective case recording systems in place
- Evidence based social policy work - proactive work has been undertaken by providers at a local level to challenge sanctions and to measure the impact of the introduction of Universal Credit. Settled and Safe campaign around housing is in the planning stage for 2016/17. This will link in to the national campaign run by Citizens Advice
- Monitoring arrangements in place that include a quality audit by the Welfare Rights team
- Investment in casework supervision - 3 vcs providers pay for monthly casework supervision from the welfare rights team.

Looking Ahead

In 2016/17 providers will work together on the following:

- External funding: the new leadership of Citizens Advice provides an opportunity for providers to work much more closely together to access external funding
- Citizens Advice service offer: significant improvements are planned.
- Service standards: a short piece of work will be done to specify the required skill levels for advice providers and to clarify the requirements for supervision.
- Growing capacity to deliver debt advice: a phase 2 plan will be developed by the service redesign group
- Referral systems: further work needs to be done to increase the level of referrals between providers and to other agencies, including data sharing agreements between providers and use of secure emails.
- Advice in children's centres: work will be done to continue to improve rates of attendance at appointments and to move provision to the busiest centres.
- Volunteer involvement: expanding the use of volunteers to support some clients to do more things for themselves including translation, on-line applications etc, so that trained advice workers can be freed up to deliver advice to the most vulnerable.
- Sandwell Advice Providers Network website: carry out an options appraisal to determine the merits and function of a dedicated website.

Members of Sandwell Consortium

Sandwell Consortium is made up of the following voluntary organisations:

Bangladeshi Islamic Centre (BIC)
Bangladeshi Women's Association (BWA)
Brushstrokes
Centrepont Christian Church?
Community Connect Foundation (CCF)
Confederation of Bangladeshi Organisations (CBO)
Ideal for All
Sandwell Consortium?
Sandwell Youth and Community Centre
Skills Work and Enterprise Development Agency (SWEDA)
Yemeni Community Centre (YCA)