

Annual Report April 2016 - March 2017

Introduction by Chair of Sandwell Advice Providers Network (SAPN)

This is the second annual report for Sandwell Advice Providers Network. 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 continues to work hard to make a very real difference to Sandwell residents by providing free advice across a wide range of areas including: welfare benefits, debt, housing, employment and immigration. In the last year we have helped more than 11,000 people, an increase of over 17% compared to 2015/16. As the need for support increases I am proud of the way that the advice services have responded in such a positive way.

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 Sandwell, 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 and services joined up. 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

The context

- The welfare rights team focus on benefits advice. All other agencies deliver advice on a range of topics including welfare rights, housing, debt, employment, consumer etc
- Welfare reform has meant that benefits are reducing and are harder to secure.
- The time required to secure a positive result for a number of clients is increasing as cases become more complex - for example claimants from abroad
- Need to challenge DWP decisions continues
- Citizens Advice are looking at ways of they might follow up benefits advice to confirm gains for clients.
- SPMA have been able to increase the number of clients that they are supporting by involving 2 - 3 volunteers and securing funding for a debt worker

Numbers of unique clients supported

Organisation	2016/17
Citizens Advice	12,732
Sandwell Consortium open door	3,160
Sandwell Consortium children's centres	801
SPMA	739
Welfare rights team	11,430
Total	28,862

Welfare rights advice April 2016 - March 2017

Organisation	Level of funding	Confirmed gains	Leverage
Citizens Advice	583,946	2,469,646	4.23
Sandwell Consortium open door	232,571	3,867,010	16.63
Sandwell Consortium children's centres	97,059	1,220,437	12.57
SPMA	30,445	1,009,345	33.15
Welfare rights team	976,917	22,932,380	23.47
Total	1,920,938	31,498,818	16.40

Members of Sandwell Consortium are listed at the end of the annual report.

Debt outputs April 2016 - March 2017

In 2016/17 Citizens Advice debt advice service funded by the council 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. In 2016/17 achievements include:

- Free training programme updated to keep abreast of current needs
- April 2016 first networking event for all advice staff: "Working together more effectively to support our clients"
- Oct 2016 second networking event for all advice staff with the focus "Prevention - Helping People to Manage their Money More Effectively"
- Jan 2017 revised service standards with an emphasis on quality of welfare rights advice
- Speakers at SAPN meetings included: Revenues and Benefit Service (introduction of on-line Housing Benefit form and debt recovery, Citizens Advice housing law specialist, Employment Support (the Impact Programme), Healthy Sandwell, Citizens Advice Witness Support Service, Community Transport Furniture Service.
- Citizens Advice undertake a service review using the same staff to deliver a more flexible service
- Briefings on Benefit Cap changes and Universal Credit
- Development of the SAPN website

Looking Ahead

In 2017/18 providers will work together on the following:

- External funding: providers working together to access external funding
- 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.
- Universal Credit: preparation for the roll out of UC in July 2018
- Getting the SAPN website up and running

Members of Sandwell Consortium

The following members of deliver generalist advice:

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)