

Annual Report April 2017 - March 2018

Introduction by Chair of Sandwell Advice Providers Network (SAPN)

This is the third annual report of Sandwell Advice Provider 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 poverty.

Everyone in the Network is working hard to make a real difference to the people of Sandwell. In 2017/18 we supported over 29,000 people (comparable with 2016/17) and secured over £36million in benefits for local residents (an increase of £4,500,000 or 14% compared to 2016/17).

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. 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 - seeing more cases where medical evidence is poor or where agencies such as Capita have carried out poor quality medical assessments, leading to increased refusal of PIP and ESA claims.
- This ability to challenge successfully has increased as advisers confidence grows as a result of investment in training and support.

Numbers of unique clients supported

Organisation	2017/18
Citizens Advice	13,630
Sandwell Consortium open door	4,249
Sandwell Consortium children's centres	644
SPMA	769
Welfare rights team	10,143
Total	29,435

Welfare rights advice April 2017 - March 2018

Organisation	Level of funding	Confirmed gains	Leverage
Citizens Advice	583,946	2,576,419	4.41
Sandwell Consortium open door	232,571	3,751,414	16.13
Sandwell Consortium children's centres	97,059	830,289	8.55
SPMA	30,445	1,612,349	52.96
Welfare rights team	976,917	27,356,783	28.00
Total	1,920,938	36,127,254	18.81

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

Debt outputs April 2017 - March 2018

The Citizens Advice debt advice service is jointly funded by Sandwell council and by the Money Advice Service. Outputs were as follows:

Funder	Supported clients dealing with debt totalling	Amount of debt written off
Sandwell Council	£ 3,350,933	£108,375
Money Advice Service	£ 7,063,308.	£604,390
Total	£10,414,241	£712,765

SPMA have levered in additional funding for a debt worker, as a result of which they have been able to support clients dealing with debt totalling £2,707,251 and helped to write off £920,355 of that debt.

Continuous improvement

Members of the network are all committed to service improvements. In 2017/18 achievements include:

- [SAPN website](#) goes live June 2017
- Citizens Advice develop a referral tool to identify and meet wider client needs
- All training courses now include an assessment
- Energy advice (including water) starts to become embedded in routine advice
- SAPN speakers: Severn Trent Water (Big Difference scheme), South Staffs Water (Assure tariff), Modern Day Slavery, DWP, Black Country Mental Health Trust
- Housing performance measures developed for housing advice
- Jan 2018 - new opening hours for Citizens Advice
- Universal Credit briefing for advice workers
- Focus on developing an immigration offer - Jan 2018 level 1 training delivered to 15? advice workers. Citizens Advice, Brushstrokes, CBO and SPMA exploring ways in which offer can be expanded.

Looking Ahead

In 2018/19 providers will work together on the following:

- Immigration advice: build capacity to deliver OISC level 1 and 2
- Support to newcomers: explore ways in which more joined up support can be provided
- Prepare for roll out of Universal Credit in November 2018: this will include providing budgeting and digital support
- Refresh SAPN meetings: focus on challenges, successes and problem solving, exploring the needs of the Matters Family
- 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
- Energy advice and water tariffs become a routine part of advice

- BetterOff Sandwell is well integrated into the advice offer

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)