

Scottish National Standards for Information and Advice Providers Summary Audit Report

March 2011

East Sutherland Citizens Advice Bureau

Stephen Rhind

1 INTRODUCTION AND AUDIT OUTCOME

East Sutherland Citizens Advice Bureau's central office is in the town of Golspie. The premises are comfortable and welcoming and ideal as a service delivery point. The bureau covers a large geographical area and, in reflection of this, provides an outreach clinic service in the towns of Helmsdale, Brora, Dornoch, Bonar Bridge and Lairg.

Many of the presenting problems reflect issues consistent with the rural location and advisors use the established internal processes to offer constructive advice and direction to customers accessing the service.

The bureau deals directly with Welfare Benefits and Money Advice issues, with Housing advice being provided by a very experienced Housing and Homelessness Officer as a shared resource with a neighbouring Citizens Advice Bureau.

The agency is to be commended on the significant amount of work done in a short space of time since their pre-audit visit. The manager responded positively to the advice offered at that stage and has implemented and completed an action plan with his staff team prior to the commencement of the full audit.

The remit of the service is:

- To ensure that individuals do not suffer through lack of knowledge of their rights and responsibilities of the services available to them, or through an inability to express their needs effectively.
- To exercise a responsible influence on the development of social policies and services both locally and nationally.

1.1 AUDIT OUTCOME

The on-site audit visit took place during 14th and 15th March 2011.

Following the audit visit, it was concluded that the advice service provided by East Sutherland Citizens Advice Bureau meets the requirements of the Scottish National Standards for Information and Advice Providers (the Standards).

East Sutherland Citizens Advice Bureau is accredited to the Scottish National Standards for Information and Advice Providers in the topics and for the types of service shown below until March 2015.

Housing topics accredited

TOPIC	Type Applied for	Type Accredited to
2.1 Rent Arrears	II	II
2.2 Mortgages/Secured Loans	I	II

2.3	Housing Benefit/Council Tax Benefit	II	II
2.4	Disrepair in Rented Housing	II	II
2.5	Housing Options	I	II
2.6	Discrimination in Housing	I	I
2.7	Eviction	I	I
2.8	Anti-Social Behaviour	I	I
2.9	Harassment and Illegal Eviction (includes race discrimination)	I	I
2.10	Homelessness	I	II
2.11	Relationship Breakdown	I	I
2.12	Rent: Private Sector	I	I
2.13	Security of Tenure	II	II
2.14	Statutory Tenancy Rights	II	II
2.15	Repair and Improvement Grants	I	II

Money and welfare benefits topics accredited

TOPIC	Type Applied for	Type Accredited to
4.1	Means-Tested Benefits	II
4.2	Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit	II
4.3	Tax Credits	II
4.4	The Social Fund	II
4.5	The Impact of Work on Benefits	I
4.6	Child Benefit and Guardian's Allowance	I
4.7	State Retirement Pension	II
4.8	Disability Living Allowance and Attendance Allowance	III
4.9	Benefits for People who are Incapable of Work	III
4.10	Benefits for Work-Related Illnesses and Disabilities	I

4.11 Benefits for Veterans	I	I
4.12 Carer's Allowance	I	I
4.13 Jobseeker's Allowance	II	II
4.14 Benefits for Maternity, Paternity and Adoption	I	I
4.15 Bereavements Benefit	I	I
4.16 Benefits for People in Public Care	I	I
4.17 Benefits for Students	I	I
4.18 Benefits for People from Abroad and/or who are Subject to Immigration Control	I	I
4.19 Ancillary Benefits	I	I
4.20 Financial Statements	II	II
4.21 Liability for Debts, Extortionate Credit, Unfair Contract Terms, Unenforceable Debts, Creditor Malpractice, Codes of Practice, etc.	II	II
4.22 Identifying and Agreeing Options in Debt Cases	II	II
4.23 Negotiating and Making Offers to Creditors	II	II
4.24 Diligence, Diligence Stoppers and Court Proceedings	I	I
4.25 Bankruptcy and Sequestration, Voluntary Trust Deeds	I	II
4.26 Recalls and Appeals against Court Decrees and Orders	I	I
4.27 Utility Debts	II	II
4.28 Local and National Tax Debts	I	II
4.29 Rent Arrears	II	II
4.30 Mortgages and Secured Loans	II	II
4.31 Civil and Criminal fines and other Financial Penalties	I	I
4.32 Business Debts	I	I

Although the agency could not evidence all of the Type I topics during the audit visit, the auditors felt that there was sufficient evidence presented to infer competence where appropriate.

In addition, the auditors also evidenced casework in the following advice topics to accredit the agency to Type II where Type I accreditation had been sought;

2.2: Mortgages/Secured Loans

2.5: Housing Options

2.10: Homelessness

2.15: Repair and Improvement Grants

4.5: The Impact of Work on Benefits

4.25: Bankruptcy and Sequestration, Voluntary Trust Deeds

4.28: Local and National Tax Debts

2 AUDIT FINDINGS

2.1 STRENGTHS

There is a good team working ethos and the staff members interviewed felt supported and valued by their manager. The manager monitors the staff team's casework files and has his own casework files peer checked by a senior colleague within a neighbouring Citizens Advice Bureau.

The auditors noted that the time and effort in implementing the transition from a mixture of paper files and internal database system to the CASTLE electronic case recording system for all clients' cases had been a very worthwhile exercise. Auditors found the case recording information comprehensive, benefit checking clearly evidenced and the case notes easy to follow.

The electronic diary system has been embraced by the staff team and is an essential tool for monitoring key dates.

The bureau has built a good local network of other relevant support agencies and is sharing an excellent housing and homelessness resource with a neighbouring Citizens Advice Bureau.

2.2 AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

None identified.