

Citizens Advice has been helping people in Scotland since 1939



Patron Princess Anne helped Citizens Advice Scotland celebrate its 80th year by spending three hours chatting to the many volunteers who form the bedrock of the charity's work.

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The first Citizens Advice Bureaux were set up 80 years ago, to help people during World War Two.

Issues back then ranged from ration books to evacuations from homes and missing people.

There are now 59 CABs the length and breadth of the country, which are overseen by Citizens Advice Scotland (CAS). While the issues have evolved over the years, their remit has remained the same: to provide free, independent advice in complete confidence. Derek Mitchell, CAS chief executive officer, said: “We are the biggest independent provider of free advice in Scotland. “Our CABs offer a one-stop shop to help people solve their problems. Someone can come in about their energy bills but we discover they have an average of seven different issues in their lives. When you’re living on a budget and your washing machine breaks down, you have to make a choice to fix it and send your children to school with clean clothes or to pay your rent. Making that choice can result in more debt. “That’s when our service really comes into its own.”

And there’s little doubt that the advice service works; CABs have dealt with 750,000 advice issues in the last year and helped more than 270,000 Scots. Last year, they secured £131 million for the 272,500 people who made contact – money which has helped not only those seeking advice, but the communities in which they live. Derek said: “I think our trust rating speaks for itself: 97 per cent of people who have used our service would recommend us to a friend or relative. In the last decade alone, we’ve secured £1.3 billion for our clients, money which is spent in local communities which are also struggling. “For every pound invested in our services, we provide a minimum of £10 return.”

CAS also invests in people, with some 2500 volunteers across Scotland helping staff to provide services. “Our unpaid advisers are very, very good at what they do,” said Derek. “And something that isn’t widely known, but should be celebrated, is the fact that 48 per cent of them go on to paid employment or further education. I don’t know of any other organisation in Scotland that can claim such a return in investing in its people.”

Whether paid staff or volunteers, there are four main issues every CAB deals with on a daily basis – debts, benefits, employment and housing. The Scottish and UK governments have provided funding to allow CAS to provide services, including Help to Claim, Financial Health Check and, more recently, EU Settlement.

These national services operate across Scotland and help supplement funding from local authorities for CAB services.

Derek said: “Help to Claim was introduced to help clients claim Universal Credit, which a lot of people were having difficulty with.

“Money Talk can be accessed over the phone or in person at Citizens Advice Bureaux. It’s just a chat to see what you might be entitled to and advice to help make the most of your money. And more than 50,000 people in Scotland have applied to the EU Settlement scheme, seeking leave to remain here after Brexit. The service offers free assistance to any EU, EEA or Swiss person who wants to stay here. We have helped many of these people through the process; we think there may be many more who would like to apply but don’t know how to go about it.”

Despite all its good work, Derek believes the need for the advice service is only likely to grow, with an uncertain future facing many families and individuals in Scotland. He explained: “In terms of political and economic uncertainty, life for many people we see is going to get worse rather than better. But we have been here for 80 years and people should know we’ll continue to be here for them, should they need our support. From 1939 to today, we have been there to give people who are marginalised in our communities a voice. We use the information we glean from our clients to advocate for them on a national platform. If people are coming in to our CAB offices across Scotland and raising the same issue, we can pull that information together and say to the Scottish and UK governments there is an issue we need to solve. That’s quite a powerful tool which helps to give people a hand up, rather than a hand out.”

That tool was used to good effect to ensure Universal Credit claimants no longer had to phone a premium rate number to lodge claims. However, there is much more yet to be done. Bringing seven benefits into one in theory is fine but in practice it made it much more difficult for people,” said Derek. Having to phone a premium number for around 40 minutes was costing people £20 or more so we lobbied and the premium number no longer exists. But the five-week wait for benefits is still a major issue and we will continue to campaign on that issue. We were at the forefront of calling for changes, long before anyone else in Scotland, and we will continue to do so.”

In its 80th year, CAS has had much to celebrate with patron, Princess Anne, being at the centre of celebrations – spending three hours speaking to volunteers. A debate in the Scottish Parliament ran for an hour as so many politicians wanted to share their experiences of the service. And during the general election in December, every political leader praised the work that CABs do.

Derek is proud that the charity has stood the test of time and believes it will still be going strong in another 80 years’ time.

However, his last word of thanks was to the volunteers who help run the service. We would not be here if it wasn’t for the volunteers who give of their time freely,” he added, “they are the bedrock of our service. What they do, day in and day out, across the country is invaluable. We couldn’t open the doors without them and they are vital to our future.”

For more information on services across Scotland, visit www.citizensadvice.org.uk/scotland.

History of Citizens Advice Scotland, from 1939 to 2020

1939-45: The first CABs were busy tracing missing people, arranging evacuations and helping with war damage claims. Rationing also generated thousands of enquiries, and bureaux persuaded the government to grant extra clothes coupons to pregnant women. The first CABs in 1939 were in Glasgow, Aberdeen, Stirling and Dundee.

Post-war period: Against expectations, the end of the war brought an increased demand. CABs dealt with more enquiries than at the height of the blitz. Housing problems and family breakdowns increased. To meet this demand, the number of CABs began to proliferate. The advent of Legal Aid and the NHS led to a surge in enquiries.

1950s: Housing problems continued to grow as people struggled with the housing shortage, overcrowding, and the end of rent controls. Hire purchase promised life on the ‘never-never.’ For many this led to mounting debts.

1960s: Rents were rocketing, yet many people were still living in slum conditions and homelessness was rising. By 1965 housing problems accounted for a quarter of the 1.25 million problems dealt with by CABs across the UK. Divorce reform too led to a surge in enquiries, with family problems representing 25 per cent of the CAB workload.

1970s: Family, housing and benefit problems remained the top priority, but the consumer boom saw personal debt soar too. Industrial change saw an increase in redundancies and workers’ rights issues.

1980s: Consumerism brought with it two recessions and debt and benefit cases doubled. Employment enquiries rose by 50 per cent. But debt, stemming from easy credit, became the biggest CAB issue.

1990s: Social security became the top issue and sharp rises in VAT didn’t help. Repossessions and homelessness increased.

2000-2020: Payday loans, combined with a lack of affordable housing, caused unprecedented levels of debt. Welfare reform left many families in debt, with Universal Credit generating enormous numbers of enquiries.