

FALKIRK COUNCIL

Subject: CITIZENS ADVICE BUREAUX: SCRUTINY PANEL FOLLOW-UP
Meeting: SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Date: 13 MAY 2014
Author: DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE & NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 A report was presented to Scrutiny Committee on 10 October 2013, providing Members with information about process, evidence and recommendations arising from the Scrutiny Panel focusing on Falkirk Citizens Advice Bureaux (CABx), which considered ***‘How well do Citizens Advice Bureaux work together in order to deliver consistent services across the Falkirk Council area?’***
- 1.2 Following Scrutiny Committee referral of the report to the Executive in November 2013, Members asked that the recommendations be developed into actions. The actions have been incorporated into the CABx Strategic Joint Action Plan, which describes a shared vision for service delivery across the Falkirk Council area. The plan is appended to this report as appendix 1. The purpose of this report provides Members with an update on the progress made against the recommendations.

2. SCRUTINY PANEL RECOMMENDATIONS AND CABX PROGRESS

- 2.1 The Scrutiny Panel made conclusions and recommendations under the following headings:
- Outreach
 - Working with Other Agencies
 - Pace of Change
 - Communication between Community Advice Service and CABx
 - Premises
- 2.2 During the past 6 months, the CABx have continued to work together via the Joint Action Group. The detail of the conclusions and recommendations made by the Scrutiny Panel are set out below, along with the progress made against each, to date. Appendix 2 also provides a summary performance report.

3. OUTREACH

- 3.1 The panel concluded that traditional forms of outreach i.e. staff and or volunteers providing a service within community based buildings on scheduled days and times are not always an effective use of resources. Over the past years, the CABx have established and publicised traditional outreach in a range of areas across the Falkirk areas, however client numbers making use of the provision are sporadic and generally very low.
- 3.2 Through working with other organisations, the CABx should provide an alternative form of outreach which would specifically target vulnerable groups of people who may not have been able to access the services of CABx.
- 3.3 It is important that clients are able to choose which bureau or outreach service they approach, based on convenience and any other relevant factor. In order to ensure equity of access to the CAB service across the Falkirk Council area, CABx must continue to operate on the basis of client need rather than by the boundaries which indicate areas of coverage.
- 3.4 Recommendations and progress to date:

Outreach should be revised and modernised to maximise access to vulnerable groups, particularly for those who would not otherwise access the service

Progress to Date:

- 3.5 CABx continue to test a range of outreach formats to assess what is the most accessible service for clients and the best use of resources. This includes open and appointment based outreach in various communities and facilities. Evaluation has highlighted that targeting specific client groups who are engaged with other agencies is generally most effective. The exception has been the Bo'ness outreach which continues to be well attended. Reasons include:
- Bo'ness has a significant population that is on the outskirts of Falkirk Council area.
 - CAB has had an outreach service in Bo'ness at varying venues for over 10 years, so is well established, with the current venue being by far the busiest.
 - The outreach is based in Dean Road Health Centre, which is visited by a large number of the population many of which have issues over and above their health, resulting in referrals from GPs and publicity.
 - Significantly, the outreach is available for 2 x 3 hours sessions each week. Traditionally most outreach services are provided for 2 or 3 hours once a week, due mainly to financial/resource restrictions. The Fairer Falkirk Fund has helped maintain the service levels at Bo'ness.

The CABx identify further opportunities for targeted outreach, to work alongside other service providers in the Falkirk Council area

Progress to date:

- 3.6 There has been an increase in the number of organisations who are now using the CABx to provide outreach services to their own clients. This has been introduced by proactively promoting the CABx service to organisations. New contact has been established with, for example, Y-People, Remploy, Silver Bairns and Signpost Forth valley. Service is provided when required.

CABx work with Council Officers to identify rooms within Council buildings across the area, which can regularly be used as interview rooms

Progress to date:

- 3.7 Outreach services are currently delivered in Bankier, Bonnybridge and Kersibank Community Education Centres. The service is evaluated on a quarterly basis and amended to suit the needs of the client group. The Falkirk Area Welfare Benefits Advice Support Unit (FAWBASU) has now established points for outreach delivery within each Council ward providing an ability to provide specialist support to clients based on need and demand. A series of roadshows have recently taken place in One Stop Shops which highlighted CAB services to staff and clients. The roadshows were particularly well received by Council staff, who were interested in the breadth of support provided.

CABx continue to operate on the basis of client need rather than by designated geographical boundary

Progress to date:

- 3.8 Area wide initiatives are currently being delivered by the CABx, which include FAWBASU, ASAP, Fuel Poverty and Welfare advice for those with mental health issues. The bureaux identify a lead bureau and work collaboratively to ensure that clients from across the area have access to the services.

CABx ensure that the availability of home visits is publicised

Progress to date:

- 3.9 Home visits have increased during the past year. The service is available to people who have a specific reason for not being able to access a service within bureau offices, for example, terminal illness and frailty due to old age. Home visits are resource intensive and pose a challenge to the CABx.

4. WORKING WITH OTHER AGENCIES

- 4.1 The Panel received information regarding the signposting and referral systems that are currently in place between CABx and other agencies. It would appear that there remains a potential for clients to fall between services. There may be a range of reasons for this, for example, high level of demand on services and therefore the potential inability to provide a smooth transition between agencies.

4.2 Recommendations and progress to date:

In conjunction with other agencies, consider the development of a client signposting and referral tracking system

Progress to date:

- 4.3 Referrals to other services are now tracked via quarterly monitoring returns. The majority of referrals made are to FAWBASU and the Food bank. Referrals are tracked and uptake is monitored. It is more difficult to follow-up clients who have been signposted to other agencies. There has been limited progress in adopting a wider referral tracking system although it is anticipated that this will partly be supported in line with service development in connection with the impact of welfare reform.

Provide the opportunity for advice providers to participate in a planning group, which will develop a strategic approach to provision of a consistent pathway of advice across the Falkirk Council area

Progress to date:

- 4.4 CABx are keen to participate in relevant forum which may be developed in relation to the impacts of welfare reform. The CABx and other local providers are currently considering the formation of a practitioner's forum and managers currently attend the DWP form. The CABx have been represented via FAWBASU in recent information exchange established through the Drugs and Alcohol Partnership.

5. PACE OF CHANGE

- 5.1 Members were very pleased with the work which is being taken forward by the Joint Action Group (JAG) and commend the CABx for the improvements in joint working over the past 2 years. It is however, noted that some of the actions within the JAG strategic plan are not progressing quickly and therefore the results of the joint work are limited in some areas. In addition, Members were not provided with evidence which showed that resources are being used in the most effective way, either by individual bureau or collectively.

5.2 Recommendations and progress to date:

JAG continue the excellent work

Progress to date:

- 5.3 JAG continues to meet on a quarterly basis and have recently updated the Joint Strategic Plan which describes the CABx collective direction up to 2017.

JAG consider the use of the totality of the resource in terms of funding, staff and volunteers to ensure that best value is being achieved

Progress to date:

- 5.4 The CABx are now working together in a range of areas which contribute towards efficient use of resource for example, joint recruitment and training of volunteers, joint funding applications.

6. COMMUNICATION BETWEEN CABX AND COMMUNITY ADVICE SERVICES

- 6.1 During Panel meetings, information was provided to Members which highlighted some inconsistency in procedures between CABx and Falkirk Council's Community Advice Service. This was particularly in relation to referrals and suggested that there was a need to improve communication between agencies.

- 6.2 Recommendations and progress to date:

Ensure that communication between agencies is adequate and consistent

Progress to date:

- 6.3 The joint project between Falkirk Council's Community Advice Service and CABx, FAWBASU has enabled enhanced communication and co-ordination of service provision. The FAWBASU Steering Group, which meets on a monthly basis. The Community Advice Manager for Welfare Benefits participates within the group along with CABx Managers.
- 6.4 Debt advice statistics are recorded across Council and CABx services on a quarterly basis. A future action is for further analysis of this information to analyse trends.

Ensure that procedures across agencies in terms of referrals are clear and consistent

Progress to date:

- 6.5 Referral processes have now been developed for the FAWBASU project and being effectively used by CABx and Council.
- 6.6 There remain some areas of improvement regarding lines of communication from the Council to the CABx. An example of this is changes in procedure for Discretionary Housing Payment which was not communicated effectively. There have however been areas of improvement, particularly where the CABx have contacted Council services or agencies to establish links and exchange information, for example with the SDS team. The One Stop Shop roadshows have also been an effective means of sharing information about CABx services to frontline Council staff.

7. PREMISES

- 7.1 Members noted the different arrangements in place regarding CABx premises. Members noted particular concerns regarding Falkirk Bureau's premises in terms of its fit for purpose, capacity and ability to cope with current demand and the development of future services.

- 7.2 Recommendations and progress to date:

Council Officers work with Falkirk CAB to consider alternative premises arrangements for the future

Progress to date:

- 7.3 Falkirk CAB has identified possible new premises within a Council owned building. The Board and Manager have been working with Development Services to agree a lease and consider renovation of the premises. The cost associated with the refurbishment of the new CAB premises. Although a Council owned building has been identified, and the lease agreement is being developed, the refurbishment costs currently lie with Falkirk CAB.
- 7.4 It will be challenging for the bureau to access external funds due to the tension that the investment would be to improve a Council asset. It should be noted that the bureau's average waiting time is 40 minutes but often clients can wait up to two hours to be seen by and adviser due to both the increasing complexity of individual cases coupled with a bottleneck in interview room availability. As a result the bureau is currently unable to see on average 30 people per week who are in need of services. Further information is provided in appendix 3 of this report.

8. CONCLUSIONS

- 8.1 The CABx willingly engaged in the Scrutiny process and have taken prompt action to address the recommendations. The JAG group continues to oversee the area wide direction of the CABx and the CABx monitoring officer is a member of the group. The CABx have provided feedback stating that the process of Scrutiny was helpful in helping them focus on further joint working and approaches to service delivery.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

Members are asked to:

- 9.1 **Acknowledge the good progress made by the Citizens Advice Bureaux in working towards recommendations arising from the Scrutiny Process;**
- 9.2 **Agree that subsequent progress reports be brought in line with the annual reporting schedule relating to Following the Public Pound.**

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DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE & NEIGHBOURHOOD

Date: 4 April 2014

Ref: ABC0514LM

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LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS

Any person wishing to inspect the background papers listed above should telephone Falkirk 01324 5062060 and ask for Lesley MacArthur.