



**Report to
Prudhoe Town Council
July 2016**

Post-merger

Figures in brackets relate to the previous quarter and are for comparison purposes

Quarter 1 of 2016-17 was the first full quarter in which the Citizens Advice service in Northumberland was fully merged. After this period comparisons between quarters will become more meaningful as the county wide figures will no longer be subject to sudden changes following the integration of a new office.

Overview of service delivery

In Quarter 1 of 2016-17 Citizens Advice Northumberland assisted 4,759 (3,749) clients. Of these, 18% (24%) were helped through our Hexham office (including the Prudhoe and Haltwhistle offices). 179 (158) clients helped by the service were from Prudhoe wards. This equates to 4% (4%) of all Citizens Advice Northumberland clients.

What problems are we helping with?

During Quarter 1 of 2016-17 Prudhoe clients were helped with 610 (586) different queries of which 47% (53%) related to welfare benefits and tax credits compared to 41% for Citizens Advice Northumberland as a whole. 27% (22%) related to debt compared to 29% for Citizens Advice Northumberland as a whole. The other main subject areas included housing at 5% and relationship issues at 4%.

The top 3 areas of welfare benefits advice for Prudhoe residents related to -

- Employment support allowance (particularly challenging decisions and appeals).
- Personal independence payments (particularly eligibility and making and managing claims).
- Tax credits (particularly eligibility and managing a change of circumstances).

In 2015-16 the number of welfare benefits queries which the Citizens Advice service in Northumberland dealt with increased by 11% compared to 2014-15.

In this quarter 22% of all benefit queries and 9% of queries across all subject areas relate to personal independence payments. A further 20% of all benefit queries and 8% of queries across all subject areas related to employment support allowance. By comparison figures for universal credit remain small at 1% but will grow significantly as the roll out continues.

The top 3 areas of debt advice related to -

- Debt relief orders (particularly the implications and application process)
- Unsecured personal loans (particularly dealing with repayments)
- Overpayment of tax credits (particularly dealing with repayments).

Project spotlight – British Gas Energy Trust Health Project

Citizens Advice Northumberland runs a number of projects which are designed to help support particular client groups or develop services in particular areas. One of these services is an advice project based in our Morpeth office which is funded by the British Gas Energy Trust and aims to improve health by addressing fuel poverty. The service is available to clients from across the county and referrals to and from the project can be made from all our offices including Prudhoe.

The county wide, telephone based project has been established for nearly four years and employs 2 full-time caseworkers. The workers address fuel poverty in a range of ways including applying for charitable grants, negotiating with fuel suppliers, advising on fuel debt, providing energy comparison checks and advising on energy efficiency. Beneficiaries do not need to be customers of British Gas.

Last year the caseworkers provided support to 534 clients and eradicated more than £760,000 of fuel debt following applications for grants to pay debt relief order and bankruptcy fees and to pay off utility debts. In addition the caseworkers assisted households to obtain replacement boilers and deliveries of oil/LPG/coal for off gas network households.

The service is complemented by a face-to-face service based in our Hexham office which enables home visits to be made to clients in the west of the county who are in need of greater support.

Project Case study

Mr A, who is 82 years old lives with his 75 year old wife in a three bedroom property which they own outright. Thirty years ago the couple installed a solid fuel fire and central heating system which had become old and inefficient.

Mrs A has been treated for cancer and both she and her husband have significant health problems. They were struggling to manage the solid fuel heating system but could not afford to have it replaced.

Following referral to the project the couple were given assistance to maximise their income and were placed on the Priority Services Register. They confirmed they were receiving Winter Fuel Payment and an energy comparison check was carried out which provided them with the opportunity to move to a cheaper tariff. Alongside this an application was made for a replacement oil fired central heating system as the couple were off the gas network. The British Gas Energy Trust was able to assist in funding this work with a grant of £3,650.

Updates and future developments

- The Citizens Advice service is non-political and, to maintain its impartiality, took a neutral position in relation to the recent EU referendum. Although it will be some time before it is clear what the result will mean for people's day to day lives it is inevitable that the outcome will have implications for us and our clients. We are clear

that our role will continue to focus on providing independent, impartial advice. At present that advice is focussed on confirming that the right to live, work, travel or get benefits in the UK and the EU will remain unchanged until the various governments pass new laws. We will also be monitoring any increase in hate crime following recent media coverage.

- Following the completion of the process which merged the six Citizens Advice Bureaux in Northumberland it has always been our intention to carry out a review of the organisation to help to ensure that we remain fit for purpose and are delivering services which best meet local need. This review is now underway.

It is external factors that are likely to have the greatest influence on the way the organisation develops in the medium to longer term. The outcome of the EU referendum; devolution and the development of the North East Combined Authority; the impact of the funding environment on both the voluntary and public sector; the continuing roll out of welfare reform; technological innovation and the government's Digital by Default programme are just some of the factors that will influence both demand for our services and our ability to respond those demands. These influences will form an important part of our review, which we expect to complete by the autumn.

Moira Macfarlane
Chief Executive
July 2016

