

PRUDHOE TOWN COUNCIL
Report of the Meeting with Northumberland Citizens Advice Bureau,
held in The Spetchells Centre on 17th August 2017

PRESENT

Jane Stratten – Trustee of NCAB

Moira MacFarlane – Chief Executive of NCAB

Cllr Gerry Price (Chair), Cllr Chris Cuthbert, Cllr Russ Greig, Cllr Jennifer McGee, Cllr Eileen Burt, Cllr Andy Gill

Following introductions, Cllr Gerry Price requested information on the proposed re-organisation of NCAB; what would change for Prudhoe? What are the long-term intentions? What is the time-frame for change? How have the opinions of the users been taken into consideration?

Moira MacFarlane advised the decisions are based on two factors – that funding has decreased by 25% and at the same time the demands on the service have increased. The Money Advice Service funding that is received is specifically for debt management. Local Authority funding has not changed and NCAB still seeks contributions and grants from elsewhere.

The telephone service started up in April 2014 and the number of clients trying to access this service went from 750 in April 2016, up to 1250 today. The model of dealing with clients over the telephone hasn't changed but pressure from the social service system is adding to the pressure on NCAB. The aim is to enable as many people as possible to access the service without rising costs as funding is not expected to increase. Moira MacFarlane stated that NCAB recognises that some people wish to access the service in different ways because they work or they may be isolated or have complex issues.

Moira MacFarlane explained that NCAB needs to address the 25% reduction in funding and in order to do this staffing levels had to be reduced, adding, now that significant changes have been made to staffing levels they need to look at changing the service model.

Moira MacFarlane added that if people can get through on the telephone, they can get help. The service may in some cases be available for longer hours over fewer days or via appointments. In Prudhoe the discussion is currently that the service will be delivered via appointments, decisions about whether there is still a drop-in are still being taken but we expect to see the changes in October.

NCAB need new volunteers who will be trained differently to deliver support individually with online supervisors. NCAB also need to deliver sessions to help with advice on Universal Credit.

Moira MacFarlane explained that the second biggest cost is premises and information technology and the challenge is delivering the service more flexibly. In Prudhoe NCAB have 1 office and interview rooms and are currently paying for information technology on a full-time basis; NCAB wants to put money back into frontline services.

Jane Stratten explained that from the point of view of a Trustee, they have looked at every possibility and there is no other way. Jane Stratten went on to explain that there is a 3-year programme and at the end of that time the trustees want to make sure that NCAB are seeing all the people they need to. A new telephone system will be installed with a gateways system; if immediate help can be given it will be; a more in-depth 2nd call may be required or a face-to-face appointment. Jane Stratten summarised that the decision was made by the Board of Trustees and although she is a supporter of face-to-face advice, NCAB needs to show funders that money is being spent on service delivery not bricks and mortar. In final comments, Jane Stratten made clear that Trustees have looked at the reserves and they need to be protected, although changes are not set in stone NCAB would not be able to survive in the future if changes are not made.

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Cllr Gerry Price asked if the drop-in service at Prudhoe would remain. Moira MacFarlane said that Prudhoe would retain face-to-face on an appointment basis. Cllr Eileen Burt said that the drop-in service is very busy. Moira MacFarlane responded that the loss of the drop-in is not due to a lack of demand, as explained, but due to needs.

Cllr Gerry Price stated that he found it difficult to understand why there was not a business plan if it was economics that was the driving force. Moira MacFarlane responded that a business/financial plan did exist but that it was nationwide and not itemised specifically to Prudhoe.

Cllr Price asked why Prudhoe was being singled out to lose the drop-in sessions. Moira MacFarlane responded that no one place had been picked on but they had looked at accessibility and delivery, stating again that nothing was fixed in stone. Additionally, volunteers were described as being a driving force – in Amble, volunteers are trialling a drop-in without a supervisor.

Cllr Jennifer McGee thanked the representatives of NCAB for what they do for the most vulnerable of society, especially in these times of budget cuts.

Cllr Eileen Burt raised the point that the changes are happening in October and the Town Council as the main funder of the service in Prudhoe should have been told earlier. Moira MacFarlane stated that she could still not confirm what service would be operating on from 2nd October and that was due to the dedication of those making decisions as they are constantly trying to improve.

Cllr Gerry Price asked for clarification as to what funding was being reduced. Moira MacFarlane explained that many pots of Restricted Project Funding are coming to an end; Big Lottery – Integrated Debt Advice, British Gas Energy Trust as well as the end of the Northern Rock Foundation.

Moira MacFarlane assured the meeting that there was no targeting of any area and that NCAB wishes to stay and provide as equitable a service as possible.

Cllr Chris Cuthbert asked if staff are being reduced is the use of volunteers being increased. Moira MacFarlane answered that CAB is a very traditional service and some volunteers may not wish to stay, they will then need to bring in new volunteers. There are offices that are run entirely on volunteers and this best practice needs to be developed.

Cllr Chris Cuthbert asked if the telephone service would be expanded to cope with the reduction in face-to-face. Moira MacFarlane responded that the Morpeth office was offering the telephone service now and was expanding to include email and web-chat; this could be rolled out. Moira MacFarlane added that although volunteers give their time freely, they need to be managed.

Cllr Eileen Burt asked if NCAB has asked NCC to increase the funding given. Moira MacFarlane responded that they were in direct contact with NCC and they were fully aware of the situation, however, they have always been very supportive and NCAB does not wish to jeopardise their relationship with them.

Cllr Gerry Price responded that NCAB may not wish to make an appeal for more funding for NCC but the Town Council could on their behalf. Cllr Gerry Price added that they had written to the MP Guy Opperman regarding Universal Credit. Moira MacFarlane explained that Newcastle CAN is dealing with the fall out of Universal Credit now on a large scale and although NCAB has asked the Government to halt the roll-out they need to prepare volunteers for this.

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Cllr Chris Cuthbert asked about providing the service from alternative buildings, such as the Job Centre. Jane Stratten explained that they would like to operate within libraries and jobs centres and other Community places and that they are talking to NCC and the NHS Trust regarding this.

Cllr Jennifer McGee asked if central government funding had ever been received. Moira MacFarlane explained that the National CAB receives National Funding and that Money Advice was initially funded by Central Government.

Cllr Gerry Price thanked everyone for their attendance.

END OF MEETING