Support from Within

An evaluation of the advice service provided by Community Advocacy, Support and Advice for Balsall Heath Sure Start, Birmingham

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About the Authors

Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC) is an independent registered charity working with and on behalf of voluntary and community organisations in Birmingham. BVSC seeks to support and promote the development of an effective and diverse voluntary and community sector.

The Disability Research Network (DRN), based at BVSC, exists to support and empower people with disabilities and organisations working with them, to play an active role in designing and driving research and, ultimately, policy. In order to achieve this aim, the DRN comprises of three components: Eight weeks of training in research theory and practice, a four-week bridging programme and placements in employment.

The DRN is part of a much wider initiative called the FORWARD Development Partnership (DP). This partnership consists of a number of organisations i.e. BVSC, Birmingham and Solihull Learning and Skills Council, Birmingham City Council, Job Centre Plus and community/voluntary organisations, who are all working together to find new ways of opening up employment opportunities for people experiencing specific difficulties e.g. people with disabilities, older people (50+) and people with core skills needs. All of the activities managed through the FORWARD DP are funded through all the organisations in the partnership together with money from the European Social Fund through the European EQUAL programme.

Frank Challenor began placement employment as a Researcher with BVSC in September 2004, having successfully completed the DRN research training. As part of his employment, Frank was asked by BVSC to undertake a contracted review of the Community Advocacy, Advice Support project based at Balsall Heath Sure Start in order to access the type of service provided and its usefulness.

Helen Mullan is part of the Research Team at BVSC with shared responsibility for supporting members of the Disability Research Network at all stages of the programme.
1.1 Introduction

This report seeks to evaluate the advice surgeries provided by C.A.S.A. on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays on behalf of the Balsall Heath Sure Start Project. The Community Advocacy, Support and Advice Service (C.A.S.A) has been established to provide independent and impartial advice and advocacy services in one of the most deprived areas of Birmingham.

This free service is available to all, irrespective of race, religion, gender, disability or sexuality. Its purpose is to empower clients to make informed decisions concerning their rights and responsibilities and to help them to communicate their needs as effectively as possible.

By the development of networking links with existing local agencies, C.A.S.A. seeks to both better serve its clients and to further publicise the work that it offers to the community. The project has also sought to influence policy decisions in the local area. Generic advice and support is being provided through both a number of easily accessible surgeries situated in the community and as part of home visits where this is appropriate.

This report draws on data from both structured fieldwork, and a variety of documentary sources and will use both qualitative and quantitative analysis.

1.2 The Historical Development of CASA Advice Project

The Community Advocacy, Support and Advice Service (C.A.S.A.) has its origins in the Balsall Heath Advice Project founded by its current manager Louise Haycock. Aware of a considerable need within the local community in which she lived, Ms Haycock developed an organisation that she initially funded herself and that later was to receive support from both Sure Start and the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF).

Sure Start understood that the project would be providing support and guidance not only to their parent client group, but to also to a broader clientele. Advice was provided on areas such as housing benefit, education, debt issues, and bailiff matters.

The relationship between the two organisations became symbiotic in nature, with information and skills being exchanged for the benefit of all.
Presentations have been given to staff on such issues as Working Tax Credit. In 2003 it was suggested that the Advice Project become a limited company. CASA is now a limited company, registered at Companies House. It has 11 board members drawn from a variety of backgrounds in the Sparkbrook and Balsall Heath areas.

1.3 Location and Measures of Inequality

The area served by this project is one in which many inequalities exist. The Sparkbrook ward is identified as one of the most deprived in the U.K. The index of Multiple Deprivation shows that it is the 33\textsuperscript{rd} most deprived ward in the country, out of 8414 wards in total. The area is ranked 10\textsuperscript{th} for income, 32\textsuperscript{nd} for employment and 13\textsuperscript{th} for housing. The employment problems are demonstrated by the analysis given in figure 1.0 which compares employment data for the Sparkbrook area with Birmingham and England & Wales.

Figure 1.0 Compares Employment Data for the Sparkbrook Ward with that for Birmingham and England & Wales.

A large proportion of the areas population lives at or below the poverty line and there are notable debt problems. In the 2001 census a comparatively large section of the population aged between 16 and 74 were found to be either permanently sick or disabled or to be otherwise economically inactive. This is illustrated in figures 1.1 and 1.2 respectively.
Such figures would appear to suggest that there will continue to be a marked need for advice on health and disability issues within the projects main catchments area.

Figure 1.2 Those who are Economically Inactive:

Other Economically Inactive (Source Census 2001 ONS)
The 2001 Census data suggests that a marked proportion of the population in the target area are fully engaged in looking after the home and family.

**Figure 1.3 Those Looking After Home and Family.**

![Bar chart showing the percentage of residents aged 16 to 74 looking after home and family in Sparkbrook, Birmingham, and England and Wales.](chart1)

The areas population is very diverse, a fact clearly reflected in the 2001 Census and shown in figure 1.4. Such marked diversity within the local community will generate a broad spectrum of needs, which the advice centre may be required to respond to.

**Fig. 1.4 Ethnic Group Comparison 2001.**

![Bar chart showing the percentage of residents in Sparkbrook, Birmingham, and England by ethnic group.](chart2)
The ethnic minority mix of the population in 2003 was 77.9%.

1.4 Target Audience of the CASA Advice Project

Although the advice surgeries are open to anybody, the main target beneficiaries are parents with children under the age of four and their extended families. The majority of these families are Sure Start clients. There are however a number of people coming into the surgeries who are not within the Sure Start area. The organisation is also doing a survey for the South Birmingham Primary Care Trust and as a result has identified a number of people who are not covered by the existing Sure Start catchments area. The Community survey will help to inform and evaluate its future work. This survey will examine health issues, debt issues, and the quality of housing in the target area. The project hopes to use such information in conjunction with its existing activities to challenge aspects of social exclusion in the target area and make an ongoing contribution to the regeneration of the neighbourhood.

1.5 Nature of the Advice Provided

The spectrum of advice that is provided is broad. Assistance is given on a variety of aspects of housing for example, including housing applications, and information about a variety of organisations for the homeless. Other topics covered include debt management, benefit and child welfare issues, disability problems, bailiff matters and pensions. Support is provided with respect to representation at proceedings in the Birmingham County Court and also with eviction proceedings. During the advice surgeries observed by the researchers for this report, clear and direct advice was given in a welcoming and friendly environment. Staff demonstrated a constructive and empathetic rapport when working with their clients. The issue of confidentiality was given a high priority and when necessary clients were advised of their rights under the terms of the Data Protection Act. There was clear evidence of strong administrative support. Records of clients requirements were kept and information such as their marital status, age, gender, employment status, special needs, language, geographical area and the agency that had referred them were all collated. In addition backup for advisors was provided effectively, for example in gaining access to contact details for other local agencies when appropriate. When necessary an interpreter provide support to clients
and staff. Clients were encouraged to become empowered to take responsibility for dealing with their own problems.

During one session for example, advice was given to some clients who were seeking a better standard of accommodation in the local area. The advisor explained that due to the limited availability of housing stock they would have to wait a very long time before they could get a property of the type that they were seeking. It was suggested that they would need to look in a much broader geographical area than that which had been their first choice. The interview also illustrated the way in which clients were provided with information on matters not directly related to their initial enquiry. In this case, the clients had a young child and were concerned about the danger from the stairs in the flat in which they were currently living. They were provided with information on the availability of child safety gates. The Census data demonstrates that a high proportion of the property in the area is rented either from The Local Authority, Housing Associations or Registered Landlords.

**Fig. 1.5 Comparison of Numbers of Council Rented Properties.**

[Comparison of Numbers of Council Rented Properties (Source 2001 Census ONS.)]
**Fig. 1.6 Illustrates the Percentage of Property Rented from both Housing Associations or Registered Landlords.**

Comparison of the Percentage of Property Rented from Housing Association or Registered Social Landlords (Source 2001 Census ONS.)

The data suggests that much of the housing stock is of low quality compared to that in other areas of the country as can be seen from the figures below comparing households that do not have sole use of a bath, shower or toilet (Fig. 1.7).

**Fig. 1.7 Those Households without Sole use of a Bath, Shower or Toilet.**

Those Households Without Sole Use of a Bath, Shower or Toilet (Source 2001 Census ONS)

The data presented in the illustrations above points to a high probability of there being a continued need for advocacy and advice on a wide variety of housing issues.
1.6 Analysis of Clients’ Perceptions and Responses

Researchers carried out a series of confidential face-to-face interviews with clients who had had direct experience of the project in order to evaluate their perceptions of and responses to its work. These interviews took place in Balsall Heath at the Sure Start Offices.

The respondents were from a variety of genders and ethnic backgrounds. Some though not all of the sample group were Sure Start parents. In some cases they had learnt about the project from posters such as those found in the local Sure Start Nursery or from the Balsall Heath Forum, others had attended on the basis of recommendations from friends or neighbours in the community. The majority expressed no concerns or worries over attending the surgeries only one respondent indicated they had some concerns prior to attending an interview because of the nature of their particular problem.

All the clients felt that the surgeries were accessible and easy to find. The topics on which advice was sought in this sample included: Debt management, the effect of benefit claims, childcare, HND courses, housing, local schools, family tax credit, immigration issues (referred to another agency), neighbourhood problems, disability benefits, nursery education and information on income support.

In all cases the clients felt that their interviews had been conducted in a private and confidential manner, one for example sighting the fact that legal issues had been discussed in a separate room. In each case they indicated that they felt their interviews had been fair according to their age, gender, ethnic origin and where applicable, their disability. In one example the respondent highlighted how important the presence of a translator had been. All the clients were pleased with the immediacy with which the staff had been able to assist them. The interviewees all believed that the advice they had received had been clear and easy to follow.

In each instance the respondents said that they had received sufficient information from their advice interview to enable them to act on the problems they faced. In all applicable cases the clients felt that their referral to another agency had been dealt with appropriately and effectively.
The group suggested that they had all received additional valuable information on subjects not necessarily directly related to their initial enquires. One individual sighted how she had been made aware of the possibility of a Sure Start Family Worker who could listen to their problems and provide them with further help and support.

One individual did indicate that they would have preferred a CASA interviewer from the same ethnic background as themselves. However all those to whom the researchers spoke said that they would access the CASA service again in the future.

1.7 Documentary Analysis:

A series of supportive administrative documents used by CASA were analysed to evaluate the extent to which these facilitated the work of the Advice Project.

The Confidentiality Policy was found to be clear and well structured, providing guidance for staff on the correct principals for dealing with all aspects of client work. There is a Confidentiality Agreement for use by staff and volunteers. The Confidentiality and Information Security Statement is displayed in the Projects offices.

The Advice Project has a carefully constructed pro-forma for recording all aspects of a clients personal details and information concerning the nature of a given case, particular matters of issue and any applicable referral agencies.

There was found to be in place a Client Care and Complaints by Clients and Employees (paid and unpaid) Policy. This document sets out the criteria for standards of care and the exact procedures for handling complaints. The information given in the document was both unambiguous and constructive. A clear structure exists for dealing with serious disciplinary complaints. There are complaints forms available for recording all aspects of a given problem. In addition the organisation has more general Client Feedback Questionnaires that can be used to inform and develop its general practice.

Three sets of transaction criteria have been developed, one concerning housing, another covering issues of housing disrepair and a third dealing with issues of homelessness. Each provides practical advice and procedural information on housing issues.
The documentary analysis indicated a constructive and supportive administrative structure that could readily be accessed by staff and clients when appropriate.

1.8 Conclusions and Recommendations:

- The indices of deprivation within the projects' area would suggest that there is likely to continue to be a considerable demand for impartial advice on the range of topics that are currently offered. The NFR Application form for Nov. 2003 indicates that the organisation had received 1,700 enquiries in the last quarter from its target group.

- Analysis of the data from the sources considered in this report indicates that those seeking advice are provided with an accessible, structured and cohesive service.

- Both the field observations and the documentary information portray a constructive working environment in which clients are provided with effective, empowering, information in a confidential manner, and with full respect being given to any issues of ethnicity, religion, age, gender and disability. Such an image is reinforced by the fact that the project has recently gained a Quality Mark from the Advice U.K. organisation.

- It will be important to ensure that future staffing levels are increased in order to take account of growing demand for the advice services' work. If staffing levels were to remain static whilst demand increased then potentially the quality of service being offered could suffer.

- Information from the Community Survey and other such client participatory approaches could provide a useful starting point for decision making on matters of policy.

- It may be of value in the future to consider what use could be made of electronic media such as e-mail and text message services as a means for clients to make initial contacts with the organisation. Such forms of communication have been used by other advice services and could potentially be quite attractive to a younger cliental. Issues of confidentiality applying to such systems would however need to be given careful scrutiny.
**Key Findings**

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<th>Key Findings</th>
<th>Actions</th>
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<td>Continue advice on a range of topics currently offered.</td>
<td>Established continued need for surgeries at these venues and other.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advice provided is structured and CASA provide cohesive service.</td>
<td>Staff levels to increase.</td>
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<td>Quality Mark from Advice UK Organisation.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Electronic Media email/text message for the younger cliental to contact CASA.</td>
<td>Issues of confidentiality need to be given careful scrutiny.</td>
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Balsall Heath

and

Welfare, Benefits, Housing
and
Advice Surgeries
Evaluation

2004-05
Introduction From Sure Start

Sure Start Welfare, Benefits and Debt Surgeries first began in February 2002. CASA is a full member of Advice UK and can offer a professional indemnity insurance up to £1 million to cover advice and advocacy.

A tender was sent out to all organisations that previously expressed an interest in conducting benefit surgeries. Other organisations that offer benefit advice include Islamic Resource Centre, TUC Sparkhill, Ashiana and Job Centre Plus.

This is:

1. To offer advice surgeries via established community based groups, projects and organisations on a weekly basis.
2. Home visits to offer advice.
3. Represent clients at housing appeals, welfare benefit tribunals, court representation defending ie. Possession and eviction cases and offer other advocacy services.
4. Give advice and undertake welfare benefit assessments with potential claimants.
5. Assist potential claimants in the completion of benefit and housing application packs.
6. Undertake advice on homelessness issues and where necessary make referrals to appropriate agencies.
7. Design an information pack for young families including advice on general housing, welfare benefit issues and information on other advice/support services.
8. Negotiate debt repayment schemes.
9. Immigration services and legal services/representation is available within CASA offices. Half an hour free independent immigration surgeries are held on a weekly bases with CASA offices. Legal advice on family matters, road traffic and domestic violence, wills/probate, criminal matters. This advice can be given over the phone or on a pre-booked one to one basis. This is an Independent firm of solicitors who don't have a contract in this area.

The tender was given to CASA (Community Advocacy Support and Advice) formerly know as Balsall Heath Advice Project who currently undertake our surgeries.
We Wish to Thank Balsall Heath Sure Start and other agencies for the continuing support of C.A.S.A.

Our assessment of the basis and scale of market need has been identified through the successful running of the Balsall Heath Advice project since February 2002 which has been a pilot for the CASA project, CASA is a PLC we are registered at companies house and currently have 11 board members.

The Balsall Heath Advice pilot has also demonstrated the need to provide complementary services to the advocacy and advice function, which had not initially been fully recognised. In order for the CASA project to successfully promote the progression of individuals into the mainstream (rather than simply deal with their problem and then leave).

CASA have managed to attain the quality mark from Advice UK (formally F.I.A.C) a recognised organisation for independent advice centres/projects, membership to Advice UK enables the C.A.S.A to obtain a reduced rate of professional indemnity insurance, it further allows C.A.S.A’s staff members to obtain updated training, access Advice UK’s advisors help line and access up to date news relating to various benefit, housing and debt matters.

With the assistance of Balsall Heath Sure Start, CASA have identified a persistent need in the area for the continuation and expansion of the type of service provided under the project we are attempting to secure additional funding for those persons who do not meet the Sure Start criteria.

C.A.S.A in partnership with South Birmingham P.C.T have undertaken a comprehensive survey of 11 streets (adjacent to Edward road) which will fall into the B.H S.S. catchments area, the findings are to be used to improve the health and well being of the area and to identify met and unmet needs of house holds and the local area.

Energy saving light bulbs and referrals have also been made the Health through warmth scheme, to assist the house holder with obtaining energy
saving advice and grants, such as loft insulation, cavity wall insulation, in extreme cases new heating systems draft proofing etc.

In the last year CASA dealt with over 2300 enquiries, of which over 800 enquires arose from Sure Start parents.

Since April 2004 to date we have dealt with 261 enquiries from Sure Start Parent/s Families.

The majority of enquires arose from housing issues, return to work benefits, benefit entitlements, debt matters, occupational therapy referrals, tenancy disrepair, energy efficiency grants and domestic violence issues to name but a few.

We assisted with abating 23 Possession proceedings and 10 eviction proceedings, we negotiated 34 rent arrears matters, attended 9 benefit appeals on behalf of sure start clients.

It is clear that the current staffing team are unable to deal with this volume of activity, because of such we are in the process of advertising for a specialist Benefit, Housing and Debt advisor; we have temporarily employed a worker Glen Feld who has the prerequisite requirements for the post.

We have recently received requests from grass roots community organisations (other than the group we currently work with on the C.A.S.A project) to run in-house surgeries on their premises, in order to expand our outreach activities in the local community.

Two of these organisations deal with refugee groups in the Birmingham area who, given the short period of time which most have been in the country let alone the local area, are in definite need of our and partnership agencies services we also actively refer to statutory and non statutory organisation/ agencies. We perceive that CASA will identify Sure Start Parents through some of these and other surgeries so enabling us to refer them to Sure Start.

CASA in partnership with Warm Front energy efficiency programme and South Birmingham P.C.T are undertaking a survey of user needs, our surveyors are to contact 2,300 homes within the Sparkbrook and Sparkhill areas of Birmingham. The main thrust of the survey is to identify house holds most in need of upgrading there property/ tenancy
relating to poor energy efficiency, we are also focusing on housing, health, employment, debt and welfare matters to highlight current met and unmet needs within the aforementioned areas.

Given that the Balsall Heath Sure Start area is to be expanded we would be in a prime position to refer families who we have accessed through our community survey to Balsall Heath Sure start.

Other partner agencies that hold regular surgeries within our own offices are the:

**Pension Services**

State Pension matters and related benefit advice

**Immigration Advisory Service**

Asylum and immigration Law and representation (they are franchised with the community legal services)

**Phillip Haycock Solicitors**

This firm specialise in: Family matters, wills and probate, crime, road traffic law, Divorce, living together agreements, living wills, contact issues, parental responsibility matters, Injunctions - they offer initial free advise on the aforementioned matters.

All service provision of the above agencies is open to all sure start Clients.

We currently have a Sure Start Volunteer in post who has recently increased the number of hours she works. We have 2 new benefit and housing advisors one of which can speak 4 different languages.

We can attribute much of our success to the support and encouragement of Balsall Heath Sure Start over the past 2 years and have taken the opportunity to highlight the partnership, We would like to take this opportunity to thank all of the Staff and Board members of Balsall Heath Sure Start, particularly Nargis Osman Ghani and Alison Moore.

Louise Haycock
Project coordinator