

## Chairman's Overview

It is my pleasure to present the Fifth Annual Report & Accounts for CAB in Swale.

The year 2008/9 was another very successful year during which we advised 6,543 clients about 6,942 different enquiries. These enquiries covered 25,786 issues, an increase of 40% over the previous year, reflecting the growing complexity of client enquiries and the increase in employment, housing and debt problems arising from the economic downturn.

However, despite the increasing complexity of problems and extended waiting times over 89% of clients surveyed rate our general advice service as good or very good and 91% said that they would recommend it to family and friends. Equivalent ratings for our specialist services exceeded 95%.

It was a year in which we built on the strong base of partners and contacts that we had developed and continued to seek new ways of providing a quality advice service to the people of Swale.

The CAB in Swale:

- continued the development of a closer working relationship with other CAB in Kent and Medway to attract and retain cross Kent funding leading to a Kent County Council grant of £250,000 to be shared between Kent Bureau in 2009/10;
- continued the development of closer working links with other providers of civil legal aid in Kent to ensure that it is in a good position to bid for and retain its legal service contracts in housing, debt and welfare benefits so that the quality service provided via these contracts continues to be available to the people of Swale;
- worked closely with Swale Housing Association to deliver the Berr's (BIS's) Financial Inclusion Fund targets and to provide support to tenants with rent arrears and other debts via a fast track referral system;
- successfully developed the new independent housing advice service funded by the Housing Options Team at Swale Borough Council and by Swale Housing Association;
- continued to explore areas where we could work more closely with Swale Borough Council and build a service based on our respective strengths;
- installed an information kiosk in Seashells children's centre in Sheerness funded by the East Kent Primary Care Trust and agreed to provide welfare benefits training for health care professionals in East Kent;
- successfully bid for new funding from BIS via CitA to enable the Sheerness Bureau to open for an additional day, on a Tuesday. This new service commenced in April 2009 and has proved very successfully. We very much hope that the one year funding that we have received will continue;
- decided to introduce a gateway based advice system across our three Bureaux to reduce waiting times, to improve customer service and to

enable us to advise an increased number of clients. This new system was firstly introduced in Sheerness in April 09 and will be extended to the other two Bureaux during the summer of 2009;

- successfully bid for funding from the Nationwide Building Society to develop a financial capability program using volunteer advisers. The aim is to provide financial education using a fun based program to groups of end users. Development began in January 2009 and program delivery commenced in April 2009.

The year 2008/9 will also be remembered as the year in which we began to use CASE, CitA's case recording system in all three bureaux. This was a major development which involved moving from a local computerised case recording system in Sittingbourne and Sheppey, and from a paper based case recording system in Faversham.

- Some of our volunteer advisors had never used computers before we needed to completely reconsider data collection requirements and the way in which we recorded case details.
- We needed to begin to understand how we could extract data from a very complex system.
- The problems of implementing a new system were exacerbated because parts of it did not work very well, it cut people off as they were working and corrections and up-dates were being applied to a live system throughout the summer and autumn of 2008.
- It is of great credit to all involved, and especially to Vanessa, Linda, our Session Supervisors and all our volunteer advisors that the system is now running successfully.

We are the only organisation in Swale, apart from solicitors, which holds the Specialist Quality Mark (SQM). It means we are able to provide casework in the three main areas of social welfare law – welfare benefits, housing and debt – as well as offering general advice services.

However, the facts and figures tell only part of the story. We contribute to the life of the borough by participating in local events, by training staff and by giving help and assistance to some of the most vulnerable and marginalised members of our community. At least 30% of our clients were disabled or had health problems and nearly 20% were single people with dependant children. The links between poverty and lone parent families or those with disabilities and health problems is well documented.

We are a major user of volunteers and over the course of the year we have had 69 volunteers helping us to provide our services. The volunteers and the 24 paid staff (of which, only six are full time) receive high satisfaction ratings from clients despite frequently working in cramped and difficult surroundings.

The management of the CAB is thoroughly professional and this makes the job of the Trustee Board much easier. I am pleased to work with a committed Board of Trustees and a committed management team which continually considers the strategic focus of the CAB in Swale to ensure that it meets the ever changing demands and expectations of clients and funders. We also ensure that the

governance of the CAB is fit for purpose. With ever changing legislation this is no easy task, but the management team and the Board work closely together on clearly agreed principles.

We would like to thank all our funders in Swale and elsewhere for their continued support and confidence in our service. We continue to face a significant challenge to continue to deliver the quality and breadth of service that we provide, in the face of reducing grants and ever increasing financial strictures.

**Robin N Duncan**

**Chairman**