

Southwark Citizens Advice Bureaux Response

The financial health of the borough

“The main determinants of health are socio-economic. If we want to promote good health, prevent ill health and reduce inequalities in health, we must act on the social determinants that are likely to impair people’s health.”

Professor Sir Michael Marmot [2010] Author “[Fair society, healthier lives](#)”.

1. The main issues facing CAB clients

In the year 2013/14 Southwark CABx helped 12,951 local residents: an 8% increase on 2012/13.

The top 3 enquiry areas:

- Benefits 31% of the total
- Debt 22%
- Housing 16%

We helped local residents to increase their income by almost £4m in the last year mainly from grants, benefits and compensation claims

Some of the main issues that are affecting the people we see are:

- Problems with Employment Support Allowance, including delays caused by mandatory reconsideration
- Delays in Personal Independence payments- the CAB team who provide welfare benefits advice in hospital settings report cases taking up to one year.
- Job Seeker sanctions: Peckham Job Centre has the highest level in London. We are currently working on a Freedom of Information request to try and find out why this is. Sanctions are the single largest reason that we have to provide clients with vouchers for the Pecan Food bank. Many of the people we see have physical and mental health problems, which are being made much worse by the stress of sanctions.
- Increasing rent arrears, often caused by welfare benefit changes. Discretionary Housing Payments administered by Southwark Council are preventing mass evictions but we have no idea how many

- Reliance on high cost credit leading to debt: there is a concern that the move to monthly Universal Credit payments could push more people to take out loans for everyday living expenses.
- Fuel Poverty: the CAB has seen a 40% increase in this area since 2012. Many residents are reliant on pre-payment meters and tenants in private rented accommodation have the worst issues.

Although we are very pleased to have maintained our funding from Southwark Council the effects of Legal Aid cuts are impacting on our ability to assist some of the most clients particularly in welfare benefit, and immigration cases and also our ability to refer clients to other free sources of legal advice.

There have been recent changes in entitlement to benefits for more recently arrived migrants. It is too early to know what impact this may have on homelessness in the Borough.

The sheer scale of the changes to welfare benefits is causing major problems for the vulnerable people that we see, and impacting on their health.

5,000 households have been affected by the bedroom tax so far, 24,000 by the abolition of Council Tax benefit and around 500 by the benefit cap.

We have run monthly welfare reform information and advice events around the Borough since February 2013 working in partnership with Southwark Council and other agencies. We have seen around 1,200 residents. Many of the people worst affected by welfare benefit changes are between 50 and 60 with disabilities or health problems. They aren't able to get a job or improve their situation. Particularly affected are men in this age group who have been manual workers.

It is also a myth that people over pension age are protected from the effects of welfare reform. We regularly see people in their 70's and 80's having to help out middle aged children and grandchildren. As people are forced to downsize and move communities are broken up and support networks for older people put in jeopardy.

2. High cost credit

Reliance on payday loans and pawn shops is a symptom not the cause of poverty in the Borough. We find that people on the lowest incomes are often the best at budgeting and have good financial awareness; they just have very limited choices.

The CAB works closely in partnership with London Mutual Credit Union and through our financial capability project Money Savvy Southwark we provide awareness raising on the cost of credit and financial products.

In the last four years the Citizens Advice service nationally saw a ten-fold increase in the number of debt clients with payday loans, while our evidence showed that payday loan companies were not treating their customers fairly

and were even breaking regulations and guidance regarding responsible lending.

Most of the problems we were hearing about related to payday lenders not checking that customers could afford the loan, and pressuring them to 'roll over' the loan when they struggled to pay it back on time, as well as the way in which lenders took payments from their customers' accounts – leaving them with no money for essentials.

Citizens Advice and other charities have run high profile campaigns on these issues which has led to the new rules, set out by the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA), came into force on 1st July 2014 and cover the following:

- restrictions on the number of times a loan can be 'rolled over'
- a limit on continuous payment authority (CPA) attempts
- warnings about risk.

The Financial Conduct Authority has recently ordered payday lender Wonga to pay £2.6 million in compensation to customers, after it was found to have sent letters chasing debt repayments from legal firms that don't exist.

It is estimated that around 44,500 people are affected by this issue. Wonga has started writing to past and present customers to let them know whether they have been affected by these poor business practices and to offer compensation where appropriate. It aims to have contacted everyone they think is affected by the end of July.

Other customers will be compensated after they overpaid Wonga because their balance was calculated incorrectly.

A key area that Citizens Advice nationally is working on is trying to encourage banks to offer small short term loans.

Southwark CABx has recently been awarded funding by Citizens Advice nationally to run the London Consumer Empowerment Network. One of the strands of work we are currently focusing on is raising awareness of illegal money lending and developing partnership work with the national Illegal money lending team to try to tackle this.

3. Background information on the Southwark CABx Service

Southwark CABx was one of the first to open in the UK and this year is our 75th Anniversary. We opened in 1939 in response to the issues residents were facing in the second world war and have been providing advice to local residents ever since.

We are members of Citizens Advice our parent organisation, and benefit from their support around quality assurance and up to date information. We are

however an independent local charity overseen by a Trustee Board largely drawn from members of the community we serve.

We have a team of 29 paid staff and approximately 70 volunteers.

A recent audit of the quality of advice we provide carried out by Citizens Advice as part of our membership scored our service at 86%. This is the highest score in London.

Our services

We have 2 main offices based in the more disadvantaged areas of the Borough:

Bermondsey CAB

8, Market Place, Southwark Park Road, London SE16 3UQ

Drop in information sessions Tuesday and Thursday 10-1pm

Peckham CAB

97, Peckham High St, SE15

Drop in information sessions Monday Wednesday and Friday 10-1pm

We are the busiest CAB service in London and in order to ensure people do not have to wait too long to be seen we operate a triage service that we call Gateway. When someone comes along during the drop in times for face to face advice their issues are first assessed by one of our trained volunteers and in discussion with the Advice Session Supervisor the client will be helped to decide the next steps. This includes self-help information, or an internal or external referral for an appointment.

Clients can also telephone on **0844 499 4134** or email for advice by visiting the website www.southwarkcabservice.org.uk

We work closely with Blackfriars Advice Centre (BAC) the other generalist advice provider in the Borough. They are based at

Cambridge House, 131 Camberwell Road, London SE5 0HF

Tel: 020 7358 7035 www.blackfriars-advice.com

If you would like to signpost constituents for advice the best place to start is either one of the CABx or BAC whichever is closest for them.

All information about how to access advice services in the Borough can be found on the website www.southwarkadvice.org.uk

2.1 Outreach and specialist services

In addition to the generalist and debt advice services we provide a number of specialist services

i) Immigration Advice

There is a serious capacity issue in London following the withdrawal of legal aid for most immigration advice. The CAB generalists can deal with basic immigration advice (level 1) and we have a full time specialist worker funded by Trust for London, Gary Goddard.

In the period 1 June 2013 to 31 May 2014 Gary has dealt with 117 complex cases, many needing representation at tribunals.

Our clients come from many different countries of origin with the largest single group coming from Nigeria, which reflects the demography of Southwark.

The type of cases that Gary can deal with includes:

- entry clearance applications for family members;
- applications for leave to remain on family life grounds (in particular under article 8 ECHR or for victims of domestic violence outside of the rules);
- deportation and revocation appeals;
- bail applications

To make a referral: Telephone 020 7394 7424
immigration@southwarkcabservice.org.uk

ii) Advice for Southwark Council Leaseholders

In 2013 Southwark Council increased the funding for this service to enable us to employ a full time worker: leasehold@southwarkcabservice.org.uk
Telephone: 020 7237 9532.

The service delivers advice and casework with issues such as managing service charges, and major works. In 2013/4 we provided advice for over 300 leaseholders and helped to increase leaseholders' income by approximately £200,000 by identifying additional help with bills from the DWP, particularly for older leaseholders.

iii) Macmillan/Dimbleby welfare benefits service

We have been funded since 2008 to provide welfare benefits advice on an outreach basis for people affected by cancer. The service is provided in hospitals across SE London including Guys and Kings.

iv) Outreach at Southwark Day Centres for Asylum Seekers

Southwark CABx Service has provided outreach advice sessions in the premises of Southwark Day Centres for Asylum Seekers (SDCAS) since 2007.

v) Outreach on the Kingswood estate: Tuesdays 10-12

We recognise that there is a geographical gap in services in this area, and local residents may find it difficult to travel to our main offices. We work in partnership with the Kingswood Community Shop to provide an outreach advice session every Tuesday Morning.

vi) Outreach on the Aylesbury: Tuesdays 10-12

Southwark CABx works with the Creation Trust to run a weekly outreach in their premises on the Aylesbury estate

vii) Family Law Clinic

We work with solicitors offering their time as volunteers to run 2 sessions per month by appointment. One of the sessions is women only. The sessions are held in the evenings at Peckham CAB. To arrange an appointment please contact jennymcgregor@southwarkcabservice.org.uk

We have also developed a Mackenzie friend service. We have trained volunteers to support people attending court in family law cases to try and deal in a small way with the withdrawal of legal aid.

viii) Money Savvy Southwark

www.moneysavvysouthwark.org.uk

This is a 5 year funded financial education project aimed at social housing tenants. We are providing group and one to one sessions in areas such as cost of credit, and prioritising housing costs.

We also train a group of community champions to ensure they can effectively signpost the people they come into contact with.

We run monthly welfare reform events aimed at reaching people who have been affected by changes such as the bedroom tax who may be struggling and in rent arrears. To date we have helped over 2,000 residents.

Contact sallycauser@southwarkcabservice.org.uk

Follow us on Twitter @moneysavvyswark

ix) Tackling Fuel Poverty

This is becoming a major issue for people on low incomes. We have small amounts of funding to support residents with fuel issues.

We currently have some funding from the Council to promote the Big London Energy Switch. Contact anniesirabidze@southwarkcabservice.org.uk.

We also have funding from Citizens Advice to lead on Big Energy Saving Week in London. We will be holding a launch event on Monday 20th October.

x) Rent Arrears Drop in clinic

3rd Tuesday of the month at Bermondsey CAB 5:30 - 7:30pm

2014 Dates: 15th July, 19th August, 16th September, 21st October, 18th November, 16th December

xi) Council Tax Drop in clinics

1st Tuesday of the month at Bermondsey CAB 5.30-6.30 pm.

2014 dates: 5th August, 2nd September, 7th October, 4th November, and 2nd December

xii) London South Bank University Money Advice Outreach Project for LSBU students

Southwark CABx Service, working in partnership with London South Bank University provide debt and money advice at the Student Centre for students of LSBU.

Students access the service by attending the LSBU Student Centre and are referred to the CAB adviser by speaking to the Student Advisors.

xiii) Home Search Support

Around 4,000 households in Southwark are affected by the Housing Benefit under occupancy rules, and around 20,000 people are registered for housing. Southwark operates an online bidding system. This works well but relies on the fact that people have access to the Internet and are confident about using it.

We have a team of volunteers who can help people register and bid online. The support sessions are on Thursdays 1-4pm at Bells Gardens Community Centre: working in partnership with Southwark Group of Tenants Organisation

and Fridays at Blue Anchor Library and Southwark Pensioners Centre. 10-1pm.

4. Networks

- i) **The Southwark Legal Advice Network (SLAN)** was formed to ensure that the advice agencies in the Borough work closely together in order to increase access to advice and information, particularly for more disadvantaged residents. Southwark CABx has received funding from the Big Lottery Fund since 2009 to coordinate SLAN.

The core partnership consists of:

- Southwark CABx Service;
- Blackfriars Advice Centre;
- Southwark Law Centre;
- Cambridge House Law Centre;
- Afro Asian Advisory Service;

We work with a wider partnership of agencies in the Borough such as Southwark Council Community Engagement Department, Southwark Refugee Community Forum, Faces in Focus, Age UK and London Mutual Credit Union.

The funding covers areas such as training, website development and maintenance, developing pro bono and self-help services.

Our website www.southwarkadvice.org.uk, brings together a range of information on the advice services in the Borough and links to self-help information. The website is updated on a monthly basis.

In 2009 we developed an advice strategy for the Borough, which is currently being updated.

We also produce a range of printed information such as the Advice Map and Where to get Immigration Advice.

We run quarterly Southwark Advice Forum meetings aimed at frontline workers in community agencies in Southwark which involve a training workshop, information exchange and networking opportunity.

ii) Forum for Equalities and Human Rights

We have funding from Southwark Council to act as a critical friend in terms of Equalities and Human Rights. We co-ordinate quarterly meetings of an open Forum, for community agencies and individuals with an interest in this area.

As part of our FEHRS role we comment on council policies and help to facilitate consultation with the wider community. We provide training on EHR issues. We also provide public events such as International Women's day event, Refugee week event and International Day for Older People event.

Everyone is welcome to attend FEHRS meetings or events.

iii) Southwark Financial Inclusion Forum

We set up the Southwark Financial Inclusion Forum in 2007. It brings together representatives of the statutory and voluntary sectors, Housing Associations and London Mutual Credit Union. The aim of the forum is to work in partnership to alleviate some of the problems of debt and financial exclusion in the Borough.

As a result of this partnership working we have set up the drop in sessions for people with council tax arrears and people with rent arrears.

We also coordinate the Keep Warm Keep Well Partnership, aimed at tackling fuel poverty, and the Youth Employment Forum which brings together youth groups and employment support providers.

5. Social Policy Activity

Social Policy is an important aspect of our work at Southwark CABx.

We hold regular social policy group meetings to help identify areas we should campaign on. Details are on the Intranet.

Everyone is encouraged to attend.

Local issues we are currently working on:

- Job Seeker sanctions and Claimant Commitments
- Southwark Hardship Fund
- Southwark Council Lettings policy
- Fuel poverty
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Citizens Advice campaigns: Making ESA fit for work, use of food banks.

We feed into local consultations and also provide information for national Citizens Advice campaigns.

Through the Forum for Equalities and Human Rights we are working with Southwark Council to help them to review their equality objectives.

For more information about any aspects of our work please contact sallycauser@southwarkcabservice.org.uk

07766 028 499