

Citizens Advice Services in Europe



A background discussion paper for the 6th European Forum of
Citizens' Advice Services on the Exercise of European Citizenship Rights

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Section 1: Introduction

Citizens advice organisations exist across Europe. Their primary aims are, first, to enable citizens to learn of their various rights and, second, to influence the development of social policies. These organisations, therefore, are crucial links in the relationship between citizens and the political entities within which they live and work: local authorities, regional bodies, member states and the European Union.

All citizens advice services are committed to

- Equal access to justice for all regardless of income, social, political, ethnic, confessional, linguistic or similar distinctions
- Providing free, independent, confidential information and advice on legal and administrative problems
- Helping in solving problems whether legal or administrative as a first step to combating social exclusion

The scale of the citizens advice network is impressive. Each year, nearly seven million individuals benefit from the high-quality advice that is provided by member-organisations of Citizens Advice International, the umbrella body formed in 2004 in order to represent the interests of citizens advice organisations throughout the world.

The majority of the work conducted by citizens advice organisations is concerned with aiding citizens to make sense of the legal and administrative frameworks of national states. For instance, in England and Wales in 2005-6, the majority of enquiries directed towards Citizens Advice focused on issues relating to benefits and debt; issues that fall within the purview of the UK state. Similar patterns exist in Scotland: the issues raised most often here related to benefit (30.6%) and consumer (22.3%) concerns. Citizens advice services in Poland deal with almost 30,000 enquiries every year, out of which a great part concern family issues, housing, entitlements and allowances, financial, employment and unemployment issues. In Northern Ireland, fifty two percent (52%) of enquiries relate to social security issues, while in the Czech Republic citizens advice centres are leading community players in the provision of advice related to social services.

At the same time, advice organisations play a key role in providing information to individuals on their rights, as defined by local authorities and regional bodies. EU law and the rights and responsibilities of European citizenship increasingly inform the work of advice organisations in Europe. A proportion of the recent work conducted by citizens' advice bureaux in the UK and Ireland, for instance, has been

The citizens advice service, usually under the name of Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), provides free, independent, confidential and impartial advice to everyone on their rights and responsibilities.

The principles of the citizens advice service:

Independent – we will always act in the interests of our clients, without influence from any outside bodies.

Impartial – we don't judge our clients or make assumptions about them. Our service is open to everyone, and we treat everyone equally.

Confidential – we won't pass on anything a client tells us – or even the fact that they've visited us – without their permission.

Free – no-one has to pay for any part of the service we provide.

concerned with enabling migrants from the accession states to exercise various citizen rights in these countries. In Romania, citizens advice services have been extended in recent years, especially in the field of EU related citizens' rights.

While for citizens advice services the starting point is the citizen and concern about the welfare of the individual, the activity of citizens advice services does not stop there. They also analyse and group together problems brought to them to examine whether law, policies, and the practices of the private and public sector are working.

All citizens advice services have two main aims. The first aim is *'to ensure that individuals do not suffer through lack of knowledge of their rights and responsibilities or of the services available to them, or through an inability to express their needs effectively'*. The aim relates to advice organisations' objective to enable individuals to learn, predominantly about their rights as citizens but also, to a certain extent, about their responsibilities towards the state, the EU and their fellow citizens.

A further dimension of this capacity for learning is the commitment of volunteers who work in bureaux. In return for which volunteers benefit from the training and experience that they gain while working in bureaux. Approximately 70% of the work of citizen advice bureaux is done on a voluntary basis. Thus the service plays a valuable role in providing individual volunteers with key skills and experience and in enhancing the overall skills base within the wider community.

Advice organisations to a large extent, therefore, can be viewed as a promoter of a so-called 'fourth right of citizenship'; namely *the right to education and information, which can act as the basis of citizens' civil, political*

and social rights, as the National Consumer Council in London put it in 1977.

The citizens advice services second aim is *'to exercise a responsible influence on the development of social policies and services both locally and nationally'*. This second aim involves a different kind of learning; namely, the way in which individual bureaux learn of the challenges facing their clients or of the failures of particular policies, and the way in which this knowledge is then transmitted and translated from individual bureaux to national umbrella organisations and thence to various government departments within member states and the broader EU.



In short the work of citizens advice organisations could be seen as being predicated upon different forms of learning: citizens learning about state organisations at various levels; state organisations learning about the challenges facing citizens.

In the following sections, two different kinds of learning are expanded on; and the broader opportunities and challenges that are associated with these different forms of learning: for the advice organisations themselves, for member states, and for the EU. Brief conclusions, which feature some recommendations on the way ahead for advice organisations and the EU, then follow.

Section 2: Empowering citizens

Research has shown that there is a profound need for knowledge and advice about obligations, rights, remedies and procedures for resolving peoples' problems. This unmet need for advice is continuing to grow. In addition, there is an increasing complexity in the issues that are presented to advisers in citizens advice bureaux. Clients often bring a wide range of issues that require complex routes to solutions – and they need to be supported in finding a way through the advice maze.

The primary role of citizens advice organisations throughout Europe then is to enable citizens to learn of their various rights and responsibilities so that they may better cope with the range of personal, social and financial problems that they face. The key to achieving this aim is to ensure that individuals are able to access advice that is meaningful and useful to them.

There are three different categories of citizens, which require different methods of learning and teaching:

- There are some people who are able to resolve their own problems provided that key elements of information are identified and/or highlighted (assisted information);
- There are some people who are able to resolve their own problems following detailed advice or a brief intervention on their behalf (generalist advice);
- There are some people, those in greatest need, who at a particular point in their lives require a skilled adviser to act on their behalf (casework).

What is significant is that there is almost a presumption in this approach that clients, on the whole, have the ability to solve

their own problems and, indeed, that they should be encouraged to do so.

“There is a broader benefit. Our view is that if you do something for someone then this sounds terribly patronising, then they won't take responsibility for the position they're in. You know, 'give me all of that, don't worry, I'll sort it out for you'. They're much more likely to carry things through if they've been involved in the process themselves. But, having said that, we recognise that there will be people who cannot rather than will not do the work for themselves. And that could be anyone. Somebody suddenly finds themselves unemployed, don't yet have benefits, mortgage or the rent is in arrears, credit card debt coming out of their ears, they may be so traumatised by that that they can't do anything. So we would take them through the process, get everything in place for them and hand it back to them when they're ready to take it back. So it's about working out what is the service that that individual needs at that particular point in their lives.”

- A citizens advice professional

At the same time new technologies are enabling citizens advice services to help a wider group of advice seekers find their own solutions. However, critical to the service is finding the balance between helping as many people as possible, while having a personalised approach which provides a face to face service for those for whom that is essential.

Citizens advice services across Europe are using new technologies in the advice work– e-mail, an internet advice service and, in future, a possible single telephone number for citizens advice services in some of the countries. For example,

Adviceguide - www.adviceguide.org.uk - the UK self service advice and information website, makes available a range of fact sheets, FAQs and brief information leaflets in a variety of languages. Its aim is to act as 'the main public information service, providing people with round-the-clock access to CAB information on their rights - including benefits, housing and employment, and on debt, consumer and legal issues'.

In promoting these new developments citizens advice services are seeking to promote a more active form of learning amongst its clients. The evidence for this shift comes most clearly in the material provided to explain the purpose of the Adviceguide website:

"We aim to empower people by providing them with the information they need to solve their own problems and to signpost them to appropriate advice when necessary. Adviceguide helps you to have a better understanding of your rights and entitlements, and also to take the first steps in resolving your problems." (www.adviceguide.org.uk, accessed on 18 September 2008)

Interestingly this rescaling of learning to the national level that is taking place within citizens advice organisations is actually underpinned in large measure by local bureaux. There is a strong inter-dependence of advice agencies' national umbrella organisations and individual bureaux, and many in the service would argue that *"the connection between the local bureaux, the communities and the national bodies is what makes the service unique and of vital importance in the policy making work"*.



Section 3: Learning about citizens' problems – the social policy work of advice organisations

The key processes of learning that facilitate the social policy role are the ones by which individual advice organisations learn of the problems facing their clients, how this information is fed up into national umbrella organisations, and how this information is then used as a means of influencing state policies, whether at the local, the regional, the national or the EU scale.

The kinds of policies targeted by citizens advice organisations as part of this work are wide-ranging. A trawl through the Social Policy Bulletins published by Citizens Advice England and Wales and Northern Ireland over the last year indicates a broad range of social policy agendas, such as: providing evidence for the Office of Fair Trading so that it could prosecute a test case against banks concerning the excessive use of bank charges (Citizens Advice 2007c: 11); working with Age Concern in order to lobby the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform to change the laws on doorstep selling (Citizens Advice 2007d: 4); providing evidence on the denial of basic employment rights in Northern Ireland (Citizens Advice Northern Ireland 2008 "In the Dark Summary").

Characteristics of the social policy work done by citizens advice organisations

There are a number of different themes that feed into the social policy work of advice organisations.

First, *the focus of the national social policy work is to look at the sorts of problems that clients bring into bureaux* and to change things for the better, either by

- highlighting problems,
- changing policies or practices,
- or by influencing legislation.

In other words, social policy as *integral* to advice giving, in that it aims to prevent problems rather than just cure them.

Second *the social policy work conducted by citizens advice organisations is wholly dependent upon the evidence that it is able to collect from the citizens advised* – either client experiences, statistics, or research; or a combination of the three. The criteria is that either the problem is impacting now on our clients – such as delays in processing benefit forms -or the evidence collected indicates that it will – such as in Scotland the proposed introduction of land attachments as a new court enforced means of debt collection. This evidence based approach makes social policy work robust and reliable.

A third theme relates to *the kind of information that is collected by citizens advice organisations*. They make use of both *quantitative and qualitative information* by referring to facts and figures. Then to underpin the facts and data, the citizens advice organisations use case studies of a variety of individuals that are adversely affected by the respective policies.

A fourth theme concerns the different ways in which information is collected from clients and bureaux. In the UK each bureau provides statistics to the national body Material about the various citizens seen in bureaux has, over the long term, been communicated to citizens advice organisations' central body so that it, in turn, can use it as a source of information both for monitoring the types of enquiry being brought to bureaux and for conducting policy campaigns. To do this, advisers are trained in identifying social policy issues and feeding these back to the national body

But in addition to this regular collection of information from clients, national central bodies centrally also seek to garner in a more targeted manner information about key issues

that they would want to explore in more detail. Specific research projects are undertaken to bolster broad statistics and bureau case evidence. For example in Scotland the reports 'Continental Drift – advice needs for A8 migrant workers', and 'Growing Old Together – older people and debt'

The fifth theme is related to *a trend in which clients themselves are being enrolled into the process* of teaching the state about the problems that they face. Citizens are recruited to this work in a variety of ways. People visiting bureaux, for instance, are asked to explain their situation on postcards, which are placed in bureau waiting rooms. These life stories can then be used as snapshots of the problems facing individual clients. In addition, posters are put on waiting room walls, which provide further information to clients about the citizens advice organisations' role in influencing social policy agendas.

Finally, the way in which this information is used: The whole point of collecting data, after all, is to affect policy changes so that citizens' quality of life is improved. Much of the information collected by and from bureaux is used for local and national policy work in a variety of different contexts. Connections are made with local government and central government departments, most especially with those concerned with work and pensions, justice, housing, health and others. The evidence gathered is used in a variety of ways to campaign for change; such as briefings, consultation responses, work in partnership with other organisations, written and oral evidence to parliamentary committees, and so on.

Research on Cyngor ar Bopeth (Citizens Advice in Wales) – for instance, has shown that the plentiful sources of evidence available has contributed to Cyngor ar Bopeth's effectiveness in influencing the policy agenda within Wales (Jones forthcoming). Cyngor ar Bopeth

(2007: 2) makes much of the fact that it 'has access to a body of evidence from around 300,000 cases a year in Wales and over 5 million across England and Wales' and that 'this unrivalled evidence base allows us to campaign for policy change nationally and throughout the UK'. An individual involved in Cyngor ar Bopeth's social policy work in Wales, in this respect, argued that 'we know what we're talking about'.



Citizens advice services' social policy work is one of the ways that bureaux are unique: as one of the few – and possibly the only – network of advice agencies where social policy work is rooted into advice provision. It is evidence based, and deals with the practical impact of policies made by parliaments, and those policies that fall in the cracks between parliaments. Most importantly, there is, of course, scope for this information to be used to influence the social policy agendas of the EU .

This raises interesting questions regarding how umbrella organisations of advice agencies in European countries seek to collect their data, and which methods are the most appropriate. To what extent should this model be replicated in other countries?

The answer to these questions depend on the resources available to advice agencies within particular countries, as well as the degree to which there is a tradition of active citizenship amongst advice agencies' clients.

Section 4: Opportunities and challenges

There are a number of broader themes that arise from advice organisations' role as providers of information and advice to citizens about states/the EU; and to states/the EU about their citizens.

First of all, it is clear that there exists a virtuous circle between these twin elements of the work of advice organisations. By providing advice to individuals in response to their queries, advice organisations also acquire the raw material that can enable them to influence social policies. In the same way, the engagement of advice organisations with policy-makers – at various levels – also improves the quality of the advice that can be provided to clients.

Second, the ability of advice organisations to help citizens they advise and to engage in social policy work is underpinned by the fact that the service that they offer is impartial, free, confidential and independent. The impartiality of advice organisations is particularly important in this respect. It helps to ensure that the information and guidance that they provide to people is trusted, while at the same time making their input into social policy debates more valued.

Third, it is evident that the means through which advice organisations attempt to help their clients and promote social policy work is changing. New technologies are being used to enable clients to learn about their rights and to help advice organisations to learn about the problems facing their clients – the basis for social policy work. At the same time, citizens are increasingly being expected to play a more active role in the work of advice organisations, whether by learning themselves about their own rights or contributing to social policy campaigns. These changes, of necessity, possess considerable opportunities and challenges for advice organisations throughout Europe.

Fourth, the potential for 'lesson-learning' between advice organisations in different countries needs to be recognised. CAI plays a crucial role here in providing a platform and mechanisms for information exchange, co-operation and joint projects among citizens advice associations.

Fifth we need to appreciate how the practices adopted by advice organisations in Europe vary spatially. A balance needs to be struck between the need for some consistency between the role played by advice organisations and the need to acknowledge and celebrate a healthy diversity of practices throughout Europe. Advice organisations, because of their financial circumstances, may well vary in terms of their ability to introduce new ways of helping clients, for example in terms of new technologies. There may also be different cultural and political traditions in particular countries, which will influence the kind of work that can be carried out by advice organisations.

While advice organisations in the past have forged connections between citizens and local, regional and national states, they are also in an excellent position to promote a much-needed rapprochement between citizens and the EU. Advice organisations, it has been argued, have much to offer the EU. As well as providing 'proximity to the citizen', they can also promote 'a social Europe, closer to the citizen' (ECAS 2001: 1).



Section 5: Charting a way ahead

The benefits of advice organisations to citizens and to the political organisations within which those citizens live and work are clear. Advice organisations develop stronger relationships between citizens and various kinds of political organisation; a relationship that is predicated upon sharing information and a two-way process of learning.

How can the EU and a broader European political and cultural project benefit from advice organisations? - Advice organisations can facilitate a better relationship between citizens and the EU. There are obvious benefits here in terms of how advice organisations can help to promote the perceived legitimacy of EU institutions in the lives of ordinary citizens.

Advice organisations can enable citizens to learn about European law and administration, especially when we think that a great part of the European law is translated into the national legislations of the member states. As well as being of practical value to citizens, the work of advice organisations in this respect can enable Europe to become more embedded in the lives of the citizens of Europe.

In addition, by engaging more fully with advice organisations in Europe, the EU should be able to learn about the problems facing its citizens; how its laws are being implemented and the problems associated with them; the way in which European laws have different impacts in different EU member states; how migration within Europe is reinforcing or undermining European citizenship. Once again, this process of learning by the EU – through the work of advice organisations – can help to create an EU that is more responsive to the needs of its citizens, wherever they live and work.

The need for an increased role for advice organisations in promoting a connection between

the EU and its citizens is palpable and, moreover, is likely to increase over coming years. Advice services can persuade the Institutions of the European Union to give more priority to informing people of their European rights. The European role that can be played by advice organisations is likely to increase given the higher levels of mobility that have characterised Europe in recent years. Furthermore, the credit crisis may also lead to an increasingly complex set of connections between European mobility and economic hardship, especially with regard to low-income migrant workers.

Following on from this, there is an argument that the EU should shoulder more financial responsibility than it does at present. If advice organisations are to play a crucial role in responding to clients' problems, which derive in part from EU laws and administration and European mobility, then there is a moral argument that the EU should also contribute resources to support their work. At the very least, the EU should ensure that European citizen information and advice services should be available in each Member State. By taking on this coordination role, the EU would be able to ensure that duplication of service was minimised within EU member states and across Europe.

'One size fits all' approach to developing citizens advice services may not be appropriate. However, whilst there may be a wealth of local solutions across Europe, it is necessary that the advice services work together so they can better engage with funders, decision-makers, and partner advice organisations. This needs a well funded Citizens Advice International to promote greater synergy between citizens advice services, and to ensure that the bureaux across Europe are supported for optimum impact. In this regard, it is not solely the quantity of advice that matters but rather the quality of advice that is provided to citizens in – and about – Europe.

Acknowledgments

This paper was conceived by **Rhys Jones**, and revised by Kaliani Lyle, Vice-Chair of CAI and Coralia Catana, consultant for CAI.

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Citizens Advice International - CAI

Citizens Advice International is a non-profit non-governmental international organisation representing interests of free advice giving associations throughout the world. CAI is made up of a network of national and local organizations from Europe and New Zealand, which have as main object of activity information and advice services for citizens.

Mission

CAI enables a global network of Citizens Advice Bureaux and other information and advice services to identify, share, apply and promote the best practices in empowering people to exercise their rights and in shaping social policy making.

CAI Members

- Citizens Advice, England and Wales
- Citizens Advice Bureau, Gibraltar
- Citizens Advice, Northern Ireland
- Citizens Advice Scotland (CAS), Scotland
- Asociace občanských poraden, the Czech Republic (Association of Citizens Advice Centres)
- Bratislavská Občianska Poradňa (NPO), Slovakia (Bratislava Citizens Advice Centre)
- Lietuvos gyventojų patarėjų sąjunga, Lithuania (Lithuanian Citizens Advice Union)
- National Association of Citizens Information Services (NACIS), Ireland
- Asociația Națională a Birourilor de Consiliere pentru Cetățeni (ANBCC), Romania (The National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux in Romania)
- Związek Biur Porad Obywatelskich (UCAB), Poland (Union of Citizens Advice Bureaux)
- The New Zealand Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux (NZACAB), New Zealand
- Pravno-informacijski center, PIC, Slovenia (Legal information centre for NGO- PIC)

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- Tony Venable, Director European Citizen Action Service (ECAS), Brussels
- Dorian Filote, former President of CAI
- Monika Bysrka, former CAI Coordinator

Citizens Advice International (CAI)

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