

BITE SIZE LEARNING SESSION

The story of the Citizens Advice service The 1930s and 40s

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If you are new to any organisation, you don't know how and why it came about. The Citizens Advice service is nearly three quarters of a century old and has a fascinating history which we have tried to capture in this bite size session.

It is also interesting that some of the early debates and discussions are still happening today. We hope you enjoy reading it.

Before World War 2

The word 'advice' is usually associated with organisations like the CAB, consumer protection departments, Law Centres and Housing Aid Centres, but these are all comparatively recent developments.

Communities have always had people who give advice, like doctors, 'wise women', religious leaders, neighbours. The growth of advice centres reflects that peoples' needs for advice have become more complex and demanding and so advisers need more skills, knowledge and back-up.

The idea of advice centres in Britain goes back to the Betterton report on Public Assistance (1924). This report said that advice centres should be set up so the public could get advice on their particular problems.

Chester seems to have been the first local council to act and a centre calling itself 'Citizens' Friend' was opened by the Chester Council for Social Welfare.

During the 1930's one of the many plans made for a possible start of war was to decide the role the voluntary sector would have. In 1938 a meeting was called by the National Council for Social Service (NCSS) which planned to set up 'Citizens Aid Bureaux' in case war was declared.

During the war

Two hundred bureaux opened their doors at the start of the war and this number soon grew to over a thousand. A typical bureau set up at this time would have been run by the local bank manager or newspaper editor – the local 'great and good'.

Offices everywhere were improvised in air-raid shelters, empty shops, church halls, cafes, private homes, Labour halls and rest centres. With transport often disrupted, bureaux went to the people in mobile advice units touring badly bombed areas.



A horse-box used as a mobile CAB (about 1942)

The majority of problems were caused by the war (evacuation, allowances and pensions, tracing soldiers lost in battle and contacting prisoners of war).

However, war related problems were not an overwhelming majority. Family support mechanisms were disrupted, being a particular problem for 'young wives'. Common problems dealt with were accidents, housing repairs, neighbour disputes, adoption, divorce, pensions and benefits. This was an indication that there was a need for advice services in peace time.

During this time bureaux liaised with government, establishing a relationship which would carry on after the war.

The post war service

After the end of the war about 350 bureaux closed, but it became clear that many bureaux would have to remain open to help with the problems caused by resettlement. There was a large housing shortage, as a result of the bombing, and government plans for resettlement gave CABx the explicit responsibility for providing information to those who had not served in the armed forces.



A bureau, just after the war

New post war problems

At the first national conference of CABx in 1945, the vice chair giving the keynote address said

" The type of job hitherto dealt with by CABx has on the whole been negative in character – the giving of information and advice to get out of difficulties, whereas tomorrow the service should turn to the positive and set out to let people know what the government was offering to the advantage of the citizen".

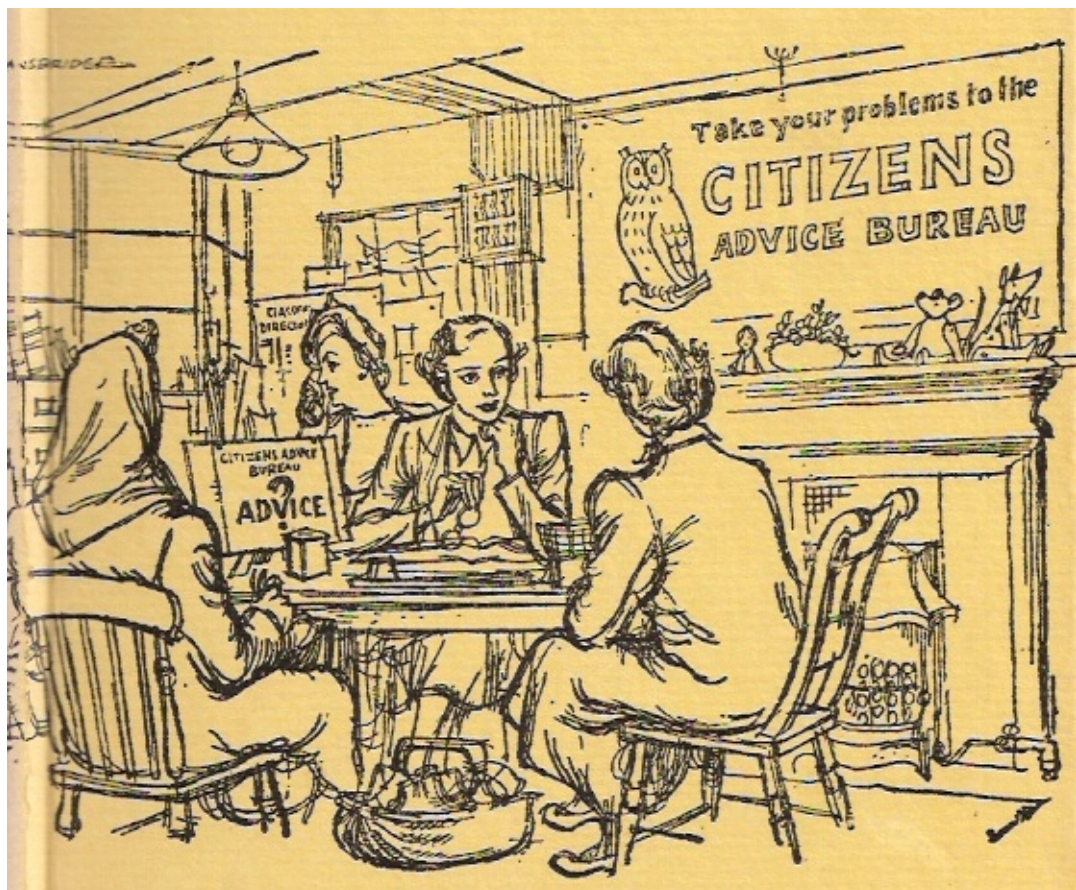
However, what the vice chair perhaps did not foresee was a growth in new kinds of problem:

- The housing shortage and disrepair produced many enquiries (from both landlords and tenants) to bureaux. In 1946 the new Rent Act was introduced to control rents and home improvement grants were introduced. After the 1957 Rent Act, housing became 25% of bureau enquiries.

- Steps were taken by the government to improve the economy leading to problems about accessing re-training and employment.
- The new 'Welfare State' laws resulting from the 1942 Beveridge Report about health and social security were complicated and confusing to many who needed help.
- In October 1956 there was 'an influx' of refugees from Hungary after the uprising. These refugees had lost their homes and all their possessions, having to take refuge in a strange country where many did not speak the language.

Bureaux provided them with advice and information about housing employment and personal problems.

- Later that month, all British subjects were expelled from Egypt after the Suez crisis. As with the Hungarians many had no experience of Britain and required detailed information and advice.



A 1950s Punch cartoon, showing the image of a CAB

At the 1959 national conference of CABx, the Home Secretary said:

" Whilst all of us in public work are there because we are interested in the social improvement of our people, we differ from you in that we have so little intimate knowledge of these subjects".

This statement reflects many early examples of what we would now call social policy work:

- The nature of marriage, families and the role of women was greatly affected by the war causing many enquiries after the war was over. Because of these changes, in 1953 the government set up a Royal Commission on marriage which partly relied on evidence from the Citizens Advice service. The rules on divorce, separation and custody were later changed as a result.
- After the war trade practices began to change resulting in many enquiries about buying goods and credit. In 1955 the Citizens Advice service submitted recommendations about trade practices and Hire Purchase. The service also produced a Booklet giving advice on Hire Purchase and credit buying.

One quote from a bureau where new homes were being let was "There are never less than five or six representatives of Hire purchase firms on the doorstep whenever we give out the keys on a Thursday".

- In 1955 the Franks committee reviewed the workings of the newly formed tribunals. The Citizens Advice service was the only lay representative on the Franks committee.
- The deep freeze of the winter of 1963 caused enormous hardship for elderly and disabled people who had to 'sign on' to get welfare benefits, often at an office several miles away.

After CAB representations, this requirement was ceased, and later replaced by a postal system.

Emergencies

There were several occasions where the Citizens Advice service showed that they hadn't lost their origins of providing an emergency service.

For both the Lynmouth flood disaster and extensive East coast floods of 1952, emergency bureaux were set up to advise and offer personal support to people who were often too dazed to leave their homes. Bureaux also provided information bulletins about emergency grants and how to deal with valuers.



The Queen Mother visits a London Bureau

Developments in the Citizens Advice service

The National annual conferences co-ordinated the overall direction of the service with a small team run by the National Council of Social Service providing central and field support to bureaux.

The aims and principles that we still have are closely based on those drawn up in 1947. At the beginning of 1950, the grant for central and regional support to bureaux was withdrawn completely. This meant the end of the travelling officers who gave support to bureaux management committees and threw bureaux, once again on to their own devices. The result was the closure of many bureaux, from the war time number of over 1000, by 1948 it had dropped to 570 and by 1960 to 415.

- One response was to form National Citizens Advice Bureau Committee (which later became NACAB) with the ethos "It is upon you and not us in London that the movement stands or falls"; still true today.
- In 1946 training for 'intending CAB leaders' and experienced advisers was introduced. There was a continuing demand for training lectures and workers meetings to keep advisers up to date as well as discussing the principles of CAB work and the changing social conditions.
- Also in 1946, the national conference agreed the need for a nationally co-ordinated training programme for new advisers. A national syllabus was agreed to help bureaux set up training courses.
- In 1947, Citizens Advice Notes (known as CANs) was formally adopted to provide national reliable information back-up for advisers.

- In the late 1940s, many CABs used Poor man's Lawyers, where a solicitor or barrister would come into the bureau to offer specialist advice. This became the solicitor rota scheme that still exists today.
- Information Retrieval (now called social policy) was adopted in 1949.
- In the mid 1950s, in recognition of the needs of 'country people', the Citizens Advice service set up mobile centres that could serve local villages.



A mobile CAB for rural areas

The growth of quality of service standards

During the post war period, the service had many discussions and attempts to set standards of advice.

- In 1940 some standards were set out in the Signs of Recognition.
- In 1947, these became the more sophisticated Recognition Scheme.

These standards have been developed since, now forming the present day membership scheme.

Where to find out more

A video **Ask CAB** contains footage from the Ministry of Information in 1942 to spread the word about the Citizens Advice service. The video can be ordered from Citizens Advice customer services, price £4.99

The information for this bite size session mainly comes from two books, both out of print, but second hand copies are available through Amazon:

- The story of the Citizens Advice Bureaux published in 1964.
- Inform, Advise and Support published in 1989.

If you enjoyed this bite size session, have a look at the second part of the short history – The 1960s to today.

Some last thoughts

The history of the Citizens Advice service has a number of common themes and debates, which are still live issues today, for example:

- The position of volunteers in the service. How much can we ask them to do? What involvement in decision making should they have?
- Bureaux are always coming up with new ideas, for example, different ways of delivering the service, different ways of supporting advisers
- On the one hand, bureaux are financially supported by government, on the other, the service is frequently critical of government policy through its social policy work. A continuing potential conflict?
- Are bureaux leading the service or is it being led from the centre?

Any comments about Bite size sessions?

Bite size is a new way of learning, so we would like feedback on what you think of this session or bite size in general.

Click on [feedback](#) and it will raise an email for you to send.

Many thanks.

Don't forget to add this bite-size learning to your training record.