

## Memories of Dover Citizens Advice Bureau

As we know, Citizens Advice started at the beginning of World War 2 and was initially started to give help and practical advice with Ration Books, war damage claims and resulting problems. It has gradually become a national organisation, reaching most towns and cities across the UK. It now provides a computerised support service over a complex range of subjects.

The Deal Bureau was started in the mid 1960s, earlier than the Dover office, perhaps maybe because of the different industries and needs in the two towns, Deal having a large mining community but possibly less prosperous than Dover, a bustling port at that time, with its train ferries, car/passenger ferries, large engineering works, national railway transport system, and international docks, etc. The history of the Deal bureau has been well documented in the past but little appears to have been recorded in respect of The Dover Bureau.

### **The early years**

The Dover Bureau opened in 1971. Previously, the local library had been receiving many requests for help and assistance with various issues, which prompted the need and start up of the service. The office was opened initially in a tiny upstairs office within Biggin Hall, the former librarian's wife being the first organiser and manager. The service covered many and varied problems, as we do today, from debt, benefits, relationship issues, consumer and legal problems etc.

Later, as the service became even busier and the office space very limited, the service moved to offices owned by the local authority, above the council rent office, in the Maison Dieu car park. The entrance was at the side of the building and had a steep staircase up to the office. (There was a stair lift fitted in case of need, but I cannot remember it ever being used, although it was frequently tested!) There was a small reception area and a row of several chairs for clients to sit and wait. (Appointments were not made, it was simply a drop-in service. Although this meant the advisers did not have prior information about the client's requirements, there was the benefit that there was not wasted time researching information for clients that did not turn up!).

In today's modern office, technology driven, the old operation is difficult to envisage. These new premises, although bigger, were basically comprised of one large office which had to accommodate the telephone adviser, manager, and numerous filing cabinets to store the paper Information System. There was a large wooden table in the centre of the office, round which the advisers sat to research issues in the Systems very bulky reference books, for the information their clients needed. At that time, the manager was responsible for updating these reference books from information received in a monthly pack from Citizens Advice, a very onerous and time consuming task. Eventually this was unsustainable and it was arranged for a lady volunteer to come in every Wednesday afternoon to do this work. Later this workload became so heavy that a further two ladies came in to help.

The telephone adviser also sat at this desk with the other advisers, whilst they hand wrote their case sheets once they had vacated one of the two interview rooms and shown the client out. The case sheets were later checked by the manager. There was a further very small room near the downstairs entry to the Bureau, which had to be used on many occasions too, advisers having to go up and down frequently for reference to the paper System and guidance when needed. There was also a very small kitchen area and a toilet. It was quite difficult to maintain confidentiality when interviewing clients in these circumstances, and a radio was continually played in the clients waiting area to try and muffle any discussions!

Much of the training of advisers was in-house under the supervision of a "guidance tutor", and formal courses in all subjects were attended at Faversham to reach the standard of certification.

Among the volunteer advisers there were some great characters, from all walks of life; a WW2 veteran, and a lady who had worked in a munitions factory (and had many a tale to tell), an accountant, two nurses, a teacher, and a company director, to name but a few!

Although very cramped, this office situation did lend itself to camaraderie amongst the staff, as they had brief interaction with each other and regularly contributed to colleagues in the midst of dealing with clients, when they came to look up information in the paper system. This particularly helped newer advisers to benefit from others previous experience and knowledge. (Advice Session Supervisors had not been invented then.) Today, advisers disappear into their allocated room, switch on the computer and seldom see their fellow advisers!

This situation, although busy, did have its lighter moments. I am reminded of the time the telephone adviser had to advise a client on the death of a pet. The adviser, a lady who had never heard of Monty Python, was heard to say "so the parrot is dead" and then wondered why all her colleagues had been reduced to helpless mirth around her.

On another occasion, the manager got herself locked in the toilet. After much consultation through the door, she was asked if she could squeeze herself through the very small window. "Not with my hips" came the retort! While further discussion took place as to how to resolve the problem, the case sheets that advisers had already written up were slid under the door for the manager to check so that she did not waste time!

Yet another occasion, a male adviser was showing a German client out of the main office when the client said in a very loud voice "thank you darling, what you gave me was most interesting", reducing the listening advisers into fits of giggles wondering what had happened behind closed doors! (Perhaps not politically correct by today's standards, but provided some light relief at the time!)

A further time, an adviser was required to give a maths lesson to a husband and wife, convinced that the local butcher had cheated them. The joint of brisket was placed on the desk as a visual aid, whilst the difference between pounds and ounces and kilos and grams was hopefully explained!

All part of the colourful tapestry of Bureau life!

Monthly advisers meetings were held to update advisers on new issues and the like and occasionally representatives from other organisations came to speak. On one such occasion, a lady from Head Office came to discuss political correctness. She produced pictures of animals and objects and invited comments as to their use/purpose. (A cat = companionship for an elderly person.) All went well until she put up a duck; one of our older advisers, a WW2 veteran, said "The Chinese Restaurant, they probably took them in the first place." The whole Bureau was then told they would have to attend more training courses!

There were some significant times also; the first asylum seekers (Bosnian Serbs and Czech Roma) to arrive in Dover were a huge cultural shock for the population which until then had been almost monocultural. Citizens Advice felt that the Bureaux should play a major role in this situation, but an organisation called Migrant Helpline eventually became available for reference/referral.

There were also the male clients from the north of England looking for accommodation who said they were job seeking. Very difficult time as by then, Dover was little better for job opportunities than the areas they had left. It was then discovered they had come for the "boot legging" of alcohol and cigarettes! This activity was eventually stopped when the DHSS and Customs and Excise started joint checks at the docks. Our information system did not advise on "what is normal consumption of these items" – a question often asked by clients found by Customs and Excise to have vans full of goods and all seats removed to make room for beer and cigarettes!

Eventually, the computer age came to the Bureau. A second-hand Server was donated by Pfizer; it was noisy and needed small receivers in each room. Unfortunately, some of these disappeared with some clients! A new computerised advice system called Petra was introduced which we were trained to use. Sadly though at this time, the service lost several long standing good advisers; they had never used computers at all and felt they did not wish to be part of this new era.

The next office move came when the rent office on the ground floor was relocated by the Council and the Bureau given the opportunity to move downstairs – more convenient space to accommodate both the service and clients, in view of the increasing need and complex problems arising. A much more professional service had been emerging over time, with the introduction of a more rigid training programme, advice session supervisors to steer and assist advisers, gateway assessors – used to gather information in the first instance with a client, in order to find out exactly what and the type of assistance the client needed. More administration staff added to the service, providing order and control of filing etc. (Advisers previously had to file/sort case sheets etc.) Various ancillary services enhanced the service too, a local firm of solicitors offering a regular weekly slot to give further legal advice for clients and another giving access to a mediation service.

Some parts of the service will always be needed, particularly debt. In the early days, two advisers would do a special weekly afternoon session, going through the debt cases and preparing income and expenditure sheets. One adviser was able to attend Benefit Appeals on a regular basis and another to write simple Wills. The Bureau was also open on Saturday mornings, giving greater access to some of the working population.

It has been very interesting to see over the years how the Dover Bureau has developed, advanced technologically, and has met the increasing and complex needs of the population.

Written by Vanessa Fatcher with help from other former advisers

## We advise a celebration



**SPOT ON:** Dover Citizens Advice Bureau has won a quality award for the advice it gives. Delighted by the news are, left, Vanessa Fatcher, deputy manager and manager Wendy Hunt  
Ref: 30682

VOLUNTEERS at Dover's Citizens Advice Bureau are celebrating after being rewarded for their high standard of service.

The centre in Maison Dieu Road has been awarded the Quality Mark from the Community Legal Service.

"We understand this bureau is the first in this area to receive this award," said centre manager Wendy Hunt.

"We are delighted to achieve this recognition for our advice-giving."

Fully trained volunteers at the centre give advice on 14 different categories from employment to debt. But more volunteers are urgently needed as the bureau receives more than 5,000 inquiries a year.

The bureau was singled out especially for its standards of administration and the quality of advice that it gives.

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Page 3



**DOVER Citizens' Advice Bureau is now without its longest-serving interviewer. Mrs Sylvia Corrall, who was the first organiser/manager, from its opening in 1971, retired on Monday.**

Mrs Corrall, pictured centre with friends and colleagues, enjoyed the challenge of the voluntary work, which involved meeting all sorts of people and coping with many varied problems, from consumer and educational issues to debts and divorce.

She worked in Dover Library for a total of 20 years, from where she retired in 1984, but kept her post

## Bureau stalwart retires

at the CAB until recently, deciding to move away from Kent to be with her family in Abergavenny, Wales.

Having lived in her house at Bewsbury Cross Lane, Whitfield, for 42 years, Mrs Corrall says she will miss Dover, but has no inten-

tion of discontinuing her interests.

As chairman of Dover History Society, she says she will probably keep up that hobby in her new town.

She is also a keen wildlife photographer.

"I'm looking forward to retiring as a challenge, though naturally I'll miss doing the things I do here. I would like to wish the CAB every success in the future."

At a retirement buffet at the Dover Motel on Monday evening, friends and colleagues presented her with gifts which included a kettle and a toaster.