

Case study Sharrow Citizens Advice Bureau

“The biggest fear for us is that we don’t know what’s going to happen next”



About the Organisation:

Sharrow CAB supports the neighbourhood of Sharrow in central Sheffield, offering advice and information on a range of issues such as housing rights, welfare rights, money and debt, consumer rights and employment rights. The organisation is committed to social inclusion, and both its staff and the people it works with come from a wide spectrum of backgrounds. Sharrow is a diverse community with a significant immigrant population, and thus Sharrow CAB offers its services in a range of languages including Cantonese, Mandarin, Punjabi, Somali, Urdu and Vietnamese; indeed, between one third and one quarter of the advice at Sharrow CAB gives is delivered in a foreign language.

Feeling the impacts of the recession...

on the organisation itself:

As might be expected, Sharrow CAB has seen a significant increase in demand for its services over the past year: the number of people coming for advice was up by 16% during the first quarter of 2009, as compared to the first quarter of 2008. The problem, says Manager Frances Potter, is that, “demand for our services always outstrips supply anyway”, and thus Sharrow CAB is unable to meet the needs of all those who seek its help. On a positive note, Sharrow CAB received a grant from its national organisation, Citizens Advice, to extend its opening hours. However, this grant only lasts a year and after that Sharrow CAB may not be able to secure extra funding to meet the increased needs of the local community: “The biggest fear for us is that we don’t know what’s going to happen next,” says Frances.

Indeed, funding is a serious issue. Sharrow CAB’s income for 2007-8 was £277,729, but whilst half of this funding was met by a core grant (which itself must be applied for on a yearly basis), the rest must be sought from a range of sources. “We have a collection of small pots of money this year,” Frances explains, “but next year we just don’t know whether they’ll be there. If not, we could have to make staff members redundant.” Sharrow CAB’s reserves in 2008 were only £43,599: nowhere near enough to cover its annual expenditure, which in 2008 was £280,835.

Another area in which Frances would love to see more funding is for the development and retention of volunteers (Sharrow CAB currently has 8 full-time equivalent paid staff, and 25 volunteers). “We’re getting volunteer enquiries by the bucketful,” Frances smiles, “and we’re passionate about people volunteering. But you do need the back up and support for that. If we had more funding for volunteer support we could expand our volunteer staff whilst maintaining focus on the clients. Our first commitment is to our clients, but the value added to our service by us taking on volunteers is really significant. Volunteers get so many positive things out of the experience: it increases their self-confidence and gives them a real sense of purpose.

We've seen an amazing transformation in some of the people that have worked with us."

on individuals and local communities:

The recession has certainly had a noticeable impact on the Sharrow area, affecting not just those already in vulnerable situations but also those who had previously seemed relatively secure. "We're getting people who've never used advice services before," Frances notes, "and many of the problems we see are almost certainly results of the recession. We're hearing lots of stories about jobs being lost, and about employers reducing hours and terminating short contracts. Many people also come in with multiple debt problems, that have been building up for a while but have now reached a crunch point. And of course there are the various family problems that tend to go with that."

Frances feels that Sharrow CAB's work with the immigrant community is particularly important at the moment, as the recession is often even harder to deal with for those who have only recently come to the UK or who do not feel fully integrated into society. "Many unemployment advice and job search facilities have switched a lot of their services to the telephone," Frances explains, "and many of our most vulnerable clients can't handle that, especially if their first language isn't English." What's more, she adds, "because of difficulties in entering the job market, immigrants here are more likely to be agency workers or self-employed in small businesses. Thus the first wave of people getting hit by the recession seems disproportionately to be immigrants."

Looking to the future:

Sharrow CAB's staff are facing up to the fact that the next few years will be particularly hard. Furthermore, some of their clients seem to feel a sense of hopelessness that wasn't there before the recession hit: "even though times were always hard, there was a strong belief in progress; but now for some people these beliefs are fading."

However, Frances is confident that Sharrow CAB can continue to offer support to those affected, as long as the organisation's funding can be sustained. Indeed, as described above, Sharrow CAB would love to extend its services if only it were given the necessary funds.

The problem, says Frances, is that the grants that the government has offered so far (under the Real Help For Communities initiative), "have had too many limiting criteria, and involve deadlines that are too quick. To apply, it seems you have to tell a very particular story; you can't just show that you're really helping the people most affected by the recession."

The recession could provide a positive opportunity, Frances thinks, as, "people who are normally unaware of the difficulties of unemployment and are coming into contact with it and may change their attitudes to giving and to welfare policy." However, as it stands, she says, "the powers that be have got the levers to make things better, but are not using them in the right way."

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