

# Voice



A magazine for the Citizens Advice Network in Scotland

SUMMER 2025



# North stars

Volunteering on the islands

**Get on board**

What makes  
a great trustee?

**People power**

Standing up for a  
human rights bill

# Shift in focus

Many people who seek bureaux' help aren't simply struggling as a result of the benefits system, or inadequate housing, or barriers to legal support. They are being denied one or more of their essential human rights.

That point might seem slightly abstract while handling the pressing issues that people bring. But in this edition we explore why it might be useful to look at advice and advocacy work through a human rights lens.

We also consider the perennial issue of volunteer recruitment and retention, at both bureau and board level. With one bureau currently lacking any volunteer advisers at all, what are the secrets of building a strong and loyal team?



Keep in touch at **[voice@cas.org.uk](mailto:voice@cas.org.uk)** to respond to articles, suggest new ideas, or share how your bureau or service is innovating to respond to clients' needs.

# Standing up for our rights

CAS recently took network evidence on key economic and social rights to the UN. What happens next?

On any given day, CAB might support people who can't afford to eat or stay warm, who are living in unfit accommodation, or who can't access health services.

All these situations might amount to a violation of internationally-recognised human rights.

The Strong Communities team recently took these concerns to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Senior policy officer Hyo Eun Shin highlighted key network evidence of failings by UK and Scottish governments to make rights real for people and provided recommendations for improvement.

This is a new realm for the network, but rooted in the daily advice and advocacy work of bureaux, says Gillian Fyfe, who heads the team.

"A lot of what the network does is about realising people's human rights, even if we haven't often used that language," she says.

Hyo adds: "This is the first time our national advice code data has been considered through a human rights lens.

"It might seem a bit abstract now, but it is helpful to understand all these rights, such as rights to housing, food, social security, work and health, as interconnected – and that reflects the holistic nature of the advice the network provides."

This work fed into the most detailed set of recommendations the UN Committee has ever presented to the UK and devolved governments. It had over 90 asks, including an independent review of the impact of austerity measures, and reversal of policies such as the two-child



Hyo Eun Shin





Gillian Fyfe

limit and the five-week delay for the first Universal Credit payment.

The Scottish Government committed to introducing a Scottish Human Rights Bill, bringing four major international human rights treaties into Scots law, but

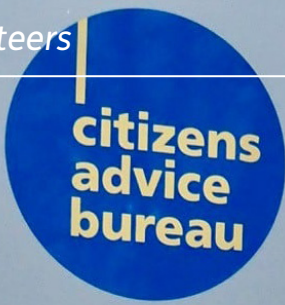
progress has slowed. CAS continues to push for this powerful Bill, which has huge potential to improve peoples' lives in Scotland.

The network and others will be keeping up the pressure – the UN Committee recommendations give us further tools to do this, says Gillian: “These will be shared with bureaux soon – watch this space.”

### Getting results

Human rights is just one area in which frontline evidence from the network is having an impact on policymakers.

- Bureau evidence is helping to secure ongoing improvements to the **Adult Disability Payment** process. With 20,000 pieces of ADP advice given in the last quarter, the network is in the best position to help hone the policy for clients' benefit.
- Ofcom issued a ban on inflation-based **mid-contract price rises** to phone and broadband contracts, following evidence from the network and others about the unfair impact.
- The network's evidence to the Scottish Government was instrumental in delivering a six-month moratorium against **debt recovery action** for people experiencing mental health problems.



**Penicuik**  
**Citizens Advice Bureau**  
 Palmer House  
 Opening Hours  
 Monday 9.30 - 15.30  
 Tuesday 9.30 - 15.30



Sue Peart

who came across the CAB in the course of their work; others have been volunteer advisers.

Manager Sue Peart takes no credit for curating this diverse bunch. “I don’t think it’s my role to choose trustees, because they have to be independent,” she explains.

“We advertise, or people hear about it and just come forward – maybe because they have a genuine interest, rather than the arm up their back.”

Retaining them once they’re in place, however, is very much Sue’s business. “It’s like a family – it’s a close-knit group,” she says. “It’s about keeping that shared sense of purpose. We meet at least every other month.”



Dylan Lynch

### Two-way flow

While the trustee role is a governance rather than an operational one, there is a lot of flow between bureau and board.

“Trustees spend part of their induction shadowing the advisers.

I think that’s really important, so they understand just how skilful our advisers are,” says Sue.

The prime example is the bureau’s new chair, Dylan Lynch – he first joined as a volunteer adviser over a decade ago, during his law degree.

Another trustee, Nicholas Grier, was Dylan’s professor at university. He worked with deputy bureau manager Russell Gray to set up a volunteer programme that has seen dozens of law students volunteer at Penicuik over the years.

The pair have also set up a more formal traineeships scheme. This sees a trainee lawyer work within the bureau over two years, supervised by a local law firm. A new trainee is about to start work.

The arrangement delivers for all parties, Sue says: “We get an adviser here, maybe delivering a project. It’s great experience for the student, and the law firm gets an additional trainee.” ➤

# Building bridges

Trustees at Penicuik CAB are creating new connections between the bureau and the next generation.

A community police officer. A GP practice manager. People from social work, law, HR and finance. Gatherings around the board table at Penicuik CAB bring a wealth of experience from trustees’ current and former professions.

It can be especially hard for bureaux to find volunteers for roles that lack the hands-on satisfaction of dealing with people and enquiries – instead demanding a forensic approach to the back-room stuff of accounts and governance.

Penicuik is fortunate in its band of mostly long-serving trustees. Some are community stalwarts

# Prize legacy

The success of Penicuik's legal traineeship scheme illustrates how trustees can play a big role in forging relationships between bureaux and their communities. Another example is the legacy of former Penicuik chair, Professor Sir Geoff Palmer, who died recently aged 85.

"Geoff was such an amazing supporter of the CAB service," Sue reflects. "He would pop in and talk to the volunteers, and he was just the warmest friend to individuals."

At Geoff's suggestion, the bureau will award an annual prize to a deserving pupil selected by head teachers at two local high schools, Beeslack and Penicuik High.

"We set up the Palmer Prize just before Geoff died," Sue says. "He wanted to recognise young people who might have achieved despite adversity, as he himself did."

"It's also another way of raising the CAB profile among the community and the younger generation in particular." [➤](#)



Former chair Sir Geoff Palmer, who died recently, gave his name to the Penicuik bureau building and to a new school prize

# ‘Being a chair is not meant to be an ego trip’

## What makes a great trustee or chair?

In the early 19th century, Penicuik became the centre of a big paper-making industry, founded by local businessman Alexander Cowan.

“A great benefactor to Penicuik, he gave work to many people in the area and helped French prisoners captured during the Napoleonic wars,” says his descendant, Professor Nicholas Grier.

Nicholas has now made his own substantial contribution to the Penicuik community, as a long-serving trustee for the town’s CAB, including a spell as chair.

The ancestral connection was a factor. But his first contact came when the bureau asked him to consider sending some of his law students at nearby Edinburgh Napier University to volunteer.

“They came back to me with glowing reports of how well they were being trained, how they got to sort out their clients’ difficulties, and how welcoming the bureau was,” he recalls.

“In the light of all this, I thought I’d better see what my students were getting up to. One thing led to another...”

As trustee, Nicholas was to usher many more students in the bureau’s direction. He’s especially gratified that one of those former students, Dylan Lynch, has recently been appointed as the bureau’s chair.

“Dylan brings his own considerable experience of trusteeship work elsewhere, along with his skills as in-house counsel in industry,” says Nicholas. “He is a great asset to the bureau.”

Alongside trustees’ role in ensuring the accountability and governance of the bureau, it’s the chair’s job to set the tone of the organisation, Nicholas believes.

“If staff see that the chair, senior management and trustees expect each other to act with integrity, good manners and professionalism, it soon becomes everyone’s expectation,” he reasons.

“Being a chair is not meant to be an ego trip, or a power battle.”

While Penicuik has a loyal and diverse team of trustees, Nicholas is all too aware of the constant struggle to attract new blood to bureaux.

“A cheap jibe made of committees of charities such as CABs is that they’re full of people who are male, pale and stale. While I plead guilty to these three vices, it’s increasingly hard for many small organisations to recruit any trustees, irrespective of their gender, hue or freshness,” he says.

“It’s no surprise that retired people, who may have the time and the expertise, are willing to serve. They should be applauded, rather than sneered at.

“At the same time, it’s important to have a good mix of trustees. We need a wide age range to prevent the old being stuffy, and the young impetuous.

“Above all, we need people who care about our citizens, especially citizens who struggle with their financial or other problems. Caring should shine through all that we do.”



Nicholas Grier: "It's hard for small organisations to recruit trustees"



# Justice denied

For thousands of Scots, entitlement to legal aid is no guarantee of provision.

“There’s no oasis in the legal aid desert.” That’s how Stirling CAB’s chief executive, Craig Anderson, characterises the legal picture in the city and the surrounding Forth Valley.

The bureau’s advisers have long found it almost impossible to signpost clients to local providers of pro bono and legal aid work.

Stirling has a small law school, but unlike those at several other universities in Scotland, it does not offer a law clinic. Only one local firm offers free initial interviews about legal aid applications. That leaves few options for a population of 305,000.

Social policy researchers at the CAB – Matthew Miller, David Briggs, Paul Chitty and Yiran Zhang – have now published a comprehensive report on the issue.

As well as comparing provision across Scotland, their research included submitting a Freedom of Information request to identify the numbers of people appearing at Stirling Sheriff Court by category of law, and how many were unrepresented.

There’s a particular dearth of legal aid provision in some areas of law. “People seeking solicitors in the context of domestic abuse often have to

contact 100 to 200 solicitors before they find one willing to take the case,” says Craig.

Funding is at the root of the problem. “It’s really about the economic viability of legal aid to support the amount of legal need,” Craig adds. “That’s why there’s been such a revolution of law centres in the West of Scotland. It’s concerning that no such facility exists to allow access to social justice anywhere across the central belt.”

The report calls for a Civil Legal Aid Office to cover Stirling and the Forth Valley. As a first step, it suggests piloting a law clinic at the University of Stirling one day a week.

Policymakers have already taken notice. “We’ve had a meeting with the Scottish Government and the Scottish Legal Aid Board, at their request, following the publication of the report,” Craig says. “I’m putting in a proposal for a six-month pilot which we’re hoping they will fund.”

Copies of the report and an associated pro bono legal guide are available from [Craig.Anderson@Stirling.cas.org.uk](mailto:Craig.Anderson@Stirling.cas.org.uk)

# Island squad

In Scotland's more remote areas, mustering a volunteer crew comes with distinctive challenges.

At this time of year, two members of the volunteer team at Orkney CAB vanish from the bureau. One spends her summers as a paid tour guide on the islands; another simply enjoys multiple holidays.



Barbara Brown

Their absence is keenly felt in a cohort of five volunteer advisers and seven receptionists. However, extending that flexibility has been key to fostering a loyal team.

"We're quite fair. We understand this place can't be a volunteer's top priority if they're getting paid elsewhere," says deputy manager, Barbara Brown. "It's the same with the team member who goes travelling: volunteering needs to fit around her life."

In a small community, dispersed across 20 islands, the bureau knows the value of having a committed team. After losing some volunteers during the pandemic, the bureau has bounced back to a strong position. And Barbara intends to keep it that way.

Volunteers can turn to constant support from the Orkney staff on the rota for advice session supervision, which the team has dubbed ASS ("We quite like the acronym," says Barbara).

"The volunteers know they're not being a nuisance to anyone, because they're part of the team," she says. "We all get on together – there's no delineation. They are absolutely

## 'Travel logistics can be a nightmare'

Orkney adviser Stephen Fraser understands only too well the difficulties his CAB faces in finding and keeping volunteers.

In his career with the fire and rescue service, he was responsible for recruitment and retention of firefighters on Orkney's islands, most of them voluntary.

"Trying to recruit and retain people was a real challenge. It's no different for CAB," he says. "The population swings on the smaller islands are hard to contend with, and the travel logistics can be a nightmare, especially in winter."

Stephen himself lives on the Orkney mainland, so travel as a CAB volunteer isn't an issue. He finds the role stimulating:

"I can keep my IT skills up to date and also keep informed of everything from benefits to immigration. Where else would I get that breadth of experience?"



Stephen Fraser

fabulous. There's a lot of laughter in the reception throughout the day."

Finding new recruits is more of a challenge. While space is a limiting factor in the current offices, Barbara admits she would ideally like to double the existing volunteer count.

A limiting factor is travel to Kirkwall. "We've had interest from people on the outer islands about volunteering, but the journey takes over an hour and a half each way," says Barbara. "We have one

volunteer who comes by boat, but from one of the inner islands where the ferry crossing is quite short.”

Nor is it practical for volunteers to work remotely on their own islands: “People mostly don’t want an adviser to be someone they know, and face-to-face is still what most clients are looking for.” Outreach sessions on the islands of Westray, Hoy and Sanday are run by bureau staff.

The CAB shares a building with Voluntary Action Orkney. Barbara meets with her counterpart there on a regular basis: VAO has the CAB’s volunteer job descriptions on file and has channelled several new enquiries towards the bureau.

That’s a big help in a community where multiple charities are keen to snap up volunteers from a limited pool.

“Recruitment for the board is the area where there is the most competition between agencies,” Barbara says. “Our adviser roles are unique locally, and the reception roles are actually quite different from other agencies too, which I think helps.

“But we definitely benefit from word of mouth too – many of our volunteers already know someone who volunteers or works here before they apply. Not that we constantly nag everyone we meet into joining us or anything...”

### ‘You need a sense of humour’

Recognising a familiar voice on the phone can present a dilemma for Dorothy Taylor.

The Orkney triage and reception volunteer is acutely aware of the potential sensitivity for people seeking CAB help within a very close community.

“You can be in two minds whether to say who you are,” says Dorothy. “I find it’s better to say that it’s me, and then offer the chance to talk to somebody different. But most people don’t mind and they trust us to keep everything confidential.”

Dorothy has volunteered for seven years and has no plans to stop: “I think I’ll carry on until I drop. Everyone is so nice and kind and funny. I think you need a sense of humour sometimes to get through it.”



Dorothy Taylor

### Scarce supply in the Isles

Margaret Macleod wasn’t looking for a new role after retiring from the NHS, but her son Malcolm had other ideas.



Margaret Macleod

Malcolm, who had worked at the Stornoway bureau before leaving to study on the mainland, encouraged his mum to get involved. “He said ‘they’re really short of volunteers’, so I agreed to come in and see,” says Margaret.

She is now one of just three reception volunteers in the Western Isles. Since two long-serving advisers left last year, there are currently no volunteer advisers covering the 26,500 population.


The service is led instead by staff based in Lewis, Harris, Uist and Barra. By necessity, phone advice predominates, though face-to-face meetings are encouraged for clients with hearing or language barriers.

Bouncing back from the pandemic has proved especially hard for the islands’ CAB, says service coordinator Kenny MacLeod.

“We’re actively looking for volunteers all the time and we hope to advertise shortly,” he says. “I think the online training can be off-putting for some – people just want to get stuck in – and there’s competition for volunteers from charity shops and nursing homes.”

Margaret believes false perceptions play a part too: “People don’t necessarily recognise that the CAB uses a lot of volunteers – they probably think it’s well funded from the government.”

“We’ll be pulling out all the stops to spread the word over the next few months. Meanwhile our receptionist volunteers are a fantastic team to build on,” Kenny says.



# Lobbying for change

This year's campaigns will have a crusading edge.

Lacking a phone or an internet connection can make modern life hard. But the ultimate form of exclusion is not having access to a bank account.

For those locked out, basic tasks become huge and costly obstacles, credit access can be blocked and the cost of essentials such as insurance and energy bills are likely to climb.

'Basic' bank accounts do exist, aimed at often-excluded groups. Yet bureaux report frustrating processes to access many of these. They are rarely promoted by the banks, and are often inaccessible for different reasons.

In fact, all but two of the 12 banks offering basic accounts oblige customers to apply for standard current accounts first, or impose inflexible verification requirements.

A recent report by Sarah-Jayne Dunn, financial health policy manager, identifies five groups particularly affected: prisoners and ex-offenders; refugees; people experiencing homelessness; survivors of domestic abuse; and undischarged bankrupts.

For one of this year's network campaigns,

bureaux will be asked to reach out to these groups in their areas, raising awareness of how they can help people get access to accounts.

It will also be an opportunity to support CAS's national call for all banks to follow the example of the two which offer fully accessible and widely advertised basic accounts.

Similarly, other campaigns on this year's calendar provide elements of advocacy, rather than simply encouraging more enquiries to already hard-pressed bureaux.

- There will be a campaign calling for a **minimum income guarantee** – subject of a recent expert report to the Scottish government.
- Another exercise will raise awareness of **social tariffs** for broadband and mobile – bureaux can get free SIM cards from CAS to distribute.
- And the annual winter **energy** campaign will also feature calls for social tariffs.

As in recent years, bureaux will be able to choose the timing of their local campaigns. Toolkits will be issued from September to support their efforts.

# Talking point

The network's public webinar series is a year old – and creating a genuine buzz.

Online meetings have become routine since the pandemic. But there's something fresh about the network's ForeCAST sessions.

For a start, these webinars on critical network themes are open to everyone – including the network, external stakeholders and the general public.

Each features a bureau manager providing a frontline perspective, alongside members of the Directorate and expert speakers from other organisations.

The brainchild of Emma Jackson, head of social justice at CAS, ForeCAST is designed to showcase the network's data and insight, highlighting areas where social policy is failing people.

The four sessions to date have certainly got people talking.

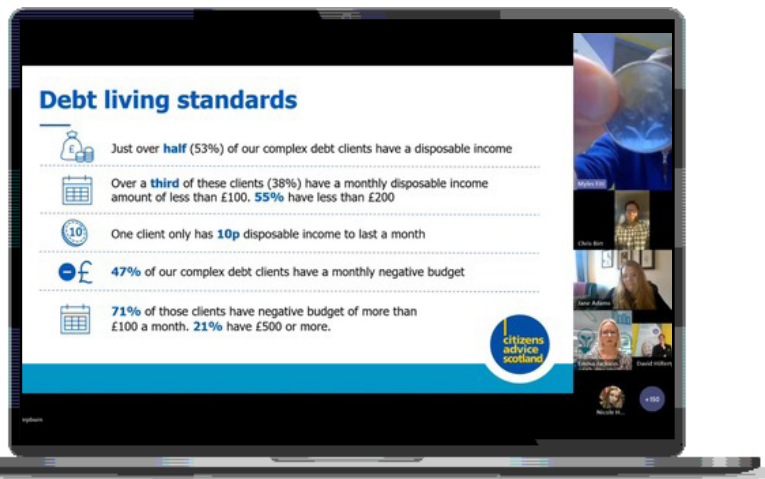
Highlights have included the Extra Help Unit's Natasha Gilmour recounting the response of a client for whom the unit resolved a highly complex energy issue: he called her to say "thanks so much, I think I'll be able to sleep now."

In another memorable moment, financial health lead Myles Fitt held up a 10p piece to show the daily spending power of one client.

Perhaps this is why attendance has been high. Almost 200 people joined the most recent webinar



Emma Jackson



## What they're saying

- "I felt a genuine sense of pride whilst listening and watching. If it impacts on me in that way after 28 years as a CAB manager, imagine the difference it could make to staff and volunteers struggling with the unrelenting nature of frontline work."
- "Expert, eloquent speakers giving real-life examples to illustrate the societal issues CABs and their advisers are dealing with day in, day out."
- "An excellent and powerful presentation, which resonates across all sectors about how we can all do more for society."

live, while each episode gets a similar number of YouTube streams afterwards.

The impact has gone beyond awareness-raising. We know that major funders and foundations are taking inspiration and insight in learning about the bureaux' work first-hand and this in turn is influencing some of their decision-making.

- The next ForeCAST, on housing issues, will feature Shelter Scotland. [Sign up](#) for the live webinar on Thursday August 28 at 10am.
- You can also watch the rest of the series – on living standards, money and debt, energy and the poverty premium – on the [ForeCAST page](#).



*Bonanza: Edinburgh CAB CEO Benjamin Napier marks the funding award with Foundation Scotland's Giles Ruck and David Hilferty, CAS director of impact*

# Cash for local action

Bureaux are sharing in a welcome £6m windfall.

The network's 'emergency service' has been recognised by Scotland's only community foundation.



Giles Ruck

Foundation Scotland has awarded £6m to Scottish CABs. It represents half of the funder's fast-tracked 'Response Fund', designed to support organisations serving the hardest-hit communities around the country.

The funding programme came about in response to increased pressure on charities and community groups, facing soaring demand alongside higher costs.

CEO Giles Ruck explains: "When we started to think about this network as a possible recipient of funding, and reflecting on their enormous breadth of service provision, it became obvious very quickly that CABs provide life-changing advice and support.

"We also saw that there were record levels of demand from people across all corners of Scotland, with stretched staff and volunteers doing their absolute best to meet that demand.

"This funding recognises both the immense strain they've faced and the fact that they know best where to direct resources to make the greatest impact locally. That's why the award is unrestricted, so that each individual CAB can decide for themselves where money is best spent."

## How CABs are spending it

"It will go to running costs. So this additional money will be used to effectively subsidise the cost of running the core service."

**Craig Anderson**  
CEO, Stirling CAB

"We are undecided on it just now – it was actually discussed at the board meeting this week and they are looking at several options for it. At least deciding how to allocate funds is a nice problem to have!"

**Barbara Brown**  
Deputy manager, Orkney CAB