

Voice



A magazine for the Citizens Advice Network in Scotland

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Drawn from life

Kids' creativity tackles the stigma of poverty

All fired up

Fighting for justice on rural fuel needs

Smart move

The phones giveaway bringing people online

Celebrating innovation

This edition of Voice coincides with the network's annual conference – an opportunity for people to get together and share ideas.

This year's event in Edinburgh will hear inspiring accounts from some of the bureaux involved in recent innovative projects.

Among the initiatives featured will be West Dunbartonshire CAB's work with local schoolchildren on tackling the stigma of poverty (see page 6) – a prime example of collaboration with community partners to achieve positive change.

This edition also showcases other initiatives that push the boundaries of the network's core mission. On page 4 we feature a bureau campaigning on a highly-emotive local energy issue. And the network-wide effort to tackle digital exclusion is outlined on page 11.



Share how your bureau or service is innovating to respond to clients' needs. Keep in touch at voice@cas.org.uk

A call for justice

The network turned out in force to demand a better deal for Scots.

"It's a really difficult time for far too many people in Scotland. But it doesn't have to be this way."

Emma Jackson, CAS strategic lead for social justice, sums up the rationale for last month's Scotland Demands Better march and rally in Edinburgh.

Dozens of staff and volunteers from bureaux and CAS joined 5,000 people from nearly 300 like-minded organisations for the event. They marched from the Scottish Parliament to the Meadows, where music, food and free kids' events were laid on.

Behind the upbeat, family-friendly vibe was a serious message to politicians: you need to do better.

The marchers were calling on the Scottish and UK Governments to deliver policies that will allow every household to prosper.

Jobs, investment and social security are the headlines, with detailed demands including fair wages, affordable housing and energy, investment in social care, and higher child benefit payments.

Emma underlines the direct link between these aims and the issues handled every day by bureaux on behalf of local people.

"We need to say to both the UK and Scottish Governments that bold and urgent action is needed to tackle these issues," she adds.

The Edinburgh event was just the start of the campaign. The day was designed to "build real solidarity and create momentum for change," according to Peter Kelly, CEO of the Poverty Alliance.

"All too often, it's easy to think nothing can change – or if there is change, it's probably for the worse," he says. "We really must believe that creating better is not only desirable, but possible."



Network staff and volunteers get the message across on the streets of Edinburgh and at the rally in the Meadows. Photos by Steph Mander and Lilly Jackson



The headline demands

- Better jobs for everyone who needs one, with fair conditions and wages that pay the bills
- Better investment for life's essentials, like affordable homes, good public transport, a thriving natural environment and strong public services
- Better social security, so that all of us have a foundation for the future.

Read the 14 detailed policy demands at www.scotland-demands-better.com

Keep the home fires burning

Lums will continue to reek on the islands as a CAB fights for climate justice.

Gazing into the crackling flames of a home fire can be a trance-like experience.

But for many, a woodburner or open fire is much more than a pretty addition to the living-room. It might be their only practical source of heat.

When the Scottish Government proposed last year to ban wood and log-burning stoves in new homes, the aim was to cut pollution and climate impacts.

But advisers in Skye and Lochalsh CAB were immediately concerned about the effect on people in their area.

Power cuts

Through regular energy enquiries, staff and volunteers are all too aware of the challenges of living off the gas grid. Alternatives, such as oil, are expensive to run, especially given rural delivery charges.

“Power cuts lasting two or three days aren’t uncommon here,” says the CAB’s money adviser, Anthony Donnelly. “In those situations people need the fallback of their woodburner or peatburner. They’re not just cosmetic – they’re a necessity.”

Bureau manager Mo Hannah adds: “People in rural areas already face higher electricity costs. This ban would see them penalised twice over.”

Survey

Anthony launched research on the likely impact of the proposed new-build heat standard.

Through focus groups, client interviews and a survey publicised via local media, Anthony gathered evidence from householders.

They included neighbours on the island of Raasay, who source discounted wood from the local distillery as home fuel – with less than 20% moisture, the wood emits fewer emissions when burned.

“These targets are being set for the wellbeing of future generations – but we can’t lose sight of our current generation”

Anthony Donnelly
Money advice worker, Skye & Lochalsh CAB

Other communities told how they gather in the homes of neighbours with wood-burning stoves at times of extreme weather or power cuts, to share warming bowls of soup.

Several respondents spoke of being deterred from new-build applications by the ban proposal.

“These are people who were born and bred here, who learned the necessity of a log burner as they grew up,” Anthony says. “Denying that is going to deter young people who want to stay on the island.”



Anthony Donnelly

Disadvantaged

Nor is it just home owners who are affected.

The bureau was approached for help by a council tenant, a single mum with mental health issues. The council advised her it would be replacing her open fire and back-boiler with storage heating to meet environmental standards.

The bureau was able to intervene to strike a compromise, but the case further illustrates the disadvantages faced by people living in rural areas in the energy transition, says Anthony.

“Imposing electric storage heaters would have increased this client’s electricity bills significantly, besides leaving her unable to heat her home during a power cut,” he points out.

U-turn

In the event, the Scottish Government had a change of heart on its proposals. While fossil fuel gas and oil burners will still be banned in new homes, wood stoves and peat heating systems have been reprieved.

The bureau still felt it was important to release its report, Up in Smoke. “The promised review on this issue never happened, so the threat of a ban remains,” Anthony says.

He and colleagues see the issue as essential to the ‘just transition’ to a net-zero economy: “These targets are being set for the wellbeing of future generations – but we can’t lose sight of our current generation.”

Fuel for thought

Some responses from the Skye and Lochalsh CAB survey:

- “I have an oil boiler heating system and when power goes off or if I’ve no oil, then I have no way of keeping my home warm.”
- “I remember one New Year we had no electric, therefore no oil central heating for three full days. Luckily my parents have an open fire and a Rayburn so we were able to go there and cook and keep warm.”
- “I had planning in for new build and was impacted by the ban on log burners. Was told we weren’t allowed one. Thankfully there has been a U-turn but it did have an impact on our application.”



“People in rural areas already face higher electricity costs – this ban would see them penalised twice over”

Mo Hannah
CEO, Skye & Lochalsh CAB

Stories from the heart



How to tackle society's misperceptions about people in poverty? One CAB reached out to the next generation.

As they filed into the classroom, the team from West Dunbartonshire CAB felt some trepidation. “We were very much out of our depth,” admits CEO Joe McCormack.

He’s reflecting on his group’s first encounter with a class of 11- and 12-year-olds in Clydebank.

The aim was to spark discussion about the shame that can heighten the difficulties of young people affected by poverty – and how their friends, classmates and communities might make a positive difference.

With no experience of youth work, the team of advisers and volunteers were relying on the guidance of teachers at Saint Peter the Apostle High School.

As it turned out, their nervousness was misplaced. “The young people were so open,” Joe recalls. “Their enthusiasm was a revelation.”

The eventual outcome was an engaging set of stories, told through comic strips and videos – and a potentially lasting project to counter stigma.

Changing attitudes

Behind any person who approaches a bureau about financial hardship, there’s likely a bunch of other people affected – including children.

Peer pressures can add to the struggle faced by young people in a household that’s finding it hard to get by.

However painful, it’s an aspect that typically lies outside the influence of adviser casework. But West Dunbartonshire



Robyn Lock

volunteer Robyn Lock was keen to find a way to change attitudes.

Robyn, then a Masters student, and now leading the project’s research and development as it progresses into PhD research at Glasgow Caledonian University, was using her placement to study how poverty can affect young people.

Meeting Joe and hearing from him about local campaigns was a turning-point for her.

“In Clydebank, where deprivation is high, young people often grow up with the perception that asking for help carries stigma. This struck me as something that needed to change,” Robyn says.

Creative spark

She proposed a project to stimulate the creativity and imagination of some local young people.

The idea was taken up by Joe, alongside

colleagues from Glasgow Social Policy Project – set up to strengthen the capacity of local social policy initiatives.

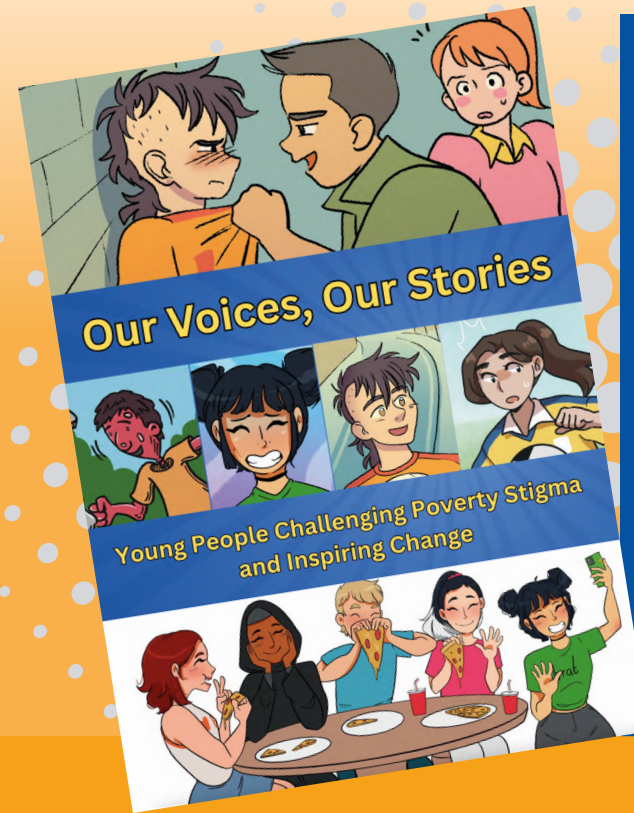
While rooted in Glasgow CABs, the project also works with bureaux beyond the city, offering guidance and supporting social policy coordinator volunteers.

That’s how Dr James Patrick Ferns, who leads the project, and his colleague Gary Wong came to join Robyn and Joe in the school workshops. Parkhead CAB volunteer Lonjezo Ngalande completed the team.

The original plan was to work with primary school pupils. However, a contact in the local education department steered the team towards first-year, secondary school students, suggesting young people at this level were more likely to be experiencing external influences and peer pressure. ▶



Young creators from Saint Peter the Apostle High School celebrated their artistic achievements at a special event - and challenged adults, including some from the network, to come up with their own cartoons about the social impacts of poverty



Comics with a message

The stories created by the first-year pupils at Saint Peter the Apostle High School are:

- George's story – When George's dad is evicted, George gets help from the food bank, but is targeted by taunts at school.
- Molly's story – Molly feels singled out when she's unable to afford a football strip to take part in the local team.
- Trouble in the family – Balloon Boy Bob's dad has addiction problems, and Bob's gran has to step in.
- School photo day – When Maya's mum loses her job, the school photo club sets up a fundraiser to help.

Read them and watch the videos at <https://www.wdcab.co.uk/ovos/>



Building stories

Linking up with teacher Greg Allan, the team began fortnightly sessions with a class assigned at random.

Robyn paved the way. Her initial workshops were designed to explore the embarrassment and stigma that can go hand-in-hand with financial hardship, and how kindness, empathy and inclusion might help.

Then the students' creativity was let loose in smaller groups, with storyboards designed to capture the narratives they came up with.

"We made it clear we didn't want anyone to discuss their own personal circumstances," says Joe. "Beyond that, we stepped back and let them create their own strong characters."

This led to some weird and wonderful results. Most of the pupils' characters were firmly based in

reality, but the boys in Joe's group came up with a protagonist named Balloon Boy Bob. Having shepherded Bob through struggles involving his alcoholic father, the boys decided his happy ending should entail being signed to play for Celtic.

It was left to comic artist Paul Bristow to suggest to them that joining the school team, and attracting the attention of a talent scout, might be a more realistic climax to Bob's story.

Young ambassadors

In collaboration with local artists, the stories were developed into published comic strips. Separate digi-comic versions were produced too, voiced by the young people themselves. A CAS grant funded the productions.

The young people clearly gained from the experience – and it doesn't stop there. The

materials for what is now called *Our Voices, Our Stories* have been adopted within the school's curriculum.

"The 20 pupils we worked with are now in their second year, and have agreed to train as ambassadors – helping to deliver sessions to the new intake of first years," says Joe.

Robyn adds: "Their honesty and clarity make them powerful advocates for change."

This work has already opened doors to national conversations, including invitations to present at the Scottish Government's mental health series, to exhibit at the Scottish Parliament, and to feature in the Poverty Alliance's Challenge Poverty Week.

Robyn has high hopes: "The ambition is for this work to shape not only local practice, but national thinking on poverty, stigma and inclusion."

Community resilience

At the network level, West Dunbartonshire CAB is creating a toolkit for other bureaux interested in doing similar work with young people locally.

One side benefit has been the opportunity to present CAB services to a new generation.

"In one of our most poignant discussions, the young people were saying they wouldn't know who to ask for help," says Joe.

"We spoke about community resilience – not just about CABs, but the support available everywhere from food banks to mental health, employment services and addiction services."

The CAB team is thrilled with what the young people have achieved with their support.

"We somehow stumbled from success to success," says Joe. "It's been one of the most enjoyable experiences of my career."

Advice, insight, people

CAS has spelled out how it aims to work with CABs over the next 5 years.



The typical organisational strategy is brick-sized and thick with management-speak. The new CAS strategy breaks the mould.

In a crisp 12 pages, the document focuses on the fundamentals. Developed with CABs' input, it sets out CAS's vision up to 2030 in three key areas – advice, insight and people.

Those three priorities also form the theme of the annual network conference early in November, where the strategy will be officially launched.

Advice

The strategy highlights the unique nature of the network's "people-centred, interconnected, wraparound" advice.

It promises CAS will go on adapting services to meet the changing needs of people experiencing the greatest harm.

A "determined and proactive" approach to securing funds is another priority, alongside continuing to ensure people in the network get the knowledge and skills they need.

"The strategy is a platform to cement the network's role as Scotland's leading independent advice provider, ensuring we can adapt and evolve in the years ahead."

Jonathan Watt, director leading on advice, CAS

Insight

The strategy puts a priority on making best use of the network's unique evidence base to promote policy solutions that improve people's lives.

CAS will go on building strong relationships with policymakers, while sharpening its approach to "influencing with purpose".

It will also work with the network to empower influencing at local level.

"No one else outside the public sector has this level of real-time insight and evidence on issues affecting people across Scotland today. We are determined to make that count."

David Hilferty, director of impact, CAS

People

Making CAS "one of the best places to work in Scotland", and supporting the network to ensure staff and volunteers can thrive, is the strategy's third pillar.

Elements include investing in colleagues' wellbeing, strengthening network relationships, and promoting equality and diversity.

CAS also aims to build a pipeline of future leaders across the network.

"Our people priority is what marks us out as fundamentally different to other organisations. By focusing on our people, we'll enhance our reputation for trust, empathy and quality."

Anne Lavery, deputy chief executive, CAS

Digital lifeline



While some grapple with smartphone addiction, thousands of Scots face the opposite problem: digital exclusion.

People who can't afford a device or data find themselves locked out of essential services – from banking and benefit claims to job opportunities – besides the ability to simply keep in touch with loved ones.

Over the past few months, hundreds of people in this situation have been thrown a digital lifeline by their local bureaux. Eligible clients are receiving a smartphone, along with practical help to get set up.

Virgin Media O₂ is providing 1,200 refurbished phones for distribution via CABs across Scotland. Each comes with mobile data, texts and calls.

To support the process, CABs received user guides designed specifically for people who might have never used a smartphone.

Despite some challenging issues around delivery of devices and accessories, which are being addressed, the project is proving effective in supporting digitally-excluded people.

"Some CABs have already distributed all of their allocation, owing to the significant need in their communities," says Kyle Scott, of the CAS Strong Communities team, which is coordinating the project.

"We've seen cases where devices have been issued to people who have presented to the CAB as homeless, and are now in the process of starting and managing their own social housing applications.

"There is also a spread of new and repeat clients who have received a device in addition to the holistic advice they needed."

Of course, donating phones can only go so far. CAS will continue to press for more affordable products and enhanced digital skills to tackle the structural causes of digital exclusion – as well as measures to ensure public services are offered through a variety of channels.



Kyle Scott

Life-changing device

One Inverness adviser describes the impact of the phone giveaway for a homeless client who has been sleeping in a tent, lost his phone and lacked money or a bank account.

"It has made the most incredible difference. Getting the phone allows us to contact him, provides access to his Universal Credit journal and enables him to access emails.

"He had no identification, but the phone has enabled him to get a copy of his adoption certificate – which means we can now assist him in making a homeless application. It is genuinely life-changing!"

A northern journey

CAS chief executive Derek Mitchell took a tour of Highlands and Islands CABs.

Derek visited eight bureaux in September and October, meeting staff, volunteers and trustees to learn more about their operations.

“We spoke about the challenges of making ends meet in a difficult fiscal context, and the particular challenges and opportunities many rural CABs face,” Derek says.

“We discussed issues around national projects, volunteers and volunteering, training and learning,

including some issues around standards and compliance, as well as the services CABs receive from CAS.

“There were also some specific issues around external organisations where CAS have good pre-existing relationships – we will raise challenges for them and report back.

“I learned a huge amount,” Derek concludes, “and it reinforced my long-held view that our CAB services are brilliant and run by caring, compassionate and value-driven people.”

Photos show Derek Mitchell with (clockwise from top right): Michael Simpson and Jane McIntosh in Caithness; Cheryl Allan, Stephen Marshall, Michael Laing, Mabel Wallace, Jason Polley, Kirsty Cameron and Christine Donnelly in Lochaber; Peter Wardhaugh in Sutherland; Alan Prior, Alistair Rogerson, Marty McKillop, Liz Dobson, Teresa McGhie, Mo Hannah, Fiona Christie and Kathleen Paterson in Skye & Lochalsh; Alison Gunn and George Vickers in Orkney.

