

Wellbeing and Sustainable Development Bill

CAS response – February 2024



Scotland's Citizens Advice Network is an essential community service that empowers people in every corner of Scotland through our local bureaux and national services by providing free, confidential, and independent advice.

The Citizens Advice network across Scotland helped over 187,100 people in 2022-23, resulting in £142.3 million being unlocked for clients to use in their local communities. The advice we provide is life-changing and often live-saving. Moreover, we use this unique evidence base to advocate for consumers and influence long-term structural change.

Key messages

- The third sector plays a critical role in terms of supporting personal and collective wellbeing and this should be recognised in the forthcoming Bill.
- The wellbeing of people working in the sector is inextricably connected to wellbeing of the communities they support.
- Third sector organisations can play a unique role in design of systems and approaches that put wellbeing front and centre – because we understand the experiences of people who are at risk of or experiencing vulnerability and poverty.
- That same evidence base from the lived experience of those supported by the third sector will provide a different level of insight into wellbeing that cannot always be fully captured or understood via econometric measures alone.
- The forthcoming Bill cannot be viewed in isolation – at an early stage it is important to connect with related pieces of legislation such as the upcoming Community Wealth Building Bill.

The role of the Citizens Advice network towards improving wellbeing

The Citizens Advice network and the broader third sector landscape play a critical role in terms of upholding and improving personal and collective wellbeing. The benefits of advice reach far beyond the quantifiable financial gains for clients. We put people first to improve living standards and reduce poverty. Feedback from our national welfare rights and income maximisation services found that 93% of clients report improved peace of mind, while 81% of clients report improved ability to help themselves. 64% of clients report improved mental health as a result of engaging with advice services.

Broader research into clients across all Citizens Advice network services demonstrates similar outcomes:

- 70% of respondents report improved mental health and wellbeing.
- 80% of respondents report that the service helped to relieve stress.
- 91% of respondents report that the service gave them confidence to deal with their issues.

These findings underline the wider positive impacts of timely, accurate and accessible advice. The impact on clients' wellbeing has wider societal benefits, including helping to reduce the pressure health and care services. [Independent analysis](#) suggests the advice the network provides saves the NHS around £22 million per year in terms of physical and mental health spending.

Supporting those who support others

Advisers work to improve wellbeing and bring stability to the lives of people facing the most desperate and traumatic circumstances, and yet their own livelihoods are often at the mercy of short-term funding cycles. CAB managers across Scotland are all too painfully well acquainted with the annual process of issuing redundancy notices to staff as the new financial year approaches because the funding for their post is yet to come through. This can lead to scenarios where advisers find themselves helping someone with bills and debt when they face prospect of losing their own job; or CAB managers seeing demand soar without knowing whether they will have sufficient capacity even in the short to medium term.

Alongside uncertainty about funding security, the increased complexity and urgency in the advice workload creates additional pressure on CAB staff. [Research from Money Advice Scotland](#) found that the increase in demand due to the cost of living crisis harmed the wellbeing of 72% of advisers.

The wellbeing of the adviser and volunteer workforce is directly linked to the wellbeing of the community. If we want to entrench wellbeing at the heart of systems, we need to put the experience of people supporting wellbeing on the frontline on a secure and sustainable footing. That should be reflected in forthcoming Bill.

Measuring and reporting wellbeing objectives (Q13)

Macro and high-level indicators can give a partial picture of collective and personal wellbeing, but data from the Citizens Advice network and other third sector organisations can offer a different level of insight into communities across Scotland.

Moreover, this focus on wellbeing needs to be hardwired into the design of policy from the outset. Again, in this respect third sector and voluntary organisations can play a unique role in the design of systems and approaches that put wellbeing front and centre – because we know the experiences of people who are at risk of or experiencing vulnerability and poverty.

Future generations (Q17-18)

CAS supports the principle that underpins the introduction of a Future Generations Commissioner of ensuring that governments and public bodies take a longer-term perspective to policy and decision-making.

From our perspective this is particularly important in two ways:

- This should ensure a long-term and sustainable funding approach to the essential advice service provision that supports wellbeing.
- Taking a long-term lens on policy development rather than a short-term, reactive approach can also help to mitigate harms to wellbeing.

At an advice service provision level, short-term funding harms the wellbeing of clients as well as that of advisers who provide life-changing (and often life-saving) advice. Properly resourced agencies can provide more support, better training, transferable skills, and employability opportunities which collectively help to sustain individuals and local economies.

From an advocacy and influencing perspective, we see the impact of decision-making that is short-term and reactive in response to problems that are entrenched and almost intractable. A pertinent example of this is the energy crisis where time-limited interventions such as the Energy Price Guarantee provided short-term, temporary support but failed to address the structural problem of longer-term affordability – our [Winter 2023 Cost of Living Analysis](#) shows that one in five (21%) people seeking food insecurity advice needed help with energy bills.

A short-term focus on policy development harms wellbeing and sustainable development aims. We support proposals to take a longer-term view that will help meet the overarching aim of the Bill to ‘focus on future’.

Intersection with other SG priorities

Even at this early stage in the development, it is crucial to make connections between this Bill and other planned legislation such as the Community Wealth Building (CWB) Bill. The CWB approach and ethos mirrors the Citizens Advice network ethos of advocacy and providing advice to enhance citizen rights and improve wellbeing.

We hope the finalised proposals for both Bills recognises the significant contribution of the Citizens Advice network and the broader third sector in Scotland. With respect to the CWB Bill specifically, [we support the addition of sixth pillar within the Scottish Model](#) that focuses on wellbeing to reflect non-financial rights-based wealth building.