

Voice



A magazine for the Citizens Advice
Network in Scotland

SUMMER 2021

Refit, remodel, relocate

How bureaux got in shape
for a post-pandemic era

Very remote working

The advisers whose bureaux
are hundreds of miles away

Lights, camera, action

Tips on directing
campaign videos

Proving our worth

It's always nice to be valued. So the news that the network is worth £245m a year to Scotland, as calculated by economic researchers, is welcome (see page 23).

However, we all know that the real value of the network's advice is in the help it offers to clients in need. For many people, that support is priceless.

It has been in particular demand during the pandemic. And with the lifting of furlough protections, client demand will doubtless remain high through the autumn and beyond.

This edition of Voice looks at the network's response to some of the big issues raised by the impact of Covid-19 – including rising debt problems, the extra strain on Universal Credit, and the impact on volunteer pools.

Keep in touch at voice@cas.org.uk to respond to articles, suggest new ideas, or share what's going on in your area.



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Blue Skye thinking

The pandemic triggered a volunteer crisis for one bureau – but also opened up creative ways to rebuild the adviser pool.

With a strong pool of long-term, committed volunteers, the Skye & Lochalsh bureau has never needed to run a mass recruitment and training programme. But last year, all that changed.

Four volunteers were unable to go to the bureau because of their Covid-19 vulnerabilities, and felt remote working wasn't for them. At the same time, four other volunteers decided to move away from the area.

“Almost overnight, we lost the equivalent of three full-time staff,” says bureau manager, Morag Hannah. “It left us with just one generalist volunteer, and two existing trainees.

However, due to the pandemic, they couldn't come into the bureau either. It was a bit of a predicament.”

With no let-up in client contacts, bureau staff pitched in, discarding their usual specialist roles and responding to calls via their mobiles to keep the service afloat.

Meanwhile, Morag took the opportunity to apply to the new Small Grants Fund, set up by the



Morag Hannah



Skye's recruitment campaign emphasised the range of volunteer roles

CAS development committee as a way to offer a simple, swift route to project funding.

Armed with £3,000, and with an eye on retention as well as recruitment, the bureau took a creative approach to its campaign in local media.

Firstly, it promoted the full range of potential directions for advisers – for example, specialising in triage, research or training, as well as generalist advice.

And the success of remote working also provided a lightbulb moment. The bureau realised that not all of its future volunteers would necessarily need to be based in Skye & Lochalsh itself.

“Once we had got our first remote volunteer adviser up and running, the penny dropped: this could work for other people too. So we made it part of the recruitment campaign,” says Morag.

Of the seven candidates accepted onto the >

► training programme, one lives outside Skye & Lochalsh but has links to the area. Another, pre-existing volunteer is now working for the bureau from her new home elsewhere (see opposite).

“Prior to Covid-19, having a volunteer living outside our area was something we would never have thought possible or likely entertained,” Morag says.

Remote working has other benefits. In a vast rural area, it enables volunteers to avoid a round trip of up to three hours for a bureau shift. It also makes a dent in volunteer travel expenses, which were running at £10,000.

Today the Skye & Lochalsh volunteer pool looks healthier again. Five trainees have reached ATP stage 3. Meanwhile, some of the existing volunteers who initially felt remote work wasn't for them have been persuaded to give it a try, two of them in specialist roles (employment enquiries

‘Prior to Covid-19, having a volunteer living outside our area was something we would never have thought possible’

Morag Hannah, manager, Skye & Lochalsh

and social policy reporting).

Volunteers and trainees alike received thank-you gift bags from the bureau during Volunteer Week, part of Morag's continuing focus on retention.

“Most people know the network is free, confidential and independent, but one of the other principles is that we're a voluntary service,” she points out. “So it's really important our volunteers know they're valued and that we give them time and assistance when they need it – no matter where they're based.”



The long-distance trainee

Anthony Donnelly's experience as a client of the network inspired him to want to join it as a volunteer.

“In 2020 I had financial problems and phoned the national helpline,” Anthony recalls. “They handled it really well and helped me at a stressful time.”

Anthony knew the adviser who had supported him had been based at Skye & Lochalsh. So, although it's not his local area, that was the bureau he approached as a potential volunteer.

“They were very pleased to run through it with me and see if we could make it work,” says Anthony. He's now midway through his training with the bureau, answering supervised calls through Teams.

As a single dad, Anthony is keen to volunteer from home, so he was attracted by the ability to train – and ultimately, work – remotely. “It works for me, so as long as it works for the bureau too, that's great,” he says. “It's one of the very few good things to come out of the pandemic.”

Though he lives in the Central Belt, Anthony travels extensively. “My work as a landscape photographer often takes me to Skye, so I know the demographic,” he says.

And during a recent trip to Skye, he was able to visit the bureau to see the set-up and meet his session supervisor, Alan Prior, in person.

Keeping up the connection

When Sandra Dew decided to move away from her Skye home to be closer to family, she assumed that was the end of her role with the CAB at Portree.



But the bureau wasn't going to let its valued volunteer go quite so easily. Manager Morag Hannah suggested Sandra could continue her adviser work from her new base on the mainland.

"I loved the idea," says Sandra. "I enjoy the work and I would have missed it otherwise."

Sandra now serves Skye & Lochalsh clients from her daughter's home outside Glasgow. She can draw on her knowledge of her old community to ensure clients get a great service – without necessarily knowing their adviser is elsewhere.

Due to the pandemic restrictions, Sandra had already been working remotely in Kyleakin in the months before her move south. So the transition wasn't a hugely disruptive one.

"I still miss the company of the team, and being able to bounce things off people as a sounding-board if you weren't sure about something," she says.

"However, I have a phone link to Alan, the session supervisor, and I can join them all virtually for team meetings. They tell me they miss my Empire biscuits – I always used to bring cakes in on a Monday!"

Fast, flexible funding

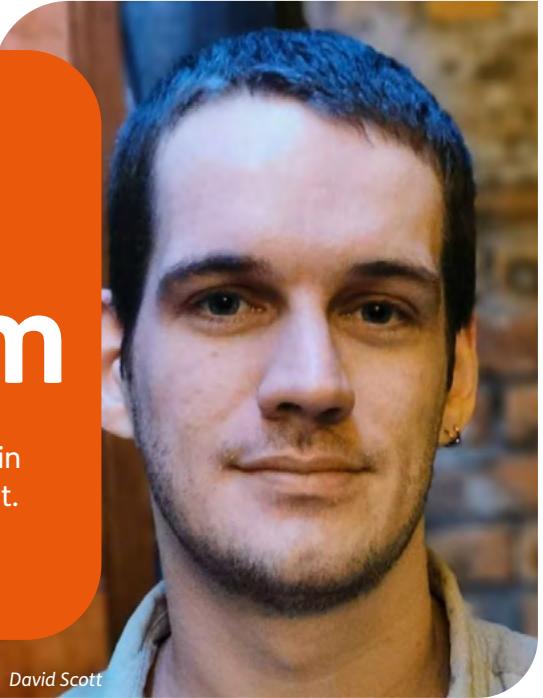
The Small Grants Fund used by Skye & Lochalsh for its volunteer campaign was designed to appeal to bureaux who don't usually seek CAS funds. Over half of the 23 grants awarded in the past six months were from bureaux that hadn't made a development committee application in the previous five years. Funding decisions are made within two to three weeks.



Find out how to apply [here](#).

Cracks in the system

Universal Credit has buckled under the strain of Covid-19 – the network has a plan to fix it.



David Scott

When the pandemic hit, thousands of Scots were forced to turn to the benefits system for the first time.

Applicants for Universal Credit (UC) soared sixfold in the space of a month. Almost half a million are still claiming today. It's been a huge test for the system – so how has it coped?

A major survey of clients by the network highlights the stress, anxiety and hardship caused by many aspects of UC design.

The complexity of the application process was a recurring issue. “The application made me feel that I had to justify me being allowed to live,” said one client. “I gave everything I was asked for, but it’s a very unfriendly website. There were no help boxes or explanations of why they needed information.”

Many were discouraged by the requirement for digital access too. “I found out that it had to be done online but I have great difficulties with that,” another client said. “I have a great problem with reading screens and I was hoping that I could do it over the phone.”

Another key sticking-point was the difficulty of contacting the DWP. With Jobcentres closed and capacity stretched, fewer than a third of clients said they were able to speak to a DWP adviser or work coach if they needed to.

The five-week wait for the first UC payment was a particular source of stress. Single clients, single parents, homeless clients, and those without a final wage were most likely to need to take out loans during that time, saddling the most vulnerable people with debt.

‘We wanted to see what can be learned from the past year, and how we can future-proof the social security system’

David Scott, policy officer

Over 600 clients across Scotland were interviewed for the study, the first of its scale and type. Their experiences have informed a series of recommendations by the network to make UC fit for purpose.

“The pandemic was a remarkable stress-test for UC,” says policy officer, David Scott. “We wanted to see what can be learned from the past year, and how we can future-proof the social security system so it will stand up better in the future.”

The findings are being released in a series of three reports. The second and third parts will be published in the autumn – one focusing on clients’ experiences of living on UC, the other on potential policy fixes.

Download the first report [here](#).

81%

of clients surveyed had never claimed UC before the pandemic

72%

of claimants found the UC application process stressful

‘We need more openness from DWP’

A view from Lewis

“On Lewis we’ve lost the likes of Peacocks and Edinburgh Woollen Mills, which were important local employers. The number of new UC claimants hasn’t dropped off – I’ve spoken to several clients recently who have lost their jobs. Our money advisers are kept very busy.

“I find some of the hardest cases are homeowners, who don’t have the potential back-up of housing benefit and face the prospect of losing their homes. The £20 uplift helped a little but could only cover a small part of most people’s outgoings.

“One of the most important improvements that could be made to UC would be introducing more openness and availability to answer questions on the part of the DWP. For instance, if a UC50 capability for work application is refused, no reasons are given, as they are in PIP refusals. That means further delays while we



Dez Cross
adviser, Lewis CAB

request a statement of reasons.

“We are relatively fortunate here because the DWP in Stornoway has stayed open throughout most of the pandemic, and we have a good working relationship with them – they’re still referring people to us.”

‘People spent all day on the phone’



Carolyn McAllister, Help to Claim adviser, Citizens Advice & Rights Fife

A view from Fife

“In Fife we’re seeing a lot of older people among the new claimants, because the pension age is creeping up and they need to claim UC rather than pension credits. They tend to have fewer digital skills, so they find it hard to manage a UC online claim.

“At one stage there were stories of people literally spending all day on the phone trying to get through to the DWP. Things have improved, but a wait of up to an hour is still common and older people often give up. That leaves them open to automatic sanctions for failing to respond to an instruction to contact the DWP.

“Clients who would normally have used Fife’s community job clubs or their local library for internet access obviously haven’t been able to do that. Our bureaux are now open for appointments, but we find it’s hard to get through an online claim in a 45-minute appointment slot, unless the client’s circumstances are very simple. The form is so long that it can take an hour and a half for a couple, or if the client’s first language isn’t English.”

36%

faced at least one problem during the application process, including problems gathering supporting evidence and dealing with UC’s digital-by-default design

29%

found it hard to get information about applying for UC before they approached the network

41%

did not find it easy to contact DWP

Agenda for change

The network is calling for improvements, including:

- better DWP information so people can understand their UC entitlements
- more non-digital access for clients, including the right to claim by phone and face-to-face
- improved channels of communication with the DWP
- recruitment of more phone staff and work coaches, especially for the withdrawal of furlough in September
- more clarity about DWP decision-making
- replacement of the five-week wait with a non-repayable assessment period grant at the beginning of all UC claims.

Refit, reshape, relocate

After the pandemic, no bureau looks quite the same. Some have used the watershed as an opportunity to transform their layout completely. Others overcame the challenges of lockdown to complete long-planned office moves. As the network reshapes itself to serve a post-pandemic society, many of these changes are set to endure...

A win for client choice



Ross & Cromarty staff and volunteers got their creative minds in gear when they were asked for ideas to make their bureaux Covid-secure.

Potential solutions included replacing windows with doors, or building gazebos as outdoor waiting-rooms.

After consultation and testing, the Alness and Dingwall offices opted for interview rooms with Perspex screens, each with a separate entrance for advisers and clients. Windows on each side allow air flow. And electronic door entry with CCTV ensures safe admission.

“We were quite digital even before lockdown, but that’s accelerated,” says CAB manager Mary MacDonald. “All our interview rooms now have digital and webcam capability as well as face-to-face.

“Clients often appear with lots of paperwork, so we’ve introduced a system where they can place it in a plastic folder on the door. The door is then closed, staff take the paper, scan it and return it.”

The digital revolution ushered in by the pandemic has been a boon for the two offices, which serve clients across an area of almost 5,000 square kilometres. For instance, clients in Gairloch dependent on public transport could only get to Dingwall on a once-weekly bus.



“Of course, clients could always have accessed us by phone, but sometimes people just want the reassurance of seeing a face,” says deputy manager, Chris Spence. “And when the issue being presented is not the main issue, it’s easier to pick that up through body language.

“The option of webcam advice actually gives us more flexibility. Before, we were restricted in the number of advisers we could have on site, so we had bottlenecks. Now, location doesn’t matter.”

That will be a lasting change, he says, even if some rooms revert to their previous purpose after pandemic restrictions ease.

“Now that we’re starting to return to more traditional means of contact, there’s no reason why we can’t continue to offer the channels we’ve been using over the past 18 months. It will be the client’s choice.”



Breathing space

The ‘race for space’ is a common term for househunters looking to expand after lockdown – but it’s equally applicable to bureaux.

West Dunbartonshire’s three offices, for example, have each knocked through walls to end up with fewer but bigger interview spaces.

“In general the rooms were big enough for social distancing – but they feel considerably more spacious now if you have a client in with partner, kids and a buggy,” says Gareth King, operations manager.

“The new layouts can look stark initially. But there’s been a generally positive response from staff and volunteers to the extra desk space and less crowded feel.”

Clydebank workers now have the bonus of their own kitchen area too – allowing people to make a quick cuppa without the scrutiny of patient clients in the waiting room.

Like many bureaux, Alexandria, Dumbarton and Clydebank won’t be resuming drop-in sessions any time soon. “Besides the health risk,



we’ve had a drop-off in volunteer numbers over the past year, because the pandemic has been a natural end point for some,” says Gareth.

However, more remote working has led to better choice for clients: “Many staff are quite happy to do more flexible hours from home. Some are now working until 6 or 7pm, so we can arrange phone appointments with people outside their working hours.”



3 weeks to quit!

When they were given notice to leave their Lochgilphead premises, the team at **Argyll & Bute** had plenty of options – in theory.

The existing office was part of an old college in Lochgilphead. But the bureau also has a satellite office in Helensburgh, and does outreach in Dunoon, Campbeltown and Oban. Any of these towns could have been a viable base for the area.

The team hadn’t anticipated the limitations of lockdown, however. “It was really difficult to look at properties or even make contact with people, let alone progress heads of terms and licences to occupy,” says Jen Broadhurst, bureau manager.

Eventually a prime site was found: a three-

storey corner unit in Lochgilphead itself. Staff and volunteers began preparations – which had to be rapidly accelerated when the CAB was given just three weeks’ notice to leave.

That meant there was still a lot of work to be done when the first staff took up occupancy, back in March. By midsummer, the signage and paintwork was done, and staff and volunteers were starting to return on a rota basis.

The offices have extra space for interview rooms, admin teams and the bureau’s Pension Wise service. The top floor, provided for a nominal rent of just £1 a year, could allow colocation with a local advocacy group.

New site, fresh image



Airdrie's quest for new bureau premises was a long and difficult one – and Covid-19 almost scuppered the move at the last minute.

The bureau's old offices, occupied for 45 of its 50 years, were rented from the local authority. The building was beautiful, but run-down and cramped. "Some people were literally working in cupboards," says chief executive, Vince McKeown.

There were many vacant units in the town. But nothing proved suitable and affordable. A hope of space in the old Airdrie Savings Bank headquarters after the bank's demise was dashed when plans for the building changed.

Then an opportunity arose for larger premises in Stirling Street. Lengthy negotiations ensued with the prospective landlord.

"Our previous building had a very cost-effective annual rent, so this was a major step change,"

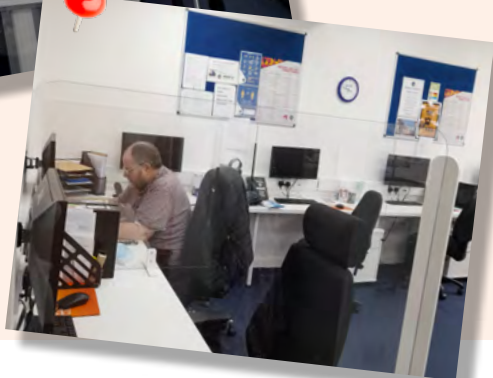


Vince says. "But there were many positives: a modern, dynamic working environment, a training room, and a better image for the organisation."

The original plan to move in April 2020 was blocked by pandemic restrictions. Unable to arrange surveyors or legal work, the bureau feared the landlord might pull the plug on the deal. Finally, as restrictions eased between lockdowns, the move went ahead in September.

"With hindsight, it's been a great move from a Covid-19 point of view. I don't think we could have operated at all in the old building; the new place is bright, airy and has better ventilation," says Vince.

"As part of our ambitions to develop and grow further, we're keen to take on more projects and develop new partnerships, and I think the new premises will be a catalyst for that."





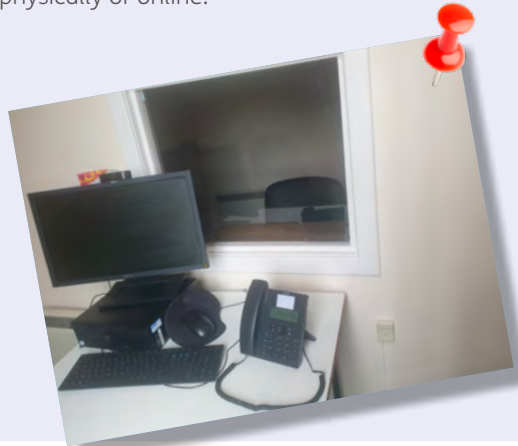
Expanded empire

To comply with social distancing in its main office, where generalist advisers work, **Coatbridge** CAB has taken on an extra unit within their business centre. This allows the team to have a dedicated adviser room, where they can work safely while dealing with phone enquiries.

Further enhancements have been made in the interviewing area. “We’ve turned four interview rooms and a waiting area into two face-to-face rooms, plus a telephone interview space,” says bureau manager, Marian Tobin.

“We had to knock holes in walls and put up screens between the interview rooms, since we could no longer use one room for both clients and staff. We used Covid-19 funding to buy new furniture, webcams and screens, which was a great help.”

The extended layout will be a permanent arrangement: “Now that we’ve gone down this road, it’s a far better working environment. With the new webcams in place, it shouldn’t reduce our ability to see clients face-to-face, whether physically or online.”



Downsized, upgraded

It was unwelcome news for the **Grangemouth** bureau when Falkirk Council decided to knock down the former customs and excise building, where the CAB had been located for over 25 years.

But the council offered alternative central accommodation a short walk away, within the York Arcade shopping centre. After work to combine two units into one, the move took place in July.

“It’s a downsize for us, although that’s not too much of a problem because our previous offices were pretty large,” says Bill Palombo, Grangemouth manager. “We do have a few storage issues though, especially since they built a boiler in one of the store rooms!”

“When we originally planned the move, we thought we really needed to have a fourth interview room. But we’ve stuck to three rooms,

on the basis that Covid-19 has changed the way we deliver our services for the long term, increasing access by telephone, e-mail and video call. Face-to face-interviews will still be crucially important, but we will be doing less.

“It’s shaped up nicely. And our new location has a much higher footfall, as it’s opposite the post office and council hub, so it won’t take long for people to know we’re there.”



At last -

foundations for the future

One morning in July, concrete was poured to create the foundations for **Nairn's** new bureau office. For staff and volunteers, it was the first tangible result of more than 10 years of effort.

"People have worked so hard, sitting out in wet fields on Saturday afternoons to raise a few bob," says manager Gill Maclean.

Despite the help and goodwill of the wider community, there had been a few false starts.

Highland Council initially approved a community asset transfer to the bureau of an old social work building, for the bargain price of £1. But after gaining planning permission and drawing up conversion plans, staff were hit with a bombshell: the cost would be £1.5m, well over twice the original estimate.

With that plan in tatters, the council suggested an alternative. It wanted to build flats for social rent on a neighbouring town centre site; the bureau could buy the ground floor of the development as a purpose-built office.

Drawing on its own hard-earned pot of £300,000, together with funding from CAS and the Davidson Trust, Nairn was able to sign up to this plan – and dream of an alternative to their existing cramped offices.



An artist's image of the Nairn building, with flats above the bureau offices

"The new building will have seven interview rooms," says Gill. "There will be a community digital hub, staffed by volunteers, where people can come and do online activity such as benefits applications. We'll be able to host information sessions on different topics and allow people to join remotely.

"The architect appointed by the council has been brilliant at helping us make the best use of space. And Highlands and Islands Enterprise have donated time from one of their facilities managers to plan an acoustically-friendly open-plan office.

"The site will include a bike rack and charging points for electric cars. And it will be cheap to heat, with the same domestic-standard insulation as the flats above."

Volunteers and staff are looking forward to moving in to King Street in June 2022. Meanwhile, there's no let-up in the fundraising efforts. Together with family and friends from the local Rotary club, the bureau took part in this year's Kiltwalk to raise £15,000 towards the digital hub.



Above: Nairn staff, volunteers and friends raise funds towards the new offices.

Right: work starts on site





Closer **contact**

A new platform is widening the options for hassle-free video interviews with clients.

For clients and advisers alike, the severing of face-to-face contact was one of the most frustrating effects of the pandemic.

Teams and Zoom were quickly embraced. But now there's another option, in the form of Near Me – a video appointment and consultation service already widely used by the NHS.

The tool offers several advantages. It's GDPR-compliant: chat messaging on Near Me leaves no footprint. It's also easy to use, with no requirement for clients to have an account or download an app. It's available free to bureaux until March 2022. Visit the website to find out more.

Near Me is now offering a real sense of face-to-face delivery for advisers in several areas, including Airdrie, which was one of 11 bureaux involved in a pilot.

Body language

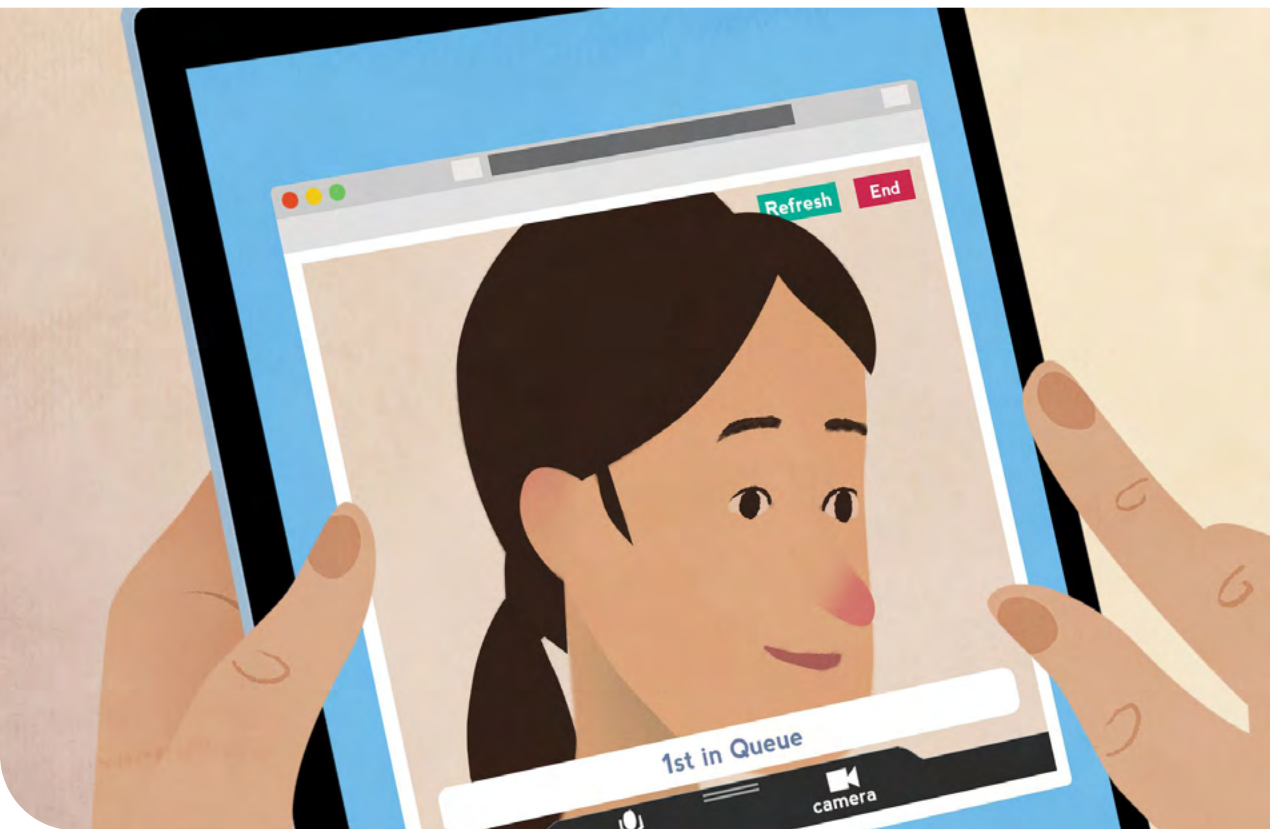
"The chance to see the client's body language is sometimes invaluable," says Evelyn Anderson, business and development manager at Airdrie. "Near Me is also a good substitute for home visits, because you can see the client's environment."

Some are already familiar with the tool: "The clients who find it easiest to use are people with long-term health conditions, who are used to it from GP or consultant consultations."

At Falkirk, another of the pilot bureaux, two Near Me waiting-rooms are in operation: one for appointments, currently used by staff, and another for drop-ins, to be used by volunteers as they return to office working.

Some clients have been reluctant to try the new tool, says Ann Taylor, service manager at Falkirk: "But the general reaction from advisers and clients is that they're surprised how simple it is to use. In comparison with Zoom or Teams, it makes a

Find out more about [Near Me](#).



difference that we have a single link for each waiting room, so there's no chance of entering the wrong meeting by mistake."



Ann Taylor

Training tool

Near Me has a shared screen function, which has allowed Airdrie to use it to help clients complete applications for the EU Settlement Scheme, and for benefits such as Carers and Attendance Allowances.

"You can bring another person into a call, such as an interpreter or a client's family member," adds Evelyn. "That also allows it to be used as a training tool, which would be especially useful for more rural bureaux."

Clients can use Near Me from the location of their choice, such as a local library or community

'The general reaction from advisers and clients is that they're surprised how simple it is to use Near Me'

Ann Taylor, service manager, Falkirk

centre if they lack a home connection.

"Even once the bureau is fully open, we plan to keep offering Near Me. It's not the default, but it's a useful option for clients who want to use it."

By August, 31 bureaux had been set up with Near Me waiting rooms; the previous month 46 consultations took place on the platform. Kirsty Noble, CAS development officer, says: "We hope the number of CABs signed up will increase in the coming months, so the whole network can benefit from this opportunity to expand client choice." ➤

‘It was so emotional’

“Having dealt with calls by phone since lockdown, my first Near Me call was with a long-standing client who has significant mental health issues.

“I can’t tell you how emotional it was to be able to see her – it meant a lot to her as well. She felt very comfortable with Near Me and it was a great session.

“Although she lives in an area where the internet isn’t great, the connection was very stable and the sound was clear as a bell.

“It was exciting to get this platform going, and all our advisers are now on board.”

Mandy McGinley, training officer, Parkhead



How it works



Clients who express an interest in a Near Me consultation are sent a link by text or email



Using a tablet, smartphone or other device, they click on the link at their appointment time



After completing their details they are held in a private waiting room until the adviser joins the call



Waiting areas are monitored either by advisers directly or by admin staff, who can respond to calls and identify any technical issues before the adviser joins.

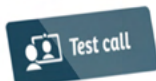
Citizens Advice Scotland:

Airdrie Citizens Advice Bureau - Appointment

Are you ready to make video calls?

Click the following button to test your device, connection,
microphone, and web camera setup.

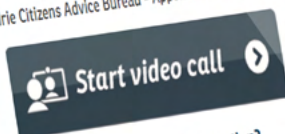
Note: This test does not actually make a call.



(Windows, Android, MacOS) Use the Google Chrome web browser
(MacOS, iOS) Use the Apple Safari web browser
(Windows only) Use the Microsoft Edge web browser

Enter the Waiting Area

Click the following button to enter the
Airdrie Citizens Advice Bureau - Appointment waiting area:



Need help or more information?

[Setup guide](#)
[Troubleshooting](#)

Target audiences

Where should the network be directing its campaigning efforts next? Bureaux have given a resounding answer.

Two clear campaigning priorities emerged from the campaigns survey carried out earlier this summer.

The end of furlough in the autumn was highlighted as a key time for people facing financial difficulties and needing increased support. This will be the focus of a campaign in September and October.

The second most cited area was support for people at risk of debt, including council tax debt, those who are newly indebted or people who have benefitted from payment deferrals. A campaign on these issues will run in February and March 2022.

Another major change as a result of the survey is to move the annual Big Energy Savings Month back to the start of the winter, and run it through the season. Over 80% of bureaux supported this

move. The campaign will now run as Big Energy Saving Winter from the end of November.

“The aim is to start discussions around saving energy and money earlier in the winter as preventative measures, rather than in January, when winter fuel anxieties may already be well under way,” says Barbara Adams, senior officer for campaigns.

More than half of bureaux were in favour of a more flexible approach to campaigning. From now on national campaigns will be spread over longer periods, with bureaux having flexibility to campaign locally at the best times for them.

CAS funding will be more generous too, with grants of £400, £1,100 and £2,400 available for bureaux supporting campaigns to different degrees.

80%

of bureaux supported three or more campaigns in the past three years

91%

found social media toolkits useful in campaigns

90%

found campaign videos useful



Making movies

Three advisers became screen stars to give human faces to their bureau's campaigning.



As Covid-19 restrictions scotched face-to-face campaigns, Jade Scott, Connor Walker and Kirsty Davies of Clackmannanshire fronted up a video in support of Big Energy Saving Month.



Jade, who has arts and photography qualifications, used her background to direct her colleagues and herself.

The biggest challenge was not technical, but getting over the inevitable self-consciousness, says Jade: "People do get nervous and forget their lines as soon as you start – I much prefer being behind the camera myself!"

The resulting video, combining personal

presentation and graphics, gained over 2,000 views on the bureau's social media channels – a big result for a small catchment area.

Clacks hope to trump their initial effort with a sequel for this year's energy campaign, which will start in November and run through the winter.

"We hope there will be face-to-face campaigning by then, but I'm keen to keep building on the social media following we've grown during the pandemic," says Jennifer Kean, management team support worker at Clacks. "Neither face-to-face nor digital campaigning will reach everyone – it has to be a hybrid from now on."

Video campaigning was among bureaux' top-rated tools for effectiveness during the pandemic, according to the campaigns survey. Also highly rated were campaign materials and toolkits, social media copy from CAS, increased digital activity and template letters to MSPs and MPs.

Tips for budding directors

Jade Scott offers some starting points for bureaux breaking into video campaigns:

- Use landscape rather than portrait format – it looks better online
- Clear any potential distractions out of your background
- Position your speaker a couple of feet from the wall, to avoid shadows
- Hold the camera at the speaker's eye level and film from the waist up
- The speaker shouldn't fidget – but they can emphasise their words with hand movements
- Use cue cards if needed, but encourage the speaker to talk naturally, as if explaining something to a friend
- Relax, have fun and set aside time for plenty of takes to get it right!



Out of court

The network is striving to take the sting out of disputes before they grow too bitter – and expensive.

An overgrown hedge. The right to cross a garden. A used car that doesn't live up to the billing.

They're the stuff of everyday disputes across the country. Most are resolved informally. But sometimes, resentment spirals, intransigence takes root and the row ends up in court.

Many bureaux strive to help clients find less formal, and cheaper, ways to settle disputes. In the Edinburgh, Livingston, Jedburgh and Selkirk areas, there's a valuable resource in the form of the mediation service run by Citizens Advice Edinburgh.

The service handles around 150 cases a year. Most are referred by in-court advisers, who, like the mediation service, are funded via the Scottish Legal Aid Board with the aim of taking strain out of the court system.

Mediation is delicate enough in normal times. After the pandemic struck, Heloise Murdoch, who coordinates the service, worried that trying to bring feuding parties to an accord via Zoom would be difficult.

'Some people can be quite stressed or angry. Part of the mediator's job is to allow them to vent and get their feelings out, but also to gain the other person's perspective'

Heloise Murdoch, Edinburgh Sheriff Court Mediation Service

"It can be harder to build a rapport online," she says. "But in fact, our success rate for reaching a settlement has remained constant, at around 75%."

It's Heloise's role to assess cases as they come in, speak to the parties involved, and assign cases to the pool of CAB volunteers who've gained the required external qualification in mediation. She then progresses casework while the mediator tries to find common ground.

"Some people can be quite stressed or angry. Part of the mediator's job is to allow

them to vent and get their feelings out, but also to gain the other person's perspective," says Heloise.

"Much of the time, people really want to save face – they want to bring an end to the dispute, but it's been going on for so long that they don't know how."

If a resolution is reached, the mediator helps the parties to write a settlement document. Heloise then monitors the case afterwards to check the agreement has been adhered to.

"One of the good things about mediation is that

there's an opportunity to bring in aspects beyond finance, like an apology or a change of behaviour," she says.

"We can write pretty much anything into the settlement that the parties want. Sometimes both have even agreed to go for a beer afterwards!"

Courtroom ally

Turning up for a court case can be a bewildering and nerve-wracking experience. That's true even in the relatively relaxed atmosphere of the 'simple procedure' court, formerly known as small claims.

It's Paul Barlow's job to help those floundering in the system to navigate their way through it.

As in-court adviser – one of 12 supported by bureaux in different parts of Scotland – he supports claimants or respondents in cases valued up to £5,000, typically involving unpaid debts.

Some clients are passed to him via bureaux in Edinburgh, where Paul is based. In other cases, the presiding sheriff will seek his involvement.

"The obvious reason is where one side has a solicitor, but the other party isn't sure what they're doing or what the purpose of the hearing is," Paul says.

"We might give legal advice on specific areas such as contract law. Or we can just offer procedural advice, showing the client how the process works and giving them an idea of how strong their case is."

In specific circumstances, Paul will represent



the client in court himself, though this is unlikely to entail any Rumpole of the Bailey-style drama: "We tend just to get involved in procedural hearings, helping the case along to the next stage."

The pandemic briefly brought work to a halt for Paul and his caseworker colleague, Emma Santry. Now the courts are back in virtual form.

"We used to have a physical presence in the court, so clients would come to us or we would approach people who might be in need," Paul says. "With online courts, that's a bit more complicated, but the sheriff will often suggest that we get involved." ➤

Patchy provision

The network is calling for better access to ‘alternative dispute resolution’ (ADR) to help people avoid court action in disputes and minor debt cases.

“Provision is quite patchy across the country – it’s often quite localised and sector-based,” says Tracey Reilly, policy manager (strong communities). “In our discussions with government we’re seeking to improve that provision and put a more preventive approach in place, allowing people to resolve disputes at an earlier stage.”



Mediation



- Scottish Mediation can provide mediators, though this is a paid service.
- Some university law schools also run services – the University of Strathclyde’s mediation clinic offers free access, for example – but there is inconsistent coverage across the country.
- Mediation is also offered by some family law firms.
- Housing associations often provide mediation services to resolve tenancy disputes.

Conciliation



- Many trade bodies run their own conciliation schemes for consumer disputes.
- There are also free Ombudsman services for consumers who have been through the trader’s complaints system.
- For employment disputes, ACAS provides a conciliation service.

Arbitration



- A legally binding decision about complaints or disputes can be made using an arbitrator. Independent arbitration arranged via the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators is a fee-based service.

Our value in the pandemic

£24.9m

Estimated value of the network's advice to Scottish society in the second quarter of 2020 (April to June)

542

Jobs supported over the same three-month period

£12.6m

Wage income supported

Our value to Scotland



£245m

Estimated worth of the network to Scottish society in 2019/20



£97m

Estimated economic impact of the network's support across 10 advice areas in 2019/20



£148m

Impact of the Citizens Advice Scotland website information



19,215 tonnes

Estimated tonnes of carbon emissions saved through the network's activities (equivalent to the annual emissions of 2,184 homes)



£15m

Savings on mental health spending

These figures are from a recent independent report by Europe Economics. It analysed the economic impact of the network's advice, looking at client financial gains as well as wider impacts such as the consequences for client health.

Princess Royal makes a flying visit

HRH The Princess Royal dropped in on the Barra bureau to give the royal seal of approval to its Castlebay premises, occupied since 2019.

Arriving by helicopter, she was welcomed in bright sunshine by pipers from Castlebay Community School, led by their tutor Donald MacDonald from Uist.

The bureau moved to the Castlebay offices in 2019, but this was the first opportunity for the royal patron of Citizens Advice to perform the official opening.

Her Royal Highness spoke with founder members and current staff of Western Isles CAS, and was interested in how the move to electronic recording has been valuable to the service during the pandemic.

HRH also found time to present awards for long service and recognition of work within WICAS. Those being honoured in person or remotely were Jeanne Christie, Elizabeth MacAtear, Jessie MacNeil, Flora Matheson, David Blaney, Ken Kennedy, Katie MacKinnon and Morag Munro.



Following the online presentations HRH was shown the bureau foodbank, before unveiling the plaque and signing the visitors' book outside in the sunshine.

Though the visit had not been publicly advertised, the Princess Royal was greeted by a small crowd, for whom the pipers continued to play while she was in the building. Photographers Tony and Dee Kearney caught her smiling broadly at something said by founder member Elizabeth MacAtear, but whatever it was remains a secret...

