



Darlington



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Budget Proposals
Communications Team
Room 106
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24th February 2016

Dear Budget Proposals Communications Team

Could I please add my feedback to be taken into consideration for the Budget proposals.

Please note, I request that this feedback is marked for the attention of Ada Burns, Bill Dixon and council officers responsible for the budgetary proposals. I will also be sending a copy to Darlington MP Jenny Chapman.

Assuring you of our best attention at all times

Regards

Dawn Gill

Dawn Gill
Advice Services Manager
Darlington Citizens Advice Bureau
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Chief Executive Neeraj Sharma

Citizens Advice Darlington is an operating name of Darlington Citizens Advice Bureau
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**Legal Aid
Agency**

Have your say – Budget cut proposals

Dawn Gill Advice Services Manager Citizens Advice Darlington

In my capacity as Advice Services Manager of Citizens Advice Darlington I wish to officially register a response to the cuts proposed to Citizens Advice Darlington, which will enforce closure within a year. Please note, I request that this feedback is marked for the attention of Ada Burns, Bill Dixon and council officers responsible for the budgetary proposals. I will also be sending a copy to Darlington MP Jenny Chapman.

Question - What will the community do without a one stop shop? It is understood that advice is available on the internet or by telephone, but the most vulnerable people in our community need face-to-face intervention, and somewhere with local connections, to ensure they don't lose their home or possessions.

Citizens Advice Darlington is where someone of any age can get advice and support to deal with financial capability, debt, housing, employment, benefits and family issues. For example, if you face redundancy, illness, or other life-changing issues, it affects income, housing, employment, benefits and the ability to manage financially, but Citizens Advice Darlington can deal with all of the issues while also helping with impact and underlying causes.

It is also a place where advice and information can be accessed via our volunteer-manned call centre and through (volunteer-delivered) access to our home visiting services for elderly housebound residents. We are the only advice organisation within Darlington that provides a multi-tiered advice provision where Gateway (Triage) staff will assess residents seeking support. If a resident has an issue which is not complex and they do not have capability needs, then they are provided with assisted information. We empower these residents to act with the information provided. Gateway support is provided face to face and over the telephone.

The loss of Citizens Advice Darlington all have a resounding effect on the community accessing help and advice at a time when Darlington Borough Council Welfare Rights have ended, housing evictions are at their highest, and welfare reforms are still impacting on the community as sanctions and loss of benefits are at their highest. It will also affect the Local Authority in regard to the collection of revenue. Citizens Advice Darlington's intervention with financial capability, income maximisation and debt advice ensures collection of council tax, rent and fines.

Closure will also impact local businesses as the bureau's volunteers maximise income via the drawdown of unclaimed benefit entitlement (key in-work and out-of-work benefit entitlement) which, when released, is spent on local goods and services, which has a value of over £4 million a year which is spent in the town. However, the true cost of benefit drawdown is likely to be much higher as we do not

have the capacity to follow through with all residents post advice to check what benefits have been forthcoming after our intervention.

Citizens Advice Darlington runs a Volunteer Centre where we have over 80 volunteers who come from varied professions in the community. The volunteers are trained to work with the public, gaining experience which not only helps support the community, but has meant that those seeking employment have gained the skills, training and experience to move into paid employment. Volunteers are trained to a high standard in advice, management, administration, IT and reception work. This – valuable service will be wiped out by the cuts as core funding from the Local Authority ensures the volunteer service. The other Project Funders who fund some of Citizens Advice Darlington's services, earmark their funding for specific projects within a community, not for core funding.

I bring your attention to the some of the future funds Darlington Borough Council states it may have available:

Financial, debt advice and welfare rights services (£50,000). Reference: Cabinet papers, Item 6, paragraph 52(k)

It states that previously Darlington Borough Council funded financial advice in Children Centres, Age UK over 50's and the CAB. The proposal is to reduce the funding but maintain one universal and accessible provider. The funding will be linked to performance indicators that support residents to maintain their homes and avoid legal actions.

May I bring to your attention that Citizens Advice Darlington is the only organisation in Darlington that gives holistic benefit, money, housing and debt advice under one roof. It is the only debt provider registered with the FCA to give free full debt advice in Darlington and it is audited for Quality of Advice on a monthly basis. It has in the past had paid advisers in Age UK, Children's Centres and local Foodbanks. Those advisers ensure holistic advice with benefit uptake, benefit appeals, financial capability, budgeting skills and debt advice/support. They ensure clients are supported to stay in their homes and avoid legal action. The reports show they have far surpassed all performance indicators as part of their DBC contracts each and every year.

Fund of £50,000 to promote public sector volunteering. Reference: Cabinet papers, Item 6, paragraph 53(t) I am unsure exactly this is? Is it a duplication of (m) community development and engagement - where it says support would continue for Darlington Cares (via PRG) which already works with local businesses and the public sector? Why would Darlington Borough Council replace Citizens Advice Darlington volunteer structure, which has been in Darlington for 75 years and trains professional volunteers from all sectors of the community to gain paid employment, just to set up another unknown venture? Any new venture would need set-up costs, structure and support to organise and network with business partners. Why not

utilize what is already there? Use Citizens Advice Darlington's knowledge and expertise in this field as part of the funding. Why would you lose a tried and tested product for an unknown that may lose money with no definitive outcomes to show the true value of the cost, in comparison to the outcomes already in place with Citizens Advice Darlington?

Professional volunteering structures are already present in the North East of England:

1. Cranfield Trust
2. Business Connectors
3. Business In the Community
4. North East Employee Volunteering
5. Community Foundation

All of the above currently provide professional volunteering schemes, so rather than allocate £50,000 resource to this stream of work, conversations should be held with the above, especially with regard to number 5, where CDCF could work with the region's other foundations with a view to replicating their success.

Currently, the professional volunteering is in the form of Organisation X's accounts team painting voluntary sector B premises. What is rare is for Organisation X to support Darlington voluntary sector organisations with business planning or marketing strategy. Indeed it would be wasteful to do so as there are other organisations that can provide the voluntary sector with this level of support (as set out in 1-5 above).

Cost free enrichment whereby businesses would have the opportunity to free up staff to take up strategic roles on voluntary sector trustee boards. Organisations such as ours have developed job descriptions and role profiles, and businesses would simply need to assess the skills of any staff member wanting to provide professional volunteering against the required skills set out within the JD and role profiles (of the relevant voluntary sector organisation).

One off investment - Voluntary Sector Development Fund of £100,000. Citizens Advice Darlington should be considered for this because it has attended outreach at local children centres to give timely holistic advice and support to families and vulnerable children. Family situations can fast become complex, impacting on all areas in their life and it also impacts on the wellbeing of the children. Citizens Advice Darlington can deal with all issues, ensuring benefits are in place and there is money for heating and food by income maximisation, budgeting, supporting family matters, financial capability training, negotiating debts and challenging benefit decisions. This ensures the families can manage going forward.

Citizens Advice Darlington is the only voluntary organisation in Darlington that deals with all aspects under one roof, to ensure continuity for the client.

Citizens Advice Darlington services should be protected. The services are an integral part of Darlington Borough Council with regard to ensuring revenue and meeting the duty to protect the vulnerable within the community.

The cuts to Citizens Advice Darlington will have a negative consequence on protected characteristics of many who are currently supported. Presently Citizens Advice Darlington strives to ensure equality for many and works hard to campaign for rights. It actively challenges discrimination in respect of: (non-exhaustive listing) age, sexuality, disability, race and religious beliefs. Citizens Advice Darlington's core values are to strive for equality, researching and campaigning for change, and we continue to refine our services to ensure that we achieve this (such as becoming a Hate Crime Reporting Centre – February 2016).

Darlington Borough Council needs to assess what it has proposed to cut and to match skills to the future funds. However, due regard needs to be applied to the establishment of new services, including set-up costs. Citizens Advice Darlington is a tried and tested service which continues to deliver and exceed targets and we are vital for the future stability and sustainability of residents within Darlington.

I empathise with Darlington Borough Council - you have difficult decisions to make. However, to cast aside the lifeline that we provide would be a critical error. Certainly the feedback from residents has left us overwhelmed, in just short of seven days we have received nearly 700 signatories asking for the services to be retained. Residents recognise the vital service that Citizens Advice Darlington provides and I implore you as a trusted funder and partner, to reconsider your proposals and ensure that residents of Darlington continue to receive the one shop advice service that Darlington's residents deserve, and Citizens Advice Darlington provides.