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# Why Australia (and the NT) needs a Citizens Advice Bureaux Network

By Rosemary Jacob

By way of introduction, a quote from the Citizen's Advice Bureaux website:

"The first Citizen's Advice Bureaux were opened in the UK at the start of World War II. The background history on the website at <http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/mac/index> includes the following information:

## Helping to solve problems since 1939

- 1935: The government is considering the need for an information service linked to the fledgling social welfare service
- 1938: When the prospect of a world war loomed, the National Council of Social Services (the forerunner of today's National Council of Voluntary Organisations), established a group to look at how to meet the needs of the civilian population in wartime. "Citizens Advice Bureaux should be established throughout the country, particularly in the large cities and industrial areas where social disorganisation may be acute."
- 3 September 1939: War declared.
- 4 September 1939: The first 200 bureaux open.
- From the start, volunteers who worked from public buildings and private houses, ran the service. Advisers dealt with problems relating to the loss of ration books, homelessness and evacuation. They also helped locate missing relatives and prisoners of war. Debt quickly became a key issue, as income had reduced due to call-ups.
- 1942: 1,074 bureaux have opened, entirely run by volunteers including converted horse boxes

parked near bombed areas.

- 1950s: Despite the success of Citizens Advice Bureaux, funding from the Ministry of Health was cut after the war, and by 1953, the number of bureaux had halved. The service continued thanks to the support of charitable trusts such as the Nuffield Foundation, Carnegie Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- 1960: Funding from the Government for the national body is restored.
- 1960s: A quarter of enquiries are related to housing; the number of bureaux had reduced from 1,074 to 416.
- 1970s: Consumer protection became a priority during the 1970s.
- 1973: A development grant from the government is given to national charity, the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux (NACAB) to extend the network.
- 2000s: Debt, housing and employment continue to be key issues that bureaux deal with, particularly in relation to asylum issues.
- 2002: Bureaux in Wales adopt a new logo – Cyngor ar Bopeth which translates as 'advice on everything'. The service receives a £20 million grant from the Government's Capital Modernisation Fund to provide IT infrastructure to roll out e-government services to CAB clients.
- 2003: Adviceguide website is made available in English, Welsh, Bengali, Chinese, Gujarati Punjabi and Urdu and visits continue to increase - extending access to CAB advice to those who cannot



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use bureaux.

- May 2004: After a 10 year campaign using evidence from CAB clients, the Government added an amendment to the Housing Bill to include a tenancy deposit scheme.
- 2006: There are 462 members of Citizens Advice Bureaux across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Each one is an independent registered charity, helping people to resolve their legal, money and other problems by providing free advice and influencing policy makers. The network still relies on over 20,000 trained volunteers to keep the service running and provides free advice from over 3,000 locations (in bureaux and at community outreach venues), as well as by phone, in people's homes and on the Internet. Visits to [www.adviceguide.org.uk](http://www.adviceguide.org.uk), the public advice website rose to 4.3 million in 2005/06 - an increase of 83%.

In Europe there are at least eight countries outside the UK listed on the website of Citizens Advice International, including New

Zealand.”

(<http://www.citizens-advice-international.org/index.html>)

Australia has several Community Service Centres under various titles which offer or give referrals for some or all of the following services:

- Legal Advice
- Financial Counselling
- Family & Personal matters
- Social & Welfare services
- Health
- Benefits, Pensions & Concessions
- Political & Civic information
- Clubs & Organization contacts
- Service & Support groups
- Tenancy for Landlords & Tenants
- Consumer Advice

One service not identified in that list, but which is undertaken in the UK, is the collection of information from Bureaux clients, to support recommendations for changes in Government policy and/or legislation.

Here in Darwin, many of these services are available, but not in one coordinated centre.

Australia does, of course, inherit a problem from its colonial foundation. Each State and Territory is responsible for its own legislation, except in those areas where the Commonwealth has exclusive responsibility. There have been moves towards unifying legislation, but this is not a guaranteed or speedy process.

This is of importance because of the need for a central body responsible for providing a database to be accessed by the CAB volunteer advisers. The link mentioned above ([www.adviceguide.org](http://www.adviceguide.org),

uk), is available to the public throughout the UK, while there is also a central database accessible only to CAB staff. Both are developed and maintained centrally – which avoids much of the duplication of effort that is necessary if a database has to be prepared for each jurisdiction. The concept of the Bureau is of a one-stop-shop, where advice in all areas can be provided. This may be in person, through the website resources, by email or by telephone.

I visited the UK last year for an extended period to catch up with relations (including the latest and probably last grandchild), friends and former fellow university students, some of whom I had not seen since 1957, others since 1973. While there, I made contact with Citizens Advice (CA) which is the central HQ for the CAB network, based in London, although, as seen in their website information quoted above, each individual CAB is responsible for raising its own funding and training its own volunteer workforce. I understand that the modules they develop for training are accredited, so that they can be credited to formal courses relevant to later paid employment.

I also visited one of the local CABs, at Leatherhead in Surrey, where I talked at some length with the Supervisor – who is a paid employee. In addition, I had email correspondence with the Learning Development Consultant with CA, Helen Kerridge, who advised me of the following:

“The training program is based on competencies, which demonstrate that advisers are competent to give advice to the required standard (both internally and externally). The full competencies are attached<sup>1</sup> but they are grouped into 5 key areas:

- Ways of working within the aims, principles, policies and procedures of the CAB service.
- Working through the

advice process with clients interviewing skills and managing the interview process.

- Working with the main enquiry areas, gaining and applying understanding of the main problems presented by clients.
- Working to influence social policy change identifying and dealing with social policy issues.
- Working to develop your own practice reaching and maintaining the competences for the role.

The certificate program is a blend of learning (self study, face-to-face courses, e-learning and reflective practice) designed to help advisers achieve these competences over time. The time that it takes advisers to complete the certificate varies greatly, but on average it is at least 18 months.

The program has five key stages (outlined in a diagram<sup>2</sup>).

1) Induction: Which is done in bureau, and usually involves bureau staff doing some sessions with new trainees and giving them self study packs to work through.

2) Understanding the Advice Process: Trainees observing interviews in bureau and developing their knowledge of subject areas and processes.

3) Simulated Practice on Training Course: Four day training course where trainees practice the stages of interviewing.

4) Starting to Interview: Once trainees are ready and have completed study on main enquiry areas, they have three observed interviews. If these are satisfactory then they can start to solo interview.

5) Additional Trainee Adviser Development: Trainee advisers continue to build up their knowledge and once they are ready, they

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demonstrate competence from working with clients.

This is a very brief overview of our certificate program.”

We are constantly reminded that we have an ageing population, but we also are living to much greater ages than did our parents and grandparents. It is very probable that we will have increasing numbers of people who no longer wish to work a full week in paid employment, but who are happy to be rostered on as an adviser, once properly trained. I have discussed this idea with a range of people, including some in government and local government and some who, like me, are moving on to other careers or occupations, after their first period of paid employment is behind them. Most have seen the concept as a worthwhile, one to be pursued, but to be effective it needs to be universal, and needs much more input and effort to achieve coordination of existing services in NT centres.

The concept is not limited, obviously, to legal advice, but at least those lawyers who currently do pro bono work and/or volunteer for DCLS sessions, will have some understanding of the need to help people who cannot afford professional fees for advice. And, hopefully this article may be read by others outside the legal profession, who may feel an urge to get involved in helping such a development actually happen.

### Footnotes

1. This is too lengthy to include here, but anyone interested in reading the document can contact me on [rosemaryjacob@ozemail.com.au](mailto:rosemaryjacob@ozemail.com.au) to obtain a copy. RJ

2. As above – please contact me direct. RJ

November/December Balance - Apology

## Justice in Rural and Remote Areas

By Melanie Little SM

The Law Society apologises for the accidental omission of the footnotes from the Melanie Little SM article ‘Justice in Rural and Remote Areas’, which appeared on pages 8-9 of the Nov-Dec 2008 edition of *Balance*.

They are printed below.

1. Indulkana Court – dingo comes into court, Magistrate requests Court Orderly to take photo, client asks me, “what is he doing?”, I say the Magistrate has asked him to take a photo, he has never seen a dingo in Court before, client says “where has he been all his life?” No reply, but thinking “the leafy suburbs of Adelaide”.

2. Coober Pedy Court – defending charge, witness been waiting all day, field officer urges not to call witness after lunch (likely to be sparked up), ignored field officer’s warning, called witness, a one armed man with a three legged dog, witness stands at court door, waves to the Magistrate with his stumped arm and says “good-day your Honour, I’ve come to send Archie B to jail”. Magistrate asks “and this is YOUR witness Ms Little?” A lame “yes” is the reply.

3. In the four years I attended Papunya, there was never air-conditioning or heating in the room where Court was held. Many days in summer were extremely hot and made it difficult to work. The air-conditioner in Yuendumu was broken at times. One very cold winter’s day we worked all day in winter coats and I almost decided to convene the first ever “Beanie Court”.

4. From the Report: “The NT Emergency Response (NTER), especially the increased Police

Melanie Little SM



presence, appears to have had a flow-on effect to the justice system and the corrections system. In 2007-08, criminal listings in the Magistrates Court rose by 12 percent throughout the Territory over the previous year. There was also a 15 percent increase in listings in the Alice Springs region. Given that THEMIS stations were first established there, the Alice Springs figures may give a good indication of the overall increase. In addition, the number of circuit court days increased by 16 percent over the previous year. It is not easy to estimate what proportion of the increase in court activity is attributable to the NTER. Implementation of alcohol and drug diversionary programs has almost certainly contributed to the increase in court listings as well.

The recommendation is that: “The Board is aware the anticipated increase in prosecution of child sex offences has not occurred. Services do report rises in prosecutions of teenagers for under-age consensual sex cases and increased prosecutions by Police of traffic offence matters. The Australian and Northern Territory Governments assess the impact of additional Police and other law enforcement measures on the Northern Territory justice system, and ensure there are enough resources to handle any increased pressure, including reasonable access to court houses and other essential services”.

5. These are my views and are not intended to represent the views of other members of the Court.