

GP Outreach Project

Clackmannanshire Citizens
Advice Bureau Ltd.



The Case for a GP Outreach Service

The Citizens Advice Network across Scotland provides free, confidential and impartial advice and support to clients across the country. With the pressures of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent on-going cost of living crisis, demand for these services have never been higher. This impact has also been seen in both the Clackmannanshire and Stirling bureaus. While advisers working in these bureaus go above and beyond to support clients, both localities face specific challenges which can make reaching some residents more difficult. Both Clackmannanshire and Stirling have a mix of rural and urban areas, with the bureaus both being in the town centres. Rural locations can often have unreliable and inconsistent transport links, and with many clients the bureaus see having disabilities that may mean they are unable to drive or not having the financial means to run a car, the main offices can become inaccessible.

Digital exclusion also presents as a barrier to certain clients. Those who cannot access a device wouldn't be able to seek advice over the phone or online. They may also lack the confidence in operating a device or simply feel more comfortable with face to face, in person support. Digitally excluded people as a result of this are also less likely to be aware of the support available to them, and even if they are more and more applications have become digital by default and they may not have the digital skill or confidence to complete this independently. In their Digital Inclusion action plan, the UK Government set out that disabled people and older people are two demographics more likely than others to be digitally excluded. Combine this with the above challenges rurality can present, and it leaves a situation where these vulnerable groups are left unable to access the support they need and are entitled to. In our current economic climate, it is more important than ever that people are able to access the economic support they are entitled to.

There is also an element of stigma that some may feel about attending the main bureau. Many may not want to be seen to be struggling, and would worry about being spotted attending the bureau for advice. There is also an issue of pride, which can especially be seen in older people, about wanting to be independent and supporting themselves which makes them reluctant to reach out for support even when they really need it.

In order to effectively tackle these barriers, outreach services can be a lifeline. Situated in the heart of communities, in areas which people would already frequent, these outreach services can be more accessible and less intimidating to people that may need them. For these reasons, GP surgeries can offer the perfect location for outreach support. The demand for this is already evident from the pre-existing service in Clackmannanshire operated out of the Tullibody Health Centre and Alva Medical Practice one day a week, offering appointments and drop-on advice to all. In the reporting year of 2024-25, the service saw 87 clients and offered support on a wide range of areas, predominantly benefits, utilities and debt. This advice generated a client financial gain of £99,769.32, a sum of money which can be absolutely life changing.

In a survey carried out by Clackmannanshire bureau, respondents who had accessed the service noted they experienced improved mental health and wellbeing, reduced stress and an improvement in the knowledge of their entitlements. The positive impacts this will have on the clients that have used the service cannot be understated, highlighting the importance of this service.

The Benefits of a GP Outreach Service

There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that when medical practitioners refer patients for advice on non-medical interventions, there are significant and quantifiable benefits to not only patients but to medical practitioners as well. Co-location of advice workers within GP surgeries leads to greater uptake of advice and support services. With advisers being able to offer advice and support which addresses the underlying causes of stress and related health issues, such as financial, debt and housing concerns, this can result in improved health outcomes and in turn reduced pressure on GP practices.

There are a wide range of benefits to patients that utilise on site advice services. A key benefit is reduced stress, anxiety and depression. Similarly, they also note an improvement in their health as a result of increased income through benefit take-up and welfare rights support, allowing them to look after themselves more effectively by being able to afford essentials such as healthy food and heating. In turn, reduced health inequalities and social determinants of health have also been noted through similar programs.

In Edinburgh and Dundee, 95% of service users sampled felt their self-worth had increased through feeling less stigmatised. The ability for medical practitioners to refer patients to advisers also allows for earlier intervention in crisis situations, meaning that detrimental impacts on the patient can be prevented. Furthermore, as outlined in the previous section, there are a number of factors that may prevent a person from accessing their local bureau or from feeling confident in doing so.

Accessibility can be restricted by age, disability, poverty, transport and psychological barriers. By basing an outreach service in GP practices they can be easily accessed and if a medical practitioner identifies an issue, they can refer the person meaning that lack of knowledge of their rights and entitlements do not present a barrier to accessing the support they are entitled to. This may also increase comfort in using the service as it is based in an accessible and convenient location which is local and familiar to them. Service users also felt that their concerns about stigmatisation were eased by the fact the service was recommended by a health professional.

Patients aren't the only ones who benefit, with benefits to medical practitioners and practices also being reported. A clear benefit to both practitioners and practices is a reduced work load. There is an estimated 15% reduction in GP's time spent on benefit issues and around a 20% reduction in hospital admissions when advice services are co-located within the practice. Similarly staff are able to better utilise their time and focus on clinical interventions, with advice workers being able to aid with social and welfare interventions. With interventions from advisers addressing some of the root causes of certain health issues, practices also see a reduction in repeat appointments and prescriptions. These benefits collectively reduce demand on medical practices and their staff, resulting in practitioners reporting higher job satisfaction.

An economic benefit has also been identified by co-located advice services. For example, in Edinburgh and Dundee, where an advice worker was employed to work within a medical practice, it was found that every £1 invested would generate £39 of social and economic benefits. In a similar scheme ran in Rotherham, it was found that the social return on investment was an estimated £50 for every £1 invested.

While other schemes have operated, there is an undeniable benefit to this scheme being operated via the CAB network. Both the local bureau in Stirling and Clackmannanshire are trusted bodies in their areas. Both already offer outreach services in rural areas, with Stirling CAB having an established advice network throughout rural libraries including Killin, Balfron, Strathblane and Callander. Similarly, Clackmannanshire offers outreach services in Tullibody, Dollar and Alva. Both Stirling and Clackmannanshire bureau also have significant experience of localised social prescribing and advisers located in practices can then refer onto specialised programmes the bureaux operate such as welfare rights advocacy, fuel poverty support, housing tribunal representation and veteran support. With the project in Clackmannanshire in Tullibody and Alva already proving highly successful, with one survey respondent saying the only thing they would like to see changed is an increase in service availability, and a space having already been offered for a similar service at the Stirling Health and Care Village, implementation of the service would be smooth and efficient. Stirling bureau also has an established addiction advice service and with Stirling experiencing a high level of drug-related hospital stays, Stirling bureau are perfectly placed to address this.

A survey was conducted with both patients and practitioners in the GP practices where Clackmannanshire bureau offers an outreach service. 17 patients and 12 practitioners in total responded to this. All respondents were aware of the outreach service available, and over half of practitioners had actively referred a patient to the outreach service. The referrals were for a range of advice areas, predominantly benefits, money advice/ debt, and housing. All of those who had made a referral stated they would do so again. This survey highlighted a range of benefits for all. Practitioners felt it saved on their time and improved their patient wellbeing. Respondents also highlighted the accessibility of the service and the convenience of the location, as well as the service being beneficial to specific demographics such as elderly people.

Patients and users of the advice service also highlighted in their responses how beneficial they found the service. Of the 11 respondents who had used the service, all of them stated that they found the service helpful. They highlighted reduced stress, improved knowledge of their entitlements, and improved mental health and wellbeing as some of the outcomes that resulted from the support provided. Nearly all of the respondents who had previously used the service also said that they would use it again. The results of this survey are undeniable, clearly showing the important benefits clients and practitioners gain.

In summary, there is an undeniable benefit to co-located advice services in GP practices. The service in Clackmannanshire, while currently only operating on a half day per location, has already proven to be highly beneficial with the client financial gain being incredibly high. It is more important than ever to ensure that all people are able to access the support that they need, with rapidly increasing costs on every essential bill, that support can be a lifeline. For those who don't know what support is available or are unable to access it, having this support based in their community and endorsed by a trusted figure such as their doctor, then we can ensure they reach this support when it is needed. Not only does this benefit clients but also the practices that see them, reducing the burden on medical practices who are already facing overwhelming pressure.

These effects have already been seen in Clackmannanshire, and based on the already established trust and partnerships that Stirling bureau has in it's community then it can be presumed similar results will be found. Advice services are a lifeline to those who are struggling and the swift roll out of this project will ensure that those who need support get it, and are supported to not only survive, but thrive.