

Citizens Advice Newcastle - Case Study

Citizens Advice Newcastle regularly has journalists knocking at its door for stories from the frontline. And it's not just the local or national media, even the UN's own investigator met its clients to understand poverty in the UK, the visit itself making international headlines.

CAN's open-door policy to the media, and "envious" position being able to employ a full-time Research and Campaigns Officer, gives it the ability to speak freely and with confidence about issues facing the local community.

Neil Duffy holds the post, funded since 2014 by Millfield House Foundation. The role is almost unheard of in other services, who usually rely on volunteers to undertake campaigning activities. It's also unusual to have funding for a local research and campaigns role, normally these are only seen at national charities.

Citizens Advice Newcastle uses the resource to great effect, combining statistics and testimony from the 12,000 clients it meets face to face every year. This strong evidence base has attracted academics, think tanks and local universities who work closely with CAN on social policy research.

"My role gives me time to speak to people and understand the underlying reason for their issues, rather than just focus on their immediate problem," explains Neil. From this analysis, he's able to notice trends in data and look at a client's overall situation, which feeds the campaigning side of his work. Recent priorities have included: challenging local universities and councils to pay the real Living Wage; improving Council Tax collection and campaigning for changes to Universal Credit.

The organisation has "a bit of a scary reputation" according to Shona Alexander, Chief Executive, which she says works in its favour when it comes to local businesses. Virgin Money, a major employer in the city, was recently challenged by CAN, in partnership with Tyne and Wear Citizen's, to pay the real Living Wage. Thanks to this successful campaign, 500 local people got a pay rise.

CAN's has also built a reputation as a critical friend. The local Job Centre, Department for Work and Pensions and NHS all now use the service to try out new IT systems and processes with clients and staff. Shona says "They know they can trust us to be honest yet critical. They're not the enemy, we want to help them develop policy better. We can feedback to them quickly when things are going wrong at a local level and get it fixed, thanks to our evidence-based approach."

There has been a ripple effect to other Citizens Advice offices too; inspired by Neil's work, they have started to do more of their own campaigning, with his support. Other offices around the country are looking at CAN's model and using its success as evidence in their own funding bids.

The stability of long-term funding and encouragement from Millfield House Foundation has allowed CAN to take risks and not play it safe. The "hands-on" funder organises regular network meetings of the six charities it funds, to share experiences of 'what works' in campaigning on policy issues. It is unique in its approach of only funding local policy work with a focus on poverty and inequality.

Shona believes CAN's campaigns have a distinct and authentic voice, coming straight from the frontline, which can get lost in national work. But cautions other funders:

"Campaigning on social issues is not something you can dabble in; it needs a long-term commitment with often two to three years of work before you see results. Nor can it be watered down. If you'd spread this same resource across ten local Citizens Advice offices, nothing would happen. You need a concentrated effort, recognising as funders you can't do everything, so do this one thing well."