

Our vision is  
a fair society  
for all, with  
lives well lived

Citizens Advice Gateshead  
STRATEGIC PLAN 2019-22  
Executive Summary



## A message from our Chief Executive

Citizens Advice is a whole population service. This means whatever your circumstances, whether you are rich or poor, and no matter what your problem, we can help you – everything from checking your benefit entitlement, resolving issues with your mobile phone contract, adaptations for your home if you are infirm through to helping you to escape domestic violence. We genuinely are here for everyone. We are immensely proud of our history, of our staff and volunteers, and we are proud to serve our citizens.

No matter what you might read in the popular press, our waiting room is not full of ‘the undeserving poor’, nor is it full of families who haven’t worked for generations or asylum seekers ‘living the good life’ funded by our benefit system. In fact, 60% of everyone we help lives in a household where at least one person is in employment. The problem, often, is the quality of their employment which can be low paid, unsustainable and in some cases made up of three or four part-time jobs. It’s exhausting and it’s difficult to manage even for the most skilled employee.

There are 14 million people living in poverty in our country<sup>1</sup>, 8 million of whom are working age adults, 4 million are children and 1.9 million are pensioners. Of this number 7.7 million are said to be living in persistent poverty, meaning they have spent all or most of the last four years in poverty; 6.9 million were living in families with a disabled person. Poverty is measured by the proportion of households with an income lower than 60% of the median household income – it includes essential expenses such as childcare costs, costs associated with disability and housing.

So what does this mean for Gateshead? It means 1 in 5 Gateshead children are living in poverty. It means the life expectancy in some of our poorest wards is almost 15 years less than in our most affluent wards<sup>2</sup>. In the 21st Century, in the United Kingdom, should you really die prematurely because you have less money than your neighbour who lives just a short walk away? It also means escalating deaths from substance mis-use, an insatiable demand for food banks, charity and mental health services.

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1 Joseph Rowntree Foundation

2 Gateshead Joint Strategic Needs Assessment

Persistent poverty is not something you can “knuckle down and get over”, it is poverty for the long-haul, it gets under your skin, it kills your aspiration and it is incredibly depressing. Can you imagine not sending your daughter to school because you can’t afford sanitary protection or missing the last day of the summer term because you don’t have the money to send the teacher a gift when all the other kids will be skipping in with flowers and chocolates?

Citizens Advice Gateshead is standing strong, holding the line, calling out poverty and doing everything within our power to strive for a fair society for all, with lives well lived. Whilst we are, and always will be, an advice and information service, we recognise that problem-solving on its own isn’t enough to turn lives around; it needs more, we need to be more, ensuring we make every contact count, giving the right advice, at the right time and in the right way – bespoke to the needs of every individual, at a place to suit them and delivered in a way they can easily understand.

We recognise we need to broaden our service offer, to pull resources from across the system working collaboratively to meet our citizens’ needs and where those services don’t exist, or aren’t working, we will work hard to diversify, to fill the gap so people, more often than not, get what they need.

This 2019-22 Strategic Plan nods firmly to our roots as a free and impartial advice and information service but it also shapes our future; it demands we do more, we are more and we deliver more. It shapes the future we want for our citizens; a chance of self-fulfilment, the opportunity to meet their potential, an offer of hope and a life well lived, and we don’t think that’s too much to ask. Hopefully you will agree.



Alison Dunn, Chief Executive Officer



Citizens Advice Gateshead has been established for over 60 years and has grown into one of the biggest providers of Citizens Advice services nationally, with turnover approaching £4m and employing 150 staff and almost 100 volunteers.

## Local impact

The charity provides advice, information and in-depth casework support to over 12,000 people in Gateshead each year, handling almost 80,000 advice issues. Our skilled and dedicated team is committed to helping people to know and understand their rights and responsibilities across the full expanse of social welfare issues including housing, money and debt, welfare benefits, employment, family and health. We do this in partnership with a wide range of agencies including Gateshead Council, NewcastleGateshead Clinical Commissioning Group, Gateshead Foodbank, Wise Steps, Oasis Aquila Community Housing, Your Voice Counts, Money Advice Service and our own membership body, Citizens Advice.

We actively campaign on concerns facing the local population such as fuel and food poverty, and we provide specialist support in response to clients' individual needs and circumstances including mental health and long-term illness such as dementia and cancer.



"Honestly I don't know whether my thanks can be enough to express my gratitude for what you have done"

Our impact has been significant, improving people's lives often in immeasurable ways, but also tangibly delivering hard cash. We recorded £7.8 million of financial gains by Gateshead clients alone during 2018/19 – this is isolated to one year of gain, so the reality for cases of some ongoing benefits is that the cumulative gain is significantly greater. This is a staggering sum of money – *real money going back into the pockets of local people.*

This income is valuable both on an individual level (average £600 per person and in many cases significantly greater) and as a contribution to the local economy and the wider public system. Financial gains for clients are achieved in many ways, one example being through support with welfare benefits appeals. 85% of the appeals we supported in the past year were successful, relative to a national average of 70% according to figures released by DWP in March 2019.

We need people to know and understand their rights and responsibilities, to understand how the system works, and where the system is clearly not working we are working hard to do something about it.

## Regional and national expansion

Over the past 5 years we have extended our face to face and digital services regionally, and digital services are now also well-established nationally delivering almost half a million digital contacts a year. Services include:

- Housing duty scheme (Legal Aid Agency);
- National discrimination advice service (Civil Legal Advice);
- Direct access to social welfare support for families of children affected by long-term illness (Great North Children's Hospital Foundation);
- Specialist advice to 400,000 digital contacts a year, including the national Consumer Service (Dept of Business Energy and Industrial Strategy/ Citizens Advice); the Witness Service (Ministry of Justice/Citizens Advice); national Citizens Advice Adviceline;
- Regional Gambling Support Service (Gamble Aware/Citizens Advice).

Our objective is to build further on this expansion for two primary reasons: to mobilise our in-depth knowledge and capability to extend and deepen the scale of our impact; whilst enabling us to recover the highest proportion possible of our overheads through contract delivery in order to maximise the funds available for re-investment in local service delivery.

## Job creation

As well as the obvious benefits of our free and impartial advice and information services in removing barriers to employment for our clients, we have ourselves made a significant impact through job creation within the charity. 34 new posts have been created over the past 12 months alone, and 32% of our vacancies in the second half of 2018/19 resulted in permanent employment opportunities for our volunteers.



**"I cannot praise you enough for the volunteer opportunity you gave me and the training I received"**

## Our vision is a fair society for all, with lives well lived

As we stand today, we are a long way from a fair society for all. However we firmly believe that the enormity of the task ahead of us does not in any way justify us shrinking our ambition. When people born into poverty are cast to live a life in poverty we need to act. When inequality is increasing rather than diminishing through misguided values, policy and practice we need to act.

For too many people basic needs are lacking and self-fulfilment is impossible. Only if the system supports and enables (and doesn't stigmatise or cause hardship), only then will we have a fair society for all with lives well lived.

The Trustees of the Citizens Advice Gateshead charity, its Chief Executive, staff and volunteers, are wholly committed to focusing our charitable activities on achieving this vision.

We are also clear that we will not be able to do this on our own. This strategic plan sets out the role that we intend to play both directly and indirectly, locally and nationally, however we will also add to our own efforts by garnering the support of people and organisations that can make their own contributions, however small, towards achieving a fair society for all, with lives well lived.



BARRY TAYLOR, Chair of Trustees



**"This is our  
society, and  
society  
matters"**

## Our mission is to mobilise knowledge so the system works, it works for everyone, and it powers the changes we need to be an equal and inclusive society

At Citizens Advice Gateshead we believe that by mobilising knowledge that delivers tangible social value we can power change to move us closer to our vision for a fair society for all, with lives well lived.

Through our charitable activities we will be working to mobilise knowledge across multiple spheres of influence to power the change needed to enable a fair society for all. This means that:

- people will be informed and empowered;
- people and organisations will change unfit systems, processes and practices;
- people will use their influence to power a change in attitude across society as a whole and, most importantly, to inspire action.

## Services for society

We are also making our mark through our independent social enterprise Society Matters Community Interest Company.

We have a clear social purpose and a bold ambition to deliver innovative and vital services that will make an even bigger mark on society. Our aim is to bolster the work of the charity through mobilising knowledge in people and in the system across the North East region and nationally.

To give us a head-start, we have taken a unique and highly impactful approach to the design and delivery of social welfare training to improve the support system's knowledge and understanding of Universal Credit. The course has been independently quality endorsed by accrediting body ncf, and following successful piloting will now be launched from Autumn 2019.



## Our priorities reflect our ambitions

Grounded in our absolute commitment to the people we exist to support, and to the staff, volunteers and partners who are devoted to achieving our vision, we have defined three clear strategic priorities for the next three years.

### Help people to know and understand their social welfare rights and responsibilities so they can improve their quality of life.



We will enable people to easily access the knowledge they need.

We will shape our service around the needs of each person.

We will deliver quality, impartial advice and information.

We will know the true impact of our services on people's lives.

### Progress to a system that supports and enables people to reach their full potential - that doesn't stigmatise, cause hardship or allow anyone to fall through the net.



We will embed our voice across the wider system as an impartial and evidence-based commentator.

We will shape and influence commissioned services until they meet people's needs.

We will drive policy change to eradicate the root cause of poverty, disadvantage and inequality

We will galvanise people, individually and collectively, to be a compelling force for change.

### Be an enduring and dynamic charity that never stands still until we have a fair society for all, with lives well lived.



We will become the charity of choice full of great people who are motivated to make difference.

We will support and nurture people with the right values and the will to grow and evolve.

We will drive income through innovation and creativity, and make every pound count

We will be known as ethical and inspirational, and a leading light in the community and voluntary sector.

Our core values are fundamental to the ethos of the charity, reflecting the attitudes and behaviours we encourage, expect and praise



## Rock the system

Our mission is to mobilise knowledge so the system works and it works for everyone. We put the individual needs of our clients at the heart of everything we do every day, and actively work individually and collectively to be part of a system that has a tangible and positive impact on people's lives.

## Stand up for equality

We believe that our common humanity makes us equal in worth, dignity and rights and are striving for a fair society for all, with lives well lived. We value diversity, actively seek out and challenge discrimination and respectfully speak out as advocates for social change.

## Own it!

We strive every day to be the best that we can be, holding ourselves personally accountable, taking ownership of our actions, our achievements and our development. With our focus on efficiency and shrewd planning we take pride in making every pound count and securing the long-term health of the charity.

## Blaze the trail

We know that the status quo is not an option, so we actively embrace and power change. We challenge, come up with new ways of doing things, and are always prepared to give new ideas a go.

## Our ethical principles are fundamental to our success and feature highly in our strategic priorities

The [Charitable Ethical Principles](#) published by NCVO in 2019, following Dame Mary Marsh's recommendations, have formed the basis of our own ethical principles as we believe they perfectly capture our standpoint.

### Beneficiaries first

We work for the public benefit and put the interests of our beneficiaries at the heart of everything we do. We are driven to add value to society through our efforts, to help people, their families and whole communities.



### Integrity

Our staff, volunteers and trustees will always uphold the highest levels of institutional integrity and personal conduct. We take pride in doing things properly, in making a real difference. Of course we will sometimes get things wrong, but it is in these situations our integrity will shine through as we do our best to do the right thing, to put right our mistakes and to fully commit to those who put their trust in us to do what we do best.



### Openness

We are committed to being an organisation that has a willing and open dialogue with our donors, supporters and the general public, so they can see and understand how we work, deal with problems and spend our funds. Through continuing to strive for an increasing level of awareness and understanding within the charity we can deliver even greater transparency to those outside it.



### Right to be safe

Everyone who works with, or comes into contact with, Citizens Advice Gateshead will be treated with dignity and respect, and feel like they are in a safe and supportive environment. We have made a commitment to continually developing the knowledge and skills of our staff and volunteers, as well as the resources and knowledge they have at their disposal to heighten their ability to be safe, and offer safety to others.



## Independent endorsements

Our commitment to quality assurance and continual improvement is fundamental to our values. This is evidenced through our robust approach to delivering client services, as well as independent endorsement through quality standards and accreditations.

Quality assurance is embedded into all aspects of the charity, to maximise our effectiveness, our efficiency and the impact we have on our clients and all other stakeholders.



## Affiliated Members of Citizens Advice

At Citizens Advice Gateshead we highly value our long-established affiliated membership of the Citizens Advice network, as one of almost 300 independent charities across the UK. As a Citizens Advice member we research and campaign on behalf of our citizens, we contribute innovation and lead best practice across the network, and we draw on the extensive knowledge base and resources of the membership organisation.

We are proud to uphold the immense value of the Citizens Advice brand through our work, and are equally proud that whilst doing so we are ploughing our own furrow as a local charity with a national presence and an absolute commitment to delivering of our vision of a fair society for all, with lives well lived.



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