



**Northern
Ireland**

Citizens Advice City Centre Station Belfast	
01 MAR 2018	
JK	[Signature]
EC	

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citizensadvice.co.uk

CONFIDENTIAL

To: All Council Chief Executive Officers

28 February 2018

Dear Chief Executive

Future of Citizens Advice from 01 April 2018

I am writing to you in my capacity as Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Citizens Advice Northern Ireland Service, which currently operates in all 11 council areas helping 100,000 people each year with 300,000 problems and generating over £40 million annually for vulnerable clients. I am aware that Councils received correspondence from the Department for Communities (DfC) on 23 February stating its "ongoing support for Citizens Advice bureaux" as a "critical partner for the delivery of advice services". Unfortunately, I must share with you the concerns of the Citizens Advice Northern Ireland Board that there is a significant risk that the present trajectory for Citizens Advice that is increasingly determined by DfC will have a catastrophic impact on the future of Citizens Advice across Northern Ireland. This includes significant risk of service interruption to clients as well as risk of losing the Citizens Advice brand for Northern Ireland as whole.

Citizens Advice has a unique governance model. The organisation operates as a single overall Service, with separate constituent parts at regional and local levels.

Each has specified legally binding functions. Crucially, one cannot operate without the other. There cannot be local Citizens Advice offices without a properly resourced umbrella organisation.

As yet, we have not received confirmation of funding from DfC since 01 January nor for 2018/19. In the event that appropriate funding without arbitrary restrictions on other income is not confirmed in the near future, the Regional Trustee Board will have to consider prompt steps to fulfil its fiduciary duties including cessation of key services. This is new and dangerous territory for Northern Ireland. There is a significant risk that those consequences could include:

- **Citizens Advice brand**– local offices in your Council area would no longer be able to trade using the Citizens Advice brand; meaning a service trusted by 98% of people in Northern Ireland¹ could be lost
- **Quality Mark** – local offices' accreditation under the Citizens Advice quality mark would lapse, removing proven quality controls and undermining trust at a critical time for vulnerable clients with Universal Credit rolling out and Brexit looming
- **Client data** – to use the Citizens Advice brand license in the UK, all Citizens Advice must use a case recording system controlled by Citizens Advice. Without this case recording system local offices would not be able to create case records for new clients and existing clients left in limbo or

¹ IpsosMORI 2011



inconvenienced. Furthermore, the 9 million client records already held may have to be deleted under the regional charity's duties as data controller, creating litigation risks for local offices

- **Adviser Information System** – advisers would lose access to the AdviserNet system relied upon by advisers daily; the most advanced of its kind in the world (as all NI content is provided from the NI Regional Office) meaning advisers would be left to research problems individually leading to fewer clients helped and increased risk of inconsistency and errors
- **ICT** – staff and volunteers would lose access to all ICT hardware; staff emails; adviser diaries; effectively halting all services to clients
- **Information Security** – loss of all encryption and cyber security protection, posing major data security and GDPR compliance risks
- **BMIS/CABlink** – loss of access to Citizens Advice resources such as the online BMIS management toolkit (part of the Quality Mark)
- **Insurances** – loss of insurance cover including employers liability, public liability and professional (i.e. advice) indemnity
- **HR support** – loss of expert HR advice contract support including for ongoing issues
- **Training** - courses (mapped to Citizens Advice Quality Mark) would cease
- **Accreditation** – various passported accreditations would cease, e.g. Information Commissioner's Office, Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner, Copyright Agency, etc.
- **UK Services** – local office access to participation in UK wide Citizens Advice activities would cease

- **Public website** – Northern Ireland content (used by 473,000 people last year) would be removed from the UK public information site
- **Charity Commission** – the Charity Commission would be notified of these changes, and local offices at a minimum would need to be reconstituted with potential upheaval including new funding negotiations, new bank accounts needed, myriad compliance changes and the potential for existing bureaux to have to close and reconstitute as other entities.

Our colleagues in Citizens Advice, England & Wales, are aware of our current difficulties. Our clear understanding is that the nature of the funding challenges and threats to independent governance of Citizens Advice from DfC here mean that it would be unlikely that any alternative arrangements would be feasible, not least as the level of financial support provided by DfC is already considerably below that provided to Citizens Advice services in England, Wales or Scotland. There is therefore a high risk of the best independent advice service in the UK and Ireland, delivered through a regionally accountable organisation, being lost to Northern Ireland. I have already indicated that survey evidence demonstrates 98% of people in Northern Ireland trust Citizens Advice. In the current highly unstable political climate and with Universal Credit being rolled out and Brexit on the horizon it would, in my view, be foolish to ignore the potential consequences of such a loss.

I am aware of the distress and anxiety which the current situation is causing within our Service. I am also conscious of the significant impact on the public



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and on our clients in your Council area, should these risks be realised. I feel obliged to share this with you to give you a full understanding of the interconnectedness of Citizens Advice at local and regional levels and the potential risks to all stakeholders.

I will keep you fully informed of developments over the next period and look forward to your support. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss any of the above issues with you or your officers, should you consider that to be helpful.

Dave Wall OBE

Chairperson

Copy: Rt. Hon Karen Bradley MP, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

Citizens Advice Trustee Board

Citizens Advice Membership & Standards Committee

Local Citizens Advice Chairs

Local Citizens Advice Managers

Leo O'Reilly, Permanent Secretary, Department for Communities

Gillian Guy, Chief Executive, Citizens Advice (England and Wales)