

**Council Chief Executives
c.c. Council Community Support Officers**



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Dear Chief Executive,

You will be aware of the ongoing situation with Citizens Advice NI (CANI) regional office, the Department no longer provides funding to CANI to provide support services for Citizens Advice frontline bureau in NI. The Department has been liaising with staff from your community support divisions on this issue at meetings of the Council Liaison Group, a further meeting of this Group will be scheduled for mid – May 2018 to provide detailed information. In the meantime I want to update you on the progress being made to implement measures that will ensure local Citizens Advice bureau have ongoing support.

Over the past weeks the Department has held a number of meetings with local Citizens Advice Bureau to identify immediate contingency arrangements and longer term options for advice sector support functions. These meetings have been delivered in conjunction with colleagues from Citizens Advice England (CitA) who the Department has commissioned to ensure the Citizens Advice brand is maintained in NI and to assist in immediate contingency support. These meetings have focused on the following areas:

- Citizens Advice Brand and membership;
- Access to IT services and developing a new case recording / IT system;
- Delivering the advice strategy '*Advising, Supporting, Empowering*'; and delivering Welfare Reform initiatives.

Citizens Advice Brand and Membership

The Department has facilitated workshops with local Citizens Advice Bureaux and Citizens Advice England & Wales (CitA), extensive work and discussion has taken place and proposals are currently being developed for consideration. A further workshop to confirm details of membership and support required to meet the Citizens Advice brand is expected to be held within the coming weeks.

Access to IT services and developing a new case recording / IT system

Access to CARMA records continues to be a concern. Frontline managers have advised of the precise technical issues that need to be addressed. It was agreed at that meeting that Chairs and Trustees of local bureaux may wish to write to Citizens Advice NI asking that access to CARMA etc. remains in place.

An initial meeting of the IT working group took place on 18 April and immediate contingency proposals were discussed. The Department, CitA and local managers will act quickly with these contingency arrangements in the event that access to CARMA etc. is not available. Subsequent meetings of the IT working group will work to develop a new case recording system for the advice sector, in line with the Advice Strategy (this working group will include representatives from across the Advice Sector in NI). Work is ongoing between meetings with relevant IT specialists. The Department remains hopeful that CANI will give full access to CARMA in the coming weeks.

Delivering the advice strategy '*Advising, Supporting, Empowering*' and Delivering Welfare Reform initiatives

There are a number of Advice Strategy objectives where work is required and there are also Welfare Reform initiatives which require co-ordination across the Citizens Advice network in NI. Local Bureaux and CitA are considering how best to progress this work. The Department will then consider their proposals to deliver this work.

The Department is working closely with local Citizens Advice Bureau to put in place necessary arrangements and we will provide a level of financial support to enable managers to participate in this ongoing work. I am aware that CANI are not in a

position to provide statistical information at present and I have been advised that this is due to sick absence within the organisation, this same issue prevented provision of statistical information for a period in 2017. I will provide an update on this position to council officials at the meeting in mid- May.

Finally, I would like to thank your officials for the support and co-operation they have given to the Department over the past months, our key aim has been to ensure that there is no impact on the provision of advice to citizens and I remain confident that is the position.

Yours sincerely

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Elaine Downey".

ELAINE DOWNEY

Head of Advice Services Team, Voluntary and Community Division