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## A friend, a helper and an advisor

On the road: An archive image of the Citizens Advice Bureau from bygone days



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IT emerged 70 years ago as an emergency war service.

SOPHIE HAZAN looks back at the ever changing face of the Citizens Advice Bureau in Leeds.

WITHIN 24 hours of war being declared on September 3, 1939 a band of volunteers stepped forward in a united effort to help communities make sense of the new situation.

Whether it was finding relatives lost in the Blitz or replacing stolen ration books, there was no limit to the problems that needed fixing at grassroots level.

And so the Citizens Advice Bureau was born.

Seven decades on the Second World War might be a distant memory but the service the CAB provides is no less vital.

One of the first centres to open its doors was the Leeds branch, then run by a women's group from a terraced house opposite Leeds University.

Today the service can be found at the Westminster Buildings in New York Street, close to the Leeds Bus Station.

Dianne Lyons, centre manager, said: "Over the years things have changed but the founding principle has stayed the same.

"We offer advice, campaign for change and make a difference to the most vulnerable people in Leeds."

In the forties – when Leeds CAB moved its operation into a former gents toilets that served as its office in the grounds of Leeds Parish Church – it influenced the Government's rationing policy.

Pregnant women got extra clothing, and gardeners were given extra cheese.

Postwar Britain in the fifties saw an explosion in hire purchase and credit agreements, and the bureaux was key in the creation of consumer protection law.

Housing was the big issue of the Sixties, with the service supplying evidence of hardship after witnessing steep rate increases in the Leeds local authority area. Fast forward to today and the CAB's campaigns continue.

Nationally the bureaux is holding the Government to account on its promise to halve child poverty in Britain by 2010; demanding a fair welfare system and fighting fuel poverty in Wales.

In Leeds, the CAB recently won an award for its Hung Up campaign, which highlighted the real cost of phoning government 0800 numbers from mobile phones.

The big concern was that half of CAB clients, who are among the city's most vulnerable, do not have access to landlines, and so are hit by big bills that keep them from making often crucial phonecalls.

Inquiries that come into the bureaux now reflect current issues.

Recession has meant debt (35 per cent of all inquiries), benefits (20 to 25 per cent), employment and housing (five to seven per cent) are the main concerns of the most vulnerable people seen by the CAB in Leeds today.

Back in the Forties, volunteers were administering the Red Cross Message Scheme and helping with claims for war damage relief.

Then each inquiry had to be researched laboriously by volunteer advisers, often in the local library. In Leeds, helpers shared just one telephone.

Of course technology has to some extent made things easier for modern day CAB staff.

But there are continuing challenges. One is funding, another staffing and a third an ever increasing client demand.

Leeds CAB's five branches cost £1.4m to run.

Just less than half of that figure comes from Leeds City Council, which leaves a lot to fundraising efforts.

Ninety per cent of the total is spent on salaries – the 200 volunteers cost the service £25,000 each a year in training, travel costs and other expenses.

Government policy can cost dearly too.

The 2002/03 asylum dispersal of migrant workers has seen a continuing flow of new residents in Leeds with basic needs, including housing, employment and help with bills and benefits.

There are also extra complications such as language barriers – over the last 12 months £23,000 has been spent on interpretation fees. Most recently translators who speak Tigrini and Kurdish have been in most demand.

It is necessary but frustrating that the charity is expected to pick up the extra work without being given the extra financial support, said Dianne.

It takes cash away from the core needs, namely the cost of volunteering.

"To be in a position where more people want to volunteer than can't be trained is so frustrating," she said.

"But we are currently running a recruitment drive right now, which is exciting."

She added: "The thing for me to do now is to think about the next 70 years.

"Part of the CAB history has been about change and we have to be ready for the next big issues."

The Leeds City Centre branch has already extended its opening hours and there are plans afoot to refurbish the

dated ground-floor reception and interview area.

If you are interested in volunteering or want to find out more, email [admin@leedscab.org.uk](mailto:admin@leedscab.org.uk) or write to Volunteer Recruitment, Leeds CAB, Westminster Buildings, 31 New York Street, Leeds, LS2 7DT.

*CAB's origins in a terraced house*

**Leeds CAB opened its doors on September 4 1939 and was initially run by a women's group from a terraced house opposite Leeds University.**

**But for many years Leeds CAB was based at Kirkgate House, Church Row, which was in the grounds of Leeds Parish Church.**

**There were a collection of church buildings and CAB occupied a room that had previously been the gents's toilets.**

**The room was divided into three spaces – two for interviewing and one as a reception/waiting room.**

**By 1969 Leeds CAB had outgrown the Parish Church and relocated to St Marks House on Woodhouse Lane, opposite Leeds University.**

**The first paid member of staff was recruited as an "organiser" for the service, who was keen to tackle consumer issues.**

**It soon became apparent that the premises – although spacious – were not central enough so there was a fourth and final move to the Westminster Buildings on New York Street in the city centre in January 1975.**

**This brought a big increase in the number of people accessing the service and the number of paid staff also began to grow.**

**Initially CAB occupied half of the first floor at Westminster Buildings, which gave them space for four interviewing rooms, a tiny reception, a small waiting room and a room for the manager.**

**Back then the CAB shared the building with tailors, who worked upstairs, and a bed shop on the ground floor.**
