

Advice Services In South Ayrshire

Has the Council previously considered introducing a Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB)?

Yes. The Council has considered this option on a number of occasions, most recently [on 23 September 2015](#), when the former North Ayr Resource Centre (NARC) submitted a business case to create a CAB.

Why did the Council reject proposals to form a CAB?

The Council reviewed existing information and advice provision in South Ayrshire and determined that there were a number of internal services and externally funded partners such as NARC who delivered professional, high quality advice in a range of areas including: money advice; welfare and benefits advice and income maximisation.

In addition the council has a comprehensive network of Customer Service Centres, professional Consumer Advice services through [Trading Standards](#) and access to employability advice and programmes through our Employability and Skills team.

In light of the above and, having determined that the 2015 business case to introduce a CAB did not represent best value, the council decided to integrate NARC into council services to form the Information and Advice Hub. The Hub comprises 100% professionally trained employees. This ensures a flexible and consistent, reliable service. It should be noted that CAB operates a delivery model which comprises 75% volunteers.

When did North Ayr Resource Centre (NARC) transfer to the Council?

NARC was fully integrated into council services in April 2016. We then carried out a further review of services and customer trends to recommend the most appropriate staffing and delivery model to ensure a holistic service to customers and help address the impact of welfare reform.

Did North Ayr Resource Centre (NARC) operate as a de facto CAB?

No. NARC was fully funded by the council, operated entirely independently of CAB and staff were trained primarily by the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG)

What factors did the Council consider in developing the current Hub model?

From April 2016, we introduced modern customer case management and recording systems which enable better tracking of, and reporting on, customer trends. These provide comprehensive information on customer demand by area and enquiry type, which was previously unavailable.

Using the systems referred to above, we analysed customer trends and data to develop a more targeted delivery model for customers.

We considered the likely impact of Universal Credit (UC) and, through the council's Strategic Approach to Welfare Reform Group, we worked with Voluntary Action South Ayrshire (VASA), and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to anticipate customer need arising from welfare reform.

The DWP provided us with projected increases in enquiries arising from UC implementation. Additionally, we benchmarked with other authorities where UC implementation had begun.

We then used all of the above data to develop a new Hub staffing and delivery model.

Has the move to the current Hub model reduced staffing resources?

No. We created a staffing structure which reflected the differential workloads identified through analysis of customer data.

Has the Hub model delivered any improvements for customers?

Yes. Significant service improvements have been made since the Hub was formed, including the following:

- We introduced a more targeted approach to 'outreach' provision based on analysis of customer demand, with delivery reduced in some areas to reflect demand, but introduced or expanded in other areas where gaps in provision were identified. For example there was no outreach provision in Girvan or Maybole prior to the establishment of the Hub in 2016;
- We developed a bespoke online referral system, Signpost, which allows us to map provision across South Ayrshire and to ensure customers are referred to appropriate agencies. Signpost also allows us to analyse customer trends by enquiry type. We introduced a [Signpost directory](#) which customers and partner agencies can access to find available services in South Ayrshire and nationally;
- We revised opening hours to improve service availability to customers (the former NARC closed over lunch and on Friday afternoons). We are now available-
Monday – Thursday (08.45 – 16.45)
Friday – (08.45 - 16.00)
- We refurbished and comprehensively modernised the Hub building in Mainholm Road, Ayr (formerly NARC). The building now provides a safe and welcoming environment and is accessible for disabled customers, which was not previously the case;
- We moved outreach provision from public areas in libraries to private interview rooms within Customer Service Centres;
- We transferred Crisis Grant applications to the Hub to ensure applicants are offered more holistic advice and guidance when in crisis;

- We increased staffing flexibility and all advisors are now contracted to work across South Ayrshire, rather than having one dedicated ‘outreach’ worker which was previously the case;
- We introduced multi-skilled advisors who are professionally trained in both Welfare Rights and Money Advice. This enables a more holistic and flexible service to customers and ensures that the majority of enquiries can be dealt with by one person, rather than customers having to deal with a range of advisors;
- We significantly improved tribunal success rates;
- We now manage staff training and performance against the Scottish Legal Aid Board’s (SLAB) Scottish National Standards for Information and Advice Providers and are undergoing the process to become accredited by SLAB;
- Our approach in having fully trained, experienced advisors completing benefit applications and getting it right first time, prevents claimants from the stress of having a claim rejected, prevents them having to attend a Tribunal and also lessens the cost to public funds by reducing the number of Tribunal hearings taking place. In 17/18 we helped 80% of our customers to get their benefit applications right first time.

Does the Hub provide Tribunal representation?

Yes. We moved primarily to paper submissions in February 2017, following information from the Scottish Courts and Tribunal Service advising that written submissions were perfectly acceptable in light of the projected increase in cases.

The move had a positive impact on customers, with advisors being able to dedicate considerably more time to preparing the Tribunal appeal submission, rather than attending the Tribunal hearing where, other than in exceptional circumstances, the Advisor was not required, or indeed, permitted to speak on behalf of the customer and in effect attended as a companion.

Since moving to paper submissions, our success rate at Tribunal has increased significantly, in spite of an increase in volume, as detailed in the table below.

Tribunal Hearing Cases	Total	Won
Date April 16 - March 17	194	101 (52%)
Date April 17 - March 18	302	216 (72%)

It should be noted that advisors do accompany customers to Tribunal if they are particularly vulnerable or require more specific assistance.

Why Does the Hub operate an Appointments System?

The appointments system was introduced to ensure that customers can access the service at a convenient time for them and with all the required documentation. The introduction of the system significantly reduced waiting times, particularly in relation to outreach services. Prior to this a 'drop-in' system applied, and some customers had to wait for a significant period of time, only to be sent away to return at a later date with the required documentation.

It should be stressed that, if a customer is in crisis and presents without an appointment, we do not turn them away.

How do customers get an appointment?

Customers can get an appointment by calling 0300 123 0900, by asking at any of our Customer Service Centres or Hub building or by email: informationandadvicehub@south-ayrshire.gov.uk

What services does the Hub provide?

We provide the following services:

- Advice and information on all benefits
- Advice on Money and debt related issues, we may negotiate with creditors on your behalf
- Personal Budgeting Support
- Tribunal representation
- Income Maximisation checks/Better Off Calculations
- Food bank vouchers
- Crisis grant applications

We help customers to:

- Ensure they are claiming the right benefits
- Appeal decisions on benefit applications
- Apply for Social Fund Loans and Grants
- Maximise their benefit entitlement
- Deal with issues where they are at threat of eviction or disconnection of their fuel supply
- Deal with issues such as struggling to cope with repayments to credit cards or loans.

We also provide initial advice and signposting for a wide range of enquiry types through the Signpost Directory.

Information on the number and type of enquiries handled through Signpost can be found on our website.

Do you support customers with online Universal Credit Applications?

Yes. Customers can make an appointment with a UC digital support officer by phoning 0300 123 0900 or visiting a Customer Service Centre.

Have costs increased since the implementation of The Hub?

No. The Hub staffing arrangements released savings of £53,000.

Does the Hub offer independent and impartial Advice?

Yes. All advice given by the Hub is free and impartial and any cases relating to council services are referred to appropriate agencies. It should be noted that the former NARC was fully funded by the Council and therefore was no more independent than the Hub.

Does the Hub offer employment advice?

We do not offer employment advice but refer customers to independent advisors, such as the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS). With regards to our employees, we actively encourage them to join a Trade Union who provide this independent service.

Does the Council ensure residents can maximise their income by making them aware of relevant council tax discounts and exemptions?

Yes. There is comprehensive information on our website regarding both [discounts and exemptions](#), including the ability to apply on-line for sole occupiers. In every case where there is a change of address, we issue an enquiry form giving details of all exemptions and discounts which are available. There is also reference to sole occupier discount on the reverse of every Council Tax notice issued. Support and advice is also available at any Customer Service Centre where staff are fully trained and can offer information and guidance on how to make an application and will provide assistance to complete applications, if required.

The CAB network informs the development of social policy in both Holyrood and Westminster. What influence can the Hub or the council have in this regard?

We share best practice nationally through COSLA, Money Advice Scotland, the Improvement Service and the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG). We participate in national consultations and networks through COSLA, Money Advice Scotland, the Improvement Service, the Scottish Government, the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) and the Accountant in Bankruptcy (AIB). We are active members of Rights Advice Scotland.

CAB is a recognised brand. How do residents in South Ayrshire know where to get help?

We advertise our services in a range of ways, including through social media, web pages, leaflets, information in Customer Service Centres, Tenants' newsletters, [South Ayrshire Council Live](#), community events, schoolbag leaflets etc.

What feedback do you get from customers?

We regularly receive positive feedback from customers and carry out surveys, the results of which we publish on our website.