Welcome to Advice NI’s latest Membership Profile Report. This information reflects the workload and services provided by independent advice providers. While the statistics show the high number of people being assisted and enquiries dealt with, it is important to remember that behind each number is an individual and mindful of this case studies have also been included in order to illustrate the life-changing positive outcomes that independent advice can achieve for clients.

The number of people assisted has remained at record high levels. The evidence that services are targeted towards those in greatest need can be seen from the fact that 56% of all enquiries are social security related and a further 13% are debt related.

Workloads have remained persistently high which reflects the situation across Northern Ireland in terms of the lingering impacts of the economic downturn and the ongoing reductions in terms of social security spending. Looking to the future the prospect of Welfare Reform Bill implementation will undoubtedly increase pressure on advice services.

Advice NI ‘generalist’ advice providers are locally based at the frontline in Council areas across Northern Ireland, providing advice and support to people in need. For some organisations advice provision is their sole function; for others advice is just one element of a range of community development work. Unsurprisingly, when located in areas of need, the figures show that 84% of enquiries are either social security or debt related.

Advice NI ‘specialist’ providers focus their service on a particular subject, where comprehensive, in depth expert knowledge of a specific subject or topic defines the service provided. ‘Targeted’ providers tailor their service towards people with specific, definable needs. In terms of workload housing issues, social security benefit enquiries and debt represent the bulk of the workload.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Workload</th>
<th>Total Enquiries:</th>
<th>270,710</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Members</td>
<td>27% Benefits</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Workload</td>
<td>13% Employment</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Generalist</td>
<td>1% Disability</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workload</td>
<td>5% Other</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Specialist/Targeted</td>
<td>5% Housing</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Workload</td>
<td>1% Money/Debt</td>
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The tribunal representation workload of members again increased dramatically to another record high figure of 2,505 hearings which represents an increase of 613 or 29% in comparison to 2011; which itself had seen representation at 1,467 which was 138 or 10% higher than the previous year.

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<tr>
<th>DLA</th>
<th>ESA</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tr>
<td>860</td>
<td>812</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>2,505</td>
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Advice NI Tribunal Representation*

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Case Studies

**Vine Centre**

Client called at the Vine Centre for help with completion of ESA and DLA forms. ESA claim was successful, but DLA was not awarded. Client was assisted with appeal through referral to the Belfast Citywide Tribunal Service for representation. The Appeal was allowed and additional benefit awarded. The client was also referred for counselling initially through WAVE and then referred to Everton Complex for PTSD trauma counselling.

**Disability Action**

Two elderly sisters (both in their eighties) living together most of their lives. One sister was profoundly disabled; the other sister was the carer.

They both contacted the adviser with a housing enquiry and the adviser dealt with their specific query. The adviser also asked if they would like to have a benefit entitlement check carried out on their circumstances. It turned out that for years they should have had Severe Disability Premiums and one underlying Carers Premium payable within their respective Pension Credit awards. After prolonged correspondence and in-depth investigation, Pension Credit acknowledged the entitlements and arrears were paid amounting to £25,000.

**Ligoniel Improvement Association**

As part of the SSA Benefit Uptake programme the adviser received a referral from the Advice NI team regarding an elderly couple with potential benefit entitlement. The adviser identified that the gentleman was in receipt of DLA-high rate mobility and middle rate care and both were receiving State Retirement Pension. The adviser assisted the lady with application forms for Attendance Allowance, Pension Credit, Carers Allowance and Rates Relief. Rates relief was paid in full and they received £22 per week Pension Credit. However the lady’s Attendance Allowance application was disallowed.

The adviser appealed the decision, represented the case to appeal where the lady was awarded high rate Attendance Allowance at £17.50 per week back dated for 42 weeks. They also received back dated money amounting to £16,414.50. This made a great difference to the quality of life of this couple.
A client was awarded zero points following a medical assessment for ESA. An appeal was lodged and following the hearing the appeal was also dismissed. A Statement of Reasons was requested following the appeal decision and was subsequently withdrawn when they became aware that the client was in prison. At this point he approached the HRS prison adviser for help.

The adviser appealed the decision on the basis that the client did not need to physically present in order to be entitled to Housing Benefit. Not to accept the tribunal assessment fell outside the Commissioner’s Decision: CH/2957/2004). Following a lengthy appeal process HNI agreed to pay Housing Benefit and to reinstate the offer.

Dove House Advice Services
Client was disabled and was also a lone parent caring for her daughter who also had a disability. She was advised by the Social Worker to apply for assistance with her renewal application to take place 12 months earlier and the adviser further advised the client to appeal against the decision to be marginalised and living. The Social Security Agency refused to have the evidence from his Social Worker. The adviser prepared a submission on behalf of the client to proceed with a reassessment it was decided that he no longer entitled to ESA. The client’s Social Worker referred the client to EBIAC for assistance to appeal the decision.

North West Advice Service
A couple in their 80’s made an enquiry in relation to their rates bill. A full benefit entitlement check was carried out and assistance was provided with the Social Security Agency details of new committals to the case. Following the break-up of his marriage he began drinking heavily to cope with his depression and alcoholism. The Social Worker referred the case to an Supported Accommodation as he needed the input of a Support Worker and other staff. Jim received Supported Accommodation as he needed the input of a Support Worker and also referred to the arrangement whereby the client did not need to be physically present in order to be entitled to Housing Benefit. Not to accept the tribunal assessment fell outside the Commissioner’s Decision: CH/2957/2004).

The adviser drafted a letter challenging the decision citing that the client did not have the opportunity to explain his situation and also referred to the arrangement whereby the Prison Service reports weekly to the Social Security Agency details of new commitments to prison. A satisfactory outcome was secured for the client.

Magherafelt District Advice Service
Client was referred to the advice service by Women’s Aid following the breakdown of an abusive relationship. She had parental responsibility for 3 children and had been ejected from the marital home. The client had no income and although Women’s Aid helped her to secure accommodation she had no means of providing for herself or her children.

The adviser was able to assist the client secure entitlement to the following: Income Support; Child Benefit; Child Tax Credit; Child Maintenance; Carers Premium and Severe Disability Premium entitlements and was also advised on Pension Credit. In total, the couple’s weekly income increased by £30.25 per week.

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Ballynafeigh Community Development Association
Client sought advice as she was subject to a HMRC compliance check regarding her tax credit award. HMRC believed that they had discovered a potential undisclosed partner. The case went to an appeal hearing which found in favour of the client which resulted in a £12,000 overpayment decision being overturned.

Restorative Justice
While attending a Restorative Justice event the client was sentenced to 5 months imprisonment in order to progress to the Commissioner. At the Magherafelt District Advice Service (SENAC) client was in his 40’s and suffered from long term physical and psychological disability. Following the tribunal award the client was offered a tenancy by NIHE which he refused and the adviser drafted a letter challenging the decision to be marginalised and living. The Social Security Agency refused to have the evidence from his Social Worker. The adviser prepared a submission on behalf of the client to proceed with a reassessment it was decided that he no longer entitled to ESA. The client’s Social Worker referred the client to EBIAC for assistance to appeal the decision.

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