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Welcome to the Information Technology special!

Keeping abreast of developments in technology to enable bureaux to provide the best possible service is a key message in the Strategic Plan for 2008 – 2012 (currently in draft on CABlink). Most of you will already be using

CASE, but with mandatory use on the horizon, we thought it an opportune time to look at how the system benefits the service as a whole and how you can use it to benefit your bureau. We are also delighted to be able to feature two systems that have been developed by Halton CAB and Epsom & Ewell CAB, with support from external IT experts. Both are proving invaluable tools for streamlining processes common to most bureaux – you might have seen them being demonstrated at the Knowledge Fair if you were at this year's annual conference. If you would like further details about any of the systems featured, all the necessary contact details are included in the articles.

Online incoming referral system

Since 2005, Halton CAB has been using a bespoke online system for taking client referrals from partner agencies. The bureau developed the system because of a number of problems that resulted from the traditional paper-based procedure for taking and recording referrals.

Firstly, Halton CAB is a district structure and advisers regularly work from different sites. As each bureau location made and recorded separate paper-based records, the advisers were unable to access cases that had been recorded at the other site. Secondly, the bureau was unable to monitor allocated referrals if an adviser was unexpectedly absent. Thirdly, the bureau could not back up anecdotal evidence about the volume of referrals from specific agencies with accurate statistics, which was frustrating for the team. Finally, the bureau was keen to adhere to formal referral protocols that were being adopted by partners in the local CLSP and to collect reliable statistics to pass on to the LSC.

What did the bureau do?

The bureau recognised that an online system would alleviate many of the problems mentioned above, as it would be accessible from any location and could be used to collect useful management information, statistics and analysis. In addition, the bureau wanted a system that would allow partner agencies to make client referrals themselves.

The obstacles to introducing such a system were that the bureau neither had the funds to pay for its development, nor the necessary in-bureau knowledge to develop it

themselves. Undeterred, the bureau turned to the internet and found an organisation called IT4communities, a not-for-profit agency that matches IT professionals with volunteering opportunities in their local area.

How the system works

The bureau spent a lot of time discussing its needs with the assigned IT volunteer to ensure that both parties were clear about the other's expectations and requirements. The system was designed to match a detailed specification that the bureau and volunteer drew up and agreed at the outset of the project.

In the system, the user (referring agency) inputs several key pieces of information:

- the bureau location that is most convenient for the client
- the area of law the client's enquiry relates to
- the client's contact details
- other relevant client information.

The system then asks supplementary questions based on the area of law selected so that the bureau has as much information as possible about the client's problem. This means that it can make an informed decision about how best to progress the enquiry in the bureau. The system automatically generates a confirmation receipt which can be given to the client. The receipt includes a checklist of all the information that the client needs to bring to the bureau. Once the bureau picks up a referral, the details of the enquiry are logged on CASE and the client joins the normal advice process.

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Approximately 40 partners use the system to submit referrals to bureau, including: local authority, GP surgeries, midwives, housing associations, Age Concern, MIND, Halton Credit Union, Sure Start and local solicitors.

The referral system has a suite of management reports, which have been invaluable for collecting statistics for external agencies, such as the LSC, and for identifying any issues with the referral process in the bureau. The reports include unallocated referrals; acknowledged referrals; referral by agency; referral by area of law and many others.

The benefits of the system

The introduction of the system has brought considerable benefits. The bureau now has a structured and manageable referral procedure that relieves pressure on the waiting rooms and the telephone service. In addition, the bureau is able to manage both client and agency expectation about waiting times, as they are clearly displayed by the system during the initial referral process. The bureau also has access to a mine of useful management information about demand for advice in the local area, which can be used as evidence in funding applications or when approaching agencies about working in partnership.

The bureau shares a lot of this management information with partner agencies and other stakeholders, such as the local authority and the LSC. This naturally cements existing working relationships and provides stakeholders with information about unmet advice needs in the area,

which can influence future development plans and their own funding initiatives.

Future development

A member of the Citizens Advice IT department has spent time with Halton CAB looking at the system and identifying whether and how Citizens Advice can support it in the future. The system clearly fits within the objectives of the Access Strategy and the benefits that the bureau has enjoyed suggest that further exploration into future development would be sensible. The long-term development plans depend on the level of interest shown by other bureaux and on further investigation into how the system could interact with CASE. Hitesh Patel, manager of Halton CAB says:

“We are really keen to share this system with other bureaux. We have found it invaluable in streamlining our referral procedure and in forging closer links with local organisations. At this stage, I would be delighted to hear from any bureaux that are interested in the system and would like to learn more about it.”

Estimated initial costs are a set-up fee of £500, which includes a two-year licence. Halton CAB would host and provide support for the system so bureaux do not need any in-house IT expertise to maintain it.

To find out more go to www.online-referral-system.org.uk to see a working demonstration of the system. For further information please contact Hitesh Patel at Halton CAB, hitesh.patel@haltoncab.org.uk or 0151 257 2443.

Computerised local information system

A couple of years ago, Epsom & Ewell CAB introduced a computerised local information system that gives advisers quick access to details about local and national organisations. The system was developed by one of the bureau’s volunteers, Margaret, and her husband, Andy, who also run their own independent IT company.

Having volunteered as an adviser within the bureau, Margaret had moved into an administrative role that included maintaining the existing paper-based local information system. She soon realised that updating the paper records was a difficult and time-consuming task, which meant that it was impossible to keep all of the records up to date. In addition, the paper system was only indexed in one way, which meant that it was often hard to find things.

With the combined experience of working in the bureau and of developing IT solutions, Margaret soon realised

that a computerised system could help to iron out the problems she had identified. With agreement from the bureau management to pursue this idea, she spent time talking to members of the bureau workforce about the kind of information they would like a computerised local information system to provide and the way in which they would like to access the information.

“This is an excellent system for use in a CAB. It is very simple to use and keep up to date and the fact that it’s free of charge is a big bonus. It comes with really useful implementation notes that cover the sorts of things that you should consider before introducing any database system, such as who is to maintain it, data migration and backing up the system. The ‘help’ text is also clear and actually provides help! In Abingdon it replaced a huge number of files and bits of paper and information is now so much easier to find.”

Garry Cook, Abingdon CAB

How does the system work?

The system was developed with three main principles in mind:

1. Information should be easily accessible to the user
2. The indexing should be flexible, thus making it easier to find things
3. Data input should be kept to a minimum, i.e. if the system can link to an external website this relieves the burden of updating the information from the bureau.

Once the bureau had completed substantial user testing, the system was offered to other bureaux via the IT Forum on CABlink and Area/Wales newsletters. Further versions of the software have since been released to take into account the comments and suggestions from users all round the country. Currently, over 60 bureaux have the system.

The system works on any computer that uses the Windows operating system. It comes with comprehensive installation instructions that do not require any in-bureau IT expertise. The system can be installed on a stand-alone PC or across the bureau network – using either a server or a PC to hold the database. System updates are made on the central PC and distributed to the rest automatically.

The system also comes with a simple Excel-based program for inputting large amounts of data (typically used when setting up the system) or for migrating data from existing systems.

Once all the relevant data has been transferred on to the system, advisers search for items using an enquiry screen. Any matching items are displayed as a list, from which the adviser can select the most appropriate. Once the adviser selects an item, the system opens up a record giving full details of the organisation or agency, which can include links to websites or documents stored on the bureau network.

Full details of how the system works, including screen shots of the system, can be found on the Constructive IT Advice website – www.SeelTA.com/CAB.

“Our local information is now as accessible as AdviserNet - our advisers have direct access to it in the interview rooms. Previously we had a set of 30 ring binders to hold the local information. Since using the system, we have been able to eliminate all our paper documents except leaflets that provide supporting information. Using the system also means that advisers don't have to wait for someone to finish using one of the paper files before finding information, everyone can use the system at the same time. The key is to have people in your bureau who are responsible for maintaining the system and ensuring the information is kept up to date. I would thoroughly recommend bureaux take time to look at how this system could be used within their own bureau.”

Ann Flower, Epsom & Ewell CAB

There is also detailed information covering the installation process, good practice in implementing a local information system and a technical overview of the system. There is also an option to request a free copy of the system on CD ROM, which comes with all the material that you need to start using it in your bureau. Andy, who can be contacted via the above website, provides full technical support for the system should you encounter any problems.

Benefits of the system:

- It's free!
- Easy to install and use – backed up with comprehensive guidance and instructions
- Can hold a wealth of different types of information, including links to websites and other documents
- Items can be found using a number of different search terms
- No need for a large, paper-based system
- Does not require any additional equipment or software
- Comes with tools to help people administer the data.

Online knowledge share

After featuring the bureau-to-bureau discussion board on CABlink in the last edition, we are going to include any postings that involve the sharing of good practice in future editions. This month we have a request to set up an information-sharing group:

Jen Hall, Bureau Manager at Berwick CAB, would like to hear from anyone who is involved in working with migrant-worker clients and would be interested in setting up a discussion forum or email group. Jen says:

“We have increasing numbers [of migrant-worker clients] and have been able to secure five-year Reaching Communities' funding to assist them. I feel this is now one of the bureau's unique selling points as far as the local authority is concerned, but we spend a lot of time trying to find information in Polish, Russian and Portuguese and, I am sure, we are constantly reinventing the wheel.”

You can contact Jen on admin@berwickcab.fsnet.co.uk.

Making the most of CASE

At the October Citizens Advice Trustee Board meeting it was confirmed that, from April 2008, the use of CASE for statistical recording, for generalist advice case recording and for the submission of bureau evidence forms (BEFs) will be mandatory for all bureaux. Citizens Advice is developing an additional programme of support to enable bureaux either to start using CASE or to continue developing the way they use it.

CASE not only enables bureau advisers to securely record, find and update client information but it also provides the tools to help the service deliver its message on a national scale:

- **Electronic bureau evidence forms (e-BEFs)**

Bureaux use CASE to report issues to the Citizens Advice Social Policy team. The CASE reporting system allows both bureaux and Citizens Advice to capture trends in evidence submission, both at a local and national level. Using the Bureau Evidence Retrieval Tool (BERT) the Social Policy department are able to search the database of e-BEFs enabling them to establish trends in evidence.

- **CASE Reporting**

CASE statistics are published to a secure website known as CASE Reporting, which is only accessible to users on the Citizens Advice network. It provides instant access to basic statistics (standard reports) and a wide range of extra statistics and data listings that bureaux can request on demand (dynamic reports).

CASE compiles statistics in the same way for all bureaux, to ensure consistency across the service. Each bureau can only access its own reports. All users can also access statistics at regional and national level.

The statistics are available for the bureau as a whole (as set up on CASE) and can also be broken down into

“Once we had overcome some initial difficulties in accessing the CASE reports, we soon realised the enormous benefits in being able to provide the City Council with a detailed analysis of our bureau’s work. Without CASE, we would have had to pull this level of information together manually, often requiring clients to complete detailed forms. We save a huge amount of time and effort using the CASE Reporting system. Our trustees love having access to this level of information and now feel a lot closer to what is happening in the bureau. The reporting facility also gives us the ability to monitor case loads so that we can ensure that none of our advisers are overloaded.”

Heather Brent, Wavertree CAB

individual outlets. They are available for the financial year (by quarter) as well as by quarter (broken down by month).

Benefits of CASE:

- Provides enhanced statistical information
- Increases the effectiveness of social policy work by facilitating the creation and analysis of bureau evidence forms
- Streamlines the case recording process in bureaux
- Benefits clients, as they only have to give their details and explain their problem once
- Uses a secure system, ensuring that no one outside the CAB gains access to data.

“We record details of all financial outcomes in CASE, which we hadn’t been able to do in any systematic way before. It’s really useful information to feed back to the bureau advisers so that they can see the difference they are making. It also provides invaluable information for existing and potential funders.”

Peter Singer, Wear Valley Bureau

For further information and support in setting up or developing CASE in your bureau see CABlink > Information Technology > CASE or contact the Business Support Team on the IT service desk on 0845 602 0415 or at support@citizensadvice.org.uk.

For information regarding the Mandatory Use of CASE project go to CABlink > Information Technology > CASE > CASE Mandatory Use or contact Catherine Stephenson, Project Manager – Catherine.stephenson@citizensadvice.org.uk.

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