

SCOTTISH NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR INFORMATION AND ADVICE PROVIDERS PANEL

ANNUAL REPORT MARCH 2007

Why accreditation of quality in advice services is necessary

In research undertaken for Scottish Homes in 1997 a mystery shopping exercise discovered that the main weakness in the provision of advice was the diagnostic skills of the adviser.

Only 26% of voluntary agencies in the exercise spotted potential homelessness in the caller's case.

(Peter Gibson Associates 1997)

INTRODUCTION

In Summer 2005 I was appointed by Communities Scotland to serve as Chair of the Scottish National Standards for Information and Advice Providers Panel – known as the National Standards Panel. Along with my fellow panel members we have responsibility for

- Monitoring the accreditation process through reports from the accreditation contractor
- Recommending changes to the Standards to HomePoint following evidence from the accreditation contractor
- The final phase of the appeal process against decisions made by the accreditation contractor on the award or withholding of certificates
- Publishing an Annual Report
- Advising on the strategic direction of audit of advice agencies
- Agreeing the additions or revisions of the Panel membership

This is the National Standards Panel's first Annual Report and covers a busy year. As Chair I was involved in the final stages of appointing the accreditation service contractor on behalf of the Panel. Since that appointment we have overseen a full programme of work. In this document we report on the relaunch of the National Standards with their inclusion of money related advice and the extension of the accreditation service to agencies working in this area. We also report on the agencies that have come forward for accreditation and our plans for future years.

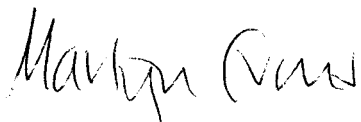
The Panel has also championed the public accountability of the accreditation service. One of our first decisions was to insist that the reports of the accreditation service on individual agencies should be publicly available – whether the agency secures accreditation or not.

The first year of the full accreditation service saw other changes as well. Charges for agencies applying for audit were introduced for the first time. Whilst the cost of audit has been kept to a minimum and Communities Scotland continues to meet half of the fee, this charge was introduced part way through the financial year and a number of agencies had not budgeted for this. This undoubtedly contributed to the slower than anticipated start to the service, but demand has picked up considerably and we are confident that the numbers seeking accreditation will continue to rise.

In some areas funders are beginning to look for accreditation in the services they fund as a guarantee of quality and in others, services themselves have identified a range of benefits for them in securing accreditation. This annual report contains evidence from both accredited agencies and funders of the benefits of both working to the Standards and the discipline of preparing for audit.

The Panel is constantly reviewing the accreditation process and we expect to see further changes in the coming year. In all of the work I am proud that the Panel has maintained its focus on consumers of services. We remain convinced that access to good quality advice and information can make a real difference to people's lives. The National Standards are a key tool to secure improvements in the quality and accessibility of information and advice services for the people of Scotland.

In signing off this first Annual Report I would like to acknowledge the hard work and commitment of my fellow Panel members and thank the team at HomePoint who have provided the secretariat to the National Standards Panel and carried forward its work between meetings.



Martyn Evans
Chair



LIST OF NATIONAL STANDARDS PANEL MEMBERS

Martyn Evans	(Chair) Scottish Consumer Council
Bethan Evans	Citizens Advice Scotland
Yvonne Gallacher	Money Advice Scotland (from November 2006)
Rob Hughes	Scottish Federation of Housing Associations
Derek O'Carroll	Advocate
Hazel Thoms	Scottish Legal Aid Board
Alison Watson	Shelter (Scotland)
Angus McIntosh	Scottish Association of Law Centres
Laura Dolan	Scottish Executive
Lynn Sweeney (Adviser)	Communities Scotland (Regulation and Inspection)
Eleanor Clark and Judi Reid	Secretariat, Communities Scotland (HomePoint)

Why accreditation of quality in advice services is necessary

Research undertaken for Money Advice Scotland in 2002 demonstrated that the most valued aspects of getting advice were friendly, non-judgemental advisers and relief from the burden of dealing with creditors. Users assumed that they had been given accurate information and advice.
(Collard and Burroughs 2002)

THE QUALITY FRAMEWORK

When the Scottish National Standards for Housing Information and Advice providers were first published in 1995 it was the result of a comprehensive piece of work by all sectors of the advice industry. Research undertaken in 1993 showed a wide disparity in the availability of advice services across Scotland and a great variance in the quality of the advice provided. HomePoint was set up within the then Scottish Homes to improve the scope and quality of advice in Scotland.

The starting point to improving quality was agreeing with the advice sector what constituted quality in advice provision and then compiling a set of National Standards. The challenge for HomePoint was compiling a set of Standards that would serve as a common quality framework for all information and advice services whether they were located in local authorities, voluntary organisations which also provided other support services, housing associations or advice agencies providing generic advice.

The Standards were revised in early 2000 to take account of feedback from providers, changes in legislation and methods of delivery. The new Standards were unique in that as well as having clear performance indicators for the effective and efficient delivery of an advice service they included comprehensive competence requirements for advisers in nineteen areas of housing law.



ACCREDITING AGENCIES

During the consultation with advice agencies which led to the revised Standards in May 2000 a gratifying number of agencies indicated that they were using the Standards as their guide to quality. However the feedback also indicated that agencies wanted credit for this, and for the resulting improved quality of their services.

HomePoint had previously considered developing accreditation for agencies and were very clear about the advantages this would bring. Users of service could have more confidence in selecting an agency of a confirmed quality, funders could be assured of getting a high quality service for their money and providers could refer cases to other agencies confident that their clients would get a quality of service equivalent to the one they provided.

So in response to the demand from the sector HomePoint was happy to develop and pilot a process by which agencies could be audited for accreditation against the Standards. Thanks to the co-operation and hard work of the eighteen agencies who participated in the pilot HomePoint were able in 2005 to invite competitive tenders for the delivery of an audit service and to award accreditation to agencies. The contract which was awarded to Michael Bell Associates in November 2005 is managed by HomePoint who are secretariat to the National Standards Panel.

During the two year pilot period the audits were free, and fourteen agencies were audited. Beyond the pilot the costs are subsidised by Communities Scotland but each agency is required to pay a share of the costs. We anticipated on average 30 applications per year from agencies seeking accreditation.

The benefits of going through the process of accreditation to agencies and users

We consider the experience of seeking accreditation as very positive, our already good services have continued to develop and the whole operation of the centre has been enhanced.

Ayr Housing Aid Centre

CASE STUDY

Ayr Housing Aid Centre

Ayr Housing Aid Centre offers a comprehensive housing advice service from its offices in the centre of Ayr. The agency was involved in the original pre-pilot process and came forward for accreditation during 2006. Accreditation was awarded in August and followed by a celebratory lunch and presentation of the certificate in Ayr Council Chambers later in the year.

Our management committee and staff have always supported the drive to improve quality of services to the homeless and people in housing need. We consider the experience of seeking accreditation as very positive, although it required a lot of hard work and commitment from management committee and staff. Our already good services have continued to develop and the whole operation of the centre has been enhanced. This is a worthwhile investment for any organisation.

John Mulholland
Co-ordinator
Ayr Housing Aid Centre



CASE STUDY

East Ayrshire Citizens Advice Bureau

The accreditation service is open to all Citizens Advice Bureaux (CABx). The audit for CABx covers quality of advice and a reduced number of Standards, in recognition of the separate membership audit carried out for all bureaux by Citizens Advice Scotland. East Ayrshire Citizens Advice Bureau is the most recent bureau to be audited by Michael Bell Associates and was successfully accredited at the beginning of 2007.

CABx should not be afraid to put themselves forward for accreditation. Once the remit of the service is agreed and the housing cases identified it is a fairly straightforward process. It is also extremely satisfying to know that that our practice of using volunteer advisers supported by paid staff gives good results, whether being audited by CAS or an external agency. This should stand us in good stead for the National Standards in money and benefits advice.

Margaret Burgess
Manager
East Ayrshire Citizens Advice Bureau



CASE STUDY

Fife Council

Following the piloting of new money related advice competences, agencies which had taken part in the pilot had the chance to be accredited. Fife Council Money Advice Team was the first service to come forward for audit and accreditation. Undertaking the audit was a learning curve for auditors and the Council. All concerned survived the experience! Additionally, the lessons from this audit will inform future money related advice accreditation visits.

We have always found external audits to be useful. There is a lot to be gained from the professional opinion that a fresh pair of eyes can give and they are a real antidote to complacency, after all there is always room for improvement. Following our recent audit for the new Money Advice Standards we have agreed on several areas where we can improve service to our clients.

Martin Wardrop
Team Leader
Fife Council Money Advice Team



CASE STUDY

Glasgow Simon Community – Resettlement Training Service

This audit is an example of how the Standards and the accreditation service are applicable in a wide range of advice giving settings. The service involves peer educators who work with people experiencing homelessness to raise awareness of information and advice. This helps people feel more confident about accessing support services. Accreditation was awarded in 2006.

The audit process was challenging for both the auditors and the Resettlement Training Service because the service provides housing information and advice in a non-traditional way in a variety of different settings. It was a good process to undertake as it affirmed many of the working practices and allowed development work to happen with regard to working procedures and monitoring systems. The team, which includes the peer educators, were delighted to receive accreditation, which endorses the hard work of the project.

Margaret Anne Gachagan
Resettlement Training Service Manager
Glasgow Simon Community



ACHIEVEMENTS

Between 2004 and the summer of 2006 HomePoint worked with stakeholders from both the money advice and welfare rights sectors to expand the National Standards to encompass debt counselling, housing, money, income maximization and welfare benefits. The new composite framework, The Scottish National Standards for Information and Advice Services, was launched on 21 November 2006 by Des McNulty in his first official engagement as Deputy Minister for Communities. The audit process was extended to the expanded range of agencies.

Over the last few years, auditors have travelled the length and breadth of Scotland to carry out on-site audits for agencies hoping to become accredited. The map on the following page gives details of the geographical spread.

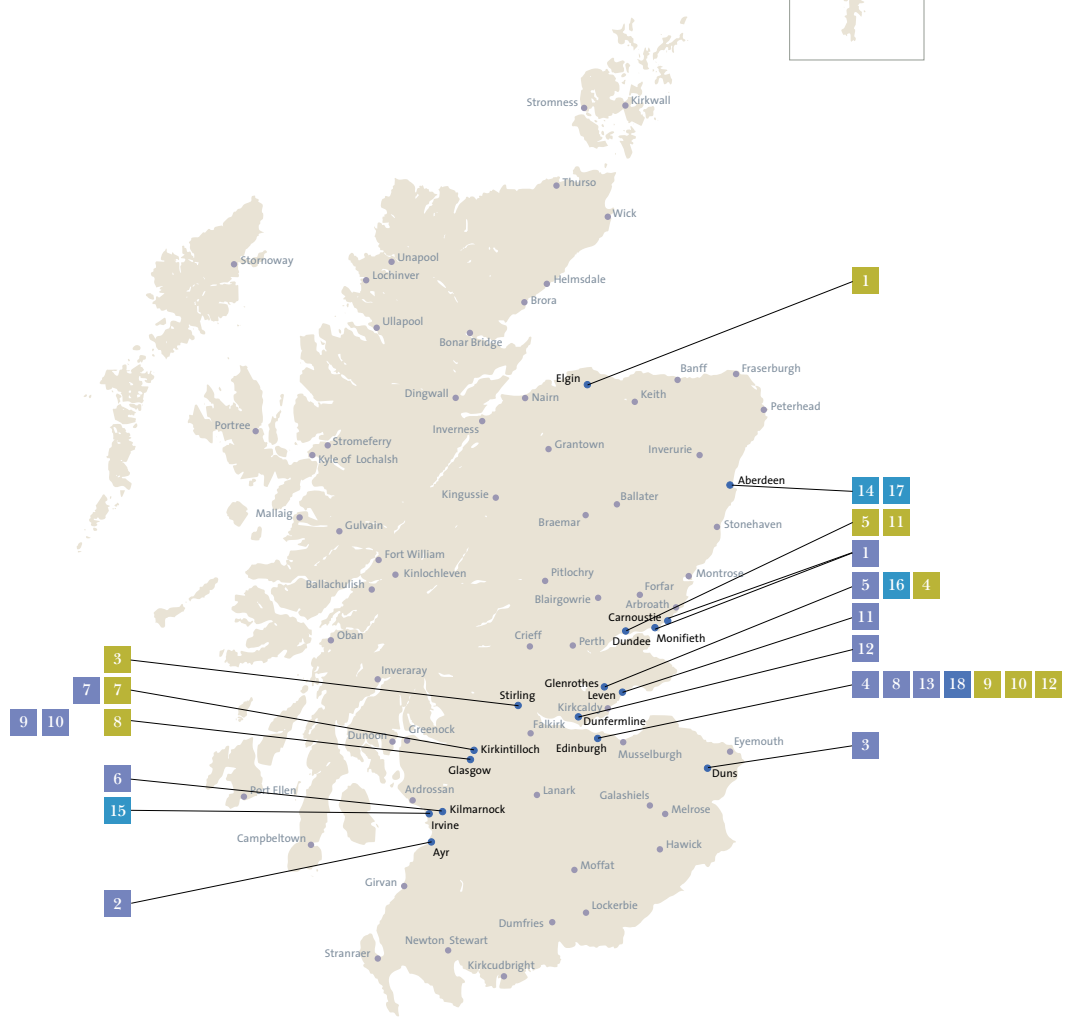
The benefits of going through the process of accreditation to agencies and users

It is extremely satisfying to know that our practice of using volunteer advisers supported by paid staff gives good results.

East Ayrshire Citizens Advice Bureau

Following our recent audit for the new Money Advice Standards we have agreed on several areas where we can improve service to our clients.

Fife Council Money Advice Team



List of audited agencies and forthcoming agencies

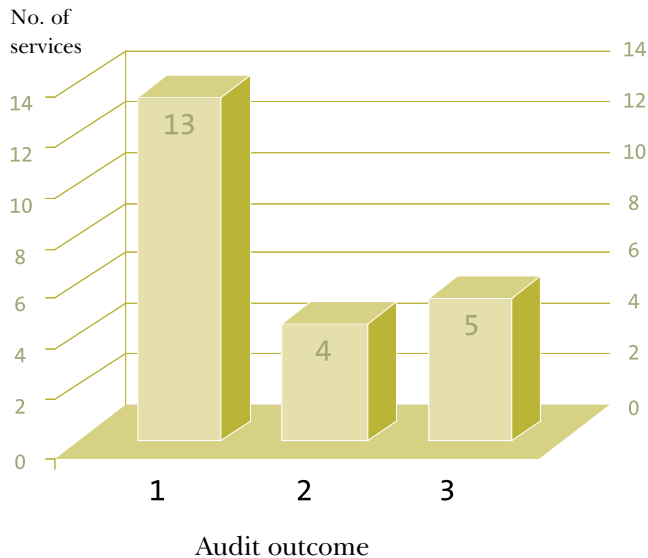
	AGENCY/ORGANISATION	STATUS FOLLOWING AUDIT
1	Angus Council, Carnoustie and Monifieth ACCESS Office	Accredited
2	Ayr Housing Aid Centre	Accredited
3	Berwickshire HA, Duns	Accredited
4	City of Edinburgh Council – Homelessness Service	Accredited
5	Clackmannanshire CAB, Glenrothes	Accredited
6	East Ayrshire CAB, Kilmarnock	Accredited
7	East Dunbartonshire CAB, Kirkintilloch	Accredited
8	Edinburgh Central CAB	Accredited
9	Glasgow Housing Aid Centre	Accredited
10	Glasgow Simon Community	Accredited
11	Levenmouth Homelessness Trust, Leven, Fife	Accredited
12	Open Door Fife, Dunfermline	Accredited
13	Scottish Housing Law Service, Edinburgh	Accredited
14	Aberdeen Cyrenians	Conditional accreditation
15	Community Housing Advocacy Project, Irvine	Conditional accreditation
16	Fife Council, Glenrothes	Conditional accreditation
17	HomeChoice, Aberdeen	Conditional accreditation
18	City of Edinburgh Council Central Housing Office	Not accredited

	AGENCY/ORGANISATION – AUDIT PENDING OR UNDERWAY
1	Moray Council, Elgin
2	Berwickshire HA, Duns
3	Stirling Council
4	Fife Council (Housing) Glenrothes
5	Dundee City Council
6	Aberdeen CAB
7	East Dunbartonshire CAB, Kirkintilloch
8	Shelter Glasgow Housing Aid Centre
9	Shelter Scottish Housing Law Service
10	Shelter Edinburgh
11	Shelter Dundee Housing Aid Centre
12	Shelter Edinburgh Housing Aid Centre

An additional four agencies audited in the pilot period were not accredited. In line with the confidentiality policy agreed with pilot participants they have not been identified here.

While we are pleased to be able to report a growing interest from agencies and support for accreditation, the numbers applying for audit have been less than expected this year. Some agencies do cite lack of funds as the reason for not applying but a substantial majority have delayed because of restructuring within departments and teams or crucial members of staff moving on.

To date (including the pilot process), 22 services have been audited. Of these 13 have been accredited. Another 4 are currently conditionally accredited. This is a recommendation open to auditors where there are issues which required to be addressed, but where these can be tackled by the agency within a reasonable period of time (usually 6 months). Five agencies have not been successful in achieving accreditation. Four of these were audited during the pilot period, before the option of conditional accreditation was developed.

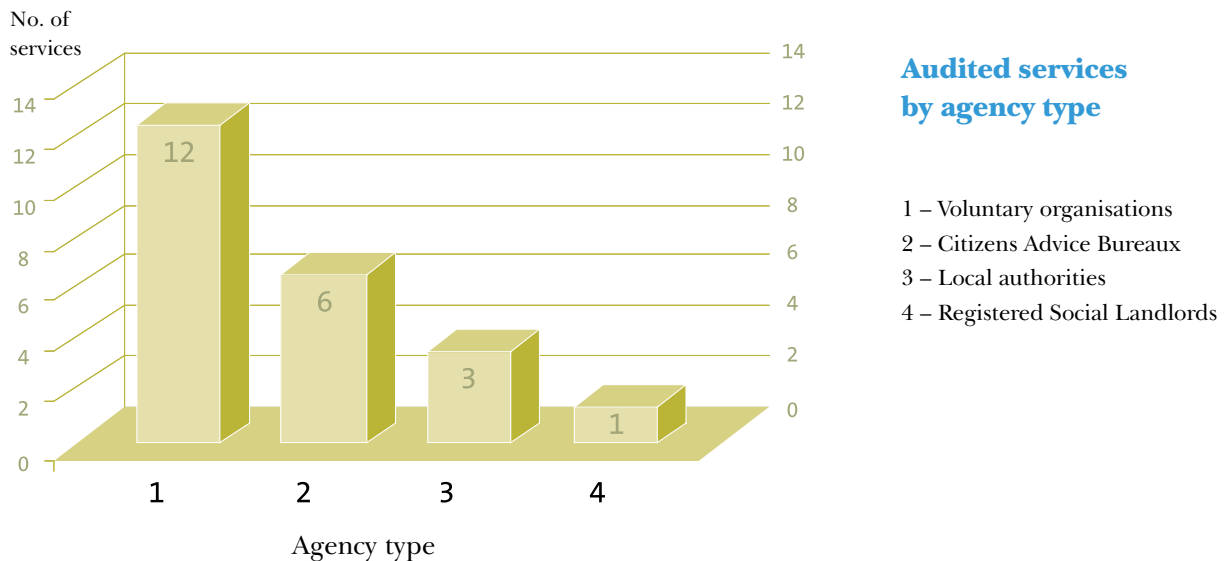


Audited services by accreditation outcome

- 1 – Accredited
- 2 – Conditional accreditation
- 3 – Not accredited

In addition to this, another 8 audits are currently scheduled, with other applications in the pipeline. The forthcoming audits include 4 local authorities which have not been audited before and 2 money related advice audits. They also include a tailored audit for a national organisation which will have 4 offices from across Scotland audited in one audit process.

The breakdown of services audited is shown below. Audit reports can be viewed on the HomePoint section of the Communities Scotland website www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk The majority of agencies to date have been voluntary organisations. The lowest number of audit visits have taken place amongst local authorities and registered social landlords (RSLs), although interest is increasing, in particular with the introduction of accreditation for money related advice. Part of the focus for promotional work during 2006/07 was local authorities and RSLs services. It is anticipated that 2007/08 will see an increase in numbers applying from these sectors.



ISSUES FOR DEVELOPMENT

HomePoint and the accreditation service providers have been working together over recent months to address barriers which agencies seeking accreditation may face. Examples include:

- Improvements to the accreditation process – the self-assessment checklist has been combined with the audit application form. This will mean less paperwork for agencies and also make it easier for them to apply for accreditation, once ready.
- Listening to feedback, including at an evaluation session held on 8 March in Edinburgh where a number of agencies which have been accredited, or have audit visits pending, came together to give their views.
- Taking a flexible approach – where appropriate, the accreditation service providers will look at requests for tailored audits. For example, one agency has asked to have 4 services in its organisation included in one accreditation process, to avoid a more piecemeal approach (one of these services was due for re-audit and another for interim validation).
- Working with Communities Scotland Regulation and Inspection Team to clarify roles and avoid duplication, a key issue for local authorities and RSLs.
- Working with Citizens Advice Scotland to review guidance for CABx and to simplify the process so that CABx no longer have to wait until they undergo their CAS membership audit before applying for HomePoint audit.

The accreditation service will continue to respond to issues as and when they arise.

Cost of accreditation

Feedback from many agencies focuses on the cost of applying for accreditation. This has been a particular issue for some voluntary organisations. Funders and commissioning bodies are being encouraged to see the Standards and accreditation as an essential element of service delivery and to build the costs of audit into funding packages. In addition, work has been taking place on restructuring the fee charging schedule so that, in future, agencies will be charged by the number of areas they apply for, creating a more proportionate charging regime.