

# Law

Can divorcing couples  
be made to talk before  
reaching a courtroom?

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## Is the CAB showing its great age?

The Citizens Advice Bureau celebrates its 70th birthday this month. Karen Glaser reports on a service that is at full stretch

"Sorry, due to staff shortage (swine flu etc) we can only see a limited number of people today," reads the note pinned on the door of the Tottenham branch of the Citizens Advice Bureau. I have a full four minutes to digest the message because it takes that long for someone to open said door.

She points to a ticket machine and hands me a form. "Fill this in," she says, motioning towards a waiting room crammed with people.

It is not the most auspicious of beginnings but I have a ticket and a form. The last time I visited the CAB I was told I was too late even though it was 11am and the office closes at 4.30pm. "If I need to be here by a certain time why doesn't your literature say so?" I asked. The receptionist had shrugged. Furious, I marched outside, where I met Kais. He had made the same mistake. For him the consequences were potentially bigger — I had a dodgy gym contract, he was about to become homeless.

The next time I spoke to Kais his life was looking up. He had got to the CAB at 7am, two and a half hours before opening, and his adviser was able to find him temporary accommodation.

This cheering story is all in a day's work for the CAB, which this month celebrates its 70th anniversary. The first 200 bureaux opened on September 4, 1939, the day after Britain declared war on Germany.

Since then the charity that started as an emergency wartime service has given free advice on debt, benefits, redundancy, family issues and immigration to millions of people. Last year it dealt with six million problems: this year it is tackling 17,000 new debt and benefit queries every day — pretty impressive for a workforce of 27,000, four fifths of whom are volunteers.

There is no doubt that these volunteers are a special breed, dealing as they do with other people's complicated lives. There is also no doubt that Britain benefits from having the CAB: nearly five in ten people who have used the service say that they are less stressed as a result.

It is also true that it is virtually impossible to book a CAB appointment on the phone, still less get any direct advice. I tried to get through to my local bureau for a fortnight before schlepping there, my toddler in tow.

The problem is, of course, that de-



The CAB offices may open at 9.30am but many clients know that to get advice they have to be first in the queue

mand exceeds supply. And that demand keeps growing: the charity received just under 1.7 million inquiries in the three months to the end of June, 17 per cent more than the same period the previous year. And although the organisation saw almost two million people last year, Teresa Perchard, the policy director, says: "There are as many again who failed to get free help. There is a lot of unmet need out there."

This pressure explains why Middle Britain, over the decades, has largely abandoned the organisation, particularly in urban centres where queues often reach A&E proportions. When you can phone Consumer Direct about your gym contract or subscribe to Which? Legal Advice for £51 a year and speak to a lawyer within minutes, why bother trying to get an appointment?

Perchard does not disagree: "Those most knowledgeable about their rights as consumers would probably not need to turn to us, and services such as Consumer Direct are complementary to ours for fairly straightforward consumer problems."

It was not always thus. I grew up in South Wales and I remember my

### Problems, problems

- There are 448 Citizens Advice Bureaux across England, Wales and Northern Ireland
- Last year the CAB advised 1.93 million people on about six million problems
- Debt is the most common problem, accounting for one in three queries
- One in two of us have used the service at some point in our lives, the organisation says
- Teresa Perchard, the policy director, acknowledges that the CAB's phone service is inadequate. "We're launching a big fundraising campaign later this year to raise £5 million over three years to run new national telephone advice lines in England and Wales, planned for roll out from this autumn," she says. "We've wanted to improve the service for the past decade, and, when we have, it'll be an important transformation."

Source: Citizens Advice Bureau

father and his friends visiting the CAB regularly for white-goods gripes and the like, particularly after 1979, when the minister responsible for consumer affairs closed a network of consumer advice centres. Now the IT-literate middle classes are more likely to visit the CAB website for information about mobile contract misadventures.

The problems with this are the social consequences that always prevail when Middle Britain deserts public institutions: articulate, demanding voices disappear, queues lengthen and receptionists start to shrug.

John Brookes, a high street solicitor who volunteered for a South London CAB 20 years ago, agrees: "It's general gossip among family lawyers that the service isn't what it was. It used to be part of the local community — now advisers are so busy hitting performance targets and organising translators for clients they don't have time for personal relationships."

Florence Charles, a volunteer for 20 years, is also frustrated by the "tedious" statistics about clients' gender, race and housing status et al that advisers must compile. "It's apparently all about funding, but it eats into time I could spend giving advice," she says.

When you finally get it, that advice is generally good (although several lawyers I spoke to described it as very basic). After six hours at the Tottenham CAB I was certainly primed to give my gym a kung fu crescent kick for its ropy contract. Before I left I asked my adviser how staff were coping on the swine-flu front. She looked at me blankly. "The notice on your door?" "Oh, that," she said. "It should have been taken down ages ago."

## Hold the front page (lawyer's request)

Journalism is changing faster than at any time in its history but still not as frequently as the law. The editors of *McNae's Essential Law for Journalists* need to revise their textbook roughly every two years which, since an up-to-date edition is required reading for media students, must be fine for royalties but involves constantly beating deadlines. As journalists turned academics they should feel comfortable with that.

To publish before the new university year was supposed to be completed by February. But as pages were en route to the printers new information was being added almost daily as laws were being prepared for change or being changed.

In March Max Mosley began a libel action against the *News of the World* after his successful action for breach of privacy. A revised edition of the Editors' Code was published and the Press Complaints Commission warned that reproduction of photographs from networking sites such as Facebook could be in breach of the existing code.

In April there was the promise of guidance to police forces to prevent their stopping cameramen taking photographs in public places. Jack Straw, the Justice Secretary, started procedures to provide more transparency in family court cases.

In May the Government dropped its plan to hold inquests without a jury in cases affecting national security, and *The Times* was fined £15,000 with £27,400 costs for contempt of court after publishing some of the views of a jury foreman in a controversial manslaughter case. As the book went to press *The Times* was seeking leave to appeal.

To stay current, the editors have created an online resource centre, on which cases can be updated and changes in the law affecting journalism will be posted.

This edition, the twentieth since 1954, has been revamped and helpfully restructured to recognise the common factors of print, broadcast and online media. It uses charts to assist explanation of procedures and is heavily cross-referenced to create a more user-friendly interface.

Older journalists would find it almost unrecognisable; it used to fit into a pocket; now, at more than 600 pages, it requires a briefcase.

Revel Barker  
*McNae's Essential Law for Journalists*  
by David Banks and Mark Hanna;  
Oxford University Press; £19.99

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