

Change at the CHAIN

By Geoff White, Chairman of the CHAIN

CHAIN is the acronym for Community Help Advice and Information Network. It was set up 11 years ago by Warwick District Council, in response to a survey which indicated that the people of Crown Ward, Lillington wanted a drop in advice centre to help the community. Crown Ward has the distinction of being in the top 20% percent of deprived areas in the UK, largely on the back of high unemployment. This still applies. At the time the office was opened, nuisance crime was a big problem, as was the ability of many residents to communicate with authorities. The CHAIN is manned by a team of volunteers and opens five weekday mornings throughout the year, and on Saturday the office is used by Credit Union for their service to local residents.

A record has always been kept of customer numbers, and this week we passed 27,000 customers since opening. This comprises of any problem which people walk in with, and because of the experience of volunteers, few matters need signposting to other organisations. However, our customer base was largely individuals and we benefited from our position on the main thoroughfare through our patch and the attitude of customers towards the CHAIN. As will be seen below, we have a valuable asset in that people regard our office as neutral territory; those who will not go anywhere official, willingly come to our office. Although three days each week are for general enquiries, one day is largely for Neighbourhood Watch matters and the fifth morning is for clinics with the Police and the Council Housing Officer, from whom we receive support.

Significant change began in 2010, coinciding with my appointment as Chairman and a change imposed by the District Council, which required us to be responsible for our own money management (not a problem) and also reduced our record system based on 16 criteria to four. The latter system required only reporting 1) the number of local people accessing the office, 2) the number of times professionals access the office, 3 the number of voluntary/community groups accessing support and 4) the number of people signposted to other services. We were worried that our low rate of signposting would be seen as negative, but this has not proved to be the case. In the way of the world, it has been easiest to continue to use our 16 criterion system and then extract the data our funding body requires. This has implications as outlined below.

We know that clinics with the Council Housing Officer and Police are highly significant in number. Social Interaction, which is largely people who need to talk with sympathetic volunteers, is always at a high level, whereas since the advent of TAG Busters (a collaborative effort with the Police and local youth centre), the problem of graffiti in Crown Ward has virtually disappeared. We also know from our records that crime, not only nuisance crime has fallen to a low level during the period we have recorded events.

The most major changes in years have occurred during 2010, the most significant being the arrival of a nurse from Warwick Hospital, who will see patients from the addict community in

our confidential office. These are people with serious problems who will not go anywhere official. We have interactions with Bromford Housing Association, who in this area cannot see their clients in their own homes. A Local History group and the Community Enterprise Officer now use the office. The most recent additions have been the Lillington Parents Group, which supports parents of children with behavioural difficulties, and the Warwickshire County Council Family Information Service, for whom we just advertise the service. It is obvious that our client base is changing to one where significant numbers of people will access the office under a variety of organisations that need the simple facility of our confidential office.

Recently, the Warwick and Leamington Casework Conference was held by Chris White MP, where Chris highlighted at least 20 organisations that perform some casework roles for local people across mental health, advocacy, tax/benefits advice and career support. There were 45 participants and there was a very good morning of discussion. His initiative will go on to make leaders aware of other organisations and their work and I see this in the spirit of Compact.

To end on a slightly bizarre note, towards the end of last year we agreed to act as a collection point for plastic bottle tops, this being in support of a hospice. The reaction of the community has been truly amazing in that some people regularly arrive with black bin liners full of caps. Never could we have foreseen such a positive response.

Anyone wanting further information, please contact: thechain@btconnect.com