



Mid Bedfordshire

Annual Report 31st March 2021



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Aims and Principles of our Service

Mid Bedfordshire Citizens Advice is a registered charity and depends upon local organisations for its funding. It serves the rural communities in the north of Central Bedfordshire covering seven towns and forty three parishes.

The Citizens Advice service provides free, independent, confidential and impartial advice to everyone on their rights and responsibilities. It values diversity, promotes equality and challenges discrimination.

The service aims:

- To provide the advice people need for the problems they face.
- To improve the policies and practices that affect people's lives.

Update from the Chair - Rich Wiltshire

I am pleased to present the annual report for Mid Bedfordshire Citizens Advice for 2020-21. This is my first annual report as Chair of the Board of Trustees and I am very proud to be involved in such a brilliant organisation.

It has been a very challenging year for many people and our service has become even more important for many in our community. Our staff and volunteers have done a brilliant job in keeping services available for those who need them during multiple lockdowns and in a way that was safe and secure for all involved. I am very excited to see what the future holds for us, moving past the pandemic and I look forward to seeing the exciting ways that we will develop services even further.

Chief Officer Update – Jo Hansen- Cole

I write this report as the Interim CO having taken over from Christina King in Sept 2021.

It has been an extremely challenging year for everyone. The news in March 2020 that lockdown was fast approaching meant that we all had to act fast to ensure we could continue to deliver our service. Within days of being locked down, we had moved our whole service to be delivered remotely. We all soon learnt what Zoom, Teams and Google Meet were and the inevitable phrase of “you are on mute!!!” This was all achieved by the sheer determination and commitment of all staff and volunteers. I

would like to thank Christina for her part in making all this happen and wish her well in her new role.

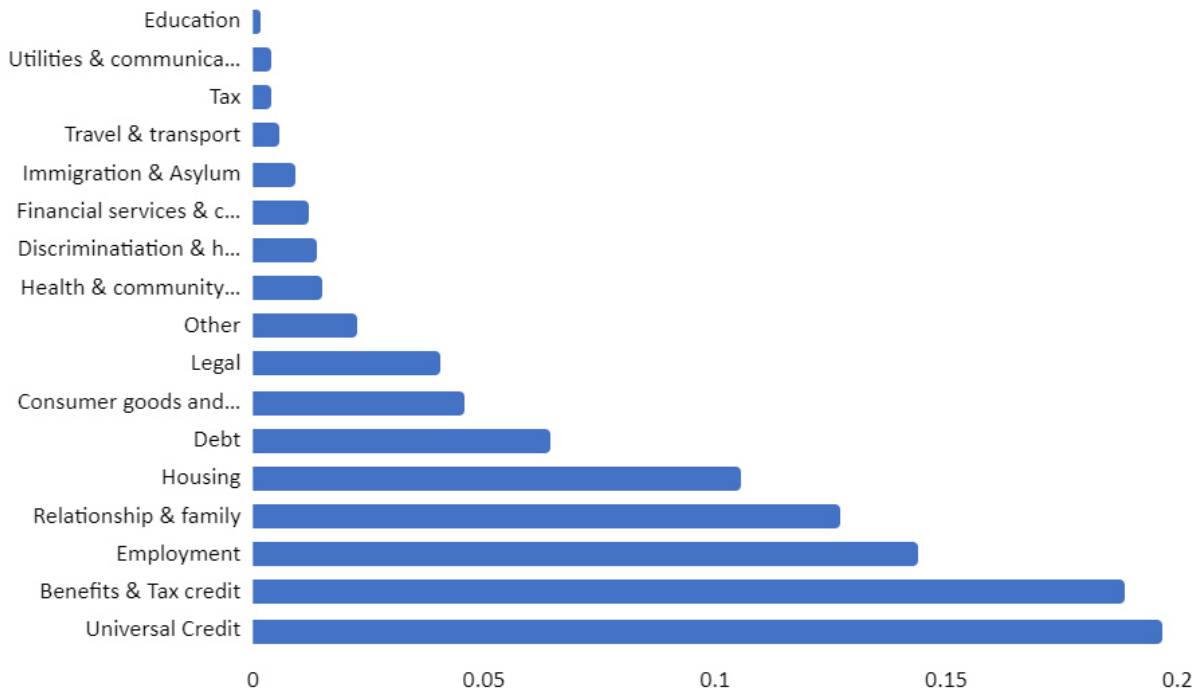
Our volunteers and staff have done an amazing job in transitioning to providing our service from their own homes. It is because of their adaptability and commitment that we were able to provide the service to our clients at a time when it has been needed the most.

Statistics

As we moved our service to be completed remotely, via the phone or email, we have managed to maintain the number of clients that we have supported.

From 1/04/2020 – 31/03/2021 we have seen 2219 Clients with 7272 issues with an estimated income gain of £1,093,000. However, this is a conservative estimate and we are working to improve how we record this information to get a more accurate figure.

The graph below shows the percentage split of the issues.



Project Updates

Help to Claim – Universal Credit

As of March 2021, we have been running the Help to Claim service for 3 years and 3 months. During this time, we have assisted a total of 950 clients. This year we have seen 482.

Due to the lockdown, all of our client contact had to be carried out remotely mostly using telephones and webchat, although we are hoping that we can begin to see some clients in person again soon. Before this change, about 50% of our clients were assisted through face to face appointments. Thanks to the rapid turnaround with the technology, a mixture of telephone, webchat and email, we were able to have no breaks in service as we transitioned to working from home. This has unfortunately meant that we haven't been able to continue our work within the Job Centre + office in Biggleswade; hopefully this can be resumed once we are ready to begin our client-facing services again.

We have been assisting our clients with a range of queries, from quick questions about filling in the application to checking whether a client should move over to UC, through to helping a client check their eligibility and then supporting them until they have the money in their bank account (over a month's process). We very much tailor the support to the client's needs.

During the last 12 months we have also seen a change in the makeup of our team, a couple of people made the decision to leave our team (including our new Chief Officer, Jo), leaving Hannah, Jonathan and Carl. In addition, Jonathan made the decision to take on more client-facing work along with the supervision he does for our general team, and Hannah took over the Help to Claim supervisor role in November 2020. Our three-person team is working well with a wonderful general team to assist and back us up at every turn.

Outreach

With the national lockdown occurring just before the start of the financial year it meant a significant change in the way that the Outreach Service has been able to operate throughout the year. No home visits were carried out this year and we have had to adapt to providing support to our clients by phone and email only.

Over the course of the year the Outreach team carried out 200 phone appointments with clients. The majority of clients have been able to engage well with us over the phone and some of them have confirmed that they prefer this means of contact, rather than having to engage with someone face to face. However, for some clients it has been very difficult and they have needed support from friends or family to be able to engage with us effectively. We have been able to provide clients with the option of dropping forms into our offices so that we can complete them on their behalf, if they do not feel capable of doing it themselves. This has been successful, although as this does take longer we have had to be careful that we still meet deadlines for the paperwork to be returned.

We have been notified of successful outcomes in 23 cases, leading to an increase in income for our clients of over £103,000 in total. The majority of these payments were achieved following an unsuccessful benefit claim which we helped the client to challenge. The original decisions were overturned and the client was awarded the benefit either for the first time or at a higher rate than awarded originally. Unfortunately, in many cases we do not know the outcome of the advice that we have given to clients but we are hoping that this is something that we can improve on in future by proactively contacting clients for updates on their applications and appeals.

Due to the effects of the pandemic a lot of benefits claims were extended by the Department of Work and Pensions so there were fewer people than usual requesting help with form completion and benefit appeals. Face to face health assessments were also suspended which again has had benefits for some clients as they found the phone assessments easier to cope with. Unfortunately, in some cases clients have not had the outcome that they expected following a phone assessment, possibly due to the assessor finding it more difficult to make an accurate assessment of the client's abilities over the phone. Appeal hearings have also been carried out over the phone and again, some clients have preferred this as it was less intimidating than having to attend the Tribunal in person.

Going forward, although we have now started to carry out some home visits to the clients most in need of face to face support, it is likely that we will also be supporting clients on the phone and by email to a much greater extent than we have in the past.

Money and Pensions Service funded debt advice – Increasing Capacity.

As a result of the Pandemic, funding was available to join this project and we joined in November 2020. This project provides support for Clients in debt. The initial few months were focused on completing the training pathway for our Adviser, who is now fully trained and providing excellent service to our debt clients.

Good News

Although our service has been delivered differently this year, with no clients seen face to face, we have still managed to help a large number of clients with a wide variety of issues.

We have helped clients with benefit claims and appeals, which have resulted in clients being better off, sometimes by hundreds of pounds a month. We have helped clients find housing if they are homeless, or new housing if they are soon to be homeless. We have assisted in blue badge applications, small claims and consumer issues. We have arranged many food parcels, which have an immediate impact on clients. We have advised clients on work issues and discrimination.

Citizens Advice head office gathers feedback using an independent organisation for the whole of the service. From this, 80% of people said their problem was resolved following help from Citizens Advice. 60% of people said that they felt less stressed, distressed or anxious.

Here are just some of the comments we received from clients this year:

'Thanks so much for your help.'

I have sorted everything out now and spoken to DWP...many thanks for helping.'

'Many thanks for your kind assistance this morning.'

'Thank you very much for the email. I'm so sorry that I haven't been able to answer my phone, it is turned off (at work). Thank you for the links and information to people who may be able to help me.... I really appreciate how much you've tried to contact me!'

'Thank you. I really appreciate your help.'

'Hello, it was lovely speaking to you. Thank you very much for your time and for your patience.'

'Thank you. You have been very helpful.'

'Hello just to let you know my PIP decision has been overturned. It went to court so I have now been awarded PIP. Thank you for all your help.'

'Hi, information safely received and thanks so much for taking the time to speak with me- greatly appreciated.'

'Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me.....Your support is very much appreciated.'

'Thanks for the link and chat.'

'Thank you to you and your team for all the help and advice that you have given to me over the past few months.'

A BIG Thank you to Jenny O'Ross

Jenny O'Ross has been volunteering with us since 2014. She was an adviser and also helped us to raise funds for our outreach service by seeking grants from charities and local town and parish councils. In the time Jenny was with us, she raised a significant amount of money. Without her invaluable commitment and support we would have struggled to obtain this income. We would like to send our wholehearted thanks to Jenny for her support over the years.

Thanks to our funders and supporters

- Central Bedfordshire Council for their financial and moral support
- All our volunteers for their hard work and commitment, including those who have left us in the last year
- To our members for their continuing support
- Our neighbouring Bedfordshire offices for their support and friendship
- Shefford Town Council for financial support for our Outreach project
- Ampthill Town Council for financial support
- Biggleswade Town Council for financial support for our Outreach project
- Marston Moretaine Parish Council for financial support for our Outreach project
- St Andrews Church, Biggleswade for the use of their car park
- Biggleswade Masonic Centre for the use of their car park
- Ampthill Methodist Church for the use of their room for our AGM
- All our partners in the voluntary and statutory sectors for their support and friendship
- The Community and Voluntary Service Mid & North Bedfordshire for their general advice

Statement of Financial Activity

Please see Paper Mid Beds CAB - Signed Accounts YE 31.03

Information Assurance

The local Citizens Advice Trustee board oversees the information security of all personal information of our clients, staff, funders and strategic partners that is processed. The local Citizens Advice hold joint responsibility for client data that is held in our case management system, with the National Citizens Advice service. An information assurance management team exists to ensure the confidentiality, integrity and availability of all personal and sensitive data is maintained to a level which is compliant with the requirements of the UK General Data Protection Regulation and Data Protection Act 2018.