

March 2022

A brief overview of the service

Uttlesford Citizens Advice is a local charity that aims to empower residents, helping them to solve problems and find a way forward. Our support helps people to:

- understand their rights and responsibilities;
- overcome digital barriers;
- budget;
- talk - we often advocate for them with 3rd parties;
- take practical steps to improve their situations

We provide general advice in housing, benefits, immigration, community care, relationship and consumer law. All our supervisors are capable of overseeing procedures related to specific court processes (e.g. suspension of an eviction order). They also work with our volunteer advisers to support homeless clients and people who need our help following violence, abuse or discrimination. In addition, we have teams of specialists who provide casework support across three distinct areas:

- to help residents manage problem debt (using tools like Breathing Space, Debt Relief Orders and bankruptcy);
- to support residents who are navigating the disability benefit appeals process
- our four qualified 'Energy Experts' work with residents in fuel poverty, providing warm homes and energy efficiency advice

Our service is free, confidential and independent. In 2020/21 we helped 2,382 unique clients, many of whom used our service more than once, to deal with over 9,073 issues. Using government approved impact assessments this equates to £4.16m in value to our clients, by increasing their income, working to get debt written off and providing consumer advice. We focus on empowering people, whilst utilising our resources effectively. We signpost the most able people to self-help options where appropriate, allowing us to concentrate our efforts on supporting the most vulnerable members of the community.

Many of our clients come to us for help to deal with serious, life changing circumstances, such as bereavement, job loss, family separation or the loss of a home, situations which often result in complex, multi-dimensional problems. We aim to work with clients to prevent difficulties from escalating and help them to move forward in their lives. 86% of clients surveyed over the last year said that our advice helped them to solve their problem and 72% said that they felt less stressed, depressed, or anxious after receiving advice. (This data is collected independently by calling and emailing a random sample of our clients each quarter.)

Sadly, a long standing but growing part of the work we do is working with local trusts, such as Saffron Walden United Charities, to provide financial emergency support. Our knowledge of benefits and budgeting and our reach across the district means we are well positioned for this task, last year distributing £15,382 worth of food vouchers and emergency funds to residents in desperate situations with no money for food, to top up electricity and gas meters, travel to medical appointments, visit sick relatives, access shelters, or purchase essential items for their home. We regularly refer clients to organizations that provide further support, such as food, clothing and baby banks; last year we recorded 512 issues relating to foodbank referrals and 205 to other types of charitable support. However, we are aware that emergency support is merely a 'sticking plaster' and so we are focused

on working with clients to help them to resolve their issues and build up their ability to manage independently.

Challenges

- The loss of a number of experienced advisers and difficulty recruiting and training during the pandemic means that we are currently operating with 15% fewer volunteers and 25% fewer volunteering hours.
- We expect demand to increase over the coming year. With the cost of living rising faster than income, we predict a rise in demand for help with debt support and housing issues. We are already seeing a rise in requests for help with budgeting as people try to manage their household expenditure and avoid falling into debt in the first place. Pressure on household budgets will inevitably lead to an increase in requirement for emergency support - foodbank referrals, emergency funding and fuel vouchers.
- We are expecting to show a deficit in the financial year 2022-23, with key drivers being the loss of income from finished projects, which covered a proportion of our core staffing costs, combined with an increase in salary costs and overheads.

Priorities

- **Increase our volunteer adviser numbers and continue to upskill current volunteers**
Continuing to rebuild and strengthen our volunteer capacity is a priority.
- **Manage demand - particularly around debt, warm homes, budgeting support and emergency support.** Our staff have worked tirelessly to meet demand in 21-22 whilst balancing recruitment and training to increase volunteer numbers and increase experience and competence levels across the service. As the economic situation continues to get more challenging with inflation and further significant increases in household bills expected from April - we are already putting plans in place to increase our proactive work with clients by targeting budgeting help (this is linked to our use of £16,000 of Essex Household Support Funding with 80 households). We will continue to look for creative ways to best target our resources to achieve the greatest impact.
- **Increase access to our service and support wider community joint working** - we have already provided a 'proof of concept' in using video links, which has been successful in Great Dunmow and Stansted (Takeley is just opening and Thaxted is yet to open). We have seen that staff and volunteers in Great Dunmow and Stansted are more confident about encouraging their service users to engage, they have also been more ready to ask questions on behalf of their users. Most importantly we have seen that clients who would perhaps have previously struggled to access our services are finding it possible to reach us from a safe and warm location.

Client Feedback

A quarterly client satisfaction survey is undertaken by the national body of Citizens Advice on our behalf. The Results and analysis are reported to the Council on a quarterly basis and to our Trustee Board with recommendations, where appropriate, which are incorporated into the Business and Development Plan. Of the 156 clients surveyed over the

last 9 months, 95% said that our advisers helped them to find a way forward with their issue, 89% said that the service was easy to access, 86% said that we had resolved their problem and 95% would recommend our service to family or friends. Please find below a selection of the comments made by clients taking part in the latest survey:

CAB have been a lifeline to me in one of my darkest periods of my Life.

I have mental and health issues and find it difficult to express myself and sort out paperwork. So the ladies there helped me greatly.

The advice and help I was given has helped me live without the worry of facing each week wondering if I can make it to my pension payday. The staff at Saffron Walden have been so kind and helpful in filling in the benefit forms, I know I could not have done it without your help. Thank you so much.

The staff at CA Saffron Walden, supported me a great deal. I was referred to them through a social worker at my GPS. They stayed in touch with me every step of the way, they reassured me and helped me. I am very grateful they were there for me.

Without CAB help I would have found resolving my issues very difficult, if not impossible. Their help is truly exemplary.