

The Covid-19 crisis has created unprecedented challenges for us all. At Citizens Advice in North and West Kent we have attempted to meet the challenges of the pandemic head-on; focussing on embedding our remote services, expanding capacity to meet demand and ensuring that our advice and support remains of the highest quality and accessible to the most vulnerable in our community. As a result, we have been able to provide advice for similar numbers of Tonbridge and Malling residents as in usual times, just delivered in different ways.

Key elements of our approach to the pandemic so far include:

- Expanding our services:
We have **expanded the capacity of our telephone and email advice services to help meet increased demand by local people** through many developments including:
 - Enabling Advisers to deliver advice remotely from their own homes, still supported by Supervisors.
 - **Introducing a more process-led approach to increase efficiency in the initial telephone advice** and ensuring that all clients receive high quality advice at the level of support needed for their case.
 - Using short-term funding (all of which must be spent by 31st March 2021) to **trial new ways of delivering advice**. It is hoped that these short-term initiatives can not only help us meet unprecedentedly high demand now, but also support us in developing our services in the future.
 - **Joining national Citizens Advice initiatives to expand telephone advice capacity**; from mid-November our local telephone Adviceline will become free to call, and will be available 9am-5pm, Monday-Friday (an additional 15 hours/week).
- Promoting our services:
Using social media, local community website and partner agencies, we have focused on increasing awareness of our advice services across Tonbridge and Malling. With the support of local foodbanks and community volunteer schemes, vulnerable residents have received CANWK leaflets (with contact information and key advice messages) with their food parcels.
- Using our facilities:
Following the first lockdown, **Tonbridge Castle** has been an ideal office in the circumstances, with enough space for social distancing to allow some volunteers who could not give advice from home to return to support our efforts on the telephone and email advice services.

Learning so far:

- **Increased capacity of telephone and email advice services enables residents across the borough to access our services more easily, with residents in the north of the borough finding our new ways of working more accessible than face-to-face support services.** Since the start of lockdown, we have seen an increase in the proportion of clients from the north end of the borough, particularly from East Malling, Kings Hill, Larkfield and Snodland.
- There is no doubt that our **integrated approach to advice giving is more efficient for us as an organisation.** By developing our use of Teams and other online communication and information sharing tools, we have been able to provide supervision and specialist advice support more efficiently.

Our experiences in recent months and learnings so far pose a number of questions for our future service:

- The model of telephone and email advice as the first point of contact seems to have worked well for both us and for clients. **Should we be continuing this model of remote advice for first contacts, bringing in virtual and face-to-face appointments further along the advice process, where it is needed?**
- We have constantly questioned and challenged ourselves to ensure everyone, including vulnerable people, can access our service during the pandemic. We believe we are succeeding in this – client feedback suggests that so long as they can get through to us, they are happy to receive advice via telephone and email. **Having made great progress in increasing efficiency and capacity in answering calls, how should we continue to maintain this when our short-term additional funding comes to an end in March 2021?**
- **Has the lack of a face-to-face drop-in service prevented very vulnerable people from accessing our advice?** We believe not, due primarily to our mitigating actions including making our Adviceline free to call and introducing telephone appointments for more complex issues as well as trialling video chat and kiosk services. We know that many of our past regular clients have been in touch.

These are questions we will explore further over the coming weeks and months as we continue to support local people with the challenges being created by the pandemic. We welcome your feedback and suggestions.