

## CANWK

(Year to date 2020/21)

The Covid-19 crisis has created unprecedented challenges for us all. At Citizens Advice in North and West Kent (CANWK) 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 features of our approach to the pandemic so far:**

1. Ensuring our staff and volunteers have the technology and support to operate remotely.
  2. Expanding our advice services to focus in increased demand for telephone and email advice.
  3. Promoting our services to ensure local people know how to reach us.
  4. Using our facilities as much as possible.
  5. Developing new and existing partnerships to reach out to vulnerable local people.
1. Ensuring our staff and volunteers have the technology and support to operate remotely:

Due to Covid-19, it became necessary for us to stop all face-to-face advice from 16<sup>th</sup> March and then to close our Tonbridge office to all volunteers on Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020. Throughout this time and since, we have been able to maintain our ability to give information, detailed and casework level advice to existing and new clients remotely, via telephone and email.

**We have invested in our technology over this period to further improve and expand our abilities to operate remotely, and now have around 120 staff and volunteers actively working from home and fully supported by Supervisors and Managers.** Each have been provided with necessary equipment to work remotely from home, including a softphone (uses computer app) or mobile phone, encrypted laptop and remote access to Casebook and Adviceline telephone service. We were already using Office365 for cloud storage and document sharing, and all staff have been trained to use Teams for meetings, information sharing and camaraderie with colleagues.

2. Expanding our advice services to focus in increased demand for telephone and email advice:

**From the early days of the first lockdown, we have continued to provide an uninterrupted, high quality advice service through our ability to bring together the shared resources, volunteers and staff from all 5 CANWK offices to work together to meet demand.** We quickly developed systems to share local knowledge amongst our Advisers from all areas, to ensure they had the knowledge

and confidence to help people with both general and locally-specific advice. By pooling our resources in this way, we have been able to not only maintain our services during lockdown, but actually increase services to meet rising demand.

As the situation developed, and it became clear that we would need to adapt our services for longer than initially hoped, we have been proactive in our approaches and used the need to adapt as a catalyst for positive developments in our services. Examples of these developments include:

- **Creating a new email advice service as an alternative to telephone advice.** This has not only increased our capacity to give advice in different formats, but has also enabled more of our trained volunteer Advisers to get back to advice-giving. Unfortunately remote telephone advice is more difficult for many of our volunteers, who may not have the skills or confidence to cope with live calls and remote supervision. The email advice service enables volunteer Advisers to research a client's problem and formulate a response, which can then be checked by a Supervisor before being sent as a reply to the client.
- **Introducing a more process-led approach to increase efficiency in the initial telephone advice** and ensure that all clients receive high quality advice at the level of support needed for their case. This approach follows guidance from National Citizens Advice and is ensuring high standards of advice are maintained, supports the client journey through our service and will help us to continue to cope with the challenges in meeting demand ahead.
- Using short-term funding (all of which must be spent by 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021) to **trial new ways of delivering advice.** For example, we have trialled employing a team of 6 full-time Adviceline Advisers, who completed their Citizens Advice training in 2 weeks and then began answering live calls supported by a supervisor. This team have been extremely successful in supplementing and supporting the efforts of our volunteers and within a period of just a few months, they are answering high numbers of calls and supporting clients at a very high standard. It is hoped that short-term initiatives such as this 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; making Adviceline free to call and open for longer.** Since mid-November 2020 we joined a national Citizens Advice single queue initiative, which means that within our group, we answer whichever call is next without local priority. The result of this is that **more client's calls are being answered first time – currently 60%-80% depending on demand.** Further follow up support for clients, if it is needed, is still carried out by CANWK for our local clients. Furthermore, we took the opportunity to be in the first wave of freephone rollout from national Citizens Advice, which meant that we also switched to a **freephone Adviceline in November 2020.** This means that cost should never be a barrier to a client seeking our advice. With the new Adviceline

### Introducing our new freephone number and extended opening hours

For free, independent, confidential and impartial advice please call

Citizens Advice in North & West Kent

**0808 278 7810**

Open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm

or email your enquiry to [advice@nwkent.cab.org.uk](mailto:advice@nwkent.cab.org.uk)

 citizens advice

North & West Kent



Advisers mentioned above, we have also been able to extend the opening hours of Adviceline to 9am-5pm, Monday-Friday (an additional 15 hours/week).

- Promoting our services to ensure local people know how to reach us.

**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 as much as possible.

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. Whilst we have needed to reduce numbers again during this latest lockdown, we have continued to maintain a presence at the Castle, both for Advisers and for clients who need to deliver paperwork for photocopying etc.

- Developing new and existing partnerships to reach out to vulnerable local people.

In our role as Coordinator and lead partner in the Advice Together Partnership (bringing together local advice organisations from across North and West Kent), we have also drawn together service information from our partners to create and share details of the range of advice services still available during the crisis – once at the beginning of the first lockdown and again at Christmas to include festive opening hours. This information has been well received by local stakeholders and helps to ensure that those most vulnerable in our community can still access the help and support they need. We are delighted to have welcomed the TMBC Housing Team to Advice Together and our Refernet online referral system, which will enable us to provide more seamless support to the most vulnerable local people.



### Tonbridge & Malling residents supported in 2020/21

Since the start of lockdown, **we have supported over 1,500 TMBC residents, with over 5,600 issues.**

Early in lockdown, the issues people were coming to us with were more often information but now **issues are becoming much more complex and the need for our specialists input is rising** further. This is, at least in part, because people's

situations are more complicated and legislation across all our specialisms is constantly changing – further increases demand for advice and adds complexity to delivery.

Issues being faced by clients:

- 36% of issues for which people sought help were related to benefits and tax credits, including help with claiming Universal Credit. This was 57% during the earlier period of lockdown but has reduced as a proportion of total issues more recently as people begin to deal with the wider impact of Covid-19.
- 11% of clients sought help with employment problems including redundancy and entitlements.
- 15% of clients sought help with debt issues. The number of clients seeking help with their debts plummeted at the beginning of lockdown, as people were focused on urgent crisis and with the suspension of court proceedings and creditor action those in debt felt under far less pressure to address their issues. This is now changing; in the last 2 months we have seen debt cases rise substantially and we expect this trend to continue in the coming months.
- 56% of clients were seeking advice for problems which put them at risk of homelessness.

We have certainly seen changes in our client profile since the start of the pandemic, with the proportion of each of these groups having increased:

- More clients from outside of central Tonbridge wards - from 58% to 62%
- More clients of working age - from 84% to 89%
- More clients with mental health issues - from 30% to 34%
- More clients in full time employment - from 22% to 29%
- More clients in any employment - from 46% to 50%
- More clients who are home owners - from 19% to 29%

We will continue to monitor our client profile to ensure that we are continuing to reach out to those people who are most in need in these very challenging times.

### **Our learning so far**

Having developed our services so quickly in response to the demand we have faced, we are now taking time to consider what we have learned and how we can use this experience as we move forward.

- **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 focused in central Tonbridge.** Since the start of lockdown, we have seen an increase in the proportion of Tonbridge & Malling clients being from areas further out in the

borough, particularly East Malling, Kings Hill, Larkfield and Snodland and no decline in the proportion of clients from other outer areas including Aylesford, Ditton, Hadlow and East Peckham.

- There is no doubt that this **more integrated approach is much more efficient for us as an organisation**. With everyone operating remotely instead of in separate offices, we have been able to share services more easily and effectively. By developing our use of Teams and other online communication and information sharing tools, we have been able to share supervision and specialist advice team support far more efficiently, meaning that more clients have access to this advice.

## Thank You

We would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone at Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council for their continuing support and encouragement during these most challenging times, which has been so appreciated by all our staff, volunteers and Board of Trustees. We look forward to continuing to work closely together to ensure local residents have the knowledge, skills and confidence to face the difficult times ahead.

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## Age UK Sevenoaks and Tonbridge

During the year staff and volunteers have assisted a total 524 people with information and advice issues, resulting in £652,724 being gained in unclaimed benefits. The year has been extremely challenging due to Covid 19 as we have had to observe, national lockdowns, together with local tiers. This has resulted in mainly telephone interviews and completion of benefit forms by IT methods, which in itself has been a real challenge.

Many older people have severe hearing issues and do not have connectivity to the internet to be able to have face to face calls to assist. Some home visits and planned office based interviews have taken place with the appropriate social distancing and full PPE equipment in place. The office at Bradford Street has been manned throughout Covid, but on reduced hours, due to staff working from home on some days of the week. Appointments have been made for specialist advice, where other ways of contact could not take place.

We have continued to produce our own local factsheets and these have been circulated to clients and carers on a wide variety of topics, including Covid related issues. We have received a high volume of telephone calls from people asking for information and clarification on many topics, during the pandemic.

We have continued to assist older people in TMBC area with emergency shopping, afternoon teas, prescription collection, and activity bags.

(Normal Home Visit carried out when allowed to visit)

## **Information and Advice Case Study**

### **Jennifer**

Jennifer lives in Tonbridge. She asked Age UK's Information & Advice service for help as she was retiring on ill health grounds and was worried about how she was going to manage.

Bob visited her at home and discussed her situation. She has severe sight loss due to macular degeneration and was waiting for her gallbladder to be removed due to bad gallstones. In addition she has migraines and sciatica. She was depressed about her health and having to give up work.

We agreed to apply for Attendance Allowance health benefit immediately and decided to wait until she gave up work before applying for means-tested benefits. We also gave her some large print information on help for people with sight loss in Tonbridge.

We returned a month later and helped her apply for a Blue Badge disabled parking permit. We also applied for Pension Credit, Housing Benefit & Council Tax Support as she had now given up work.

She was awarded the Higher Rate of Attendance Allowance as well as means-tested benefits. In total, this increased her income by £282.07 per week which made a significant difference to her ability to manage. She was turned down for a Blue Badge but we offered to help her re-apply if she wishes.

We discussed her wider situation. She was widowed some years ago but sees her children and grandchildren. She doesn't know her neighbours and all her friends were based around work. We agreed to try and find a befriender for her. We also referred her to the One You service for help with further aids and equipment.

### **Edward**

He is a 94 year old man who served in The Army - Suffolk Regiment between 1944-1948 stationed in Burma.

Edward lives alone following the unexpected death of his wife earlier this year. He has good family support however, losing his wife was a complete shock to him. Family insure he gets his medication, shopping, takes him to appointments and he usually goes to his granddaughter's home on a Sunday for the day.

Edward has an old left shoulder injury which limits his range of movement and impacts on his ability to self-care and his balance. He is resistant to formal support at home wishing to maintain his autonomy. He is a tenacious man and family support in area's he will accept. Edward was referred by his GP.

His bathroom requires adaptations to support his independence. He's had several falls landing on his shoulder resulting in extreme pain and he now has regular steroid injections to manage this. He has a personal alarm to enable him to gain assistance if needed and he struggles with complying to wear it stating 'I know where it is if I need it'

Since Edward's bereavement he has been scammed to around £30,000. Police and bank are aware of this and there is an ongoing investigation. He is no longer able to answer his phone which rings frequently throughout the day. Currently Edward is resistant to changing his phone number but he is considering it. He and his family are considering LPA. I have provided Age UK Factsheets regarding this.

Still driving Edward himself says he feels less confident now and both he and his family asked about funding for a mobility scooter. I agreed to refer to SSAFA to determine if he would meet the criteria for a grant to fund.

Action plan:

Referral to Information and Advice for support with applying for Attendance Allowance and Blue Badge. Applications completed and now waiting decisions.

Referral to Social Services for bathroom assessment.

Referral to SSAFA who have completed assessments for both a mobility scooter and bathroom. Bathroom assessment forwarded to Social Services.

Mobility scooter assessment forwarded to Edwards regiment to consider funding.

Legal Advice Factsheet provided for Edward and family to consider LPA