



Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council

Update of Activities

January – December 2021

The impact of the pandemic has of course continued to dominate our work during 2021 and all at Citizens Advice in North and West Kent (CANWK) have been working incredibly hard to cope with the unprecedented challenges created, both for our clients and for the way we are able to deliver our services. We have continued to develop our advice services to withstand the pressures faced by high demand and continuing Covid-19 restrictions to ensure that our advice and support remains of the highest quality and accessible to the most vulnerable in our community.

Key features of the year include:

- We have been experiencing **consistently high demand on our freephone Adviceline telephone advice service throughout the year**, with weekly demand often reaching the same peaks as in the first few weeks of lockdown in 2020. However **unlike in those early months, the issues being raised are far more complex and diverse**. As the complexity of cases we are supporting clients with has increased, so has the effort and time being put into each client's case, both on Adviceline and in follow-up appointments. There have been times when our resources have been under severe pressure, however ongoing service developments and the support of our volunteers and staff have ensured we have continued to provide an uninterrupted, high quality service.
- There have been **many operational challenges to overcome this year**, with financial pressures being one. We were able to access several emergency funding sources for 2020/21 which enabled us to invest in technology for remote advice-giving and additional paid staff to cope with the twin pressures of increased demand and reduced volunteer availability. All this emergency funding ended on 31st March 2021, however the same operational pressures have continued. Whilst we have sought every opportunity to raise additional

funds from charitable sources, it has been necessary for CANWK Trustees to allocate reserves to cover a projected £100,000 deficit for 2021/22. Whilst our Trustees have been willing to support this in order to preserve our ability to meet client demand, they have been clear that this cannot continue and there is a need for a more balanced budget next year. Our funding position for the next financial year is extremely uncertain at this point.

- We have been delighted to be able to support TMBC in delivering **household support grants for Tonbridge and Malling residents** struggling with the ongoing financial impact of Covid-19. So far, we have supported 160 TMBC households with supermarket and fuel vouchers, along with linking them into other CANWK advice services to assist with the underlying causes of their crisis.
- We have successfully completed the process of **OISC Level 3 registration for our immigration advice service**. This has been an arduous process, but now means that we have the expertise and permission to provide free immigration advice to local people with the most complex immigration issues. We are currently working with the National Lottery to plan how best to develop this essential service and secure the necessary funding.
- We have **continued to develop all our specialist advice services to meet existing and emerging needs of local people**. Along with the immigration advice team above, CANWK has specialist advice teams supporting clients with benefits, debt, housing and homelessness, employment and energy issues.
- **Opening up the offices has enabled us to focus on re-invigorating our volunteer Adviser team**. Whilst several long-serving volunteers in Tonbridge have chosen to retire, having found lockdown a natural break point, many others have returned to advice now they can come to the office and be supported by a Supervisor in person. Some refresher training has been needed, but we are delighted to have the benefit of their experience and commitment as we continue to cope with high demand from clients. We also began a programme of recruitment and training of new volunteers in September 2021. 10 new volunteers have now completed training and started advice-giving – 2 as form-fillers and 8 as two-day per week Advisers. As we now have a **rolling programme for volunteer training** using online resources developed during lockdown, new volunteers can start as and when they come forward and do not need to wait for a course to start. As a result we are confident that we are well on our way to rejuvenating our pool of volunteers following the pandemic.
- We have **strengthened our local partnerships to ensure the most vulnerable in our community are supported throughout the pandemic**. Examples include:
 - A CANWK volunteer Adviser attends a weekly session at the FEAST Community Larder in Tonbridge to support users of the larder with

underlying issues they may be facing. We also work closely with the other Tonbridge and Malling foodbanks to ensure they can refer clients as needed.

- We have been working closely with the TMBC Housing Teams on many client cases, providing additional support for the most vulnerable residents at risk of homelessness.
- Through the Advice Together partnership and our Refernet secure referral system we are working with many local agencies to ensure residents benefit from seamless support from the most appropriate agency. This has been particularly vital during the pandemic, as all organisations have needed to make changes to how clients access their services.

Key learning from this period:

Whilst for much of the year we have been operating a fully remote advice service due to ongoing Covid-19 restrictions, by late spring we were able to open-up our offices, including Tonbridge Castle, in a limited way, to minimise risk but enable volunteers to return to advice-giving. Rather than simply return to exactly how we were operating before the pandemic, we wanted to consider what we have learned and what could enable us to continue to operate an efficient services which is also accessible to all.

From the review, we have learnt that:

- **Telephone advice works well for most clients** – people like the anonymity and flexibility and the more efficient service has enabled CANWK to support more clients with more limited resources.
- **By channelling resources into our Adviceline service we are better able to support people who live outside of our town centres.** Additional capacity on the telephone means that when clients know their call will be answered, they do not feel they need to travel into the town centre to visit an office.
- There are some vulnerable people for whom telephone advice is more difficult. This includes some people with communication difficulties and some people with mental health issues. Therefore **it is vital to maintain alternative access routes to ensure our advice services remain accessible to all.**

Consequently, we have decided to continue to focus on maintaining capacity on Adviceline and encourage this as the primary channel for first access to advice.

For clients, it is a free and simple way to reach a fully trained Adviser from the comfort and safety of their own home. Face-to-face appointments will still be available for clients who really need to meet with an Adviser in person.

Client Case Study

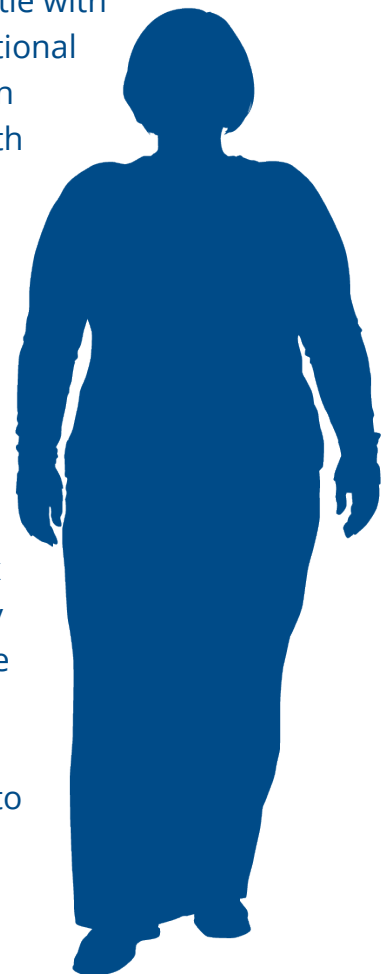
A client telephoned the CANWK freephone Adviceline service, seeking help as they were about to be made homeless from private rented accommodation where they had lived for a long time. They were due to be evicted by bailiffs in two days' time.

Through further discussion with the CANWK Adviser, it became apparent that the client had no established immigration status within the UK and No Recourse to Public Funds. They had also been a victim of sex trafficking both into and throughout their time in the UK.

The Adviceline Adviser referred the client to our Housing Specialist and Immigration Specialist Teams, who in turn contacted the Head of Housing at TMBC. Working together, a meeting was arranged within 24 hours between CANWK, TMBC and Porchlight. TMBC assisted the client into temporary accommodation, CANWK facilitated a meeting at the Castle with Porchlight, who assisted by making a referral via the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) to the Modern Slavery Human Trafficking Unit. Together we also provided the client with transport, food vouchers and an old office smartphone, in order to enable her to make a fresh start.

The client's application for an NRM was successful; they have been moved to a safe house outside the CANWK/TMBC area and are now supported by another charitable organisation. They are awaiting the Conclusive Grounds decision and are claiming asylum.

We are extremely proud of CANWK's role in this complex case; by gaining the client's trust we were able to identify a case of human trafficking and support the client to take positive action after many years in a desperate situation. It is also an excellent example of how local support agencies come together, bringing their own specialisms to provide a web of support for the most vulnerable in our community.



Plans for the year ahead:

The year ahead will be focused on embedding the service developments of the previous year and making necessary adjustments as we continue to adapt to the changing environment in which we are operating. We need to ensure that our advice services continue to be flexible to ongoing Covid-19 restrictions and evolving habits of individuals. We will also need to be mindful of the challenging financial environment in which we are operating.

However of particular focus for CANWK will be:

- To create a **Meet & Greet Team in our Tonbridge & Malling office at the Castle**. We have been successfully piloting 'Meet & Greet' in other CANWK offices over the last few months as a way to ensure that we are accessible to local people who are finding remote advice difficult. Our Meet & Greet team do not give advice themselves, but they can support anyone who comes to the door by giving them information on how to access our telephone and email advice, and anyone who is unable to, or lacks the confidence to, use these services will be assisted to do so. The team are also able to support clients with their paperwork, and will help people to use the 'virtual face-to-face' video calling facilities which enable clients to access the advice and support of Advisers with particular specialisms based anywhere in North and West Kent.
- **We will continue to recruit more volunteer Advisers to increase our advice-giving capacity**. We have 4 additional new trainees currently on our rolling training programme (giving 8 more volunteer advice days per week) and have another 3 potential volunteers to be interviewed. The online training is proving to be an effective way for us to bring new volunteers into our organisation as they are supported to complete their basic training in their own time and only need to start coming to our office once they are ready to start giving advice.
- **We will strengthen our links with other community groups across Tonbridge and Malling, with a particular focus on the 'M20 Corridor' villages**. We work hard to maintain our partnerships with voluntary and statutory organisations as we know that this is often the most effective way to reach the most vulnerable in our community. As more community groups are starting to open up and return to face-to-face activities, we are keen to refresh these links and ensure that the key messages about our services are well known and that we are engaging with others effectively.
- **We will develop new projects which build upon and broaden our advice services to fill gaps and meet client needs**. We are currently preparing funding proposals with the National Lottery to develop our immigration and homelessness specialist advice services. We are also planning to pilot 'virtual outreaches' for those clients who would prefer to see their Adviser but cannot easily travel to our central offices. Virtual outreaches could be delivered at a far

lower cost than in-person outreaches, and therefore have the potential to be rolled out across multiple locations across the District. With the support of the Snodland Partnership, our first virtual outreach pilot will be launched in Snodland in April 2022.

Tonbridge & Malling residents supported in 2021:

We have supported 2,166 Tonbridge & Malling residents during 2021, with almost 9,000 separate issues. In achieving this figure, we have increased the number of local people supported by 22%, compared to the previous year.

Issues being faced by clients have included:

- **38% of issues for which people sought help were related to benefits and tax credits, including help with claiming Universal Credit.** Whilst 27% of these issues were related to claiming Universal Credit, often due to the impact of the pandemic, the proportion of clients seeking support with disability benefits has been steadily increasing in recent months.
- **10% of clients sought help with employment problems** including redundancy and entitlements.
- **14% of clients sought help with debt issues.** Whilst the number of clients seeking help with their debts declined earlier in the pandemic (suspension of court proceedings and creditor action meant those in debt felt under far less pressure to address their issues), the number of debt cases has been steadily increasing throughout the year. We unfortunately expect this trend to continue, as local people continue to feel the impact of the financial challenges.
- **17% of clients sought help with housing issues, and 59% of clients were seeking advice for problems which put them at direct risk of homelessness.**

Client Outcomes:

Due to the nature of our work, we do not always get to know the outcomes of our advice, because once problems are resolved, clients tend to move on quickly. However of those clients who have kept in contact, **our advice and support has resulted in over £907,000 in financial outcomes and many more positive results for client's housing, health and wellbeing, life prospects etc.**

Client Profiles:

The changes in our client profile first seen in 2020 as a direct result of the pandemic have largely continued in 2021, for instance:

- More clients from outside of central Tonbridge wards – 68% in 2021, up from 58% in 2019.
- More clients of working age – 91% in 2021, up from 84% in 2019.
- More clients who are home owners – 29% in 2021, up from 19% in 2019.

However, there were also some indications of a reversal of some of the earlier pandemic changes in client profile:

- Fewer clients in full time employment – 22% in 2021, down from 29% in 2020.
- Fewer clients in any employment – 43% in 2021, down from 50% in 2020.
- Fewer clients not disabled and with no long term health problems – 54% in 2021, down from 59% in 2020.
- More clients with household incomes under £1000/month – 43% in 2021, up from 36% in 2020.

Whilst these changes are all fairly easily explained by the impact of the pandemic, it is essential that we ensure that our advice services remain accessible to all, and particularly the most vulnerable in our community. We are confident that this is the case, however as described earlier in this report, we will continue to provide alternative ways to access our advice and work with community partners to retain our accessibility across the district.

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.