



Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council

Update of Activities

January – December 2022

We are continuing to experience extremely high demand as local people struggle with the pressures of rising costs of living. The complexity of cases we are supporting clients with has also continued to rise, and therefore the effort and time being put into each client's case, both on Adviceline and in follow up appointments, has also increased. We continue to focus on maximising the efficiency of our service and trying to stretch ourselves to meet demand wherever possible, however inevitably there are times when client demand exceeds our capacity.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone at Tonbridge & 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.

Key service developments during the period

- We have been experiencing **consistently high demand on our freephone Adviceline telephone advice service throughout the year**, with weekly demand now regularly reaching 700 calls per week (whereas calls peaked at around 350/week during the pandemic). However **unlike during the pandemic, the issues being raised are far more complex and diverse**. As the complexity of cases 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.

- **We have successfully piloted virtual outreaches in Snodland and East Malling this year.** Virtual Outreaches are drop-in sessions in local community venues, where a volunteer will support people to connect with an experienced Adviser via video call, so that they can receive face-to-face advice. The volunteer is also trained to provide practical support, including scanning documents to share with the Adviser during the live advice session and helping people to read and complete forms with direction from the Adviser. We are delighted by how popular these sessions have proved to be, particularly with very vulnerable clients who dislike telephone advice.
- We have also launched our **first in-person outreach since the pandemic, with weekly drop-in sessions at the community café at St Stephens Church** in central Tonbridge.
- We have been delighted to be able to support TMBC in delivering **household support grants for Tonbridge & Malling residents** struggling with the financial pressures of these challenging times. **In distributing £65,000 to local residents, we have supported 410 Tonbridge & Malling 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 **continued to develop all our specialist advice services to meet existing and emerging needs of local people.** CANWK has specialist advice teams supporting clients with immigration, housing/homelessness, benefits, debt, employment and energy issues.
- **Successful funding bids to the National Lottery Community Fund have enabled us to secure the future of our specialist housing and immigration projects.** As the only free OISC Level 3 immigration service in Kent, we are delighted that continuation funding for our immigration project means that we can continue to support clients with the most complex immigration cases, including refugees. The new 'Homelessness Prevention Project' continues to provide specialist housing advice but extends its focus to work with community partners to identify and support local people at an earlier stage, before they risk crisis point.
- Our Homelessness Prevention Project has continued to **work closely with the TMBC Housing Teams on many client cases**, providing additional support for the most vulnerable residents at risk of homelessness. This partnership approach has been extremely successful in achieving positive outcomes for local people.
- Having begun a programme of recruitment and training of new volunteers towards the end of 2021, to reinvigorate our team following the pandemic, **we have since recruited 19 new volunteer Advisers and 2 new volunteer Form-Fillers, each volunteering at least 1 day/week in Tonbridge.** In total, we now

have 93 volunteers across North and West Kent, supporting local people with the challenges they are facing.

- We have **strengthened our local partnerships to ensure the most vulnerable in our community are supported**. 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 provided benefits training to the Tonbridge and Malling Community Wardens, to support them to give better quality advice to local residents, to recognise benefits issues and potential solutions, and understand how best to support people to access our specialist advice.
 - We have supported the development of the KCC ReferKent scheme as the expansion of our original Advice Together Partnership, through which we are working with many local agencies to ensure residents benefit from seamless support from the most appropriate agency.
- **We launched our new CANWK website at the end of 2022 at www.citizensadvicenk.org.uk** This has been a long-awaited ambition for us and we're very excited it is now online. It has been funded by a strategic development grant from the Kent Community Foundation and was designed to meet two goals - providing advice and service access information for local people and giving us an online presence to further develop our project and fundraising objectives. It is a fully accessible website, easily translated into other languages and fully compatible with accessibility software such as audio description. There are sections of the website aimed at people seeking help – linking them to self-help advice for the issues they are facing, highlighting local advice and support we can offer and telling people how to access our services. There are also sections for people interested in knowing more about CANWK and how they can support us through volunteering, fundraising or making a donation. Being able to direct people to different sections of our website will make a huge difference to our work in many ways.
- **December 2022 also saw the launch of our newest project, the Kent Money Advice Hub**. This is a pilot developed by us, in partnership with KCC, Debt Free Advice and other Citizens Advice in Kent, and aims to increase our capacity to support local people who are struggling financially or need help to manage the increasing costs of living. We are trialling the use of alternative digital resources (emphasis is on video calls and use of a small number of kiosks in other areas of Kent) to help people access the service in a way that works for them. We hope

that our learnings from this pilot will enable us to further expand our money advice service in the future.

Client Case Studies

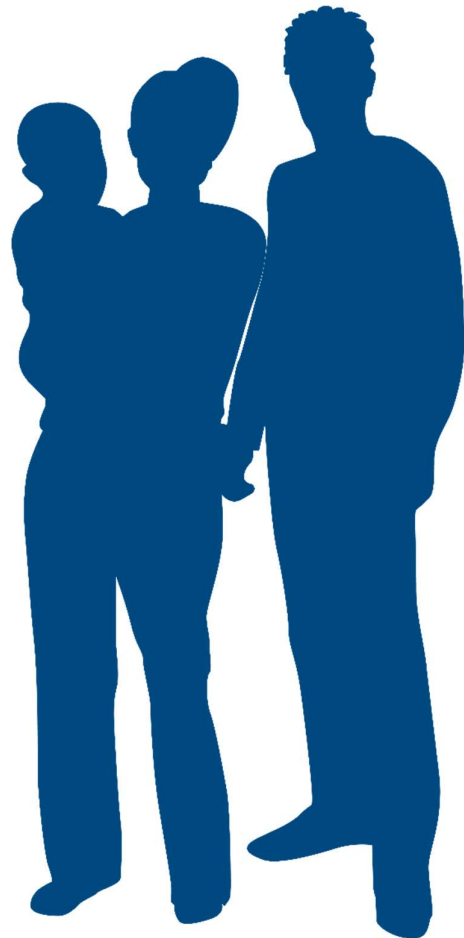
Client 1: John

John was referred to CANWK by the TMBC Housing Team. He and his wife had no financial troubles before the pandemic, but had started to struggle when his wife could not work during lockdown and their car, which was essential to his ability to work, had broken down. Having built up a number of debts, John had taken out an Individual Voluntary Arrangement (IVA) to try to resolve their financial difficulties, however they were not told of the potential difficulties with IVAs. When their landlord issued a Section 21 order to vacate the property when she decided to sell it, the IVA proved to be a major hurdle to securing a new property and resulted in the need for a guarantor, which the couple did not have.

Faced with the real threat of homelessness, John had approached TMBC, and they were referred to CANWK for support with their financial situation.

The CANWK Housing Specialist began by checking that the Section 21 order was valid, which it was. She then worked with the Debt and Benefits teams to explore what financial support was available and how best to deal with the IVA. As a result, the couple's income was maximised through access to appropriate benefits, and a longer-term financial plan was put in place. The CANWK Adviser continued to liaise with the TMBC Housing team to check on progress and provide further information to assist their work.

After several weeks, John and his wife were supported to find private rented property they were happy with and the Council was able to use their Homelessness Prevention Fund and Landlord Incentive Scheme to help secure it. This was an excellent example of partnership working to achieve homelessness prevention.



Client 2: Harry

Harry came to our Snodland virtual outreach asking for help with applying for benefits for him and his wife as he was struggling to cover his day to day expenses. Harry explained that whilst he could call Adviceline, he would not be able to make the application because he could not read or write and his wife, who would usually help him with this, was currently in a residential mental health unit.

The Adviser started by exploring Harry's current situation, discovering that he had long term health issues impacting on his mobility and ability to live independently. Whilst Harry and his family were receiving some benefits, his previous application for the disability benefit PIP had been turned down in 2019. Our Adviser felt he would have a strong claim for PIP and therefore made a further appointment to support him to complete the application form. During this appointment the following week, the Adviser carefully explored each part of the application with him, questioning him further in order to be able to answer in ways which accurately reflected his current situation. Whilst it is likely to be several weeks before Harry receives a decision from DWP, he was extremely grateful for the support he has received so far, and understands that he can come back to us if he needs further support in the future.

Client names changed to protect their identities.

Plans for the year ahead:

The year ahead will be focused on further developing our services to meet the challenges we currently face with increased demand and complexity of problems being faced by local residents. We will also need to be mindful of the challenging financial environment in which we are operating.

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 to ensure that we are accessible to local people who are finding telephone 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 advice, and for anyone who is unable to, they will assist in the most appropriate way, including arranging a face-to-face appointment. 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 develop new projects which build upon and broaden our advice services to fill gaps and meet client needs.** We have several additional community locations keen to host virtual outreaches for drop-in video advice. We will be preparing a number of funding applications to enable these developments, along with continuing our existing outreaches in Snodland and East Malling. We will also be seeking further funding to support our specialist advice teams, as their skills in supporting clients with the most complex cases are in very high demand.

Tonbridge & Malling residents supported in 2022:

We have supported 2,317 Tonbridge & Malling residents during 2022, with over 9,300 separate issues.

We find that clients' cases are increasingly complex, with people seeking our support for multiple issues which have built up to create the difficulties they are facing, however broadly this includes:

- **40% of issues for which people sought help were related to benefits and tax credits, including help with claiming Universal Credit.** In a reversal of the trend seen during the pandemic, 59% of these clients were seeking help with disability benefits rather than Universal Credit, particularly with applications and appeals for Personal Independence Payments (PIP).
- **68% of clients were seeking advice for problems which put them at direct risk of homelessness.**
- **16% of people sought help with housing issues.**
- **15% of clients sought help with debt issues.**

Owing 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 Tonbridge and Malling clients who have kept in contact, **our advice and support resulted in over £950,000 in financial outcomes and many more positive results for clients' housing, health and wellbeing, life prospects etc.**

Whilst open and accessible to all, we target our services to the most vulnerable people in our community, including those on low incomes, people with disabilities and long term health conditions, older people and those who are socially excluded for many reasons. During this period, notable indicators of the profile of our Tonbridge and Malling clients include:

- 63% were female.
- 46% were disabled or had a long-term health condition, including mental health issues.
- 84% were of working age.
- 42% had dependent children.
- 66% were in rented accommodation (local authority, housing association or private rented).
- 12% were living in households with an income of less than £400/month and 38% with an income of less than £1,000/month.
- 65% of clients lived outside of central Tonbridge wards.