

Citizens Advice Staffordshire North and Stoke on Trent's Report to Staffordshire Moorlands District Council

April 2017 - March 2018

Since 2013 when we merged Citizens Advice Staffordshire North and Stoke (CASNS) has provided the residents of Biddulph and the surrounding area with a high quality advice service. We provide advice on several levels ranging from basic signposting and the provision of information, to generalist advice through to specialist casework. We also deliver that advice in many ways including face to face across all 4 of our sites, telephone advice and email advice.

Telephone advice was previously provided via the Staffordshire Advice line until the end of February 2017 when funding was withdrawn by Staffordshire County Council. Since this date we have been trying to run a limited phone service for clients from Biddulph using volunteers as we are very aware many clients cannot attend in person due to disability or caring responsibilities. In September 2018 we started an exciting new project using Keele Law students to supplement the volunteer resource to help increase the provision of phone advice to Biddulph and the surrounding area.

Achievement and Performance

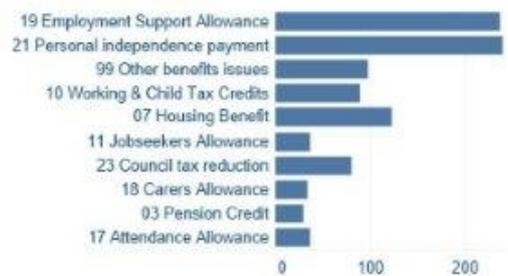
During the 2017/18 financial year the local office dealt with 2,408 issues for 822 unique clients (clients are only counted once no matter how often they use the local office) with 2,179 activities carried out (activities include interceding on behalf of clients with statutory and other agencies via phone, letters, e mail and online).

Summary	
Clients	822
Quick client contacts	231
Issues	2,408
Activities	2,179
Cases	928

Every client who comes into the local office is recorded, with their permission, on our case management system (provided to us by National Citizens Advice). This system allows us to extract a lot of very useful information about our clients, their problems and what we do for them which is then used to inform our work with partners and also to assist in our Research and Campaign work at both a national and local level.

Advice Categories

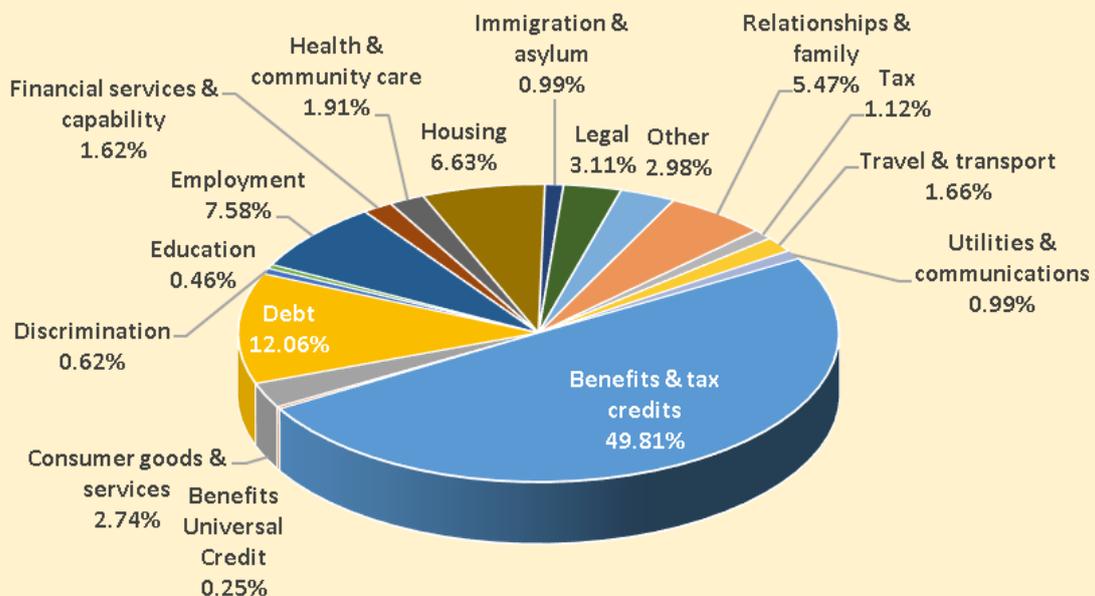
Top benefit issues



Top debt issues



Biddulph CAB



As the table shows the area of welfare benefits remains by far the highest category of problem in Biddulph (49.81%). The biggest demand is with assistance with disability benefit claims, with PIP followed by ESA being the biggest benefit areas. The largest debt issue is with council tax recovery.

We are anticipating that as Universal Credit is rolled out across Biddulph the demand for advice in both welfare benefit and debt will increase, as council tax reduction is not one of the benefits amalgamated into U.C and legacy benefit claimants will be being migrated to a new benefit with new compliance conditions that they have not previously been subjected to.

We are still experiencing a demand for assistance with to the number of housing benefit (HB) applications we are assisting clients with since Staffordshire Moorlands required all claims to be made on line. Over the last financial year we have assisted 25 households with making and managing a claim as they were either unable to navigate the application process unsupported or did not have access to the appropriate technology. In addition to this since blue badge applications have come online we have assisted 15 clients with their applications because they were digitally excluded.

Case Study 1

Client Profile

Client is a single female, divorced living in a Your Moorlands property, client suffers from epilepsy, anxiety and depression as well as migraines. Her sister came with her due to her blacking out and did most of the talking due to the client forgetting. She has had epilepsy for the past 64 years however the seizures have become more frequent. She has had several falls lately and burnt herself making a cup of tea.

She was previously on DLA which her social worker helped her with her DLA last time, however she was now being transferred onto PIP.

Description of client's enquiry

Client came in wanting help to fill out the PIP form as she didn't have a social worker allocated to her any more.

Action taken

We filled out the PIP form on behalf of the client, we went through the descriptors explaining the criteria for the points which she would need to be awarded in order to getting the benefit.

Once she had heard from the DWP about her application for PIP we asked if the client or her sister could let us know the outcome for records.

Outcome

Client's sister came in on her behalf and said she had been awarded Standard Rate Daily Living, bringing in a weekly income of £55.65, making an annual gain of £2,893.80.

Client's sister thanked us for all our help and brought us a box of chocolates.

Case Study 2

Client Profile

Client is retired, married, living in their own property she has had long term health issues for a while including arthritis, hip replacement, asthma and a broken arm in two places.

She was advised by her GP to make a claim for Attendance Allowance, due to how much help she needed in the daytime as well as at night time. Client was unaware of any benefit that they may be entitled to regarding her ailments.

Description of client's enquiry

Client and her husband both attended the appointment for us to help fill in the AA form which the client had received. We also offered a benefit check to the client but they declined.

Action taken

We filled out the AA form on behalf of the client, we went through the descriptors explaining the criteria for the points which she would need to be awarded in order to getting the benefit.

Once she had heard from the DWP about her application for AA we asked if they could let us know the outcome as there are two rates of the benefit.

Outcome

A couple of months later the clients husband rang to let us know that his wife had been awarded a back payment of £664.80 and a weekly amount of £83.10 making an annual income of £4,321.20.

Client and her husband thanked us for all our help and were very grateful for the service they received.

ADDED VALUE

As well as offering generalist advice to all clients and specialist advice to money advice and housing clients we are also able to assist clients to access other funds which may improve their situation. Being part of a national network like Citizens Advice does ensure we are able to access these alternative funds.

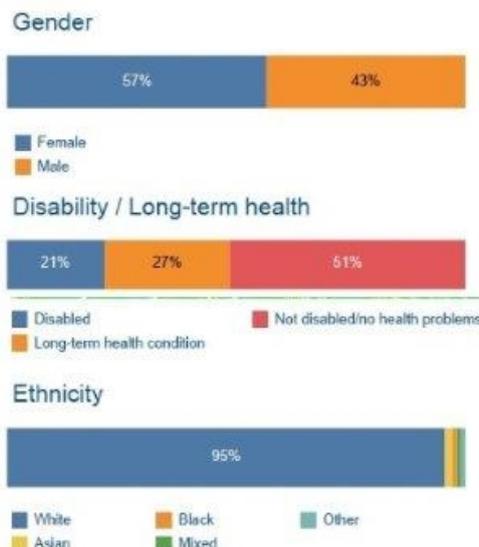
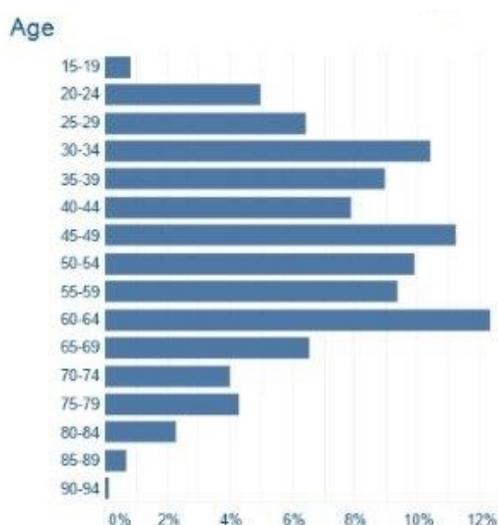
In the last financial year the generalist advisors have completed 8 applications to the Severn Trent Water Big Difference Scheme, 2 applications weren't completed due to the clients not being eligible for the scheme. 6 were successful 2 awarded an A award (80% of their bill) and 4 being awarded A+ (90% of their bill). A total amount of £1,308.44 was achieved on behalf of the clients and they have all been asked to come back in a years' time so we can help them reapply.

On some of the occasions client have also identified they have additional debts as well, in these instances the debt adviser has applied for the BDS as part of the clients overall debt strategy and we also provided information to clients on how to self-refer where they have the capacity to do so these figures are unavailable to us.

We get money for the Big Energy Saving's week each year to give people energy advice and particularly information and support to reduce their energy costs. We were able to open our local office on an extra day and were able to save one Biddulph client £140 off their energy bill.

Clients

Clearly CASNS Biddulph office, whilst one of the smaller local offices, is very highly prized and needed by that community. This can be demonstrated by the tables below which shows that it is used by all demographics that make up the local area.



Volunteers

We could not offer the services we do without the help and support given by the volunteers who assist us in giving advice or work behind the scenes within the local office. Our volunteers contributed 6,552 hours of work during the year. The estimated value of this help is £62,188 in respect of 2017/2018.

We continue to write a bi-monthly advice column in the Biddulph times and have written advice on many subjects including holiday advice and claiming compensation, Redundancy and debt and Consumer advice all issues we frequently have to in the bureau. An example of a column printed this year is below.

Biddulph Citizens Advice Corner

I am behind on my energy bills and my energy company wants to install a prepayment meter. I don't want one as I've heard they can be more expensive than paying by direct debit. What can I do?

Suppliers may try to install a prepayment meter if you are falling behind on your bills. This is so you can pay for your energy by topping up your meter before you use it, and don't get into debt.

If you don't want pay for energy in this way, contact your supplier to tell them you are struggling with your bills. They should help you agree a repayment plan, based on how much you can afford and

how much energy you use. If you are already on a plan but can't afford it, see if you can make a new arrangement.

Also discuss with your supplier the costs of the different meters and tariffs. Once you've agreed to pay back your debts, your supplier won't install a prepayment meter if you don't want one.

There are further steps you can take to help you with your bills. You may be eligible for the Warm Home Discount, which could reduce your energy bill by £140, or a one off Cold Weather Payment from the government.

Some energy companies also offer grants to their customers to pay off fuel debts, while other companies and charities have grants which are open to anyone.

For further help on negotiating with your supplier or applying for benefits, contact Citizens Advice.

For further advice on Consumer Issues contact Consumer Helpline on 03454 04 05 06 or get in touch with your nearest Citizens Advice.

Biddulph Citizens Advice (10, Tunstall Road, Biddulph, ST8 6HH) opening times Monday, Wednesday and Thursday from 10am – 1pm.

You can also visit www.citizensadvice.org.uk for information about a wider range of subjects or phone Adviceline on 03444 111 444.

Changes in coming year

We are currently preparing ourselves for the start of Universal Credit going Live in Biddulph. As our work with online applications for Housing Benefit and Blue badge applications can demonstrate there is a proven need for digital assistance for those residents who are digitally excluded either due to capacity issues or an inability to access the appropriate technology, this is an additional need in relation to their actual advice issues but one we are confident we can help address.