

# **Citizens Advice Staffordshire North and Stoke on Trent Report to Staffordshire Moorlands District Council**

**April 2018 - March 2019**

With the continuation of our funding Citizens Advice Staffordshire North and Stoke on Trent (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, email and more recently webchat.

We continue to strive to offer a 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. We are in our third successful semester of using Keele Law students to supplement the volunteer resource to help increase the provision of phone advice to our clients. In September 2019 we also started a collaboration with Cheadle Citizens Advice to increase phone provision across the Staffordshire Moorlands area by creating the Staffordshire Moorlands and Stoke on Trent Adviceline.

## **Achievement and Performance**

During the 2018/19 financial year the local office dealt with 1,870 issues for 1,012 unique clients (clients are only counted once no matter how often they use the local office) with 1,680 activities carried out (activities include interceding on behalf of clients with statutory and other agencies via phone, letters, e mail and online). This is in addition to the 49 residents of Biddulph that we have assisted under the Universal Credit Help to Claim Service

<b>S u m m a r y</b>	
<b>C l i e n t s</b>	<b>1,012</b>
<b>Q u i c k c l i e n t c o n t a c t s</b>	<b>410</b>
<b>I s s u e s</b>	<b>1,870</b>
<b>A c t i v i t i e s</b>	<b>1,680</b>
<b>C a s e s</b>	<b>833</b>

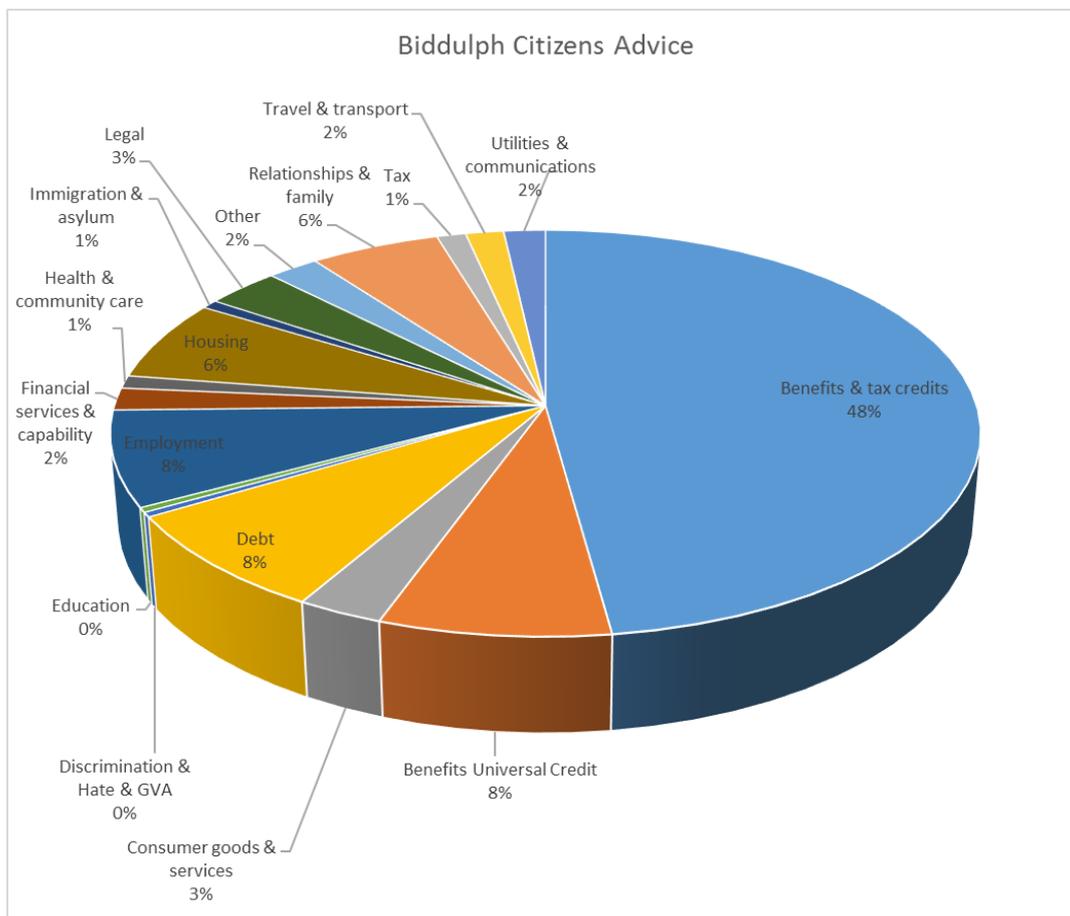
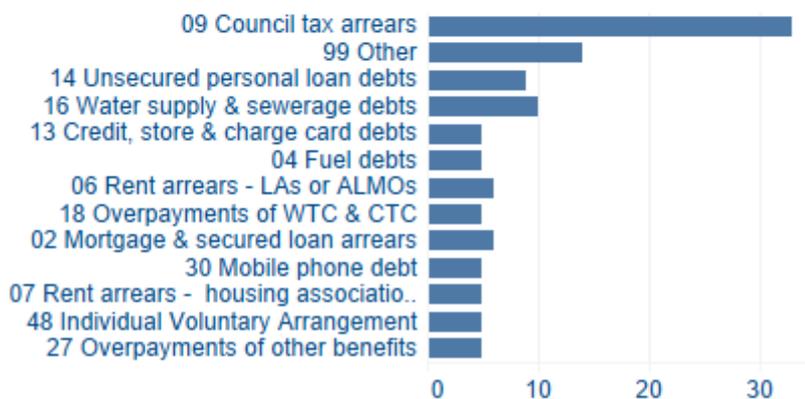
Every client who comes into the local office is recorded, with their permission, on our case management system (provided to us by National Citizens Advice). This system allows us to extract a lot of very useful information about our clients, their problems and what we do for them which is then used to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



As the table shows the area of welfare benefits remains by far the highest category of problem in Biddulph (48%). The biggest demand remains clients requiring assistance with disability benefit claims, with ESA followed by PIP being the biggest benefit areas. The largest debt issue remains with council tax recovery.

We are still experiencing a demand for assistance with the completion of housing benefit (HB) applications, Staffordshire Moorlands require all claims to be made on line and over the last financial year we have assisted 27 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 11 clients with their applications because they were digitally excluded.

## **Case Study 1**

### **Client Profile**

Our client is married, permanently sick living in a housing association property. His partner is also permanently sick and they have a claim in for ESA jointly, however we had already done a Mandatory Reconsideration for them and this was now at the Appeal process level. He was also informed by his GP to apply for PIP due to him suffering from agoraphobia, depression, anxiety and memory loss.

### **Description of client's enquiry**

Client and his wife came together on a couple of occasions and we helped them to fill out the PIP form and also helped with them appeal the ESA decision.

Our clients also stated that they had a water bill debt off Severn Trent, also some rent arrears which they were paying off at an agreed level with the housing association.

### **Action taken**

We filled out the PIP form with the client and informed him he may be eligible for both components for the mobility and daily living, however if he wasn't successful then we would do a Mandatory Reconsideration informing him of the time limits on doing this.

On the second visit we also made a phone call to the benefits delivery centre about the joint ESA claim to make sure the appeal had been logged, at the same time we helped the clients to apply to the Big Difference Scheme due to them being in debt with Severn Trent Water.

### **Outcome**

Our clients came back to let us know that he had been awarded PIP and is now receiving the enhanced daily living at a weekly amount of £87.65 and standard mobility amount of £23.20, this totalling to £5,764.20 per annum.

On the second visit when the client and his wife came to see us when we called the benefit delivery centre with the client's permission they put an ESA claim back in, whilst the appeal was going through. This then made an outcome of £114.85 a week making an amount of £5,972.20 per annum.

The outcome of the BDS scheme was an A+ giving the client a reduction in their water bill of £280.00 per annum.

## **Case Study 2**

### **Client Profile**

Our clients are married, retired, living in their own property, they are both in receipt of state retirement pension, and one also receives an occupational pension.

In January 2018 our client fell causing a broken foot & ankle and also a fractured shoulder. She had an operation to fuse her foot and is still in cast after 14 weeks. In addition she suffers from arthritis and polymyalgia rheumatic causing pain & restrictive movement in her joints which started approx. 5 years ago.

She is having to use a wheelchair and needs help from partner getting dressed, washing & bathing and using the toilet.

### **Description of client's enquiry**

Client wanted to know if we could fill in the Attendance Allowance form as this had been requested via the doctors but they were unsure on how to fill the form in. Client is literate however struggles to write due to their problems with the shoulder which is causing a lot of pain.

### **Action taken**

We filled out the AA form with the client and informed client they should be eligible, if not successful then they must return and we would be able to do a mandatory reconsideration. Offered client a benefit check at the time of filling the form out and they refused this.

Later when chasing the client to see if they were successful we were told they hadn't heard anything back from the DWP with regards to the claim, informed them to return to see us as they should have heard back within a few weeks.

Client returned to the office accompanied with their partner to chase up the form, we then re-issued the same form which was completed several months previously by ourselves, the DWP then accepted this and apologised for the form not turning up.

### **Outcome**

Client returned 2 weeks later to let us know that the claim had now been received and processed and they had been awarded the enhanced rate of Attendance Allowance which is paid at £85.60 making a benefit gain of £4,451.20 pa.

Client thanked us for all our help and gave a £20 donation.

## **ADDED VALUE**

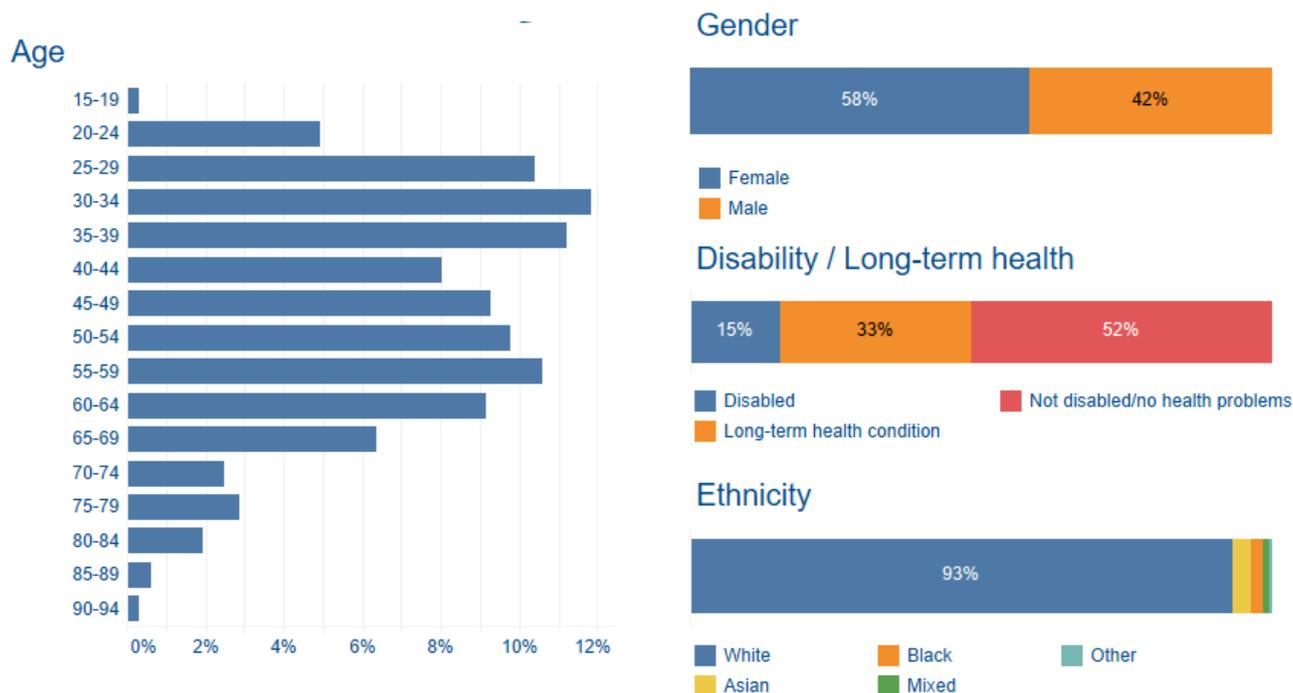
As well as offering generalist advice to all clients and specialist advice to money advice and housing clients we are also able to assist clients to access other funds which may improve their situation. Being part of a national network like Citizens Advice does ensure we are able to access these alternative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

In the last financial year the generalist advisors have completed 4 applications to the Severn Trent Water Big Difference Scheme. All were successful, 3 were awarded an A+ award (90% of their bill) and 1 being awarded a C+ (70% of their bill). A total amount of £1,131.00 was achieved on behalf of the clients and they have all been asked to come back in a year's 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.

## 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 6,916 hours of work during the year. The estimated value of this help is £64,042 respect of 2018/2019. In addition they have all maintained their skills and knowledge by attending our external training on Domestic violence, Consumer Issues, Mediation, Online Fraud awareness and Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit.

We continue to write a bi-monthly advice column in the Biddulph times and over the last year we have highlighted issues with Housing Benefit, Private Tenancies, Blue badges, Scams awareness and various benefit issues. An example of a column printed this year is below.

## Biddulph Citizens Advice Corner

**My mum has a non-visible disability, which causes her walking difficulties. I heard something on the news about how she may now be eligible for a blue badge. How can I find out about this and help her apply?**

On 30 August, the Blue Badge scheme was extended to people who live in England and have non-visible disabilities or conditions which affect their ability to walk. As a result, your mother may now qualify for a badge.

Your mother will be automatically eligible if she gets certain types of benefits. These include some categories of Personal Independence Payment and the higher rate mobility component of Disability Living Allowance.

If she's not automatically eligible she can still apply for a badge. Her local authority will use evidence from doctors and other healthcare professionals to determine whether she qualifies or not.

Your mother can check her eligibility and apply for a local authority-issued Blue Badge at [gov.uk/apply-blue-badge](http://gov.uk/apply-blue-badge). If she can't do this herself, you can apply on her behalf.

You'll need a recent digital passport-style photo, proof of her identity, address, details of any benefits she receives, her National Insurance number, and evidence of how her non-visible disability or condition affects her mobility.

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](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk) for information about a wider range of subjects or phone Adviceline on 03444 111 444 or the local Adviceline on 0300 330 9062.

## ***Changes in coming year***

We are keen to keep developing our reputation as a “one stop shop” within the community through our partnerships with Rethink and the Biddulph Network and we are currently preparing ourselves for the start of “move to Universal Credit” (formally called managed migration) in Biddulph.

As our work with online applications for Universal Credit, 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.