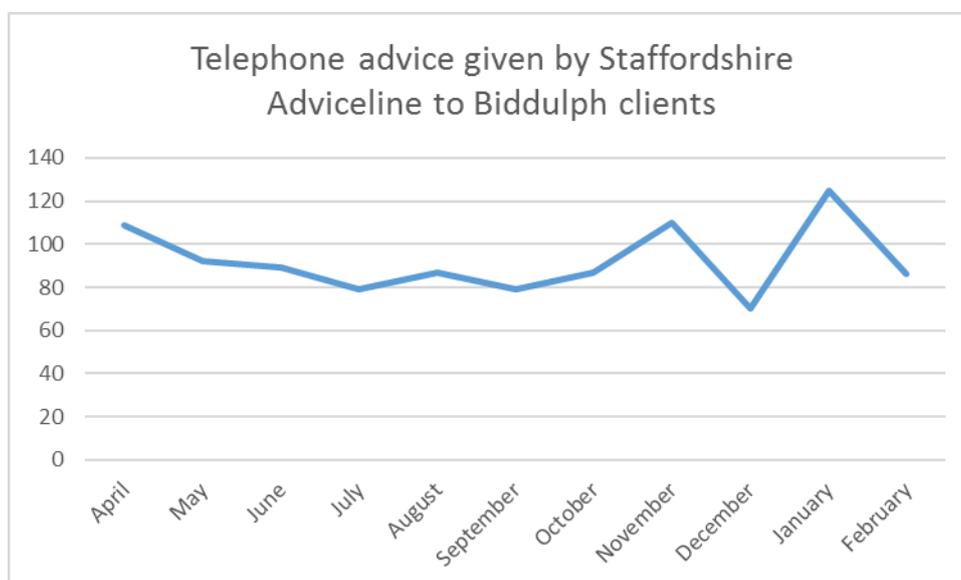


Staffordshire Moorlands District Council

Biddulph Citizens Advice Report April 2016 - March 2017

Citizens Advice Biddulph provide the residents of Biddulph and the surrounding area a high quality advice service. We provide advice on several levels ranging from basic signposting and the provision of information, generalist advice through to specialist casework. We also deliver that advice in many ways including face to face, telephone advice and email advice.

Telephone advice was provided via the Staffordshire Advice line until the end of February 2017, when funding was withdrawn by Staffordshire County Council. In the 11 months of this year adviceline answered enquiries for 1013 clients from the Biddulph area. Since that date we have been trying to run a limited phone service for clients from Biddulph using volunteers. We already know that whilst some of the clients who contacted us by phone will now come into the bureau many cannot attend in person due to disability or caring responsibilities and those clients will no longer be able to access our advice.



Achievement and Performance

During the 2016/17 financial year the bureau dealt with 1,095 enquiries for 1,039 unique clients (clients are only counted once no matter how often they use the bureau system). For clients this is an increase of 20% on the previous year.

Key Statistics

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|----------------|--------------|
| Clients | 1,039 |
|----------------|--------------|

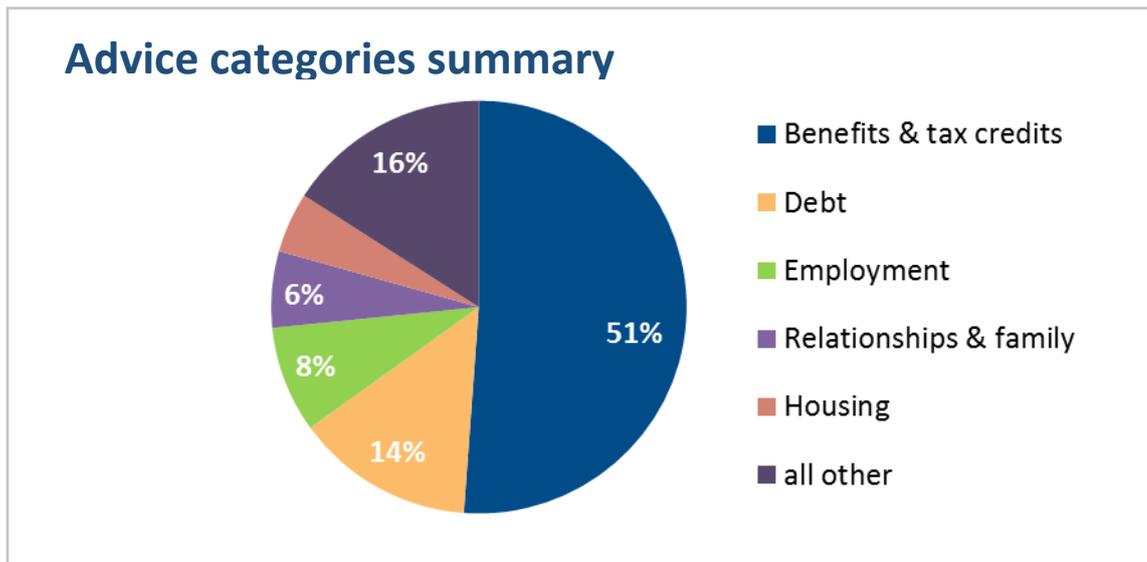
| | |
|---------------------------|--------------|
| Advice Issue Codes | 2,653 |
|---------------------------|--------------|

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|------------------------|--------------|
| Client Contacts | 2,985 |
|------------------------|--------------|

| | |
|------------------|--------------|
| Enquiries | 1,095 |
|------------------|--------------|

Every client who comes into the local service office is recorded, with their permission, on our electronic case management system which is provided to us by Citizens Advice centrally. This system allows us to extract a lot of very useful information about our clients, their problems and what we do for them. This information can be given to funders to justify what we have done but is also used to inform our work with partners to assist in Research and Campaign work at both national and local level.

The chart below illustrates the problems that clients have brought to the local service office in the last 12 months



The area of welfare benefits (51%) remains by far the highest category of problem in Biddulph. This has probably remained so this year due to the number of housing benefit (HB) applications we are assisting clients with since Staffordshire Moorlands required all claims to be made on line. In Biddulph both the library and the Town Hall give access to a computer but neither provide any assistance in completing the form. For many who are not IT literate this is not something they can complete on their own, from Jan 16- March 16 we assisted 15 people to complete HB forms. This is normally not a one off process as clients do not have all the information or proof they need on the first visit and have to return with those documents to have them added to the application. Completing this form and asking clients questions actually allows us to find other areas that we may be able to assist the client

Case Study 1

Client is married living in a rented 3 bedrooed property. He came to us to see if there was any further income he was entitled to, he and his wife were already in receipt of standard rate AA and wondered if this could be increased as he had a heart by- pass and his breathing & mobility had become worse and his wife's condition had become a lot worse. They were also in receipt of a state pension and a small occupational pension.

Action taken

Client initially had a Benefit check which flagged up that they were entitled to some CTR and HB. Client said they were up to date with any outstanding bills they had.

Outcome

- We completed 2 new forms to request a review of the rate for both of their Attendance allowances. This resulted in both being increased to the enhanced rate, an increase to their income of £56.40 a week*

- *We did an online application for HB and Council Tax rebate (CTR) using the SMDC website and he was awarded CTR of £27.12pw and HB of £20.00pw, the client was extremely grateful for our help with this as he was unable to do this himself.*
- *Client came back to us again a few weeks later as his Blue Badge was due for renewal and this also needed to be done on-line, we did the application and it went through ok.*

Client said he wouldn't know where to come if we weren't here and said he was very grateful for our time and help we gave him. As a result of his visit to us his annual income rose by £5,383.00.

Debt (14%) and Employment (8%) are the next 2 highest areas of concern to our clients.

In 2016/17 Biddulph local service office generated £5.16, in **benefits** to individuals through income maximisation, for every £1 invested by funders. The total gains for clients during the year were recorded at £250,000 which include welfare benefit entitlements as well as tribunal appeals. Benefit enquiries range from benefit entitlement checks, form filling, benefit suspensions and challenging benefit decisions. From SNSCAB a client receives both advice and support, and the tools to help themselves if possible. However advice like this is not quick. It takes time and many visits to sort out all the problems. Whilst statistics can illustrate numbers they cannot explain the depth and breadth of what we frequently do for clients.

Case study 2

Client was single living in an inherited property. He suffered from Anxiety, Epilepsy, Asthma and he had an ulcerated leg due to being a drug user for a prolonged period of time.

He was in receipt of Employment Support Allowance (ESA) but due to not feeling well enough to attend an assessment he lost this benefit. In the meantime his GP and nurse told him to come and see us with regard to claiming PIP. Client said he didn't have any outstanding debts but he had had debt advice from Citizens Advice in the past.

Action taken

- *We helped him to complete a Mandatory Reconsideration form to request reinstatement of his ESA*
- *We assisted him to complete a Personal Independence Payment. Due to the nature of his ailments it took several attempts for the client to engage with us and for these to be completed*
- *We also gave the client a food voucher on a two occasions whilst waiting for the benefit decisions.*

Outcome

We heard from the DWP that the client was successful in this application for PIP and was awarded Standard Rate Daily Living and Mobility this making an award of £55.10pw for the Daily living and £21.80pw for the Mobility component. He was also successful in getting his ESA re-instated, this meant he also received a back payment of £2,046.80

The total annual increase in his income due to our intervention was £6,046

When clients present with **debt** problems volunteer advisers initially assist clients to deal with urgent priority debts in order to stabilise the situation then refer to specialist debt workers funded by the Money Advice Service (MASDAP) if casework is required. MASDAP fund 1 full time equivalent worker throughout the SMDC area and Cheadle Citizens Advice provide this service to Biddulph clients within the Biddulph local service office. They therefore record all Biddulph clients indebtedness in their statistics and it is this way of dealing with debt that lowers the Biddulph statistics for debt.

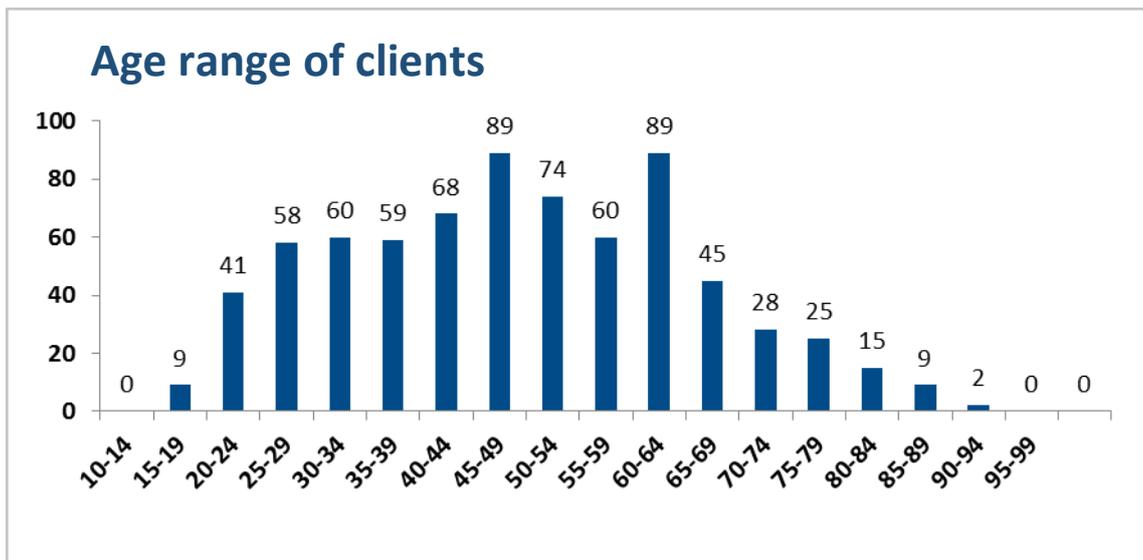
Added value

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. We assist clients to access the Big Difference Scheme which is run by Severn Trent Water to assist clients reduce their water bill. Last year we assisted 17 people with applications to the fund and saved them a total of £4,320.

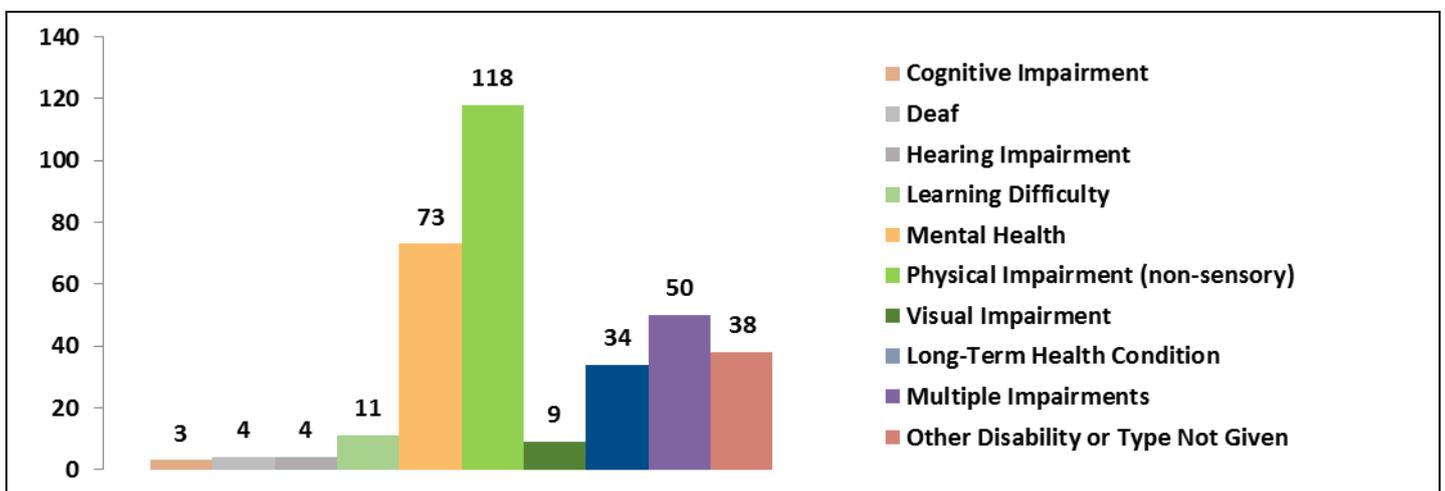
We get money for the Big Energy Savings week each year to give people energy advice and particularly information and support to reduce their energy costs. We had a stall within one of the supermarkets within the town to access people

Clients

Clearly Biddulph whilst one of the smaller local service office is very highly prized by the local community and needed by that community. This can be seen by the breadth of ages that use the bureau – see chart below.



Perhaps not suprisingly more than 50% of clients who attend the local service office report a disability. The range of disabilities reported is worth noting as it illustrates the complexity of the needs our clients have.



390 clients from the Moorlands chose to access the Citizens Advice through the Hanley or Newcastle local service office this may be because transport is easier for them to access these local service office or because they work in the 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 service office. Our volunteers contributed approximately 3,948 hours of work for the Biddulph service office during the year. The estimated value of this help is £80,348 in respect of last year (2016/2017).

Local Profile

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 into in the local service office. An example of a column printed this year is below.

For the Biddulph Times: Biddulph Citizens Advice Corner

Q. I bought a microwave two months ago but it's broken already and won't switch on. I went back to the retailer and they said they could have a go at repairing it, but I may have to pay a fee. Should I have to pay to get it fixed?

If your microwave is broken and it's not your fault you shouldn't have to pay the retailer to repair it.

Because you bought your microwave less than six months ago - you have the right to return it and get a free repair, a replacement or a refund. This applies whether you bought the item online or from a shop.

Check your retailer's returns policy to see how you should return it - some will collect it for free, while others ask you to return it through a delivery service or to a store. You'll need to show proof of purchase, such as a receipt or email confirmation, and explain the problem.

They should then offer to either replace or repair your microwave free of charge, if it's repairable. If both options are possible, the retailer should consider which will be the quickest and most convenient for you when making a decision.

If your microwave is sent away for repair but still doesn't work, you will be entitled to a full refund instead. You can also ask for a refund if your microwave is replaced with a different model.

For more information use Citizens Advice's online [faulty goods tool](#) or contact the Citizens Advice consumer service on 03454 04 05 06.

Changes in coming year

During this year Biddulph Town Council gave us an additional amount of £3,000 due to the closure of a local support agency. This will cease during 2017-18. The ending of the Staffordshire County Council funding means a reduction of £6,500 a year in funding. The local service office is secure but this does mean that from the start of April 2017 the local service office has reduced its opening hours by not opening for 2 hours on a Tuesday afternoon. We do not believe this is actually going to lead to a decrease in clients as it appears that the 3 days a week we are open are gradually becoming busier.