



LEIGHTON LINSLADE TOWN COUNCIL

CALL GRANT REPORT 2020 – 2021

Kash Karimzandi

Chief Officer

Citizens Advice Leighton Linslade

About us

Citizens Advice Leighton Linlade is based in Bossard House in central Leighton Buzzard. We serve the town of Leighton Linlade (with a population of around 42,000) but also the surrounding villages.

CALL is the principal provider of independent advice in Leighton-Linslade. There are other voluntary and non-profit making organisations who give advice as part of their services. However, most only provide advice as one of a range of services to a specific client group and often limited to only helping with one type of issue. In contrast, CALL works holistically to help with whatever issue the client is facing. We can switch between topics as matters progress which allows clients to have continuity regardless of how their life might change. We believe we are unique in offering this service.

Under normal circumstances, our service is open to the public 5 days per week including one evening session on a Monday. We also hold an outreach at a local General Practice for patients of that practice, on a fortnightly basis. We also run an ad-hoc outreach at TACTIC (the local teenage advice centre).

Aside from giving advice, we also undertake Research and Campaigns work both nationally and within our local community. We regularly give presentations in the local community. We also work with the local newspaper and radio to ensure we reach all potential clients and highlight the issues that need raising for our community.

During the last financial year 2020-2021 and carrying on into this year 2021-2022, we've continued to face challenges arising out of the Coronavirus crisis. On 19th March 2020, we regrettably had to suspend our face-to-face service, moving our operation to one entirely delivered by telephone and email. Whilst we have a plan in place to re-introduce face to face advice, we remain constrained by the physical layout of our interview rooms which currently prevents our being able to do so in a way that protects both our clients and volunteers as well as meeting the requirements of a Covid-safe environment.

Overview

Despite being restricted to telephone and email advice only, we've still seen 2,162 clients between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021 covering 6,823 separate issues. The number of clients is broadly similar to the number we saw in the last financial year, although the number of issues we helped each client with as decreased, most likely as the impact of Coronavirus really narrowed the focus of what clients needed help with.

Whilst battling with the challenges that Coronavirus has brought us, we continued to support and serve the community including delivering our obligations under our project funding. We have two projects - the Money and Pensions Service funding to deliver money advice and the Help to Claim project to support and advise clients on Universal Credit. Both projects' funding have continued into this financial year but are currently being recommissioned so it is unlikely we will be able to retain our service in its current model moving forward to the next financial year 2022-2023.

These projects bring with them extra obligations as well as an administrative burden. During the last financial year we had 7 paid staff, most of whom are part-time. Our volunteer team has grown despite the challenges: in 2020-21 we had 50 volunteers. Most of our volunteers train as General Advisers but we have other volunteers to do Administrative work, Bookkeeping and Research and Campaigns work. Two of our volunteers, including an ex-manager, provide vital support in session supervising which ensures the quality of our advice remains consistently excellent according to the National standards of Citizens Advice.

Our Board grew from four trustees to eight during 2021 - 2022 and the new trustees have embedded themselves firmly within our Board. Sadly, we said goodbye to our Treasurer, Isabel Varey, this year due to work and family commitments. We also said goodbye to a long-standing Trustee, Caroline Whitelegge who was an invaluable source of support both prior to and during the worst months of the Pandemic. We are beyond grateful that she has agreed to remain a source of support on an ad hoc basis as we move forward to the new "normal".

Client profiles and issues

You can see from the illustration of our statistics below that our main areas of enquiry continue to be Benefits and Debt. This is not a surprise considering how difficult the last year has been for people trying to cope with restrictions on working, earning less on furlough and the inevitable redundancies. For some of our local community, this is the very first time they have been forced to navigate a very complex benefits system. For many, they found themselves suddenly trying to cope on far less income, having previously had no problems maintaining their lifestyle when they had control of their work.

In 2019-2020, 53% of our client contacts were face-to-face, 23% were by telephone and 12% by e-mail or letter. By comparison, in 2020 – 2021, 60% of our client contacts were by telephone and 35% by email or letter. This represents a huge change in the way we deliver our advice and has proved challenging for our volunteer advisers who have coped remarkably well with the rigours of our new way of working. We were fortunate to obtain a small amount of funding from National Citizens Advice which allowed us to purchase some equipment to allow our staff to work remotely. It also went towards replacing our antiquated analogue telephone system and replacing it with a new cloud- based platform.

Despite this, we continue to be concerned about members of our local community who might slip through the net as we are unable to offer the face to face drop in service which was once so popular. Our dedicated advisers and staff have continued to ensure that clients benefit from a localised service by ensuring we are available to receive documentation at the door and assist clients by offering three way conversations with agencies like the Department of Work and Pensions if they are particularly vulnerable and struggle with the telephone. We've also been able to arrange for telephone interpreters for those residents for whom English is a second language. We're proud of our inclusive and focussed approach to ensuring every client receives the help they deserve.

Current Funding

Core

The Town Council has again been very generous in their support to CALL and provided a grant which increases annually to reflect inflation. The amount received in the financial year 2020/21 was £21,995.

Central Bedfordshire Council (CBC) continues to be the principal source of funding for the three Local Citizens Advice (LCAs) which cover the area: Dunstable, Leighton Linslade and Mid Beds (based in Ampthill and Biggleswade). This funding was maintained in 2020/2021 at the same level as the previous year and our share of the Core Grant was circa £61,000. We also received a share of the Welfare Reform Funding Grant, our share being approximately £13,000.

Project

We received circa £51,000 from the Money Advice Service (now Money Advice and Pensions Service) last year which largely cover the extra salary costs necessitated by the project as well as contributing to our overheads.

We received circa £17,000 in total from the Help to Claim project (the partnership between the DWP and National Citizens Advice) in the last financial year. This covered the extra salary costs for the Universal Credit Adviser as well as ongoing training for existing advisers and staff and contributing to our overheads.

Department for Business Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) Funding

In May 2020, the Government announced that they would be funding Citizens Advice up to £15 million as part of a package to front line charities. This funding was received by National Citizens Advice (our membership body) who allowed applications for funding in August 2020. We were awarded £6,000 altogether with which we used to update our equipment including laptops and softphones subscriptions to allow us to work remotely in line with the Government guidelines for a Covid-secure workplace.

Future funding

Core

Unexpectedly, this financial year CBC decided to merge both the Core Grant and the extra Welfare Reform Funding we historically receive into one grant so all three LCAs in Central Bedfordshire have been fortunate enough to maintain their current level of funding from the Local Authority. This is by no means a given for the next financial years so we continue to anticipate that there may well be a cut in this budget, particularly given the burdens on the public purse post-Covid.

Project

The MAPS project continues to provide a challenge due to the extremely onerous conditions of the funder. We understand that the Funder is currently in the process of recommissioning the project and we are unlikely to receive any funding next year so we are anticipating the loss of our specialist money advice team in the next financial year. The Board are currently working hard to try to mitigate the loss of this funding in any way and we hope to be in a position to continue to assist the local community with debt advice in some form in the future.

The Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) have also recommissioned this funding and it seems likely that we will not receive this funding in the next financial year. However, with the loss of our specialist Universal Credit adviser in September of this year, we do not have the burden of extra salary costs as we have been unable to recruit someone into her position. We are currently relying on staff and volunteers to deliver on this project and we feel confident that even without the funding, we can continue to support clients in making a claim for Universal Credit and beyond.

Despite the possible reduction in funding in the coming year and the challenges we know that will bring, the Board of Trustees are working hard to seek alternative sources of funding so our service can continue to support the community whilst the long-term impact of the Pandemic is still largely unknown. However, the continued support and funding from the Town Council would certainly assist us and allow us to keep our core services available to the local community.

Our Impact

During this year we had 50 volunteers and 8 Trustees who, between them, gave 300 hours a week of their time to help and support our organization in offering our vital service to the local community. This equates to a value of more than £360,928 for this year. This clearly illustrates the significant contribution our volunteers make and I would like to personally thank each and every volunteer for their hard work and commitment to Citizens Advice Leighton Linslade. Without them, we would not be able to offer free, independent, impartial and confidential advice to anyone who needs it, whoever they are and whatever their issue.

National Citizens Advice undertook a client survey regarding Citizens Advice Leighton-Linslade and the results of this were as follows:

- 100% of clients were positive or very positive about the service we provide.
- 100% of clients found our service easy to access.
- 100% of clients would recommend Citizens Advice to others.

Here are some of the comments we received:

Although I couldn't see somebody at the bureau initially due to them being closed I rang up and was asked to bring the relevant paperwork down and spoke to a gentleman at the door. He subsequently followed this up with a phone call to me to reassure me regarding the problem and told me to call the company back and make an offer of payments which I did and the problem was resolved. Although I probably could have sorted out the problem on my own the gentleman's advice convinced me of the right way of dealing with the problem. Thanks for the help.

Just awaiting an outcome on the problem & I know that the wonderful people at CAB can take me through the next stages.

The Team are so understanding considerate kind caring Helpful in every way. They go above and beyond to get the help we need. Thank You Citizens Advice

I was very pleased with the support although the help I am getting is still ongoing I am very pleased with the help I have received so far

APPENDIX

CALL KEY STATS 2020/2021

Key Statistics

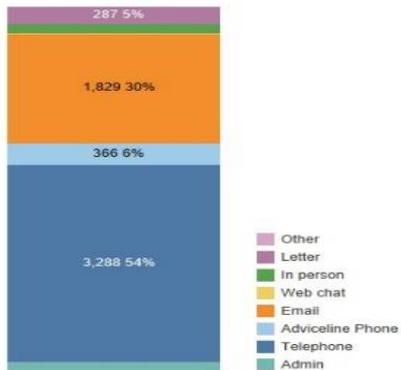
01/04/2020 01/04/2021

citizens advice

Summary

| | |
|------------------------------|--------------|
| Clients | 1,876 |
| Quick client contacts | 286 |
| Issues | 6,823 |
| Activities | 6,117 |
| Cases | 2,075 |
| Outcomes | |
| Income gain | £11,785 |
| Debts written off | £60,117 |
| Repayments rescheduled | £0 |
| Other | £1,400 |

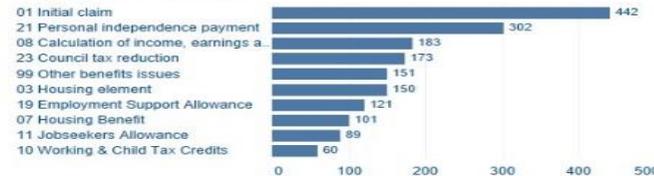
Channel



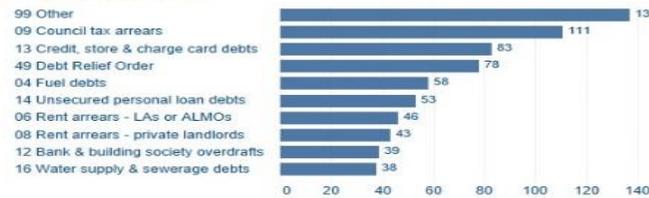
Issues

| Issues | Issues | Clients |
|---------------------------------|--------------|---------|
| Benefits & tax credits | 1,269 | 513 |
| Benefits Universal Credit | 1,010 | 449 |
| Consumer goods & services | 240 | 151 |
| Debt | 1,026 | 267 |
| Discrimination & Hate & GVA | 49 | 28 |
| Education | 43 | 24 |
| Employment | 851 | 383 |
| Financial services & capability | 208 | 110 |
| Health & community care | 144 | 79 |
| Housing | 665 | 317 |
| Immigration & asylum | 81 | 49 |
| Legal | 259 | 167 |
| Other | 143 | 96 |
| Relationships & family | 563 | 286 |
| Tax | 76 | 56 |
| Travel & transport | 85 | 55 |
| Utilities & communications | 111 | 59 |
| Grand Total | 6,823 | |

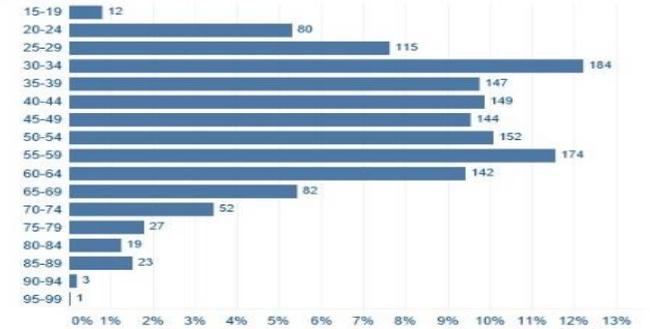
Top benefit issues



Top debt issues



Age



Gender



Disability / Long-term health



Ethnicity



Please accept our sincere thanks and appreciation for continuing to support and encourage the vital work we do for the Leighton Linlade community.

Feel free to speak to me on the details given below if you want to learn more about our work or even to organise a visit to our office.

Ms Kash Karimzandi

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