

# **Citizens Advice Stratford upon Avon And District Annual Review 2015/16**



**citizens  
advice**

# Snapshot of our Services \*

We know that many people encounter challenges and difficulties and often don't know how to deal with them. These can vary from problems with work, consumer problems, understanding housing options, managing financial difficulties or dealing with relationship breakdown. Citizens Advice Stratford on Avon and District enables people to access the support that helps them make informed decisions.

## Anyone can have a problem

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### Who we helped



**5400 people**

Helped face-to-face or by phone, email or webchat



**6300 new enquiries**

Started in the year



**23000 issues**

Top 3 issues were Welfare Benefits, Debt and Employment

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### How we do this



**8 locations**

Where we provide free and confidential support



**More than 70**

Dedicated staff and volunteers



**£415,000**

Estimated worth of donated hours by our volunteers

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### The difference this makes



**2 in every 3**

Clients had their problem solved



**4 in 5**

Clients said our advice improved their lives



**99%**

Of our clients reported satisfaction with the overall service

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## All of this benefits individuals and society

\* Citizens Advice outcomes and impact research 2014. Plus local statistics

# A Review of Our Year

## Yvonne Hunter, Chair

### Reaching out

As we look back at 2015/2016, we can be proud of the work undertaken by the service in reaching out to increase the number of clients helped and the range of issues handled. We made a number of changes to help our clients get advice more easily, including by email advice and through a national Citizens Advice pilot of help by webchat. We have also worked with Stratford District Council to set up a videolink service, for those who cannot reach our main office.

However, life continues to be ever more complicated and difficult for many of our clients as further cuts to welfare benefits are planned.

In June this year we said goodbye to our manager Sue Green. She had managed the service for over 6 years and before that served as a Trustee. On behalf of all of us, I would like to express our sincere thanks to Sue for her dedication, which enabled us to develop and grow.

We recognise the increasing need for Citizens Advice's work, but also the financial pressure on our funders. We are working to see how we can best reconcile the two.

We are exploring the merits of a merger with Citizens Advice in Warwick District to form Citizens Advice South Warwickshire. Over the last two years we have been working increasingly closely, delivering joint services and sharing best practice and resources. We feel positive about the collaborative work we have undertaken and see the increased financial and operational resilience that a merger could bring. Since July 2016, the Manager of Warwick District, Aidan Knox, has also been our manager. This has improved our understanding of the services we can provide together. We are supported in the merger by the County Council and have engaged consultants to see how this might work and what the risks might be.

Our Trustee Boards have agreed in principle that a merger is likely to be the best way to sustain and develop services to clients in the future. We are working towards a merger date of 1st April 2017, subject to the approval of members at the AGM, and an EGM in early 2017.

We are very grateful to all our funders, but finding sufficient funding to address the needs of the many vulnerable people in our community is a serious challenge. Often we are the only source of help when they need someone to stand up for them.

We owe an enormous debt of gratitude to our volunteers, including my fellow trustees, for their commitment and hard work. Without our volunteers there would be no service. We also thank all our staff for their unstinting efforts to provide services to our clients, putting in efforts above and beyond our expectations in order to keep the Bureau running and developing.

People often forget or never realise that we are a local independent charity and we depend on our local authorities and other funders to support us to provide our service. We would welcome any further support which reached out to help over 5000 people in this year alone.



Aidan Knox, Manager and Yvonne Hunter, Chair

# Reach Out and Help

This project aims to uncover those people or households who are socially isolated, who are not getting the help they need to address the issues they face. This often results in an escalating number of unresolved issues often relating to debt, health, unemployment and housing problems.

The service has been so successful that we have been awarded a Big Lottery Fund grant to continue delivery in the town and wider district for another three years. This new funding began in July 2016.

## Fighting poverty in Stratford town

Our first Reach Out and Help project, funded by Stratford Town Trust, supported people in crisis and hardship who had nowhere else to turn. Over three years we knocked on more than 4000 doors in the town and as a result were able to help over 1400 people of all ages with their problems.



*"To all members of staff involved in helping us through a very difficult time with a polite and professional manner. We are all so very grateful."*

## Reach out and Help Stratford District

At the start of 2015, we extended Reach Out and Help through funding from Orbit Heart of England, Stratford District Council and Warwickshire County Council, into a number of towns and villages in the District. The project began in Alcester, Henley and Studley, and then moved to Lighthorne Heath, Kineton and Southam. Demand in Alcester was particularly strong and so we're delighted that the new funding from the Big Lottery Fund will run for three more years in Alcester alongside Stratford and the surrounding villages. We aim to support a further 500 households.

*"You put people at ease and explain everything in an easy, simple manner."*

## Healthy Homes



The Healthy Homes project was launched in March this year across South Warwickshire as a partnership with Warwick District Citizens Advice, GP surgeries, Prime GP and Act on Energy. The project targets vulnerable patients with illnesses and conditions affected by living in a cold home, such as COPD, asthma and pregnancy. It tackles poor housing conditions such as poorly heated or draughty homes, lack of insulation, damp or mould, and maximises people's incomes including help switching to better value fuel tariffs. We take referrals from health workers based in the GP surgeries. The project is funded by British Gas Energy Trust.

## Outreach



Stratford District is a large rural area of some 378 square miles. To ensure that we are accessible to as many people as possible we operate seven outreach services across the district. All of these outreaches are valuable to local residents and we made 566 appointments over the year. The financial benefit to the district of this service is substantial and includes helping people claim welfare benefits, rescheduling or writing off debt and obtaining charitable grants to tackle hardship.

## Money Advice

**£** The Money Advice team worked with 225 new clients during the year and managed debts totalling just under £3 million. Demand for their services continues to rise as debts become larger and more difficult to deal with. The team identified additional welfare benefits for their clients, easing financial pressures on struggling households.

*"Two months ago my life was in crisis. Now I have a more settled income, my debts are being rescheduled and now I can see a way forward."*



Healthwatch Warwickshire (HWW) is the independent consumer champion for health and social care. We work in partnership with HWW, Age UK, WCAVA and other Citizens Advice services across the county to oversee issues arising in the field of health and social care. This partnership is ideally placed to pick up trends, to provide feedback about services, to campaign, and to ensure that individuals get help to navigate and access the health and social care services they need.

## Web Wise



This project, funded by Comic Relief and delivered by Stratford Citizens Advice in partnership with Age UK Warwickshire, entered its third year in 2015-16. It aims to help older people in the District get access to and learn how to use computers and the internet in order to manage their finances and improve their household budgets. Our home visit service supported 535 clients and secured nearly £1 million of additional income for them. Some 97% of our clients had a disability and the average age of clients was 80 years. A survey in 2016 revealed 87% of clients felt the service had made a significant difference to their lives.

*"The CAB worker who came to see me was very knowledgeable. Having early stage dementia it was much easier having someone coming to see me as I might not have found my way to the office."*

*"Cannot imagine what I would have done without your help."*

*"Made it possible to eat well and keep warm."*



## Court Desk Service



Our court desk worker represents clients at repossession hearings and helps them to afford to remain in their homes. A successful collaborative approach which includes money advice, financial capability work, and liaising with Stratford District Council and landlords at an early stage have all helped to prevent homelessness. The local judiciary value this approach. Our court desk service helped 117 families during the year. On the 33 occasions where we supported a tenant with advocacy to suspend the execution of a Warrant of Eviction the defendant was successful. In virtually all the other cases negotiation with landlords and lenders enabled the clients to remain in their homes. Prevention of homelessness saves distress to individuals, families and children. There is also a substantial financial saving to the District—on average £16,500 per eviction prevented. The court desk service is funded by Stratford on Avon District Council, and on this basis their investment has saved the District around £1.5 million.

## We resolve 2 out of 3 client problems<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Citizens Advice National Outcomes and Income Research, 2014

## Campaigning for change

As well as helping clients with their problems, we also keep an eye on issues with local or national policies and practices and highlight the impact they have in the district.



Fuel poverty is a concern. We campaign to raise awareness of better fuel tariffs, switching providers, getting grants for boilers, and dealing with the high cost of prepayment meters. We have run energy awareness campaigns and events, some in partnership with other organisations such as Act On Energy.

We are concerned that lack of access to bank accounts is a barrier to getting into work for some vulnerable clients and have taken part in national Citizens Advice work to help get this improved.

Our Consumer Empowerment Partnership forums continued to be valuable for sharing knowledge and for networking. A highlight of the year's meetings was a visit from Wendy Alcock of Moneysavingexpert.com who gave an inspiring talk on campaigning for change.

## Our Volunteers

Our volunteers across the whole service provided an equivalent of £415,000 in time. Volunteering as an adviser in the Citizens Advice service is rewarding and challenging and our advisers are rightly proud of their skills. We work hard to keep up with the never-ending task of attracting, training and retaining volunteers in all roles who are vital to the continued success of our service.

Our volunteers perform a variety of roles in addition to advice. Our receptionists are volunteers. We have volunteer case workers, interpreters, session supervisors, research and campaigns workers, outreach workers, administrators and fundraisers.

And of course our Trustee Board members are all volunteers too.

*"Brilliant, efficient, friendly advice"*

*"The clarity that the meeting brought is priceless. Thank you."*

*"Really helpful, and concerned about my situation."*

*Client comments, October 2015*

## Community Fundraising

During the year we held a number of fundraising events, organised by bureau volunteers and staff. Our fundraising was fun and raised the profile of our work. Events included a quiz night, a fashion show, our Grand Christmas Raffle and charity bag packing at Waitrose. A generous donation from Stratford Rotary enabled us to buy a TV for our office reception area. In addition to this we received a substantial legacy.

We were proud to be one of the two charities chosen by Stratford-upon-Avon Mayor, Tessa Bates and one of the charities for the High Sheriff, Janet Bell Smith. This gave a major boost to our community fundraising. Throughout the year Tessa and Janet supported our events and they in turn held events that supported us, such as a ball, a cabaret evening and a quiz. We were proud to take part in the Shakespeare Birthday Parade as Tessa's guests. At the end of their term of office we received a proportion of the money raised during the year, but more importantly, through their work our profile has been raised and more people know that we are a local charity.



Mayor Tessa Bates and High Sheriff Janet Bell Smith

# Free, confidential advice.

# Whoever you are. Whatever the problem.

We help people overcome their problems and campaign on big issues when their voices need to be heard.

We value diversity, champion equality, and challenge discrimination and harassment. We're here for everyone.

Citizens Advice Stratford Upon Avon & District would like to acknowledge the support of our major funders:



## Contact us

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Registered Charity number 1105342

