

IMPACT REPORT 2020



**citizens
advice**

Uttlesford



www.uttlesfordcab.org.uk

FOREWORD

The Coronavirus outbreak has drastically changed all of our lives and the way that we work.

In line with Government advice, our offices closed on 19th March and, with the help and support of our staff and volunteers, we moved immediately to a telephone service. Like so many groups and organisations we were forced to rapidly adapt to the new demands of working and training remotely whilst legislation, guidance and support provision seemed to alter on a daily basis.

The sudden change in circumstances was reflected in a marked difference in the range of enquiries we received from our clients. Although benefits remained our top advice area, debt and housing issues were temporarily pushed down the advice list, to be replaced with emergency response work and employment advice. There was also a noticeable shift in our client base, with a 5% reduction proportionately in clients aged over 50 and a 5% increase in the 20-39 client age group.

During the initial phase of lockdown our call volumes actually reduced as some of our most vulnerable clients seemed to benefit from the temporary uplifts in welfare payments, restrictions on bailiffs and evictions, payment holidays and delays in benefit assessments, which helped to keep demand manageable. Recognising that loneliness and isolation were likely to become increasingly difficult for people, we developed a temporary service called The Listening Line. This enabled us to respond to a need whilst allowing us to utilise those of our volunteers who were unable to deliver home visits.

As we enter a second lockdown, we know that an increasing number of people are facing economic insecurity. As temporary financial support and protections are lifted, we expect



“WE KNOW THERE ARE DIFFICULT TIMES AHEAD AS WE MANAGE GROWING DEMAND AND AN UNCERTAIN FUNDING ENVIRONMENT”

even more will feel the impact. We have already seen a significant increase in people requiring employment advice, benefit support and access to emergency support and anticipate that over the next few months more people will require help to manage debts that may no longer be sustainable on a reduced income. In response to this changing need we have successfully applied for funding to recruit and train a further two part-time debt advisers and have supported the development of a community led clothing bank.

We know there are difficult times ahead as we manage growing demand and an uncertain funding environment. We remain sincerely grateful for the strength of commitment shown by our volunteers and staff and the support of our funders and the local community. Together this ensures that we can continue to give people the knowledge and the confidence they need to find their way forward – whoever they are, and whatever their problem.

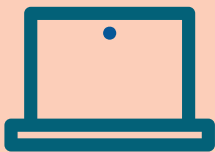
Richard Armitage
Chair of Trustees

RESPONDING TO A CHANGING NEED

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented challenges for both our service and the people we help.

Thanks to the creativity and resilience of our staff and volunteers we were able to move to a home-based service overnight whilst maintaining rigorous standards of client confidentiality and data protection. We continue to offer high quality advice by phone and email.

Between March and September 2020:



We answered 4,215 phone calls and 1,755 emails



We helped 278 clients with Universal credit issues



Redundancy issues increased by 367% compared to the same period last year

6 MILLION PEOPLE HAVE FALLEN BEHIND ON THEIR BILLS DUE TO #CORONAVIRUS. THAT'S 1 IN 9 ADULTS IN THE UK – BUT CARERS, PEOPLE WHO WERE SHIELDING AND KEY WORKERS ARE AT LEAST TWICE AS LIKELY TO BE BEHIND ON THEIR BILLS.

“When you are really down they give reassurance and point you in the right direction”
Mrs A



Foodbank referrals increased by 143% compared to the same period last year



We advised 33 clients on homelessness issues



8,596 people viewed a facebook post about how to access our service

Uttlesford Citizens Advice
We're here to help

- Telephone advice**
Advice on benefit entitlements, money worries, employment rights, housing concerns or relationship challenges
- Help to claim**
Help to claim Universal Credit, including support to overcome any technical barriers to making your claim
- Disability benefits**
Help to complete disability benefit forms and advice on appeals
- Access to local support**
Foodbank referrals, access to emergency funds and information about other local support services

Call **01799 618840**
or email help@uttlesfordca.org.uk

citizens advice Uttlesford

Staff and volunteers are available
Monday to Friday
from 9.30am to 3.30pm

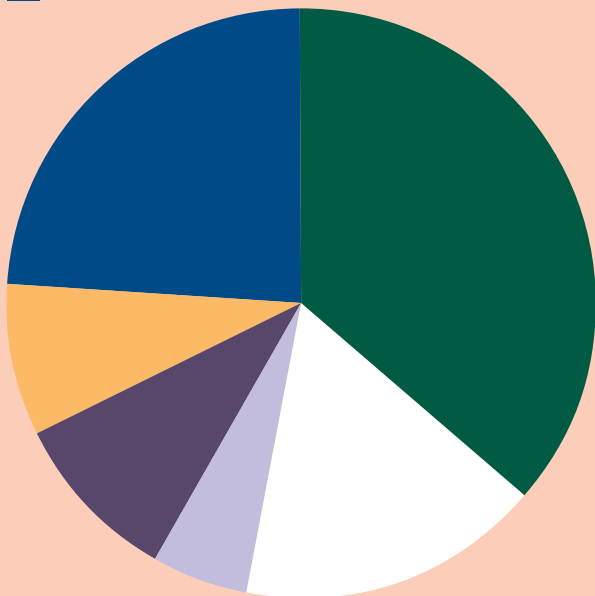
WE'RE HERE FOR EVERYONE

We try to reach as many people who need our help as possible. This year we've helped 2,761 people deal with 9,469 separate issues. More than half of our clients have a disability or long-term health issue.

Our clients are often dealing with serious life changing circumstances, such as bereavement, job loss, family separation or the loss of a home, situations in which one problem can very often lead to another. For example, a long-term illness can lead to job loss, debt and homelessness. It is our aim to work with clients to prevent difficulties from escalating and help them to manage a sudden change in circumstances.

CORE ADVICE ISSUES 2019-20

- 36.4 % benefits
- 16.8% debt
- 5.4% employment
- 9.3% housing
- 8.3% relationships
- 23.8% other



“I left feeling so much calmer and a lot less worried than when I arrived”

Mr W

In 2019/20 we generated a total of over £5.58 million in value to our clients, by increasing their income, working to get debt written off and providing consumer advice.

(We use an established model to calculate the financial value of our advice and the positive outcomes it contributes to both individuals and society.)

DEBT SUPPORT

Last year we worked with 519 clients, providing them with debt and budgeting advice to help them move forward. Many debt clients have extreme levels of anxiety and mental health challenges, so we introduced a new volunteer role to provide additional welfare and mental health support.

“MY MONEY ADVISOR WAS FABULOUS. SHE ASSURED ME THAT EVERYTHING WOULD BE FINE AND NOT TO WORRY. SHE WORKED DILIGENTLY AND THE WHOLE PROCESS WAS FAR BETTER THAN WHAT I WAS EXPECTING. I CAN'T THANK HER AND EVERYONE ELSE ENOUGH FOR ALL THEIR HELP.”

“Uttlesford Citizens Advice has always helped me when I’ve found myself isolated in the system”

BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

We know that around 30% of our clients are uncomfortable using, or do not have access to the internet.

With many services moving online, our Benefit Take-Up, Help to Claim and core service supports clients who suffer from digital exclusion due to illness, poor literacy or computer skills. Going forward we feel our role will increasingly be to help clients bridge the digital divide as more services expect their clients and customers to transact in this manner.

CASE STUDY: Rose and Winston came to our office to ask for help with a Blue Badge application because the on-line application was simply impossible for them to access without a smart phone or computer. We helped them by completing the on-line form on their behalf.

BENEFIT TAKE UP

Our dedicated team of home visit volunteers help clients to complete complex disability benefit application forms and offer support and advice on social transport, care options, fall prevention, access to priority registers, help with fuel bills and legal issues. Although our home visit activities have temporarily stopped, we continue to complete forms on behalf of clients over the phone.

Appeal work continues too and we have successfully overturned numerous unfair decisions, helping 122 people with reconsiderations and appeals. Last year our work brought in over £1.45 million extra benefit income to the district – money that helps people to heat their homes, maintain special diets and pay for services and adaptations that improve their independence and quality of life.

To improve processes and reduce unfairness we regularly send letters to our MP and Ministers about the continuing failures in PIP applications and assessments.

CASE STUDY: Rob’s mental health condition meant he was unable to work, but he was turned down for disability benefits. Our specialist supported him throughout the appeal process. Rob won the appeal and received a backdated payment of over £5,000 – this meant he was able to pay off his rent arrears and stay in his home.

ACCESS TO ADVICE

As a result of Covid-19, our plans to deliver our service from Great Dunmow and Stansted libraries has evolved. We are now actively investigating ways in which clients may be able to access our service using remote technology instead. Our ambition is to replicate the same service and support within a library setting as someone would receive if they were visiting our office. Instead of ringing the bell, they will touch a screen - but everyone will see a friendly adviser and access advice, emergency support or help to read a form or explain a letter.

CASE STUDY: John and his wife were both self-employed and were unable to work during lockdown. John called Citizens Advice for help as he was struggling to apply for Universal Credit. Our advisers continued to support John and his wife until they received their Universal Credit advance and helped him to secure the documents he needed to apply for work.

Need help making a new claim for Universal Credit?
Citizens Advice can help!

citizens
advice

LOCAL ISSUES

WARM HOMES

Uttlesford has the highest level of fuel poverty in Essex. A cold home can have a significant impact on an individual's health and wellbeing; it can increase the risk of falls and cause stress and worry. It can also exacerbate existing health conditions.

We support people in a variety of ways - through income maximisation, helping them with benefit claims or by offering debt and budgeting advice. We also advise on energy tariffs, switching providers, low cost energy efficiency measures and can help clients to apply for grants and discounts where appropriate.

CASE STUDY: Sean and Freya were really struggling financially. They could not afford to heat their home or buy enough food for their family. Our warm homes adviser carried out a benefit check and found they were missing out on over £600 a month in benefits and extra support. A grant from a local charity helped to get their finances back on track. Now that they have enough money to live on each month, they feel less anxious and can look to the future.

“Great result for our Energy Specialist! Brand new, energy efficient boiler hoisted up to a top floor flat and installed at no cost to a client on low income.”

#warmhomes



RESEARCH & CAMPAIGNS

- **School Transport**
We have campaigned to improve school bus services, to make sure students get to school on time. We have also been monitoring price increases and access to ticket information on service websites, investigated school access for families living at Carver Barracks and campaigned to make school transport information clearer and more accessible.
- **Blue Badge applications**
Working in collaboration with Maldon Citizens Advice we are collecting evidence to illustrate the challenges many clients face when applying for a blue badge.
- **Benefit Applications**
Focussing on the PIP application process, we suggested a move from a paper-based system to an electronic system - it has been confirmed that the PIP2 form will be available electronically by the end of the year. We have also campaigned for recording devices to be allowed in medical assessments, for shorter wait times on DWP phone lines and for an improved point of contact with DWP.



HEALTH & WELLBEING



One way we can measure the impact of our advice is through improvement to our clients' health and wellbeing. Over 70% of Citizens Advice clients believe they would have been unable to resolve their problems without an adviser's help. While we are working with clients to improve their mental wellbeing; help them keep their home warm; provide an opportunity to disclose domestic violence; offer support to achieve stability in their finances or maintain or achieve employment – we regularly identify other areas in their life where another service could help.

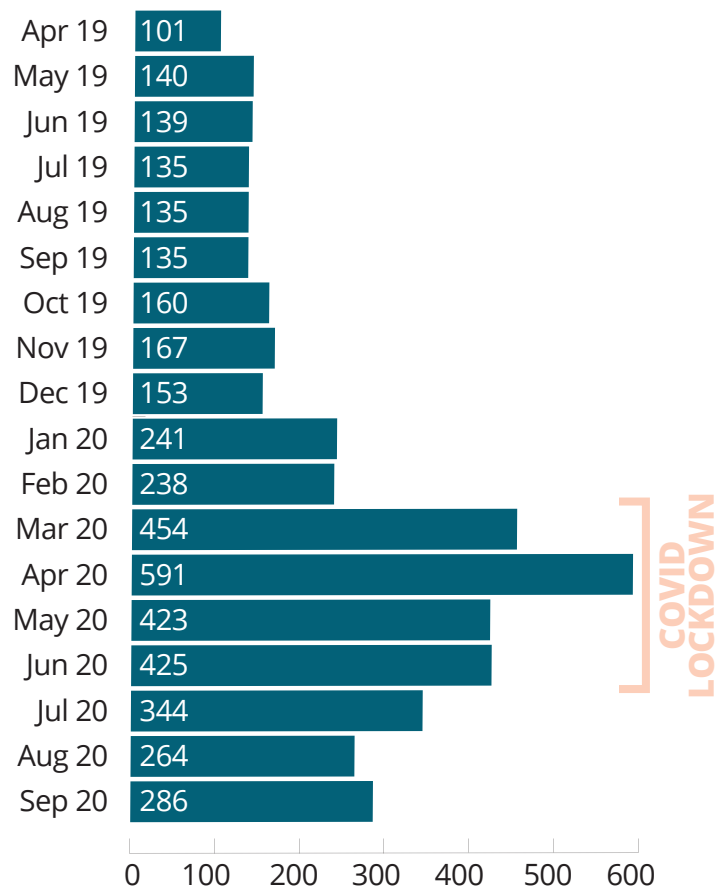
In 2013, with the support of a number of other organisations, we applied for a Big Lottery Grant to build our first pilot for a multi-agency referral and signpost system. Moving on 7 years, we are still evidencing the impact of this tool – now available across west Essex with the support of ECC and WECCG NHS funding.

At the moment 114 different organisations, ranging from district councils; GP practices; advice agencies; Essex Police and Befriending services are using the district-based platforms to send referrals to over 283 different services across west Essex. In 2019/20 referral volumes increased by 58% and signposts increased by 78%. Over the first half of 2020/21 use of the tool has grown even faster, with referrals increasing by 297% compared to the first half of last year. Clearly users value the ability to securely and reliably work with different organisations, particularly when many traditional face to face services are not readily accessible.

“WE WERE QUICK TO REACT TO LOCKDOWN BECAUSE WE ALREADY HAD OUR DIGITAL REFERRAL SYSTEM IN PLACE: FRONTLINE”

UTTLESFORD FOODBANK

REFERRAL VOLUMES PER MONTH ACROSS WEST ESSEX



“USING FRONTLINE, WE WERE ABLE TO CREATE AN EMERGENCY RESPONSE REFERRAL PAGE WHICH ENABLED US TO COLLATE AS MUCH INFORMATION AS POSSIBLE; THIS MADE OUR RESPONSE FOR SUPPORT AS EFFICIENT AS POSSIBLE”

WE CAN SERVICE

OUR WONDERFUL TEAM

Our staff and volunteers have been even more amazing, creative and resilient than ever during the Covid-19 pandemic. Their dedication enabled us to move swiftly to a home working model and they have continued to offer support and care for our clients.

However, we know that volunteering at home has presented its challenges; poor internet speeds; juggling volunteer time with caring responsibilities; working hard to become more confident or familiar with working independently and to keep up to date with the vast number of changes to national and local support. We are also aware that many of our volunteers have really missed the social engagement and support of friends and colleagues in the office – so we thank you for your perseverance and continuing commitment.

Despite the restrictions and challenges, we are delighted that 14 new trainees have been inspired to join our team this year – diligently completing their training online.

- **Each week, our 66 volunteers give up over 383 hours to help us deliver our services. If they were paid, this would be worth over £378,000 a year.**
- **This year we have also recruited 8 new 'Language Friends' to help users with language barriers to access our service.**

“The opportunity to help others has given me a greater sense of purpose in these strange times”
New Trainee

“I CAN NEVER REPAY ALL THE HELP AND SUPPORT I HAVE RECEIVED BUT WILL DO EVERYTHING I CAN TO SUPPORT YOUR WORK IN THE FUTURE THAT I NOW HAVE”
MISS K



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If you are interested in finding out more about our charity, would like to join our team of volunteers or perhaps offer your support in other ways through fundraising, helping with publicity or by providing pro bono services for our clients, we would love to hear from you! Please get in touch with our team on 01799 618840.

