



**A Global  
Pandemic...**

**A Local Response**

to the pandemic and beyond

Citizens Advice Cheshire West

**Community Report** 2021



**Cheshire  
West**

# Contents

Foreword	4
A pandemic “year” in numbers	5
Case study: Yvonne	6
Supporting our clients	7
Introducing a community service	8
Case study: Brian	9
Working with our partners	10
Case study: Tony	11
Key statistics	12

“

I can't tell you what a difference you have made to me and my son. Winning the Universal Credit appeal was amazing, **it felt like a weight was lifted**. Getting the backdated payment for my son was a bonus! ”

Client Shilpa\*

\* name changed to protect client confidentiality.

Providing vital information...

We helped people understand about the benefits they were entitled to and the grants they could claim, as well as providing information on employers' responsibilities under the furlough scheme.

# Foreword

by Jason Bishop CEO

Our offices closed to the public on March 16th 2020. Like many organisations we could only wonder what the future would hold....how could we operate? How could we help our clients? How would our clients cope? How many people would need our services, who had never done so before?

Both our paid staff and volunteers immediately stepped up to change their way of working and from week one of lockdown we were offering telephone advice from our homes. Team leaders were providing remote supervision to ensure our quality remained at our usual high standard and in the 2 weeks to the end of March we had helped 420 clients. The main issues in those first weeks were, understandably, employment queries, support for people to make initial benefit claims and issuing foodbank vouchers.

We recognized that not everyone can, or likes, to use the phone so by May 2020 we had developed our email advice service. To date this service has helped over 6000 clients and feedback is that they have found it easy to use, helpful and they liked the quick response time.

Our staff, volunteers and clients have adapted to new ways of working over the past year and as we begin to move out of lockdown we want to keep the benefits that these have given us, both as an organisation and for clients.

That means that we won't be going back to our traditional face to face only service from 4 offices. Instead we'll be continuing to offer phone and email advice which are especially useful for those who find it difficult to access our service in person. And we will also be opening "access points" across the district, with a minimum of 12 of these offering face to face appointments.

We provide confidential, impartial, non-judgmental, free advice and we know we are needed now more than ever because the right advice at the right time can change lives.

# A pandemic “year” in numbers\*

Since lockdown we have made a difference to thousands of Cheshire West residents...

We have helped **over 11,800 clients** with **over 37,000 issues**, and we have helped our clients **gain over £3.3 million income**.

In the first week of lockdown we dealt with **over 100 new universal credit claims**, compared to 30 per week in the middle of February.

In the first week of lockdown we also **helped 209 worried clients** to get information from other organisations.

In the first week of lockdown **25% of clients were under 35** with queries about employment.

In the first month of lockdown we helped **an average of 210 new clients each week** with detailed advice.

Throughout lockdown we had contact with **an average of 75 clients per day**.

\* 17/03/20 - 31/05/21.



## Case study: Yvonne\*

**Yvonne\* was very distressed when she contacted us for a foodbank voucher. She had a stroke last year and needs a machine to help her breathe because she suffers from COPD.**

Her Disability Living Allowance payments were stopped a while ago and her only income was Employment Support Allowance.

She had been paying £100 per month off her fuel debt and was terrified of running out of electricity because she relies on it for her breathing machine, so she was constantly cold.

When she came to us she had dropped 3 dress sizes due to being unable to afford food and her clothes no longer fit.

The first thing we did was to order a foodbank delivery. With her permission, we then put in a request to the Salvation Army and Foodbank for warm winter clothing. A local councillor brought warm blankets and jumpers and we delivered these to Yvonne\*, who was overwhelmed.

We also supported her in successfully applying for Personal Independence Payment.

Finally, one of our Community Connectors referred her for an energy appointment and she was then able to apply to the Scottish Power hardship fund as well as to the Green Doctor for a cold weather pack.

\* name changed to protect client confidentiality.

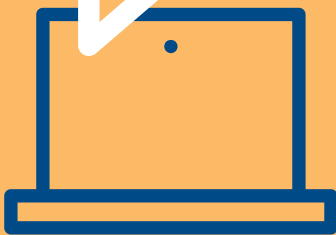
# Supporting our clients

Through lockdown to May 31 2021



We have received nearly  
**18,000 Client calls**

We have answered



**over 6000 emails**



There have been over  
**15,000 visitors  
to our website**

People visited a range of pages including:  
**holiday cancellations, winter grants,  
fuelbank, furlough, access point map  
and benefits.**

# Introducing a community service



Internet access at Elton Community Centre

**We will be continuing to offer phone and email advice, as we have done through the pandemic, with many clients preferring these methods of contact.**

**However not everyone has a phone or access to the internet and some people need face to face help. So as the lockdown eases and things return to normal we will be continuing to open “access points” and opening up face to face services through some of them.**

Access points mean that people can contact Citizens Advice much closer to where they live and get help with using the phone or internet. The aim being to improve accessibility. Appointments will also be available at some access points, meaning that for many clients there will be less need to travel to see an adviser.

Access points will be in local venues and differ in what they offer. Each will require a different level of commitment and physical space, so we are working with venues on that.

Some will have a freephone, some will have a computer and internet access, others will have bookable appointments available and in one in each town there will be in-person support.

Currently we have 36 access points available and 32 have been used over the pandemic. Venues include schools, community centres, mental health charities and foodbanks to name but a few and it's fair to say each is slightly different, but all provide support to access our services.



# Case study: Brian\*



**Brian\* had a pituitary tumour, which resulted in a hormone imbalance and anxiety issues. He came to us after having failed his Employment Support Allowance (ESA) assessment. We appealed the decision and advised him to submit a claim for Universal Credit (UC).**

He was already in the process of appealing a Personal Independence Payment (PIP) decision, when we took over on his behalf.

During the course of his time with us he opened up about his money worries and we referred him to our debt team for help with a Council Tax summons and a few other issues. They recommended that he claim UC for his son, who lives with him for the majority of the time. Brian was awarded the child element and disabled child element, so he no longer has to pay the bedroom tax.

He missed out by one point on the daily living component of PIP but we took the case to the upper tribunal on a point of law and, after a rehearing, he was awarded standard rate daily living and standard rate mobility.

In total, he received £11,000 in backdated benefit entitlements.

Since we started to help him in 2018 his income has increased from £745.29 per month to £2418.86 per month and he has received more than £16,000 in benefit arrears.

In addition to this he has managed to avoid a debt relief order (DRO) and has come to an arrangement to get his water rates, electricity and gas deducted from his benefits.

\* name changed to protect client confidentiality.

# Working with our partners



## Foodbank Vouchers

During the pandemic we have worked closely with both West Cheshire and Mid Cheshire Foodbank issuing over 1000 foodbank vouchers and delivering food to clients.

## Fuel Poverty Help

Over the winter months we were able to help clients suffering fuel poverty through the DWP funded Winter Grant Scheme, helping with the purchase of gas, electricity, oil and firewood.

## Community Connectors

Our community connectors took over 200 referrals from the health service, to work with people suffering from social isolation and related issues.



## Case study: Tony\*

**Tony\* is a 79 year old pensioner who lives on a houseboat. He had become stranded in Northwich due to COVID as he was on his way down South to be near his son.**

We advised him to claim help for mooring fees and that meant he only had to make a £10 per week contribution.

But a few months later he received notification that, although the mooring fees had increased,

his Housing Benefit had gone down and he now needed to pay more.

We helped him to successfully appeal the decision based on the fact that the time limit for him being moored in one place had been extended due to the pandemic.

\* name changed to protect client confidentiality.

# Key statistics 2020-2021

## Summary

<b>Clients</b>	<b>10,068</b>
<b>Quick client contacts</b>	<b>3,974</b>
<b>Issues</b>	<b>31,143</b>
<b>Activities</b>	<b>22,004</b>
<b>Cases</b>	<b>10,810</b>

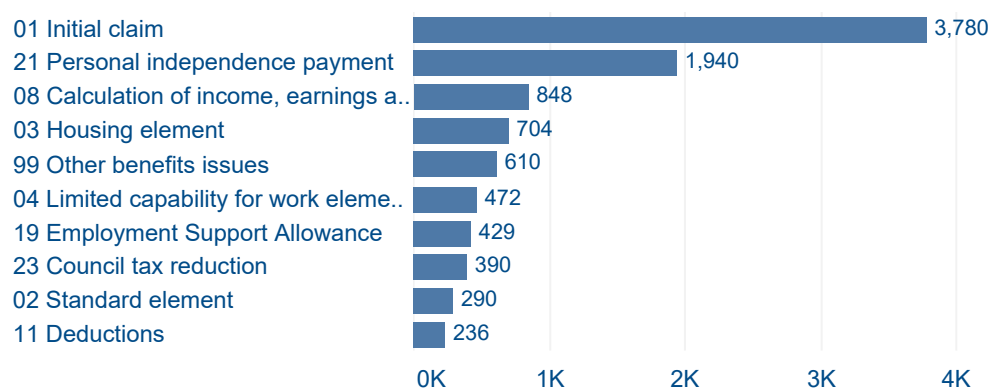
## Outcomes

Income gain	£2,753,197
Re-imbursements, services, loans	£50
Other	£722,270

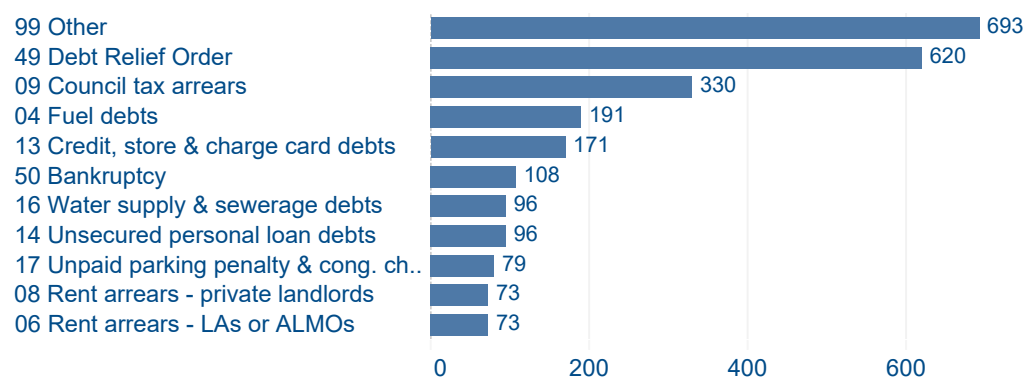
## Issues

	Issues	Clients
Benefits & tax credits	5,163	2,003
Benefits Universal Credit	7,387	2,082
Consumer goods & services	1,035	349
Debt	3,228	943
Discrimination & Hate & GVA	177	108
Education	89	51
Employment	2,982	1,308
Financial services & capability	2,433	2,239
Health & community care	509	223
Housing	2,468	1,229
Immigration & asylum	207	116
Legal	817	372
Other	1,736	760
Relationships & family	1,632	756
Tax	123	71
Travel & transport	162	87
Utilities & communications	995	390
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>31,143</b>	

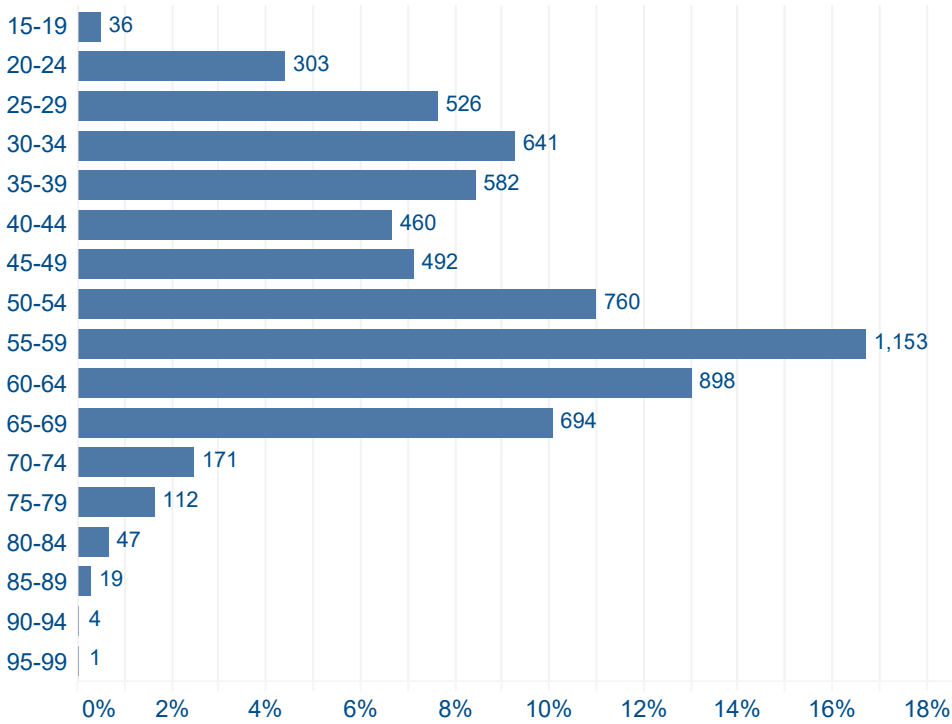
## Top benefit issues



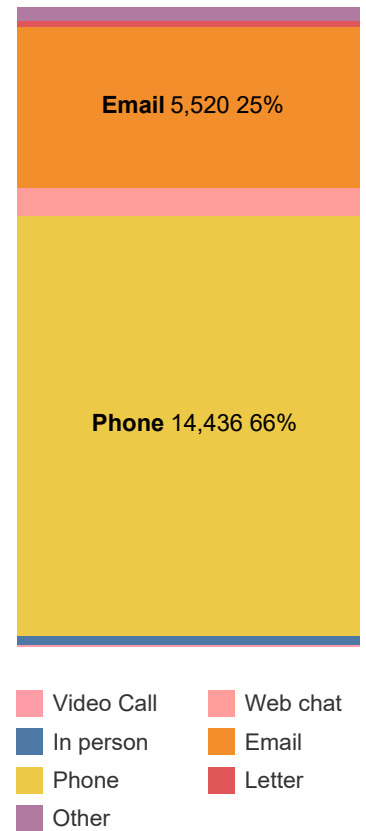
## Top debt issues



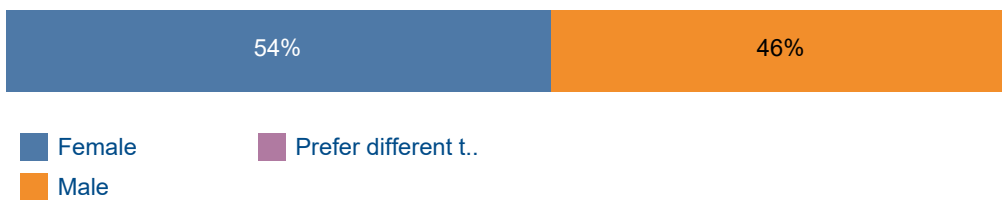
## Age



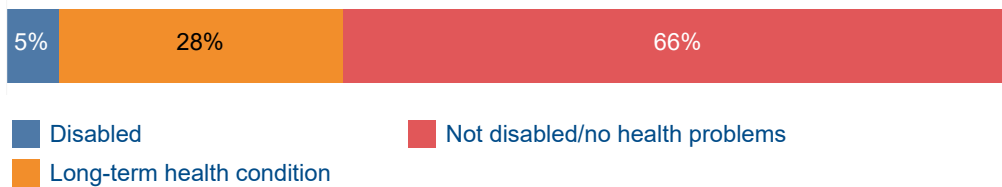
## Channel



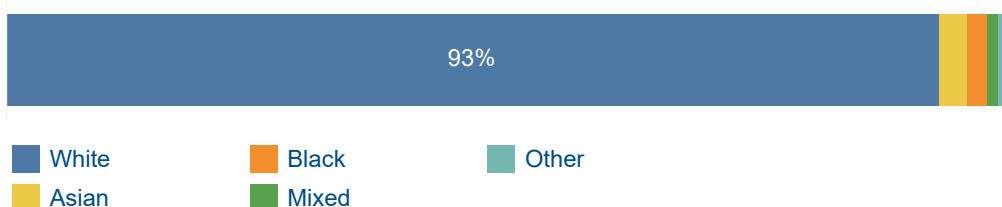
## Gender



## Disability / Long-term health



## Ethnicity



# Free, confidential advice. Whoever you are.

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.

## Registered Office

Wyvern House, The Drumber, Winsford, CW7 1AP

Authorised and Regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority FRN 617553.

[www.citizensadvicecw.org.uk](http://www.citizensadvicecw.org.uk)



©Citizens Advice Cheshire West July 2021

Published July 2021

Citizens Advice Cheshire West is a registered charity. Charity registration number 1128367.

Company limited by guarantee. Registered number 06783496 England. Authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority FRN: 617553. Registered office: Wyvern House, The Drumber, Winsford, Cheshire CW7 1AP.