

October 2018

Dear All

Welcome to our latest newsletter.

We are already half way through our financial year and this year seems to have been a particularly busy one.

Review of the first half of the year

In April, we conducted our annual Client Satisfaction survey, the results of which were extremely positive and included comments such as *"can't improve"*, *"the service is excellent"* and *"a true caring team"*. All of the clients surveyed stated that they were very happy with the service that they received and would recommend PWAC to others.

In May, we completed a full review of all of our Policies and Procedures to ensure compliance with the General Data Protection Regulations ("GDPR") which came into force on 25 May.

We spent the summer improving our Referrals Network and building our partnerships with other local agencies, work which has continued into the autumn. We were very pleased to meet with representatives from Parkinson's UK, Tunbridge Wells Mental Health Resource (MHR) and strengthen our relationship with The Community Storehouse (Paddock Wood's food bank) and Paddock Wood Primary School.

On 18 September we held the first of three full-day training sessions for our volunteer advisers to be held over the next three months. The theme was Money and Debt Advice, which is the second most common issue our clients face making up around 11% of our client contacts. The training was tailored to support the learning of everyone from our newest recruits to our experienced debt case-workers and we worked through a case study designed to help us better enable clients to manage their debt problems by giving them a structured framework for dealing with debt. By the end of the course, even our newest advisers were feeling confident about helping clients to resolve their debt problems.

We have further training sessions on Universal Credit and Dealing with Difficult Client situations planned for October and November respectively – these sessions are to be delivered by AdviceUK and are on top of our standard in-house training package.

At the end of September we were audited by Recognising Excellence against the Advice Services Alliance's Advice Quality Standard (AQS). This is the quality standard for providers of general advice services in the areas of social, welfare and public law and we have held accreditation since 2014. We are delighted to announce that the Auditor commended our service, highlighting "an impressive number of good practices across every heading of the AQS Standard" and recommending that our AQS certification be continued for a further period of two years.

Statistics

During the first half of the year, we saw 282 new clients over the course of 2,070 contacts.

Welfare Benefits remains the single biggest issue facing our clients (66% of contacts). This is unlikely to change with Universal Credit rolling out to the local area on 21 November, although we are hoping to minimise the impact by meeting with our local DWP Partnership Manager as well as the Town & Country Housing Group in the next few weeks. So far this year we have generated £51,426 worth of financial gain for our clients as a result of Benefit/tax credit one-off payments and we have also secured £165,389 in ongoing Benefit/tax credit payments (annual gain) for them. The majority of these relate to disability benefits. We have represented 10 of our clients in appeals against DWP decisions at the first tier tribunal since the beginning of April, winning every single one. The work undertaken during the appeals process is complex and extremely time consuming and we commend our Welfare Rights specialists for their efforts, particularly as we now have a caseload of 33 cases which await a tribunal date.

We have already mentioned that debt is the second biggest issue for our clients. All of our advisers are now fully trained in providing debt advice and our specialist debt case-worker oversees each case personally. Since April, we have supported our most vulnerable clients by helping them to negotiate payment plans with their creditors and obtaining Debt Relief Orders providing for £11,550 worth of debts to be written off.

Our volunteers gave 1,747 hours of their time during the first half of the year and as always, we are grateful to them for their dedication and commitment. We are delighted to welcome two new advisers and one returner making a team of 16 volunteers in total. We are proud to be the only advice agency to offer drop-in advice and tribunal representation in the Borough of Tunbridge Wells and without our amazing volunteers, it would be impossible to run our face to face service and serve our community in this way.

AGM

Our sixth AGM will be held at the Matfield Pavilion on Thursday 1 November 2018 at 7:30pm. You are all invited and we hope to see as many of you as possible. Wine and nibbles will be available if you need an added incentive to attend!

Yours Faithfully

Paddock Wood Community Advice Centre

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Company Limited by Guarantee: 8006468 Charity Registration No: 1147816
Registered Office: 64 Commercial Road, Paddock Wood, Kent TN12 6DP

