

July 2024

Dear Supporter,

Elections bring into sharp focus our reliance on those in public office to formulate policies and develop services for the benefit of every member of our society. Advice centres such as ours in Paddock Wood have a privileged position in seeing how the condition of the economy and the health of public infrastructure directly impact people's lives and we thought we would share a few key observations which demonstrate how every service and every individual in post has the power to make our community a better place for the most marginalised.

Responsiveness of public services

Many of our clients live with health, literacy or digital access limitations and find it challenging to interact with public services including the DWP and local councils due to opaque communication systems and a lack of face-to-face services. They come to us exasperated, bemused and desperate. It is common to find delays with correspondence responsible for issues being escalated to courts and enforcement agents when previously they would have been solved with a single, direct personal interaction. Too often opaque wording of written communications is equally problematic.

Each year we report increased client numbers on the year before and this year is no exception: we have helped 1,060 clients on 1,298 different issues over the course of the year, approximately 14% up on the previous year. Our Top 3 issues for advice remain as welfare benefits, housing and debt.

Increases in cases of consumer issues demonstrate that the commercial sector is failing its customers in a similar manner.

Accessing Disability Benefits

The growing number of applicants for disability benefits is a common news item but one of its primary causes which is less commonly reported is financial distress because this drives people to explore what benefits they may be entitled to. The difficulty in applying for these benefits is covered in the media even more rarely: we help about 10 people a month apply for disability benefits and many of them could not attempt these forms alone, some of which are 40 pages long. In fact, quite frequently their health condition is the main impediment to them doing so. If we feel a client has a strong case but an award is not made, we may offer to represent the client at Appeal and this year we won all 11 Appeals at which we represented clients. Ultimately, this is a success for each of these clients, but reflective of a fundamental failure in the initial decision-making process. A delay which causes financial and psychological distress.

Housing shortage and disrepair

The uplift in the Local Housing Allowance rates in April has made private rental more accessible to many but each week we see numerous families and individuals struggle to access the housing they need. The overall supply of low rent homes is a major issue, as is the rate of relationship breakdown. It is common for social housing to have damp and mould which is not addressed on a timely basis and children who are in emergency accommodation often find themselves moving several times and suffer disruption to their schooling. Each service which these families interact with needs to be led with empathy and generosity: in so doing we could significantly reduce the stress and delay.

Our impact in the year to 31 March 2024

100%

Appeals won at the First Tier Tribunal

10,848

Contacts with clients

1,060

People helped

£1.4m

Financial gain secured for our clients (up 19% from previous year)

5,850

Volunteer hours provided

14

volunteer advisers

Adjusting our service model for 2024/2025

As we look ahead to the coming year, our commitment remains steadfast: to continue providing vital support to our community and surrounding areas, but pressure for our help has led to a few changes to our service delivery.

- Last year our clients were from the Borough of Tunbridge Wells (67%), Tonbridge and Malling (16%) and Maidstone (7%) and the remainder come from beyond these boroughs. Given demand is now outstripping our ability to deliver a quality service to all, we have regrettably decided to focus on enquiries from residents of Paddock Wood and the neighbouring towns and parishes, especially those who fund us.
- In June, we added two salaried roles to our team: a Debt and Benefits Case Worker to build our Debt Advisory service delivery and an Assistant Operations Manager. This role was established to optimise advisory capacity by alleviating administrative and operational burdens on our advisors. These recent additions will fortify our ability to provide a robust and comprehensive service.
- Mental health issues have been the focus of our training this year as we witness the growing prevalence of mental health issues amongst our clients. While we remain

committed to prioritising practical help because we witness how profoundly the mental strain of managing life issues impacts our clients' wellbeing, with an associated cost for all of society, we hope to be able to enhance the effectiveness of our signposting and improve our understanding of organisations addressing mental health needs in the local area.

Thank you

Paddock Wood Community Advice Centre remains primarily a volunteer run and staffed organisation and we would like to thank our trustees and volunteers for their outstanding commitment to quality and for their regular service. We also thank all our supporters - this year we have been very grateful for the recognition of the Mayor of Tunbridge Wells, Hugh Patterson and we also thank our regular funders, referral partners and clients for promoting and supporting our service throughout the last year and we look forward to a continued relationship.

Please get in touch if you would like to know more about our service, we would be very pleased to welcome you to our offices.

Yours faithfully

Katie Hargreaves

Senior Manager

Paddock Wood Community Advice Centre

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