

# Overview

## March-September 2020

**citizens  
advice**

**Tunbridge Wells  
& District**

## IMPACT OF COVID-19

There is no doubt that, as for all organisations, this has been an exceptionally challenging six months. The entire team moved from office to home working in the space of a day in March and we continue to be moved by the commitment, energy and generosity of our volunteers in stepping up to deal with the crisis and the ongoing increase in demand for advice.

In the first, rather surreal, week of lockdown, there were over 2.4m hits to the Citizens Advice website. Our team, while adjusting to home working, helped 237 people with over 400 issues. From March until the end of September we have advised nearly 3,000 people compared with just over 2,000 in the same period in 2019. As expected, queries regarding employment and benefits have more than doubled over the last six months and many of those contacting us, including many more younger people, are seeking our help for the first time.

	2019	2020
Number of clients	2123	3000
Employment queries	400	850
Housing	500	700

Since March, our advisers have been helping people via phone, email and webchat. Some of our beneficiaries have adapted remarkably well to remote advice, despite initial complications with documents; we will continue to support volunteers to work from home for the foreseeable future, while also recognising that there will always be a need for face to face meetings - particularly for our more vulnerable clients.

The team is supporting people locally as well as playing its part in answering the national advice line and supervisors are supporting the team via phone and email.

## LOCAL ADVICE NEEDS

As the impact of the pandemic becomes clearer, we can see that the local vulnerable households are falling deeper into crisis.

Around 12,400 people have been furloughed in our borough and we are bracing for a surge in need when the Job Retention scheme ends in October and again after Christmas when businesses seek to cut costs by making redundancies - with all the knock-on effects we know that brings. The demand for help with Universal Credit (first time claims and moving from legacy benefits to UC) has more than doubled and we are concerned about a rise in housing issues and homelessness as a result of the recent lifting of the eviction ban.

We are recruiting a trainee debt caseworker and have plans to build a team of debt specialists to deal with the increase in debt cases we expect to see over the coming months.

## VOLUNTEER TRAINING

Our new volunteers are currently undertaking their training via Zoom and we are grateful to members of the staff team who have stepped in to augment online training and cover specialist areas. We are delighted that 16 new recruits will start to take live cases from the end of October with a further 5 receiving additional training. They will be supported by an enhanced team of five supervisors, who will give support and mentoring via phone and email. We have also increased our case-checking capacity to ensure quality of advice.

We have three new recruits who are waiting to begin their training and a waiting list of eighteen people who will be interviewed before starting a new round of training in the New Year.



**Could you  
volunteer to  
make a  
difference?**

Use your skills  
Gain experience  
Meet new people

## PROJECTS & OUTREACHES

All of our outreach locations have moved to remote working for the foreseeable future - this includes our advice sessions at 6 GP surgeries, the YMCA, the Kitchen Table community cafe, the Mental Health Resource Hub, Pembury Library and the Soup Bowl drop-in centre for people who are homeless or on very low incomes.



**citizens advice** **Tunbridge Wells & District**  
Connecting to Communities

- Cranbrook Library
- Pembury Library
- Soup Bowl
- The Hub
- YMCA (under 25s)
- The Kitchen Table
- GP's Surgeries
  - Greggs Wood
  - St Andrews
  - Kingswood
  - Rusthall
  - Clanricarde
  - Lamberhurst

The advisers who run these outreaches are available to take referrals via phone and, although we have been able to organise a limited number of face to face meetings with more vulnerable clients, we are keen to get back into the community again as soon as we can.

## IMMINENT OFFICE MOVE

We have taken the opportunity of a forthcoming break clause in our current rental contract to plan a move later this year to a more central, visible and welcoming office space in the Royal Victoria Place shopping centre (next to Marks and Spencer on the ground floor). We hope that the move will enable us to reach more and different people and as there will be no rental charge this will save us vital funding which can be invested into providing additional support.

Our plan is that we will be based in the RVP for a period of at least three years and in that time we will raise the profile of our charity locally. We expect our move to a more visible location will help us to support those who will be particularly hard hit by the fallout of the pandemic in the years ahead, including those who may not otherwise have sought our help - either because they were unaware of our existence in the town or because they thought our services were 'not for them'.

The new space will enable us to offer a quick, triage/drop-in service for people with simple advice needs with appointments being made for those who require more specialist advice.

## FUNDING

We are extremely grateful to have received emergency Covid-19 funding from the national Citizens Advice charity, Kent Community Foundation, the National Lottery, the Clothworkers' Foundation and the Julia & Hans Rausing Trust. This provided the funds to set up our team to work from home and to increase the size of our supervisor team

As ever, we have also received much appreciated support from our wonderful Friends organisation who, despite having to cancel several fundraising events, have made a generous donation towards our core costs and even organised a socially-distanced sponsored walk over the Summer.

We are also grateful to Charlotte, who runs our communications and raised over £1000 with Zoom quiz nights during lockdown and our Advice Services Manager, Jenny who ran the Virtual London Marathon for us in Sevenoaks. In the rain and without the crowds to cheer her on this was a fantastic achievement which raised £1000.

## FEEDBACK

As ever, the positive feedback that we receive from beneficiaries keeps us going. Our 'Book of Joy' where we record and keep messages and thank you cards has moved online while we are unable to use the office and can be viewed at [www.catwd.org.uk/ournews](http://www.catwd.org.uk/ournews)

We continue to raise our profile locally using social media, (gaining over 67 followers on Twitter since lockdown and starting an Instagram account which now has over 200 mainly local followers) as well as local press, with recent articles in the Times of Tunbridge Wells and an interview on BBC Radio Kent.



### PHONE MESSAGE FROM A CLIENT

"Hello, I have had a call this morning from DWP  
I have been awarded ... you ready for this !!  
ENHANCED ON BOTH!!!!

I'm so overwhelmed!!!! Thank you so much for all your help, without you I wouldn't of gotten anywhere. Hope your doing okay."

Anonymous



### CARD & FLOWERS FROM A CLIENT

"Thank you so much for being my rock through this. I can't thank you enough for everything, these flowers aren't much but hope you like them. Without you I honestly don't know how I would have coped with it all.

Anonymous

