

July 2020

Dear All

Welcome to our latest newsletter and the first of our current financial year. We start as usual with our statistics, however they are rather unusual due to the extraordinary start to 2020 we have experienced with the effects of Covid-19.

Since the start of lockdown on 23 March 2020:

- We have helped 324 individual clients
- We have had 1,007 contacts with these individuals
- Our dedicated volunteers gave 1,020 hours of their time, for which we are extremely grateful
- We have made 288 telephone calls and sent 304 emails to help clients
- We have generated £521,892.50 worth of additional income for our clients by helping them to access unclaimed welfare benefits
- We have helped clients to have £10,056.91 worth of debt written off

Impact of Covid-19

Throughout the lockdown, our physical office has been closed but our wonderful team of volunteers have continued to provide advice, Monday to Friday by telephone and email.

The most common issue we have dealt with is Welfare Benefits, with many clients navigating the Welfare Benefit system for the first time in their lives. In quarter one, we saw double the number of clients about Universal Credit issues than we saw in the same period last year. We have continued to help clients to challenge incorrect decisions about disability benefits in the first-tier tribunal and helped twelve clients to win their appeals through detailed written submissions and representation 'in person' at telephone hearings. This is a 100% success rate.

The DWP recently reported a 40% decrease in new applications for Personal Independence Payment (PIP) in April 2020 compared with the previous year. We have also observed a decline in new applications for all disability benefits, including PIP, Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and Attendance Allowance (AA). This reflects the difficulties many vulnerable people have with navigating telephone and online systems to demonstrate that they qualify for a benefit with a complex set of rules and requirements. We believe that maintaining our face to face advice service is of paramount importance during these difficult times and were delighted to successfully re-open our doors for face to face clients on Monday 13 July 2020.

As expected, the second most common issue has been Employment, which has made up 1 in 5 of our new cases. These have varied from enquiries about furlough, working rights, redundancy, and holiday pay. Employment issues will continue to be common as the furlough scheme changes and more and more businesses start to look at redundancy to cut costs.

What is clear is that we are yet to see the full impact of this unprecedented period and we anticipate an overwhelming demand for our services as measures introduced to alleviate financial pressure on people at the start of lockdown begin to be phased out. It is not

surprising that housing and debt enquiries, both of which regularly feature in our top 3 issues, have fallen away over the last few months as people have not had to deal with evictions, bailiffs or benefit sanctions. Most of these measures are due to end over the next couple of months and we will be busier than ever.

Premises Search

We are sad to announce that, after eight and a half years at our premises at 64 Commercial Road, our landlord has given us notice. Fortunately, the value of our service to the local community is recognised and our landlord is being extremely accommodating about giving us sufficient time to find somewhere new. We have started the hunt for a new location and would be delighted to hear of any ideas you might have, information about properties which may become available in the next few months or if you are interested in collaborative working.

Annual General Meeting

We hope to see you all at our Annual General Meeting, which will be on Thursday 15 October at 7:30pm, pending the Government guidance applicable at the time. Please put the date and time in your diaries. Formal notice and further information will follow nearer the time.

We would like to thank all our trustees, volunteer advisers, supporters, funders, referral partners and clients for promoting and using our service throughout the last quarter.

We look forward to your continued support so that we can maintain our service to the residents of Paddock Wood and surrounding areas.

Yours faithfully

Paddock Wood Community Advice Centre