


 citizens
advice

Westminster

Citizens Advice Westminster's newsletter

Update from CEO Joanna Cain

As we start the new financial year and as the pandemic recedes, at Citizens Advice Westminster we are very excited to be opening up and extending our advice and information services. At this very difficult time when the cost of living crisis is causing real hardship across Westminster, with rising levels of repossessions and a steep increase in the number of personal debts each client is dealing with, we will be:



- continuing and expanding our debt service, in partnership with Debt Free London, with face to face debt advice from our Paddington office alongside video and phone advice.
- delivering energy advice, now also linked to advice on risks relating to carbon monoxide.
- opening up new outreach opportunities including reopening advice shop at Church St
- expanding our digital advice with a new front page to the website and a webchat service

Westminster residents can reach us by:

- calling our phone line 0808 278 7384 between 10 – 4 pm Monday to Friday
- [dropping in to our Zoom sessions](#) from 10am – 11am on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays.
- [making an online enquiry 24/7](#), with webchat following soon

We also want to ensure that it is as easy as possible for advice agencies across Westminster to work together to make sure that residents get the help they need at the right time. That's why we have developed the [Westminster Refernet Partnership](#), a GDPR compliant platform to enable referrals between agencies. Already over 20 agencies are involved, including Shelter, Asylum Aid, Age UK, Cardinal Hume, The Passage, many of whom are also part of our regular [Advice Shop](#).

You can read more about the work we've been doing over the last 6 months in this edition.



**Citizens Advice
helped me find
a way forward.**

What our clients tell us...

Hamza: "Thank you for your kindness and understanding and for your time and patience"*

Claire: "I cannot thank you enough ... [you] have lifted a heavy burden of stress and anxiety"*

*names have been anonymised to preserve client confidentiality

Key statistics

6,437 clients
25k enquiries
£2.4m financial gain

Over the last year we have helped 6,437 clients who have raised 24,860 issues with us. We have undertaken 6,960 actions to support them.

Not surprisingly given the pandemic, 70% of clients made contact by phone with a further 23% doing so by email. A smaller number used web chat or video calls to get in touch.

In headline terms, our services obtained just over £2.4million for our clients mostly from backdated or unclaimed benefits (£1.3million). Debts written-off was the second largest win for clients accounting for just under £85,000.

Of the issues raised with us, benefits was top of the list amounting to 11,380 issues with housing and debt also high priority issues. Amongst clients seeking our help with debt issues, the most common problem was with fuel debt. Council tax and rent arrears were two other major categories for debt queries.

More than half our clients are either disabled or have a long-term health condition. And 59% of clients are women (whereas women make up just under 48% of the population in Westminster).

When we look at the ethnicity of our clients it largely reflects the pattern of the city population. The exception to this is that black and ethnic minority people make up 18% of our clients, but only 7% of the city's population.

A comment from our client Fareeda*

"Through the North Paddington Foodbank I was initially put in touch over the phone with Debt Advisor Noreen at CAW in late February. She patiently advised me on options. She followed up her advice with a detailed email to me and arranged a face to face meeting with CAW Advisor Gavin in Paddington a couple of weeks later.

Over nearly two hours Gavin listened patiently as I explained my situation, all the time keeping me on track in order to uncover all the issues I was facing. Both advisors were friendly and thorough and have really taken a weigh of my shoulders with their guidance. Thank you"

*names have been anonymised to preserve client confidentiality

Westminster Local Hardship Fund



Citizens Advice Westminster has been administering the Local Hardship Fund on behalf of the City Council since December 2021. The total funding distributed reached tranche of the fund covering Winter 2021/22 was £425,290.

Clients could refer themselves but mostly were referred from 55 different statutory and voluntary partners across the borough. A total of 1,598 local households received support. The vast majority of applications were for help with food with smaller numbers seeking help with household essentials or energy or water bills. More than two-thirds of applications were from women.

Households with children made up the largest group of applicants followed by disabled people. Underlying causes ranged across a wide range of issues; benefits not keeping pace with rising costs of food and energy was a major theme. We have followed up 625 people with further support on energy and debt.



Led by our Advice Partnership Coordinator, Adam Zaki, the Advice Shop has been run by Citizens Advice Westminster since November 2018, originally as a drop-in service with partners. Since September 2021 we have been running twice monthly sessions at the Beethoven Centre in Queens Park and a monthly session in Pimlico.

From March 2022 this has been held at our new venue in the Ebury Bridge area of Victoria (not too far from Pimlico). The sessions run from 10am to 12 noon on the second Tuesday of each month. And like those at the Beethoven Centre, clients need to prebook a slot via the [Citizens Advice Westminster website](#) or by calling Adviceline (number above). From May 2022 we will also be back at Church St library – pop into the library to make an appointment.

Alongside Citizens Advice Westminster, clients can book to see advisers from the Passage, Asylum Aid, Shelter, the Westminster Employment Service, City Council and several other agencies.

Our volunteers

Volunteers play a crucial role working alongside paid staff at Citizens Advice Westminster to deliver a high quality, agile service which reflects the issues and needs of communities and which puts clients first.

Here is what are volunteer have told us...

"The opportunity to gain invaluable experience and to help the community with practical tools. Also, the team is wonderful. The support and training is great"

"I always enjoy my time in the bureau - everyone in the office is so lovely and I get to meet lots of interesting people on the door!"

"I feel that I was able many times to give some relief to people in Westminster. We have many tools available at CAW to help people and they really can change a person's situation."

"It was a wonderful experience for me to be able to volunteer with Westminster Citizen Advice, thank you for giving me the valuable chance. I have learnt so much and this experience has prepared me for the roles I am doing right now"



Irma Kadiu,
Volunteer Coordinator

Want to help the local community and gain client skills in the meantime? We are now recruiting for volunteers. Applications for some roles close on 29 May 2022.

We have a range of opportunities you can get involved with which will allow you to get involved in community work and also build up your confidence and skills in numerous areas.

Are you up for a challenge? As a volunteer, you will be placed at the core of our services. Depending on the role, you might work on the phone or deliver in person services, interacting with our clients directly to assess their needs and provide crucial information.

You can choose your own path – volunteer as an assessor, communications, outreach or digital media volunteer. Our roles offer flexibility and opportunities of development and progression.

Want to know more? Click [here](#) for more details.