

Annual Monitoring Report for Three Rivers District Council for financial year 1st April 2021 to 31st March 2022

Citizens Advice Service in Three Rivers (CASTR) provides advice and representation to residents across almost all advice areas to include benefits, consumer, debt, education, employment, finance, health, housing, immigration, legal, relationships and family, travel and utilities.

In Three Rivers we manage 3 local offices in South Oxhey, Abbots Langley, and Rickmansworth. We offer an Outreach service in the community and currently provide a fortnightly advice service at the South Oxhey Foodbank, a weekly advice service at the Mill End Foodbank and a monthly advice service at the Emmanuel Church Foodbank

CASTR also delivers specialist benefit advice to 1st Tier tribunal level, specialist debt advice and family law casework. We are still assisting clients with housing matters and helping to defend clients at possession and stay hearings.

CASTR also provides information to, and works in partnership with, other organisations. We are active within the Three Rivers Partnership and work collaboratively with the 9 other local citizens advice offices in Hertfordshire, particularly when there is county funding available to work on projects for the benefit of all the residents of Hertfordshire. Together the 10 local citizens advice services in Hertfordshire come under the umbrella of Hertfordshire Citizens Advice.

As part of our twin aims (the first being to provide the advice people need for the problems they face) we are involved in Research and Campaign work so that we fulfil the second aim to try to improve the policies and practices that affect people's lives. We do this by working with local MPs, the local authority, social housing providers, benefit agencies and any other body where to effect change.

COVID 19

Our services continue to be affected by the pandemic even though lockdown and restrictions have ended. We have recruited record numbers of volunteers but have had a high turnover of volunteers. Reasons for volunteers leaving the service include

- new need for paid work
- caring responsibilities
- feeling unable to return to the office environment but not confident to work remotely
- level of training needed to undertake advice work

Headline Figures for 2021/22 (vs 2020/21 results)

- **Total number of advice issues – 15,616 (up 18.40% from 2020/21)** Although we have not returned to pre covid levels (17,942 issues in 2019/20) this is a significant increase. We believe that clients are still not returning for the same variety of issues as they concentrate on the effects of the pandemic and the cost of living crisis. There is likely still an element of under reporting of issues when a client attends with multiple issues when one or two issues are very pressing.

- *Total number of clients with a new enquiry - 7040 (up 8.25%)* We found that more clients visited the national website for 'self help' – these visits were up from circa 6,000,000 from 2019/20 – and the same clients contacted us multiple times. Returning clients are not counted twice within the same quarter
- *Money gained for clients in the past year - £2,417,660 (£2,769,991 in 20/21/ £1,194,305.00 in 19/20)*

Please note that this continued high level of financial outcomes are a result of the large numbers of clients that are claiming Universal Credit for the first time due to the pandemic. We are seeing significantly more Three Rivers clients than last year as we have moved away from helping clients via the national service and have all our doors open to the public. At CASTR we were conscious that our clients may not be able to use these national remote services and worked hard to improve our local telephony services and moved swiftly back to face to face advice, the first local citizens advice to do so in Hertfordshire. We are still active on Herts Adviceline and answer more than 100% of our client demand. We also note that the national services cannot meet the demand of all clients as there are too many clients trying to access services at the same time and via fewer channels than pre COVID.

- *Total hours donated by volunteers – 34,944 (up 21.74% from 2020/21 and up 9% from pre COVID levels of 2019/2020)*
- *Equivalent contribution of volunteers, if paid: £594,048 (at £17.00 gross per hour)*
- *Total additional external Funding raised to run the Three Rivers CA service - £175,310, accounts still with auditors (income less grants/ donations for South Bucks, plus management fee for running South Bucks in 2021/22)*
- *Number of volunteers supporting the work of CASTR - 84 (up 21.74%)*
- *Total number of people attending financial awareness courses – due to recommence 2022/23*

Health and wellbeing

40% of clients declared that they are disabled or have a long term health condition (**29% 20/21, 44% 2019/20**). The most declared health problem was mental health. We are now almost back to pre COVID statistics which were stable for some years. We believe that the 2 main contributing factors to the 29% anomaly in 20/21 were:

- health assessments for sickness and disability benefits being deferred resulting in fewer clients needing this help from us
- digital exclusion – we have seen an stable correlation between face to face availability and the number of clients in this group

Gender

Of those clients that declared a gender 36% **38%** identified as **male** and 64 **62%** as **female**. In 2019/20 the split was 42% male and 58% female.

Top Enquiry Areas

Top advice issues	2021/22 %	2020/21 %	2019/20 %
Benefits	36.34	40.21	38
Debt	14.46	10.71	15
Housing	12.60	10.55	10
Employment	5.32	9.8	8
Other	6.71		
Family & Relationships	6.25	5.7	8