



**Bridport  
& District**

# **ANNUAL REPORT**

**2020 - 2021**

## WELCOME FROM THE CHAIR



The year of 2020/21 has been extraordinary for all, Citizens Advice being no exception, experiencing challenges and wholesale changes in working practices and an increase in work load.

Over 3,863 clients have been helped with 9,958 issues developed and resolved by our team.

Our staff and volunteers, with their 'can do' commitment and individual qualities, have taken us through the year well and have taken us into a strong position to continue to

deliver our service in the forthcoming year; with its anticipated rise in demand post 'lockdown'.

Although the current numbers of volunteers and trustees enable us to continue to deliver our services, the numbers have fallen slightly; we will need to put some effort into this area in the upcoming year.

Working together with other agencies, other Local Citizen Advice offices in Dorset and being a partner in Citizen Advice in Dorset (CAID) adds to our strength, and ability to increase our areas of work, particularly in the areas of deprivation in Bridport District and across Dorset.

I wish to thank all our financial supporters for their contributions and our local councils, for their continued efforts and much valued support. We look forward to a successful bid for long term funding from the Dorset Council, due to be announced before October this year.

By remaining at the forefront of delivering well informed and free advice, we are able to assist our local residents in Bridport and the surrounding District with their issues, assisting them to lead as safe and secure a life as possible.

I am grateful for the continued support of all our friends and especially our volunteers and staff, who have helped deliver another successful year.

Tony Rogers  
Chair, Board of Trustees

## The Board 2020/21

### Trustees

Tony Rogers (Chair)  
Richard Jones (Company Secretary)  
Colin McReavie (Treasurer)  
Stephen Godfrey  
Sue McLaney  
Graham Smith  
Sylvia Barker  
Stan Williams

*Mark Van de Weyer died 3.5.20*  
*Roy Tarsnane resigned 25.8.20*  
*Bruce Willoughby resigned 9.2.21*

### Representatives

Cllr Sarah Williams (Dorset Council)  
Cllr Barry Irvine (Bridport Town Council)  
Cllr Alan Dawkins (Beaminster Town Council)  
Cllr Stan Williams (Lyme Regis Town Council)

### Staff Representatives

Kate Goldrick  
Douglas Baldwin

## Our staff 2020-21

Chief Officer: Rovarn Wickremasinghe

Deputy Manager: Martin Wood

Admin Supervisor: Carol Pearson

Benefits Specialist: Andy Pennington

Debt Adviser: Mark Lancaster

Projects: Sarah Silcox, Alison Burt,  
Barry Lovejoy, Fiona Boggis,  
Kristina Zadunaiskaja, Yolanda Oswald,  
Nicky Willis (retired 30.4.21)

Training Supervisor: Helen Cadisch

Cleaner: Wendy Knight



Andy Pennington  
Benefits Specialist



Carol Pearson  
Admin Supervisor



Rovarn Wickremasinghe  
Chief Officer

## What we do

The Citizens Advice service provides free, independent, confidential and impartial advice to everyone on their rights and responsibilities. We value diversity, promote equality and challenge discrimination.

We aim to provide the advice people need for the problems they face and improve the policies and practices that affect people's lives.

"I greatly appreciate how quickly the CAB were able to respond. I appreciate how quickly your colleagues were able to pick up the content of my conversation and offered suggestions and positive approaches in a totally unbiased manner.

On one occasion I left a message leaving my phone number and again I greatly appreciated your colleagues who responded to this and rang back. The 'old school' courtesies were apparent which then helped to resolve not only the situation itself but it helped to resolve my mental wellbeing immensely  
Thank you to all members of the CAB."

"I was taken seriously and treated with a great deal of respect. My issue was resolved swiftly. My issue had come about due to my inexperience with renting and whilst I had been naive and the circumstances a result of my own actions or inactions, I was given a great deal of support resolving said issues, and feel confident to engage in this organisation if future issues arise."

"I dont know how we would have sorted our problem. In total it took over eighteen months to get the right outcome our Citizens Advice advisor worked tirelessly for us and we will be eternally grateful."

## Key Activities 2020-21

We helped 3,863 clients with 9,958 separate issues in 2020/21. 'Issues' relate to the problem a client contacts us about. 'Activities' records the separate pieces of work done on behalf of the client such as telephone calls, a face to face contact or email.

We have been successful in helping a greater number of clients this year, assisted by additional project funding through the pandemic, most significantly from the collaboration with the Trussell Trust and their Help through Hardship project: we contribute to staffing a national helpline for income maximisation advice and foodbank evoucher referrals to Trussell Trust foodbanks. In 2020-21 this project helped 1729 clients.

	2020-2021	2019-2020	% Change
<b>Clients</b>	3,863	2,340	65%
<b>Issues</b>	9,958	6,943	43%
<b>Activities</b>	8,057	7,674	5%

As part of Citizens Advice in Dorset we help staff a shared telephone advice service, Dorset Adviceline.



**Adviceline**

**5,256** calls answered by Local Citizens Advice in Dorset Unitary area

**1,131** calls answered by Bridport and District

Our biggest enquiry area overall remains welfare benefits at 35% of all enquiries (split between Universal Credit and all other benefits). The 'Other' category in the table below mainly covering foodbank and charitable support enquiries has risen dramatically because of our involvement in the Trussell Trust food bank project but also due to an increase in local demand.

Enquiry Area	Issues	%
Other	2,384	24%
Benefits & Tax Credits	2,014	20%
Benefits Universal Credit	1,513	15%
Debt	859	9%
Housing	672	7%
Employment	619	6%
Utilities & Communications	421	4%
Relationships & Family	331	3%
Consumer Goods & Services	226	2%
Health & Community Care	223	2%
Financial Services & Capability	169	2%
Immigration & Asylum	165	2%
Legal	141	1%
Travel & Transport	72	1%
Tax	59	1%
Discrimination & Hate & GVA	50	1%
Education	40	0%
Grand Total	9,958	100%

**54%** of clients report a disability or long term health problem

**34%** of these conditions related to mental health

## Projects

We were successful in achieving funding for a number of additional projects in 2020-21. These included improving our IT and telephony infrastructure to facilitate remote working thanks to grants from the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, Bridport Town Council, Dorset Community Foundation and Netherbury Community Support.

Funding from the Money and Pensions Service enabled us to employ a trainee debt caseworker to increase our capacity for debt advice, which is vital as 'safety net' measures are gradually withdrawn. They successfully completed all their initial training and are assisting people with debt casework.

Since May 2020 we have been engaged in a national project, Help through Hardship, a partnership with the Trussell Trust and Citizens Advice. We staff a national telephone advice service with other Citizens Advice offices providing benefits and income maximisation advice as well as e-voucher referrals for food parcels to Trussell Trust foodbanks

We were successful in obtaining funding from Dorset Council for a short term Food Security Project to improve referral pathways for all Dorset food banks and social supermarkets so that they can access timely advice interventions for their users.

We thank the Community Justice Fund for a grant for funding our specialist welfare benefits post during the year and providing additional funding for staff training.

## Trends

The table below lists the main enquiry areas and change in number of issues compared to the previous year. The most significant trend we saw overall was the massive increase in the 'Other' category relating to foodbanks and charitable support.

Enquiry Area	2020-21	2019-20	% Change
Benefits & Tax Credits	2,014	1,959	3%
Benefits Universal Credit	1,513	1,212	25%
Employment	619	453	37%
Housing	672	607	11%
Other	2,384	310	670%
Debt	859	715	20%
Relationships & Families	331	375	-12%
Utilities & Communication	421	318	32%

This was predominantly due to our participation in the national Trussell Trust project but we also saw a 17% increase locally in these issues. Employment was a significant trend with increased enquiries relating to furlough, redundancy and pay and entitlements. Locally, we saw a decrease in debt enquiries thanks to safety measures such as the ban on evictions and less active debt collection and enforcement.

“Very helpful regarding redundancy. Employer refused to pay outstanding holiday pay.”

## Outcomes

We record financial outcomes such as income gains – where a benefit entitlement has been identified for a client and claimed, or awarded following a successful dispute or appeal. Reimbursements include tax refunds, road tax exemptions, reduced charges/ costs and the waiver or reduction of court fees.



Financial Outcomes 2020-21	Amount
Income Gain	£1,471,718
Debts Written Off	£ 23,444
Re-imbursments, services, loans	£ 83,795



**119** clients assisted with homelessness enquiries



**86%** of our clients told us we helped them find a way forward

**90%** would recommend our service

“Without the help from one of your colleagues we would never have sorted our problems out .Your colleague has helped us over two years to sort out my disability money and ESA that took forever as I have a very rare condition. We would have given up long ago and are forever grateful for the help we received.”

## Impact of the Pandemic

The trends highlight some of the changes in the enquiries we dealt with during the pandemic compared to the previous year. Rising employment concerns and food insecurity are real problems for many clients.

We had to withdraw our face to face services and outreaches at the start of the pandemic but thanks to our committed and flexible volunteer and staff teams we were able to successfully transition to delivering full advice remotely via phone, email and webchat soon after lockdown in March 2020. This was assisted by BEIS funding via National Citizens Advice which helped us with the costs of a new internet telephony system, laptops and peripherals to facilitate home working for volunteers and staff. We also redesigned our website and made it easier for people to get email help through our web contact form.

Together with the other Dorset LCAs we undertook an analysis of whether the shift in delivery of advice from face to face to phone and digital channels due to the pandemic had any possible adverse impacts on our client group. Across Dorset there was a possible adverse impact on the over 65 age group as numbers using the service had dropped significantly.

The tables below show the data for Bridport and District service. We saw a similar trend in the falling numbers of the over 65 age group accessing the service with no significant changes in gender and health profiles. We are addressing this through the re-opening of face to face provision and community outreach work

Gender	% Clients 2019-20	% Clients 2020-21	Comparison LA
Female	59%	60%	52.4%
Male	40%	40%	47.6%
Prefer different term	0%	0%	

Disability	% 2019-20	% 2020-21
Disabled	9%	8%
Long-term health condition	37%	37%
Non-disabled No health problems	50%	47%
Prefer not to say	4%	8%

Ethnicity 2020-21	Comparison Local Authority proportion	Bridport & District Citizens Advice	National Proportion
Ethnic Minority*	4.4%	8.8%	19.5%

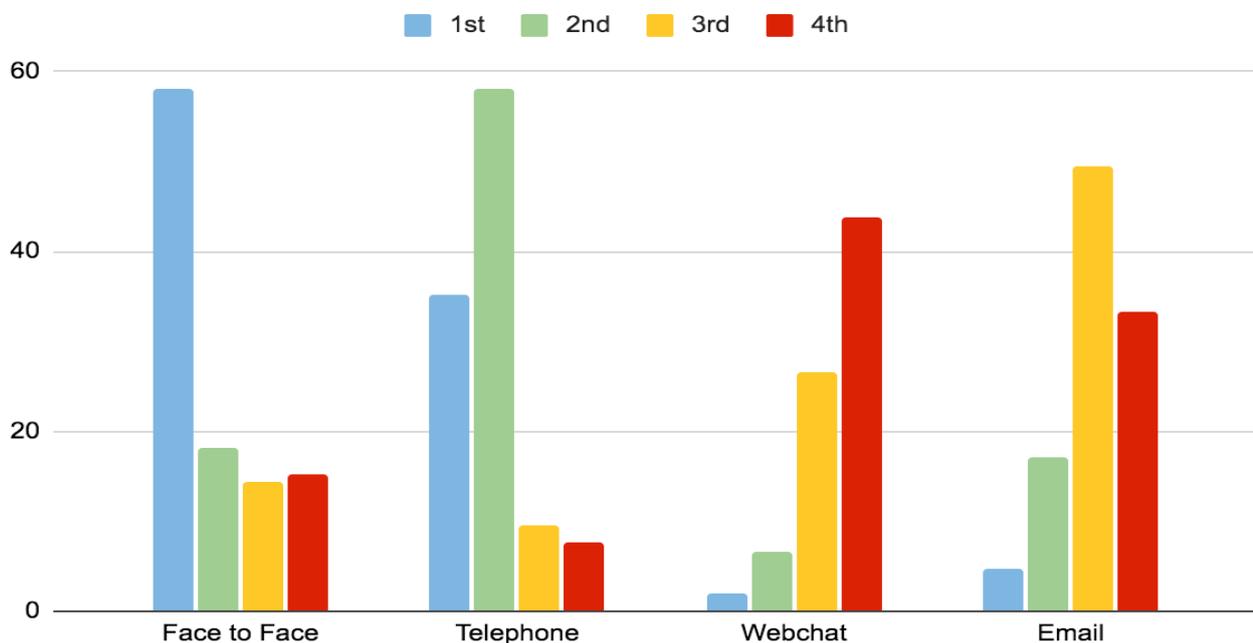
Data: from State of Dorset report 2020. Casebook C6

\* Excludes White British and people who identify as white who have UK national identity (English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish).

Age	Dorset proportion 2019	Bridport & District CA 2019-20	Dorset proportion 2020	Bridport & District CA 2020-21
15 - 24	9%	4%	9%	6%
25 - 34	9%	15%	9%	17%
35-44	10%	15%	10%	17%
45-54	14%	18%	13%	18%
55 - 64	15%	21%	15%	21%
65+	29%	27%	29%	21%

Dorset Data: GeoWessex. Casebook C6

Together with the other Dorset LCAs we also carried out a Dorset wide survey of clients to understand whether the pandemic was changing attitudes to accessing Advice and Information. We asked clients to indicate how they would prefer to contact us in the future This survey showed that a majority (58%) of clients chose Face to Face as their preferred method of communication, with 18% choosing it as their second choice. 35% stated telephone as their preferred channel for advice, with 58% choosing it as their second choice. Email was the preferred third choice for clients (50%) compared to webchat (27%).



## A Trainee's Perspective



Having made the decision to move to Bridport full-time early in 2020, I was keen to explore the possibility of fulfilling a long held ambition to volunteer with Citizens Advice. Then the pandemic hit. Our move was delayed until May,

by which time so many elements of our day to day interaction had changed immeasurably. However, despite the challenges it posed, the Bridport CA team were keen to continue with our training and our cohort of three began in September 2020.

By this time, only a skeleton staff was still coming into the Bridport office and most of the advisers were getting used to operating from home. Being only three trainees we were able to begin our sessions at the office, maintaining social distancing protocols as we spread around the large training room. This initial onsite interaction meant that having spent some time together in person, we were much more able to cope when we were eventually forced to stay at home and continue our training remotely.

However, being unable to bring the training modules to life by shadowing experienced advisers has been a disadvantage. Seeing how an adviser puts theory into practice is vital to gain confidence and also pick up invaluable hints and tips on how to approach what can appear at first glance as challenging problems.

So it's with great excitement that I can join my colleagues in the office and really feel that my training can be put more effectively into practice. A huge thanks to everyone for facilitating my training under very difficult circumstances. Let's hope we're on our way to resuming some form of normality and I can finally get to meet my CA colleagues in person!

Helen

### Case Study Benefits

A disabled client with a complex neurological condition was informed by the DWP that they had been overpaid UC to the amount of a few hundred pounds as they had not taken into account other benefit income properly and that they would be taking steps to recover that money.

We advised client that the DWP had erred in law and that they had been substantially underpaid not overpaid as additional amounts for limited capability for work had not been paid from the correct date. We helped the client appeal. The appeal was lapsed in client's favour by the DWP a week before the Tribunal was due to hear the case. Client awarded over £2000 in underpaid benefit.

"Even though the advice they gave me wasn't an end to a means just talking to them helped me to clarify certain issues I was having and reduced the stress I was under. I was also given advice for the action I needed to take after my initial issue was resolved and they even followed up with a phone call to see how I was dealing with everything. All in all the two ladies I spoke to were very knowledgeable concerning my predicament very approachable easy to understand very sensitive and compassionate to my feelings at that particular time because I was so confused and worried about my circumstances. Thank you for your help."

## A Supervisor's Perspective

April 2020; it is the first day of remoting working. I am sitting at home on the sofa with a coffee table in front of me. On it are my laptop, my private mobile phone, my work mobile (an ancient iphone I've revived on a PAYG contract), the house phone, and my ipad. The laptop is plugged in, and I have tabs opened on Casebook, Advisernet, CPAG online, Advice Guide and Microsoft Office email. I feel like Captain Kirk at the control desk of the Starship Enterprise.

Mondays start with a Teams meeting at 9.30 that everyone joins. Having looked at the tasks in the Bridport Message Book, I begin allocating cases to members of the team. Although we assign tasks in casebook, I always talk to everyone to check they are ok with whatever the enquiry is. For some, this means a call to their landline or mobile phone. Fortunately most people are happy to chat or receive messages on WhatsApp. Once everyone is sorted, I can sit back and put my feet up for the rest of the day - or not!

Supervising, whether remotely or in the office, is a strangely demanding job. Team sizes vary day to day, but my Monday team consists of Lee, a debt adviser, Christine, a benefits caseworker, Helen, an experienced assessor, Harriet, an adviser, answering the local phone, Gill, in the office on Adviceline, Martin a soon to be qualified adviser, Helen, a trainee adviser, and Kristina, a paid Income Maximisation adviser and assessor for food bank referrals. I am responsible for ensuring that the high standards expected of us by the management team and the QAA auditors from National Citizens Advice, are maintained. The supervisor has to be aware of all the cases, and assess any likely issues that may arise, which often means doing the same research as the adviser, using online resources.

Teamwork is the key to happy working, and at Bridport CA we are lucky to have a supportive trustee board and approachable managers, coupled with the ever efficient admin skills of Carol and an extraordinary team of volunteers, many of whom have been executives and managers themselves. The clients are similarly diverse; some make us want to weep, some make us laugh, a few are disgruntled with the world and others are so grateful to find a helpful, friendly person to guide them through the complexities of our increasingly digitized and confusing world.

Hilary

### Case Study Long Covid

A client contracted Covid and developed Long Covid symptoms needing several months off work. The client had to return to work when their company sick pay ended because of financial difficulties despite ongoing fatigue and 'brain fog'.

On return the client was not offered a capability assessment or a phased return and immediately required to do late shifts followed by early shifts which involved heavy lifting and lone working.

The client worked two days and then explained to their employer they were not capable of working the hours being allocated. The Company insisted that the client had to work as they 'were running a business' so the client felt they had no option but to resign.

We asked the client for copies of their employment contract, email correspondence with the company and GP sick notes to be forwarded to Citizens Advice Specialist Employment Unit. The case has now been assessed for eligibility for Constructive Dismissal and the Specialist Employment Unit feels the client has sufficient grounds to bring a case.

## Research & Campaigns

Recent Research and Campaigns work has included engagement in the national Citizens Advice campaign to retain the £20 per week increase in Universal Credit introduced during the pandemic through briefings and meeting with our MP, Chris Loder.

We participated in the Dorset Council Homelessness strategy consultation together with the other Dorset Citizens Advice offices.

We can help change policy through our specialist welfare benefits casework:

The DWP recently conceded a judicial review challenge by the Public Law Project (PLP) to its practice of making 'offers' to disabled claimants awaiting a First-tier Tribunal appeal hearing.

The Judicial Review focused on the unfair, unlawful and discriminatory nature of the practice of making 'offers' to claimants awaiting an appeal hearing, and that evidence showed that claimants felt pressure to accept the 'offer', were regularly not told about their appeal rights, and were not given an opportunity to discuss any offer with representatives. Bridport & District Citizens Advice were approached by the PLP to assist with a witness statement in the High Court and submitted evidence of eight cases at this office.

As a result of the challenge, the DWP has agreed to re-write its policies and guidance and will retrain DWP officials.

"The CAB advisor told me where to find the relevant link on your website for me to compose a letter to put my problem right. This was the answer to my problem I was surprised that after I sent the letter I had no more hassle from the offending company after taking the CAB advisors advice. Thank you very much excellent service."

"I went to CAB to help me sort out the best deal energy deal. The adviser was helpful, patient and thorough. I could have done this on my own but I find some of the forms confusing and cause a great deal of stress. With the adviser I was able to follow his approach and will try to do the same when my contract runs out. A great service. Thank you."

## THANK YOU TO ALL OUR SUPPORTERS

Access to Justice, Allington Parish Council, Beaminster Town Council, Bothenhampton and Walditch Parish Council, Bradpole Parish Council, Bridport Child Contact Centre, Bridport Lions, Bridport Town Council, Bridport and District Friendship Centre, Broadwindsor Group Parish Council, Burton Bradstock Parish Council, Char Valley Group Parish Council, Chideock Parish Council, Child Poverty Action Group, Chris Loder MP, Community Justice Fund, DEFRA, Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, Dorset Community Foundation, Dorset Council, Dorset Library Service, Ex advisers and volunteers and grateful clients, Hall and Woodhouse, Litton Cheney Parish Council, Lodgers PC, Lyme Regis Town Council, West Dorset Mencap, Morrisons, Netherbury Parish Council, Money and Pensions Service, Peoples Post Code Lottery, Powerstock and North Poorton Group Parish, Prout Bridge Project, Public Health Dorset, Public Law Project, Puncknowle and Swyre Group Parish Council, Salway Ash, Netherbury & Melplash Community Support, Shipton Gorge Parish Council, Symondsburry Parish Council, Trussell Trust, Uplyme Parish Council, Valentine Trust, West Bay Car Boot Grants Scheme, Wessex Water

### Contacts:

**Adviceline: 0800 144 88 48**

**Website: [www.bridportca.org.uk](http://www.bridportca.org.uk)**

**Email advice: use website contact form or [advice@bridport-cab.org.uk](mailto:advice@bridport-cab.org.uk)**

**Existing clients: 01308 456594**



**Charity Registration number: 1101576**

**Company Registration No 4876990**

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