



**Bridport  
& District**

**ANNUAL REPORT  
2024 - 2025**

## WELCOME FROM THE CHAIR



The past year has again proved a very difficult year for many local families and households. The cost of living, especially in energy and food prices, continues to be very high and a major challenge.

Our services continue to provide much needed help, advice and support for families. Over the past year, some 2,300 clients have been helped, with over 9,400 problems identified and resolved by our team. We have seen a 17% increase in issues handled, including nearly 2000 cases relating to charitable support and foodbanks.

I am very proud of the essential public service that Citizens Advice provides to many local people in need. And I am very grateful to the dedicated body of staff and volunteers who enable us to provide this excellent service to all our clients so efficiently and cost-effectively.

This work would not be possible without the financial support we continue to receive from many organisations and individuals. I would like to thank local businesses, councils and friends in particular for their continued support.

Two trustees have stepped down over the past year. I would like to thank Geoff Jones and Colin McReavie for all their support and advice to the board over the years. I am also very pleased to welcome Karen Delafield, Jim Smyllie, Keith Wilson and Linda Child who have joined in the past year, and know that they will all make excellent contributions to the work of the board.

David Gibson

Chair, Board of Trustees

"I am waiting to hear if my application for attendance allowance for my husband has been successful, but without Citizens Advice help, I would have struggled to complete the form. Having to complete the form when you are in an emotional low yourself is very hard and the staff were so kind and patient. I have sung their praises to everyone I meet. Sincere thanks."

"I literally had no money to pay bills or support my family. I was at the point of a breakdown because of all the stress but with amazing support I was able to access financial support and assistance to get back on track. I couldn't have done it without the amazing Citizens Advice helpers support. Thank you"

## The Board 2024/25

### *Trustees*

David Gibson (Chair)  
Colin McReavie (Treasurer, resigned 21.3.25)  
Graham Smith  
Geoff Jones (resigned 10.1.25)  
Sue Pemberton  
Jacqui Bishop  
Lavinia Sonnenberg  
Karen Delafield  
Jamie Scott  
Jim Smyllie (Vice Chair, Co Sec)  
Keith Wilson (Treasurer)

### *Representatives*

CLlr Sarah Williams (West Dorset Council)  
CLlr David Worthington (Bridport Town Council)  
CLlr Stuart Cockerill (Lyme Town Council)

### *Volunteer Representative*

Gill Acton

## Our staff 2024-25

Chief Officer: Rovarn Wickremasinghe

Deputy Manager: Martin Wood

Advice Session Supervisor: Juliet Evans

Admin Supervisor: Carol Pearson

Volunteer Co-ordinator: John Freeman

Specialist Projects: Andy Pennington,  
Sarah Silcox, Kristina Zadunaiskaja,  
Alison Burt, Alan Bowley, Jane Bryant,  
Mecki Testroet

Trainee Adviser: Zoe Hill

Cleaner: Wendy Knight



Carol Pearson  
Admin Supervisor



Martin Wood  
Deputy Manager



Kristina Zadunaiskaja  
Henry Smith Project  
Benefits Caseworker

## 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 policies and practices that adversely affect people's lives.

## CHIEF OFFICER'S REPORT



We have had another busy year as people continue to struggle with bills and the cost of living. Enquiries concerning charitable support or foodbank help nearly doubled compared to the previous year.

Although the number of people we helped remained broadly similar, the data shows that people are seeking help with more problems (four issues per client) and a sustained trend has been that increasing numbers of clients present with disability or long-term health problems.

These complex needs mean that our users often need multiple contacts and prolonged support to resolve their problems.

Managing demand has not been easy at times, particularly with the need for debt and money advice, but I am very grateful to our fantastic team of over 50 volunteers and paid staff for their hard work and commitment which has resulted in some great outcomes for local people as highlighted later in the report.

The core service provides general help in many advice areas including employment, consumer, housing, benefits, debt and tax at our main office and outreach locations in Bridport, Lyme Regis and Beaminster. These include foodbanks, library, community centre and family hub. We also run a number of funded specialist projects with paid advisers, working closely with the volunteer advisers. This type of model has helped us broaden the scope of our work and provides a good framework to support volunteers and help them develop their skills

The projects have provided much needed specialist advice in areas such as debt casework, welfare benefit appeals representation and energy advice so residents get the range of help they need.

Rovarn Wickremasinghe  
Chief Officer

## KEY ACTIVITIES 2024-25

The service helped 2,273 clients with 9,368 separate issues in 2024/25.

'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.

Clients contact us with multiple problems (on average 4 separate issues per client), which can take numerous contacts to resolve.

	2024-25
<b>Clients</b>	2,273
<b>Issues</b>	9,368
<b>Activities</b>	11,200

Source Casebook C6, all regions/LAs, includes quick contacts; 117 clients

The following table shows just the numbers of Dorset Council area residents that we helped compared to the previous year.

	2023-2024	2024-2025	% Change
<b>Clients</b>	2,093	2,000	-4%
<b>Issues</b>	7,447	8,688	17%
<b>Activities</b>	8,456	10,507	24%

Source Casebook, C6 filtered for Dorset residents

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



### Adviceline

**530** calls answered by Bridport office

**3,687** calls answered by Local Citizens Advice in Dorset Unitary area in total

The table below shows the issues by enquiry area, for the whole service, across all geography.

Enquiry Area	Issues	%
Benefits & Tax Credits	2,900	31.0%
Charitable Support & Food Banks	1,992	21.3%
Housing	778	8.3%
Debt	633	6.8%
Benefits Universal Credit	732	7.8%
Utilities & Communications	461	4.9%
Consumer Goods & Services	383	4.1%
Relationships & Family	293	3.1%
Employment	296	3.2%
Financial Services & Capability	186	2.0%
Health and Community Care	194	2.2%
Legal	180	1.9%
Tax	75	0.8%
Travel & Transport	98	1.0%
Immigration & Asylum	64	0.7%
Other	57	0.6%
GVA & Hate Crime	31	0.3%
Education	15	0.2%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>9,368</b>	<b>100%</b>

Casebook, C6 all regions.

Our biggest enquiry area overall remains welfare benefits at 39% of all enquiries (split between Universal Credit and all other benefits). This increased from a 36% share the previous year. We have seen increased demand for charitable and food bank help which accounted for 13% of issues last year.

Increasing numbers of the people we see have health problems.

**61% of our clients now report a disability (12%) or long-term health problem (49%).**

From the latest census data in Dorset 82.4% of the population report no disability, 6.5% disabled and limited a lot, 11% disabled and limited a little.

Of the 854 clients who gave details of their disability/limiting health problem the breakdown is as follows:

Type of Disability	Percentage 2024-25
Multiple Impairments	45%
Mental Health	20%
Physical Impairment	14%
Learning Disability	3%
Mobility	3%
Hard of Hearing	2%
Stamina or breathing or fatigue	2%
Visual Impairment	1%
Deaf	1%
Other type or not specified	9%

Dorset Data: Census 2021, Casebook C6 filtered for Dorset residents only

The age profile of our clients who are Dorset residents is a reasonable reflection of the latest census County profile.

Age	Bridport & District CA percentage	Dorset percentage
15-24	4%	9%
25-34	11%	9%
35-44	16%	10%
45-54	17%	13%
55-64	23%	15%
65+	29%	30%
85+	3%	4%

Dorset Data: Census 2021, Casebook C6 filtered for Dorset residents only

Gender	Bridport & District CA percentage	Dorset percentage
Female	59%	51%
Male	40.9%	49%
Prefer different term	0.1%	0%

Dorset Data: Census 2021, Casebook C6 filtered for Dorset residents only

Ethnicity 2024/25	Comparison Local Authority percentage	Bridport & District Citizens Advice	National Percentage
White Ethnicity	97.1%	95.8%	81.7%
All other Ethnicities	2.9%	4.2%	18.3%

Data: from Census 2021 and Casebook C6 filtered for Dorset residents only

## TRENDS



The table below lists the biggest % changes in issues in the main enquiry areas compared to the previous year (filtered for Dorset residents only).

We saw increased demand for charitable support, foodbank assistance and advice on benefits as cost-of-living pressures continue to hit household budgets.

There was a reduction in utility and communications enquiries which may be influenced by falls in the energy price cap from historic highs.

Enquiry Area	2024-25	2023-24	% Change
Charitable Support & Foodbanks	1992	1065	+ 87%
Benefits & Tax Credits	2900	2290	+ 27%
Benefits - UC	732	631	+ 16%
Utilities & Communication	461	551	- 16%
Relationships	293	341	- 14%

## PROJECTS IN FOCUS - STAFF VIEWS



Sarah Silcox  
Henry Smith Project  
Benefits Caseworker

### Specialist Benefits Project

The Henry Smith complex benefit casework project helped 189 clients to challenge benefit decisions made by the DWP, HMRC and local authority in 2024/25.

The project is staffed by three benefit specialists and supports clients from the Bridport and Weymouth/Portland areas who are struggling with complex benefits issues. Often this involves supporting people with appeals against decisions to refuse or stop a benefit. Most of the time, these appeals are successful – in 2024/25 we helped people gain just over £1 million in benefits put back in payment, or benefit overpayments wiped out.

Most cases we take on involve personal independence payment (PIP) and universal credit (UC), and the specialists on the project are expecting workload to increase further when the proposed welfare benefit reforms are implemented from next year.

The current financial year is the last in which we have funding from the Henry Smith charity, so we are busy applying for fresh funding to ensure that the expertise built up over the past three years is retained and we can continue with this vital area of work.

*Sarah Silcox, Benefits Adviser*

### Case Study: Henry Smith Benefits Project

Personal independence payment (PIP) challenges continued to account for the bulk of the case work of the Henry Smith team in 2024/25. A vulnerable young man approached us for help to reinstate his PIP as it had been stopped after he asked for a review following a significant deterioration in his fragile mental health. Rather than increasing his award, as was his intention in asking for the review, the DWP removed it altogether, causing him huge stress and threatening to derail his mental health completely. We requested that the DWP look again at the decision to end his award (by submitting a mandatory reconsideration); the Department changed its mind and reinstated the client's original PIP award, avoiding the need for a lengthy, and for the client stressful, appeal.

## Debt Project

In the last year at Bridport & District Citizens Advice we have helped 230 clients manage their debt. But what does this really mean? Dorset Community Foundation and SGN Energy have helped fund a part-time member of staff and supported office and volunteer costs to provide a debt service. We have been able to:

- Make 16 applications to Wessex Water's Assist & Restart program - reducing monthly water bills for clients and writing off debt
- Make 11 Debt Relief Order applications and total debts written off of just over £238,000
- Successfully request the withdrawal of HMRC's notice to file for income tax and the associated penalties and interest for a client
- Help clients make payment plans with Dorset Council to repay their council tax arrears
- Help clients make payment plans for all other kinds of debt (energy, credit card, store cards etc.)

Perhaps equally importantly, we have helped our clients achieve peace of mind regarding their finances.

*Jane Bryant, Debt Caseworker*

### Case Study: Debt

Millie came in to ask for help with her debts. She worked full-time, had a partner and a young child, but was unable to pay essential bills and manage her debts.

Millie's mental health was worsening, and she could not see a way out. She explained that her debts had built up when she had been made redundant and lost her home. She had used credit to survive that very difficult time.

Our debt adviser, over the course of several appointments, established a financial picture of her situation. She owed £32,000 (mostly on credit cards and loans) which required repayments of nearly £400 per month. However, after all her essential bills were paid, she typically only had £50 per month to repay her debts.

There were a couple of options available to her and we talked her through what those options, including insolvency, would mean. Millie opted for a Debt Relief Order. 12 months later her debts were written off and she was debt free. A fresh start for Millie and her family.

## Energy Project



*Mecki Testroet*

The energy adviser's job is to interview clients and find out how best to help them. Some clients come with a clear idea what they need help with (a utility issue, such as being overcharged, a meter not working properly); the majority come because they struggle with their finances in general.

The approach is twofold: try to reduce their outgoings by looking at all household bills and try to increase their income by carrying out a benefits check and providing them with any grants they are eligible for and are available at the time.

### Case Study: Energy

Ellen was struggling with her finances. She had no debts but relatively high energy bills as her son had to have the heating on because of his medical condition.

After doing a benefits check, we identified that Ellen was entitled to Pension Credit of over £200 per month. Ellen was also not receiving the correct amount of Council Tax Support (she was entitled to a full reduction).

We were able to advise on further energy efficiencies to enable Ellen to reduce her bills, including access to free loft insulation.

"I was so impressed by the care and attention shown to my problem. When a phone call was made the fact that Citizens Advice were calling clearly made a difference. Had it just been me, I'd have been fobbed off yet again, but Citizens Advice meant things were taken seriously and acted upon. You have a well-deserved great reputation and I'm grateful to you."

## PARTNERSHIPS

We work in close partnership with the Citizens Advice in Dorset Consortium delivering the Council's advice and information contract including services such as the Dorset Adviceline and leading on the single point of contact email referral system for third parties.

We collaborate with local organisations to deliver shared objectives and are involved with Bridport Local Area partnership on community matters relating to homelessness and health and well-being. We are also active members of the Local Alliance Group promoting financial wellbeing, improved learning and resilience outcomes for young people and their families in West Dorset. We have developed good referral links with the Jurassic Social Prescribing Team.

We would also like to thank all our partners who have supported our outreach advice sessions in local food banks, The Family Hub and the local library as well as our main outreaches in Lyme Regis and Beaminster.

## RESEARCH AND CAMPAIGNS



In 2024-25 we were involved with several National Citizens Advice campaigns. This included contacting the MP with campaign asks for the Autumn 2024 budget. Some of the campaign asks were successful, for example, uprating the Local Housing Allowance.

Locally we were involved in a Pension Credit take up campaign with Dorset Council following the introduction of means testing the Winter Fuel Payment. This led to a 20% increase in Pension Credit claims. We contributed to a report on the delays in processing Council Tax write off requests and also collaborated with the other Dorset offices on a submission to the Housing Ombudsman consultation 'Repairing Trust', highlighting the significant problems with getting Housing Associations to undertake timely repairs, citing many case study examples.

Fuel Poverty Awareness Day in November 2024 was successful – the Dorset Energy Bus was in Bridport Bucky Doo Square and had free winter warmth packs as giveaways, which generated a lot of interest and led to further referrals to the Bridport Energy Advisers. We undertook scams awareness activity in the local Natwest Bank in January 2025.

The coming year will see a focus on the Welfare Reform agenda, with concerns over the impact on disabled people, and how the Government's proposed new Crisis Resilience Fund will be used to support local residents... and don't mention parking fines.

*Juliet Evans*

## 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, food parcels, reduced charges/costs and the waiver or reduction of court fees. These are conservative estimates as only a proportion of outcomes get recorded for various reasons.



Financial Outcomes 2024-25	Amount
Income Gain	£1,915,739
Debts Written Off	£238,750
Re-imbursments, services, loans	£372,021
Other	£37,690



**133** clients assisted with actual or threatened homelessness enquiries and/or using the Council homelessness service

Other service measures and 'soft' outcomes include:

**85%** of our clients found our service easy to access

**87%** told us we helped them find a way forward with their problem

**86%** told us their problems were resolved

**75%** said they felt significantly less stressed, depressed or anxious after receiving help from us

**90%** would recommend our service

"I'm so glad we have a CAB office in our town. It is a much needed and appreciated service"

As always, I had the best of care and advice. Thank goodness for the wonderful advisors and helpers who give their expertise in times of need. Just like to thank you all.

"I can't thank Citizens Advice enough for their help. Their staff are so helpful and professional. I tried to sort out my problem before I sought their help but failed. I was advised to seek their help further down the line and they managed to resolve everything for me. Superb service!"

**We would like to thank the dedicated volunteers who deliver our service. At the end of the financial year 2025 the volunteer team was made up of 9 trustees, 3 supervisors, 40 advisors and 10 support staff.**

**We estimate that our volunteers contributed over 12,000 hours of their time, providing enormous benefit to the local community.**

### **Case Study: Housing**

Mary dropped in with a Notice of Eviction from her housing association property which was due to be executed in just a couple of weeks' time. She had a history of rent arrears and had narrowly escaped eviction the previous year.

Mary was assisted to submit an application to the Court to postpone the eviction date and with an application to enter the rent arrears debt in the government's standard Breathing Space scheme to prevent bailiff enforcement for 60 days.

After examination of Mary's finances and gentle exploration of her situation, it became evident that her rent arrears had arisen due to alcohol dependency. She was supported to get help with her addiction from another charity pending the successfully postponed eviction hearing.

With assistance from Dorset Council's Tenancy Sustainment Team, Mary's landlords were persuaded to request the Court to suspend her eviction on agreed terms and she was able to remain in her home and seek the treatment she needed to deal with her alcohol addiction.

## THANK YOU TO ALL OUR SUPPORTERS

We would like to thank, Alice Ellen Cooper Deane Foundation, Bridport Lions Club, Bridport and Lyme Regis Town Councils, Bridport Rotary Club, Child Poverty Action Group, Chris Loder MP, Citizens Advice in Dorset, Dorset Community Foundation, Dorset Library Service, Edward Morello MP, Foodbanks, Loders PCC, Morrisons, National Citizens Advice, National Lottery Community Fund, Parish Councils, Public Law Project, Prout Bridge Project, SGN Energy, The Henry Smith Charity, Valentine Trust, Wessex Water, West Dorset Mencap and our main funder Dorset Council for financial assistance and support in 2024-25

### **Contacts:**

**Adviceline: 0800 144 88 48**

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

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