

Briefing for NWLDC on advice services during 2020/21 and the impact of the Covid pandemic on those services

When lockdown was announced on 16th March 2020, we had to move very quickly to telephone and digital services only, provided from remote individual locations rather than communal offices. This meant a huge piece of work getting volunteers and staff set up on our telephone advice system and ensuring that everyone involved would have access to equipment to enable them to work and volunteer from home.

Within a week, despite the enormous challenges, we were providing an extended phone and email service and have continued in the development of remote services since then. Some of our existing volunteers, unable to make the change to remote channels, are currently not active in the service, although still wishing to resume their volunteering as soon as they can.

Despite the fact that not all of our volunteers have been able to participate, we've been able to maintain our reach in North West Leicestershire as shown in the Headline and Comparison stats in Section 1 - Key Achievements:

1. Key Achievements of 2020/21

- Achieving a smooth transition to remote channels whilst still being able to help our vulnerable clients and continuing to strengthen our working relationships with local authority departments.
- Continuing to provide a quality advice service for the residents of North West Leicestershire, despite the pandemic.
- Developing our online referral route for partner agencies to allow for smooth referrals through to the right service for Local Authority departments and other partners.
- Developing on-line recruitment and training for staff and volunteers which has allowed us to fill staff vacancies when they have arisen and recruit a new cohort



of volunteers being trained and working from home.

2. Headline stats for 2020/21 & Comparison stats 2019/20 & 2020/21

Total number of unique clients advised	2,562
Total number of cases (including new and repeat clients)	2,682
Number of issues dealt with	7,095
Number of activities	6,581
Number of older people advised	697
Total amount of debt dealt with	£976,490
Total amount of income gained	£1,308,389
Online Adviceguide views by North West Leicestershire residents	58,537

Below is a comparison between 2019/20 and 20/21: despite the challenging conditions, we managed to do slightly better in all areas except debt which is covered more in Section 2.

Description	2019/20	2020/21
Total number of unique clients advised	2,279	2,562
Total number of cases (including new and repeat clients)	2,569	2,682
Number of issues dealt with	7,040	7,095
Number of activities	5,417	6,581
Number of older people advised	656	697
Total amount of debt dealt with	£1,968,123	£976,490
Total amount of income gained	£970,898	£1,308,389
Number of online Adviceguide views by North West Leicestershire residents	49,987	58,537

3. Services

Since the start of the first lockdown, all of our services have been delivered remotely, either by telephone or by email. We have, so far, been able to deal with all enquiries, providing information and assistance and there have been no instances of us being unable to help someone through a remote channel. However, we are aware that there may be a small number of residents who have not been in touch with us as they cannot engage through the channels available.

As well as financing the services listed above, the core funding we receive allows us to bring in funding for specialist services and projects which also benefits the residents of North West Leicestershire and are listed below. These services have continued remotely throughout the pandemic:

- **Macmillan Benefits Advice Project** covering the whole of the County and the City providing benefits advice and casework (including appeals and representation) for those affected by cancer. The current contract, which was due to expire on 31st December 2019, has been further extended until December 2021.
- **East Midlands Money Advice Project**, now funded by The Money and Pension Service, which took over from The Money Advice Service, providing specialist debt casework and one off advice across the County.
- **MESO UK Benefits Advice Project** - this project continues to provide a mixture of telephone and online face to face help for people suffering from Mesothelioma, an aggressive cancer related to exposure to asbestos and for which there is currently no known cure.
- **The Pensionwise Service** - LeicesterShire CitAL was successful in its bid to deliver the National Pensionwise Service across Leicestershire, Leicester City and Rutland. This provides information to those approaching retirement age who are contemplating taking advantage of the changes in pension regulations allowing people to take part or all of their pension pot as a lump sum.
- **The Help to Claim Service** - this service helps new claimants to apply for Universal Credit and continues to assist them until they receive their first full payment. This was a DWP response to the many issues around claiming Universal Credit and the acknowledgement of the need for widespread support. The service currently provides assistance by telephone or webchat through a team of specialist advisers.
- **Auxiliary Money Support Service:** With regard to the national concern regarding the predicted surge in debt, we have secured funding for 1 year for a new project, the Auxiliary Money Support Service (AMSS), which is designed to increase local capacity for debt advice in the wake of Covid-19, and enhance



the range of debt and money support available for Leicestershire residents, particularly those experiencing mental health issues which impact on their ability to deal with debt, and assist with benefit application. We are currently recruiting to this team.

4. Areas of advice

- Benefits issues remain the highest area of demand representing almost 52% of all enquiries from North West Leicestershire residents. The lack of face to face has presented some problems where a paper application form for benefits is required, and, while we have been able to overcome this, it is a lengthy and time consuming process. To improve accessibility for all we are actively campaigning for all benefit applications to be available online.
- Employment enquiries have risen significantly with redundancy and furlough the most frequent topics. We are expecting a further surge in redundancy enquiries when the current furlough comes to an end on the 30th September, and businesses have to make some hard decisions around staff retention. Whilst employment has traditionally been just a small proportion of enquiries, it has risen significantly during the pandemic.
- Debt has always made up a significant part of our work, but there has been a sharp reduction in debt clients in line with a national trend. People have been taking advantage of the support put in place by government and financial institutions - payment holidays, restrictions on enforcement action etc - and, as a result, have put off dealing with their debt. However, with these supports gradually ending, we are already beginning to see a steady increase in debt work with a significant surge predicted in the near future. Because there was a cessation of enforcement action on rent arrears, there has been a steady rise in this area but with little debt work, mainly we believe because tenants knew they were safe from eviction. However, with those protections coming to an end, we expect to see a sharp rise in clients facing homelessness, especially in the private sector. Similarly we are seeing an increase in Council Tax arrears.
- There has been an emerging issue with regard to contact with children where contact for non custodial parents and the wider family have been restricted due to the perceived risk of coronavirus. We flagged this with the national organisation as part of our campaigning work and subsequently the Government have now issued a briefing paper, 'Coronavirus: Separated Families and Contact

with Children in Care’, published by the House of Commons on Wednesday 23rd September with clarification on this subject.

- Despite information nationally indicating an increase in Domestic Abuse, we have not seen any substantial increase, possibly because this is being picked up by specialist services. We have advised 6 clients reporting domestic abuse and 3 reporting child abuse. We are continuing to monitor this.

5. Development

We were just embarking on a review of services and how we deliver them when the pandemic hit. We have continued with that review, incorporating the valuable learning from the adaptations we have had to make, and also considering both short and long term goals. The main thrust of the review is to make sure that services remain relevant and fit for purpose in an uncertain landscape:

- **Face to face services**

Now that restrictions are being lifted we are looking at our face to face services and how we want to provide these going forward. With regard to the pandemic, there are still precautions that need to be taken, especially as most of our interview rooms at the Council offices have little or no access to fresh air and are also not large enough to allow for any social distancing. We will be embarking on risk assessment in the near future and this will allow us to gauge what needs to be in place to safeguard staff, volunteers and clients. Initially however, there will be no return to a drop-in service. In both the short and long term we intend to ensure that any face to face services will be reserved for those clients who are very vulnerable and for whom remote channels are not suitable. So face to face appointments will be booked according to need and the nature of the assistance required. Furthermore, when we are able to re-introduce a drop-in service it will only be available for vulnerable clients in crisis or with real emergencies. Anyone attending the offices who does not fit these criteria will be asked to ring our adviceline or self refer through our online referral system/email.

- **Video interviewing**



We have been considering how we can expand remote channels of communication, looking at systems which offer video call access as a part of day to day operations, and can mimic that face to face contact which we are currently missing. We were able to obtain funding to allow a 12 month pilot of a system called Attend Anywhere, which is widely used in clinical settings across the country. From a client point of view, it is simple to use, requires no software download and can be accessed from desktop computers, laptops, tablets and mobile phones. We simply send a link to the client with the date and time of the appointment and they use the link to enter a virtual reception area from which the adviser will collect them. We are currently rolling this out across our teams and have just started implementation in the County. We believe it has many advantages especially for those with limited access to public transport, who live in rural areas or who are housebound. For those clients who can use it, it has the advantage of being able to see the adviser 'face to face' and, if the client needs support, family members or support workers can be invited to attend without needing to be physically present.

- With the ongoing effects of the Covid 19 pandemic, and our move to delivering advice via remote channels, we have begun to lose volunteers for whom telephone and digital work is not something they want to do. This is a sad loss of experience and knowledge but we are currently recruiting volunteers specifically for home working and advising via remote channels. This is proving to be popular and we are getting regular applications which will allow us not only to sustain the current service but expand it. We have had 30 applications over the last few months and many have already started their training. They will be used to answer calls on our advice line across all of our County districts.
- Our training team has successfully made the transition to remote volunteer recruitment and training and we are specifically recruiting volunteers able to work remotely from home , using telephone, email and video call channels. We have also moved our recruitment of paid staff to a remote model and have successfully filled a number of vacancies.

- The National Adviceline and Local Adviceline have introduced freephone numbers so nobody ringing us will be charged for the call. The new numbers can be found on our website. Our old number is still operating but it gives the option of terminating the call and redialing the free phone number if continuing to incur a charge for them.
- We have been working hard to secure funding to update our IT equipment and have been successful in that endeavour. We are now looking at funding to allow us to equip access points, especially in rural settings where clients who do not have smart devices can access a computer to allow them to have an Attend Anywhere interview or possibly have a telephone interview.

6. Joint Working

We already have some well established joint working with partners but need to continue to develop this for the benefit of all of our customers/clients. To this end, we are looking to:

- Continue our involvement with the City and County Social Welfare Cell of the Local Resilience Forum COVID 19 Recovery Phase which aims to support communities/groups who have been disproportionately affected by the Pandemic.
- Work with partners to improve take up of our online referral system.
- Continue the development of systems such as Attend Anywhere for appointments where support workers and other professionals can attend to support/assist the client.
- Look at how we can work with other organisations to assist those who are struggling with remote channels.



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Appendix 1

Case Study

Profile of Client:

Client is a single mother, aged 42, who lives with her 2 daughters aged 18 & 2. She has received no maintenance from either girls' father as both are unemployed due to Covid-19. She is struggling to afford food. She is unemployed and on benefits - Universal Credit, Housing Benefit, Council Tax reduction and Child Benefit.

Summary of issues:

Client recently moved house to a Housing Association (HA) house. Job Centre said they would only pay £300 towards her £600 rent per month but HA said they would pay in full. UC then paid her full housing benefit to her and not HA when she moved in. Rent then went up by £18 in April and she told UC. They are now deducting £54 per month from her UC because they say she has breached the benefit cap. She is confused. She is also paying back a UC loan to help with the moving costs. She used the loan to buy a fridge, a cooker & a few essentials. She has a child's bed for her 2 year old to move into but she and her elder daughter sleep on old mattresses on the floor.

As she has not received maintenance from her children's father for some time due to the pandemic she is struggling to buy food and has no money for anything else.

Options Discussed & Advice Given:

Offered the client a food voucher to help with the food situation. Explained she can have up to 3 in a six month period but to return if she needed more as we could ask the food bank. Client to attend the Food Bank.

Advised client that she might be able to get help with beds and possibly other household furniture through Leicester Charity Link (LCL). Unfortunately, local resources such as the MRC Furniture project, were closed due to the pandemic. Explained she would need to think about her priorities as there is scope to ask for 3 things. Bed with a mattress should



count as one. She also said she had no table for the family to eat at so added table & 4 chairs to the list. Advised that she needs to identify approximate costs, although LCL can often supply the items rather than the money. Advised her on the information she needed for the form.

Any action taken by the adviser:

Adviser contacted her to complete the form which was sent to LCL requesting 2 beds and a table & chairs.

Client confirmed she had resolved the Benefit Cap issue and did not require further help with this.

Outcome :

LCL were not able to supply the table & chairs. They were unable to supply the beds requested immediately due to stock problems but could supply two new mattresses. Client was happy with this as she could place the new mattresses on the old and this would raise them up higher off the floor.

Client collected food from the food bank and was invited to return if further help needed.

Any unusual factors or difficulties for client:

No



Appendix 2

Quote from a volunteer working remotely

"I used to really enjoy working from an office with fellow volunteers and CitAL staff but accept that this isn't possible at the moment. But as time has gone on I have found that working remotely has big advantages. For example, I don't now have to drive to Lutterworth or Blaby or Market Harborough. And I also have greater flexibility with my time - so if my youngest son has to be at home from school for a Covid related reason, I can be at home with him, but can also put in some hours for CitAL.

"I am also glad to be able to continue volunteering for CitAL which wouldn't have happened if we weren't able to work remotely. This means I can maintain my skills, do further training and, most importantly, I can keep helping those in need of CitAL services. I started by doing email work during full lockdown but now that full lockdown has ended and we have fewer family in the house I have moved to Adviceline. Recently I had to self isolate for 14 days and being able to continue to volunteer from home really helped me to keep myself busy (and hopefully was good for clients too!). Another factor for me is that I am still able to access supervision remotely, which is very important to me, so all in all it is working well".



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