



DIDCOT TOWN COUNCIL
Grant Report – Activity 22/23
Report submitted May 2023

1. Background

On 28th November 2022, Didcot Town Council's Finance and General Purposes Committee awarded Oxfordshire South & Vale Citizens Advice a grant of £10,000. We are grateful to the Town Council for this funding and their continued support; it is essential to our financial security. We receive no core funding from the national Citizens Advice charity or any other national source. All our core income is raised locally.

This report sets out what the funding has been used for, and a summary of our impact in 2022/23 supporting the local Didcot community.

2. An Introduction to Oxfordshire South & Vale Citizens Advice

We are an independent local charity providing free, confidential and impartial advice on a wide range of issues such as debt, benefits, housing and employment to over 10,500 local people each year. We serve the communities of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse from 4 advice centres, and 2 outreach hubs.

For the people of **Didcot**, we offer drop-in support, telephone Adviceline service, email support, web chat. We are currently the front line in helping people navigate the cost-of-living crisis.

Our approach is to empower people. We can all face problems that seem complicated or intimidating. We believe no one should have to face these problems without good quality, independent advice. Our work gives people the knowledge and the confidence they need to find their way forward. Our service is available to everyone.

Our local volunteers provide the backbone of our advice services. We cannot meet the many challenges of our community without volunteers, recruited from the communities that they serve. Many of our volunteers are very experienced people, they update their skills regularly and bring a huge amount of experience and wisdom to their work with clients. Their enthusiasm and dedication define the culture of the charity.

3. Purposes for which the grant was used 22/23

We are using the grant as a contribution to (a) volunteer expenses (b) office costs (c) the premises costs of our Didcot Advice Centre.

Volunteer expenses (mainly travel to the Didcot Advice Centre) **£821.73**

Office costs (Training, Reference materials, IT equipment & support, telephone, office equipment, printing and stationery, postage,)

£4702.86

Premises costs (Heat and light, rent, rates, insurance, cleaning, repairs)

£14,269.73

Total annual costs of volunteer expenses, office and premises costs

£19,794.33

Grant awarded

£10,000

This grant enables us to maintain a high-quality service to residents from Didcot and the surrounding area.

NB Our annual premises costs were higher this year due to move from Dales to King Alfred Community Centre, however ultimately, we will see a reduction in premises costs due to reduced rent and related expenses.

4. Our clients in Didcot

We reach a large number of people from the **King Alfred's Community Centre** (moved from Dales, 9-15 High Street Didcot in October 2022 to reduce running costs and be more accessible to the local community). However, there was a bit of a dip on last year's numbers due to the office move. However, Adviceline was always available to clients even when the drop-in service was not available.

During **2022/23**:

- Clients served from Didcot Advice Centre 1,880
- Clients from Didcot Wards 993
- Issues /problems raised by these clients 3220
- Resulting actions of advisors in supporting clients 3046

The difference between the total number of clients served by the Didcot *Advice Centre* and the number of clients from Didcot *wards* is explained by the fact that some clients who work in Didcot but live elsewhere may use the service, as will

clients from the surrounding Parishes. The Town Council will be interested to know that many Parish Councils are now contributing towards our costs.

In summary, while we saw a very small drop in client numbers over 22/23 (due to office closure during site move), we continue to see the complexity of cases increasing and resulting actions of advisors on the increase, per client. Last financial year we facilitated **£285,124** income gain (e.g., Benefit or Tax Credit Gain, access to charitable funds, social welfare) for the clients in Didcot Wards. This is practical, measurable, real support for those most in need in our community.

5. Issues affecting Clients in 2022/23

The top 3 issues that clients in Didcot Wards contact Citizens Advice for are:

- Benefits and Tax Credits
- Charitable Support and Foodbanks referrals
- Application for Universal Credit

The top 3 Debt Issues clients in Didcot Wards contact Citizens Advice for are:

- Debt Assessment
- Council Tax Arrears
- Fuel Debt

6. Didcot Wards Client Profile for 22/23

- 4% of clients are registered disabled, and 37% have a long-term health condition
- 65% are women, 35% men
- Over 80% of our clients are of working age (20-64)
- 87% are white, 4% Asian, 4% Black, 3% Mixed and 2% Other

7. Client Satisfaction, Impact and Feedback in 2022/23 across South Oxfordshire and Vale

We know our service makes a positive impact on the lives of those we help. Last year, approximately 500 of our clients took part in an independent survey of our service. The results show we are succeeding in our main aims to empower people with **85%** of clients answered positively when asked if the advice we had given them enabled them to move forward and **87%** said they would recommend the service.

Good advice is also an effective health intervention albeit an undervalued one. As part of the same survey, clients were asked “as a result of the help you have received from Citizens Advice, do you feel less stressed, depressed or anxious?” 43% said a ‘great deal’ or ‘a lot’ another 41% reported it had ‘helped somewhat’ or ‘a little’.



A focus on client numbers or statistics does not capture the experience of our clients. Many are overwhelmed by their problems. Often their home or job is at risk. This has a big effect on them and their families and their hope for the future. This is reflected in some of the testimonials we have received from clients:

- *“The lady I saw was very patient with me as I suffer with bad stress and anxiety, she gave me confidence to be able to resolve and better understanding of my issues, by helping me to fill in the appropriate forms, she was very patient with me can’t speak highly enough of her brilliance”*
- *“Clear, professional help with a Universal credit issue. The expertise available is phenomenal. With your guidance the friend I was helping managed to claim a health-related benefit which doubled the amount he receives each month. Without being too fanciful, I reckon between us we have saved his life and certainly his mental health.*
- *“The Citizens Advice is a very helpful service, and even if a problem continues to be unresolved, it is a vital service to be able to pick up the phone to talk to someone about it rather than feeling like you are banging your head against a brick wall, and feeling like you’re all alone in having to deal with a situation, that you are unhappy about”*

8. Looking ahead

The cost-of-living crisis is looming large in people’s lives. We have seen an increase in demand across our services and we have seen a **21%** increase across the two districts of clients coming to see us in **financial crisis** – comparing the whole of 22/23 to 21/22. We have seen a significant rise in the numbers coming

to Citizens Advice locally for referrals for food banks and emergency fuel vouchers.

Citizens Advice Nationally have been tracking data through its 'Vulnerability Tracker' Three key things have stood out from this work:

- **Households who've previously been managing are struggling** – those who did not usually think of themselves as economically vulnerable are starting to struggle
- **Households are taking extreme measures to cope with rising costs** – this is not just cutting back on non-essential items but reducing vital activities such as washing or cooking food.
- **People don't want to turn to charitable support** – but are now having to turn to foodbanks, access emergency funds (formal and informal), apply for emergency fuel vouchers.

We do hope the Town Council will be able to continue its funding in 23/24. It's more important than ever. The UK, have stumbled from a pandemic into a cost-of-living crisis and our services are needed now more than ever.

Thank you for your ongoing support – we simply could not operate in Didcot Town Centre without you.

**Debbie Watts, Chief Officer Oxfordshire South and Vale Citizens Advice
May 2023**