



DIDCOT TOWN COUNCIL
Grant Report – Activity 23/24
Report submitted August 2024

1. Background

On 18th December, 2023, Didcot Town Council's Finance and General Purposes Committee awarded Oxfordshire South & Vale Citizens Advice a grant of £11,000. 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 income for our core activity is raised locally.

This report sets out what the funding has been used for, and a summary of our impact in 2023/24 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 10,000 local people each year. We serve the communities of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse from 4 advice centres (Abingdon, Didcot, Henley & Thame) , and 5 outreach hubs (RAF Benson, Berinsfield, Faringdon, Wallingford & Watlington).

For the people of **Didcot**, we offer drop-in support, face to face appointments, telephone Adviceline service, email support and web chat. Since January 2024 we also have a Pensionwise Adviser based at our Didcot Office once a fortnight, which helps people to understand the pension options available to them. All Didcot clients also have access to specially funded projects where their case meets the criteria of the project – for example OCC Money Advice Project, Money & Pension Service Debt Project, Benefits in Place (for those with health issues), and other nationally provided services such as Help to Claim (to access Universal Credit).

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 23/24

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 (Volunteer Training & Travel Costs)	£2174.04
Office costs (Staff Training, Reference materials, IT equipment & support, telephone, office equipment, printing and stationery, postage,)	£4,040.02
Premises costs (Heat and light, rent, rates, insurance, cleaning, repairs)	£5,194.06
Total annual costs of volunteer expenses, office and premises costs	£11,408.12
Grant awarded	£11,000

This grant enables us to maintain a high-quality service to residents from Didcot and the surrounding area. It should also be noted that the staff costs to keep Didcot Office open 5 days a week in 23/24 were **£40,795** in addition to costs listed above.

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). During **2023/24**:

- Clients served from Didcot Advice Centre 1,644
- Clients from Didcot Wards (West, South, North East) 860
- Issues /problems raised by these clients 3488
- Resulting actions of advisors in supporting clients 2914

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. Clients from Didcot ward are unique clients seen in that year. We work with some clients for a number of weeks and months, especially when dealing with complex case work. The resulting actions of advisors is the real indicator of work load.

While client numbers are similar to last year, we continue to see the complexity of cases increasing and resulting actions of advisors on the increase, per client. We have seen a significant increase in the financial outcomes we have achieved for clients this year.

In 22/23 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.

In 23/24 this increased by nearly 70% to see income gain of £422,342. This is in addition to other financial outcomes of £109,894 giving total financial outcomes for the year of **£532,236**

Outcomes	
Income gain	£422,342
Re-imburements, services, loans	£1,051
Debts written off	£83,271
Repayments rescheduled	£2,038
Other	£23,534

This is practical, measurable, real support for those most in need in our community. This is also return on investment for those that support us. In addition, we anticipate this income gain will support the local economy.

5. Issues affecting Clients in 2023/24

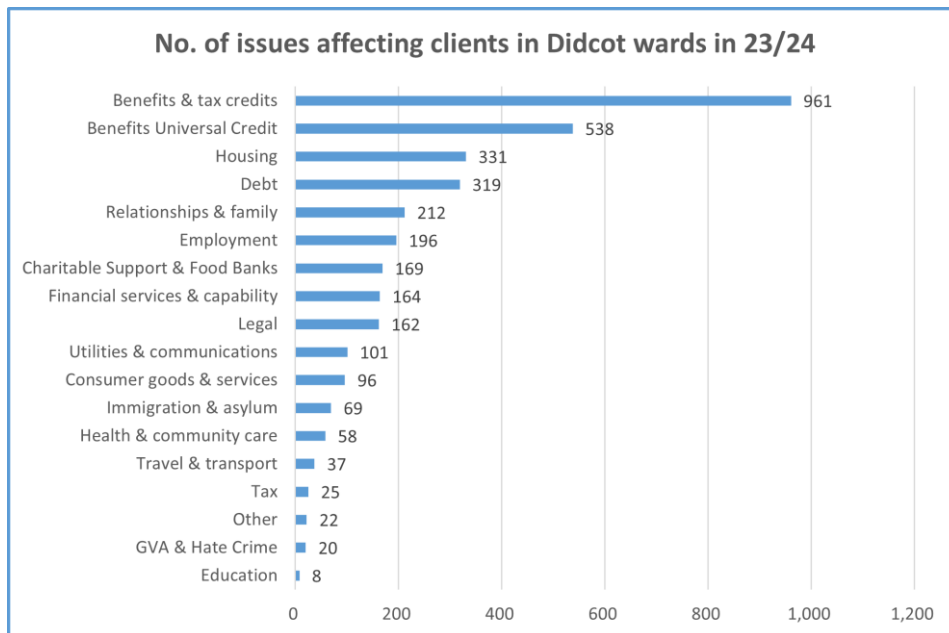
The top 3 issues that clients in Didcot Wards contact Citizens Advice for are:

- Access to benefits and Tax Credits
- Housing
- Debt

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

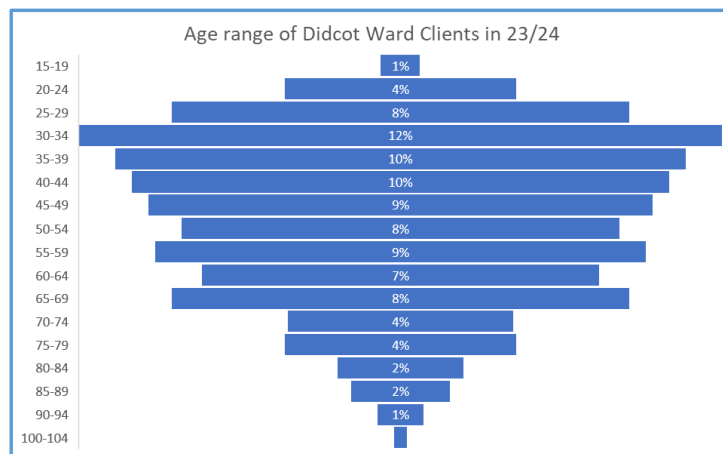
- Fuel Debt
- Council Tax Arrears
- Other debt

A further breakdown of issues affecting clients in Didcot Wards can be seen below:



6. Didcot Wards Client Profile for 23/24

- 4% of clients are registered disabled, and 37% have a long-term health condition
- 58% are women, 42% men
- 72% are white British, 11% White Other , 6% Asian, 6% Black, 3% Mixed and 1% Other
- The age breakdown of clients can be seen in the graphic below.



7. Client Satisfaction, Impact and Feedback in 2023/24 across South Oxfordshire and Vale

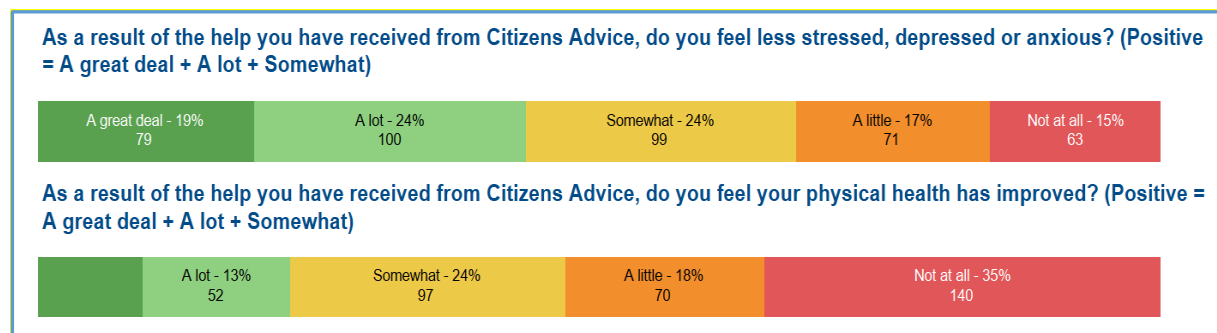
We know our service makes a positive impact on the lives of those we help. Last year, nearly 500 of our clients took part in an independent survey of our service. The results show we are succeeding in our main aims to empower people with **89%** of clients answered positively when asked if the advice we had given them

enabled them to move forward and **89%** said they would recommend the service.

Good advice is also an effective health intervention albeit an undervalued one. As part of the same survey, 85% clients felt we had some impact on them feeling less stressed, depressed or anxious 43% said a 'great deal' or 'a lot'.

65% of clients said they had some impact on their physical health 23% said a 'great deal' or 'a lot'.

This is an extraordinary achievement and confirms why looking forward we believe that we need closer alliance with the NHS and primary and secondary care providers.



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:

- *“Without the help of Citizens Advice, I hate to think where I would be now they really are wonderful kind people plus they have given me confidence to speak openly about my problems something I never thought I would be able to & not be embarrassed thank you all so much*
- *I am so grateful to the person I talked to in Didcot . She was calm, knowledgeable and kind. Thank you to all your volunteers*
- *The Didcot team were fantastic, they had gone as far as possible for me.*
- *I found the gentleman who helped me was very calm, listened to what my problem was and how it was affecting me mentally and financially, as I am a full time Carer for my husband for the last 10 years. I am still needing advice from Citizens Advice. I am relieved that I can still make an appointment to see the same person who has helped me. Which I think is great as you don't have keep going over the problem, Thank you all for being there for me, everyone I met was polite and friendly.*

If you want to hear more from Oxfordshire South & Vale Citizens Advice clients or partners please see this video link : [Voices of Impact](#)

8. The National picture - A focus on debt

Recent research conducted by National Citizens Advice in February this year, called the National Red Index illustrates clearly why the need for advice, especially money and debt advice, is needed now more than ever. . It uses detailed data from more than 300,000 people who have come to Citizens Advice for debt advice to understand what people at the sharp end of the living standards squeeze actually spend on costs like food, clothes and energy. It then uses national survey data on people's incomes and fixed costs - things like rent and council tax - to determine how many people can't afford their essentials, even if they were to cut their spending to the same levels as our debt clients. The headlines are sobering:

- Around 5 million people are in a negative budget (have less coming in than they need to meet their basic needs)
- Another 2.3 million people are living on empty
- This includes 1 in 4 households on Universal Credit, 1 in 5 single parent households
- Housing costs are the biggest driver - nearly 40% of private renters in the bottom income quintile are in a negative budget

Disabled people, racially minoritised groups, single parents, and people receiving Universal Credit, have some of the highest negative budget rates, and the deepest deficits.

By investing in advice projects, we can help communities to build resilience and reduce the long-term effects of the crisis. High living expenses, combined with low wages and job insecurity, will result in increased debt, financial hardship, and reduced quality of life. It is important for communities to have access to support and resources to help them manage their finances and empower them to move forward.

9.0 Developments for Oxfordshire Citizens Advice South & Vale.

As communicated to the Town Council on the 27th July 2024, we have been exploring a greater working relationship with two of our neighbouring Citizens Advice organisations - specifically Citizens Advice Oxford, and Citizens Advice West Oxfordshire. We believe that working together will ensure greater sustainability of our respective organisations, so we can continue to provide vital services to the communities we serve.

The board of each organisation has agreed 'in principle' to the formal merger of the three organisations and have embarked upon a due diligence process. Assuming a successful conclusion of this process, and final Board approval, we will move to a formal merger process which we aim to complete by 1st April 2025. We will be maintaining **all current client services**, while exploring new and innovative ways of reaching those most in need.

We do hope the Town Council will be able to continue its funding in 25/26. It's more important 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
August 2024.**