



2019/20 was always going to be a challenging year for Citizens Advice in Felixstowe following the announcement by the County Council that they planned to reduce our grant funding and additional pressures on our core funding with the news that East Suffolk Council were also looking at a funding and organisational review from 2020/21. Of course, what we didn't factor in was the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic which took us all by surprise after Christmas 2019. This has had a marked effect on the way that we have been able to deliver our services during the latter part of the financial year – but more about that later.

We have been working hard to try and secure other sources of funding to enable us to provide the services that we currently do to those who turn to us for help. And in these continuing times of austerity, securing grant funding is becoming ever more difficult.

And so we were extremely grateful to Felixstowe Town Council who provided us with some invaluable unrestricted grant funding to help cover our core costs – that is expenses like rent, heat, light etc. Core funding is vital to the service if we are going to continue to provide the help and support to clients who approach us with any issues which worry them. Being unrestricted, this funding enables us to cover some of the running costs of providing the service whereas the other main source of funding available – project funding- is designed to cover the cost of a specific project and cannot be used to support the day-to-day costs of running the service.

During the year we started to provide two very different forms of support to our clients in addition to our normal advice services and both of these services have attracted additional funding which has helped us through a difficult 12 months. As part of a national contract between Citizens Advice and the Department of Work & Pensions, we now employ a part-time member of staff who helps to provide the Universal Credit Help-to-Claim service. This supports clients who are unable to make a digital claim to Universal Credit without significant assistance. This has been a particularly useful service since the beginning of the Covid-19 lockdown period when claims to Universal Credit rocketed – and pressure on the Help-to-Claim helpline similarly increased.

We also decided we would make a joint bid, in association with a fellow charitable organisation, for the Social Prescribing Connect-for-Health contract which covered the Felixstowe area which would see us providing a support service to patients of our local GP surgeries and the Felixstowe General Hospital who were presenting with non-clinical conditions which didn't necessarily need a medical diagnosis but instead would benefit from the intervention of someone trained to listen and support those patients in other, more practical ways. Our bid was successful and we now employ a full-time Community Connector as part of this project and she has been particularly busy since 23 March, supporting those who are significantly affected through isolation or the inability to get out and collect things like essential food items or prescriptions.

These two services complement our day-to-day advice service which continues to see a steady rise in client numbers and a more significant rise in the number of issues that they seek our help with. As well as our main office in Orwell Road, we provide outreach services at the Felixstowe Library, the Felixstowe Job Centre and at HMP's Hollesley Bay and Warren Hill. We offer a face-to-face service and also help on the telephone but when we went into lockdown in March it was clear that the face-to-face services would have to cease and we would have to adapt to different ways of providing help to those seeking our advice. We therefore established a system whereby our volunteer advisers could work safely from home providing telephone support and in addition, a brand new e-mail support service and it must be said that our volunteers have been magnificent in adapting to a different way of working in order to continue to provide that help. In addition we have also volunteered to take phone calls from the Citizens Advice national overflow telephone

system in order to help as many people as possible get the help they need. We've worked closely with our local and national partners to make sure we are aware of what help is available – and where and we have been instrumental in getting our residents – as well as those from further afield through these last three very difficult months. Home-working is not easy when you are sometimes speaking to people with complex and in some cases, very disturbing problems and we've seen a rise in calls from people who are struggling with their mental health through the lockdown period, as well as a number of people with issues around employment and sadly for some, issues around domestic abuse. Our volunteers, supported by our small paid staff, have been extremely agile in adapting to these new working practices and have continued to help tirelessly throughout the period.

The Citizens Advice service remains the prime advice agency throughout the country – delivering advice from nearly 300 different main locations and an additional 3500+ outreach locations – providing free, confidential, Impartial, Independent and quality assured advice to anybody who needs our help.

Each local office is a registered charity in its own right and is responsible for its own fundraising in order to maintain its presence and support local people. There is no central funding received locally from the national organisation and indeed, each local office has to pay a membership fee to the National umbrella organisation in order to maintain its membership of the service and continue to use the Citizens Advice brand. And of course, with that trusted brand comes many years of support and service and an extremely good reputation both locally and nationally for providing high quality advice to anyone who needs our help.

Here are some key statistics from the work we undertook in Felixstowe during the year to 31st March 2020:

Clients helped in Felixstowe in 2019-20

IN THE YEAR ENDED 31ST MARCH 2019, WE SUPPORTED

2323 INDIVIDUAL CLIENTS!

We helped those 2323 individuals with

8292 DIFFERENT ISSUES!

We secured financial outcomes for those individuals of

£601,803!