

**citizens
advice**

**East Dorset
& Purbeck**



Connecting with Communities

Annual Review 2023-24

Citizens Advice in East Dorset and Purbeck

About Us

Citizens Advice in East Dorset and Purbeck is an independent charity that provides free, confidential and impartial advice and support. Our goal is to help local people find a way forward, whatever their problem.

We have offices in Wareham and Wimborne as well as outreach locations throughout East Dorset and Purbeck. We also have an Advice Bus that connects rural communities. We are part of the Citizens Advice network in Dorset and across England and Wales.

Our Aims

- To provide the advice people need for the problems they face.
- To improve the policies and practices that affect people's lives.

Our Principles

- Free
- Confidential
- Independent
- Impartial

Our Impact

- For every £1 invested in our service, we add £32.36 in public value



Chair of Trustees Report

It gives me great pleasure to introduce and commend the Annual Review of the activities of Citizens Advice in East Dorset and Purbeck which I hope you find interesting reading.

It has been a challenging year as more and more people seek advice and information with the cost-of-living crisis continuing to impact on the community. To help provide wider means of assistance an Advice Bus was launched targeting the more remote areas and those communities where more help was required and what a success it has been.



The Chief Officer's report covers in detail how the service has responded to the ever-increasing demands of the community and the new challenges it faces. Without additional funding being achieved it would have been very difficult to provide resources to further enhance the service for our communities which has been so vital in these difficult times. The office has again this year worked very closely with Dorset Council in processing and delivering the Household Support Fund vouchers throughout the Dorset Council area providing much needed support to the community.

A significant amount of time was spent working closely with the other local offices to ensure that Citizens Advice in Dorset continues to speak with one voice. CAiD on behalf of the local offices was successful in winning the Dorset Council Information, Advice & Guidance Services contract which started in October 2021 initially for three years and has recently been extended for a further two years until October 2026.

A significant proportion of our income comes from Dorset Council, Parish and Town Councils as well as other organisations and a big thank you to them for their continuing support. Each year a special thanks goes to John Rynne one of the Trustees who organises a number of jive nights throughout the year generating significant income for Citizens Advice in East Dorset and Purbeck.

The Trustees are very pleased that the high level of support for the community has been maintained with the challenges the service has faced and it is a very big thank you to all the staff and volunteers involved.

It is sad to report that Richard Holman the Vice Chair passed away in January. He had been a great supporter of Citizen's Advice, having first joined us in 2013. He will be sadly missed.

I would like to thank all the Trustees for their support as we move forward together to address the challenges that the future will bring.

Alan Breakwell
Chair of Trustees

Chief Officer's Report

The last financial year has been a difficult one for our clients, with many needing our help just to get by. The impact of cost of living on higher energy bills and increased housing and food costs has meant that we are seeing more local people in crisis and in need of financial assistance. Though, at the time of writing, inflation and energy prices have fallen from their peaks of last year, the effects of high household bills are likely to last years.

We're beginning now to see the emergence of growing problems with debt. The crisis has also exposed just how precarious many people's household finances are, the proportion of our debt clients whose monthly expenditure on essentials exceeds their income is now more than half.



Despite all of this, our response to the cost-of-living crisis has incontestably demonstrated the value of what we do for society. Though demand outstrips capacity, we have still helped an extraordinary number of people with advice.

Our staff and volunteers work tirelessly with a dedication that belies the fact that many have worked through four years of almost relentless crisis, but in the face of the ever growing demand, even their commitment isn't enough. At a time when people are presenting with increasingly complex problems, our commitment to holistic advice that considers the whole person is more important than ever before. We're doing what we can to help meet as much of this demand as possible.

We are adapting our services to meet the needs of the community and to improve our client's journey. I am confident that we will continue to meet this challenge. We have a dedicated team of staff and volunteers who, I am sure, will continue to provide an excellent service to our clients. We are all grateful to them for their dedication, commitment and effort.

As I have said before, our volunteer advisers are the key to our success. We will work hard to retain and refresh this vital part of our operation. We are developing and improving our training programme for new volunteers, as well as supporting the supervisors who oversee the advice services provided.

One of the hallmarks of the way Citizens Advice works is the close relationship between our advice giving and our advocacy. Bringing our frontline insight to those who make policy decisions is, as we've seen through our cost-of-living impact reports, a vital way in which we ensure that people face fewer problems in the future. A striking example of our impact was the temporary ban on forced installation of pre-payment meters which was introduced in the early months of 2023. The cost-of-living support mechanisms put in place by the government, culminating in the Energy Price Guarantee, were also advanced by the power of our campaigning.



I would like to thank all our financial supporters for their contributions and our local councils for their continued efforts and much valued support. We've received very welcome donations from trusts and foundations in the last year, these are helping us meet this surge in demand. Notwithstanding these contributions, it's important to highlight that we face a very challenging financial and economic environment. The voluntary sector is far from immune to the pressures of high inflation and we are finding it tough to maintain our vital work as funding is squeezed.

Finally, I want to record our deep gratitude to Richard Holman who sadly died in January this year. He was a dedicated and much valued member of the Trustee board who joined in 2013 taking on the role of Chair of former Purbeck Citizens Advice and Vice Chair for East Dorset and Purbeck following the merger. Our wishes go to his family.

Helen Goldsack
Chief Officer

Service Report

2023/2024 continued much where the previous year left off...

The energy crisis continued to deepen and people continued to struggle with the rising cost of living. Our Energy Unit grew and dealt with an increasing number of clients. Housing issues remained very much to the fore with clients facing challenging issues with limited resolutions available to them.



The cost of living crisis meant that our Household Support Fund (HSF) team completed a further year successfully administering the Fund for Dorset Council. Sadly, when the contract came to an end in March 2024 the team was disbanded with some members moving into other roles and at least two happily setting off to travel in South East Asia and Australia. HSF eventually continued, although in a slightly different format.

Following the positive steps taken in 2022-23 to recover and reopen the offices and outreaches following COVID-19, our main office services continued to build on that progress. The Advice Bus came into its own, proving to be a very successful addition to our resources enabling us to take our services to some of the more rural and isolated communities in our area.

Volunteers come from all walks of life and choose to volunteer for various reasons. They include students, people returning to work after career breaks, people with part-time jobs, carers, and retired people. We continue to owe our volunteers a huge debt. The value of their volunteering to the East Dorset and Purbeck community is £458,917.

Every volunteer gets something different from their volunteering experience and this can include:

- The opportunity to make a positive difference to people's lives
- Improve self-esteem, confidence and wellbeing
- Whilst gaining invaluable work experience
- Receive high quality training and develop new skills
- Use existing skills and knowledge to benefit the local community
- Meet new people from a range of backgrounds
- Feel valued and part of a team
- Change the way things work for the better

There is something for everyone within the volunteering team, from Receptionist to Information Assistant, as well as the well-known Adviser role. In addition, we recognise that you have to feel comfortable and confident as you listen to clients' experiences and offer them advice. Therefore, we offer a variety of advice channels to suit volunteer preferences, from face to face consultations to email or on the phone. To support clients over such a wide area, we operate our service from the Wareham and Wimborne offices, from smaller outreach locations as well as our Advice Bus. If this sounds interesting, please email training@edpcitizensadvice.org.uk or visit our website www.edpcitizensadvice.org.uk/volunteer.

Judy Herring
Service Manager

Advice Bus

In its inaugural year, the Advice Bus has gone from strength to strength. Reaching hundreds of hard to reach clients across fifteen locations it has become an integral part of our service.

Bus staff have become familiar faces in markets, FareShare locations, community hubs, coffee mornings and even a pub car park. From Swanage to the west, to Sixpenny Handley in the north and St Leonards and St Ives to the East. We have also attended NHS Roadshows across the area as part of their staff and patient wellbeing program.

By providing a regular service in the community, we have been able to support clients directly, whilst signposting to our specialists within the service. Issues around the cost of living continue to be prevalent in all locations, energy enquiries, benefits, housing issues and debt all feature highly in the day to day work on the bus. With a specialist Wessex Water Adviser available on the bus twice a week, we offer support directly to clients about the schemes they offer.

The bus provides clients with a soft introduction to the services of Citizens Advice, establishing a relationship through initial light touch contact. Clients will then often return with more complex issues. Many of the clients we see on the bus have experienced significant trauma which has led to a mistrust in seeking help from any organization. The bus allows them a safe space in their local area, breaking down physical and accessibility barriers to improve engagement.

Feedback from local communities and individual clients has been overwhelmingly positive.

The service is provided five days a week by two advisers and since last April, has supported over 1,000 clients, 325 of these being brand new to our service. During its first year since its launch in April 2023 it has raised over £460,000 in income gains, over £10,000 in debts written off and over £550,000 in other financial outcomes for residents.

Tracey Brightman Outreach Adviser



We Help Thousands of Local People Each Year

£ 34,608,724

Total public value

People with less problems are more content, productive and active in society. Our calculation of public value, also indicates the value of a volunteer service.

£ 33,529,040

Value to the people we've helped

We helped individual people to achieve financial outcomes including back-dated benefits, writing-off debt and refunds for customer issues.

£ 2,287,124

Fiscal value

Financial savings to local and national government due to fewer payments for out-of-work benefits, costly evictions, re-housing evicted tenants and less demand on the NHS.



People helped
5,359



Issues
29,846

Top Issues



Benefits & Tax Credits 7,464



Utilities & Comms 6,341



Charitable support & food banks 3,057



Consumer Goods & Services 2,893



Housing 2,427



Debt 2,260

We are East Dorset and Purbeck Citizens Advice



48 Volunteers
including **9** Trustees
39 paid staff

Value of
volunteering for
Citizens Advice in
East Dorset and
Purbeck in 2023/24 is
£458,917



Volunteering has social benefits that can, improve mental health and well being. You will be able to make a difference to people's lives.

Dorset Energy Unit

We've seen an increase in the number of residents in Dorset and BCP Council areas helped by the Energy Unit during financial year 23/24. Residents required a high level of support to help manage their energy costs with the cost of living crisis continuing to cause distress and worry for many.

Requests for emergency pre-payment meter (PPM) vouchers to help residents either get back on supply or to stop them being cut off has been increasing. The team has had to adapt to this ever-changing market and tailor the energy advice appropriately to help our clients. We have given practical energy efficiency advice, carbon monoxide awareness and we've been able to continue to offer free CO monitors.

We also offer a benefit check to help maximise the household income and review energy bills to ensure accuracy. The team understand the importance of working with the client to help empower them to take control of their bills. This gives our clients the confidence to deal with any future issues which may arise. The problems clients are having with their energy has further increased in complexity and time taken for the advisers to resolve the issues.

We have been fortunate to access emergency PPM vouchers, which are usually issued the same day, from our partners at the Fuel Bank Foundation and have made requests for grants via the Governments Household Support Fund, Surviving Winter Grants and applications for support from energy suppliers.

Once again, we have delivered Frontline Working Training to over 320 professionals who engage with the public to help identify when someone may be in fuel poverty and struggling to manage their energy costs, giving information on what support is available. In addition to this, we have attended events and held Fuel Poverty Awareness events in Weymouth and Poole speaking to over 200 people and offering free winter warm packs including information on services available, this was extremely well received and a highlight of our work this financial year.

Ros Dignan
Energy Team Manager



Energy Case Study

Kevin's Story*

Kevin came to Citizens Advice seeking help with his boiler and meter. We quickly identified that Kevin was living in fuel poverty due to his limited income and high energy costs.

Kevin has a number of health issues and has not been able to have his young daughter live with him in part due to the heating and hot water problems in his current property.

After his supplier replaced his gas Credit Meter with a Prepayment Meter (PPM), Kevin noticed he was paying £23 from every top up to repay a debt from a previous tenant, which totalled £1,600. Kevin's boiler stopped working resulting in no heating or hot water, this had a detrimental effect on Kevin's health and wellbeing.



How we helped

We advised Kevin to apply for Personal Independence Payment (PIP) to help increase his benefit income. Expected income increase of £3,777.80 p/yr.

Energy efficiency advice was given, a review of usage and tariff was provided and we assisted Kevin to apply for the Priority Service Register, with an annual expected saving of £550. Reviewed option on remaining on a PPM or moving back to a Credit Meter.

Identified Kevin could get help from Local Energy Advice Partnership (LEAP) and Ridgewater Energy. Kevin received a free replacement boiler worth £3,000.

Energy Adviser assisted with making a complaint to the supplier regarding the gas meter debt, the £1,600 was cleared and £300 refunded.

Kevin's stress and anxiety was reduced.

**Total financial
gains
= £9,277.80**

*Name has been changed to protect identity.

Housing

Another busy year



Much of our work this year has been with clients who have been served a 'no fault section 21 notice' and those clients struggling to pay their rent. This is usually due to rent arrears which can occur due to a variety of reasons including ever increasing bills, high rents, the cost of living, etc. Whatever the reason the ultimate result is rent arrears and the threat of eviction.

The cost of private renting has long been rising above Local Housing Allowance (LHA) and in the Autumn statement the Chancellor announced that LHA amounts would be increased from April 2024. The last time LHA was increased was in April 2020. Although this increase has been welcomed, clients are reporting that not only does LHA fail to meet most rents charged in this area, demand is higher than supply, with in some cases over 40 prospective tenants viewing a property.

Additionally, our clients report that they cannot pass the affordability checks letting agents often use before they offer prospective tenants a viewing. There is also concern that landlords will continue to increase rents due to the rise in the LHA rates and/or increases in mortgage interest rates.

We have continued to support clients to apply for housing through Dorset Council and also some other Local Authorities. This includes applying for clients to be accepted on to the housing register and in some cases to support our clients with a homelessness application to the Council. We support them through these processes and receive feedback from them that they find the support extremely beneficial whilst dealing with the stress of losing their home.

We continued to work closely with the Dorset Council Housing Team. We attend the Homelessness Forum which has enabled us to build an excellent working relationship with Dorset Council and other organisations including Shelter, Reach and Public Health Dorset.

Jacqui Few
Housing Specialist

Housing Case Study

Bethany's Story*

Bethany has a history of domestic abuse and has struggled with her mental health and addiction. Bethany lived in privately rented accommodation but stayed with her parents due to feeling unsafe in her tenancy. Bethany was served a notice to leave her accommodation and she moved into her parents with her children on a full-time basis.

Bethany's mental health deteriorated whilst she was living with her parents and her parents asked her and her children to leave and find alternative accommodation. Although Bethany's parents could no longer accommodate her, they were her support network, and Bethany wished to reside as close to them as possible.

Bethany was supported by the project caseworkers to make a homelessness application and housing register application to Dorset Council. The caseworker supported Bethany with this application and encouraged her to advise the allocated homelessness officer details of her domestic abuse history and support network. The caseworkers liaised with Dorset Council on behalf of Bethany as she was finding this overwhelming.



Bethany was able to stay short term with her parents and after some time, she was offered a permanent three bedroom housing association property in her area of choice.

The Caseworker assisted Bethany in applying for the benefits she was entitled to, ensuring she was awarded the correct amounts; these included Universal Credit, Council Tax support, food bank vouchers, a Household Support Fund voucher and emergency local assistance to buy some furniture.

When Bethany initially moved into her new property, she could not work due to her mental health; however, as Bethany was subject to the benefit cap, she was keen to return to work as soon as her mental health improved. We completed a further benefits calculation for Bethany to demonstrate how her income would change when she returned to work.

How we helped

With our intervention, Bethany's health and well-being improved and she can manage better going forward. Bethany returned to work and was no longer subject to the benefit cap, so she felt more financially secure and her mental health improved.

Financial outcomes

Council Tax Support. 52 weekly payments of **£20.75**.

The total annual amount is **£1,079.00**

Universal Credit - Housing Element, 12 monthly payments of **£490.90**,

The total annual amount is **£5,890.80**

**Total
outcomes
£12,593.88**

Assisted Bethany in securing permanent accommodation in her chosen area.

Universal Credit - Housing Element - **£10,787.88** per annum.

Household Support Fund 2 (discretionary payment) supermarket voucher - **£200**

Emergency Local Assistance - **£100**

Food Bank voucher - **£50.00**

Council Tax Reduction - **£1,456.00** per annum

Spotlight on



Research & Campaigns

Research & Campaigns (R&C) was a busy one as always. External general activities included regular social media posts and updates about local and national issues. Internally, highlighting R&C updates in the monthly newsletter, weekly briefing and staff meetings, reviewing calls for evidence and sending the quarterly report to the Trustees and Dorset Council.

Additionally working across Dorset with other Local Citizens Advice (LCA) offices and attending the Dorset R&C quarterly meetings, we consistently raised awareness with our National campaigns including Consumer Awareness Campaign, Scams Awareness Week and Energy Savers Week.

We had regular contact with MPs including a meeting with Richard Drax. In late 2023, a Renters Reform Bill letter was sent to Dorset MPs along with a National campaign request that benefits be uprated in line with inflation. This request was actually a campaign success with the uprating of benefits by the 6.7% Sept 2023 inflation figure.

Our Housing Team compiled a report that was sent to MPs. This included collecting evidence on private rentals and their market rent compared to the Local Housing Allowance rates for a one month period. Soon after another National campaign success occurred with the Autumn statement agreeing to unfreeze Local Housing Authority (LHA) rates.

In other news, we monitored the closures of banks across Dorset and contributed to the Dorset wide report on this. We also emailed Carers Leads at GP surgeries in our service area in December 2023/January 2024 in an effort to investigate Unpaid Carers Support Provision at GP surgeries.

Eleanor Murphy

Research and Campaigns Officer

Spotlight on



Income Generation

This year has seen some firsts from the income generation team, alongside some successful grant applications.

In November we held our first family fun day at the Allendale Centre and it was well attended by families, both local and from further afield. It raised a little money, but more importantly raised our profile in the local community. Another big first for us was the Brighton Marathon, which took place on April 7th, but for which our very own Adam was training hard from well before Christmas. We had 3 runners in the marathon, raising a total of £3,478.00.

In January we launched another successful crowd funder for the housing team and off the back of the launch of our new advice bus were invited to various local groups to share news of the work that we are doing.

Local Parish and Town Councils have been very supportive of the work we are doing this year and we would like to thank them for their generous grants and positive feedback about our service. We have come into the 2024/25 with many exciting prospects of partnership working and new funding opportunities.

Katrina Ford

Business Development Manager

Friends Fundraising

Our Trustee, and Friends Member, John Rynne continued to organise the successful Jive Nights at The Pavilion, Bournemouth. These events raised over £9,500 with all funds going to Citizens Advice in East Dorset and Purbeck.

The Wimborne St Giles Tea took place in August again and raised £550 for us. Thank you to John and his team of volunteers who organise these popular events whilst raising funds for us.

Spotlight on



Communications

Leading up to the Advice Bus launch in April, it was essential that potential and existing clients were informed about the new service.

A new web page was created and bus timetable. All locations were supported with posters and social media graphics to advertise the bus. The launch was a success with stakeholders, partners and local organisations invited to attend to find out about the new service. Media coverage was generated in the local press and radio stations.

We continued to communicate with our stakeholders with our Quarterly Newsletter, providing a summary of the service we provide, including the number of people helped and their issues, together with challenges faced by our residents and us as an independent charity.

Internal communications continued to be important ensuring all staff and volunteers are kept up to date with key information. Our internal portal was used to post weekly briefings, monthly newsletters, updates and training.

We supported Research & Campaigns with key national campaigns including Scams Awareness, National Consumer Week and the Big Energy Saving Winter campaign. Other comms successes include generating media coverage about the Christmas Island Medal, Alternative Fuel Grant coverage and we worked with Dorset Community Foundation helping to promote their Surviving Winter Campaign. We also placed Christmas donation adverts into The Stour and Avon and The Purbeck Gazette, which created awareness locally about us as an independent charity and the need to raise funds.

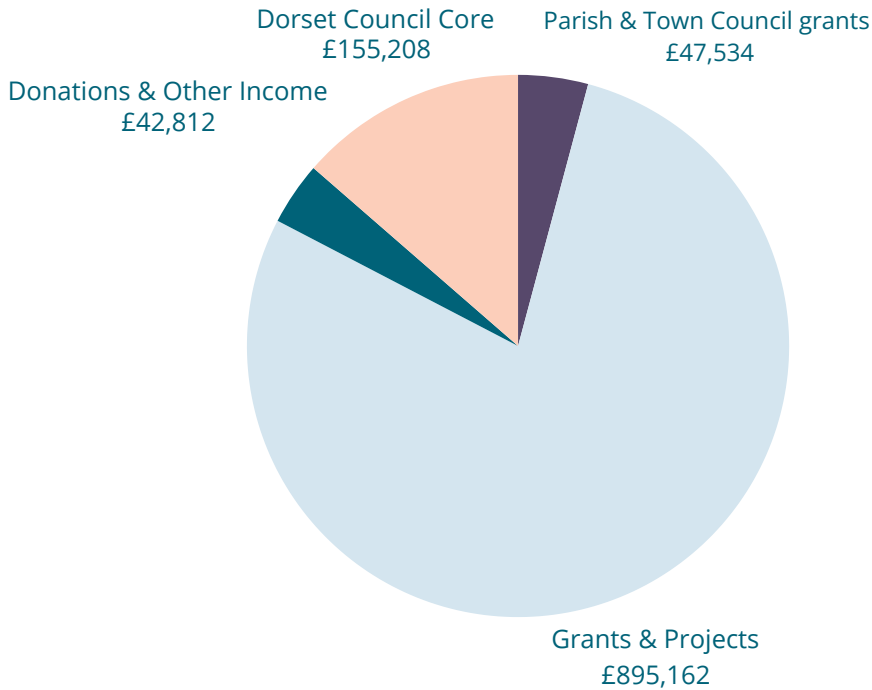
Media coverage was generated in the Dorset Echo, Dorset View, The Stour & Avon, The Purbeck Gazette, BBC Radio Solent and Wave FM.

Sian Smith

Communications Officer

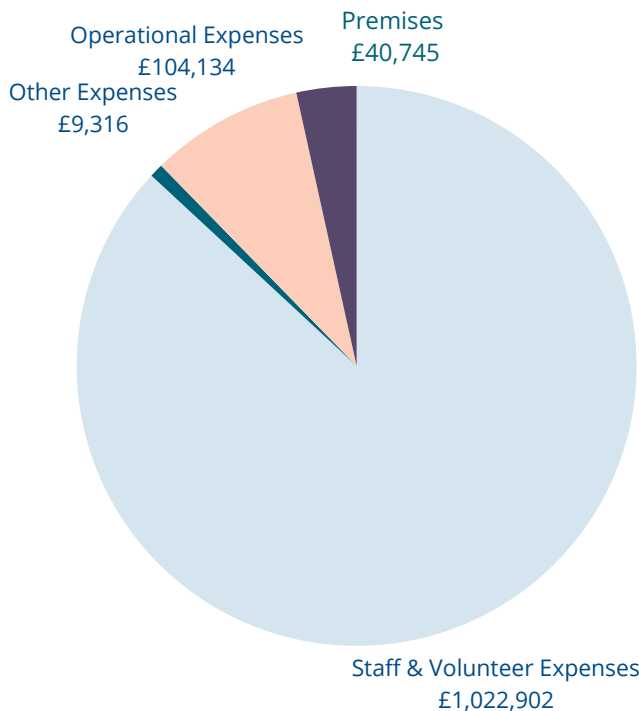
Funding We've Received

Total Income **£ 1,140,716**



How Your Funding Helped

Total Expenditure **£ 1,177,097**



Your funding helped us to deliver our general advice service, including:

- Reaching rural communities via our Advice Bus
- Provide home visits
- Recruit more volunteers
- Maintain and improve our offices in Wareham and Wimborne

How We've Made a Difference

citizens
advice

East Dorset
& Purbeck



"Thank you so much for all your help and support and helping me to achieve my goals of finding a solution to my debts."



"Although we were out of our depth with our problems, we were not made to feel incompetent only at ease and were helped all the way through until the final result."

"Knowing that I have enough money each month to pay my priority bills is a huge relief."



"I wanted to express how delighted I am with the service provided. The adviser was so professional and has helped me immensely with the electric and gas while being so friendly."



"Thanks for everything you have done for me this past year, you've managed to take a lot of pressure off me sorting out my bankruptcy and the extra problems debtors have caused. Without your persistence I couldn't have coped."



"I don't know where I would be without this service it is Invaluable and accessible to all and in the current climate desperately needed."

"You've completely changed my life, I am forever grateful to you for helping me."



"The volunteers are always polite, professional & welcoming. They are good listeners which helps you relax enough to explain what your problem is."



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