

New Year News

Your local Citizens Advice service, based in Wellington House, Barnsley, has been very busy over the past year:

- 5326 individuals have been supported with 28,600 problems
- Over £1m of income has been gained for clients
- Over £5m of problem debt has been dealt with.

Advice offered is wide-ranging, with the top 5 problem areas being: debt; welfare benefits and tax credits; financial services support and capability; housing; relationships and families. Trained Advisors offer individual advice, which meets the Advice Quality Standard.

People like 62 year old Maureen (name changed) who sought help with Personal Independence Payment as her long-term health condition had deteriorated. She was awaiting the results of a DWP medical assessment from several months earlier. The Advisor contacted the DWP and through discussion and investigation, discovered that an administrative error had occurred, resulting in the client unintentionally being taken off benefits by DWP. An apology was offered to the client, by DWP, and a backdated payment of £3k given; a happy client was relieved and grateful for the support, knowledge and skill of the Advisor.

Another client, Ron (name changed) received 4 weeks' notice, just before Christmas, to leave his rented home of several years. He had no tenancy agreement and was worried that he would be homeless or forced to take the first property he found, regardless of its suitability. The CAB Advisor told Ron, that even without a written tenancy agreement, regular payment of rent constituted an agreement. He was offered detailed advice about the legal process and felt so confident and empowered with the knowledge and support given, he was able to approach the landlord directly and indicate the error. Ron was invited to return to the Advisor should the landlord not comply with the legal process. Homelessness by Christmas was avoided.

The Barnsley service has much to be proud of. In January, their Leadership Self Assessment was audited, by the National Citizens Advice Service, and the highest possible grade was achieved in all 9 areas. This is due to hard work by staff, volunteers, trustees and supporting partners; the challenge is to maintain this gold standard!

Another cause for celebration was the national recognition given to James Lawton, Barnsley's Money Plan Financial Adviser, who won the 2017 Personal Finance Society and Citizens Advice Money Planner of the Year Award. Staff and volunteers were also delighted that their work with Deaf people was nominated in the annual Citizens Advice Conference Awards.

Citizens Advice Barnsley is constantly striving to improve and extend its services to the people of Barnsley. They work closely with other partners, including Berneslai Homes, the Local Authority and a number of voluntary organisations. They have developed many outreach sites, taking their services to communities and neighbourhoods to help people access the advice they need. As a local charity, staff are always looking for funding opportunities; they receive only very small grants from local or central governments. They recognize how advice could be extended to more people, such as those experiencing mental ill-health or those who need help with welfare benefits through physical ill-health; those who are homeless; people who need support through job-loss or the complexities of our gig economy.

None of this could be achieved without highly skilled staff and volunteers. Currently Barnsley employs 25 staff and 27 volunteers, including Modern Apprentices. Last year volunteers gave 9,500 hours at an estimated value of over £147,000. Many of these people moved into paid employment or higher education. Citizens Advice Barnsley is always looking for new volunteers; if you feel you would like to help please see: www.barnsleycab.org.uk for opportunities and application processes. Or call 03444 111 444 for a chat about possibilities.

Citizens Advice Barnsley has recently set up a Friends network. Membership is free, with opportunities to receive newsletters and invitations to networking events to gain more insight and understanding of how advice supports and complements other services, as well as contributes to the health and wealth of Barnsley. Do sign up, via the website, and support this important work in our town.