

Citizens Advice Mendip Working For The Community

JUNE 2020



CONTACT US

CITIZENS ADVICE PUBLIC SITE - WEB BASED ADVICE www.citizensadvice.org.uk

SOMERSET TELEPHONE ADVICE

Mon – Fri 10-4pm

03 444 889 623

UC HELP TO CLAIM

Mon – Fri

0800 144 8 444

EMAIL

Response within 4 days

www.citizensadvicemendip.org.uk

OUR AIM

To give the advice people need for the problems they face and to improve the policies and practices that affect people's lives. To give people the knowledge and the confidence they need to find their way forward - whoever they are, and whatever their problem.

WHAT WE DO

We provide free, independent, confidential and impartial advice to people on their rights and responsibilities. We value diversity, promote equality and challenge discrimination.

WHO ARE WE

Citizens Advice Mendip is a local charity comprised of 9 staff, 53 volunteers (with a further 4 in training) and a board of 8 trustees. Prior to the Coronavirus pandemic and resulting lockdown we operated face to face 'Drop In' sessions in Frome, Shepton Mallet, Street and Wells, plus email advice and telephone advice (Adviceline) service. However, with the need for social distancing our 'Drop In' sessions have been suspended and our Adviceline and email services enhanced.

We help clients with a diverse range of issues and queries in areas such as: benefits, debt and managing money, employment, housing, relationships, travel & transport, utilities, consumer, discrimination, health & community care and immigration.

WELCOME

Firstly, welcome to our very first external newsletter that is being sent to our partner organisations, neighbourhood groups and anyone who works in the community within the Mendip area of Somerset. Our aim is to explain who we are, what services we offer and how we have been working to help clients in the Mendip area during the coronavirus pandemic.

IMPACT OF CORONAVIRUS

In the last 3 months despite not being able to provide 'Drop In' sessions Citizens Advice has seen an unprecedented demand for our advice nationally.

During this time, Mendip residents have been assisted with 2,922 issues.

2,922

Issues
raised

50%

Benefits
related

16 - 98

Clients ages
ranged from
16 to 98

The 3 most common issues were relating to:

Benefits, including Universal Credit (50%) Debt (12%) Employment (10%)

The youngest client we helped was 16 and the oldest was 98!

Of the people we helped 54% described themselves as having a disability or long-term health condition.

We are very conscious of the fact that our more vulnerable clients may have been more seriously impacted when our Drop-in Sessions were suspended. These are typically individuals who do not have internet access, do not feel comfortable using telephone services and need support to complete paperwork such as benefits claim forms and read letters. Where possible we are proactively trying to contact the most vulnerable clients whom we have helped before, to check on their wellbeing and find out whether they need any support from us or other agencies. We are still supporting individuals to fill in claim forms over the telephone such as Personal Independence Payment (PIP) and helping appeal poor benefit decisions.

CITIZENS ADVICE SOMERSET

NEW PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE AND ONLINE REFERRAL FORM

On 1st June 2020 Citizens Advice Somerset was launched, which is a partnership of the five local Citizens Advice charities in Somerset - Mendip, Sedgemoor, South Somerset, Taunton & West Somerset. Each local Citizens Advice office will continue to provide their local services, but alongside that we have come together to provide a single online point of access to offer advice for anyone living in the county of Somerset. Workers from agencies and groups who are supporting members of the public can now refer clients to us directly by visiting:

www.citizensadvicesomerset.org.uk

- To make a 3rd Party referrals, click on "I am supporting a member of the public" link and follow the instructions. Please ensure you have the consent of the client you are referring to share their information and make the referral.
- Members of the public can refer themselves by following the 'I am a member of the public' link.

Our thanks go to the Somerset Community Foundation for the grant from the Somerset Coronavirus Response and Recovery Fund that has contributed to the costs of this partnership service and website.

LOCAL ASSISTANCE SCHEME & FOODBANKS

The 5 Citizens Advice offices within Somerset manage the Local Assistance Scheme (LAS) on behalf of Somerset County Council. The Local Assistance Scheme does not provide cash or loans, but can help individuals to get basic essentials, such as:

- Essential items of furniture and bedding
- Fuel to cook with or to heat essential rooms
- Basic kitchen equipment
- Essential baby items (nappies & formula)

The scheme is primarily used to support individuals or families who are in receipt of means tested benefits and do not have money to buy essential items because of a crisis such as benefits being withdrawn, or an unexpected debt to pay. It can also apply to those fleeing domestic abuse, prison leavers or those impacted by fire or flood.

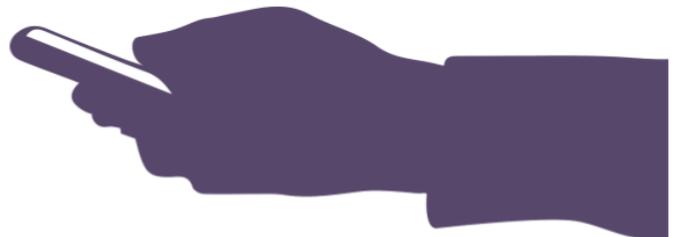
In addition, we are one of the main referrers to the local food banks who are currently doing such a fabulous job in difficult circumstances. Thank you for your continued dedication.

CAMPAIGNING: SCAMS AWARENESS 2020

Get help with online scams through Scams Action

 **0300 330 3003** - Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm

 **citizensadvice.org.uk/ScamsAction**



In 2019 Citizens Advice helped 2.7 million people within the UK and there were also 43 million visits to our online advice pages. We use this unparalleled evidence from the individuals we help to try and fix the underlying causes of people's problems. We are also the statutory consumer watchdog for the energy and post industries, meaning we advocate on behalf of consumers in these markets.

During the month of June, we are focusing our campaigning on **scams** with the annual Citizens Advice campaign taking place from the 15-28th June 2020. The campaign aims to create a network of confident, alert consumers who know what to do when they spot a scam. A recent Citizens Advice report found that almost three quarters of people surveyed had been targeted by a scam in the previous two years. The National Audit Office (NAO) has estimated that individuals in the UK lose £10 billion a year due to fraud.

This year protecting people against scams is more important than ever. The difficult issues people are facing with their employment, debt and health puts them in more vulnerable situations, which in turn makes them more likely to fall victim to a scam. Due to social distancing measures there are currently more people online and using technology, more people at home during the day, and more people applying for government support schemes as they are unable to work. This has increased the opportunities for scammers, so empowering the public against them is crucial.

Citizen's Advice data shows that scammers have been exploiting these circumstances, with scams including:

- adverts of face masks or medical equipment at high prices
- emails or texts pretending to be from the government
- emails offering life insurance against coronavirus
- people knocking at your door and asking for money for fake charities

HIGHLIGHTING SEXTORTION SCAM

Avon and Somerset Police have written to us this week alerting us that they have seen an increase in sextortion cases within their force. They have produced a fact sheet for those who do not know what sextortion is, and we have attached it separately to this email. Their website also has good advice about what to do if you are a victim and how to report it:

www.avonandsomerset.police.uk/victims-witnesses-and-offenders/support-for-victims-of-sex-tortion/

FURTHER ADVICE ON SCAMS

There is information on scams at the Citizens Advice national website at

www.citizensadvice.org.uk/consumer/scams/check-if-something-might-be-a-scam/

REPORTING A SCAM

If you know someone who has been a victim of a scam, encourage them to report the scam:

Contact the police immediately by calling 101 if:

- the scammer is in the local area
- Money was transferred to the scammer in the last 24 hours

Contact Action Fraud on 0300 123 2040, the UK's national reporting centre for fraud.

For online scams, contact Citizens Advice Scams Action helpline on **0808 250 5050 (freephone)**

For all other scams, contact Citizens Advice Consumer helpline on **0808 223 1133 (freephone)**

FURTHER USEFUL UPDATES

We give advice on such varied issues and draw from such a huge array of resources, that it is impossible to cover even a fraction of it here. In this issue we would simply like to concentrate on a few resources that are particularly relevant at this time and may be of most use to you and the people you care for:

UNIVERSAL CREDIT VIA CITIZENS ADVICE HELP TO CLAIM SERVICE

Help to Claim is a dedicated service from Citizens Advice. It's free, independent, confidential and impartial. Trained advisers can help with the early stages of a Universal Credit claim, from the application, through to the first payment. You can contact an adviser through the free national Help to Claim phone service: **0800 144 8444**

From 1 June, people calling the Help to Claim national phone line who have been made redundant will be given an option to speak to a specialist team of advisers as part of the introductory message. People pressing 1 in the option menu will be directed to a group of Help to Claim advisers who can support them with their potentially complex situation. This is part of our work at Citizens Advice to ensure we respond appropriately as an organisation to any large-scale redundancies.

IF CORONAVIRUS AFFECTS YOUR WORK, BENEFITS OR TRAVEL

Visit our public website for detailed advice on all sorts of scenarios:

www.citizensadvice.org.uk/health/coronavirus-what-it-means-for-you/

HOUSING UPDATES

The **Government has announced that the stay on possession and eviction proceedings** will be extended by 2 months until 23 August 2020. Practice direction 51Z has been updated to reflect the extension after the amendment regulations were issued. The regulations clarify that applications can still be made to the court by landlords for possession or eviction, but they'll automatically be stayed until 23 August 2020 and the court won't respond to the claim until after that date.

The government has also published **new guidance for landlords** to clarify the current position in regards to notice periods and possession action. The guidance states: "We strongly advise landlords not to commence or continue possession proceedings during this challenging time without a very good reason to do so. It is essential that we work together during these unprecedented times to keep each other safe."

GOV.UK - Letter to Social Housing Residents A letter from the Minister of Housing sets out the measures that are in place to support social housing residents during the next phase towards reopening society [Read Here](#)

MDC COUNCIL TAX HARDSHIP FUND

Mendip District Council announces extra support with Council Tax Hardship Fund

This fund will provide all Mendip residents of working age who qualify for Council Tax Support during the 2020/21 financial year with an additional reduction of up to £150 for the year. If you have less than £150 to pay on your Council Tax bill after any other discounts and Council Tax Support has been applied, then this hardship fund award will reduce your bill to zero. If your balance to pay is more than £150, this extra £150 discount will be applied to your council tax account. You do NOT need to claim this reduction, it will happen automatically in the coming weeks. Revised bills are due to go out at the end of the week for all those who qualify. We strongly urge anyone who thinks they may be eligible for Council Tax support to make their claim immediately, so they can benefit from this extra help. Check if you are eligible at: www.mendip.gov.uk/counciltaxsupport

VOLUNTEERING WITH CITIZENS ADVICE MENDIP

The coronavirus pandemic has seen our communities pulling together and a huge number of individuals volunteering to assist their neighbours by shopping on their behalf, collecting prescriptions, walking dogs or regularly phoning to check on well-being. These challenging times have brought out the best in people and hopefully this community spirit will continue when life begins to return to some sort of normality.



If you would like to volunteer with Citizens Advice Mendip and want to find out more about our volunteer roles or express an interest please contact

Lucy: volunteer@citizensadvicemendip.org.uk or

visit the Citizens Advice Mendip Volunteer page:

www.citizensadvicemendip.org.uk/Volunteering.html

THANK YOU

Finally, thank you for taking the time to read the first issue of this newsletter, which we hope you found useful and informative.

We would welcome any feedback and any suggestions you may have for inclusion in future additions: admin@citizensadvicemendip.org.uk

SHAPE
MENDIP LOTTERY

Help us by playing the Shape Mendip Lottery, tickets are only £1 per week, with 60% going towards our cause and prizes up to £25,000!



You can contact Citizens Advice Mendip for advice:

Telephone – Adviceline Somerset 03 444 889 623

Email advice – www.citizensadvicemendip.org.uk