

OUR IMPACT

2020/21

£30 million
in benefits
secured for
residents

**Over
£660,000**
worth of debt
written off



Every £1 of funding generates £14.07
increased benefits for residents



Partnership working

Supporting our residents
throughout the pandemic

Adapting services,
working flexibly



A network of 18+ independent advice providers



Annual Report April 2020 – March 2021

Introduction by Chair of Sandwell Advice Providers Network (SAPN)

This is the sixth annual report of the Sandwell Advice Providers Network. Our overall aims are to improve the quality of advice in Sandwell by joining up services, sharing knowledge and information and working together to tackle poverty in Sandwell.

Inevitably 2020/21 was dominated by Covid-19 which has had an enormous impact on residents. Residents have had to cope with lockdown, furlough, job loss, reduced income - bringing huge financial uncertainty alongside very real health fears and the accelerated pace of the move to digital. Advice providers have continued to deliver advice throughout 2020/21 despite the challenges of remote working, changing delivery to phone and webchat, adapting buildings so that vulnerable clients can be seen face to face, difficulties in sourcing PPE and outdated IT infrastructure. I believe that we have emerged much more resilient, with flexible models of delivery, improved IT infrastructure and more tools to help clients to do more for themselves.

I am immensely proud of the contribution that all advice providers have made to the well-being of some of the most vulnerable residents. A huge thank you for going the extra mile.

Shabud Ullah
Chair
October 2021

Role of the Sandwell Advice Providers Network (SAPN)

SAPN is a forum for collaboration and discussion about a very wide range of topics that relate to providing high quality, free advice in Sandwell about debt, welfare benefits, housing, immigration, consumer matters, employment and other issues. Training, referrals, social policy and information about changes in the law are discussed on a regular basis.

Over 18 independent advice providers belong to the network including: Citizens Advice Sandwell & Walsall, members of Sandwell Consortium, AgeUK, St Albans and the council's welfare rights team. Meetings are chaired by Shabud Ullah from CBO and partners from other services are invited to ensure that links are made. Any organisation that provides free advice in Sandwell is able to attend network meetings and is able to access free training.

Most but not all members of SAPN receive funding from Sandwell Council specifically to enable them to deliver free advice on welfare benefits, debt, immigration, housing and other matters.

Outputs delivered as a result of council funding

The context

- The welfare rights team focus on benefits advice. All other agencies deliver advice on a range of topics including welfare rights, housing, debt, employment, consumer etc. Citizens Advice Sandwell & Walsall provide a specialist debt advice service and Brushstrokes specialises in immigration advice
- The Covid-19 pandemic has had a huge negative impact on household income in Sandwell, with job losses, furlough, additional costs relating to the need to remain at home and increasing food prices
- People who were just about managing are now really struggling and have no resilience
- Food banks have seen unprecedented demand and as part of a number of initiatives to tackle poverty, Additional measures have been put in place such as Test and Trace payments, Covid grants, Winter grants, food parcels and advice workers have helped residents to access this support
- Covid - 19 accelerated the move to digital as face to face services closed. For some residents, those with access to the internet and digital skills, this has been positive. However, the gap has widened for our most vulnerable residents
- More of our residents have poor mental health, social isolation and money worries contributing to this
- Payment holidays has meant that fewer residents have had to access debt advice. However, when these holidays end residents will need help to deal with their debts
- Looking forward, budgeting and employment support are increasingly important tools to help people to move out of poverty.

Numbers of unique clients supported

Organisation	2019/20	2020/21
Citizens Advice Sandwell & Walsall	14,657	12,072 including 11,959 phone enquiries
Sandwell Consortium open door	4,261	2,260
Sandwell Consortium children's centres	648	358
Brushstrokes	-	577
SPMA	675	328
Welfare rights team	10,251	11,086
Total	30,492	26,681

In addition, the Citizens Advice Sandwell "Help to Claim" service, funded by central government, supported 4660 people from Sandwell and the surrounding area to claim Universal Credit.

During 2020/21 advice providers worked hard to change how they delivered services, moving to a blended approach of phone, on-line support and socially distanced face to face for the most vulnerable.

Welfare rights advice April 2020 - March 2021

The welfare rights team focus on benefits advice. All other agencies deliver advice on a range of topics including welfare benefits, housing, debt, employment, consumer etc. Citizens Advice Sandwell & Walsall provide a specialist debt advice service and Brushstrokes specialises in immigration advice and refugee support. The funding in the table below covers all advice activities.

Organisation	Confirmed gains 2019/20	Confirmed gains 2020/21	Level of funding 2020/21	Leverage 2020/21
Citizens Advice Sandwell & Walsall	£1,813,018	£1,493,994	£673,328	2.21
Sandwell Consortium open door	£4,994,466	£3,399,118	£240,305	14.14
Sandwell Consortium children's centres	£1,416,966	£787,779	£100,265	7.85
Brushstrokes	N/A	£288,267	£115,219	2.5
SPMA	£1,817,332	£2,184,396	£31,458	69.43
Welfare rights team	£23,404,097	£22,444,721	£1,014,200	22.13
Total	£33,445,879	£30,598,275	£2,174,775	14.07

In addition, the Citizens Advice Sandwell "Help to Claim" service, funded by central government, enabled people (75%+ Sandwell residents) to claim up to £11,513,000 in benefits (compared to £33,723,900 in 2019/20).

Debt outputs April 2020 - March 2021

The Citizens Advice debt advice service is jointly funded by Sandwell council and by the Money Advice Service. Outputs were as follows:

Funder	Supported clients dealing with debt totalling	Amount of debt written off (estimated)
Sandwell Council	£ 2,733,015	£ 147,771
Money Advice Service	£ 5,320,080	£521,488
Total	£8,053,095	£669,259

SPMA have secured additional funding for a debt worker, as a result of which they have been able to support clients dealing with debt totalling £3,512,780 and helped to negotiate moving £2,184,396 of that debt to payment plans.

Housing advice – support provided to people in housing crisis

Organisation	2019/20 No of clients	2020/21 No of clients
Citizens Advice	3,291	2,506
Sandwell Consortium open door	17	21
Sandwell Consortium children's centres	34	7
Brushstrokes	N/A	121
SPMA	31	19
Welfare rights team	420	289
Total	3,793	2,963

Citizens Advice and Brushstrokes receive specific funding from the council to provide housing advice to residents at risk of homelessness.

Immigration advice

Brushstrokes provide a lead on immigration advice, providing a very wide range of support, including the EU Settlement Scheme:

2020/21 figures

Total No of clients	OISC level 1	OISC level 2	OISC level 3
207	50	137	20

In addition, OISC level 1 advice is being provided by other members of SAPN: BIC, BWA, CBO, CCF, SPMA and Citizens Advice Sandwell & Walsall.

Continuous improvement

Members of the network are all committed to service improvements. In 2020/21 our achievements include:

- working in an agile way so that services were maintained even during the first lockdown.
- developing a blended approach to advice delivery including phone, on-line support and socially distanced face to face for the most vulnerable. Citizens Advice Sandwell & Walsall has been able to deliver face to face support in a range of outreach locations around Sandwell using their mobile advice unit CASSIE
- making the most of digital - welfare rights team attending on-line appeals and supporting clients via email and internet calls, Brushstrokes developing YouTube videos to support residents to complete their own forms
- maintaining network meetings using Zoom
- adapting the BetterOff Sandwell/ Resilient Residents training so that it can be delivered on-line
- supporting public health by promoting Covid safe behaviour and vaccine take up.

Looking Ahead

In 2021/22 the biggest challenge will continue to be how advice providers deliver a safe and effective advice service in the Covid-19 environment with increased demand for services such as benefit and debt advice. Priorities will include:

- supporting clients to do more for themselves,
- showing clients how to use the internet
- debt advice - encouraging clients to seek help at an early stage
- ensuring that budgeting advice and BetterOff Sandwell are well integrated into advice
- improved levels of warm referral into other services
- maintaining a training programme for advice workers including reintroducing face to face training and

Sandwell Consortium Delivery Partners

The following organisations deliver generalist advice as delivery partners of Sandwell Consortium:

Bangladeshi Islamic Centre (BIC)
Bangladeshi Women's Association (BWA)
Brushstrokes
Centrepont Christian Church
Community Connect Foundation (CCF)
Confederation of Bangladeshi Organisations (CBO)
Ideal for All
Sandwell Consortium
Sandwell Youth and Community Centre
Skills Work and Enterprise Development Agency (SWEDA)
Yemeni Community Centre (YCA)