Sandwell Advice Providers Network

OUR IMPACT
2022/23

£31 million in benefits secured for residents

Advice on **£20 million** problem debt

Over 39,000 people supported

Every £1 of funding generates £14.68 in increased benefits for residents

Partnership working

Helping residents through the cost of living crisis

Face to face support in the community

A network of 18+ independent advice providers

IDEAL FOR ALL · citizens advice · Bangladeshi Women's Association · YCA in Sandwell · Sandwell Consortium · Brushstrokes · SYCC Smethwick Youth & Community Centre · CBO · sweda · Bangladeshi Islamic Centre · Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council · cof community connect foundation · SPMA Smethwick Pakistani Muslims Association

Sandwell Advice Providers Network

Annual Report April 2022 – March 2023

Introduction by Chair of Sandwell Advice Providers Network (SAPN)

This is the eighth annual report of the Sandwell Advice Providers Network. Together, by providing high quality, free advice to residents we are helping to tackle poverty in Sandwell. This is particularly important at a time when Sandwell residents are being hit hard by the cost of living crisis. Together we are exploring ways of meeting growing demand on our services.
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 to all of our advisers for going the extra mile.

Shabud Ullah
Chair
July 2023

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 and information.

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.

Our strong network of providers

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

2022/23 context

- The cost of living crisis has had an enormous impact on Sandwell residents
- Households that were just about managing are no longer able to cover all of their costs
- Short term help, rather than long term support (Household Support Fund, Energy Price Cap), impacting on the financial resilience of Sandwell residents
- More people in need of emergency help

- Money worries are having a real impact on mental health
- The number of children entitled to free school meals has continued to grow – 20,125 at the end March 2023. This compares to 14,112 in March 2020, 17,417 in September 2021 to 18,878 in June 2022.
- 20% increase in the number of food parcels distributed by food banks in Sandwell, compared to 2021/22
- As more services move on-line, the impact of digital exclusion is increasing
- Number of volunteer advice workers has not increased to pre-pandemic levels
- Return to face to face services in the community
- Help with budgeting being offered alongside other advice, but more needs to be done to encourage people to take up the support.

Outputs delivered as a result of council funding

Numbers of unique clients supported

Organisation	**2021/22**	**2022/23**
Citizens Advice Sandwell & Walsall	5782 face to face (30%) + 13,683 phone enquiries (70%) **19,465**	12,029 plus 7,219 Digital (including phone and web chat) **19,248**
Sandwell Consortium open door	3,053	3,738
Sandwell Consortium children's centres	790	872
Brushstrokes	951	2,043
SPMA	551	626
Welfare rights team	10,663	12,635
Total	**35,473**	**39,162**

Welfare rights advice April 2022 – March 2023

The funding in the table below covers all advice activities.

Organisation	**Confirmed gains 2021/22 ***	**Confirmed gains 2022/23 ***	**Level of council funding 2022/23**	**Leverage 2022/23**
Citizens Advice Sandwell & Walsall	£2,383,853	£1,905,563	£698,588	2.73
Sandwell Consortium open door	£4,272,101	£3,806,177	£240,305	15.84
Sandwell Consortium children's centres	£1,122, 022	£1,869,341	£100,265	18.64
Brushstrokes	£659,804	£571,594	£32,719	17.47
SPMA	£3,411,865	£3,447,644	£31,458	109.60
Welfare rights team	£18,305,403	£19,519,254	£1,016,000	19.21

Total	**£30,155,048**	**31,119,573**	**£2,119,335**	14.68

***These figures include benefit gains and any one-off charitable grants**

Debt outputs April 2022 – March 2023

The Citizens Advice debt advice service is jointly funded by Sandwell Council and by the Money and Pensions Service. SPMA are funded by the Henry Smith Charity. Outputs were as follows:

Organisation	**Funder**	**Total level of client debt 2022/23**	**Estimated amount of debt written off 2022/23**	**Amount of debt managed/ moved to payment plans 2022/23**
Citizens Advice	Sandwell Council	£3,607,809	£281,392	
Citizens Advice	Money and Pensions Service	£10,953,542	£735,964	£142,396
SPMA	The Henry Smith Charity	£6,319,208	£3,630,602	
Total		**£20,880,559**	**£4,647,958**	**£142,396**

Housing advice – support provided to people in housing crisis

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

Organisation	**2021/22 No of clients**	**2022/23 No of clients**
Citizens Advice	1,396	1,346
Sandwell Consortium open door	28	329
Sandwell Consortium children's centres	20	232
Brushstrokes	187	420
SPMA	8	14
Welfare rights team	1,424	1,505
Total	**3,063**	**3,846**

Immigration advice

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

Organisation	**No of cases 2022/23 (21/22)**	**OISC level 1 2022/23 (21/22)**	**OISC level 2 2022/23 (21/22)**	**OISC level 3 2022/23 (21/22)**

Brushstrokes	381 (230)	117 (50)	240 (139)	24 (5)
Sandwell Consortium	283 (94)	283 (94)	0 (0)	0 (0)
SPMA	47 (11)	47 (11)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Citizens Advice Sandwell & Walsall	162 (311)	162 (311)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Total	873 (646)	609 (502)	240 (139)	24 (5)

Continuous improvement

Members of the network are all committed to service improvements. In 2022/23 our achievements include:

- resuming face to face services in the community
- continuing to provide advice in other ways, including telephone advice and via the internet
- keeping up to date with the range of financial support available to residents, such as Household Support Fund and the Energy Price Cap
- phase 2 of 'i-act' training for advice workers to enable them to promote positive mental health and wellbeing among their clients
- continuing professional development to enable advisers to stay up to date with changes in welfare benefits and other areas of advice, and to enhance skills and expertise in specific areas such as domestic abuse and recourse to public funds.

Looking Ahead to 2023/24

In 2023/24 the biggest challenge will be the impact of the cost of living crisis on Sandwell residents:

- cost of living crisis affecting everyone
- more people in crisis
- increasing numbers of people with no recourse to public funds
- digital challenges
- impact of Brexit – EUSS those with pre settled status will have limited rights
- seeing more complex cases, particularly newcomers with very poor language skills
- short term support likely to continue (rather than longer term changes in benefits etc)
- providers helping residents to access a patchwork of grants and one-off charitable payments
- budgeting support essential
- we will be unable to close the gap between income and expenditure, even after a full benefit check, employment support and help with budgeting

Priorities for SAPN will include:

- working with a wider set of partners, following up from the Cost of Living Crisis summit in March 2023

- delivering the Cost of Living Support Programme in a range of outreach settings
- ensuring that budgeting support is well integrated into advice and that there are appropriate referrals into employment support
- supporting clients to do more for themselves
- showing clients how to use the internet
- finding new ways of delivering services so that clients are given the time they need, leading to real outcomes
- recruiting more volunteers to deliver advice and support
- debt advice – encouraging clients to seek help at an early stage
- improved levels of warm referrals into other services such as Community Offer

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)
Community Connect Foundation (CCF)
Confederation of Bangladeshi Organisations (CBO)
Ideal for All
Sandwell Consortium
Smethwick Youth and Community Centre (SYCC)
Skills Work and Enterprise Development Agency (SWEDA)
Yemeni Community Association (YCA)