

Annual Achievements

2021 - 2022



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Legal Practice Quality Mark
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KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

16240

People provided with advice and information

£9,624,364

Welfare benefit income claimed for local residents

£18,521,739

Debt managed on behalf of clients

1676

People provided with holistic Fuel Poverty support

Summary of the Year

The challenges caused by the pandemic continued into 2021 for the Service, just as they did for wider society. Although our offices were equipped to enable 'in person' appointments as safely as possible, we continued to deliver many Services remotely for the first part of the year. The staff team managed this superbly, continuing to deliver high quality advice to clients via telephone, email and (of course) Zoom.

Although COVID responses, such as the ban on evictions, started to ease, staff shortages and the overall upheaval of the pandemic continued to cause a huge amount of delay. Court Hearings, responses from private companies and statutory bodies are all significantly affected. As a result, clients were faced with extended waiting times for hearings, responses to their enquiries and decisions to be made. In turn our advisers experienced a significant increase in caseloads as the average time taken to resolve a case increased by several months. As a result, advisers have been managing much higher caseloads, often in excess of 100 per adviser, which is unprecedented. As ever, though, the staff team rose to the challenge.

The introduction of the Breathing Space Scheme in May 2021 was a welcome development, enabling our Debt Advisers to use this to give those experiencing debt problems time to engage with advice and get their finances under control. Likewise the changes to Debt Relief Order eligibility in June 2021 has enabled more people to access these.

As the new year arrives the decision is made to start seeing more clients face to face. After a fairly slow uptake, this soon picked up as confidence amongst staff and clients built. We were pleased to re-open all of our offices (Northampton, Rushden and Wellingborough) and return to Northampton Guildhall's One Stop Shop, all are now well used again. Equally many of our other outreach sessions restarted in the latter part of the year.

We remain very grateful to our funders who have, with support and understanding, accommodated our need to change Service delivery through this last year. Credit must be given to the staff at Community Law Service who have worked tirelessly through a second very challenging year, achieving some fantastic results for their clients; the outcomes achieved speak volumes. The feedback we get from clients tells us that our Service makes a real difference to them. It continues to be a privilege to serve our community.

Your understanding took all the worry from me and saved me a huge amount of money wrongly charged by my energy supplier

I will remember your support, expertise, kindness and professionalism for a very long time

Just talking to you was a help

About Our Work



2113 people received
Welfare Benefits casework



106 clients received
Immigration advice

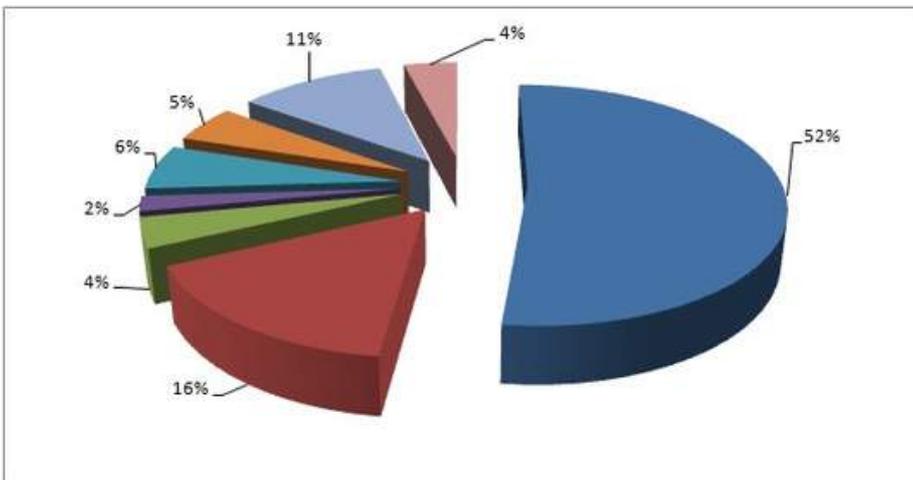


519 people received
Housing advice casework



1758 people received
Debt casework

Where clients lived



Northampton 52%
East Northants 16%
Wellingborough 11%
Kettering 6%
Corby 5%
Daventry 4%
Out of area 4%
South Northants 2%



Clients saved £234,201 through using energy savings
devices provided by CLS

**You make
information
easy to understand**

**You managed to get me to get
my act together through
the wide-ranging
advice you gave me**

Client Profile



79% of clients have a disability or long term illness



79% of clients were working age



8% of clients were carers



24% of clients were from BME communities



35% of clients had dependent children



20% of clients lived in private rented accommodation

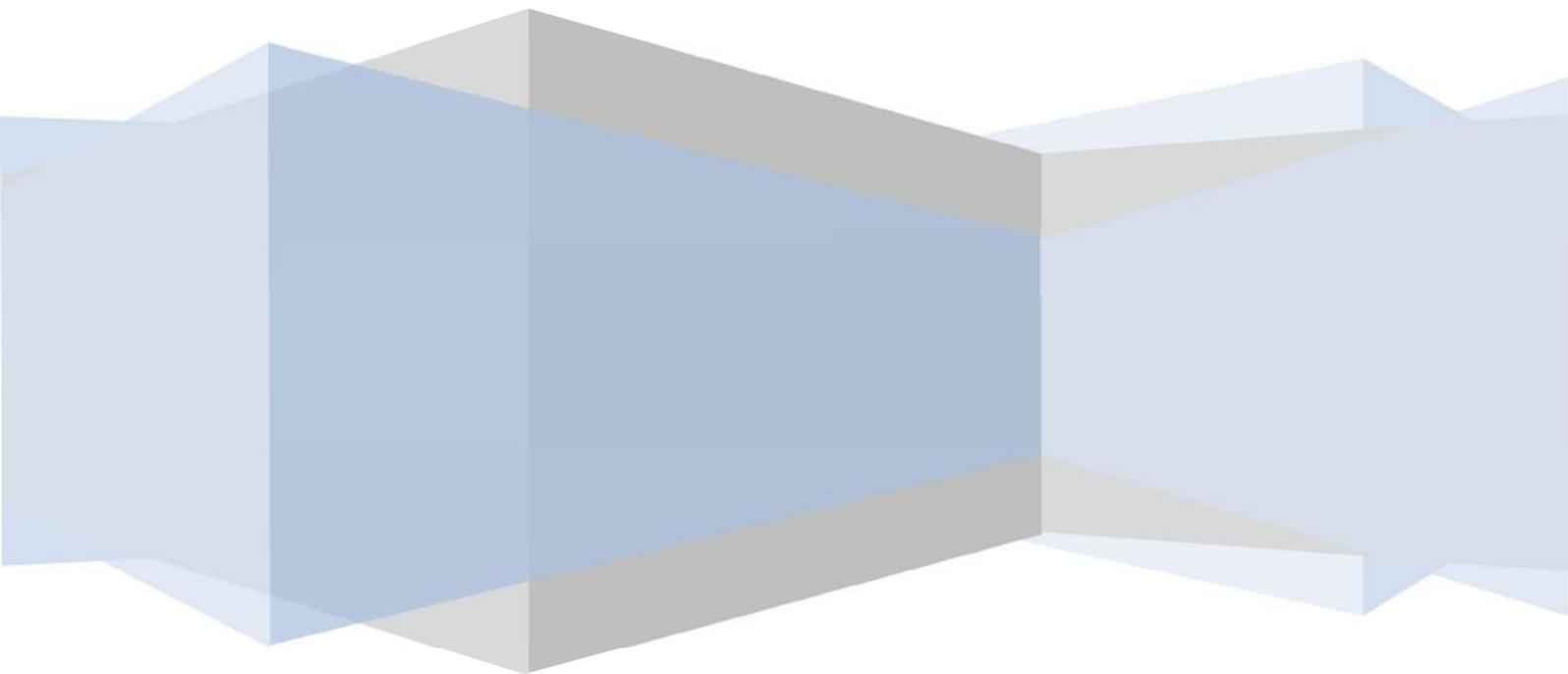
Life is stressful enough and CLS takes these pressures off by supporting parents like me

If it was not for you I don't know how me and my children would have survived



Case Studies

21/22





**West
Northamptonshire
Council**



**North
Northamptonshire
Council**

Welfare Benefits Advice Service

The Welfare Benefits Advice Service is supported through various funding sources including West Northamptonshire Council, North Northamptonshire Councils and Children in Need and are an integral part of our Energy Saving Services. Comprehensive casework and support with appeals is delivered by fully trained experienced staff covering all Welfare Benefit matters.

Mrs D was a widowed retired lady, who lived in a property that she jointly owned with a friend.

She was receiving State Pension, a small amount of Pension Credit & Council Tax Reduction which met her half share of the Council Tax liability (her friend was not eligible to means-tested benefits). She also received Attendance Allowance.

Mrs D was struggling financially as she needed to pay people to help her with some daily tasks. She also advised that her friend could no longer cope with the gardening and they needed to employ a gardener. Mrs D advised she did not know how she could afford to meet her half share of the gardening on top of her other expenses as she was already using her Attendance Allowance for her care.

The client

- Female, widow, living with friend
- Chronic ill health

Help provided:

It was identified that Mrs D qualified for a Severe Disability Premium within her Pension Credit award & that this could be backdated. She was entitled to this as she was receiving Attendance Allowance and nobody claimed/received Carer's Allowance for looking after her, she technically counted as living alone as a joint property owner.

A request for a review was raised with Pension Credit, including the issue of backdating several years. Mrs D was assisted to complete the appropriate form for the matter to be processed. Unfortunately, it took many months to resolve this matter and it was the Service's continued persistence with the Pensions Service that led to a successful outcome. Entitlement was increased and backdated for the last 8 years.

The Priority Services Register was explained for utilities and security in case of power disruption and Mrs D was assisted with registering for this service for her utilities, which gave her peace of mind, especially as she was reliant on electric for some medical equipment and a vulnerable lady.

Outcomes Achieved:

- **Increased Pension Credit of £56.16 per week, plus arrears of £23,596.18.**
- **Referral to the Priority Services Register**



Housing Advice Service

The Housing Advice Service is funded by the Legal Aid Agency and provides Housing Advice to individuals who qualify for Legal Aid. Our specialist Housing advisors and Housing Solicitor provide a comprehensive casework service and representation in respect of repossession and eviction. The Housing Possession Court Duty Schemes which provide on the day representation, are also provided by CLS at Northampton, Peterborough and Milton Keynes County Courts. The Community Justice Fund provided a grant to help support the Housing Advice Service through this difficult period. This ran alongside the Nationwide Project which aimed to help people address the underlying causes that can result in repossession and eviction.

Mrs K was issued with an ex-parte injunction order for antisocial behaviour. The social housing landlord was seeking a 12 month injunction order and possession of the property. Mrs K was a carer to her husband who was disabled and the family were seeking to move to a more suitable home due to the complex needs of Mr K.

Mrs K was arrested and detained. 39 serious allegations of antisocial behaviour were made against her. A Legal Aid Certificate was applied for and she was granted full representation to defend the injunction proceedings. A two-day trial was listed for the hearing.

Help provided:

A Barrister was instructed for the trial. Prior to the court hearing, our Housing Solicitor prepared a file on the matter in conjunction with the client and Barrister and supported the client throughout the trial. The case took careful preparation and, in total, 45 hours to conclude.

Civil procedure rules were complied with and the application was successfully defended in Court

The client

- Female, living with disabled husband
- Local Authority tenancy

Outcomes achieved:

- All 39 allegations were disproved against the client
- The client was offered suitable accommodation for her husbands needs and the family have moved since to their new home.



Debt Advice Service

The Debt Advice Service is funded primarily by the Money and Pensions Service. Additionally North Northamptonshire Council provides welcome funding. However, Debt advice is also an integral part of our holistic fuel poverty projects. A Countywide specialist Debt casework service is delivered by specialist staff covering all Debt matters including the administration of Debt Relief Orders and support with Bankruptcy.

Mr P is in receipt of Universal Credit, Child Benefit and Self-Employed Earnings.

Client had 11 Debts with various Creditor totalling nearly £60,000. Client was receiving daily calls and letters which was having a negative impact on his health.

The client

- Male, single parent
- Self employed

Help provided:

- A Credit Report was obtained for the client to enable us to have a full detailed breakdown of all the debts he owed.
- The client was supported to prepare a Financial Statement so he was able to keep track of what he was spending and help him better manage his money.
- The client was enrolled onto the Breathing Space Portal, meaning that recovery action would cease, giving the client time to work with CLS to resolve his issues.
- A Bankruptcy Application was made and the client was supported throughout the whole process.

Outcome achieved:

- Mr P's Bankruptcy Application was approved; all of his debts were written off .
- By entering into Breathing Space, it gave the client the time to address his difficult situation without the threat of further enforcement looming over him.
- The Client was able to use the Financial Statement to manage his money better to avoid him falling into debt again.

Overall Mr P is managing his money better and is no longer in debt which has given him a fresh start.

Immigration Advice Service

The Immigration Advice Service is self funded through low cost fixed fees with a free initial assessments of circumstances and options. Advice is available in respect of a full range of Immigration matters. This not-for-profit service was introduced following the Government cuts to Legal Aid funding for Immigration work and the concern about access to quality advice and the high charges of some private solicitor firms. The same legal advice and support is provided as that by private firms but at a much lower cost. The service is provided by highly experienced staff including a solicitor and a legal executive.

Ms A returned to her country of nationality after her separation. Her youngest daughter had health issues and was placed in a care home by the paternal family. Over a period of around 20 years Ms A visited frequently without the need to secure a visa. Later, immigration laws were changed and Ms A had to secure a visit visa to enter the UK. She was refused a visa for several years before finally being permitted to travel to the UK in the early 2000s. She found her disabled daughter in a terrible state. Ms A was seeking to remain in the UK for as long as possible to supervise the care of her daughter.

The client

- Female arrived from Commonwealth in 1960s
- 3 British National Children

Help provided:

- We assessed her immigration history and identified her as potentially qualifying for indefinite leave to remain on the Windrush Scheme. This is because she appeared to be a commonwealth national who should have secured indefinite leave to remain in the UK when she originally lived here in the 1960s and 70s, but was never issued with formal documentation.
- Ms A was assisted to apply for the Windrush Scheme and to prepare all the documentation necessary to support her application

Outcomes achieved:

- The application was successful and she was awarded indefinite leave to remain.
- She now lives in the UK and is able to supervise the care of her daughter who has made significant improvements due to regular interaction with her mother.



Northampton Energy Saving Service (NESS)

NESS is funded by National Grid's Warm Homes Fund to help address fuel poverty in Northamptonshire. The Project provides holistic support to low income households living in either rented or privately owned accommodation who are having difficulty affording their energy bills and keeping their homes warm.

The help provided is free, confidential and independent and includes a combination of energy and debt advice, welfare benefits advice and income maximisation and practical measures to improve the warmth and energy efficiency of homes. The Project is being delivered by Community Law Service in partnership with Care and Repair Northamptonshire, South Northants Volunteer Bureau and Citizens Advice Services Corby and Kettering. North Northamptonshire Council have a strategic role in the Project.

Miss A approached us by telephone due to the COVID-19 rules in place at the time. Her partner received disability benefits and State Pension, Miss A received Carers Allowance, and they received a joint award of Universal Credit. Due to difficulties setting up these benefits when her partner reached pension age, they had been living on very little for some time and had fallen behind with their energy payments. They owed their energy company £1400. Miss A approached us for help to start paying the energy bills regularly and to address the debt.

The client

- Female living with partner
- Carer for partner
- Housing Association property

Help provided:

- Miss A was assisted to set up payments to cover energy usage and prevent an increase in the arrears. Shortly after, the direct debit increased to over £300 a month and the energy debt increased to over £4500 causing huge upset and stress. After investigating, this appeared to be a mistake caused by the energy company's meter reader and a complaint was raised. A new, correct, meter reading was provided, which reduced the debt and the direct debit amount back to the original amount; we secured compensation for the distress caused to Miss A.
- Once the direct debit was back on track an application to clear the arrears was made to the British Gas Energy Trust. A tariff check was undertaken and Miss A was advised to remain with her current supplier as she could not save by moving elsewhere.
- An application for the Warm Home Discount was made.

Outcomes achieved:

- A grant of £1300 was awarded by the British Gas Energy Trust which cleared the arrears and gave the couple a fresh start
- Warm Homes Discount was applied for - £140 award toward her energy bill



Financial Health and Wellbeing Service

The Financial Health and Wellbeing Service funded by British Gas Energy Trust provides an holistic service to address fuel poverty and is targeted at people who are experiencing health problems or who have a disability. Working directly with health professionals including GP surgeries, Community Mental Health Teams and other voluntary and statutory agencies the Project provides a range of services to help people better afford their energy bills and keep warm at home. this includes Welfare Benefit, Debt and Energy Advice and access to various grants and other support.

Miss V approached us accompanied by her mother for advice and assistance disputing a Personal Independence Payment (PIP) awarding her only the Mobility Component at standard rate, £23.70 a week. The decision was given 3 months ago and therefore, she was outside the normal one month time limit to challenge that decision before she came to see us. She was struggling to heat her home as she had additional disability costs.

Miss V wanted to get the Daily living Component of the Personal Independence Payment (PIP). This would allow a carer to qualify to claim Carer's Allowance as she was housebound and completely reliant on care even to buy food.

The client

- Single female
- Suffering from long-term complex mental health conditions as result of groomed as a childhood to adolescence over 8-9 years period.

Help Provided

- The client was advised her case had merit and she was assisted through the Mandatory Reconsideration process. Representations were made to allow for an extension to the deadline to challenge.

Outcomes achieved:

1. The late application was allowed.
2. Personal Independence Payment (PIP) increased from £23.70 to £116.85 a week.
3. Backdated Personal Independence Payment (PIP) of £4679.60 paid.
4. Her carer was able to claim Carer's Allowance (£69.70 a week).
5. Carers Allowance was backdated for 52 weeks and a backdated payment of £3515.20 was secured.
6. The carer was able to claim Universal Credit as a full time carer and was not required to look for work, entitlement of £503.72 a month, enabling her to better support Miss V.



Carers Project

The Carers Project is a partnership project funded by, and working with, Northamptonshire Carers Association. Specialist Welfare Benefits advice and casework is provided for carers and cared for. A monthly outreach session is provided at a carers' support group in Northampton and referrals are received from Northamptonshire Carers Association at other times.

A is a retired man who lives with his wife (B), who is also of retirement age. A was referred to us by Northamptonshire Carers Association as he was struggling to care for his wife who has been diagnosed with dementia. They had a modest retirement income, but A really needed to have their heating on more than they currently did and A also wanted to be able to pay for someone to sit with his wife while he went out and did some chores or to see a friend for a break from caring.

Their income comprised of a State Pension each and an occupational pension. They had no savings.

The client

- Retired couple
- Wife recently diagnosed with dementia

Help provided:

- Initially an application for Attendance Allowance was made. This then led to further entitlements.

Outcomes achieved:

- Attendance Allowance was awarded at £89.15 a week.
- As a result of this award, a successful application for Council Tax Discount was made reducing the Council Tax bill by 25% (a **saving of £276 a year**).
- A claim was made for Carers Allowance for A. This gave A an underlying entitlement to Carers Allowance so their entitlement to other benefits were increased. As a result they were entitled to a small amount of Council Tax Reduction (**£3.75 a week**).
- **Overall A's household was better off by £98.20 a week.**

The improvement in their financial situation meant that

- A could have their heating on more frequently without having to worry about affording the bill
- A had the means to pay for a sitter for his wife to allow him to go out and spend some time with a friend
- A had time to go out and do shopping as required
- A could use a taxi to travel so he left B for shorter periods
- A felt much less stressed.