Sandwell Advice Providers Network

OUR IMPACT 2019/20

Over £1.5 million worth of debt written off

£33 million in benefits secured for residents

Over 30,000 people supported

Every £1 of funding generates £16.54 increased benefits for residents

Partnership working

Developing immigration advice across the borough

Planning for the future

A network of 18+ independent advice providers

IDEAL FOR ALL · citizens advice · Bangladeshi Women's Association · Centrepoint Christian Church · 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 LTD Smethwick Pakistani Muslims Association "Serving the wider community since 1989"

Sandwell Advice Providers Network

Annual Report April 2019 – March 2020

Introduction by Chair of Sandwell Advice Providers Network (SAPN)

This is the fifth 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.

Universal Credit was rolled out in Sandwell from November 2018 and in the last 12 months we have been supporting residents through this change and building a stronger partnership with the DWP. Alongside advice on benefits and debt, help with budgeting and referral into employment support are becoming increasingly important tools for advisers.

The network continues to make a very real difference in Sandwell: in 2019/20 we supported over 30,000 clients with a wide range of issues (benefits, debt, housing, immigration and employment) and secured over £33 million in benefits for them.

Looking to the future, the network will be responding to the challenges of Covid-19, which is likely to have a long-term impact on the financial well-being of residents. Advice providers will adjust how we deliver advice in order to comply with public health guidance - we will continue to provide face to face advice to the most vulnerable and will increase other routes such as phone advice and video calls. We will also work hard to empower clients to do more for themselves.

Finally, I would like to thank all of our colleagues for their continuous co-operation and working hard to make a real difference for the Sandwell residents. On behalf of the network I would also like to convey our gratitude and appreciation to Sandwell council for their continuous support to the advice sector.

Shabud Ullah
Chair
July 2020

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, members of Sandwell Consortium, AgeUk, Cranstoun, 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, 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
- Welfare reform has meant that benefits are reducing and are harder to secure.
- The time required to secure a positive result for a number of clients is increasing as cases become more complex – for example claimants from abroad
- Everyone has worked hard to build an improved partnership with the DWP at a local level. This has helped providers to support residents who have moved onto Universal Credit
- Budgeting and employment support are increasingly important tools to help people to move out of poverty.
- The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the issues faced by residents and the work of SAPN will be dealt with in the next annual report

Numbers of unique clients supported

Organisation	**2019/20**
Citizens Advice	14,657
Sandwell Consortium open door	4,261
Sandwell Consortium children's centres	648
SPMA	675
Welfare rights team	10,251
Total	**30,492**

In addition, the Citizens Advice Sandwell "Help to Claim" service, funded by central government, supported 6387 people to claim Universal Credit, of which at least 75% live in Sandwell.

Welfare rights advice April 2019 – March 2020

Organisation	Level of funding	Confirmed gains	Leverage
Citizens Advice	£634,382	£1,813,018	2.86
Sandwell Consortium open door	£238,734	£4,994,466	20.92
Sandwell Consortium children's centres	£99,609	£1,416,966	14.22
SPMA	£31,252	£1,817,332	58.15
Welfare rights team	£1,017,992	£23,404,097	22.99
Total	£2,021,969	£33,445,879	16.54

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

Debt outputs April 2019 – March 2020

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	£ 2,573,626	£ 119,663
Money Advice Service	£7,598,240	£627,127
Total	£10,171,866	£746,790

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 £ 2,316,647 and helped to write off £773,031 of that debt.

Housing advice – support provided to people in housing crisis

Organisation	**2019/20 No of clients**
Citizens Advice	3,291
Sandwell Consortium open door	17
Sandwell Consortium children's centres	34
SPMA	31
Welfare rights team	420
Total	**3,793**

Citizens Advice 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 with partners from across SAPN helping to run a weekly clinic (May 2019 onwards):

Total No of clients	**OISC level 1**	**OISC level 2**	**OISC level 3**
205	35	116	54

In addition, OISC level 1 advice is being provided in community venues such as CBO and Citizens Advice Sandwell.

Continuous improvement

Members of the network are all committed to service improvements. In 2019/20 our achievements include:

- working in partnership with the DWP – a member of the local DWP partnership team attends every SAPN meeting
- briefings at SAPN meetings on: the Help to Claim service run by Citizens Advice (providing support in job centres for new claimants of Universal Credit), employment support services (Sandwell Consortium), rent increases for Sandwell council tenants (welfare rights team), Direct Help and Advice Service (housing advice)
- review of learning through the Matters Family case study
- developing the immigration offer – 8 advisers gained their OISC level 1 qualification and a specialist immigration clinic opened at Oldbury Citizens Advice in May 2019 led by Brushstrokes and staffed by a rota of qualified advisers from across the network.
- delivery of the Settling Well Project by Citizens Advice Sandwell and Brushstrokes, funded by the controlling Migration Fund, following staff training the project became fully operational in November 2019

Looking Ahead

In 2020/21 the biggest challenge will 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
- Finding new ways of providing advice including on-line "how to" guides
- Ensuring that budgeting advice and BetterOff Sandwell are well integrated into advice
- Improved levels of warm referral into other services

Members of Sandwell Consortium

The following members of Sandwell Consortium deliver generalist advice:

Bangladeshi Islamic Centre (BIC)
Bangladeshi Women's Association (BWA)
Brushstrokes
Centrepoint 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)