

Wantage Independent Advice Centre / Vale Community Impact:

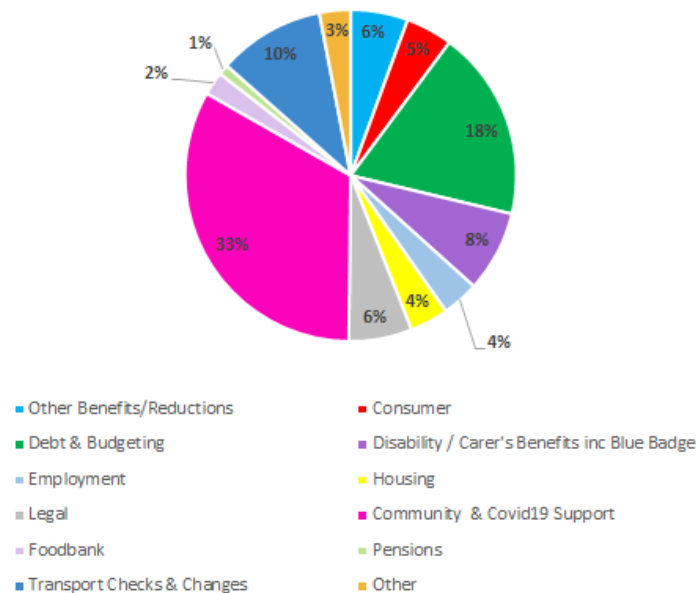
Report for the Town Council and Town meeting - the year 2020/21

It is with great pleasure that we are able to introduce Faringdon residents to Vale Community Impact (VCI), the new name for Wantage Independent Advice Centre, a name that better reflects what we do and who we help. Our charity registration number and FCA licence remain unchanged. VCI would like to thank Faringdon Town Council for the £2,250 grant provided for the financial year 2020/21. The Management Committee and all of our volunteers very much consider our service reach to be “In the Vale, For the Vale”.

The funding from the grant award contributes to the services across all three of the VCI work-streams: Advice, Transport and Good Neighbour. VCI believes that its capability to entwine two or even three of its in-house services together is a great benefit to the community and allows for a real tailoring, to suit each client’s needs, to take place.

Our accounts for the financial year ending March 31st 2021 are in the process of being prepared for independent examination by a local firm of accountants. VCI will publish these in line with Charity Commission guidelines this summer.

In the last year VCI has provided **367** advice consultations to Faringdon residents. This is a 20% increase on the year 2019/20, which continues to illustrate the steady pattern of a rise in demand level as the year before also showed a 21% growth rate over its prior year.



The Coronavirus pandemic brought many challenges not only to our clients but also to our organisation as it required rapid adaptation in process approach, technology implementations, new risk assessments and a rethinking of traditional contact/engagement options. The level of assistance required by Faringdon residents that originally related to Community Support, woven into this was support necessary as the result of a Covid19 impact, reached unprecedented levels with one third of the advice being linked to the category. Many of the cases and enquiries managed under this over-arching topic required several strands of assistance eg Universal Credit applications, employment worries, furlough issues and day to day financial hardship.

There has been no easing in the demand for our core debt counselling and money advice service, with almost 20% of all of the advice required by local residents again being related to this topic at the time of first presentation.

As one of only two partners selected by the Vale of White Horse District Council for the Emergency Assistance and Covid19 Winter Grant Schemes, VCI has supported Faringdon individuals, couples and families through the schemes in terms of initial identification, eligibility assessments, allocation of appropriate grant funds and household money management activities. VCI has also linked well with the Faringdon Viral Kindness team, the Faringdon Food Share and other Pump House Project activities to collectively deliver a solution of best-fit to a client.

VCI Trustees also approved an internal hardship fund with contributions from the Priority Funds of several County and District Councillors. This hardship fund has meant that VCI has also been able to provide local residents with crisis food shopping, emergency repairs and transport to essential medical appointments without fares.

Remarkably our community transport service, volunteers in their own cars taking clients to essential hospital or medical appointments has continued without interruption during the pandemic. Although there have been fewer drivers than our usual 60, in the region of 20 drivers have been willing to offer their time. VCI provided PPE and cleaning products as well as an IR thermometer to each driver.

There were nearly 100 bookings for Faringdon residents of which half were for trips to one of the hospitals in Oxford, Swindon or Reading. Our drivers have also been available for short notice vaccination drives to the surgery or Kassam Stadium. As previously mentioned, transport was the service most significantly impacted by Covid19 and though the overall level of requests was down from the previous year almost every booking required cancellation, rearrangement and additional support for the worried and overwhelmed clients, over and above the extra telephone calls to explain the Covid19 guidelines and the reassess again the Covid19 risk to client and driver the day before the trip.

The Good Neighbour Scheme has been able to continue to provide its service throughout the last year. Loneliness and isolation, which were already a deep concern, have been an immense challenge and repercussions on mental health are widely anticipated. At times over the last 12 months, to better protect both clients and volunteers, our face-to-face befriending visits predominantly transitioned to remote support; as opposed to in-person with PPE or socially distancing measures whilst outside, however these remote sessions were still beneficial and more than 200 befriending interactions between clients, the Good Neighbour volunteers and the VCI Liaison staff team took place for Faringdon residents.

VCI has continued to work closely with the White Horse Medical practice both medical staff and the social prescriber team, making and receiving referrals across the complete set of our services. This collaboration targets the overall welfare of residents and proves an effective approach for clients/patients eg to aid a hospital discharge a bed needed moving downstairs.

Our charity remains grateful for the continued support from the nominated Town Council representative, Kimberley Morgan, who has been a member of our Management Committee throughout the last year. Unfortunately, the Covid19 guidelines and restrictions regarding face-to-face consultations has meant that the fortnightly sessions at the Pump House have not taken place during 2020 but the publicity and marketing activities that will follow as part of our new "Vale Community Impact" name will continue to build on the out-reach ideas identified as part of our Project West initiative. The Project West initiative identified that addressing existing gatherings such as through the Day Centre and recurring activities held in Community Spaces, with one-on-one advice and group talks on Consumer, Attendance Allowance, Trading Standards etc, would be welcome and an effective way to touch a broader, larger audience. Plans that were sadly but inevitably put on hold during 2020 are therefore slowly beginning to move forward again, targeting a "roving out-reach" feel including, where safely achievable, inside residents' homes.

Our aim for 2021/22 is to ensure our valued and much needed service continues to be available to all; perhaps more so than every as part of the overall Covid19 recovery journey, so that everyone in the community realises they can access the advice they need to start to resolve the problems they face.

It is important to stress that it is possible to make a difference with even the smallest amount of "donated time"; in both Transport and Befriending services the level of flexibility is considerable. Please don't hesitate to ask for more information or contact us to chat about volunteering opportunities.