

## Faringdon Town Council

### Council Report

Activity 1<sup>st</sup> April 2024 – 30<sup>th</sup> March 2025

#### **1. An introduction to Citizens Advice and our service in Faringdon**

In 2024/25 Oxfordshire South & Vale Citizens Advice, as an independent local charity, provided free, confidential and impartial advice on a wide range of issues such as debt, benefits, housing and employment to over 10,000 people across South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse.

Our approach is to empower people. We can all face problems that seem complicated or intimidating. We believe no one should have to face these problems without good quality, independent advice. Our work gives people the knowledge and the confidence they need to find their way forward. Our service is freely available to everyone.

For the people of **Faringdon** we offered a telephone Adviceline service, email support, web chat and once a week we hold a vital Drop-in Service at the Pump House, delivered by our volunteer adviser Andrew Rushton, recently replacing Stuart Martin, and facilitated by the Town Council. We also encourage people to 'self-help' with a chatbot on the website to help people access the online support they need.

The Faringdon 'drop in' service runs from 10:00 to 13:00 on Wednesdays – typically sessions last 20-30 minutes and the aim is to listen to clients, make suggestions and agree actions that the client can commit to. In more complex cases (e.g., debt assessment, DWP benefits check) clients are invited back for afternoon sessions (typically 60 minutes). The Faringdon service is integrated with the Oxfordshire Adviceline telephone service and the Abingdon supervisor. The support given to the adviser by the local Pump House team in managing the flow of customers, and other administration, is very much appreciated.

Our local volunteers provide the backbone of our advice services. Many of our volunteers are very experienced people, they update their skills regularly and bring a huge amount of experience and wisdom to their work with clients

#### **2. Becoming Citizens Advice Oxfordshire**

As we informed the Town Council earlier this year, from 1st April 2025, Oxfordshire South & Vale Citizens Advice merged with Citizens Advice West Oxfordshire and Citizens Advice Oxford to become **Citizens Advice Oxfordshire**.

We will be maintaining all current client services, while exploring new and innovative ways of reaching those most in need. We believe that working together will ensure greater sustainability of our respective organisations, so we can continue to provide vital services to the communities we serve.

As a valued supporter of our work, we wanted to assure you that our commitment to delivering an exceptional, quality service to the community of Faringdon remains steadfast and we firmly believe this merger will enable us to leverage our combined resources, expertise, and capabilities to better serve our clients.

On behalf of Oxfordshire South and Vale Citizens Advice, I want to thank Faringdon Town Council for all their support over the years and hope that you will continue to support Citizens Advice Oxfordshire in the future.

The new organisation will be led by Teresa Archer, and contact details will be provided. However day to day queries can still be channelled through Joseph Mailler.

**3. Client Count for Faringdon 2024/25**

In the financial year 24/25 we have managed to support **243 unique clients** (Faringdon only) dealing with **875** issues resulting in **723** activities by our volunteer workforce.

Clients access our services in a number of ways:

- 34% in person (up 4% on the same period last year)
- 39% by phone via Adviceline (up 3%)
- 24% via email advice
- 3% via letter, webchat, video chat etc

Some clients attend several times over a year. The ‘issues’ clients are presenting with are multiple (up from 3 to 3.6 issues per client on 23/24) and indicates the ongoing complexity of cases. We continue to see an increase in asylum seekers using the drop-in service in Faringdon. While we are very happy to support where we can, as asylum seekers have no access to public funds, the support we can offer is limited.

In Faringdon Town we have facilitated **£122,293** income gain to those we supported (e.g., Benefit or Tax Credit gain, access to charitable funds, social welfare) – **100% increase** on the previous year. This is practical, measurable, real support for those most in need in our community. We hope this demonstrates ‘value for money’ to Faringdon Town Council for the investment they make in our organisation.

Outcomes	
Income gain	£95,359
Re-imbursements, services, loans	£541
Debts written off	£0
Repayments rescheduled	£652
Other	£25,741

**4. Top Issues that clients in Faringdon ask Citizens Advice for help with.**

The most prevalent issues we deal with at Citizens Advice are Benefits and Debt. In Faringdon, this is shortly followed by Housing issues.

The **top 3 benefit related issues** clients present with are:

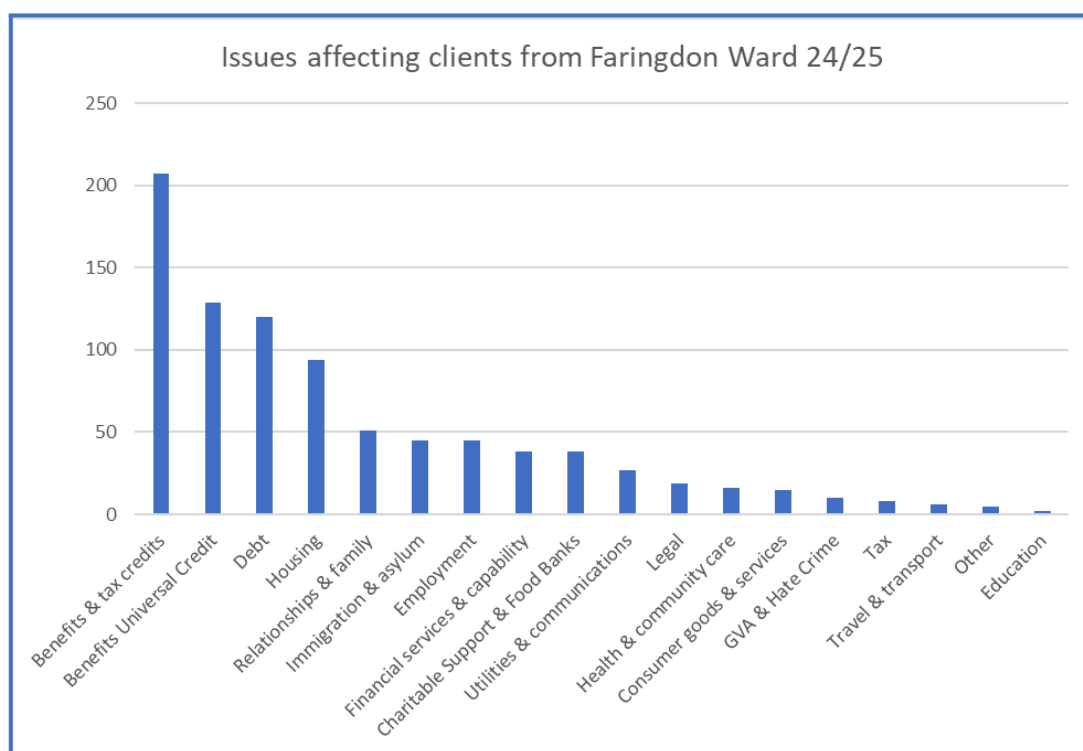
- Personal Independence Payments (PIP)

- Initial claim for Universal Credit
- General benefit entitlement

We are seeing an increase in people coming to see us in anticipation of changes to Health Benefits – specifically Personal Independence Allowance. While the changes are not timetabled until November 2026, the anxiety about potential negative effects are already driving people to our service.

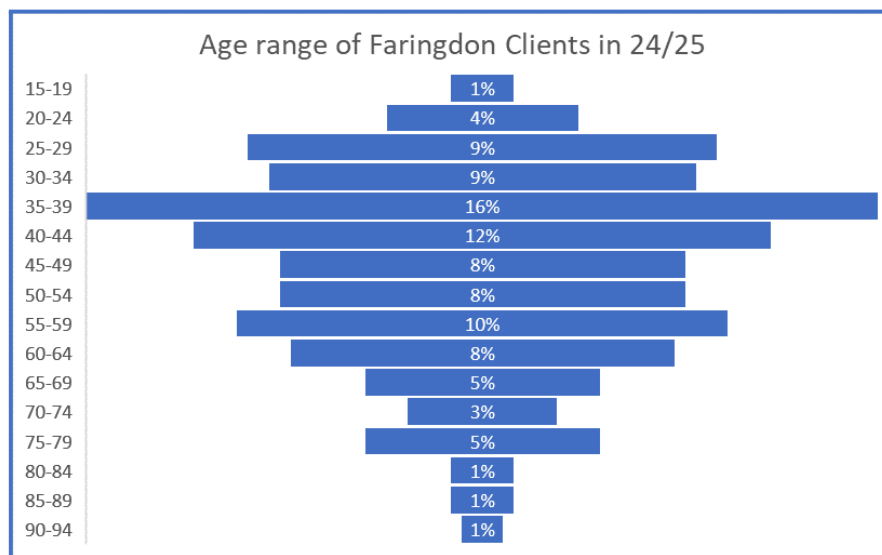
The top 3 debt related issues clients present with are:

- Fuel Debts
- General debt assessment
- Council Tax Arrears



## **5. Faringdon Client profile:**

- Our clients are the most vulnerable in society with 42% describing themselves as having a long-term health issue and 4 % registered disabled. 38% of those that cite a health condition, describe themselves as having multiple impairments, and 21% cite mental health issues.
- 73% clients are White British, 8% White Other, 6% Asian, 8% Black, 2% Mixed and 3% Other
- Women are our bigger services users - 62% women vs 38% men
- 60% of client's are below the age of 50. The age group that uses our services the most are between 35-39. Overall the age profile of our clients has become younger (<50 years old) over the last year.



A focus on client numbers or client profile does not capture the experience of our clients. Many are overwhelmed by their problems. What follows is a short profile of a client we helped recently:

*A recent client visited Faringdon drop in with a series of issues which she said overwhelmed her. She was divorcing an abusive husband who took no responsibility for the care and support of her two children, nor made any contribution to the mortgage payments. Alongside Universal Credit, the client needs to work 32 hours/ week to attempt to make ends meet. She needed legal advice, but all solicitors she contacted quoted costs which for her were unaffordable. The client was anxious and stressed, and not confident to resolve this issue on her own. In an afternoon session, the client and adviser together called the HM government Check Legal Aid service, and the helpline agent agreed that due to the combination of domestic violence and financial hardship the client would be eligible for Legal Aid. A shortlist of local solicitors was provided by Check Legal Aid which the client will now call and report back if further assistance required.*

## **6. Working with other Faringdon Charities**

Other clients have benefited from the generous support provided by the outstanding local charities, for example Faringdon United, Sanctuary Faringdon, Faringdon Food Bank and the Pump House project. The Citizens Advice adviser has been able to meet with the clients, check their circumstances, write up their needs specifically as required by the charity, who have in turn taken swift action which is much appreciated. The Faringdon Food Bank are referring long-term clients to drop in, to check their income and expenditure and see if actions can be taken to reduce their reliance on food parcels.

## **7. Client satisfaction and impact in 24/25**

We know our service makes a positive impact on the lives of those we help. Last year, approximately 400 of our clients from across South & Vale took part in an independent survey of our service. The results show we are succeeding in our main aims to empower people with **82%** of clients answered positively when asked if the advice we had given them enabled them to move forward and **86%** said they would recommend the service.

Good advice is also an effective health intervention albeit an undervalued one. As part of the same survey, clients were asked "as a result of the help you have received from Citizens Advice, do you feel less

stressed, depressed or anxious?" 37% said a 'great deal' or 'a lot' another 46% reported it had 'helped somewhat' or 'a little'. Client reported a positive impact on their physical health too.



We are not a health charity, we are not clinicians and yet we know that access to quality advice services is a crucial determinant of good health outcomes.

**Debbie Watts, Interim Director, Citizens Advice Oxfordshire, April 2025.** (Please note I will be leaving the service on 26<sup>th</sup> June)