

Citizens Advice in West Sussex

Impact Report 2025-26

citizens advice in West Sussex
North South East

Contents

CEO's Introduction 2
Chair's Introduction 3
Who We Are and What We Do 4
The Year in Context 5
Impact Numbers 6
Problems We Faced 7
Spotlight: Benefits 8
Spotlight: Home 9
Spotlight: Debt 10
Project Highlight 11
Using Our Evidence to Create Change . . . 12
The Difference We Made 13
Rob's Story 14
Our Value to Society 15
Our People 16
What our Volunteers Say 17
Looking Forward 18
How You Can Help 19
Thank You 20
Financial Statement 21

CEO's Introduction

2025–2026 has been a year of transition for Citizens Advice in West Sussex. We said goodbye to Emma Cross, our CEO of six years. Emma skilfully led the organisation through the challenging period of the pandemic and shored up the financial position of the organisation by successfully securing the Generalist Advice contract for West Sussex, giving the organisation stability to deliver essential services to our residents. I joined the organisation as interim CEO in December 2025. I had been resolute that my tenure would be a short caretaking role, but I found myself feeling invested in the people, the purpose and the passion. I am humbled and privileged to now be the permanent CEO of CAWS.

We continue to provide consistent high quality, impartial and confidential advice across the County, while responding to sustained demand, increasing complexity of client need, financial pressure, welfare reform and wider public sector change.

My priorities since commencing in post, have seen us focus on being brilliant at the basics, building strength-based foundations to grow and innovate, ensuring we have services that are fit for today and for the future. The appointment of a permanent Head of Finance has created renewed focus on organisational resilience, financial oversight, leadership capacity and strategic delivery. Through our newly formed Organisational Management Group we are building greater depth and breadth across CAWS, moving away from vertical top-down leadership and towards a more dispersed and distributed leadership approach, building greater resilience and capacity.

I want to extend my thanks to the Board, staff and volunteers at CAWS. We have incredible people, who offer a wealth of experience and expertise, and together we walk alongside our residents, making a real and measurable difference.

Building from these strengths, my priorities for the year ahead are focused on optimising what works well, increasing consistency and resilience, and creating the conditions for CAWS to grow its impact with confidence:

- Build on our strengthened financial leadership by optimising planning, reporting and reserves oversight, ensuring resources are aligned to impact, sustainability, and future opportunities.
- Develop greater levels of agility whilst maintaining consistency in the CAWS operating model, making best use of our collective expertise, supporting collaboration across localities that enables us to deliver the highest quality services to our residents.
- Position CAWS proactively in response to devolution and local government reform, using our insight, trusted relationships, and countywide reach to shape opportunities for residents and communities.
- Enhance performance, quality, and impact reporting so that trustees, commissioners, and funders can clearly see the value, outcomes and learning generated through our work.
- Continue to nurture staff and volunteer engagement, wellbeing, and distributed leadership, recognising the depth of talent across CAWS and creating more space for people to lead, contribute and innovate.

Paula Doherty
CEO



Chair's Introduction

Life doesn't get any easier for many people in West Sussex and it is the mission of Citizens Advice to be there for anyone in our community who is facing moments of crisis and need. This report shows clearly how many local people have benefitted from Citizens Advice services in so many different ways. It also shows how we are funded and how we manage that funding to deliver the most results.

It has been a year of change. I took over as Chair of Trustees in the Autumn of 2025, and we welcomed Paula Doherty as our new Chief Executive in December.

Paula has realigned and empowered her teams and strengthened the leadership and, together with the Board, has developed an exciting Strategic Business Plan that will keep CAWS focussed on the needs of local people while adapting to Devolution and changes in Local Government, the changing demands of other funders and the opportunities presented by the Intelligence Revolution. She brings a determination to ensure that CAWS can continue to be the leading Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) service in the area by adapting its ways of working to reach more local people in the way they wish to be reached to support them in solving the ever more complex problems they face.

As I come to the end of my first year, I would like to say how inspiring it has been to meet and work with volunteers, staff and trustees who are so committed to the work we do. It never ceases to amaze me just how much we can deliver with so little and I have enjoyed this last year enormously.

A word about the Board of Trustees: We currently have eleven trustees of varying backgrounds who serve three years each, renewable twice. They are a delightful group of people who work together to oversee the financial probity, strategic direction and regulatory compliance of the organisation. I have been very grateful for the welcome and the support they have offered me this year and all the work they do for the organisation.

Three of our trustees; Mike Jones, Alexia Yang and Alex Ross, will be stepping down at this AGM after many years' of service combined and I would like to thank them all personally for their considerable contribution to CAWS, as members of the Board and in their respective roles of one-time Chair; finance support and specialist in Communications and Digital.

We are delighted to have Edgar Muzvidzwa and Dawn Hornsby as new Trustees who bring new perspectives to enhance our work. We welcome interest from members of our local community who feel they have time (1-2 days a month) and can bring a useful perspective. An understanding of, and enthusiasm for, the work we do and for our community is more important than previous board experience.

Finally I would like to record my thanks to Emma Cross who stepped down as Chief Executive in December. Emma led the organisation with dedication for six years and did much to ensure its position as the leading IAG organisation in the area. Details of her achievements appear throughout this report.

Carol Burns
Chair of Trustees



Who We Are and What We Do

For 85 years, we've been helping to shape a society where people face far fewer problems. We give people the knowledge and the confidence they need to find their way forward, and we work to challenge the underlying causes of their problems.

We help millions of people every year with free, independent and expert advice across the broadest range of areas – from money and debt to benefits, housing, energy, work and so much more.

This gives us a unique and unmatched understanding of the issues that are affecting people in our society. This insight is valued by businesses, other charities, and the government.

We're a voice for the people we help. With our evidence, we can advocate for changes to the government policies and industry practices that we know make life hard for people.

That's why we are the people's champion.

Our Mission

1. Provide advice fit for the future - we'll be there for people when they need us in the ways that help make the biggest impact
2. Close the gap - we'll end the disparities in access and experience for marginalised people
3. Take early action - we'll prevent more people reaching crisis by addressing problems earlier



The Year in Context

This has been a year of rapid change for communities, public services and the voluntary sector. For Citizens Advice in West Sussex, the context in which we work is becoming more complex: demand remains high, people's problems are often more interlinked, and the systems around them are shifting quickly. At the same time, the wider charity landscape is under visible strain, with funding becoming less predictable and more tightly focused.

Recent events in the sector have underlined how fragile even well-established organisations can be. The planned closure and subsequent rescue of Reach Volunteering showed how vulnerable vital charity infrastructure can become when sustainable funding is not in place, while the closure of Papyrus Prevention of Young Suicide was a stark reminder that rising demand, increasing costs and reduced reliable funding can have immediate consequences for the people who rely on specialist support.

Alongside financial pressures, the information environment is changing. People are becoming more cautious about what they read online and are increasingly unsure who or what to trust. In that context, independent, impartial advice matters more than ever. Our role is not only to help people understand their rights and options, but to provide a trusted place where complex issues can be made clear, practical and human.

We are also working against the backdrop of devolution and the uncertainty it brings. Changes to local structures, responsibilities and decision-making may take time to settle, but their effects will be felt by residents, partners and services. For us, the priority is to stay grounded in the experiences of the people who come to us, to remain responsive as the environment changes, and to continue using what we see every day to speak up for fairer systems.



We have recorded nearly 18,000 outcomes including:

Successful benefit applications
Deportation prevented
Accessing housing
Improved health and capacity to manage

Impact Numbers

We empowered over 40,000 people with the knowledge, advice and practical support they needed to move forward with their problems.

40,000 Local people supported

Problems solved **159,000**

£35,900,000 In financial outcomes

£131,539,285 in total public value through supporting housing, health and employment problems

Nearly £1 million in savings to local authorities by preventing homelessness, evictions and mental health work

More than 77,000 advice activities recorded

Over 9,500 crisis issues supported surrounding energy, food, homelessness and charitable support

29% of our work involved casework, providing tailored support throughout our client's journey

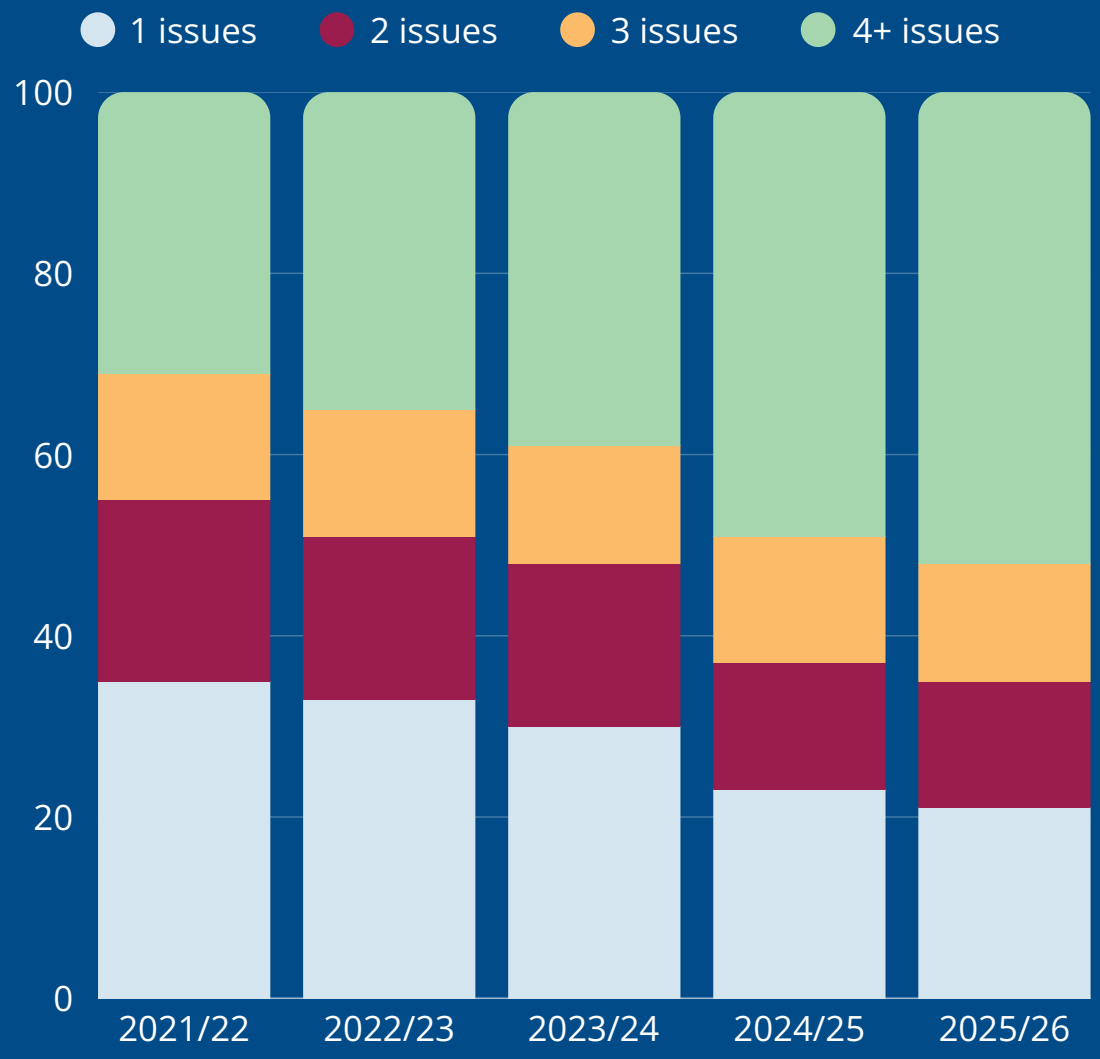
Problems We Faced

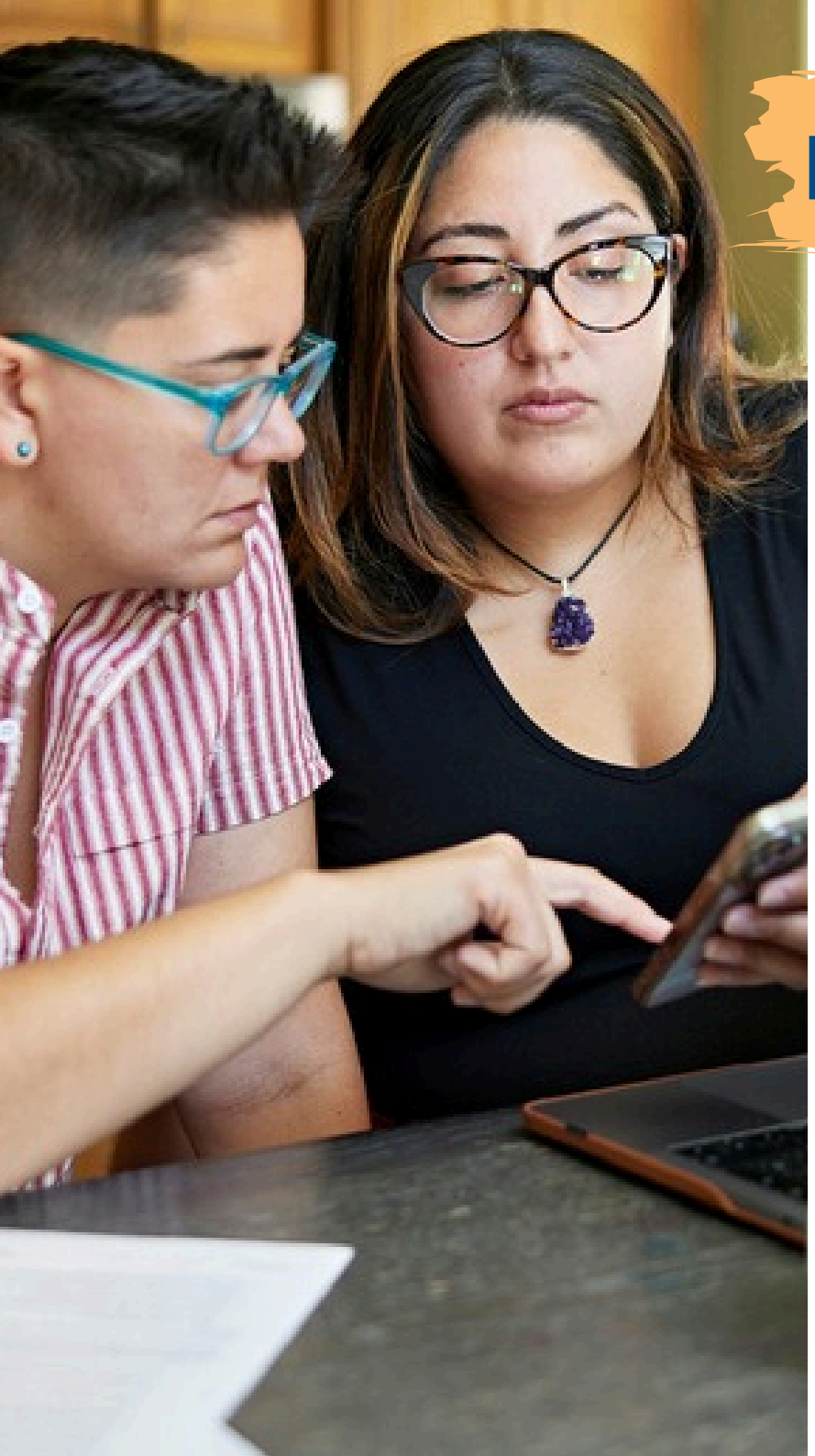
During 2025/26, we continued to see high levels of demand as people across West Sussex faced increasing pressure from rising living costs, housing insecurity, poor health and financial hardship. We advised on 159,000 issues, a 15% increase on the previous year, with clients presenting an average of four problems each, reflecting the growing complexity of the challenges people face.

Our advice goes beyond addressing the symptoms. By supporting the whole person and their wider advice needs, we help people access financial, health and social support, prevent issues from escalating and empower them to move towards greater independence and wellbeing.



People are coming to us with increasingly complex problems (2021-2026)





Benefits

A secure income can make all the difference to someone's ability to manage day-to-day life. Benefits advice remained our most common area of work, accounting for more than one in five issues advised on. Protecting and maximising incomes is a core part of our work, particularly as rising living costs continue to place people under financial pressure.

We helped people navigate a complex benefits system, understand their rights and access the support they were entitled to. More than 22% of our benefits work related to health and disability benefits, helping people secure the income they need to live independently and with dignity. We also provided vital advice and reassurance during a period of welfare reform, helping people understand and respond to changes that affected them.

18,924 health and disability benefits advised on, amounting to £7,763,856 identified

1,792 appeals, challenges and reconsiderations supported

Home

Everyone needs a safe and secure place to call home. As rising rents and a shortage of affordable housing continued to put pressure on households, we supported more than 4,000 clients with housing issues, helping them understand their rights and navigate tenancy and affordability challenges.

Demand from residents facing housing insecurity increased significantly. Homelessness issues increased by 12%, while Section 21 enquiries more than doubled as renters navigated uncertainty around housing policy changes. We supported people to access emergency accommodation, understand their options and take steps towards greater housing security.

Over 13,000 issues on housing

2,054 clients facing homelessness supported by us

More than 460 disrepair issues advised on



Debt

Rising living costs continued to put pressure on household finances, and we supported 6% more people facing debt issues than the previous year. Household bills accounted for a significant proportion of debt problems, with more than 4,000 related debts, while over 1,200 issues involved borrowing from sources such as credit cards, friends and family.

We helped people understand their financial situation, manage their budgets and explore options for dealing with debt. By breaking down complex processes into manageable steps, negotiating with creditors and helping to prevent enforcement action we supported people to regain control of their finances.

We helped our clients with over 9,000 debt issues

1,600 fuel and water debts supported so people can stay connected and heat their homes





Project Highlight

Budgeting and Money Management Training

Alongside our core advice services, Citizens Advice in West Sussex delivers a range of funded projects that provide targeted support to specific communities. One example is our financial capability programme for refugees.

In 2025/26, we delivered **24 budgeting and money management workshops**, supporting **167 refugees** across West Sussex, alongside **five training sessions** for professionals working with refugee households.

The programme helped participants build confidence in managing money in the UK, including budgeting, understanding bills, maximising income and planning essential household spending. Sessions were delivered with interpreter support to ensure they were accessible and inclusive.

> **“Prior to this training there were lots of doubts in regards to spending and managing a budget but following the session I am confident I have learned a lot to manage the budget in the future”**

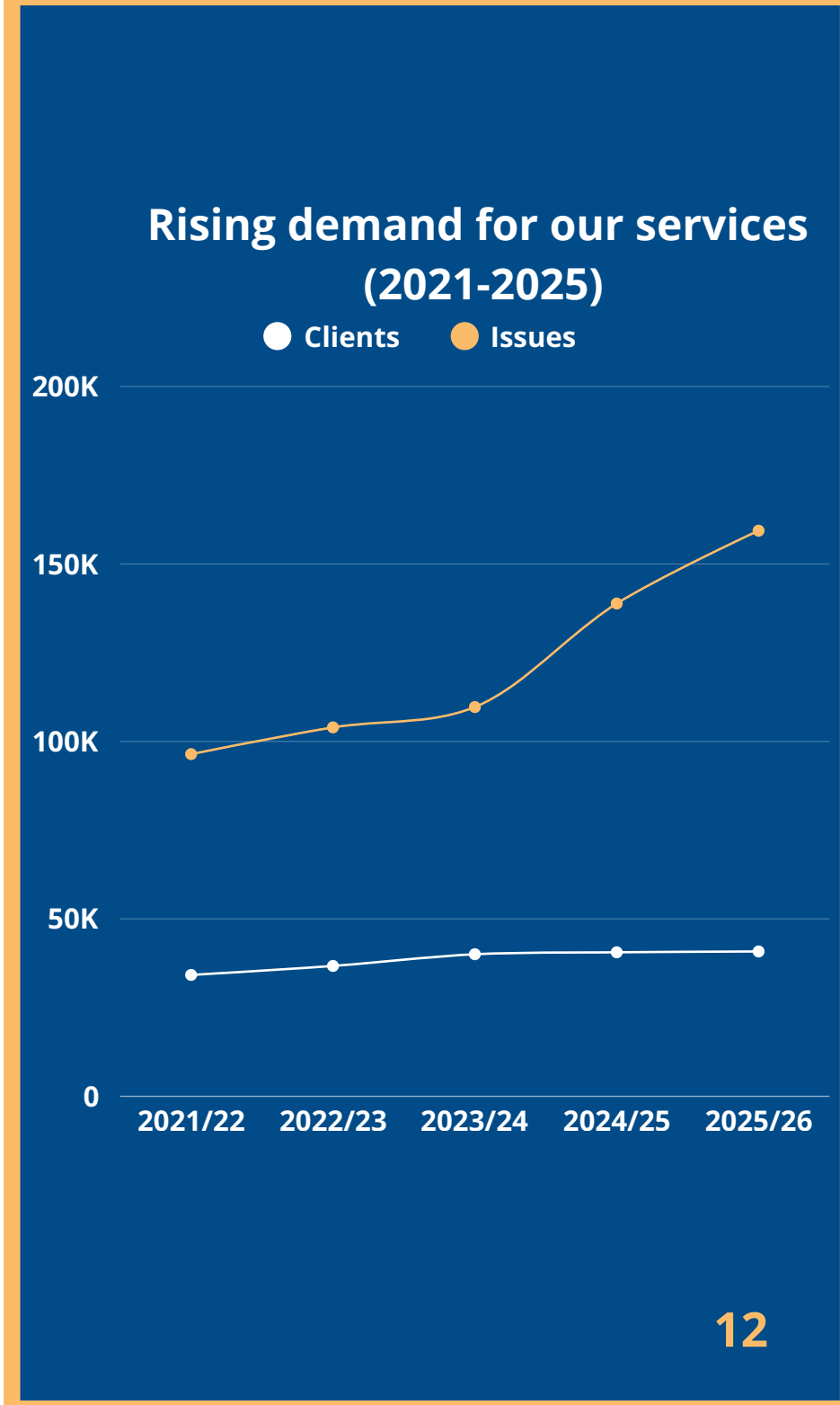
Using Our Evidence to Create Change

Every day, the people we help provide a real time picture of the challenges facing communities across West Sussex. We use our data and clients' lived experiences to identify emerging issues, understand where support is needed most and ensure our services have the greatest possible impact.

During the year, we continued to develop our Financial Resilience Framework, bringing together our work to better understand poverty and identify opportunities for intervention. Financial resilience is a shared responsibility, and we will work with partners across sectors to embed these principles into organisational processes, supporting a whole-system approach

We produced insight papers on accessibility, food poverty and homelessness, met with local MPs and responded to consultations on welfare reform to ensure the experiences of our communities were represented in local and national discussions. By turning evidence into action, we work to tackle the root causes of the problems people face.

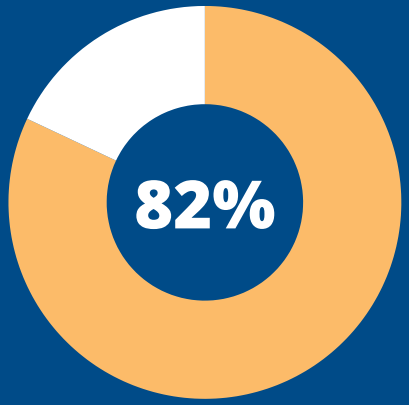
992 evidence forms raised by our team to inform research and campaigns work at a local and National level to highlight policies and practices that unfairly impact our residents



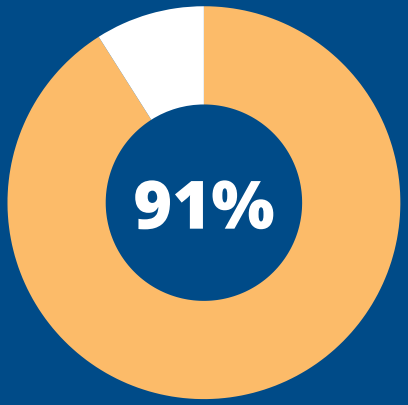
The Difference We Made

£303,778 distributed in food vouchers

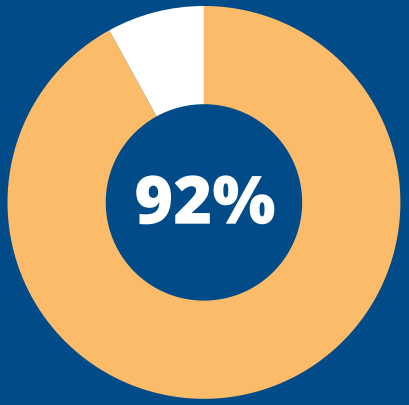
82% of clients said they could access our services easily



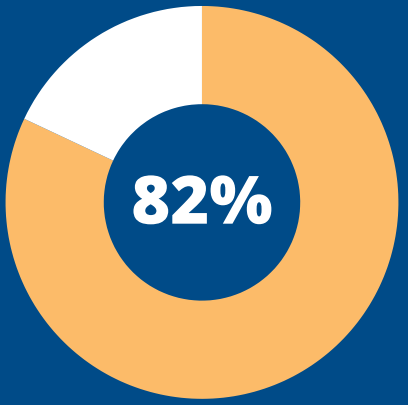
91% of clients said our service helped them to find a way forward



92% of our clients said they would recommend our service



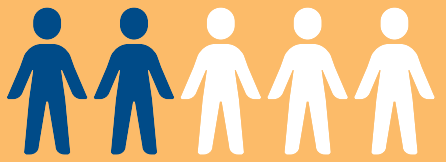
82% of our clients said their problem is now resolved



Targeting groups at system disadvantage

23% have an ethnically diverse background

59% of people who shared their health status said they had a disability or health condition



Nearly 2 in 5 clients had dependent children

Rob’s Story

After retiring in March, Rob found himself struggling to make ends meet on his State Pension alone. The income barely covered his rent, and substantial debts owed to five creditors were becoming increasingly difficult to manage alongside significant health challenges. Having run his own business for more than 25 years, asking for help did not come easily.

"I was embarrassed to go to Citizens Advice. I'd never needed help before, but I felt I had to do something."

Working with Julie, a debt specialist from Citizens Advice in West Sussex, Rob was able to tackle several pressing issues. She helped progress his housing enquiries and took the lead on managing his debt situation. Together they gathered the necessary information, completed a financial statement and negotiated affordable repayment arrangements with all five creditors.

"She just took control of it. She sorted out payment plans with all of my creditors and took all the weight off my shoulders. It was a huge relief because I just didn't know where to go."

As a result, Rob now has a clear plan in place for managing his debts and feels more confident about the future.

“**Before, I was desperate and embarrassed. Afterwards, I just felt a huge sense of relief and gratitude for everything everyone did."**

Today, Rob encourages anyone facing difficulties to seek advice:

"The knowledge is there, and it's a free service. If you're struggling, make that appointment and have a chat. I couldn't recommend it enough."



Our Value to Society

As a result of our work, we generate:

£10,217,054

In savings to government and public services by reducing pressure on other services like health, housing and keeping people in work.

£56

For every £1 invested in our services, we generate £56 in public value

£108,164,076

In wider public value through improving clients wellbeing

Financial support identified for the people we helped:

£530,000

In debts written off

£28,541,816

In additional income

£6,388,851

In wider support such as improved capacity to manage and support with accessing the benefit system

Value of volunteering

£1,841,268 in volunteering time

£481,143 in improved health and wellbeing with increased life satisfaction and improved mental health

£2,418,875 in value of activities and improved outcomes for our volunteers

Our People

We are so lucky to have so many tremendous people within our charity. United by the goal to make people's lives better.

We currently have 80 staff members and over 250 active volunteers across six offices and virtually. Each person brings something different, their range of experience, local knowledge, keeping our charity up-to-date and community based.

We are all proud of being local people and that the support we provide helps local people.



> **The people at CA are a pleasure to volunteer with. They are friendly, knowledgeable and supportive. The role can be challenging which I view in a positive way.**

> **The most important thing we do is help people in need. And, from my point of view, it keeps my mind sharper.**

What our Volunteers Say

> Volunteering with Citizens Advice in West Sussex gives me an opportunity to help people who often struggle in todays world, and, as a retired person, I enjoy being part of a local office based team

> The best thing about volunteering with CAWS is the friendliness and camaraderie of the team at both senior and junior level. Then the desire to help each other understand whatever they want to learn or understand. In a nutshell, it's a beautiful place to work and learn for me.

94%

of our volunteers reported feeling less lonely as a result of joining us

98%

of our staff feel like they are making a difference for local people

Looking Forward

While reflecting on the year gone by is important, we're equally focused on the future. The coming year will see us strengthen existing services, develop new partnerships and expand support to help more people across West Sussex.

- **Macmillan Money and More** - Now the principal delivery partner across East and West Sussex, helping more people affected by cancer access advice and support.
- **New Debt & Mental Health Project** - Working with Heads On and Community Mental Health Teams in Crawley to provide joined-up support for people facing financial and mental health challenges.
- **Money and Pensions Service** - Extended and expanded, allowing us to deliver more specialist debt advice.
- **CMAP Energy Advice** - Continued funding from Citizens Advice to help households manage energy costs and improve energy efficiency.
- **Crisis and Resilience Fund** - New funding from WSCC and ACCA to deliver preventative support, helping people address problems early and avoid reaching crisis point.
- **Language Café** - Extended until March 2027, reducing isolation and helping people build confidence and connections in their communities.
- **Horsham Outreach** - Funding secured for another year, ensuring continued local advice services.
- **Money Advice & Homelessness Prevention** - Extended for another year in partnership with Crawley Borough Council and Mid Sussex District Council.
- **Horsham LIFT** - Set to be recommissioned, continuing vital support for local residents.

Keep in Touch

Each month we send out our Bulletin, designed for stakeholders in West Sussex to hear about what we have been up to, observations we have made and important information that may be useful for your teams and the residents they work with.

How You Can Make a Difference



Time

Your time is valuable and if you can spare some of it, it would make a huge difference to the people we support. Whether it's through volunteering, providing expertise, or paid employment, having a diverse range of people and skills only enhances the service we provide. Volunteers are needed across the organisation in a number of roles which include Advisers and varying support roles. As an adviser, you will gain high-level, industry-recognised advice training, equipping you with the skills to help bring about change. All roles are supported with high quality training.

Your expertise or contacts could make a huge difference in many areas of our organisation. From making our service more efficient to discovering new ways to build a community that we all feel a part of.

Money

As a charity, we rely on the support and generosity of people and organisations. Donating to us and fundraising for us means we can invest in local people. If you are, or know someone, looking to support a charity, we'd love to chat! Whether it's spare change in your pocket or full-on project funding, every penny makes a difference to us and the local people we support.

Voice

Talk about us to everyone, everywhere, as much as you can. We are a local charity, and we need local people to know this. We are not a branch of government; our only purpose is to improve people's financial outcomes, health prospects, and quality of life. Being a champion of our work means those who need support know there are people out there who want, and have the expertise, to help. Your voice will change people's lives.

Thank You

We would love to take this opportunity to thank those who donate to us, our partners, funders, and local government colleagues for their invaluable support throughout the year. Your sustained commitment enables Citizens Advice in West Sussex to provide vital advice and practical help to people across the county. The impact we have had for residents would not have been as wide reaching if it wasn't for you all. We are incredibly grateful for your support and for the difference we are able to make together.



The support those who donate to us, our partners, funders and local government makes a massive difference to us and the residents we support. You enable us to provide expert advice advocacy and support to local people. This will always be free, confidential, and impartial. Your support makes accessing advice easier for people going though complex and compounding problems, meaning more people are able to have a secure platform from which they can grow.

We want to give a thank you to the following partners and funders:

- Crawley Borough Council, Mid Sussex District Council, Adur and Worthing District Council, West Sussex County Council, Horsham District Council
- Citizens Advice, Arun and Chichester Citizens Advice
- Macmillan
- Sussex Community Foundation
- National Lottery
- Trussell Trust, Community Foodbanks (East Grinstead, Haywards Heath, Worthing)

Financial Statement 2025/26

	2025/26	2024/25
	£'000	£'000
Total income	2,643	2,716
Total expenditure	2,609	2,653
Net Income	33	63
Unrestricted funds	851	831
Funds represented by		
Unrestricted	851	831
Restricted	152	203
Designated	411	347
Total funds	1,414	1,381

Read the full Financial Report and Annual Statements by scanning the QR code below:

citizens advice in West Sussex North South East

For more information or to partner with us, get in touch at:

Citizens Advice in West Sussex (North, South, East)
Lower Tanbridge Way
Horsham
RH12 1PJ

Communications@westsussexcab.org.uk

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