

# Agnes Smith Advice Centre



## Annual Report

April 2017 – March 2018

The Agnes Smith Advice Centre is run by an independent registered charity,  
Blackbird Leys Neighbourhood Support Scheme Ltd.

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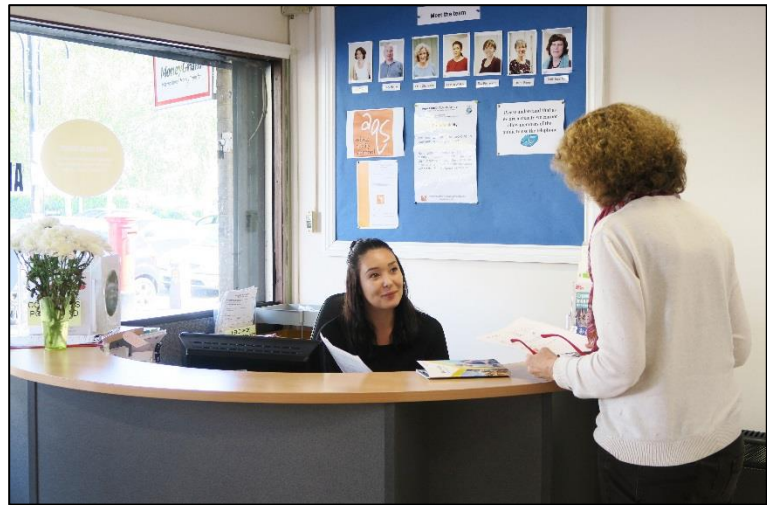
## AIMS OF THE CENTRE

We aim to ensure the best practices in the delivery of free, independent and confidential advice by:

- Maximising income through welfare benefit take-up
- Encouraging long-term sustainable plans to tackle debt
- Enabling people to remain in their own homes
- Empowering people within their own community

## WHAT WE DO

We are an independent Advice Centre, located in the heart of Blackbird Leys – a highly disadvantaged estate on the southeast edge of Oxford. Blackbird Leys is one of the largest housing estates in Europe and parts of it are amongst the most deprived 10 per cent in the country.



We have been operating since 1972. Our service is free, confidential and non-judgmental. We are firmly rooted in the local community, as well as having rigorous professional advice standards.

We are the first port of call for many individuals who do not know where to turn for advice, on everyday issues such as **debt, welfare benefits, housing and employment**. By offering advice across these key areas, we aim to bring about positive changes in people's lives.

We also aim to achieve broader changes for people. We hear first-hand about the challenges faced by local residents. We use this evidence to give feedback to local government and other agencies. In this way, we can influence changes that affect the wider community.



We work in close co-operation with other local organisations in Blackbird Leys and across Oxford.

We provide a vital service for the local community.

## OUR SERVICES

**General Advice:** We offer general drop-in services every morning, with no need to book in advance. This can cover any issue; people often come to our drop-in sessions when they have a crisis in their lives.

**Specialist Advice:** We offer specialist advice and support when a client needs more in-depth help in:

- **Debt/money advice** (including budgeting)
- **Welfare benefits** (including appeals to the Lower Tribunal)
- **Housing**

People often approach us with multiple and complex problems and may need several appointments over a period of time in order to resolve their issues.

**Self-help:** Our aim is to enable people to solve problems themselves, whenever possible. We have a wealth of information, forms and leaflets in our reception.

**Legal advice clinic:** We provide a free legal advice clinic, courtesy of Bower & Bailey solicitors. The legal advisor can offer guidance on areas of law that we do not cover ourselves (e.g. probate, personal injury).



## REACHING THE COMMUNITY



Our main **office** is in the centre of Blackbird Leys. We also offer **outreach services** in other parts of the community to reach more people. We do **home visits** for people who cannot get to us because of illness or mobility problems.



## INTRODUCTION FROM OUR CHAIRS OF TRUSTEES (Kate Griffin and Wendy Spray) and TREASURER (Andrew Carver)

Our Centre exists to serve the residents of Blackbird Leys who have yet again experienced a challenging year with continuing cuts in services, increasing job insecurity and the rolling out of Universal Credit. The impact on the Centre has been significant with individual cases becoming increasingly complex and time consuming.

In response to this, we have continued to fundraise energetically albeit in an increasingly competitive environment. We are especially appreciative of the support we receive from Oxford City Council. The Advice Services Review they conducted this year culminated in the decision to maintain their level of funding for the next three years, less 5% for development projects. The core funding we receive from the City is the base on which we are able to attract our other funding to more than match it.



We also receive invaluable support from the Blackbird Leys Parish Council and the Blackbird Leys Housing Consortium (Greensquare, Catalyst Gateway and A2 Dominion). Additionally, we would like to thank the Thames Water Trust Fund for their support for our money advice work. In that project we work jointly with Oxford Community Work Agency - an example of the increasing collaboration within the local advice sector.

We would like to acknowledge the hard work, and resilience of our highly qualified and experienced staff operating in often very draining and challenging circumstances. They have been supported by professional and perceptive management.

Our trustee board lost both Fran Bennett and Helen Leney who stood down at the last AGM and gained a new and very energetic and committed treasurer, Andrew Carver. Under his guidance, we have a new pension scheme for staff. Fran and Helen had been trustees for more than 20 years and had overseen the growth of the Centre from a small but vital local initiative to the thriving professional Centre we are now so proud of. We are greatly indebted to them.



## CLIENT PROFILE – AT A GLANCE



62% women



80% are working age



38% with dependent children



60% live in social housing



51% have a disability or long term illness

## JODY'S STORY

Jody was 77 years old when she came to us. Her husband had recently died and Jody was left to sort out his affairs, and her own finances. She told us that she didn't know where to begin.



Jody had health issues of her own, including poor mobility. She was living in a rented council house which was in her late husband's name. Jody did not have an automatic right to take over the tenancy as her husband had inherited the tenancy himself. Only one succession to the tenancy was permitted, so Jody was very worried about where she would live. Jody was also left with a funeral bill of £1,600 to pay: her husband's funeral plan only covered half the actual cost of the funeral.

We talked Jody through the various steps she needed to take. We helped her to contact all the relevant benefit agencies, banks, pension providers etc. We spoke to the Council and were able to reassure Jody that she would be re-housed in a bungalow or sheltered housing, and would not be left homeless.

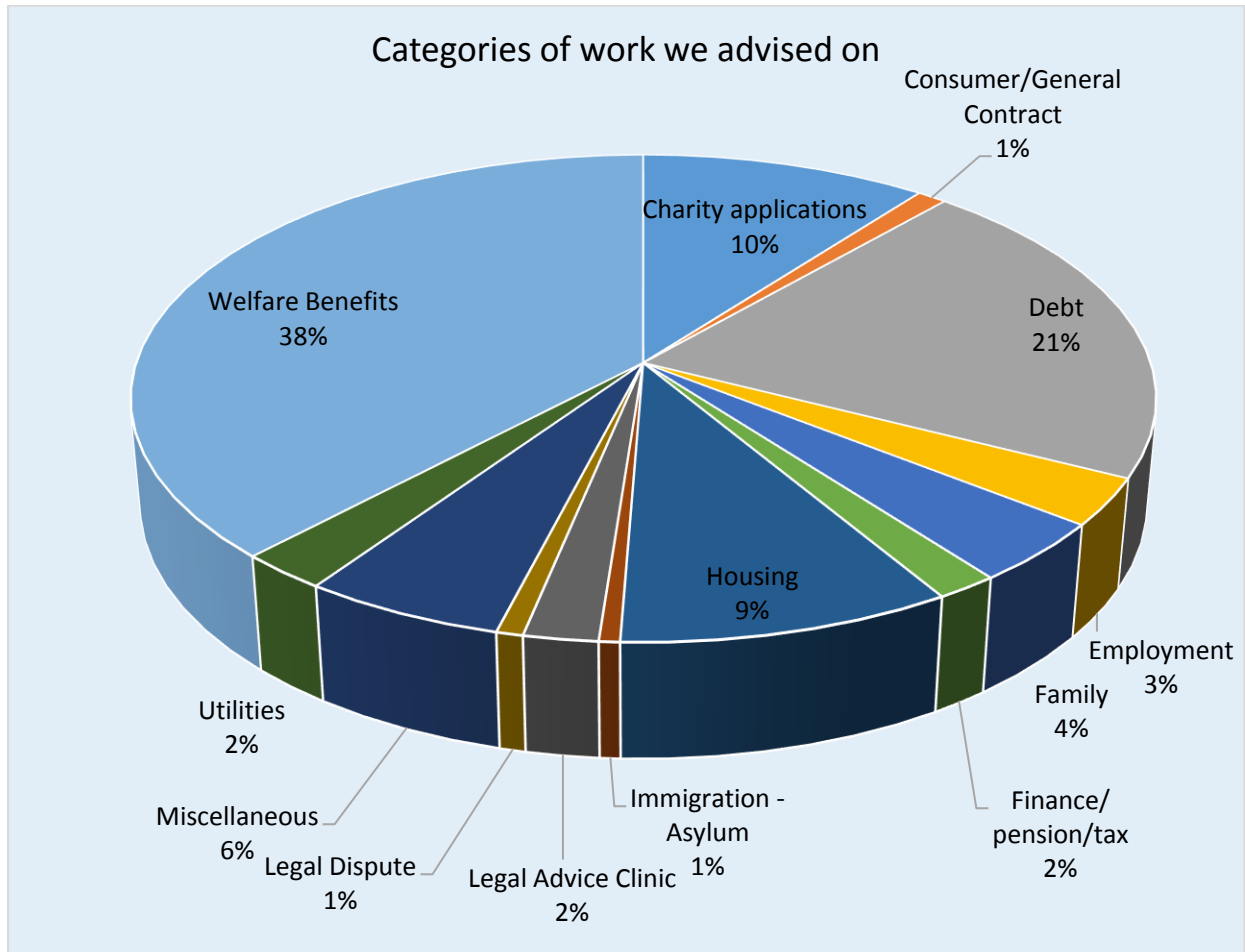
To survive on, Jody now only had her state pension and one small private pension. We did some calculations and worked out that Jody's income was low enough to entitle her to Housing Benefit, to help towards the rent. We submitted an online application for her, and she was awarded £53 per week, and a lump sum payment of £450 representing her entitlement from the date of her husband's death to the date of her claim.

Once in receipt of the Housing Benefit, Jody became eligible to apply for a Funeral Payment. We helped Jody to get all the supporting documents together and make the application. She received £1,300 towards the funeral costs, leaving only £300 for the family to pay.

We supported Jody at a very difficult time in her life. We helped her to take the steps she needed to organise her affairs and maximise her income. She wrote to us in appreciation:-

*"Thank you so much for all of your help and support for the past few months. I don't know how I would have coped without you. A very big thank you."*

## THE YEAR IN NUMBERS - 2017/18



1,287

Individual people helped with casework



1,814

Number of appointments



## MANAGER'S REPORT – Clare Charleson



The trend over recent years has been for more demand for our service and people with more complex needs. There is no sign of this abating. In October 2017 full Universal Credit was introduced in Oxford, adding a new component to the workload. Our advisers prepared as much as they could in advance. This included training sessions and working closely with the City Council to ensure as smooth a transition as possible. But the real learning began when people started to come in with real life problems. This steady flow of Universal Credit queries has created a whole new layer of work for us, at a time when we were already at full capacity.

In response to the increased workload, we recruited an extra adviser. We are delighted to welcome Mandy Richards, who worked for the Centre 13 years previously, and is back with a wealth of experience from the local advice sector. Gary Horne also joined the team this year as our specialist Money Advisor and takes the lead on our Thames Water project.

The year was also dominated by the Advice Services Review carried out by the City Council. Although it created some uncertainty over the funding of our service, it also gave us the opportunity to step back and focus on the bigger picture. We were pleased that the review highlighted the value of independent advice centres, which like us, are based on the local estates and support some of the most vulnerable people in society. We are very aware of all the pressures on the City Council's finances, so are encouraged by their commitment to fund advice provision for a further three years.

Thanks to all those who support us, and the hard work and dedication of the whole team - staff, trustees and volunteers. Without these people, the Centre would not have achieved the excellent reputation that we have today.



## OUR IMPACT



**£427,375**  
Debt written off



**£1,320,205**  
Welfare benefit gains



**£63,070**  
Charity grants and other financial gains



**58**  
Number of tribunal representations  
(82% success rate)

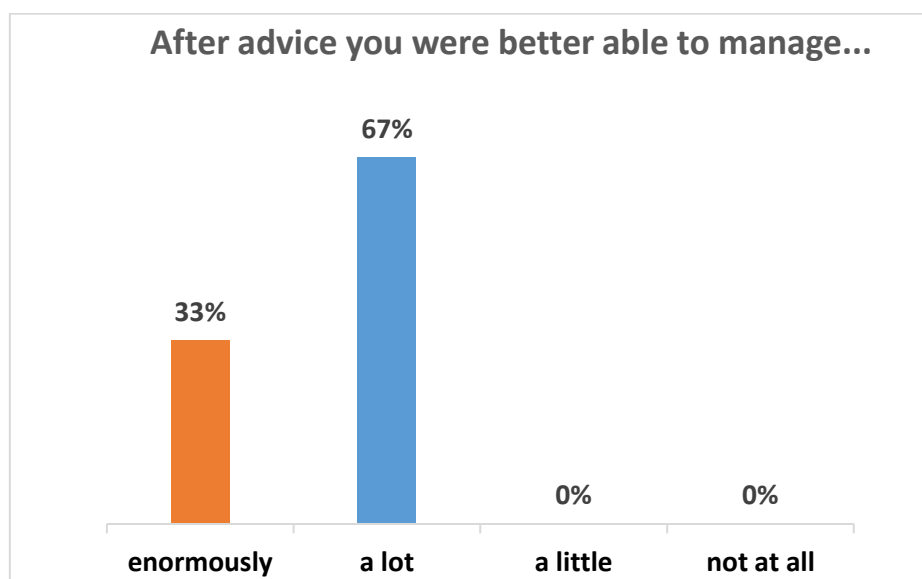
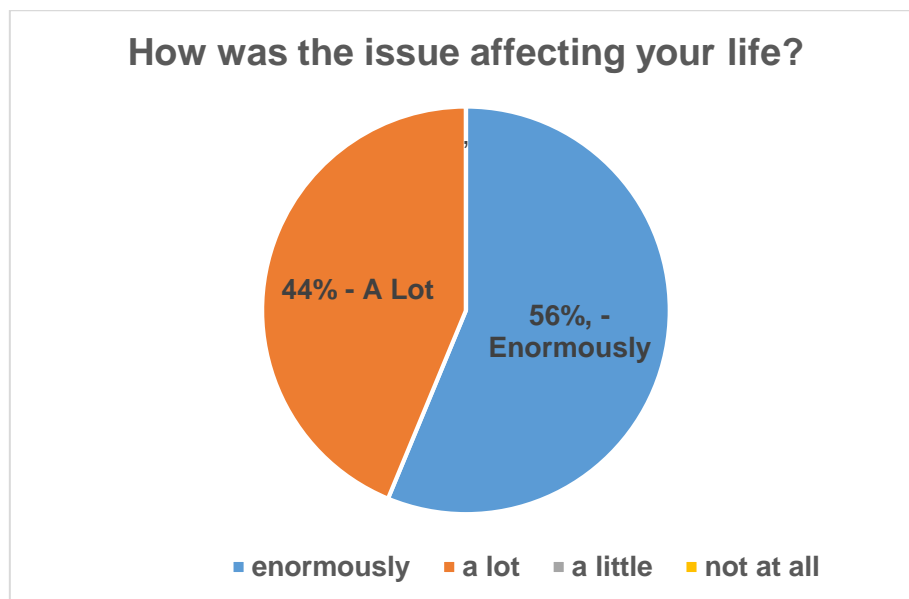


**50**  
Number supported to stay in their own home

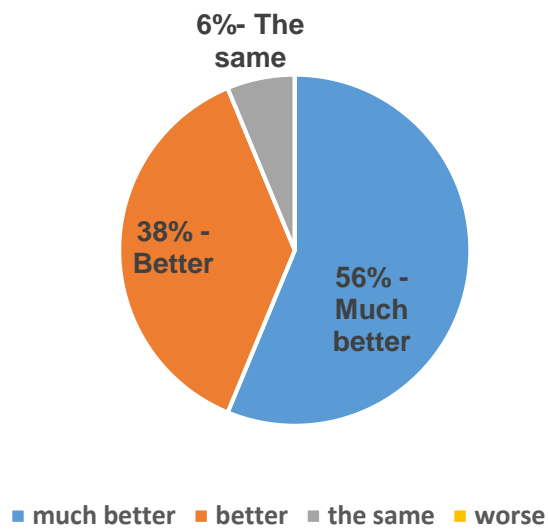


**170**  
New benefit claims

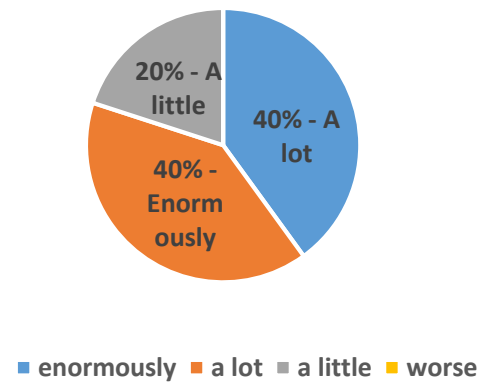
We carried out a further telephone survey this year to assess the impact of our advice. The researchers spoke in depth to 16 people selected at random, who had been to us for advice. We captured how the clients were affected by the problems when they initially came to see us, and compared this with how they were after receiving advice. Here are some of the results.



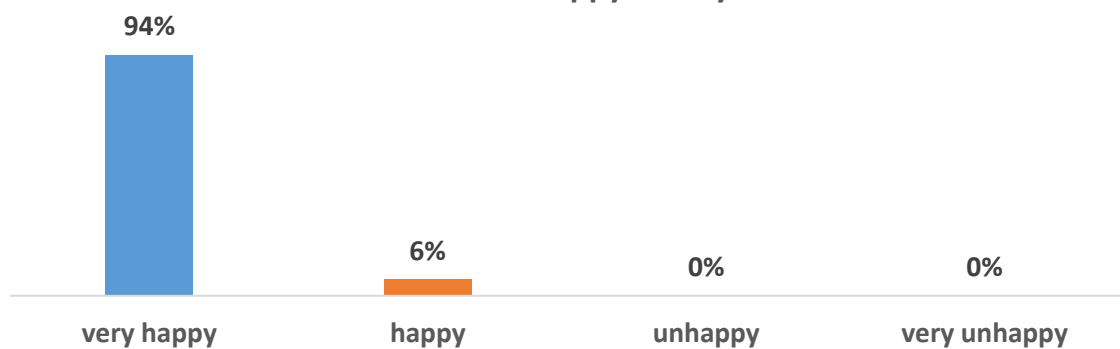
### Your peace of mind and wellbeing is ...



### Your levels of stress and family relationships have improved ...



### Overall how happy were you?



### Would you recommend ASAC to others?



## WHAT OUR CLIENTS ARE SAYING...

*I had to get up  
the courage to  
come in, but now  
I am glad I did.*

*Your service was local. The  
advice you gave me was in  
layman's terms. All the  
people in the office were so  
supportive and  
professional.*

*It took the pressure off  
me, with so much  
going on in my life, it  
gave me some  
breathing space.*

*I can sleep  
now.*

*Really helpful.  
They put my mind  
at ease with just  
about anything.*

*From the word go helpful  
and supportive.  
Increased my knowledge.  
Really relieved the  
anxiety and stress which  
improved my wellbeing.*



# THANK YOU

We would like to thank our **funders** this year:

- AB Charitable Trust
- A2 Dominion
- The Big Lottery Fund (Help through Crisis Fund)
- Blackbird Leys Parish Council
- Catalyst Housing Ltd
- Feoffees (St Michael's & All Saints' Charities)
- Greensquare Housing Association
- Garfield Weston
- 29<sup>th</sup> May 1961
- J Paul Getty Jnr Charitable Trust
- Oxford City Council
- Oxford Community Foundation
- Thames Water Trust Fund
- University of Oxford Colleges (Christ Church, All Souls, St John's, Jesus, Magdalen, Merton College, New College, Queen's College, Wadham, Wolfson, Nuffield)
- Wates Foundation
- Waitrose

We would also like to express our appreciation to the following **people and organisations** who gave their time and skills to support the advice centre this year:

- Blackbird Leys Community Centre
- The Church of the Holy Family
- Bower and Bailey Solicitors
- Cllr Sian Taylor
- Andrew Smith MP
- Ines Kretzschmar, Community Enterprise Co-ordinator

**Special thanks** to our long-standing trustees, **Helen Leney** and **Fran Bennett**, who both retired from the board in October 2017.



Helen first came into contact with the Centre while carrying out research into the needs of the (then new) Greater Leys housing estate. Her knowledge and insights were invaluable when she then became a trustee. She was instrumental in establishing new connections and consolidating existing ones for the Centre in the community. Helen acted as Chair of

Trustees for several years, and was able to lead with tact and sensitivity at a time when the Centre was going through a period of change. Her contribution over many years is greatly appreciated.



Fran became a trustee in 1994 and also took on the role of Treasurer. She was the driving force of the Centre for many years and her contribution has been immeasurable. Her energy, passion and commitment never waned, and she inspired us all. It will not be the same without her, but we know that she will keep in contact and continue to take an active interest in the work of the Centre.



# WHO'S WHO

April 2017 – March 2018

## BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Co-Chair.....	Kate Griffin
Co-Chair .....	Wendy Spray
Treasurer .....	Andrew Carver
Company Secretary .....	Audrey Bronstein
Trustee.....	Paul Dornan
Trustee .....	Elaine Chase
Trustee .....	Helen Leney (retired Nov 17)
Trustee .....	Fran Bennett (retired Nov 17)
Trustee .....	Simon Pitkin
Trustee .....	Cora Spencer
Trustee.....	Beverley Humberstone
Trustee .....	Saltanat Rasulova
Trustee .....	Jesse Erlam

## STAFF

Manager.....	Clare Charleson
Senior advisor/supervisor.....	Gail Craig
Advisor/caseworker.....	Mandy Richards
Money advisor/caseworker.....	Gary Horne
Welfare Benefit advisor/caseworker.....	Eva Pinnington
General Advisor/caseworker.....	Helen Pinne
Reception Administrator.....	Latisha Walker
Finance and Admin Advisor.....	Ruth Emsley
Cleaner.....	Carole Ewers

## VOLUNTEERS

Thanks very much to our volunteers this year: Linda Denoon, Shabikha Miah and Sue Davies.

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[www.agnessmith.co.uk](http://www.agnessmith.co.uk)



The Agnes Smith Advice Centre is run by the Blackbird Leys Neighbourhood Support Scheme Ltd, a company limited by guarantee and registered in England and Wales reg. no. 2662382.  
Registered charity no: 1050456

