

# Agnes Smith Advice Centre



## Annual Report

April 2018 – March 2019

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

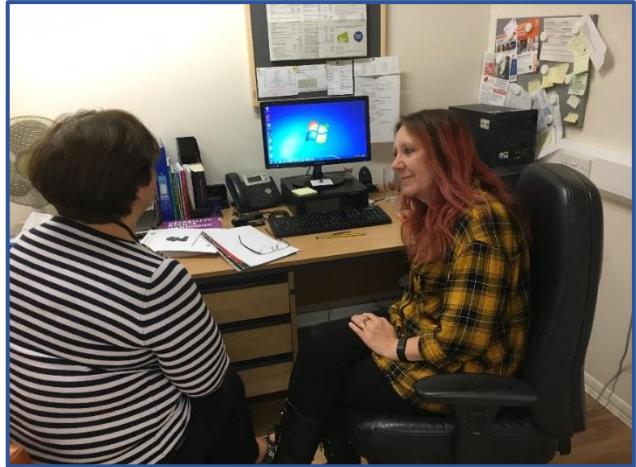
We aim to ensure the best practices in the delivery of free, independent and confidential advice by:

- 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, and we participate in events in the local neighbourhood so more people hear about us. 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.

**Digital Support:** our digital support worker helps people improve their online skills

**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.

# INTRODUCTION FROM OUR CHAIRS OF TRUSTEES

(Kate Griffin and Wendy Spray)

For the Advice Centre, 2018-19 was a year of progress and consolidation as well as change. Our departing manager, Clare Charleson, left us a legacy of enthusiastic and highly professional staff providing high-quality advice to the community of Blackbird Leys. Clare's fundraising efforts provided a stable base from which to explore some new initiatives for the future. We are deeply appreciative of the hard work and energy that she gave to the role. We were very fortunate to be able to appoint an existing member of staff, Mandy Richards, as her very able successor.



During the year, staff at the Centre helped people with ever more demanding circumstances; often because of the roll out of Universal Credit. We are always busy – our drop-in sessions are over-subscribed, and there is a two-to-three-week wait for appointments. As our recent feedback survey shows, people are overwhelmingly positive about our advice, but we know clients would like us to offer more appointments and be open for longer drop-in sessions. Our challenge, as always, is to find ways to meet demand, without sacrificing the quality of our advice.

This year, we have welcomed closer contact with Rose Hill and Donnington Advice Centre and Oxford Community Work Agency in Barton. Together, we cover the three main geographical areas of deprivation in Oxford. Trustees and managers met to consider how best to strengthen and enhance service delivery across south-east Oxford. And, thanks to Oxford City Council funding, we commissioned a feasibility study, to drive future collaborative working.

We are very grateful to Oxford City Council, the Parish Council, and the Housing Consortium of Catalyst, GreenSquare and A2 Dominion, for their continuing support. This longer-term funding gives us a secure base, allowing us to successfully apply for much-appreciated grants and donations from a number of other charitable trusts, organisations and individuals.

The Trustees would like to thank all our staff and volunteers who make the Centre such a positive, welcoming and valued place at the heart of the Blackbird Leys community.



## CLIENT PROFILE – AT A GLANCE

61% are **women**

78% are **working age**

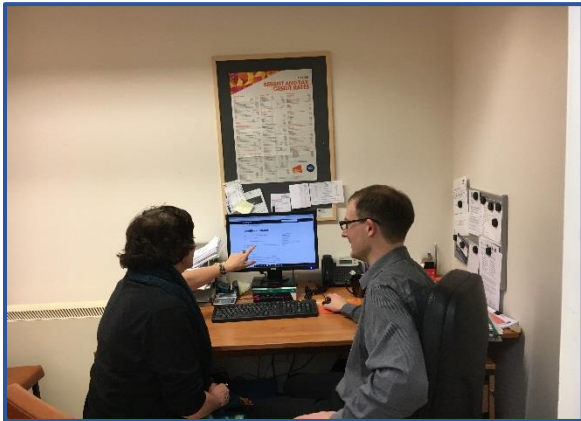
35% have **dependent children**

64% live in **social housing**

47% have a **disability or long term illness**

38% are from ethnic minority backgrounds

## MARTIN'S STORY



Martin came to see us with his wife, Ana, both in their mid-twenties. They have two young children.

Ana is in part-time work and Martin has a zero-hour contract. They share care of their youngest son, who has severe disabilities.

Ana's immigration status means she cannot claim benefits, so the couple were trying to manage on their low, part-time earnings. They were unable to increase their hours because of their son's need for round-the-clock care.

Because of their reduced income, the couple struggled to pay their bills. One creditor took court action against them, which was making them very anxious. Both were so stressed that they were finding it hard to continue to work at all.

We explained that Martin could claim Child Benefit for the children. We also helped him with successful claims for Disability Living Allowance and Universal Credit.

Initially, Martin's Universal Credit did not include the extra amounts due to him because of his son's disability and Martin's role as carer. We helped him contact Universal Credit to put this right, and also helped him make an online claim for Council Tax Reduction.

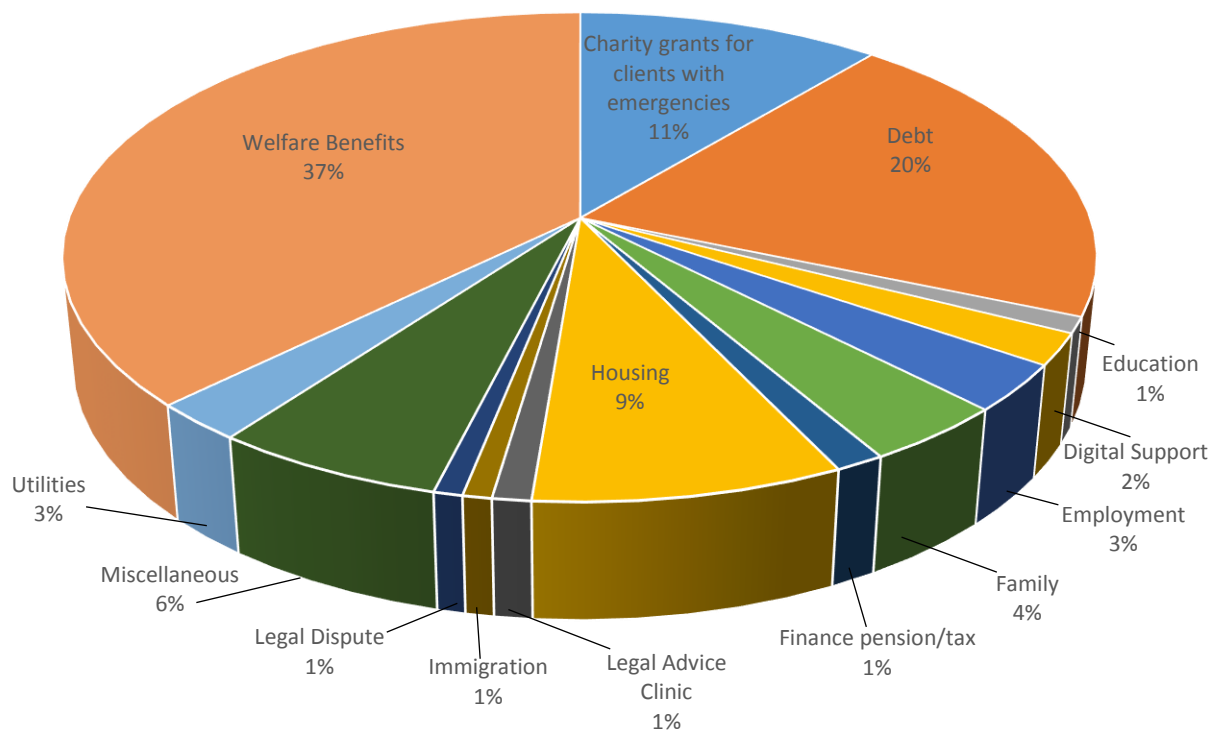
Martin is paid Universal Credit and Council Tax Reduction at a single person's rate, instead of a couple's rate, because of his wife's immigration status but, nevertheless, this has substantially increased the household's income.

We gave budgeting advice, and helped Martin to deal with his debts, to give the family a fresh start.

Without the stress of financial worry, Martin and Ana have both been able to hold down their jobs and are now able to focus on providing the best care for their son.

## THE YEAR IN NUMBERS - 2018/19

Categories of work we advised on (percentage of total cases)



1,214

Individual people helped with casework



1,786

Number of appointments



## MANAGER'S REPORT — Mandy Richards

The demand for our services has not abated during 2018-19. The impact of austerity, together with the rollout of Universal Credit in our area from October 2017, means we have seen increasing numbers of people suffering financial hardship. Universal Credit was supposed to simplify welfare benefits but, instead, it has added another layer of complexity to an already complex system. As a result, the need for specialist advice work has never been higher.

One of our focusses this year has been partnership work. Through a new, one-year project, funded by Oxford City Council, we have partnered with other local advice agencies to employ a Digital Support Worker, enabling our clients to become more confident users of new technology. We have been grateful to Oxford City Council for funding a feasibility study to look at the benefits of further collaborative working with local advice agencies. We have continued to take the lead on our successful Thames Water partnership project. We also offer intensive support to our most vulnerable clients through the Stronger Together project, led by Oxford Citizens Advice.

For the future, we were very pleased to be awarded funding from the Oxford Community Foundation (Step Change) to deliver our new Health Project, starting in October 2019. Under the project, we will take referrals from our local GP surgery for patients who need social-welfare advice, enabling us to reach people at an earlier stage, before they would self-refer.

There have been changes to our team this year: we said goodbye to Clare Charleson and Eva Pinnington, but have been pleased to welcome two new staff members - Sheena Crozier and Beth Knight.

I took over as Centre Manager from Clare Charleson in January 2019, having worked alongside Clare from 2017. Clare was instrumental in driving up advice standards at the Centre. We passed our AQS audit with flying colours at the end of 2018, and it is a credit to the whole team that we have maintained our high-quality advice and excellent service delivery during this period of change. I would like to thank all the staff, volunteers and trustees for their tireless dedication and commitment to the work of the Centre. We are also very grateful to all our funders and donors for their generous support.

## OUR IMPACT



**£650,519**  
Debt written off



**£1,378,433**  
Welfare benefit gains

**£53,412**  
Charity grants and other financial gains for clients in emergency situations



**£2,082,364**  
Total financial gain for clients



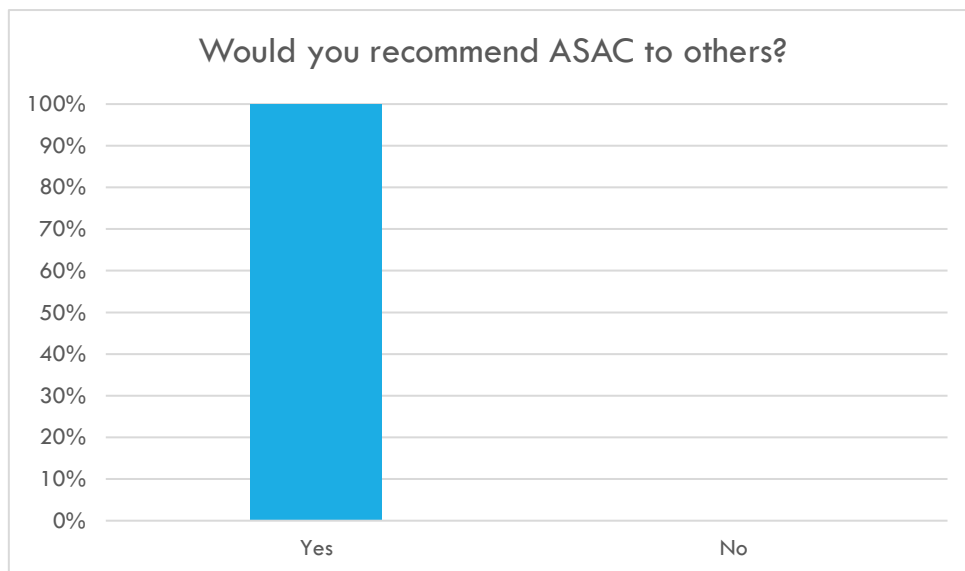
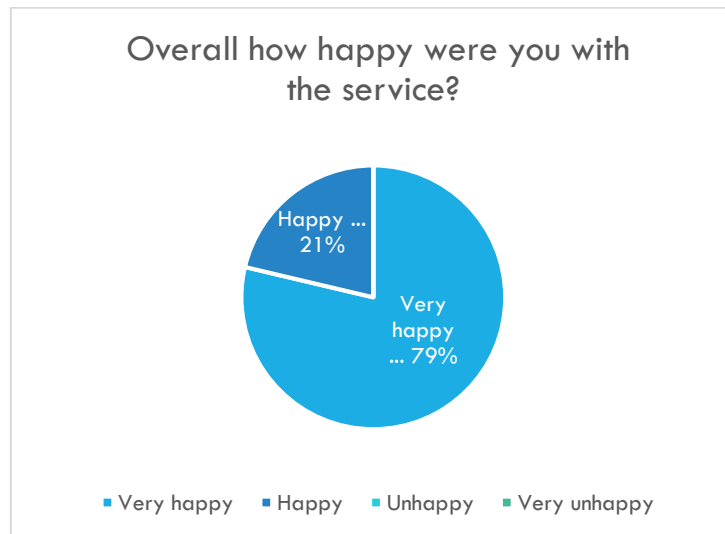
**51**  
Number supported to stay in their own home



**68**  
People helped to improve digital skills

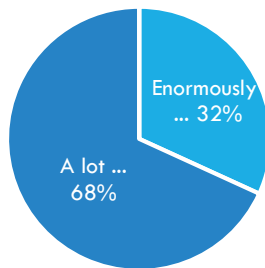
## 2018/19 Survey Results

We surveyed a total of 61 clients this year to assess the impact of our advice. 39 people completed feedback questionnaires and our researchers spoke in-depth by telephone to 22 people who used our services in 2018/19. We asked all 61 people how happy they were with our services, and whether they would recommend us to others. Here are the results:



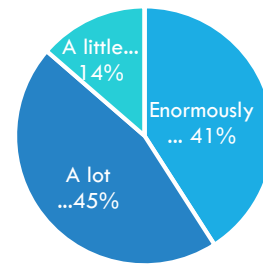
In our telephone survey, we captured how clients were affected by problems when they first came to see us, and compared this with how they were after receiving advice. Some of the results are shown on page 11, below:

How was your issue affecting your life?



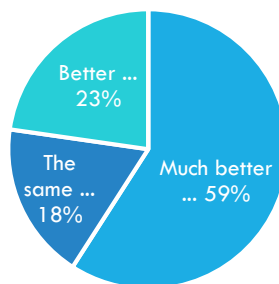
■ Enormously ■ A lot ■ A little ■ Not at all

After advice you were better able to manage...



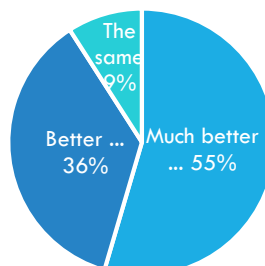
■ Enormously ■ A lot ■ A little ■ Not at all

After advice the difference to your peace of mind and wellbeing was ...



■ Much better ■ Better ■ The same ■ Worse

After advice your stress and anxiety were ...



■ Much better ■ Better ■ The same ■ Worse



## HAROLD'S STORY



Harold is a single man, in his early sixties. He has literacy problems and suffers from anxiety and depression. Until recently, he has worked as a labourer, usually on a casual basis, earning just enough to keep his head above water. Because of his age, he has found it increasingly difficult to find work and, a few months ago, work dried up altogether. He reluctantly applied for benefits.

The Job Centre wrongly accepted a claim for income-based Jobseekers Allowance, when Harold should have been advised to claim Universal Credit. When he claimed Housing Benefit, the claim failed, because all new claims for help with rent have to be through Universal Credit. When he made the Universal Credit claim, the Jobseekers Allowance stopped, but the fact that he had been receiving the wrong benefit caused confusion and it took several weeks before Harold received any payment of Universal Credit.

Harold has never used a computer, and does not have a smart phone. He was given some initial help at the Job Centre to make his Universal Credit claim but did not understand that he needed to monitor his claim through his online account. His Universal Credit was 'sanctioned' because he failed to upload details of his job-seeking activities, and he was paid just £5 to last a month.

When Harold came to see us, he had no money for food and he had fallen into arrears with rent and other bills. He was extremely anxious and totally bewildered by the benefits system.

We provided Harold with food bank vouchers and helped him apply for a small charitable grant for emergency support. We put in a successful Mandatory Reconsideration request to overturn the sanction decision. We made sure Universal Credit was put back into payment, including backdated amounts towards Harold's rent arrears. We also helped Harold make a Council Tax Reduction claim, and deal with his debts. Harold will never find it easy to manage his online Universal Credit account, even with digital skills training, but his life is now back on an even keel.

## WHAT OUR CLIENTS ARE SAYING...

*Your guidance,  
help and kindness  
have been  
amazing*

*The service and advice you  
have given us has been  
invaluable. The expertise is  
to be admired. We would  
have been in a dark place  
without your help*

*Always so helpful and  
understanding – a  
greatly needed service*

*It helped me  
realise I'm  
not alone*

*It's helped me  
with my bills,  
there is no doubt  
about that*

*You are warmly received  
when you walk through  
the door. I wouldn't  
worry about coming.  
People shouldn't be  
ashamed of asking for  
help.*

## WHAT COMMUNITY LEADERS SAY ABOUT US...

*The Advice Centre provides an excellent service to the residents of Blackbird Leys*

Anneliese Dodds MP

*The Advice Centre is a vital resource... the imposition of government austerity policies has had a huge impact on many of our residents and it is essential that they are able to access high-quality local advice*

Cllr Sian Taylor,  
Oxford City  
Council

*The Agnes Smith Advice Centre is a true pillar of the local community and it's massively helpful to me as a local councillor to know I can refer residents there for assistance when they need it*

Cllr Linda Smith, Oxford City Council



Anneliese Dodds MP (left) visits Centre

# THANK YOU

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

- A2 Dominion
- Blackbird Leys Parish Council
- Catalyst Housing Ltd
- Doris Field Charitable Trust
- Feoffees (St Michael's & All Saints' Charities)
- GreenSquare Housing Association
- Garfield Weston
- 29<sup>th</sup> May 1961
- J Paul Getty Jnr Charitable Trust
- Marsh Christian Trust
- National Lottery Community Fund (Awards for All)
- National Lottery Community Fund (Help Through Crisis)
- Northmoor Trust
- Oxford City Council
- Oxfordshire Community Foundation (Step Change)
- Oxfordshire County Council (Councillors' Priority Fund)
- Pye Charitable Settlement
- Thames Water Trust Fund
- Tony and Sheelagh Williams Charitable Foundation
- University of Oxford Colleges (All Souls, Christ Church, Jesus, Magdalen, Merton, New, Nuffield, Queen's, St Hugh's, St John's, University, Wadham)

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
- Anneliese Dodds, MP
- Cllr Sian Taylor
- Ines Kretzschmar, Community Investment Co-ordinator



# WHO'S WHO

April 2018 – March 2019

## 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 .....	Simon Pitkin
Trustee .....	Cora Spencer
Trustee.....	Beverley Humberstone
Trustee (to December 2018).....	Saltanat Rasulova
Trustee.....	Cathy Foot
Trustee.....	Jesse Erlam

## STAFF

Manager (to December 2018).....	Clare Charleson
Manager (from January 2019).....	Mandy Richards
Senior advisor/supervisor.....	Gail Craig
Advisor/caseworker.....	Helen Pinne
Money advisor/caseworker.....	Gary Horne
Welfare Benefit advisor/caseworker (to November 2018).....	Eva Pinnington
Advisor/caseworker.....	Sheena Crozier
Trainee advisor/caseworker.....	Beth Knight
Reception Administrator.....	Latisha Walker
Finance and Admin Administrator.....	Ruth Emsley
Cleaner.....	Carole Ewers

## VOLUNTEERS

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

Agnes Smith Advice Centre  
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Oxford  
OX4 6HS  
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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.  
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