

Agnes Smith Advice Centre



Annual Report

April 2019 – March 2020

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

CONTENTS

1. Contents/aims of the Centre
2. What we do
3. Our services
4. Introduction from the Chairs
5. Client profile
6. The year in numbers
7. Manager's report
8. Our impact
9. Reaching everyone in the community
10. Our service during Covid-19
- 11/12. Covid-19 case studies
13. Covid flyer
14. What our clients are saying
15. Thanks
16. Who's who – our staff, trustees and volunteers

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 advice about any issue, including family, work, bereavement and much more; people often turn to us 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.

Emergency support: We make referrals to the food bank and can help with pre-payment meter top-ups in an emergency. We also help with applications to charities for grants for essential items, such as school uniforms, or household goods.

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 adviser 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. In normal times, we offer **drop-in sessions** at our main office and **outreach services** in other parts of the community. During the Covid crisis, our drop-ins are suspended, but we have remained open throughout the crisis – see page 11 for more details.

INTRODUCTION FROM OUR CHAIRS OF TRUSTEES

(Kate Griffin and Wendy Spray)

During the last year, the key for the Centre was the outstanding way our new Manager, Mandy Richards, maintained and built on the strengths she inherited. We know that all the staff have had a challenging year; demand for their services remained consistently high. New projects required effort and adaptability. Then at the end of the year, the unprecedented circumstances required even more than their usual commitment and professionalism. They rose to this challenge and the Centre adapted extremely rapidly. With most staff working from home, they managed to keep the service going, deliver crucial advice and support on a daily basis, do outreach and partnership work to ensure clients knew the service was still available and satisfy our funders that we were able to continue to deliver an excellent service. We are very grateful to all the staff for their exceptional work and adaptability this year.

Blackbird Leys is a large, vibrant and very varied community. Inevitably many residents need help and support in negotiating their way through the maze of officialdom and the social security system. The rewards the Centre can bring are often far more than just financial, vital though that is. Clients report feeling less stressed, more empowered and reassured. In some cases their health is improved. The Centre can feel proud that it continues to provide such a crucial service to the residents of Blackbird Leys.

During the year our Away Day gave staff and volunteers the opportunity to work with trustees to feed their ideas into the process to update our business plan; to be completed in 2020 once the future post Covid-19 becomes a bit clearer.

We are very thankful for the invaluable wide range of expertise in the trustee board and for our other volunteers. We especially want to thank Audrey Bronstein who left the Board after over 20 years, the last 10 years as company secretary.

The high quality of the advice and support that the Centre provides for local residents has been recognised by our funders and we are very grateful to all of them. We deeply appreciate the continuing support of Oxford City Council, local housing associations and the Parish Council. We also thank our other funders, including those who have enabled us to extend our service with new initiatives. They all make the important work we do possible.



CLIENT PROFILE 2019-20 AT A GLANCE

62% are **women**

86% are **working age**

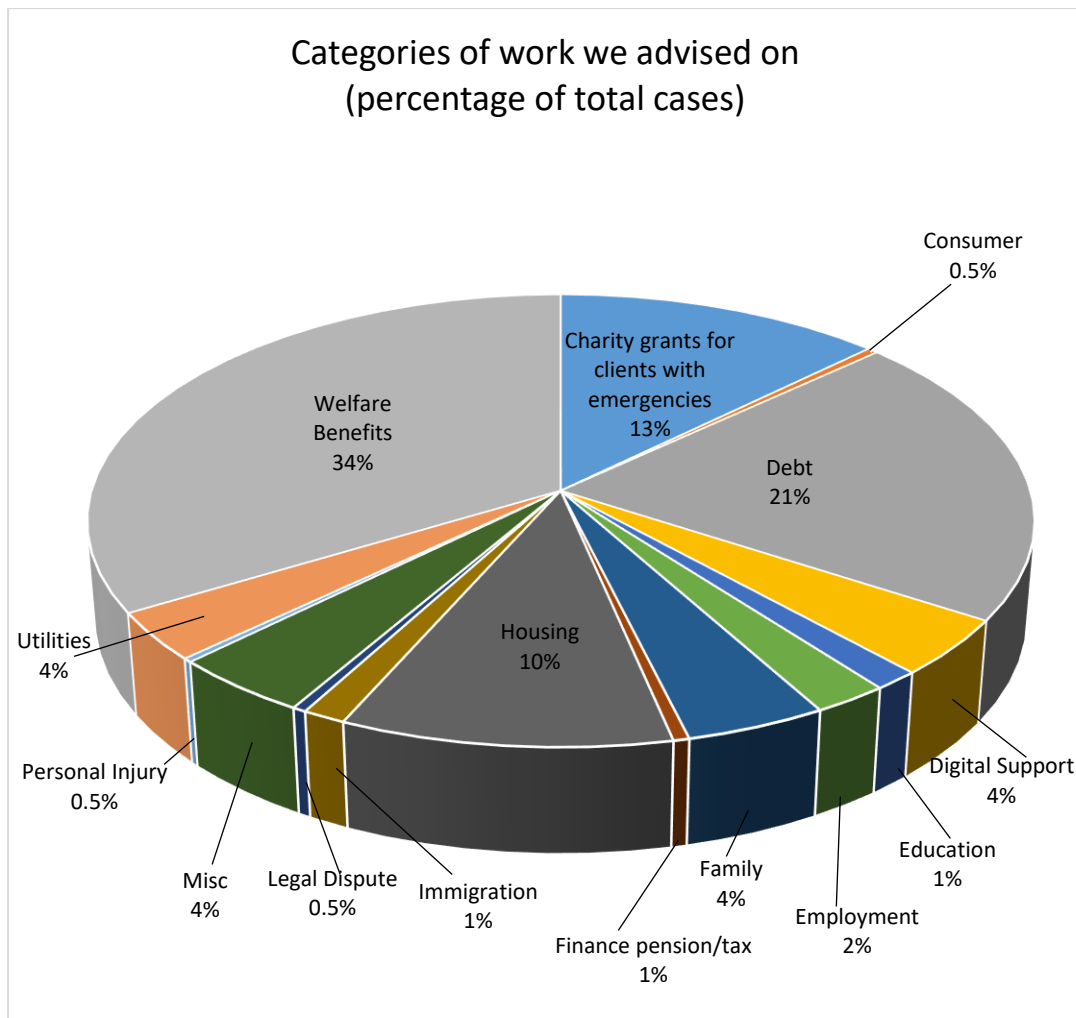
40% have **dependent children**

61% live in **social housing**

51% have a **disability or long term illness**

40% are from **ethnic-minority** backgrounds

THE YEAR IN NUMBERS – 2019/20



1,183

Individual people helped with casework



1,519

Number of appointments

MANAGER'S REPORT — Mandy Richards

It is difficult to remember, now, that most of last year was nothing out of the ordinary for the Advice Centre or the community. The impact of Covid-19 has been so huge that we have focused on our response in some detail in the following pages, even though it only occupied the final two weeks of the year.

It is important not to forget the Centre's important work in the previous fifty weeks of 2019-20 - we had another busy and successful year.

In October, we started our Advice for Better Health project, holding appointments at two venues close to the Leys Surgery for patients referred by surgery staff. The project helps us reach people at an earlier stage and raises our profile in the local area. Our project caseworker has already helped more than 50 patients with benefits, debt, housing, family and work issues. We are grateful to Oxfordshire Community Foundation (Step Change) for funding the project. Thanks, also, to Catalyst Housing Association, for making rooms available to us for appointments at the Clockhouse and at the Farmhouse in Greater Leys.

Another new initiative in September this year was our Money and Power project, aimed at reducing fuel poverty for the most vulnerable residents in Blackbird Leys. Funded by the Energy Industry Voluntary Redress Scheme, the project combines emergency support with benefits, debt and budgeting advice, as well as energy advice referrals. Between September and March, we advised over 100 households, with 72 energy-advice referrals and 36 crisis payments to top-up pre-payment meters.

We have remained open throughout the Covid-19 crisis, offering our full range of social-welfare advice by telephone, as well as helping people at the door in emergency situations. This has only been possible because of the determination and dedication of our fantastic staff team, who have often worked in very difficult circumstances to ensure that we continue to reach those in need. I would like to pass on my deepest thanks to all at the Centre for their unwavering commitment to our service users. I am also grateful to our funders and donors for their support, which is appreciated more than ever during these challenging times.

OUR IMPACT



£750,150
Debt written off



£1,140,460
Welfare benefit gains

£64,923
Charity grants and other financial gains for clients in emergency situations



£1,955,535
Total financial gain for clients



41
Number supported to stay in their own home



57
People helped to improve digital skills

REACHING EVERYONE IN THE COMMUNITY

We always make every effort to ensure our service is accessible in the local area. This year we carried out a review of the statistical data we hold for our service users, comparing this with the demographics of the local community.

We found a positive match in all categories of data – a strong indication that we are there for everyone in the community who needs us. Some of the information is shown below:

	The Leys	Advice Centre Service Users
Age		
Working Age	85	86
65+	15	14
	100	100
Disability		
DLA + PIP claimants	8	19
Attendance Allowance	19	30
Ethnicity		
White British	67	60
BAME	33	40
	100	100
Marital Status		
Married /co-habiting	35	25
Single households(under 65)	21	31
Pensioner households	13	14
Lone parent with dependent children	18	22
Other households	13	8
	100	100

Demographics of the Leys and Advice Centre Service Users

All figures are percentages. Leys data is from the Oxford City Council and District Data Service OCSI Local Insight Report Feb 2019. ASAC data is from our statistics for 2019-20

OUR SERVICE DURING COVID-19

During the Covid crisis, we have made every effort to remain as accessible as possible.

To keep people safe, we suspended our daily drop-in sessions and face-to-face appointments. Instead we have delivered nearly all our advice by telephone.



To make sure people can afford to phone us, we obtained a new free-phone number, and we publicised the free-phone and our services in the flyer shown on page 13. We are grateful to staff, trustees, Oxford City Council and a group of local volunteers, who helped us deliver the flyer to over 5,000 local households.

We have made good use of technology, arranging conference calls with interpreters to overcome language barriers, and trialling video calls to clients – we hope this is something we will develop over the coming months.

However, we know face-to-face contact is very important for many of our clients, particularly those with vulnerabilities, such as literacy problems or mental-health issues. We have maintained a skeleton staff at the Centre, so that people who really cannot reach us by phone have still had a way of getting in touch – either posting their contact details through our letter box or knocking on our door. Maintaining a presence at the Centre means we have been able to hold short emergency appointments to provide food, pre-payment-meter top ups and other essentials.

In the period from March to May alone, our advisers helped with over 150 Covid-19-related enquiries. We assisted more than 50 people with emergency food supplies or food parcel referrals, provided 49 pre-payment meter top-ups, and achieved nearly £40,000 for our service users in additional benefits and charity grant applications.

Covid-19 case studies

Ali and Zenab's story

Ali is a self-employed taxi driver and his wife Zenab works as a part-time carer on a zero-hours contract. They have two children. Ali and Zenab had low earnings, but received a small amount of tax credits and some Housing Benefit. They were just about getting by until work dried up due to COVID-19.



We checked their benefit entitlement and found they would be better off on Universal Credit. We explained the claiming process and also helped them to claim Council Tax Reduction. We helped with emergency food and referred them to the food bank for ongoing support until Universal Credit was in payment.

Jan's story

Jan is a Polish national, who has only been in the UK for 12 months and has very little English. A neighbour phoned us on Jan's behalf – Jan had not been paid and could not reach his employer, whose offices were closed. Jan only had a Polish mobile phone that does not work in the UK. He had run out of money and food. We immediately arranged for a food delivery. We applied for charitable funding to purchase a cheap pay-as-you-go phone with some credit, and delivered this to Jan. We called him on a conference call with an interpreter, and got full details of his work situation. We obtained Jan's consent to contact the employer, who confirmed that Jan's pay had been delayed due to the COVID-19 crisis, but payment was due within the next couple of days. He received full pay, under the furlough scheme. We put Jan in touch with the local Polish association for ongoing support and encouraged him to return to us for further advice as needed.

Peter and Julie's story

Peter and Julie had problems with their Universal Credit claim. Julie had not been in work for some time due to mental-health problems. Peter had previously been on Universal Credit, but his claim ended when he started a new



job in January. He was dismissed in March due to Covid-19, and tried to re-claim Universal Credit. He was expecting his first payment at the end of April and, when this was not received, he found he could

not get into his online account to check what had happened. He could not get through to Universal Credit by phone, and called us in great distress. His wife had not made a Universal Credit claim at all, because they had been overpaid benefit in the past, and she was afraid of making another benefit claim.

Our adviser contacted Universal Credit who had no record of Peter's new claim. Our adviser helped him to make a successful claim, and gave enough reassurance to Julie to ensure that she also made a claim, so that the two claims could be linked into a joint claim.

Peter and Julie were very anxious to avoid a Universal Credit advance payment, as this would have to be repaid, and they already had debts. We provided Peter and Julie with emergency food, and referred them to the food bank for a further food delivery, as well as putting them in touch with the local 'community larder' scheme for ongoing help with food. We were also able to top up the couple's gas and electric pre-payment meters through our fuel-poverty project, to help get them through the waiting period for their first UC payment. We gave budgeting help and referred Peter and Julie to our debt caseworker for help to deal with their debts.

OUR COVID FLYER – delivered throughout the Leys

Agnes Smith Advice Centre

96 Blackbird Leys Road, Blackbird Leys, Oxford, OX4 6HS. 01865 770206.
www.agnessmith.co.uk

Do you need our help during the coronavirus crisis?

We now have a new **FREE** phone number, so you can call even if you don't have credit. Leave your name and number on our answerphone and we will get back to you as soon as possible

Call us on 0800 066 2218

Or email us at asac.reception@agnessmith.co.uk

Or post your name and number through our door at the 'top shops'



Help we can provide includes:

- Advice about financial help if you've lost your job or your income has dropped
- Advice about Covid-19 changes to your benefits, debts and employment rights
- Help with Universal Credit and other benefit claims
- Help for people who are benefit capped
- Providing food in an emergency
- Applying for charity grants for essentials if you are struggling to make ends meet – such as nappies, baby milk, credit for your phone, or topping up gas and electricity pre-payment meters
- Connecting you to other local services for support during the crisis

Any questions? - phone us today on 0800 066 2218

WHAT OUR CLIENTS ARE SAYING

We contacted 10 of our most vulnerable clients, for feedback on their experience of the Centre, and to ask for their views about how we should adapt and re-open our service, as the Covid lockdown eases. Here are some of their comments:

You've always helped me so much. I honestly don't think I'd be here still, without you.

I was very happy with the service, that's the truth. Everything I asked you, you got sorted. I would come again, definitely.

I managed on the phone and you called me back quickly, but calling in is easier – please let me know when I can just drop in again

No, I wouldn't want a video call - I don't have the internet, I can't afford it. I prefer speaking to someone face-to-face

The service is fantastic and we would recommend you to anyone. All the staff are very helpful and polite. I'm lost for words, I can't speak highly enough about you.

THANK YOU

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

- A2 Dominion Housing Association
- Blackbird Leys Parish Council
- Catalyst Housing Ltd
- Energy Savings Trust (Energy Industry Voluntary Redress Scheme)
- Feoffees (St Michael's & All Saints' Charities)
- GreenSquare Housing Association
- Marsh Christian Trust
- National Lottery Community Fund (Help Through Crisis)
- Oxford City Council
- Oxfordshire Community Foundation (Step Change)
- Oxfordshire County Council (Councillors' Priority Fund)
- Pye Charitable Settlement
- Thames Water Trust Fund
- The AB Charitable Trust
- The Henry Smith Charity
- 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, 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 2019 – March 2020

BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Co-Chair.....	Kate Griffin
Co-Chair	Wendy Spray
Treasurer	Andrew Carver
Company Secretary (to Sept 2019).....	Audrey Bronstein
Company Secretary (from Sept 2019).....	Cathy Foot
Trustee.....	Paul Dornan
Trustee	Elaine Chase
Trustee	Simon Pitkin
Trustee	Cora Spencer
Trustee.....	Beverley Humberstone
Trustee.....	Jesse Erlam
Trustee.....	Gillian Dodds

STAFF

Manager	Mandy Richards
Senior adviser/supervisor.....	Gail Craig
Adviser/caseworker.....	Helen Pinne
Money adviser/caseworker.....	Gary Horne
Adviser/caseworker.....	Sheena Crozier
Trainee adviser/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, Sue Davies, Fareedha Bibi.

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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. 02662382.
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