

SUPPORTING OUR COMMUNITIES

1. RECOMMENDATION

- 1.1 That the Cabinet approve the utilisation of government funding towards Citizens Advice New Forest of £35,000 to fund a Debt Supervisor for two years to build up resilience with debt advice to support our residents.
- 1.2 To continue to work with our partners to explore further funding options and initiatives to support our communities.

2. INTRODUCTION

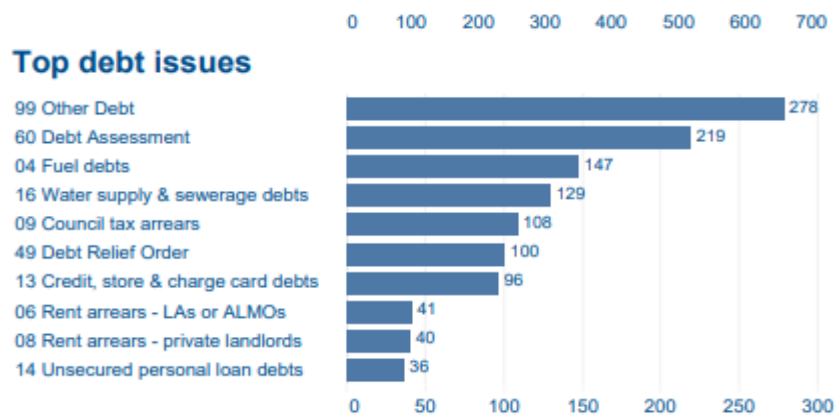
- 2.1 In response to COVID-19, the government allocated funding to provide additional support to council taxpayers which could also be used to deliver increased financial assistance through local support mechanisms. Consideration will be given to utilise the residual funding, with the first initiative being proposed to support Citizens Advice New Forest (CANF) with their debt advice service.
- 2.2 CANF have a funding agreement with the Council to provide general advice, support and information on a wide range of issues including debt, benefits, housing, and employment to all residents of the New Forest.
- 2.3 CANF currently receive funding from the Money Advice and Pension Service (MAPS) which funds a small team providing specialist support and advice to people with money problems. The funding from MAPS is changing from April with a recommissioning of the service across England, which will significantly reduce the element of face-to-face debt service. Although MAPS have stated that funding for one case worker for CANF will continue until January 2023, the overall support will be shared between all Citizens Advice offices across Hampshire with between 5 and 7 Debt caseworkers being available to provide the service via telephone or webchat. As this includes Portsmouth and Southampton, it is likely that there will be minimal resources available to residents of the New Forest.

3. BACKGROUND TO CITIZENS ADVICE NEW FOREST

- 3.1 In 2020/21 CANF supported 5,600 clients with 14,000 issues. Of these, 47% were disabled or had long term health conditions (including mental health). Debt was one of the most common problems. The support given on debt is summarised below, highlighting the increase in demand, and that clients have multiple debt issues:

Year	No. of clients	No. of debt issues
2020/21	484	1,415
2021/22 (to 28.2.22)	559	1,631

3.2 The types of debts issues in 2021/22 are summarised as follows:



3.3 CANF predict that with the increase in demand, due to the impact of the pandemic and increasing utility bills as the cost-of-living increases, this will only increase in the months ahead. CANF state that research demonstrates the link between debt and the adverse impacts on physical wellbeing and mental health, as well as the risk of homelessness, which impacts directly on our Housing Teams.

3.4 As part of their outreach work, CANF work in partnership with FareShare and attend the weekly Food Larders and provide outreach support and advice. By meeting people in their community this has proved extremely beneficial, supporting our most vulnerable residents with their needs.

4. CURRENT DEBT SERVICE PROVISION

4.1 CANF provide general debt advice and information through their core work, e.g., utility, council tax and rent arrears, to all residents across the district. In addition to their core work, CANF currently have 3 specialist debt advice workers and a trainee who undertake more challenging and complex casework with people with multiple debts, including priority debts, and issues. The specialist advisors work to strict guidelines and comply with the rules of the Financial Conduct Authority. This is achieved using an external assessor from the national Citizens Advice who reviews cases. Where a Debt Relief Order is appropriate CANF use national Citizens Advice debt workers.

4.2 Where a taxpayer or tenant is in arrears, we often signpost to CANF. CANF are reporting increased enquiries due to debt, with often council tax and rent arrears being a significant factor, and this increase is expected to continue. Often there are multiple issues and CANF look holistically to provide additional advice, support and information.

4.3 Over the years the team have built up a good foundation of knowledge and skills. Due to the MAPS funding ending these posts will not be extended, and therefore the level of support for specialist debt advice will reduce.

4.4 Another service which provided debt advice, Waterside Debt Advice, no longer operates, thus reducing the support available to residents in the district at a time when demand for this service is increasing. There are national organisations that can provide advice and information; however, these are generally telephone based and do not offer face-to-face services, with local knowledge and information, e.g., for

signposting for additional support. Face-to-face support is more beneficial with complex cases.

5. PROPOSED DEBT SERVICE

- 5.1 Whilst the general advice CANF can support people onto the pathway on sorting out their debts, it is focused, local face-to-face specialist in depth debt casework that can properly support people with their complex debt issues.
- 5.2 The Council can utilise a proportion of the COVID-19 Hardship funding to further support our most vulnerable residents who are struggling with arrears and debts. The funding of £35,000 will enable CANF to recruit a trained Debt Supervisor for two years, working 24 hours per week, to manage, coordinate and train the debt advice team and build up the debt service CANF provides to provide resilience and a sustainable service.
- 5.3 CANF are keen to continue and develop their specialist debt advice team and support residents with face-to-face advice, with support to a minimum of 360 residents per year, with many requiring multiple appointments to deal with their issues. The Debt Advice Supervisor and their team will focus specifically on in depth debt advice and casework to clients with complex and/or multiple debts to a workable solution and conclusion, which can take several hours and over a number of appointments, including budgeting, Debt Relief Orders (which will be done “in house”), money advice, negotiating with creditors, empowering residents to avoid repeat indebtedness and liaising with landlords to prevent evictions. The team will work with other partner organisations and will also provide training for their volunteers to increase the overall knowledge across CANF on debt, thus upskilling volunteers and providing a sustainable debt advice service.
- 5.4 The Debt Supervisor will keep up to date with legislation, case law, policies and procedures relating to debt advice, and provide technical support to debt advisors. The Debt Supervisor will monitor the quality of work and advice given and develop and maintain service standards. This will keep the service “in house”. As well as working with the Council, the role will also work with partner organisations, including Food Banks, Social Prescribers and family support groups.
- 5.5 CANF will provide regular monitoring information, including the number of clients assisted, the types of debts and financial outcomes.

6. WIDER COMMUNITY SUPPORT

- 6.1 The Council is supporting our most vulnerable residents in a number of ways, including the (government financed) Household Support Fund and the £150 Energy Rebate payment.
- 6.2 Supporting CANF with their debt advice service across the district is another example of targeted support. As part of a wider consideration on supporting communities, we will work with partners to explore and identify any emerging issues and review and consider further funding options to maximise use of the funding we have received and provide wide ranging additional support where it is most needed.

7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 The cost of £35,000 to support Citizens Advice New Forest is to be funded from COVID-19 Hardship Funding of £122,000. The remaining funding will be used to provide further support to our communities as stated in section 6.

8. ENVIRONMENTAL, CRIME & DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 There are no environmental, crime or disorder implications.

9. EQUALITY & DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 This funding will provide support to our most vulnerable residents, including undertaking outreach work to target residents.

10. PORTFOLIO HOLDER COMMENTS

- 10.1 I endorse the recommendations in this report, which ensure that CANF, who this Council values highly, can add targeted support to our most vulnerable residents.

For Further Information Please Contact:

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