

**citizens
advice**

**Cotswold
District**

Your local Citizens Advice is still here for you

Our staff and volunteers are working from home to ensure that clients can continue to access our services by telephone and email.

What we have helped with since lockdown started

In the first seven weeks since lockdown on 23rd March, we helped 387 Cotswold District Council residents with 1,061 issues.

The top four issues that we helped with were:

- ❖ Benefits including universal credit (386 issues/201 people). Making an initial benefits claim, council tax reduction and Personal Independence Payment were the top three benefit issues.
- ❖ Employment (233 issues/106 people)
- ❖ Debt (90 issues/34 people)
- ❖ Housing (78 issues/44 clients).

We have also worked with Cirencester Foodbank and North Cotswold Foodbank to make sure that clients can receive foodbank vouchers, either with an e-voucher or using a voucher code.

We have issued 45 food vouchers in the seven weeks since 23rd March, an almost threefold increase on the same period last year.



Employment

We provide support to many people with enquiries concerning their employment rights. Since the introduction of furlough, under the Governments Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS), we have had many enquiries concerning eligibility for furlough. These have been from people who are in the vulnerable and extremely vulnerable category and where the employer has not been prepared to furlough.

Debt

We are still very much there for our on going clients arranging debt management plans, DRO, bankruptcy, eta. We are able to continue our casework working from home and moving these clients forward as well as setting up new clients.

Call us on 0808 800 0511 (free from landlines and most mobiles) from 10am to 4pm, Monday to Friday. We continue to answer over 90% of calls to our helpline.

Email us for advice using the email facility on our website (www.citizensadvice-stroudandcotswold.org.uk).

You can find frequently updated advice on a range of issues at www.citizensadvice.org.uk.

How we are working - What to expect when you call us

When you call, our approachable and professional volunteer receptionists will take your details and put them in a work queue on our system for one of our advisers to pick up. Should your query be urgent they will alert the advisers.

“One of the most striking things from the past 7 weeks home working on Reception at Cotswold Citizens Advice has been the sheer relief people express just by us answering their call, telling them we are here and help is available. Many of the callers were desperate, not knowing who to turn to or not being able to get through to other agencies due to huge call volumes and processing backlogs. Just to feel they could talk to someone and someone was on their side was a huge relief for them.

Coronavirus and lockdown have in many cases exacerbated already difficult lives and it has been incredibly important to keep this essential service operating at full throttle, especially now.”

Janette, Volunteer Receptionist

Employment and families

Concerns have been raised about the grey area surrounding pregnancy and the associated risks to the mother and unborn child and the impact on eligibility for statutory maternity pay. In addition, the difficulties surrounding help with childcare and use of time off for dependents, flexible working, sick pay and of holidays.

Looking forward

With the gradual reduction in levels of financial support provided under the furlough scheme, we are expecting an increase in enquiries from people being requested by their employers to continue to work on reduced wages. Furthermore, it is likely that there will be an increase in the number of redundancies and businesses ceasing to trade completely. The Cotswolds are expected to be severely affected because of the large number of people employed in hospitality and tourism. Loss of jobs and reductions in hours will put strains on families and Citizens Advice can provide support in dealing with debt, relationship issues, benefits, which are so closely related.

"We're continuing to get the sorts of issues that we normally get but which at the moment are made more complicated by the current Coronavirus restrictions and changes to legislation. On top of that, we are having to work in new and innovative ways to make sure our clients continue to get effective access to our expertise and services."

Martin, Volunteer Adviser

