



**Bridport
& District**

ANNUAL REPORT

2025 - 2026

WELCOME FROM THE CHAIR



I'm delighted to introduce you to Bridport and District Citizen's Advice Annual Report for 2025. It's been another busy year for us. As our Chief Officer Rovarn explains below, the demand for our services is increasing year by year, and the challenges which some of our fellow citizens face in their lives grow more severe and urgent. But we are here to help – five days a week in Bridport and in our clinics in Beaminster and Lyme Regis. We turn no-one away.

It's worth remembering that, although we have some excellent and qualified staff, our service is largely delivered by local volunteers, who I cannot thank enough for their time, expertise and compassion.

But there is no point pretending that these are easy times for the charitable and social support sector. Despite our core grant from Dorset Council, as well as generous contributions from Bridport and Lyme Regis Town Councils, we struggle to make our budget balance. The funding climate is getting more competitive and it is harder year on year for us to supply the quality of general and specialist help which our clients are looking for.

The confidence of local people, partners in the advice sector, businesses and councillors is essential to our survival and success, and I thank you all for your continuing support.

Jim Smyllie
Chair, Board of Trustees

"I was in a desperate state of ill health and consequently financial difficulty. The team at Bridport have helped enormously by helping to fill forms out and appeal. We needed help desperately and they were there when we needed to turn to, finding grants and support that we were unaware of I'm sure their help has helped keep us afloat and aided us into keeping going where we were struggling immensely Thank you to all the team at Bridport who do amazing work and change people's lives for the better "

"Our problem was dealt very professionally and with compassion, we felt at ease with the process. I was delighted even amazed by the extent of understanding and helpfulness My financial problems are still ongoing but Citizens Advice certainly mitigated those issues They also pointed me to other potentially worthwhile resources some of which have been quite helpful in their own right I truly wish I had contacted Citizens Advice the very first time I was made aware of them"

WHAT WE DO

The Citizens Advice service provides free, independent, confidential and impartial advice to everyone on their rights and responsibilities. We value diversity, promote equality and challenge discrimination.

We aim to provide the advice people need for the problems they face and improve the policies and practices that affect people's lives.

The Board 2025/26

Trustees

Jim Smyllie (Chair)
David Gibson (Chair, resigned 31.12.25)
Keith Wilson (Treasurer)
Graham Smith (resigned 31.12.25)
Sue Pemberton
Jacqui Bishop
Lavinia Sonnenberg
Karen Delafield (resigned 30.8.25)
Jamie Scott
Linda Child
Mike Fletcher (Secretary)

Representatives

Cllr Sarah Williams (Dorset Council)
Cllr Belinda Bawden (Dorset Council)
Cllr David Worthington (Bridport Town Council)
Cllr Stuart Cokerill (Lyme Regis Town Council)

Volunteer Representative

Gill Acton

Our staff 2025-26

Chief Officer: Rovarn Wickremasinghe

Deputy Manager: Martin Wood

Trainee Coordinator/Supervisor: Juliet Evans

Admin Supervisor: Carol Pearson

Specialist Projects: Andy Pennington, Sarah Silcox, Kristina Zadunaiskaja, Alison Burt, Alan Bowley, Jane Bryant, Mecki Testroet

Trainee Adviser: Zoe Hill

Cleaner: Wendy Knight

CHIEF OFFICER'S REPORT



The past year has presented real challenges for many people across our communities with households continuing to face significant financial pressures. Many of our users additionally have complex needs, long-term health conditions and other forms of disadvantage such as digital exclusion. Demand for our service remains strong.

During 2025–26, we supported 2,598 clients, a 14% increase on the previous year, and helped people with just over 9,000 separate problems. While client numbers have increased, the number of issues per client has reduced. One driver of this shift has been increased use of our Adviceline telephone service, which provides quick advice and triage. The proportion of activity delivered through Adviceline has doubled over the year, thanks to additional funded resource and we have also significantly increased the number of calls answered locally. This has arguably enabled us to reach more people at an earlier stage, often resolving issues more quickly and reducing the need for more intensive support.

Demand for our core advice areas remains high. Welfare benefits and charitable support continue to make up a large share of enquiries, reflecting ongoing financial hardship in our communities, with housing issues ranking third. We are also seeing a continued increase in clients with long-term health conditions or disabilities, many of whom need more tailored, ongoing support.

Managing increased demand and complex user needs has not been easy. However, I am extremely proud of the dedication and flexibility shown by our team of staff and volunteers. Their ability to adapt — whether delivering advice in person, through outreach locations, or remotely via telephone and email — ensures that we continue to provide an accessible and responsive service.

Looking ahead, we face several challenges including the natural end of a significantly funded specialist benefits project in March 2026 after three years, a very challenging external grant funding environment, the need to relocate to more sustainable premises and potential changes to service delivery to reflect reduced staffing changes. However, we remain committed to ensuring that our service continues to meet the needs of our community.

Finally, I would like to thank all our staff, volunteers, funders and partners. Your continued commitment makes it possible for us to deliver this essential service and help meet the advice needs of our community.

Rovarn Wickremasinghe
Chief Officer

KEY ACTIVITIES 2025-26

The service helped 2,598 clients with 9,018 separate issues in 2025/26.

‘Issues’ relate to the problem a client contacts us about. ‘Activities’ records the separate pieces of work done on behalf of the client such as telephone calls, a face-to-face contact or email.

Clients contact us with multiple problems (on average 3.5 separate issues per client), which can take several appointments to resolve.

	2025-26
Clients	2,598
Issues	9,018
Activities	10,292

Source Casebook C6, all regions/LAs, includes quick contacts; 120 clients

The following table shows just the numbers of Dorset Council area residents that we helped compared to the previous year.

	2025-2026	2024-2025	% Change
Clients	2,257	2,000	+13%
Issues	8,337	8,688	-4%
Activities	9,759	10,507	-7%

Source Casebook, C6 filtered for Dorset residents

“ I am sincerely grateful for all the help the wonderful staff gave me. Without their help I wouldn’t have been able to sort my problem myself.
I am extremely grateful for all the help and kindness everyone at the Bridport Citizens Advice gave me.”

As part of Citizens Advice in Dorset we help staff a shared telephone advice service, Dorset Adviceline.



Adviceline

1,102 calls answered by Bridport office

4,038 calls answered by Local Citizens Advice in Dorset Unitary area in total

The table below shows the issues by enquiry area, for the whole service, across all geography.

Enquiry Area	Issues	%
Benefits & Tax Credits	2,627	29.1%
Charitable Support & Food Banks	1,556	17.3%
Benefits Universal Credit	960	10.6%
Housing	783	8.7%
Utilities & Communications	603	6.7%
Debt	586	6.5%
Relationships & Family	345	3.8%
Employment	310	3.4%
Consumer Goods & Services	276	3.1%
Health & Community Care	186	2.1%
Financial Services & Capability	184	2.0%
Legal	183	2.0%
Travel & Transport	126	1.4%
Tax	113	1.3%
Other	68	0.8%
Immigration & Asylum	60	0.7%
GVA & Hate Crime	34	0.4%
Education	18	0.2%
Grand Total	9,018	100%

Casebook, C6 all geography, Census 2021

Our biggest enquiry area overall remains welfare benefits at 39.7% of all enquiries (split between Universal Credit and all other benefits). Although total issues were slightly down compared to the previous year we have seen increases in some categories – see trends table below.

Many of our users have health problems:

59% of our clients report a disability or long-term health problem.

From the latest census data in Dorset 82.4% of the population report no disability, 6.5% disabled and limited a lot, 11% disabled and limited a little.

Of the 950 clients who gave details of their disability/limiting health problem the breakdown is as follows:

Type of Disability	Percentage 2025-26
Multiple Impairments	41%
Mental Health	21%
Physical Impairment	12%
None of the categories describe my impairment	11%
Chronic or long term condition	3%
Mobility	3%
Hearing	3%
Learning, understanding or concentration	3%
Vision	2%
Stamina or breathing or fatigue	1%

Dorset Data: Census 2021, Casebook C6 filtered for Dorset residents only

The age profile of our clients who are *Dorset residents* is a reasonable reflection of the latest census County profile but under 25s are less well represented.

Age	Dorset percentage	Bridport & District CA percentage
15-24	3.5%	9%
25-34	12.3%	9%
35-44	16.4%	10%
45-54	15.4%	13%
55-64	22.1%	15%
65+	30.3%	30%
85+	3.3%	4%

Dorset Data: Census 2021, Casebook C6 filtered for Dorset residents only

Gender	Dorset percentage	Bridport & District CA percentage
Female	58.9%	51.4%
Male	40.8%	48.6%
Prefer different term	0.3%	0%

Dorset Data: Census 2021, Casebook C6 filtered for Dorset residents only

Ethnicity 2025/26	Comparison Local Authority percentage	Bridport & District Citizens Advice	National Percentage
White Ethnicity	96.1%	97.1%	81.7%
All other Ethnicities	3.9%	2.9%	18.3%

Data: from Census 2021 and Casebook C6 filtered for Dorset residents only

TRENDS



The table below lists the biggest % changes in issues in the main enquiry areas compared to the previous year (filtered for Dorset residents only). Note the overall issue count in 2025-26 for Dorset residents was down by 4% compared to last year.

Significant increases in water bills, energy bills have meant that more people have contacted us with concerns over bill repayments. Universal Credit enquiries continued to increase with the final phase of the transition to Universal Credit from legacy benefits. The decrease in charitable support and foodbank enquiries is likely to be due to the more restricted frequency of access to Household Support Fund, while relationship and family enquiries continued to grow.

Enquiry Area	2025-26	2024-25	% Change
Benefits - Universal Credit	890	666	+33.6%
Utilities & Communication	599	452	+32.5%
Consumer	245	349	-29.8%
Charitable Support & Foodbanks	1465	1877	-21.9%
Relationships & Family	297	258	+15.1%

RESEARCH AND CAMPAIGNS

We undertake research and campaigning work to improve policies which adversely impact our clients at a local office and county level. The County group comprises the three Dorset Local Citizens Advice offices and Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole CA. The group aims to foster collaboration on R&C and joint campaigns through MPs or a wider evidence base.

At a county level we have continued to track issues relating to digital exclusion with Dorset Council such as the requirement for online digital applications for Blue Badges.

The County Team also put together a paper for local MPs regarding priorities for the Autumn budget review, including lifting of the two-child limit which was successful and uprating the Local Housing Allowance to ensure rentals are more affordable for those claiming housing costs.

Contact has been established with Edward Morello MP for West Dorset who has used the Bureau as a base for his constituency surgeries.

Case Study: Debt Advice

Ben sought our help because his ex-partner had taken out two credit cards in his name, not made any payments on them, then left them on the kitchen counter when she left leaving Ben to deal with the fall-out.

We helped Ben move forward in reporting the issue to the police and, over several months, also helped Ben manage his financial position now he was on his own with reduced income to manage household finances. We helped Ben identify all of his debts and plan a debt solution that worked for him. As a result of our help, Ben applied for a debt relief order, where his debts of over £30,000 were written off so that he could have a "fresh start" financially.

Impact: Ben was very relieved we were able to help him with a debt solution that worked for him and that he didn't have to deal with creditors or face bailiffs. He was reassured that he did not have to deal with everything on his own and that he was given the help and support to learn to manage his finances going forward

OUTCOMES

We record financial outcomes such as income gains where a benefit entitlement has been identified for a client and claimed, or awarded, following a successful dispute or appeal. Reimbursements include tax refunds, road tax exemptions, food parcels, reduced charges/costs and the waiver or reduction of court fees. These are conservative estimates as only a proportion of outcomes get recorded for various reasons.



Financial Outcomes 2024-25	Amount
Income Gain	£1,285,568
Debts Written Off	£297,196
Re-imbursements, services, loans	£239,016
Repayments rescheduled	£77,078
Other	£207,755



138 clients assisted with actual or threatened homelessness enquiries and/or using the Council homelessness service

Other service measures and 'soft' outcomes include:

87% of our clients found our service easy to access

91% told us we helped them find a way forward with their problem

88% reported positively on being able to resolve their problem with our help

74% said they felt significantly less stressed, depressed or anxious after receiving help from us

91% would recommend our service

PROJECTS

We achieved external funding to run a number of projects last year, providing specialist support for the local community. Key projects and outcomes are listed below.



Alison Burt
Cost of Living Caseworker

Cost of Living

Our cost-of-living advisers helped 268 clients with income maximisation advice, benefit claims, assistance with discretionary grants and foodbank referrals, achieving combined financial outcomes of £150,000.

Henry Smith Specialist Benefits Project

Sadly, this 3-year funded project ended in March 2026. However, we are proud of the achievements of the team helping 522 clients with complex benefit issues, disputes and representation at appeal hearings and securing £2.3 million in benefit entitlements.



Sarah Silcox
Henry Smith Project
Benefits Caseworker



Martin Wood
Deputy Manager

Debt Project

Our specialist paid and volunteer debt caseworker helped 259 clients with money management and debt issues including money management and budgeting advice, negotiating sustainable repayment plans and debt write-offs, where appropriate.

Energy Advice

We helped 150 clients with a range of energy queries including bills and disputes, switching suppliers, energy efficiency measures, smart meters, and income maximisation. Clients benefited by average of £765 per client in income gains.



Mecki Testroet
Energy Adviser

PARTNERSHIPS

We work in close partnership with the Citizens Advice in Dorset Consortium delivering the Council's advice and information contract including services such as the Dorset Adviceline and leading on the single point of contact email referral system for third parties.

We collaborate with local organisations to deliver shared objectives and are involved with Bridport Local Area partnership on community matters including health and well-being initiative. We are also members of the Local Alliance Group promoting financial wellbeing, improved learning and resilience outcomes for young people and their families in West Dorset. We have good referral links with a range of partners including the Jurassic Social Prescribing Team and Harmony.

We would also like to thank all our partners who have supported our outreach advice sessions in local food banks, The Family Hub and the local library as well as our main outreaches in Lyme Regis and Beaminster.

FROM THE FRONT LINE



I have worked at Bridport & District Citizens Advice for nearly 18 months now as a trainee advisor. During that time, I have worked predominantly on Adviceline, the telephone triage service that covers the entirety of Dorset. Working on Adviceline has been a great experience, as it has allowed me to develop my knowledge and understanding of a multitude of subjects, given the wide range of issues people face. From housing and relationships to debt and benefits, I have strengthened my knowledge and research skills and, ultimately, my adaptability as no two calls I take are the same.

One area where I have gained a greater understanding is that of the benefit system, which my law degree did not cover, but one which is so pertinent and crucial to many in society. This knowledge has allowed me to undertake cost of living work: establishing people's benefit entitlements, assisting them with applications and helping people to budget - help which, in the current economic climate, an increasing number of people continue to seek.

Supporting clients, as often the first point of contact, has been the most rewarding and invaluable experience. I am extremely grateful for my time at Bridport Citizens Advice and for the support and encouragement I have received. As I leave in September to begin my training contract with the Crown Prosecution Service, I know I will take forward these skills and experiences into both my personal and professional life.

Zoe Hill, Trainee advisor

Case Study: Housing

Chloe sought our help because her landlord issued her with a section 21 notice of eviction in February 2026. We advised Chloe that the notice may not be valid because she thought she had not been given key documents including her EPC and gas safety certificate by the landlord. We explained that she did not have to leave the property until the landlord obtained a court order and the new Renters Rights Act rules meant that she could only be evicted with a section 21 notice if she received a valid notice before 1 May. We also assisted the client to make an application to the Housing Register.

Impact: The client was very relieved that she did not have to leave her property immediately as she had nowhere else to go. She was reassured that there were some potential legal protections for her and the steps she could take to secure alternative accommodation.

We would like to thank the dedicated volunteers who deliver our service. At the end of the financial year 2025 the volunteer team was made up of 8 trustees, 3 supervisors, 44 advisors and 11 support staff.

We estimate that our volunteers contributed over 13,000 hours of their time, providing enormous benefit to the local community.

Case Study: Benefits

We helped Marcus, a college student with severe disabilities from a low income, single parent household, who had been receiving Disability Living Allowance (DLA). His mother contacted us when his DLA stopped at 16 and he had tried to claim the equivalent adult disability benefit, Personal Independence Payment (PIP). His PIP claim had been refused, and we helped Marcus to appeal the decision to a Tribunal and represented him. The appeal process took over two years and we supported him throughout.

The appeal was successful and Marcus was awarded the enhanced rates of PIP Daily Living and Mobility worth over £184.30 per week. He received arrears of PIP benefit of more than £20,000. This financial support not only helped Marcus with his ongoing care and mobility costs but supported him to continue with his University Studies.

THANK YOU TO ALL OUR SUPPORTERS

We would like to thank, Alice Ellen Cooper Dean Foundation, Bridport and Lyme Regis Town Councils, Bridport Rotary Club, Child Poverty Action Group, Citizens Advice in Dorset, Dorset Community Foundation, Dorset Library Service, Loders PCC, Edward Morello MP, Henry Smith Charitable Foundation, Morrisons, National Citizens Advice, National Lottery Community Fund, Parish Councils, Prout Bridge Project, Valentine Trust, Wessex Water, and our main funder Dorset Council for financial assistance and support in 2025-26.

Contacts:

Adviceline: 0800 144 88 48

Website: www.bridportca.org.uk

Email advice: use website contact form or advice@bridport-cab.org.uk

Existing clients: 01308 456594



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