

Helping people find a way forward

Working with Citizens Advice
A guide for MPs



**citizens
advice**



Foreword

For over 80 years, Citizens Advice has been at the forefront of providing free, confidential, independent advice. People come to us with all sorts of problems, and we work hard to help them find a way forward - something we have in common with your constituency offices.

This guide has information on a range of issues, including:

- [Practical steps](#) you and your office can take when someone comes to you for help.
- How your local Citizens Advice can help you to [advise constituents](#), [manage casework](#), and [access constituency data](#).
- How we can [work together in Parliament](#) on national issues that impact your constituents and others across the country.

We hope this will be an invaluable resource for you and your staff as you support your constituents. We look forward to working with you to empower people to help themselves, and to improve the lives of people across your community.

Dame Gillian Guy

Chief Executive
Citizens Advice

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If you have any questions or would like to discuss anything further, please get in touch with us at [**parliament@citizensadvice.org.uk**](mailto:parliament@citizensadvice.org.uk).

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Who we are and what we do



Helping people find their way forward: What does Citizens Advice do?

We can all face problems that seem complicated or intimidating. At Citizens Advice, we believe no one should have to face these problems without good quality, independent advice. For over 80 years we've given people the knowledge and confidence they need to overcome their problems.

Our network of charities offers confidential, independent and impartial advice online, over the phone, and in person, for free. Last year, empowered by over 27,000 dedicated staff and highly trained volunteers, we helped over 2.7 million people through our services and a further 29 million visitors via our website.

Whether it's benefits, faulty products, unmanageable debt or discrimination at work, **8 in 10 of the millions of people who come to us each year say we helped solve their problem.** 70% said they felt less stressed, depressed or anxious after getting advice.

No one else sees so many people with so many different kinds of problems, and that gives us a unique insight into the challenges people are facing today. We see how issues can be linked. By helping people with the underlying cause of their problems and making sure they don't get worse, we save the government and public services hundreds of millions of pounds every year.

What's our impact?

We have a positive impact on people's lives



9 in 10 people said we helped them find a way forward.



70% say they feel less stressed, depressed or anxious.



75% said they're now better equipped to know what to do.

We save society money



Our advice saved the government and public services **£485 million** in 2018/19.

Every **£1** we spend benefits our clients by **£12**.

We help address the cause of people's problems

We use our data and insight to identify the cause of people's issues, and work with government and policy makers to address these problems at the root. Some things we've worked on include:



An absolute price cap on the default energy tariff so people aren't charged excessive rates.



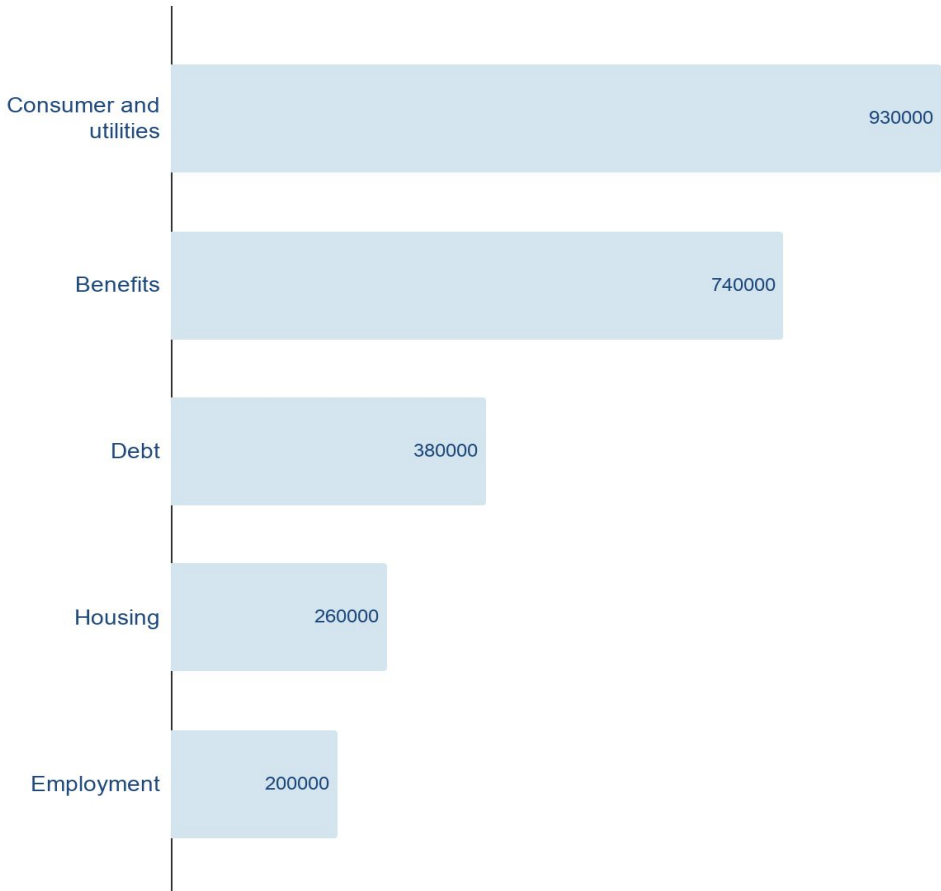
Laws saving renters millions of pounds every month through protection from excessive and illegitimate fees.



Further improvements and changes to Universal Credit making it easier to claim.

Top advice issues

Last year we provided face-to-face help to 1.3 million people, a 7% increase from the year before. There were a further 28.5 million visits to our website.



The top 5 issues we help people with

People come to us with many different problems - from benefits and debt, to consumer rights and understanding pension choices.

Our advice channels

There are lots of ways people can access our advice:

- 270 independent local Citizens Advice charities with over 600 offices across England and Wales – to find your local Citizens Advice go to **citizensadvice.org.uk**.
- Almost 2,000 outreaches in local communities, such as GP surgeries, hospitals, libraries, prisons and community centres.
- One-off services in locations across the country, such as shopping centres, schools and faith groups.
- The Citizens Advice Consumer service helpline – 0808 223 1133, or 0808 223 1144 for a Welsh-speaking adviser. If you are in Scotland, you should contact **consumeradvice.scot**.
- Self help information on the Citizens Advice website – **citizensadvice.org.uk**.
- Our Extra Help Unit, that helps people with complex energy or postal complaints. The unit is not a public helpline – people can be referred to it by the Citizens Advice Consumer Service or their local MP.

As well as our core advice, we deliver:

- **The Witness Service**
- **Pension Wise**
- **The Help to Claim service**
- Debt advice funded by the Money and Pensions Service.

We're also the statutory consumer champion for the energy market and the statutory consumer watchdog for the postal service.

Citizens Advice across the country

Citizens Advice Scotland

Citizens Advice Scotland (CAS) is the umbrella organisation for Scotland's network of 59 members. These members, as independent charities, deliver free, impartial and confidential frontline advice services.

CAS helps more than 270,000 people solve their problems each year in communities everywhere from city centres to the Highlands and Islands.

For further information, visit the CAS website at cas.org.uk.

Citizens Advice Cymru

Citizens Advice Cymru is the largest integrated, voluntary sector provider of advice in Wales. Citizens Advice Cymru has 17 member local Citizens Advice, which deliver services all over the length and breadth of Wales. Annually Citizens Advice Cymru help around 150,000 people.

In 2018/19 Citizens Advice Cymru helped:

- 46,331 people with benefits problems
- 24,590 people with debt problems
- 16,997 people with consumer issues
- 7,350 people with housing problems
- 6,871 people with employment problems

Another 27,836 people called our consumer helpline.

Single Advice Fund in Wales

In October 2019 the Welsh Government announced the results of the Single Advice Fund (SAF) bid process. Citizens Advice Cymru has been awarded £8.1 million to work with its partners to provide advice services across Wales, including a remote advice service which started on 1 January 2020.

The SAF (now known as Advice Link) has been commissioned on a regional footprint, with six regions across Wales: Cardiff and Vale, Swansea Neath Port Talbot, Cwm Taf, Mid and West, Gwent, and North. Local Citizens Advice have worked together within their regional areas to plan for how they will deliver advice services in their region.

The Welsh Government's specification will affect local Citizens Advice services in different ways. If you have any queries or concerns about how this might affect the local services within your constituency then **please get in touch by emailing rob.palmizi@citizensadvice.org.uk**.

How Citizens Advice can help you



Citizens Advice in your community: How your local Citizens Advice can help you

Our network of 270 independent local Citizens Advice charities offers confidential face to face advice in over 2,550 locations across the country. Each one shares a common goal with you - to improve the lives of people in the community and help those who face problems find a way forward.

We also provide advice over the phone, by post, email or web chat and via our self help information website – citizensadvice.org.uk.

You can find your local Citizens Advice **on our website**. We can also help you to set up a meeting with your local Citizens Advice.

Email parliament@citizensadvice.org.uk to find out more.



Advising your constituents

Our advisers don't tell your constituents what to do. They explain the options available and the possible outcomes of different courses of action.

People are encouraged to make their own decisions. We help them to manage their own problems by focusing on their needs as individuals.

Our advisers talk in confidence to people face to face, by phone, email or webchat to find out about their issue(s). They can then help people to deal with these problems. This could include:

- Negotiating with companies or service providers (such as creditors) or to appeal against decisions, for example, on welfare benefit claims.
- Prioritising their problems, for example, to sort out which debts are most important.
- Navigating bureaucracy, for example helping to fill in forms.
- Referring people to specialist caseworkers for complex problems or to other agencies when appropriate.

We also offer subscriptions to our online advice resource - AdviserNet - which provides quality-assured information on issues such as employment, benefits, housing and debt. You can find out more information on page 19.

Helping you manage casework

A central function of an MP's office is managing casework and resolving constituents' problems and concerns.

Establishing strong working relationships with agencies in the local area helps ensure that issues are dealt with promptly and systematically.

An early conversation with your local Citizens Advice Chief Executive will help establish ways of managing casework and referrals, sharing expertise and agreeing how best to work with your office.

There are several ways that working closely with Citizens Advice can help you manage casework. These include:

- Agreements on the prioritisation of cases.
- Holding joint surgeries on specialist topics, such as housing or benefits advice.
- Agreeing cross-referral processes to ensure that constituents receive assistance from specialist advisers, and where a case requires the MP's intervention, that this can be applied for appropriately.
- Sharing premises for advice sessions.

MPs and local Citizens Advice can also combine their expertise, local networks and media presence to run successful awareness raising campaigns on issues affecting local people.

If you'd like more ideas about how you might work with Citizens Advice, get in touch with your local office or email [**parliament@citizensadvice.org.uk**](mailto:parliament@citizensadvice.org.uk).

Providing constituency data

Citizens Advice has an unrivalled amount of front line, real time evidence showing the problems people face.

We can provide you with in-depth constituency data on a range of issues. For example, our local constituency dashboards provide an overview of the most common problems people face, their demographics and what parts of the constituency they live in.

If you want to delve deeper into a specific issue affecting your constituents, we can help you to spot any local trends.

Next time you visit your local Citizens Advice, please ask for a demonstration of what is available.



Supporting your work in Parliament: How National Citizens Advice can help you

Alongside helping you in your constituency, Citizens Advice can support your Parliamentary work through evidence-based advocacy.

We help 8 in 10 people resolve their problem. When someone has a problem we cannot solve, often the barrier is a systemic policy failure.

We can help government and industry find ways to make things better for people. Using our evidence and experiences of people we help, we campaign for changes to solve collective problems.

With our local and national data we understand the impact of policy and regulation, and identify solutions where it's having a negative effect on people's lives. We then work to make the case for change, on behalf of the people who come to us for help and wider society.

We share our evidence with parliamentarians so that you can use it to inform your work. On top of our research and campaigns publications, we can help your office by:

- Producing briefings for debates in the House.
- Proposing amendments to legislation.
- Providing supporting statistics and anonymised local case studies.

We have information on a range of issues including energy, benefits, debt, consumer, and housing. You can find out more about our current policy priorities by reading our **2019 manifesto**.

For more information and support please email parliament@citizensadvice.org.uk.

Advice Toolkit



Introduction to the toolkit

Whether it is by letter, email, phone or face to face at one of your surgeries, constituents will seek your advice, support and influence on a wide range of matters.

The following pages are intended to be a brief guide for how best to approach and respond to some of the issues your constituents are likely to raise.

For more guidance on specific issues such as debt, employment and housing, you can visit our advice pages at citizensadvice.org.uk.

On our website you'll find:

- Step-by-step advice on a range of topics, with answers to key questions and the information you'll need to help your constituents resolve their problems.
- Details of key organisations you might need to signpost and refer people to.
- A range of useful gadgets you can use, like our budgeting tool or benefits calculator.

We also offer subscriptions to our more detailed online advice resource - AdviserNet, which has been developed specifically for advice caseworkers.

AdviserNet

Our comprehensive online advice resource, AdviserNet, has lots of information to help your constituents with a wide range of queries - benefits, employment rights, money and debt issues, housing and family matters, and consumer problems.

This easy-to-use and accessible platform is updated on a daily basis, and can provide you and your team with quality-assured information and guidance to help people resolve their life issues.

Covering England, Scotland and Wales, the content fully takes into account the differences in law and statutory regulations across the three nations.

Citizens Advice offers access to our AdviserNet system, under license, and you can find out full details on the fees and our licensing terms **on our website**.

You can test out AdviserNet for 14 days for free before paying for a full 12-month subscription by completing the 'trial access form' on the Citizens Advice website.

Further help

If you have any questions about AdviserNet or our licensing terms, please contact the Citizens Advice Customer Services team at **customer.services@citizensadvice.org.uk**.

Helping someone through a crisis

Many people have more than one problem that they are dealing with, such as high levels of personal debt that risks homelessness and affects people's mental or physical health. These problems can at times appear insurmountable.

By giving people the advice they need, we can support them to work through these problems. Nina's story is just one example of the issues people face - and how we can help them find a way forward.

Nina's Story

Nina was struggling with her housing situation. She was behind in paying her rent. The threat of being evicted was making her feel very anxious. The strain was also aggravating an existing long term health condition making it harder to manage.



She couldn't solve the problem alone and needed help.

Nina went to her local MP's office. Anna, a caseworker, helped Nina work through her problem. She asked for more information on her issues, what had caused it and how it was affecting her.

She found out she had recently experienced a change in her employment situation. This was putting additional pressure on her finances, which was why she was getting behind on her rent.

Anna helped Nina write a letter to her landlord and set up a payment plan. This stopped her landlord trying to evict her.

Anna then decided to refer the case to the local Citizens Advice so Nina could get more support on her finances.

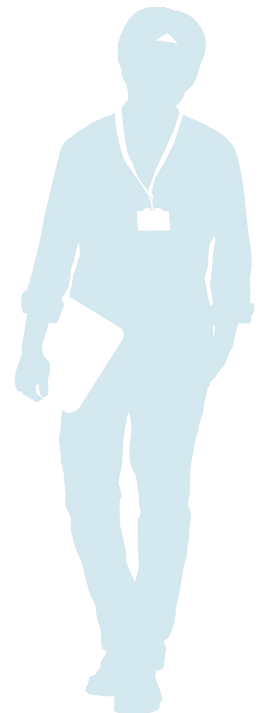
Sam, a volunteer adviser, helped Nina work out a budget to help her with other debts and maximise her income.

He also found out Nina was on a flexible hours contract, so he helped her better understand her rights at work.

Following advice, Nina was able to get back to normal and her quality of life improved. Her housing situation was now much more secure - and she felt less anxious as a result. She also had greater control of her finances and a manageable budget.

Stopping Nina from being evicted, and improving her mental and physical health, meant she didn't need extra support from public services.

Her well-being improved - and she had extra money in her pocket to help with everyday costs.



Your first conversation with a constituent looking for advice

While your first conversation with a constituent is very important, it can also be difficult. As Nina's story shows, people may come to you with serious issues and be feeling stressed and upset.

You may find the below 9 points helpful for these situations. We use them as part of our Citizens Advice adviser training:

1. If on the phone, make sure you give your name and explain who you are.
2. Speak calmly and give them your full attention.
3. Identify and respond to the constituent's state of mind or feelings about their situation. If you're speaking to the person on the phone and they seem upset, you may need to suggest they come in for a face-to-face appointment.
4. Give people time to fully explain their situation. If you're having the conversation on the phone and you think a person is having difficulty explaining their situation – maybe because English isn't their first language or they are disabled and their impairment(s) are making communicating on the phone challenging - you should suggest the person comes in for a face-to-face appointment.
5. Provide a non-judgemental summary of the constituent's situation to them to show understanding and acceptance of their viewpoint.

6. Identify any urgent issues needing immediate action and discuss the possibility of tackling these before consideration of other issues.
7. Identify if the constituent needs any other advice and help them to contact the appropriate agency/helpline.
8. If it is necessary to see letters and documents you could arrange for the person to come back to the surgery or office. Remember that if you are going to contact certain third parties on the person's behalf you will need signed authorisation from them.
9. Ensure you have taken the constituent's contact details.

Once you've followed this checklist you should be in a position to understand what steps you can take next.



Signpost, refer or deal with personally?

There are normally three options for dealing with a constituent's query: signposting, referral or dealing with the matter personally.

Signposting is where you provide information about other sources of help, and the constituent makes contact with those organisations themselves.

Referral is where you agree, with the constituent's consent, to contact an agency to arrange an appointment for them. This is helpful when the case is urgent, the person needs more support (e.g. is disabled or has a long-term health condition, has young children or is an older person) or you have already gathered a good deal of information which may be useful in progressing the case. Referral might also be appropriate if the person needs an interpreter or signer.

MP's office deals with the matter personally. There are certain scenarios when an MP's intervention can be particularly useful for a constituent, for example, when the person is seeking to obtain a response from a statutory body, when there has been a delay in dealing with a complaint or when all other avenues have been unsuccessful.

In many cases signposting or referral to an advice agency is the appropriate course of action. That is why it is really important to have built a relationship with your local Citizens Advice.

If you have a question about anything in this guide or need further information, please get in touch with us at parliament@citizensadvice.org.uk.



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