Oxford Community Work Agency

Annual Report

2016-2017
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OCWA Annual Report 2016/2017

Written by Sarah Darby
OCWA Manager

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MISSION STATEMENT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OCWA aims to work with individuals and local communities in Oxfordshire to:</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Enable people to obtain their rights;</td>
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<tr>
<td>• To empower people to meet their needs and fulfil their responsibilities,</td>
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<tr>
<td>• To use this experience to influence wider social policy in working for a more equal society.</td>
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Background

OCWA has been providing services to Oxfordshire residents for nearly 40 years and is located in the Barton Neighbourhood Centre in the heart of the local community. We run a front line advice centre (Barton Advice Centre) offering generalist advice and a telephone advice service. In addition to this we have a team who specialise in welfare benefits at the appeal level, more complex benefit cases and debt issues (Oxfordshire Welfare Rights). We deliver consultancy telephone services across both Counties of Oxfordshire and Hampshire and provide training to service providers across Oxfordshire through a training program.

OCWA is a limited charity (1049343) and a company limited by guarantee.
Our Service

**Barton Advice Centre**

Drop in (for residents in the OX3 area only)

Monday - 10am until 1pm

**Appointments**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Time</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>9am - 4pm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>9am - 4pm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>9am - 4pm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friday</td>
<td>9am - 4pm</td>
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**Telephone advice (for ALL Oxford City residents)**

Monday to Friday 9am - 5pm

Residents outside of Oxford City requiring advice should contact the Oxfordshire Specialist Advice Service on 01865 410660

**Oxfordshire Welfare Rights (Appointments by referral only)**

**Consultancy Telephone Service (for agencies only)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Time</th>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
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<td>Thursday</td>
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</table>
Staff Summary for 2016/17

Sarah Darby Manager – 35 hrs
Sophie Moss Adviser and Deputy Manager 35hrs
Theresa Elliot Adviser BAC - 35hrs (Until 27th May 2016)
Peter Turville Senior Caseworker 35hrs (from 18th July 2016)
Michael Sarosi Debt adviser – 17.5hrs
Mina Katouzian Volunteer Caseworker Assistant and Administrator (from July 2016)

Trustees from April 2015 to March 2016

Lyn Williams Treasurer
Sue Holden (MBE) Barton Community Association
Justine Brown Human Resources
Teresa Munby Ruskin College
Note from Manager Sarah Darby

I am pleased to present this report on the work of Oxford Community Work Agency in the period April 2016 to March 2017 during which has seen a significant change to our organisation both staff changes and organisational changes.

There are times in life when ones strength and resolve are severely tested. OCWA’s was last year. We started our year with the loss of three long serving members of staff. As a result of this loss we were forced to look at how we would continue to deliver a quality service. We started by asking ourselves if the service we were delivering was still relevant, needed and efficient. Once we felt we had the answers to these questions we started looking at how we could deliver this with fewer resources. This led to a new position being advertised and after the interview process, which saw a very high standard of candidates, we offered Peter Turville the position of Senior Caseworker. With the restructure almost complete we looked at our process of recording the work we do and realized how much information we weren’t capturing within our case recording system and therefore made the change to AdvicePro.

Our longstanding contract with Hampshire CABs came to an end in December 2016 due to loss of funding. We would like to thank all the advisers we were fortunate to work with and hope to have the opportunity to work with them again in the future.

I would like to personally thank Oxford City Council for their support and understanding during this period of transition. I would also like to thank other advice and support services particularly in Oxford City who have provided invaluable support to us.

I have learnt many things in the past year but the most important thing I have learned is the value of having a strong, dedicated, committed team behind me. I would like to take this opportunity to thank both current and previous staff for all of their hard work, professionalism and support both to the organisation and to myself personally.

We still have a way to go but I am confident that we are on the right road. Here’s to another year of learning and growing.
PERFORMANCE

Tribunal representation 2016/2017

Oxfordshire Welfare Rights attended 42 tribunal hearings between April 2016 and March 2017 with an 88% success rate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arrears gained</th>
<th>£84,469.77</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Annual award</td>
<td>£141,387.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>£225,856.91</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Benefits

- ESA
- PIP
- DLA
- Tax Credits
- All other

Personal Independence Payments took over as the highest represented benefit at Tribunal and we saw a 76% success rate with these appeals.

The above chart only shows cases that ended up in front of a Tribunal panel. A further £1,353,138.33 was gained through new and repeat claims for benefits and challenges by way of Mandatory Reconsiderations. This means that our total benefit gains for Oxfordshire residents for period 2016/17 was **£1,578,995.24**.
Debt

OCWA's debt specialist assisted with a total of 268 debt matters between April 2016 and March 2017 with a combined outstanding balance of £513,759.35. The split of priority and non-priority debt was as follows:

A breakdown of debts identified and resolved can be found in the chart below:

A total of £124,548.01 of debt was written off for clients across the City of Oxford following OCWA's intervention.

Total advice and caseworker gains from April 2016 to March 2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Specialist benefits advice and caseworker gains</td>
<td>£1,578,995.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debt write offs</td>
<td>£124,548.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>£1,703,543.25</strong></td>
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Referrals from other service providers

Throughout 2016/17 OCWA saw a total of 461 clients for face to face assistance. Of these 228 clients were referred to us by other service providers across the County. The chart below shows the split of referrals geographically across the County of Oxfordshire.

PERCENTAGE OF REFERRALS BY AREA

All referrals were taken through our consultancy service or from the new County advice service OSAS. The six largest referring agencies are recorded below.

Referring agencies
**Oxfordshire Consultancy Line**

The total number of calls taken from service providers across the County in 2016/2017 was 241. This was a significant drop from the previous year however we considered that this was due to lack of knowledge regarding the new County advice service.

The breakdown of providers using our consultancy service was as follows:

Calls regarding Employment and Support Allowance remained the highest at 35% of calls. Below is a breakdown of the top five enquiries taken on our consultancy line.
Hampshire Consultancy line

Our consultancy line for Hampshire Citizens Advice Bureaus ended in December 2016 due to uncertainty over funding. Between April 2016 and December 2016 we took a total of 299 calls. The six largest bureau users are recorded below.

![Pie chart]

- Basingstoke
- Farnborough
- Fareham
- Aldershot
- Winchester
- Gosport

The highest enquiry taken on the consultancy line remained the same with 27% of enquiries regarding ESA. Below is a breakdown of the highest categories of enquiries.

![Bar chart]

- ESA
- Tax credits
- Housing Benefit
- Income Support
- PIP
Training

Training was relatively quiet this year compared to previous years. Feedback was that training budgets were stretched and therefore advice and support services were focusing on training on Universal Credit.

Following the changes to the funding provided to advice services from the County Council resulting in a significant reduction in the clients who could obtain specialist assistance, the focus on training in year 2016/2017 was aimed at supporting other advice agencies in the County to cover this gap. We wrote and delivered two new courses, Challenging benefits decisions and Preparing for appeal. These courses were popular and we ran them each twice. We also wrote and delivered our first half day Universal Credit course and will be looking to add to this in 2017/18.

Other courses delivered included Employment Support Allowance and Personal Independence Payments.

We further delivered in-house training to advice services in South and Vale.

Ruskin College

We ran our annual training on welfare benefits for students taking the law module of the social work degree course. This entailed delivering four training sessions, an assessment day and marking of the papers.

Bretherton Solicitors

We delivered a series of webinars to Bretherton solicitors on welfare benefits. These were uploaded to you tube and included benefits for families, work seekers and sickness and disability benefits.
Partnership Working

Oxford City Partnership

OCWA became a partner in the Oxford City lottery funded scheme known as Help in Crisis. The aim of the project was to provide more joined up services to clients who come to us in crisis. The project is headed by Citizens Advice Oxford and includes Barton Advice Centre, Agnes Smith Advice Centre, Rosehill and Donnington Advice Centre, Shelter, Asylum Welcome, Refugee Resource and Oxfordshire Mind. This is a five year project which gives us the opportunity to learn effective ways of assisting our clients.

Sovereign Housing

OCWA worked closely with Sovereign Housing to provide welfare benefit advice to their residents. The aim of the project was to ensure income maximization and therefore prevent rent arrears. In 2016/17 OCWA assisted Sovereign Housing residents with benefit issues securing total gains of £86,313.39.

Greensquare

OCWA continued to work closely with Greensquare on a project administered through Oxford Citizens Advice Bureau. The project provided support for both staff and tenants regarding welfare benefits and debt, securing gains for Greensquare tenants of £141,339.78.

Thames Water Trust

In the early part of 2016, OCWA entered into a partnership with the Agnes Smith Advice Centre and Rosehill and Donnington to provide advice and applications for assistance funded by the Thames Water Trust. This is a project funded for two years and is available for residents living on the three estates of Barton, Blackbird Leys and Rosehill.
Bretherton Solicitors

OCWA continue to work with Bretherton Solicitors in Banbury providing welfare benefits advice and assistance nationally to clients of their spinal litigation team.

Oxfordshire Specialist Advice Service

Age UK Oxfordshire, Citizens Advice Oxford, Citizens Advice West Oxfordshire and Oxfordshire Welfare Rights have come together to provide a free, comprehensive, independent advice service.

The service helps with queries around benefits, money advice, budgeting and other welfare issues and will link clients into services that can provide further support.

The service is free for people to use. It is jointly funded by Adult Social Care and Children, Education and Families, so it is focused on meeting the needs of people living in Oxfordshire who are struggling with their day-to-day lives due to disability or ill health.

The first year of this project saw Oxfordshire Welfare Rights assist 26 Oxfordshire residents with benefit issues securing £128,872.48 of benefits income.
Without your help I don’t think I would’ve had the confidence and courage my PIP decision. You and your team do an amazing job and are a credit to the community.

As always, great training!

Thank you for all your help. Our son qualified for PIP.

Thanks loads! It was a relief that someone understood my predicament.

Excellent service. Without you we wouldn’t have got the end result we did.

10/10

The staff are skilled and more importantly they are compassionate. Their persistence in the face of adversity was remarkable.
Thank You

The work of Oxford Community Work Agency would not be able to continue without the support from our funders and partners. Therefore we would like to thank:

Oxford City Council
Oxfordshire County Council
Hampshire Citizens Advice
Sovereign Housing
Greensquare
Ruskin College
Brethertons Solicitors
The Oxford City Stronger Together Partnership
Thames Water
The Oxford City Advice Centre Forum
St Michael's and All Saints' Charities

We would like to thank our Board of Directors for their support throughout 2016/17 and once again special thanks goes to our team of caseworkers for their commitment and dedication.