



Oxford Community Work Agency

Annual Report

2015-2016

Oxfordshire
Welfare
Rights

Barton
Advice
Centre

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OCWA Annual Report 2015/2016

Written by Sarah Darby
OCWA Manager

MISSION STATEMENT

OCWA aims to work with individuals and local communities in Oxfordshire to:

- Enable people to obtain their rights;
- To empower people to meet their needs and fulfil their responsibilities,
- To use this experience to influence wider social policy in working for a more equal society.

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

The Barton Advice Centre is open for telephone advice from Monday to Friday between 9am and 5pm.

Drop in sessions

These sessions are 20 minute diagnostic interviews. An appointment may be made for further assistance following this interview.

Monday 10am – 1pm

Appointments

Appointments are available for form filling and more complex cases such as challenging benefit decisions on:

Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday

9am – 12pm

1pm - 4pm

Oxfordshire Welfare Rights

Appointments made by referral from other service providers only. Appointments are available Monday to Friday between 9am and 4pm.

Staff Summary for 2015/16

Sarah Darby	Manager – 17.5hrs
Suzy Drohan	Manager – 17.5hrs (until July 15)
Peter Turville	Team Leader Training and Consultancy – 21hrs (until March 16)
Nick Turnill	Caseworker (OWR) – 35hrs (until March 16)
Sarah Darby	Caseworker (OWR) – 17.5hrs (until July 15)
Suzy Drohan	Caseworker (OWR) - 17.5hrs (until July 15)
Ian Pattison	Caseworker (OWR) - 35hrs (until March 16)
Sophie Moss	Adviser BAC - 35hrs (Deputy Manager from November 2015)
Theresa Elliot	Adviser BAC - 35hrs
Michael Sarosi	Debt adviser – 17.5hrs

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 2015 to March 2016 during which has seen a significant change to our organisation.

We said goodbye to joint manager Suzy Drohan in July 2015. Suzy was offered a position in MP Andrew Smith's office and had been a big part of OCWA for 20 years. We wish her all the best for the future.

We were made aware of the proposed cuts to Oxfordshire County Council funding for advice provision in the County in the previous year. The new contract commissioned by County Council saw the amalgamation of two existing services; the home visiting service for the over 65's and the specialist advice service. The contract was awarded to AgeUK as preferred supplier along with West Oxfordshire and Oxford Citizens Advice Bureaus sub-contracted to provide the specialist advice part of the contract. Oxfordshire Welfare Rights are subcontracted to provide a consultancy line for service providers and tribunal representation on 25 of the most complex cases across the County.

Due to this loss of funding OCWA saw 3 longstanding members of its team being transferred to the new service.

Although far from Ideal, this gave us the opportunity to take a look at our organisation and consider how we could ensure that we were reaching the most complex of cases with the resources we had. This resulted in a restructure of OCWA and a strengthening of the team.

I would personally like to thank both current and previous members of staff for all of their incredibly hard work, expertise, professionalism and at times considerable patience particularly through the difficult times.

We now look forward to continuing to strengthen and grow and providing the high quality advice service we are so proud of.

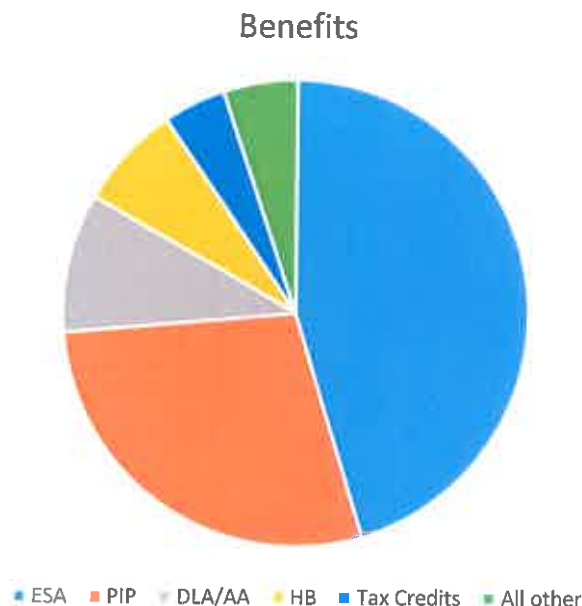
PERFORMANCE

Tribunal representation 2015/2016

Oxfordshire Welfare Rights represented at 177 Tribunal hearings between April 2015 and March 2016 with an 87% success rate.

Arrears gained	£580,404.88
Annual award	£714,888.43
Total	£1,295,293.31

Breakdown of Benefits represented at Tribunal

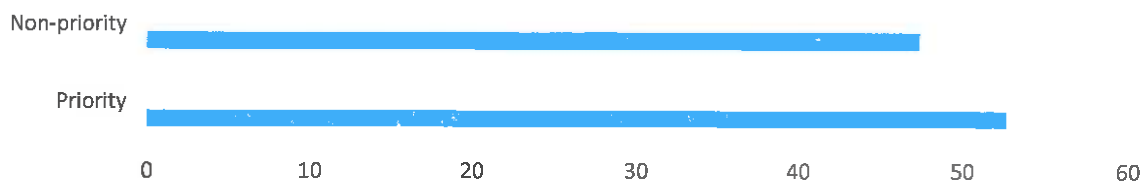


Employment and Support Allowance continued to be the highest represented benefit at Tribunal. However we noted a significant increase in appeals against Personal Independence Payment decisions.

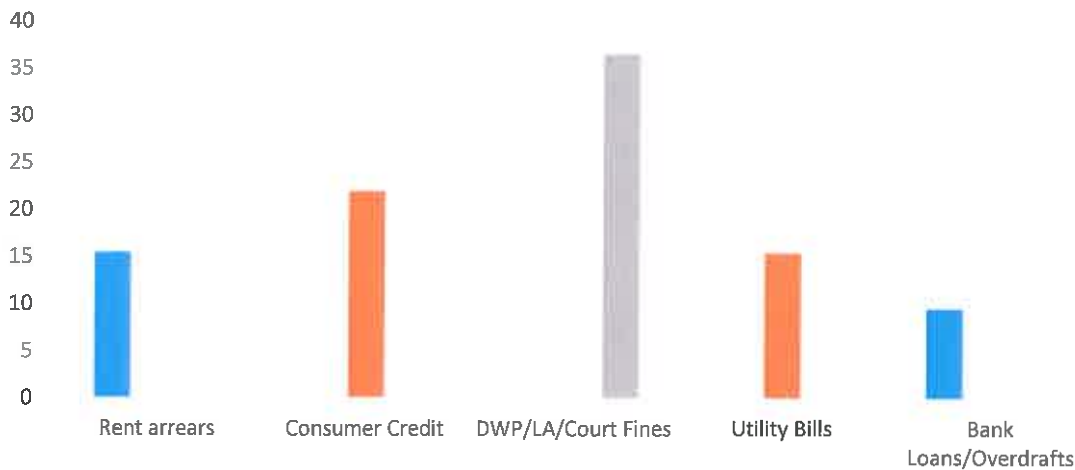
The above chart shows only cases that were heard before a Tribunal panel. OCWA assisted with a further 703 new or renewal claims for benefit and successful challenges to benefit decisions with a financial gain of £1,913,073.54. This means our total financial gains for benefits in 15/16 for Oxfordshire residents was **£3,208,366.85**.

Debt

OCWA's debt specialist saw a total of 186 debt matters between April 2015 and March 2016 with a combined total of £624,382.09 debt. 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 £115,090.29 of debt was written off for clients across the County following OCWA's intervention.

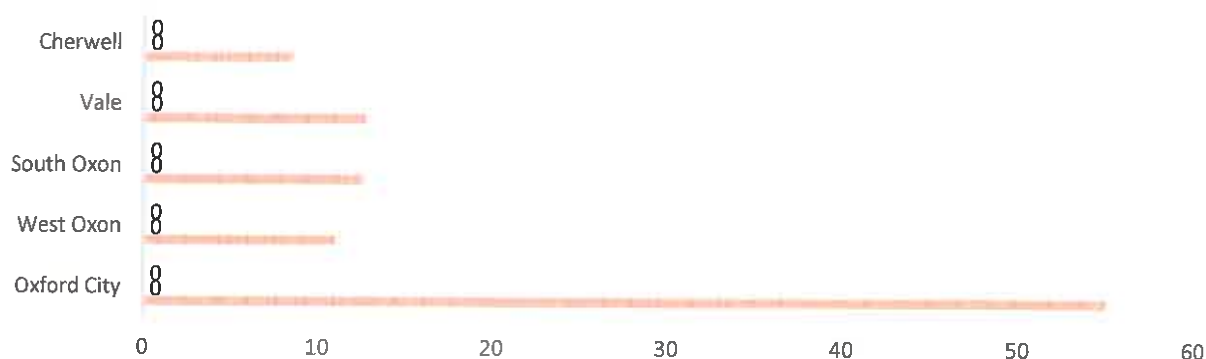
Total Advice and caseworker gains from April 2015 to March 2016

Specialist benefits advice and caseworker gains	£3,208,366.85
Debt write offs	£115,090.29
Total	£3,323,457.14

Referrals from other Service Providers

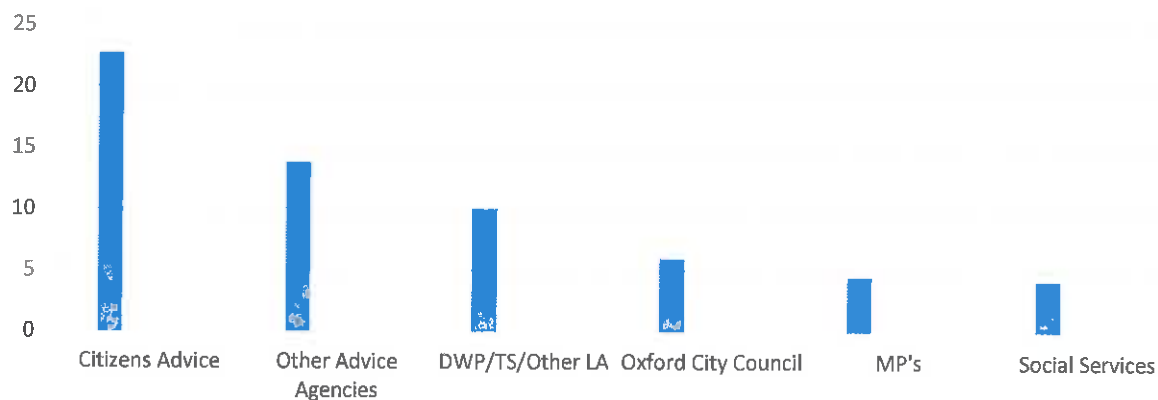
Throughout 2015/2016 OCWA, through the Barton Advice Centre and Oxfordshire Welfare Rights, saw 852 clients. Of these 396 were referred to us by other service providers across the County. The chart below shows the split of referrals geographically across the County of Oxfordshire.

PERCENTAGE OF REFERRALS BY AREA



The six largest referring agencies across Oxfordshire between 2015 and 2016 is recorded below.

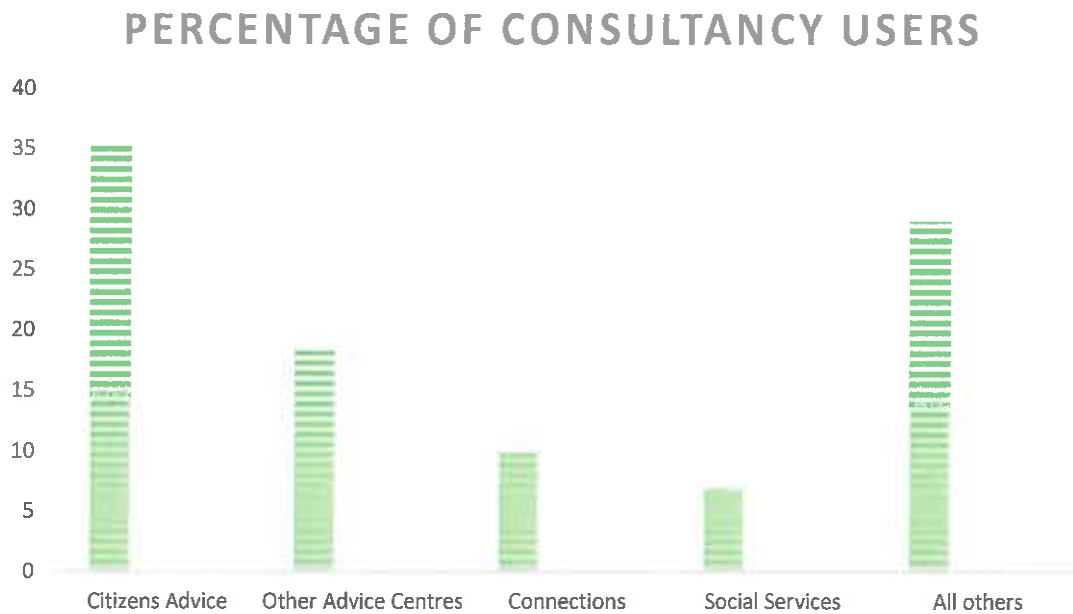
REFERRING AGENCIES



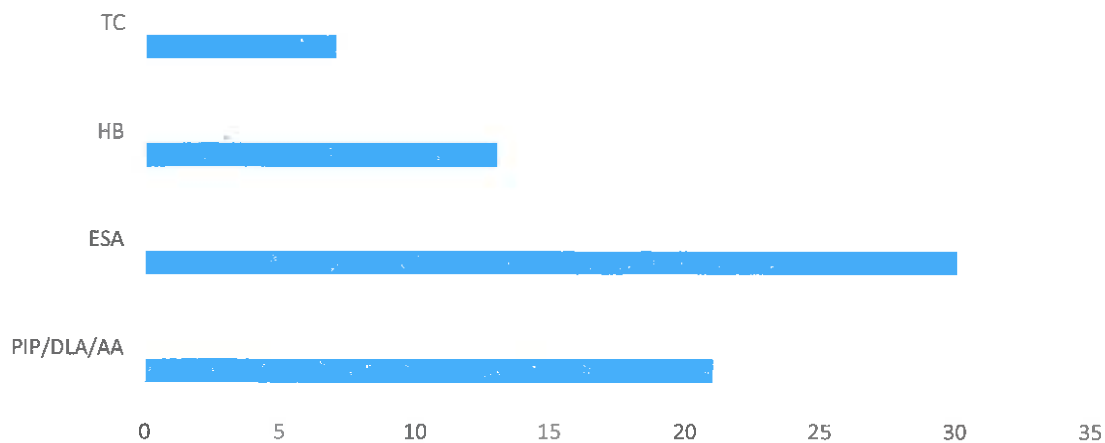
We saw an increase in media referrals in 15/16 following a high profile case taken on by OWR. All referrals were taken via our consultancy line, through our drop in service and by signposting from other agencies.

Oxfordshire Consultancy Line

The total number of calls taken from Service Providers across Oxfordshire in 2015/2016 was 502. The breakdown of providers using the consultancy service was as follows:

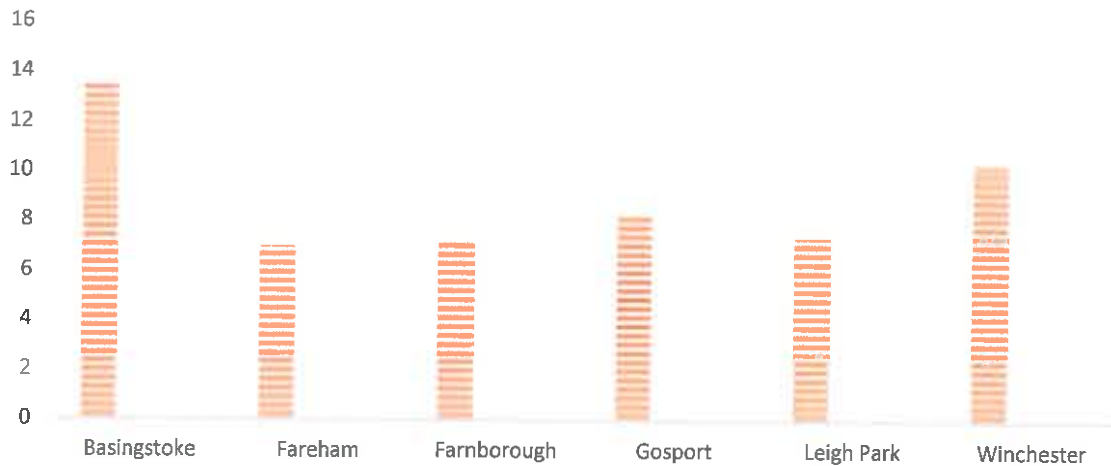


We saw a significant increase in calls relating to PIP compared to just 8% in 14/15. The chart below shows the top four benefit enquiries taken on our consultancy line.



Hampshire Consultancy Line

Oxfordshire Welfare Rights have a contract with a consortium of Citizens Advice across Hampshire to provide a telephone consultancy service for welfare benefit enquiries. Between April 2015 and March 2016 we took a total of 526 consultancy calls. The six largest bureau users are recorded below.



The highest enquiry taken on the consultancy line remained the same with 28% of enquiries for ESA. However we saw an increase in disability benefits and housing benefit enquiries against 2014-15.



Training

Oxfordshire Welfare Rights delivered training to over 150 delegates in year 2015/16. This included training from our annual training programme, in-house training and talks to individual organisations. Organisations who attended our training included:

Oxfordshire Citizens Advice Bureaus, Aspire, RABI, Homeless Pathways, Agnes Smith Advice Centre and Social Services.

The following courses were delivered here, at our centre, between April 2014 and March 2015:

Tax Credits

Disability Living Allowance and Attendance Allowance

Personal Independence Payments

Employment and Support Allowance

Universal Credit

We further delivered in-house training to Banbury CAB, West Oxfordshire CAB and Oxfordshire South and Vale CABs.

Ruskin College Training

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 plus assessments and marking of the papers.

Disability Training

We ran our annual training day for junior doctors at the Post Graduate Education Centre at the John Radcliffe Hospital.

Partnership Working

Oxford City Partnership

OCWA was a partner in the Oxford City lottery funded scheme known as Stronger Together. The aim of the project was to strengthen the work of the partnered advice agencies through a better coordination of our existing services, improve signposting and referral processes and to share experience of best practice. The aim of the partnership was to create a better journey to appropriate advice for Oxford city residents.

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 2015/16 OCWA assisted 44 Sovereign Housing residents with benefit issues securing total gains of £179'437.88.

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 £185'211.23.

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.

Excellent as always!

Clearly extremely knowledgeable

Clear detailed information, very useful and informative

Thorough and helpful as are all courses run by OWR

I sincerely hope that OWR get the funding it needs to keep up the great work they already do and have done for years. They are a 'lifeline' to the general public and advice centre's alike. I think we need OWR more than EVER now Universal Credit is imminent!

Many many thanks for the time and effort you put into my case. I so appreciate all of your hard work. I would not have had the outcome if I had not had your help.

Thank you!

Further to our conversation and your support last week I thought you'd like to know the appeal has been allowed. The client will now get the enhanced rate daily living component backdated from last year, for a 3 year period.

Thank you for your support/advice.

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

Coutts Bank

The Oxford City Advice Centre Forum

We would like to thank our Board of Directors for their support throughout 2015/16 and once again special thanks goes to our team of caseworkers for their commitment and dedication.