

# ADVICE CAFÉ IMPACT REPORT

2024-25

## Introduction

Advice Cafés are community spaces where people can drop in for free advice on debt, benefits and other important issues. One of the things we often hear from people who have experience of using the Foodbank is that when they first fell into financial difficulties, they didn't know who or where to turn to for advice and support.

Over the past couple of years, we've been working closely with our referral partners to develop a network of drop-in hubs modelled on the Advice Café that began at Leatherhead Community Hub in 2022. This aligns with our vision of creating confident, connected and empowered communities, where people are able to access the holistic support they need before they fall into crisis.

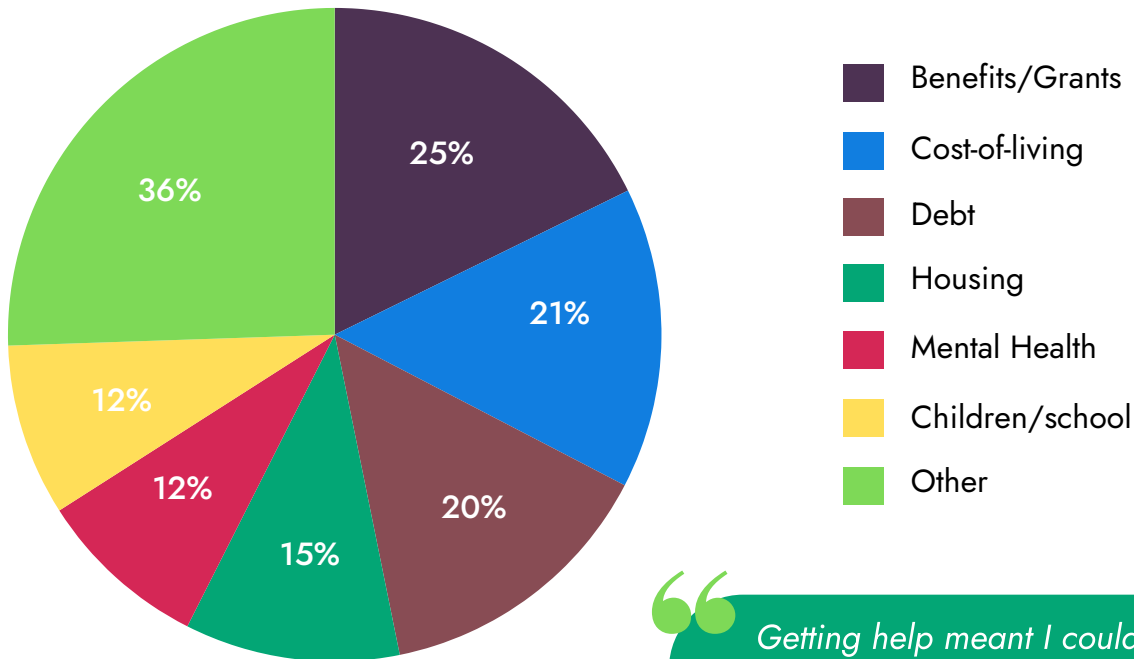
We ask our partner agencies to fill in monitoring forms for each of their clients, so that we can keep a record of who is using the Advice Cafés, how they access this service, and the type of support they receive.

Since we started using these forms at the end of April 2024, we have collected information on 605 clients from 19 different organisations across the three locations. Based on an estimated completion rate of between a half and two-thirds, this means that we saw between 900-1,200 clients over the year up to the end of April 2025.



# Reasons for visiting the Advice Café

Over the whole year, our clients have received advice and support on 900 different issues - an average of 1.5 issues per client. The most common issues, by category, were:



“Getting help meant I could have a fresh start. I’m on my way now to being debt-free. It’s a big weight off my mind.”

There was a significant change between the first and second half of the survey period. Benefits/grants have accounted for a much larger proportion of cases since the end of last year (up from 18% to 34%), with a corresponding decline in the proportion of cost-of-living cases (down from 30% to 10%).

Some issues were more likely to be raised at some centres than others. For example, debt issues were much more common at the St Barnabas Advice Café. Cost-of-living and child/school issues were more prevalent at the LCH Advice Café, and mental health and relationship issues were more common at the Merland Rise Advice Café.



# Abbey's Story

When Abbey arrived in the area with her four children, she had very few belongings. She had fled domestic violence and left her support network behind.

A local Sure Start centre referred her to the Foodbank and she was referred from there to the Advice Café.

Through attending the Advice Café, Abbey was able to apply for grants for essential items, including beds for her children, and be referred to Stripey Stork for clothing and to BESOM for furniture. She was also referred to Citizens Advice, who helped her understand and access the benefits she was entitled to.

But what Abbey speaks about most, and has had the most impact, is the emotional support she received through attending the Advice Café. She found the welcoming, non-judgmental, consistent support made all the difference and always made her feel comfortable.

Abbey acknowledges that there is a lot of support online, but it can sometimes appear that you don't qualify for help, or it can be embarrassing to ask for it.

The Advice Café also helped her discover support she wouldn't have known about on her own – such as help with second-hand uniform, funding for school trips and assistance from other local charities.

Life is still challenging for Abbey, with the cost of bills and food increasing; but she now knows there's somewhere to go for support if she needs it.

She is so grateful for the help she has received through the Advice Café: "Honestly I don't know what I'd have done without them."



**Besom**



**citizens advice** Epsom & Ewell

"Sometimes I didn't even need food, it was just a bit of company for a cup of tea, just for someone to ask if I was alright, which meant alot to me"

# Reasons for visiting Advice Café by Location

	Epsom	Leatherhead	Tadworth	Total*
Benefits/grants	24%	29%	23%	25%
Cost-of-living	16%	27%	21%	21%
Debt	33%	12%	14%	20%
Housing	12%	16%	16%	15%
Mental health	12%	11%	15%	12%
Children/school	9%	15%	13%	12%
Relationships	3%	7%	8%	6%
Social isolation	4%	3%	5%	4%
Physical health	2%	3%	5%	3%
Employment	1%	4%	3%	3%
Other	40%	32%	35%	36%

\*Some clients received support with more than one issue, so these add up to more than 100%

Advice Café clients have been supported with a wide range of specific issues, including: benefit checks, budgeting, college funding, council tax, energy top ups, housing repairs, school uniform, community activities, social isolation, housing repairs, carer respite, PIP applications, immigration issues, and blue badge applications.



“Receiving help with fuel vouchers was really useful because I had to decide – do I heat the house or top up the electric? I couldn’t always do both.”

# Kathy's Story

Kathy is a full-time carer for her partner. The benefits the couple were receiving weren't covering rising costs and everything started to feel overwhelming.

Kathy decided to go to the Advice Café. While it turned out they weren't eligible for Pension Credit, the visit opened the door to much more help. Citizens Advice connected her with the Moneywise team at Raven Housing, who helped her resolve her rent arrears.

The couple were also struggling with soaring gas and electric bills. With support from the Advice Café, they were able to clear their energy debt entirely, which "felt like a weight had been lifted off me". Kathy has now started to put money aside for future bills – something she hadn't been able to do in a long time: "Recently a bill came in and I had the money to pay it – it felt good!"

A Surrey Community Action warm homes adviser carried out a home energy assessment, and her utilities company were able to help by giving practical items like draft excluders, energy-efficient lightbulbs, and an electric blanket.

But for Kathy, the Advice Café is more than just a place to help. It's also a place to be heard.

Kathy now recommends the Advice Café to others, including her daughter who has received support with school uniform for her children and a neighbour who needed support with their Council Tax payments.

Kathy continues to need support occasionally from the foodbank and is concerned about the winter ahead; but she is feeling a lot more positive. Having access to the Advice Café gives her reassurance: "I've got somewhere to turn now, so I hope it continues. It was a lifesaver for me."



"Sometimes it's just nice to go in and have a chat. It makes you feel like you're not on your own, like you have someone to turn to."

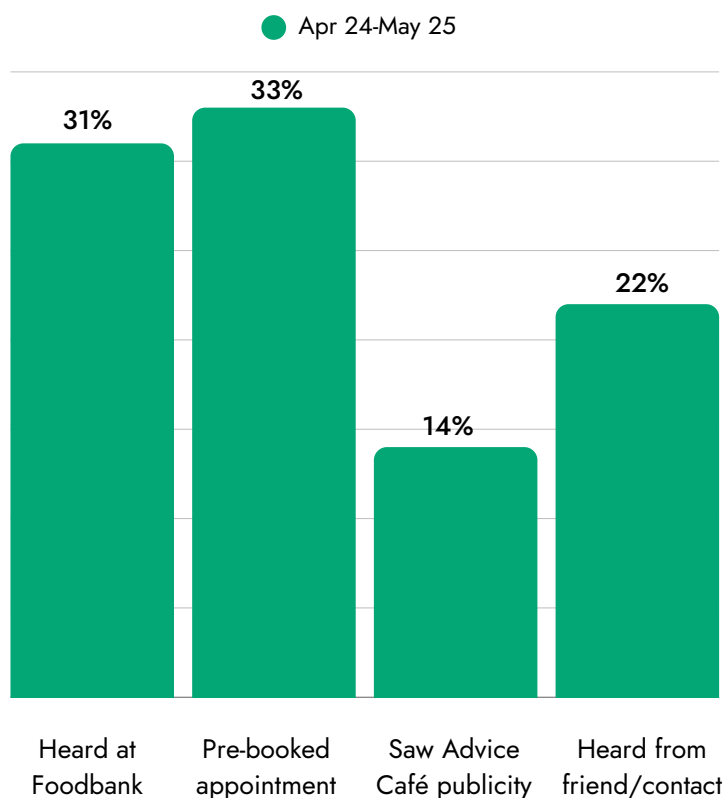
# Additional Support

In 4 in 10 cases, advisers made a referral to another agency for additional support. Most of these - nearly 7 in 10 - were verbal referrals to other advisers in the Advice Café, showing the benefits of being co-located in the same space. The remainder involved an email to another agency (2 in 10) or an online referral system (1 in 10).

# How clients heard about the Advice Café

The majority of people using the Advice Cafés (55%) had visited the Foodbank in the previous three months, although this proportion is gradually falling over time (from 57% in the first half of the period to 53% in the second half).

About a third of clients (31%) heard about the Advice Café at the Foodbank; another third said they had a pre-booked appointment with one of the advisers, in most cases one of the support workers at Good Company. The remainder had seen publicity about the Advice Café (14%) or heard about it from a friend or contact (22%).



This shows that the Advice Cafés are beginning to reach a broader group of people than recent Foodbank clients - and this should increase over time as awareness of this service spreads more widely in the community. The expectation is that the Advice Cafés will play a preventative role, helping people to address underlying issues before they reach crisis point.

*“I’m constantly telling people to go there. Even if they can’t help you directly, they’ll point you to someone who can.”*



# Experiences of using the Advice Café

Did you feel safe and welcome?

97%

Did you get the support needed?

98%

Were you told about other community activities?

68%

Nearly everyone (97%) said they felt both “safe” and “welcome” at the Advice Cafés, and 98% said they received the advice and support they needed. Overall, 99% of clients reported being “very satisfied” (85%) or “satisfied” (14%) with their experience of using the Advice Café.

Around 8 in 10 clients who visited one of the Advice Cafés this year said they had been told about other community events or activities (up from 6 in 10 last year), helping to reduce social isolation and strengthen people’s support networks. This proportion is still significantly higher at the LCH Advice Café (88%) than at St Barnabas (62%) or Merland Rise (55%), perhaps reflecting the range of other activities going on at each of these venues.



“Sometimes I didn’t even need food, it was just a bit of company for a cup of tea - just for someone to ask if I was all right, which meant a lot to me. Honestly, I don’t know what I would have done without them.”

“When you feel low, you don’t want to have to ring and talk to someone over the phone. When you can see agencies face to face and they can come over and talk to you, it’s so much better.”



citizens  
advice

Mole  
Valley

# Anne's Story

Anne first came into contact with local support services through a referral from Citizens Advice to the Foodbank. She felt nervous and embarrassed about accessing support and hadn't spoken to anyone about the challenges she and her husband were facing, including his significant health issues and their financial instability.

Anne's husband had long-standing mental health challenges, which had escalated over time. Through the Advice Café, Anne was able to access local mental health services, leading to regular visits from a mental health support worker.

Anne was invited to attend an energy-saving workshop that helped her better manage their household bills, and also reviewed her finances with the team from the Advice Café. She was able to access funding for a replacement fridge when her old one broke - an unexpected but hugely appreciated lifeline.

Over time, Anne has begun to use other services at Leatherhead Community Hub, such as the Community Fridge. Though she still occasionally needs the Foodbank during financially difficult weeks, she now feels they're managing better and knows where to turn if needed.

The social aspect of the Advice Café has been equally important. Anne values having a space where she is known, welcomed, and listened to. Even when she doesn't need specific help, she visits just to sit with a cup of tea or have a friendly conversation.

She describes the Advice Café as "brilliant", and the welcoming, community-focused atmosphere has had a lasting impact on her and her family. In the future, she hopes to be able to access more workshops and social events at the Hub.



"Sometimes it's nice to have people that you can just share with and it's not going to go any further. They're not going to judge you, they're there to help you."