

Citizens Advice Barnet

I am very pleased that the Church has decided to support Citizens Advice Barnet as one of its charities this year. I've been a volunteer there for 6 years.

Each local Citizens Advice charity is an independent charity including Citizens Advice Barnet, which has been providing local advice for over 80 years now. We offer a complete range of advice and support to anyone who lives, works or studies in Barnet.

Our service is free and confidential and the advice is independent and impartial. This means the service is open to everyone, is in their interests without outside influence and is non-judgemental. To help those in the greatest need, our advice focuses mainly on employment, welfare benefits, debt, housing and immigration. We are funded through a mixture of charitable trusts, donations and contracts with Barnet Council. We receive no direct government funding, and while we are funded by the Council, we are separate from it.

With a team of about 30 staff and over 50 volunteers, we currently help around 10,000 local people each year. We are seeing a large increase in the need for our services as a result of the pandemic. At the moment, all our work is taking place from home through email and telephone advice. Our main Office, based in Hendon, is Covid safe and for short periods of time we have been seeing some of the most vulnerable people there when the risk has been less high.

In recent years our work has become increasingly challenging, with poverty, homelessness and poor mental health becoming ever more common problems as a result of years of austerity, cuts to Legal Aid and now the pandemic. This means we now deal with complex issues for which people would have previously been able to get help from a solicitor.

To give you an example of the people we help and how we help them, I would like to tell you about Ana. Ana was desperate when she contacted us near the end of last year. She was receiving Universal Credit and struggling to provide enough food for herself and her young son. To make things even worse, her cooker was broken and she felt very miserable that she wouldn't be able to cook something nice for her family at Christmas.

An adviser looked at her Universal Credit and found she was receiving a lower amount than she should be. She was also not aware of the reductions in her

council tax and electricity bills that she was entitled to. So we were able to help her get her finances on a better footing. We also gave her a food bank voucher so she could get food for herself and her son. With her cooker, we applied to another charity on her behalf and a brand new cooker arrived. Ana was very happy. She said "Citizens Advice Barnet has saved Christmas".

The advisers play the largest role in the organisation, but there are also other roles. I am currently a volunteer in the research team and before that was in a very different role on the financial capability side. Here I gave talks to a variety of organisations around the Borough on ways of saving on energy bills. These included childrens' centres and schools – that was for the parents and carers rather than the children! Also sheltered accommodation.

As a local charity, we rely on the support of our local community so are very grateful for the support of the Church.

I hope this gives you some idea of the work of Citizens Advice Barnet. If you would like to know more, please do contact me or you might visit our website which is barnetcab.org.uk

Thank you.