

Advice Information and Guidance Service response to COVID-19 emergency briefing

1.0 Summary

This paper outlines the work which has been undertaken by the Advice Information and Guidance Service provided by Citizens Advice Southampton and their partner organisations over the Covid-19 emergency.

The paper outlines key achievements and predicted increases in need for advice information and guidance support over the coming year as a result of Covid-19.

The Board are asked to receive this paper for information only.

2.0 Background

2.1 The Advice Information & Guidance Service was commissioned by the Integrated Commissioning Unit (ICU) on behalf of SCC Health and Social Care in April 2017 to deliver information, advice and guidance in order to meet Care Act requirements and achieve the following key objectives:

- Provision of a seamless offer of Advice, Information and Guidance (AIG) coordinated by a single contractor through a network of providers.
- Delivery of a single reliable information resource, which promotes self-serve or supported self-management across the system. Building capacity within the community, individuals and families for self-reliance wherever possible, seeking to develop new capacity in volunteering.
- Promoting accessibility of AIG services in order to meet the needs of all those who require the service and supporting low level AIG delivery in core providers of health, care and wellbeing services in the city.
- Promoting new ways of accessing and using information through innovation and new technologies.
- Empowering parents, children and young people with special educational needs or disabilities through information and support to achieve the best educational, health and care outcomes for themselves, promoting independence and self-advocacy (SEND).

2.2 The contract was awarded to Citizens Advice Southampton as the lead provider, with organisations such as Age UK, Rose Road Association, No Limits, CLEAR, EU Welcome, Environment Centre (tEC) partners, Southampton Advice & Representation Centre (SARC) subcontracted to provide specialism in key areas and additional capacity.

2.3 Contract value is £613,000 per annum funded by the Council. Contract commenced April 2017 (5 years + 2 year possible extension).

2.4 The main performance outcomes of the AIG Service are to deliver:

- Improved health and wellbeing for people – seeking to prevent problems arising
- Promotion of self-management/self-serve approaches within the city
- Reduced risks attributable to wider social determinants for wellbeing, including education, health, social care, employment, poverty and housing

- Individuals and carers knowing how and when to access services appropriately
- Financial or social gain by individuals accessing the services of AIG, noting that there may be a range of measures within this outcome requiring development with commissioners through the first year of this contract (social return on investment)
- Reduced/managed need for more specialist support/services in the long term as a result of the above.

2.5 The Service is available to all residents of Southampton City

- Children and young adults – wide range of advice ranging from health/wellbeing to welfare, housing and homelessness and more specifically information and advice relating to SEND
- Adults seeking asylum in the city and Immigrants within 5 years of first coming to the city – wide range of advice relating primarily to welfare, employment and housing.
- Adults and older people – general advice regarding welfare, benefits, family, consumer, law, employment, housing, health and wellbeing.
- Adults seeking more specialist employment advice and representation.
- Other specialist advice provisions which closely link with well-being
 - Fuel poverty and economy
 - Immigration
 - SEND – children, young people (0-25 years) and parents

3.0 Impact of Covid on Service Performance

Appendix 1 outlines key outcomes achieved by the AIG services prior to the pandemic. At the start of lockdown in March 2020 it was decided to suspend performance management of the contract for the AIG service. At least weekly commissioning contact was made with Citizens Advice Southampton to provide support to ensure that continuity of service was maintained. Commissioner and provider partners worked together to problem solve and adapt the service to ensure immediate need for help was delivered. Below is a brief summary of the impact of Covid-19 on the service's contract performance indicators and how the service responded to COVID-19.

3.1: Improved health and wellbeing for people – seeking to prevent problems arising

The ability of the service to use Make Every Contact Count principles during the current pandemic has been severely limited as face to face consultations has been limited due to social distancing measures and provider buildings not being adaptable to manage the risks associated with COVID-19.

3.2: Promotion of self-management/self-serve approaches in the City

Citizens Advice Southampton and partners have been working since the commencement of the contract to shift low complexity advice, information and guidance to an online offer. As a result of the pandemic it has been possible to accelerate this shift. The Service was able to track the changing needs and themes as the pandemic took hold by monitoring access to partner websites. Initially there was a high demand online for people accessing information relating to employment, housing and welfare rights. As the government's Furlough Scheme and limitations on housing landlord actions were introduced this demand dropped to near normal levels into

May and June 2020. With the ending of the economic schemes the service has experienced a return to employment, housing, welfare and debt advice.

3.3: Reduced/managed need for specialist support/services in the long term

The number of requests for specialist support fell during the first period of the pandemic, particularly relating to children's education related issues. Providing support to individuals who have no recourse to public funding was challenging due to the COVID-19 guidance and the need to see documentary evidence. With the recommencement of tribunals, complex employment and housing issues the service is expecting an increasing demand due to the changing need in the population and as a result of the backlog caused by the suspension of government processes.

3.4: Reducing risks attributable to wider social determinants for wellbeing, including education, health, social care, employment, poverty and housing

The holistic nature of AIG services ensures that clients are supported beyond the presenting issue. It is common for clients to ask about the most pressing problem – an imminent bailiff visit, for example – but a thorough exploration will reveal additional issues such as further debts, unclaimed benefits, poor quality housing and more. Tailored advice and support is designed to address all issues to improve the client's overall situation, and can have a direct effect on health and wellbeing through resolving problems as well as indirect improvements through reducing stress and ensuring access to appropriate services. Providing this function has become more challenging as face to face support has been significantly reduced with other issues more difficult to detect.

3.5: Individuals and carers knowing how and when to access services appropriately

Knowledge of AIG services is often through word-of-mouth, and this issue is being addressed through implementation of a Communications Strategy. So with social isolation and the numbers of citizens in the city who are not yet digitally engaged this method cannot be relied upon to connect with people needing access to the service.

The AIG service is working with the council to develop a digital inclusion strategy.

The AIG service identified that some frontline services are unaware of the support offered, resulting in patchy referrals. For example, SCC social workers are on frequent rotation and it is necessary to ensure that new staff are aware of the services available. To address this, AIG intend to create a quarterly newsletter that can be cascaded down through relevant teams such as social care, the CCG, Council teams in housing, benefits and Gateway, and local community and voluntary organisations.

3.6: Financial or social gain by individuals accessing the services of AIG

Over the past year, AIG services collectively supported an income gain for Southampton residents of at least £2,471,931 – an increase of 29% on the previous year. Over the year 12,483 clients have been supported with generalist services and 2,789 in specialist projects, not including people who self-serve by accessing the AIG partner websites directly. Part of this increase is attributable to improved recording of outcomes, as specified in the service's development objectives for 2019-20. Work to establish the value of Social Return on Investment was started this year but was unfortunately suspended due to the outbreak of COVID-19. AIG

intend to resume the SROI study in 2020-21 to establish the social gains that clients experience following advice.

With the changing needs and increases in claimants for welfare benefits in the city there is likely to be a large increase in the amount of funding coming into the city. The measure used in this metric will need to differentiate between universal credit and other income sources to demonstrate the service's added value to the population of the city.

3.7 Overview of client support

This year, AIG partners supported 12,483 clients through generalist services and 2,789 through specialist services, of whom 10,026 were unique clients, across a total of 48,696 client interactions. AIG also provided light-touch support to 5,939 clients, supporting Southampton City Council's early intervention and prevention agenda.

AIG supported clients in the following categories:

SEND	280
Tribunal	114
Home visiting	360
Immigration	736
Young people (0-24)	6,103
Fuel poverty	687

4.0 AIG Recovery and response to changing needs and anticipated increases in demand

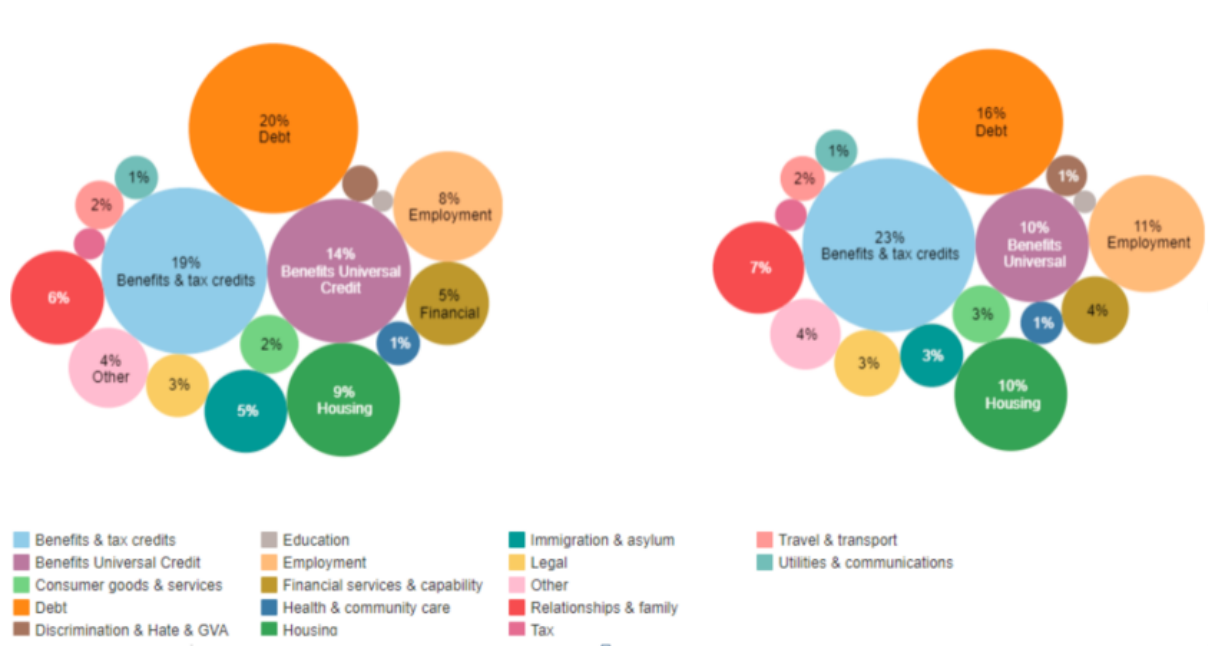
Partners providing the AIG service have responded to the changes in demand for advice information and guidance over the initial period of COVID-19 in the following ways:

- CAS has secured a freephone number for clients to access advice. This replaces the current Adviceline and local telephone numbers.
- CAB has reopened limited face-to-face services at the Central Library.
- A video (advice pods) advice pilot has been introduced with commencement of a Data Processing Impact Assessment in conjunction with Citizens Advice Hampshire.
- CAB are having productive conversations with other local debt advice providers, Christians Against Poverty and Frontline from City Life Church, about how best to work together to meet the expected increasing demand over the coming months. Novel ways of working together in partnership are being explored such as:
 - Shared referral system using the Refernet portal, so that referrals can be forwarded directly to other agencies when there are capacity issues at the agency receiving the referral. AIG partners are currently setting up a data sharing agreement to enable use of Refernet across the relevant organisations.
 - Exploring how best to monitor and share information regarding capacity so that this information is readily accessible to all debt advice providers in the City.
 - Potential for CAP Money Coaches to support clients with budgeting and collating evidence prior to a full debt advice appointment, reducing the workload for specialist advisers and caseworkers.

- Setting up a Debt Advice Forum for the City to pool knowledge and resources, initially online through a platform such as Workplace and with the potential to progress to face-to-face events when circumstances allow.
- AIG partners are also looking at Workplace as a potential platform for the wider partnership to facilitate shared learning and enhanced partnership working between organisations.
- Age UK Southampton has started reintroducing staff to the workplace. They currently have 4 volunteers who are working from home, and are steadily increasing volunteering hours; volunteers are keen to do more and to return to the office but as many are over 70, they are unable to progress this until Government guidance allows.
- AIG partners are currently in talks with the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) around increasing referrals through primary care, working with cluster groups across the City. GPs will be supported to identify those most in need and with clear information on how to refer to Age UK Southampton. AIG are proposing to use this approach for the wider partnership in future as a means of achieving improved health and welfare outcomes for clients.
- AIG partners have previously worked with Solent University on developing and piloting an Age UK app in response to a significant gap identified in the digital opportunities for older people. This would be a very simple, one-touch support offer for emergencies or to access information and advice. The project has been ongoing for a couple of years and is currently with a group of students at Solent University. Provision of equipment has been one of the biggest challenges of this project; partners are now in the early stages of investigating the possibility of using repurposed phones to cover the equipment requirements.
- The Environment Centre continues to operate remotely with a full complement of staff with fewer referrals than usual. Work is underway to consider how and when services might reopen, including what circumstances would warrant face to face support with specific consideration to enable access for those clients who struggle to use telephone or digital channels, particularly those in urgent situations or who need to prepare ahead of winter.
- The Rose Road Association has now recommenced face-to-face meetings. All requests for face-to-face contact are referred to a manager who assesses the need for a meeting in person and conducts an individual risk assessment. Rose Road Association now seeing an increasing number of contacts, including both new referrals and contacts from existing clients. Many enquiries are about child safety in school and whether parents will be fined if they choose not to send their children to school.

5.0 Future clients, channels and demand

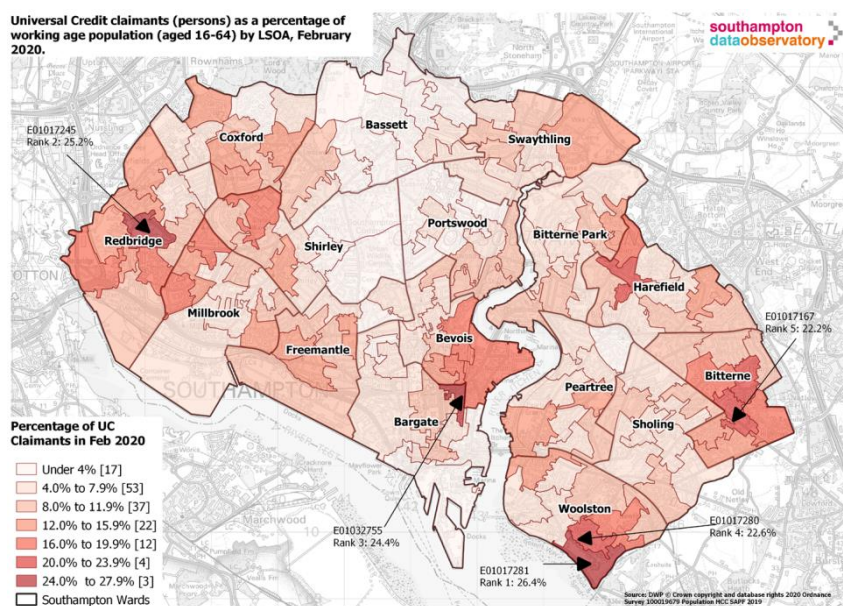
5.1 The AIG partners have experienced a shifting pattern for help. The chart below compares the types of advice requested quarter 1 in 2019/20 to quarter 1 2020/21



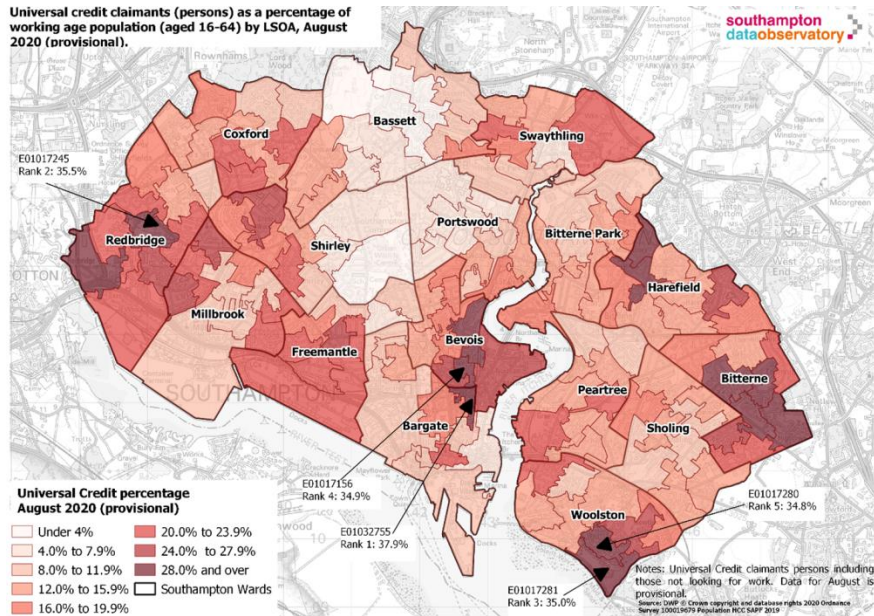
5.2 There is concern within the AIG partners about the future demand for advice information and guidance as a result of the COVID-19 economic impact.

The Council is monitoring the levels of unemployment and people accessing Universal Credit.

The 1st map of the City shows the percentage of all people (Working Age People) in each LSOA (Neighbourhood) who were in receipt of Universal Credit in February 2020 (The last full month prior to 'lockdown'). The highest rate was in Weston at 26.4% , with similar pockets of deprivation in Thornhill, Bargate, and Redbridge.



The 2nd map illustrates the change in deprivation by August 2020, where the same neighbourhoods' percentage had increased to approx. 35% of the Working Age Population in receipt of UC. It is concerning to record that over a third of the Working Age Population in some of our communities were reliant on UC at the start of the Summer, and even more worrying when it is remembered the data was recorded prior to Furlough beginning to be dismantled.



It is anticipated that levels of unemployment and applications to Universal Credit will continue to rise during the remainder of 2020 and into 2021. Levels of unemployment are a good predictor of future demand for advice services.

5.3 Based on a direct proportional comparison:

Unemployment Rate	Predicted number of clients (annual)	Predicted number of clients (per week)	% increase compared to baseline	Additional FTE resources required (minimum)
4.6% - 2019 baseline	15,272 (actual)	294		
9%	21,700	417	42%	8.6
12%	26,200	503	71%	14.6
15%	30,600	588	100%	20.4

The predicted number of staff needed takes into account an increased use of technology to access advice information and guidance. It should be noted the figures above do not include clients supported or predicted to require debt advice from CAS, as this is sourced under a different project funded by the Money Advice & Pension Service (MaPS) via the national Citizens Advice charity. Debt advice at No Limits is included in the above figures.

5.4 It has been predicted by national CAB that, demand for debt advice is expected to rise by up to 60%.

- 5.5** To meet this rising need the AIG Service is planning to strengthen the online offer and to enable people to help themselves. However there remains a significant pressure and the likelihood of further need emerging, as people who are currently furloughed being made redundant, increases in debt due to payment holidays ending, and increases in home eviction proceedings.
- 5.6** In response to rising demand the AIG Service is likely to incur further expenditure, as follows:
- Training significant number of new staff and volunteers
 - Additional debt advice expertise
 - Providing equipment to new staff and volunteers who will be remote working
 - Updates to AIG and Partner websites to improve accessibility and increase visibility
 - Production and dissemination of written information (leaflets, posters)
 - Provision of loan equipment to vulnerable clients to access advice via video call
 - External communications support to improve service visibility and distribute service information across primary and secondary healthcare providers, frontline services etc
 - Implementation of video advice pilot and subsequent expansion, if pilot is successful
 - Costs of making offices and advice centres physically safe – PPE, screens, partition walls etc. E.g No Limits have had a new front office built so clients can be triaged without accessing the main office.
- 5.7** The AIG partners are therefore seeking an uplift in funding, of approximately £91,950, to meet this and new need above the current contract levels which will be considered separate to this report.
- 5.8** It is difficult to determine the target groups of the future demand; however the bulk of the new demand is expected from younger people and families, rather than individuals who would be clients or patients with complex or significant health and social needs. A small proportion of the increased demand (approximately 1%) could be considered as a cost pressure due to challenges in providing face to face support.
- 5.9** This projected rise in demand does not include any rise in need as a result of the Home Office asylum contract recently placed within the City.

6.0 Summary

- The Council will need to consider how best to support the AIG service to enable a response to the economic impact of COVID-19 and the changing profile of needs of people for advice information and guidance services.
- Commissioners will continue to maintain close contact with the AIG partners to identify issues for resolution and support the development of innovative responses to problems

Adrian Littlemore
Senior Commissioner
Integrated Commissioning Unit
3rd October 2020

Appendix 1

Key Performance Indicators

1.0 Improved health and wellbeing for people – seeking to prevent problems arising

The partners delivering the service have taken on a Making Every Contact Count (MECC) approach which involves using every contact as an opportunity to promote positive health and wellbeing at the same time. A total 8,483 MECC interventions have taken place over the past year across the Partnership. MECC contacts are often related to mental health, with advisers signposting clients to services such as Steps to Wellbeing or their GP for support with mental health issues. Services have also directed clients to support with smoking cessation, healthy eating, sexual health, increasing physical activity, and accessing aids and adaptations for physical health needs.

2.0: Promotion of self-management/self-serve approaches in the City

During 2019-20 AIG offered light-touch or information-only support to 5,939 clients, supporting the Council's early intervention and prevention agenda. Generalist and specialist advice interventions also support clients to manage their problems longer term, as clients gain skills in budgeting, dealing with correspondence, and understanding processes and forms.

Over 2019-20 generalist websites had 188,538 unique visits, with a further 3,919 visits to specialist service sites. Both the CAS and AUKS sites also link through to national service websites, where detailed information is available to the public on a wide range of advice topics. Unfortunately full-year data on Southampton residents' use of the national sites is not available, however new reporting systems were introduced in Q4 which recorded that Southampton residents made approximately 32,726 visits to the National Citizens Advice website in Q4 alone.

Use of our websites suggests a large number of clients are seeking information and support online, and many of these will have been able to self-help with the information and links provided. However there are indications from AIG website data that a significant proportion of clients are using the website to seek contact details for full advice with "Contact Us" pages being the most commonly hit for some services (CAS and tEC) - although this does not take into account the number of clients clicking through to external sites (such as the National Citizens Advice website) who may have self-helped following their visit.

Some partner websites offer detailed information and data shows that clients are making good use of this – for example, The Rose Road Association's most viewed page is on requesting a school or college in an EHCP, whilst the advice indices on the CLEAR and EU Welcome sites are commonly viewed. Partners have in some instances produced factsheets and videos for clients to access, further supporting self-help, including new information related to COVID-19. These have proved popular with clients.

3.0: Reduced/managed need for specialist support/services in the long term

Support at the early stages of the advice process can help to reduce the need to access expert advice. For example, generalist services can support clients to fill out benefit application forms correctly, preventing the need for specialist support to appeal to Tribunals. There are of course some areas of advice, and some client groups, who will inevitably require more intensive, specialist support. Regulation of advice areas such as debt and immigration requires highly

trained and qualified advisers, and representation at Tribunal for benefits and employment issues also requires a high level of expertise.

Advice in Southampton's goal is to increase interventions in the earlier stages of clients' problems, reducing the need for specialist services in the longer term. Over the year 12,483 clients have been supported with generalist services and 2,789 in specialist projects. This compares to 13,613 clients supported by generalist services and 2,811 in specialist services in 2018-19. This could be interpreted as the service intervening earlier and so avoiding the need for specialist support at a later date. The drop in client numbers is partially attributable to the introduction of new services, such as Help to Claim and the EU Settlement Scheme, which are not funded under the AiS contract; and also due to a drop in capacity seen in mid-March resulting from the implementation of business continuity plans in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

At Citizens Advice Southampton, 81% of clients said the service had helped them find a way forward and 76% said their problem was now resolved following intervention; of those whose problem was not yet resolved, client feedback suggests that a significant proportion were due to problems with external agencies such as creditors or the DWP, or that the client was being supported with ongoing casework or awaiting the outcome of an external agency decision. These figures suggest that generalist advice services are effective in preventing the need for clients to access specialist services except in more complex cases.

Refernet a secure interagency referral portal, has been fully operational since Q3 2018-19. Referrals via this channel between agencies in the Partnership have increased, with 182 referrals via this route in 2019-20, ensuring there is 'no wrong door to get the right advice'. Use of Refernet enables clients to be transferred directly between agencies, preventing the need for clients to access two services separately and having to repeat their story.

4.0: Promotion of self-management/self-serve approaches in the City

Citizens Advice Southampton and partners have been working since the commencement of the contract to shift low complexity advice, information and guidance to an online offer. As a result to the pandemic it has been possible to accelerate this shift.

During 2019-20 AIG offered light-touch or information-only support to 5,939 clients, supporting the Council's early intervention and prevention agenda. Generalist and specialist advice interventions also support clients to manage their problems longer term, as clients gain skills in budgeting, dealing with correspondence, and understanding processes and forms.

Over 2019-20 generalist websites had 188,538 unique visits, with a further 3,919 visits to specialist service sites. Both the CAS and AUKS sites also link through to national service websites, where detailed information is available to the public on a wide range of advice topics. Unfortunately full-year data on Southampton residents' use of the national sites is not available, however new reporting systems were introduced in Q4 which recorded that Southampton residents made approximately 32,726 visits to the National Citizens Advice website in Q4 alone.

Use of our websites suggests a large number of clients are seeking information and support online, and many of these will have been able to self-help with the information and links provided. However there are indications from AIG website data that a significant proportion of clients are using the website to seek contact details for full advice with "Contact Us" pages

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Some partner websites offer detailed information and data shows that clients are making good use of this – for example, The Rose Road Association’s most viewed page is on requesting a school or college in an EHCP, whilst the advice indices on the CLEAR and EU Welcome sites are commonly viewed. Partners have in some instances produced factsheets and videos for clients to access, further supporting self-help, including new information related to COVID-19. These have proved popular with clients.

AIG Service provides performance data on support provided to target groups. See AIG’s Annual Report published August 2020 (AiS End of Year Report 19-20 - shared).

5.0 Activity & Demand

Based on available data for quarter one 2020/21, AIG websites received 24,622 unique visits of which 17,283 visits were made to generalist websites and 7,339 to specialist sites. A total of 49,126 pages were hit. The number of unique visits is comparable to previous quarters, however some sites saw a significant increase in traffic whilst others saw a reduction. For example, CAS had received around 5,000-5,350 unique visits in previous quarters; in Q1 20-21 this rose to 6,427 representing an increase of around 24%. TEC also recorded a significant increase of 400%, to 886 unique visitors this quarter from 200-230 in previous quarters. Age UK Southampton recorded a slight increase in traffic this quarter. The data clearly shows the importance of these services to Southampton residents during the crisis. Work is now underway at both CAS and TEC to improve and update their websites to ensure they can effectively meet increasing demand.

Debt enquiries dropped off significantly at the start of the financial year; in total the AIG service supported 139 clients with 397 debt issues, compared to 331 clients for the same period last year. In addition to the drop in capacity at the start of the crisis, many clients will have benefited from creditor forbearance measures and will not have sought debt advice as a result. However it is expected enquiries will rise significantly as these measures come to an end, particularly as collection activity is the most common trigger for seeking debt advice. The All Party Parliamentary Group on Debt and Personal Finance, chaired by Yvonne Fovargue MP, predicts that demand for debt advice could rise by as much as 60% over the coming months with a surge expected in November and December in the run up to Christmas.

Clients are asking about a range of priority debt problems, including rent arrears (24 clients), Council Tax arrears (16 clients), mortgage/secured loan arrears (5 clients) and fuel debt (15 clients). Despite the moratorium on evictions and suspension of possession claims, clients asked us about eviction for arrears by private landlords (4 clients) and mortgage lenders (2 clients) and possession claims for arrears by the LA (1 client) and mortgage lenders (1 client).

Employment issues have risen dramatically. Employment usually makes up around 10-11% of AIG client capacity, since 9th March this has risen to over 21% of clients and 15% of issues. Up to August 2020 AIG supported 320 clients with 585 employment issues, including 62 clients with furlough queries (actual figure likely to be higher as the furlough case recording code wasn’t introduced until mid-April) of which 17 asked about refusal of furlough; 118 clients reporting issues with pay and entitlements; and smaller numbers presenting with problems related to

terms and conditions of employment, dispute resolution, dismissal and redundancy. 46 clients asked us about Statutory Sick Pay; unfair dismissal was identified for 26 clients.

AIG supported 287 clients with housing issues in quarter one 2020/21 – an increase on the previous year, when 283 clients were supported over the whole year. Housing enquiries have risen significantly since the start of the year, and it is expected further increases over the coming months as protections for renters come to an end.

AIG have noted increases in the proportion of people from BAME communities accessing our services, particularly those who are Asian or mixed race but also Black clients. Again, national data suggests that BAME clients are particularly hard-hit by the crisis and local data would appear to support this.

Interesting results are seen when changes are correlated with the Index of Multiple Deprivation. Results in this section are calculated for Southampton residents who were supported by Citizens Advice Southampton only, excluding clients who spoke to other offices on Adviceline. Although clients in the lowest deciles (i.e. the most deprived areas) still constitute the greatest proportion of CAS clients, a significant increase in the number of clients contacting CAS from more affluent areas has occurred, corresponding to deciles 4, 7 and 8 on the IMD. Many clients who have worked all their lives will have been furloughed, or made redundant and forced to claim benefits as a result. When moving onto benefits these better-off clients are likely to experience proportionally larger changes to their household finances than those in the lower IMD brackets, leading to debt and difficulties in meeting rent and mortgage payments.

CAS also note that changes in client numbers are spread unevenly by geographic area. For example, the decrease in client numbers of 23% in Bargate ward is similar to the service-wide decrease of 25% when compared to the same period last year; but far greater reductions are seen in Bitterne Park, Harefield and Redbridge (-38%, -42% and -34% respectively). Conversely CAS have seen a significant increase in clients contacting the service from Bitterne (+16%), and proportionate increases in clients from Bassett, Portswood and Freemantle. IMD data will help to inform service planning in response to the crisis.

Levels of unemployment are a good predictor of future demand for advice services. The Future Communities report (SCC) assume predicted levels of unemployment in 2020/21 in Southampton of between 9% and 15%. The rate of unemployment in Southampton in 2019 was 4.6%, with 15,272 clients seen across the whole of the AIG partnership during this period. Of these, it has been estimated that up to 8,000 clients had issues unrelated to unemployment. Detailed assumptions, national, regional and local data sources and methodology have been used to estimate future demand.