

# Helping people find a way forward

Working with Citizens Advice  
A guide for MPs



citizens  
advice

# Foreword

Across England and Wales, Citizens Advice is at the forefront of providing free, confidential and independent advice for people in need. Our network of almost 250 independent, local charities works together to shape a society where people face fewer problems.

People come to us with all sorts of problems, and we work hard to help them find a way forward - something we have in common with staff in your constituency office.

This guide has information on a range of issues, including practical steps you and your office can take when someone comes to you for help and information about how your local Citizens Advice can help you to advise constituents, manage casework and access constituency data.

We also cover how we can work together in Parliament and beyond on national issues that impact your constituents and others across England and Wales.

We hope this will be a useful resource for you and your staff and we look forward to working with you to help your constituents, whoever they are and whatever their problem.



**Dame Clare Moriarty**  
Chief Executive, Citizens Advice

Working with your local Citizens Advice can be an extremely beneficial relationship for local MPs. Each office is part of a bigger national network. This means we have deep, robust insights into the issues faced by your constituents. We can help you understand how your constituency compares to the country in terms of the problems people are experiencing, to help ensure you're working to influence the things which matter most to people.

As a figure head for addressing people's problems, your team will no doubt be able to offer support to many of your constituents. However, building a relationship with your local Citizens Advice may open up a referral route for your constituents to access additional expert, specialist advice in areas such as welfare benefits, consumer, energy, debt and housing.

We look forward to working with you to help people in our local community.



**Andy Brown**  
Chief Executive, Citizens Advice Manchester

# Contents

## **Who we are and what we do**

What does Citizens Advice do?.....	5
What's our impact?.....	6
Top advice issues.....	7
Our advice channels.....	8

## **How Citizens Advice can help you locally and nationally**

Your local Citizens Advice.....	11
Supporting your Parliamentary work.....	14

## **Advice toolkit: how to approach and respond to your constituents' queries**

Introduction to the toolkit.....	16
Your first conversation with a constituent looking for advice..	18
Next steps – signpost, refer or deal with personally?.....	20
Advisernet.....	21

If you have any questions or would like to discuss anything further, please get in touch at  
**[cita-publicaffairs@citizensadvice.org.uk](mailto:cita-publicaffairs@citizensadvice.org.uk)**

# Highlights



What issues are my constituents struggling with?

**Page 8**



How can Citizens Advice help me to manage casework?

**Page 12**



Can Citizens Advice give me constituency level data?

**Page 13**



Where can I find more information to help my constituents?

**Page 15**

# Who we are and what we do



# What does Citizens Advice do?

**We can all face problems that seem complicated or intimidating. At Citizens Advice, we believe no one should have to face these problems without good quality, independent advice.**

For 85 years we've been one of the only organisations to provide specialist free, tailored and impartial advice on a wide range of issues, from welfare to consumer issues, debt to criminal justice support. In 2022-23 we helped people with 4.9 interrelated problems. **Our holistic advice gives us a unique insight into the challenges people are facing today.**

With **local Citizens Advice services in 1,600 locations across England and Wales, our advice provision is embedded in local communities.** Our advisers work in partnership with other organisations and local authorities to ensure people get the help and advice they need.

Spiralling rents, rising bills and a significant drop in living standards has left many households living on empty. We're seeing 2 people every minute that need crisis support - such as foodbank referrals or help with their prepayment meters. In 2022-23, over 24,500 dedicated staff and highly trained volunteers **helped over 2.66 million people with one-to-one advice and our advice website had over 60 million views.**

We work across England and Wales. There's a separate Citizens Advice Scotland ([www.cas.org.uk](http://www.cas.org.uk)), and other advice agencies [in Northern Ireland](#).

# What's our impact?

## We have a positive impact on people's lives



**84%** of people said they would recommend us to a friend



**70%** of people said we helped solve their problems



**72%** of people found us easy to access

## We save society money



Our advice saved the government and public services **£681 million**



For **every £1** spent on our service, people we help are better off by **£7.64**

## We help address the cause of people's problems

We use our data and insight to identify the cause of people's issues, and work with government and policy makers to address these problems at the root. Some recent things we've worked on include:

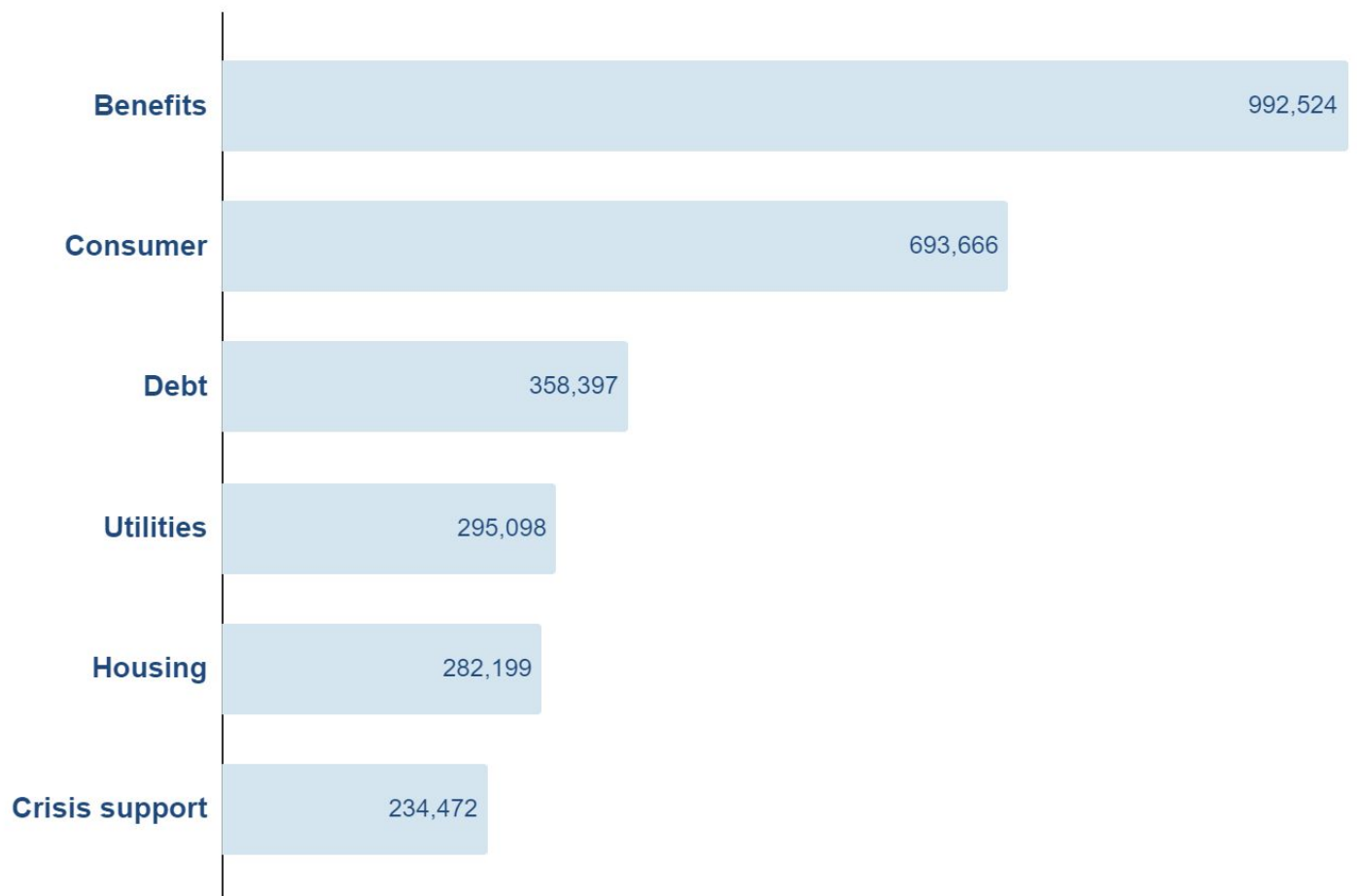
- Our publicly available [Cost of Living Dashboard](#) (and monthly briefing sessions), which tracks how the crisis has impacted people across different locations and demographic groups
- Driving a ban on forced installation of prepayment meters to help millions of people with their energy bills
- Securing benefits uprating in line with inflation in the 2023 Autumn Statement



# Top advice issues

In 2022-23 we provided one-to-one help to 2.66 million people. There were a further 61 million visits to our website.

## The top issues we help people with



# Our advice channels

There are lots of ways people can access our general advice:

- Self-help information on the Citizens Advice website
- National phone line or online chat adviser
- Nearly 250 independent local Citizens Advice charities in 1,600 locations across England and Wales

Visit **[citizensadvice.org.uk/contact-us](https://citizensadvice.org.uk/contact-us)** for details about our specialist advice services:

- The Consumer service helpline helps with issues like broken or faulty goods, or problems with energy or post
- Our Extra Help Unit helps people with complex energy or postal complaints. People can be referred to it by the Citizens Advice Consumer Service or their local MP
- For help applying for Universal Credit, people can contact our Help to Claim service
- For debt and money issues (funded by the Money and Pensions Service)
- The Witness Service provides support for witnesses in courts
- Pension Wise gives pension guidance to people aged over 50

For people in Wales, [Advicelink Cymru](#) provides advice on a range of areas, and includes Specialist Employment and Discrimination and Private Rented Sector Debt helplines.

# How Citizens Advice can help you - locally and nationally



# Citizens Advice in your community: How your local Citizens Advice can help you

Each of our independent local Citizens Advice charities shares a common goal with you - to improve the lives of people in your community and help those who face problems find a way forward.

You can find your local Citizens Advice at **[citizensadvice.org.uk/contact-us](https://citizensadvice.org.uk/contact-us)**. Please get in touch to explore how you can work together. This could include:

- Advising your constituents
- Helping you manage casework
- Providing data on the issues impacting your constituents

## Advising your constituents

Our trained advisers don't tell your constituents what to do. They explain the options available and the possible outcomes of different courses of action. This could include:

- Negotiating with companies or service providers (such as creditors) or to appeal against decisions, for example, on welfare benefit claims
- Prioritising their problems, for example, to sort out which debts are most important
- Navigating bureaucracy, for example helping to fill in forms
- Referring people to specialist caseworkers for complex problems or to other agencies when appropriate

We also offer subscriptions to our online advice resource - AdviserNet - which provides quality-assured information on issues such as employment, benefits, housing and debt. You can find out more information on page 21.

## Helping you manage casework

A central function of an MP's office is managing casework and resolving constituents' problems and concerns.

Establishing strong working relationships with agencies in the local area helps ensure that issues are dealt with promptly and systematically.

An early conversation with your local Citizens Advice Chief Executive can help establish ways of managing casework and referrals, sharing expertise and agreeing how best to work with your office.

**There are several ways that working closely with Citizens Advice can help you manage casework. These include:**

- Agreements on the prioritisation of cases
- Holding joint surgeries on specialist topics, such as housing or benefits advice
- Agreeing cross-referral processes to ensure that constituents receive assistance from specialist advisers, and where a case requires the MP's intervention, that this can be applied for appropriately
- Sharing premises for advice sessions

MPs and local Citizens Advice can also combine their expertise, local networks and media presence to run successful awareness raising campaigns on issues affecting local people.

## Providing constituency data

Citizens Advice has an unrivalled amount of frontline, real-time evidence showing the problems people face.

We can provide you with in-depth constituency data on a range of issues. For example, our local constituency dashboards provide an overview of the most common problems people face, their demographics and what parts of the constituency they live in.

If you want to delve deeper into a specific issue affecting your constituents, we can help you to spot any local trends.

Next time you visit your local Citizens Advice, please ask for a demonstration of what is available.



# Supporting your work in Parliament: How National Citizens Advice can help you

**Alongside helping you in your constituency, Citizens Advice can support your Parliamentary work through evidence-based advocacy.**

We help 7 in 10 people resolve their problem. When someone has a problem we cannot solve, often the barrier is a systemic policy failure.

We help government and industry find ways to make things better for people. With our local and national data we understand the impact of policy and regulation, and identify solutions where it's having a negative effect on people's lives. We then work to make the case for change, on behalf of the people who come to us for help and wider society.

We can help your office by:

- Sharing evidence and policy recommendations to help inform your work
- Producing briefings for debates in the House
- Proposing amendments to legislation
- Providing supporting statistics and anonymised case studies
- Supporting you to get closer to the Citizens Advice frontline through training and shadowing opportunities

We have information on a range of issues including energy, benefits, debt, consumer, and housing. We're also the statutory consumer champion for the energy market and the statutory consumer watchdog for the postal service.

For more information, ideas on how you might work with Citizens Advice or help in setting up a meeting with your local Citizens Advice email [\*\*cita-publicaffairs@citizensadvice.org.uk\*\*](mailto:cita-publicaffairs@citizensadvice.org.uk)

# Advice Toolkit: how to approach and respond to your constituents' queries





# Introduction to the toolkit

Constituents will seek your advice, support and influence on a wide range of matters. The following pages are intended to be a brief guide for how best to approach and respond to some of the issues your constituents are likely to raise.

On **[citizensadvice.org.uk](https://citizensadvice.org.uk)** you'll find:

- Step-by-step advice on a range of topics, with answers to key questions and the information you'll need to help your constituents resolve their problems
- Details of key organisations you might need to signpost and refer people to
- A range of useful tools, such as a benefits calculator or our budgeting tool

We also offer subscriptions to our more detailed online advice resource - AdviserNet, which has been developed specifically for advice caseworkers.

Many people have more than one problem that they are dealing with, such as high levels of personal debt that risks homelessness and affects people's mental or physical health. These problems can at times appear insurmountable.

By giving people the advice they need, we can support them to work through these problems. Nina's story (on the next page) is just one example of the issues people face - and how we can help them find a way forward.

## Nina's\* story

Nina was behind in paying her rent. The threat of being evicted was making her feel very anxious and aggravating an existing long-term health condition, making it harder to manage.

### **She couldn't solve the problem alone and needed help.**

Nina went to her local MP's office. Anna, a caseworker, helped Nina work through her problem. She found out Nina had recently experienced a change in her employment situation, which was why she was getting behind on her rent.

Anna helped Nina write a letter to her landlord and set up a payment plan. This stopped her landlord trying to evict her. She also referred the case to the local Citizens Advice so Nina could get more support with her finances.

Sam, a volunteer adviser, helped Nina work out a budget to help with her other debts. As Nina was on a flexible hours contract, he also helped her better understand her rights at work.



Following advice, Nina's quality of life improved. Her housing situation was now much more secure - and she felt less anxious as a result. She also had greater control of her finances and a manageable budget.

**Stopping Nina from being evicted and improving her mental and physical health meant she didn't need extra support from public services.**

**Her wellbeing improved and she had extra money in her pocket to help with everyday costs.**

*\*Name changed*

# Your first conversation with a constituent looking for advice

While your first conversation with a constituent is very important, it can also be difficult. As Nina's story shows, people may come to you with serious issues and be feeling stressed and upset.

You may find the below 9 points helpful for these situations. We use them as part of our Citizens Advice adviser training:

1. If on the phone, make sure you give your name and explain who you are
2. Speak calmly and give them your full attention
3. Identify and respond to the constituent's state of mind or feelings about their situation. If you're speaking to the person on the phone and they seem upset, you may need to suggest they come in for a face-to-face appointment
4. Give people time to fully explain their situation. If you're having the conversation on the phone and you think a person is having difficulty explaining their situation – maybe because English isn't their first language or they are disabled and their impairment(s) are making communicating on the phone challenging - you should suggest the person comes in for a face-to-face appointment
5. Provide a non-judgemental summary of the constituent's situation to them to show understanding and acceptance of their viewpoint

6. Identify any urgent issues needing immediate action and discuss the possibility of tackling these before consideration of other issues
7. Identify if the constituent needs any other advice and help them to contact the appropriate agency/helpline
8. If it is necessary to see letters and documents you could arrange for the person to come back to the surgery or office. Remember that if you are going to contact certain third parties on the person's behalf you will need signed authorisation from them
9. Ensure you have taken the constituent's contact details

Once you've followed this checklist you should be in a position to understand what steps you can take next.



# Signpost, refer or deal with personally?

There are normally three options for dealing with a constituent's query: signposting, referral or dealing with the matter personally.

**Signposting** is where you provide information about other sources of help, and the constituent makes contact with those organisations themselves.

**Referral** is where you agree, with the constituent's consent, to contact an agency to arrange an appointment for them. This is helpful when the case is urgent, the person needs more support (e.g. is disabled or has a long-term health condition, has young children or is an older person) or you have already gathered a good deal of information which may be useful in progressing the case. Referral might also be appropriate if the person needs an interpreter or signer.

**MP's office deals with the matter personally.** There are certain scenarios when an MP's intervention can be particularly useful for a constituent, for example, when the person is seeking to obtain a response from a statutory body, when there has been a delay in dealing with a complaint or when all other avenues have been unsuccessful.

In many cases signposting or referral to an advice agency is the appropriate course of action. That is why it really important to have built a relationship with your local Citizens Advice.

# AdviserNet

Our comprehensive online advice resource, AdviserNet, has lots of information to help your constituents with a wide range of queries - benefits, employment rights, money and debt issues, housing and family matters, and consumer problems.

This easy-to-use and accessible platform is updated on a daily basis, and can provide you and your team with quality-assured information and guidance to help people resolve their life issues.

Covering England, Scotland and Wales, the content fully takes into account the differences in law and statutory regulations across the three nations.

Citizens Advice offers access to our AdviserNet system, under license, and you can [find out full details on the fees and our licensing terms on our website.](#)

You can test out AdviserNet for 14 days for free before paying for a full 12-month subscription by completing the 'trial access form' on the Citizens Advice website.

## **Further help**

If you have any questions about AdviserNet or our licensing terms, please contact the Citizens Advice Customer Services team at **[customer.services@citizensadvice.org.uk](mailto:customer.services@citizensadvice.org.uk)**.

If you have a question about anything in this guide or need further information, please get in touch at **[cita-publicaffairs@citizensadvice.org.uk](mailto:cita-publicaffairs@citizensadvice.org.uk)**

Citizens Advice  
3rd Floor  
1 Easton Street  
London, WC1X 0DW

Tel: 03000 231 231  
[citizensadvice.org.uk](http://citizensadvice.org.uk)

Citizens Advice is an operating name of The National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux. Registered charity number 279057

