

Reshaping the way advice is delivered

Learning from the Citizens Advice Wandsworth
and Community Empowerment Network Help
Through Hardship Crisis Project

Phil Jew, June 2025

*“It’s important to understand that this project is
about engaging people in communities. It’s
about empowering the community, building
relationships and understanding the culture of
different parts of the local community”*

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Glossary

Adviser	A qualified staff member at CAW or partner organisation who delivers social welfare advice (e.g., on housing, debt, or welfare rights).
AFA	Advice First Aid — A training programme designed to equip community workers and volunteers with the skills to identify advice needs, provide basic support, and signpost or refer appropriately.
ALP	Advising Londoners Partnership
Assessor	A trained CAW staff member or volunteer who undertakes initial triage, information gathering, and routing of advice queries to specialist advisers.
CAW	Citizens Advice Wandsworth — A local member of the national Citizens Advice network, providing free, independent advice.
CEN	Community Empowerment Network — A Wandsworth-based organisation supporting community-led engagement, leadership, and networks.
Co-production	A collaborative approach where service users and community partners are actively involved in the design, delivery, and evaluation of services.
Early intervention	Action taken to identify and address problems at an early stage to prevent them from becoming more severe or complex.
GLA	Greater London Authority
LTHC	Long Term Health Conditions
Marginalised communities	Groups who experience social, economic or political exclusion or disadvantage.
NLCF	National Lottery Community Fund
POP	Project Oversight Panel
Referral feedback loop	A system for ensuring that organisations who refer individuals for advice receive updates or outcomes from the receiving service.
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities - refers to children and young people who have a learning difficulty or disability that requires additional support in education and healthcare
Trusted intermediaries	Individuals or organisations that act as bridges between people and services, often based in community or frontline settings.
VCS / VCSO	Voluntary and Community Sector / Organisation — Non-governmental, not-for-profit organisations rooted in communities.

1. Introduction

From small acorns....

In 2015, as then Chief Executive of Citizens Advice Wandsworth (CAW), I met with Malik Gul, Director of the Community Empowerment Network in Wandsworth (CEN) to discuss the respective work of the two organisations. We got talking about the structural barriers, systemic failings, racism and discrimination that lead to such stark inequalities in health, mental health, educational and economic outcomes, particularly for Black and South Asian communities in Wandsworth. We discussed the way that some parts of our local community were mistrustful of public services, which were all too often designed from the top-down and as a result were failing to reach and engage people.

This made me think about the way that Citizens Advice was probably failing to reach people. The service is a household name, but not necessarily identified as a local charity – moreover it could be seen by some as part of the state. We needed to break down the barriers and get out into our local community.

Fortuitously, around that same time the National Lottery Community Fund (NLCF) launched a new round of funding for services to address hardship and crisis in communities. CAW and CEN decided to submit a joint bid to combine CEN's strong community knowledge, links and co-production expertise, with CAW's advice service. Our aim was to start delivering advice in and with communities to reach people who were underserved. As we said in our bid:

“In our experience networks and organisations embedded deep inside our communities - churches, mosques and temples, VCS groups, local schools, sports clubs, tenants’ associations - are often the first point of contact when people experience hardship. They are best placed to identify those who have become isolated and vulnerable and be a friendly contact but may lack the knowledge or expertise to support or refer people to appropriate services. This is where people fall through the gaps.”

In 2016, NLCF awarded CAW over £470,000 for a 4-year Help Through Hardship Crisis Project (the ‘Crisis Project’) to work in partnership with CEN, community, social and faith networks and groups to provide tailored, community-based advice and advocacy for local people facing hardships. The project included a new Caseworker and Adviser to take referrals from the local community, the delivery of ‘Advice First Aid’ training programme and the building of a ‘Crisis Network’.

Nine years later, the Crisis Project is still going with NLCF funding and essentially the same model. The latest funding award from NLCF is for the period September 2023 to September 2026.

I left CAW seven years ago but was asked to come back in a Consultancy capacity to review the Project, the extent to which it is meeting its objectives and what we can learn to inform future development.

Learning and evaluation

This evaluation explores the extent to which the project has succeeded in achieving its outcomes, drawing on a body of evidence including interviews, survey responses, and policy literature. In doing so, it aims to contribute to a wider conversation about how community-rooted partnerships can respond to complex social and economic need with agility, empathy and impact, and how the Crisis project can be sustained and developed.

The Project was evaluated in depth in 2022 by Robin Brady. Robin concluded that it was *“effectively supporting individuals in their communities and addressing their needs, through targeted training of local community volunteers and working with local organisations in a dedicated network”*. The Project’s design was *“adaptable, and effective”*.

The AFA training model enabled community organisations to provide better signposting and low-level advice, with 87% of trained individuals using their skills regularly. The Crisis Network, comprising over 60 organisations, improved cross-sector collaboration and referrals.

The project was found to be well-suited to both the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. Its distributed model of advice delivery, including embedding advisers in trusted community settings, helped overcome barriers such as language, trust, and digital exclusion.

Key successes included increased advice access for marginalised communities, strong uptake of training, and the development of a triage model. However, the evaluation also identified challenges in referral tracking, consistent network engagement, and co-design with partners.

The 2022 report concluded that the Crisis Project has developed a replicable and potentially transformative model of advice provision rooted in community empowerment, social justice, and partnership working.

My task, as returning and learning partner in 2025 was not to simply repeat Robin’s forensic analysis. It was rather to locate the Crisis Project within the latest thinking about how to deliver effective and accessible hardship and welfare advice and gather learning that may point the way to the future of it, beyond current NLCF funding. I was, asked to look at the effectiveness and impact of the Project and identify good practice and learning and the extent to which the project’s intended outcomes have been achieved:

- A more connected Voluntary Sector in Wandsworth, who are better able to take a joint up approach to tackle welfare issues in the borough.
- People experiencing hardship in Wandsworth are more likely to access our services, or partners offering specialist help, to address their issues.
- People in Wandsworth are more likely to receive advice within their communities from upskilled individuals and organisations.
- More organisations in the advice sector have the awareness, knowledge and tools to replicate our knowledge-sharing and upskilling partnership approach.

- The staff and volunteers at CAW have more knowledge and skills to train community members and build mutually beneficial partnerships with community and sector partners.

Project leaders want to know what the main contributory factors to the achievement of the outcomes were, whether there have been any unexpected outcomes, how learning has been captured and about lessons and good practice have emerged. They also wanted to know, specifically about Advice First Aid (AFA):

- What social value has the AFA training programmes accrued for partner organisations?
- To what extent has a co-production approach been used in the AFA Training Programme and how has this approach affected the project impact?
- What are the achievements, challenges and learning of the AFA for service users, partner organisations and Citizens Advice Wandsworth?
- How has AFA been used by organisations other than CAW.

2. Methodology

My evaluation used a mixed-methods approach to capture both breadth and depth of impact. Sources of evidence included:

- A comprehensive review of project documentation and data.
- Semi-structured interviews with 31 individuals representing a cross-section of project stakeholders (including community organisations, CAW and CEN staff, Council officers, project partners and three service users).
- Crisis Network events: annual conference in September 2024, Young Adults Networking Event, February 2025
- A survey completed by Advice First Aid (AFA) trainees.
- Policy analysis including key strategic documents from Wandsworth Council and national research studies on advice access and legal needs.

It was not easy to obtain overall views on the project from stakeholders, as most only encountered one aspect of the Crisis Project (for example, AFA training, network events, making referrals or receiving advice). Systems for the on-going tracking Project impacts and outcomes were also not in place. However, my triangulated methodology allowed me to examine not just the outputs of the project (e.g., training delivered, clients seen), but the subtler shifts in relationships, confidence, capability and connection that underpin long-term change. I'm confident that it has provided a good sample of views and enabled me to draw some evidenced conclusions.

I'm grateful to all the stakeholders, staff, partners, Council officers, AFA Practitioners and clients who generously gave up their time and expertise to assist me with this study. I have listed people I spoke to at Appendix Two.

3. Project overview

At CAW, the project is managed by the Head of Community Partnerships, and delivered by a Service Manager, Caseworker Supervisor, a Specialist Housing Adviser (funded by City Bridge Foundation but based in the Crisis team), Crisis Advisers, Advice First Aid Project Lead (a post shared with CEN).

The Caseworker and Advisers take referrals from local community, voluntary and statutory organisations of people who are facing hardship and crisis. They support these clients with advice and advocacy, primarily around benefits, housing and debt issues. The aim is to provide a holistic, wrap-around service. Referrals come to the team by web form, direct emails or calls to Project staff, or via [Refernet](#) – a multi-agency referral system.

CAW and CEN have worked together to develop and deliver an 'Advice First Aid' training programme. Basic AFA training is a two-day course covering the fundamentals of advice provision, including benefits, housing and debt. CAW delivers follow-up bitesize sessions on topics such as housing, debt, immigration, and disability benefits. The training is for people who want to roll out Advice First Aid in their community. The aim is to build the capacity of people and organisations attending to support people within their communities with relevant information and signposting. For people who have attended AFA ('AFA Practitioners'), a WhatsApp group has been created to share the latest information and for participants to reach out for help and advice. Coffee mornings have also been run for AFA Practitioners to catch-up with developments and share information.

CAW and CEN have built a Crisis Network of local voluntary and statutory/public agencies, faith and community groups, holding regular network events and annual conferences. These events bring people together to build relationships, discuss issues and increase knowledge and capacity around issues related to hardship and crisis. Events in recent years, conference have covered:

- Cost of Living Crisis and the Opportunity for Change (2024)
- Enabling Rights and Advocacy to Reduce Health Inequalities (2023)
- Looking at the Cost-of-Living Crisis: Working together to reduce poverty and hardship in Wandsworth (2022)
- Learning from Service Delivery During the Pandemic (2021)

An event in 2024 focused on domestic violence and abuse and another special event in February 2025 discussed issues and services for young adults, including mental health, benefits, housing, community care and training. The events place an emphasis on involving community agencies and leaders and hearing directly from people with lived experience.

The Crisis Project has a Project Oversight Panel (POP) which meets two to three times a year to review the Project's work and development. However, not all members of the POP were engaged during my evaluation period and a reset of its membership and terms of reference may be beneficial.

4. Theory of Change

Below is a simple logic model created for this evaluation:

Context	Problems	Interventions/Activities
➤ Lasting impacts of pandemic on local people. ➤ Cost-of-living crisis. ➤ Local people experiencing hardship and crisis. ➤ Areas of high deprivation in Wandsworth: Battersea, Tooting, Roehampton. ➤ People from minoritized backgrounds, with English as additional language, disabled people and people with LTHCs particularly impacted. ➤ Rising demand for social welfare advice. ➤ Seven years' experience of delivering successful community centred interventions, prior to phase three of the project commencing in September 2023. Need to build on this and encourage replication of approach and knowledge sharing. ➤ Need to address recommendations of the 2022 project evaluation by Robin Brady.	➤ Insufficient capacity to deal with demand for social welfare advice in CAW and in community agencies. ➤ Acknowledgement that some parts of local community may not access mainstream (CAW) advice services. ➤ Financial pressures on local voluntary sector and public services. ➤ On going need to connect voluntary sector, faith, and community agencies, Council and health services and to take a co-production approach to services. ➤ On-going need to upskill community members and staff/volunteers in voluntary, community and faith organisations to tackle hardship and crisis. ➤ On-going need to build capacity of community and faith agencies. ➤ Need to build skills and knowledge of CAW staff and volunteers to train community members and build partnerships.	➤ Develop network activity: to increase the connections between, and advice knowledge of, the wider network through ➤ Advice First Aid Training ➤ Network Events ➤ Annual Conferences ➤ Provide a referral destination for our advice network: allowing them to make appropriate and timely referrals to an adviser who will provide advice and casework support for vulnerable people: ➤ Referral destination for Crisis partners (webform, Refernet) ➤ Hosting Refernet and referral meetings ➤ Local vulnerable people provided with wrap-around advice and casework ➤ Further develop the Advice First Aid Network by capacity building other organisations in the borough to ensure sustainability of advice issues: ➤ Bite sized' AFA Information sessions ➤ Supporting Propel-funded partners (develop leadership and taking referrals) ➤ Capacity Building Advice First Aid partners ➤ Increase knowledge and take-up of this partnership model of advice across the sector ➤ New AFA Webpage hosting resources ➤ Advice and support to LCAs in AFA delivery and partnership approach ➤ Speaking at external events and conferences ➤ Embedding the skills and knowledge from this project into CAW and creating a culture of generous leadership ➤ Upskilling staff to build training capacity ➤ Service User Engagement ➤ Create an organisational culture of generous leadership

The elements of the project, drawn from Project documentation and discussions are as follows:

Inputs	Activities	Outputs (3 years)	Outcomes	Impacts
➤ Funding from NLCF ➤ CAW: One generalist adviser, one housing adviser, and 0.4 Manager ➤ CEN: AFA Project Manager, Director. ➤ Part of the project is match funded by Propel (Manager time) and City Bridge Foundation (housing specialist). ➤ Citizens Advice national support. ➤ Evaluator.	➤ Advice provision, including wrap-around casework and specialist advice provision. ➤ Refernet system and web forms for inter-agency referrals. ➤ Advice First Aid training: 2-day course, short bitesize courses. ➤ Coffee mornings for AFA attendees. ➤ Provision of AFA resources. ➤ Assessor Pathway training. ➤ Crisis Network events. ➤ Annual Crisis Network Conference. ➤ Capacity building support for AFA agencies and Propel funded partners. ➤ Speaking at events and conferences. ➤ Training and upskilling of CAW staff. ➤ Supporting other LCAs/orgs to deliver AFA – inc. participation in Community of Practice. ➤ Services user engagement. ➤ Organisational culture and leadership development (CAW).	➤ 900 local vulnerable people provided with wrap-around advice and casework, (including Elays and Mushkil Aasaan referrals) ➤ AFA partners will help >1,800 community members find a way forward. ➤ Referrals from 65 local organisations ➤ 60 people AFA trained. ➤ 6 Network Events, 150 individuals benefiting. ➤ 3 conferences, 120 individuals benefiting. ➤ 30 partners on Refernet. ➤ 12 information sessions on skills/knowledge for AFAers. ➤ 4 co-produced events with Elays & Mushkil Aasaan. ➤ Capacity building support for 12 AFA partners. ➤ 50 LCAs benefit from using AFA/partnership resources. ➤ 15 LCAs to benefit from in-person support with AFA. ➤ 9 external events attended to share knowledge, reaching 200 individuals. ➤ 9 staff members from other projects trained to deliver topic-based AFA sessions ➤ 60 clients have opportunity to give in person-feedback through informal feedback sessions. ➤ 12 members of CAW staff upskilled to gather client insight. ➤ 9 staff and projects will hold relationships with community partners.	➤ A more connected Voluntary Sector in Wandsworth, who are better able to take a joint up approach to tackle welfare issues in the borough. ➤ People experiencing hardship crisis in Wandsworth are more likely to access our services, or partners offering specialist help, to address their issues. ➤ People in Wandsworth are more likely to receive advice within their communities from upskilled individuals and organisations. ➤ More organisations in the advice sector have the awareness, knowledge and tools to replicate our knowledge-sharing and upskilling partnership approach. ➤ The staff and volunteers at CAW have more knowledge and skills to train community members and build mutually beneficial partnerships with community and sector partners.	➤ Reduced financial hardship and crisis recurrence ➤ Improved health and wellbeing outcomes ➤ Fairer access to advice for marginalised communities ➤ Stronger and more resilient voluntary sector ➤ Better coordination across local advice services ➤ Increased community confidence and voice ➤ AFA model adopted beyond Wandsworth ➤ Fewer people reaching crisis point due to earlier support

5. Context and Strategic Alignment

The Crisis Project was conceived at a moment of economic and systemic strain that has only increased as the project progressed. The effects of the pandemic, the accelerating cost-of-living crisis, and longstanding disparities in access to support services collided to create a perfect storm for many residents in Wandsworth. Communities already marginalised—by poverty, disability, language, migration status or racism—faced new layers of exclusion as digital service delivery expanded while physical touchpoints diminished.

Within this context, the Crisis Project and its theory of change aligns closely with recent research and local strategic priorities. There are also consistencies with The Design Council's Systemic Design Framework, which has been used by a similar project in Shropshire.

Research into communities and advice needs

A growing body of national research emphasises the importance of community-based, early, and relational models of welfare legal advice. Two recent reports commissioned by the Nuffield Foundation—*Understanding Local Legal Needs* (Mulqueen & Wintersteiger, 2025) and *The Role of Communities and Connections in Social Welfare Legal Advice* (Dr Sarah Nason (Bangor University) et al., 2024)—provide compelling evidence that reinforces the rationale for the Crisis project's design and delivery.

These reports highlight several key themes highly relevant to the Crisis Project:

- **The importance of trusted intermediaries:** Both studies found that people experiencing hardship were more likely to seek support through known and trusted community figures—mirroring the role of Advice First Aiders in Wandsworth. The evidence supports investment in upskilling local volunteers and community workers as a critical access point for advice.
- **Early and holistic intervention:** Early identification of welfare-related issues can prevent crisis escalation. Both reports stress the value of upstream support and show that clients often present with interlocking problems—debt, housing, benefits, immigration—that require multi-faceted responses. The Crisis Project's community-based triage model is strongly aligned with the reports' recommendations.
- **Barriers to access:** Systemic challenges such as digital exclusion, poor legal capability, stigma, and complexity of services disproportionately affect marginalised communities. The Crisis Project's focus on relational, culturally sensitive support—often in face-to-face, familiar settings—responds directly to these structural access issues.
- **The role of networks:** Both Nuffield reports emphasise the role of local infrastructure and collaborative networks in enabling effective advice delivery. The Wandsworth Crisis Network is cited by stakeholders as a valuable example of what such a model can look like in practice—bringing together statutory, voluntary, and community actors under a shared purpose.

- **Systemic and policy impact:** The literature underscores the value of advice services not only to individuals but to wider systems—by reducing pressure on housing services, preventing homelessness, and improving wellbeing. Moreover, there is increasing recognition that advice providers and their networks have an advocacy role to play in shaping fairer systems. The Crisis Project’s networking and local influence efforts are important steps in this direction.

The reports collectively call for **tailored, place-based, and relationship-centred** approaches to social welfare legal support—qualities that define the Crisis Project model. They also highlight areas for development, including the need for robust referral tracking, more inclusive service design, and ongoing investment in training and infrastructure.

Local strategic priorities

The Crisis project is closely aligned with Wandsworth Council’s recent strategic work on addressing poverty and building a stronger voluntary sector, notably the findings and recommendations set out in the Council’s **Cost-of-Living Commission Report** (2023) and the **Voluntary Sector Needs Analysis** (2024).

These documents provide a vital policy context for understanding both the rationale and value of the Crisis Project within the borough’s wider ecosystem of support.

The Cost-of-Living Commission, set up in response to worsening financial hardship across the borough, calls for **bold, cross-sector partnerships** to meet urgent needs while working towards longer-term solutions. The Commission identifies key challenges including inadequate income, rising housing costs, poor access to advice and support, and deepening inequalities in access to services.

Among its most relevant recommendations are:

- **Building trusted local services** embedded in communities
- **Investing in early intervention** to prevent crisis escalation
- **Addressing the impact of advice deserts**, particularly for marginalised residents
- **Supporting voluntary and community sector resilience**

These points mirror the objectives of the Crisis Project. The Advice First Aid (AFA) model responds to the need for early, community-based support, while the Crisis Network exemplifies the kind of place-based, collaborative infrastructure the Commission calls for. By embedding advice within food banks, schools, and community groups, the Crisis Project has operationalised several of the Commission’s recommendations.

The Voluntary Sector Needs Analysis (VSNA) offers a detailed view of the health and capacity of Wandsworth’s voluntary and community sector. It identifies both strengths—such as the diversity and commitment of local groups—and barriers, including:

- Fragmented services and referral pathways

- Inconsistent co-production and voice for smaller groups
- Capacity gaps in training, digital tools, and staffing
- Limited cross-sector knowledge-sharing

The Crisis Project's design responds directly to these challenges. It invests in **capacity building**, provides **shared training infrastructure**, and fosters **collaboration across sectors** through network events. Stakeholders interviewed for this evaluation consistently identified Crisis Project as a vehicle for mutual learning and relationship-building across a broad spectrum of organisations.

The VSNA also calls for new models of **community-led infrastructure**, able to convene and support the sector beyond short-term project cycles. Crisis Project, through its partnership between CAW and CEN, has piloted precisely this approach.

The Council's reports reinforce the strategic case for continued investment in the Crisis Project model. They support the need for:

- Sustainable, embedded partnership approaches
- Support for community-based advice provision
- Investment in community training and upskilling
- Improved connectivity between organisations

The Crisis Project's ability to deliver on these priorities demonstrates its alignment with Wandsworth's ambitions for a more inclusive, resilient, and joined-up approach to addressing hardship.

The Design Council's Systemic Design Framework

A systems design framework was not explicitly used in the development of the Crisis Project, but it is interesting to note that the [Design Council's Systemic Design Framework](#) has some alignment. This Framework has been used by Citizens Advice Shropshire in their implementation of the Advice First Aid model, as part of its *Shaping Places for Healthier Lives* programme focused on addressing food insecurity.

The Systemic Design Framework is built around four interrelated stages—**Explore, Reframe, Create, and Catalyse**—with ongoing emphasis on leadership, relationships, inclusivity, and sustainability. These principles are highly relevant to the Crisis Project model, which seeks to foster cross-sector collaboration, empower community-based action, and build capacity in response to systemic hardship.

Citizens Advice Shropshire applied the framework to guide AFA training delivery and to shape cross-sector responses to food insecurity. Their use of the framework enabled them to:

- Understand community needs through co-produced discovery work and systems mapping

- Reframe service design to include place-based, stigma-aware approaches
- Create structured training (Ask, Assist, Act) with built-in support resources and referrals (see page 21 for more on this)
- Catalyse local ownership, sustainability, and shared learning across diverse partners

The emphasis on inclusive system change, storytelling, and continual adaptation strongly aligns with the Crisis Project's aims to embed advice capability across the community and promote collaborative working.

While the Crisis Project has made substantial progress in joining up advice services and building local capacity, the framework offers several clear opportunities to deepen and sustain impact:

- **Orientation and reframing:** Using structured reflection and systems mapping to reassess the role of the network and AFA in tackling entrenched hardship in Wandsworth.
- **Storytelling and leadership:** Enhancing the way lived experience, impact stories and data are used to influence strategy, build partnerships, and attract funding.
- **Creating sustainable structures:** Ensuring learning, tools, and processes (e.g. referral feedback, co-production, training delivery) are embedded and can evolve over time.
- **Inclusive design:** Applying structured co-design processes to ensure partners and residents shape next steps collectively, especially smaller or less-heard organisations.

It may be useful to consider aspects of this framework in future development of the Crisis Project.

6. Progress Against Outcomes

Strengthening the voluntary and community sector

The Crisis Project seeks to create more connected Voluntary Sector in Wandsworth, who are better able to take a joint up approach to tackle welfare issues in the borough.

The feedback received is that project has created connective tissue between organisations, some of which had previously operated in parallel or isolation. The Crisis Network events — described by several consultees as energising and ‘one of the only places where we all come together’ — have fostered a sense of shared mission. The Advice First Aid practitioner community (175 people have been on AFA training since 2016) is connected via WhatsApp, coffee mornings and follow-up training. Many were connected by attending AFA training.

Stakeholders described the value of sustained participation and the relational, rather than purely transactional, nature of the network:

“People continue to gather and come together. The Advice First Aid and advice in the community thread has been kept going, empowering communities and building collective solidarity. We now need to explore how to sustain and expand this, how to build the trust of communities in public services.”

“It’s important to understand that this project is about engaging people in communities. It’s about empowering the community, building relationships and understanding the culture of different parts of the local community”

“We need to make sure we are keeping in constant communication... that’s why I set up the AFA community WhatsApp group... it’s very, very important.”

“It’s not just about referrals—it’s about knowing who to call, feeling part of something.”

“The really powerful thing that the Crisis Network events do is to allow people to tell their stories and they engage a diverse range of people and agencies.”

I also heard concerns that some relationships remain surface-level, and that smaller, less-resourced organisations still struggle to participate fully. The Project has trained people and enabled referrals, but it hasn’t been able to provide additional resources (funding) for community agencies. However, in two cases (Elays Network and Mushkil Aasaan) partner community agencies have managed to obtain funding for advice posts. These two cases are discussed more below.

“....it has built new and trusted relationships, but take-up amongst some faith groups has been a little patchy. There may be a feeling among some faith groups that ‘we understand ourselves - we don’t need you to come and understand us’. Also, lack of capacity in community and faith organisations makes it difficult for them to engage. They just manage to get on with their own work, and struggle to add new elements to it. So structural inequalities remain.” [Stakeholder]

"The community agencies and volunteers we train are giving their time and resources freely. We're not funding them to participate and deliver first tier advice. If they could be paid in some way or given some form of financial gain or resources... it would be really, really nice." [CAW staff member]

"Even if the partners want to do it... can they do advice clinics as well as feed people, fundraise, and support their community?" [CAW staff member]

Enabling access to advice for those in hardship

It is intended that, because of the Crisis Project, people experiencing hardship in Wandsworth will be more likely to access CAW services, or those of other partners offering specialist help, to address their issues. There is good evidence that the project has made advice more visible, navigable and humane for people in hardship and extended the reach of CAW's advice service.

"You can look at the referrals... it's the people that really need that help... the vulnerable people... now saying, 'I can turn to Citizens Advice'. The project has done a lot to build up trust in CAW." [CAW staff member]

"The ability to refer to CAW under the Crisis project has been massive. The breadth of what the project deals with and the speed of the response has been important." [Stakeholder]

Over the course of its life to date (end of April 2025), the Crisis Project has advised 2,218 people. In its latest phase (September 2023 to the end of April 2025), 670 people have been helped with 2,655 issues. Many of these clients have faced extreme hardship, crisis and complex challenges and have received in-depth, holistic casework.

The demographic profile of Crisis Project clients is not significantly different from the profile of CAW client overall. Crisis Project clients are slightly more likely to have long term health conditions, be disabled or define their ethnicity as Black, Asian or 'Mixed'. CAW's overall client profile has changed during the life of the project, and it's the organisation's view that this is at least in part due to the Crisis Project. In 2017/18, 51% of clients were disabled or had long term health conditions (LTHC). This percentage increased steadily (apart from one fall in the 2020/21 lock-down year) to 60% in 2024/25. Similarly, the percentage of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) clients rose from 50% in 2017/18 to 61% in 2024/25. This may be partly explained by the disproportionate impact of the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis on disabled people, people with LTHC and BME communities, and their consequent increased need for advice. But the Crisis Project is also seen as building greater trust in and access to CAW's services across the local community.

The Crisis Project has undoubtedly widened access to advice for people in hardship through the connections it has built. Stakeholders from schools, foodbanks and community kitchens described the ways in which they had been able to support families, their guests and service users in real time with pressing issues.

“People will often disclose really serious issues to us. The fact that we can refer them to CAW for advice means that they are getting advice that they may not otherwise have accessed. And this is specifically practical advice that can help people start to improve material circumstances that in many cases impede their recovery from a range of traumas, recent and non-recent. Many people we support are living in housing, financial and social circumstances that are far from conducive to getting over both serious trauma and more common setbacks (which can then snowball).”

A school Headteacher recalled the impact of being able to make a direct referral for a family facing homelessness:

“Within 24 hours, the boy and his father were in emergency accommodation. That changed everything.”

In many cases, AFA-trained staff were the difference between someone falling through the cracks and being connected to formal support. Importantly, several stakeholders observed that the nature of their relationships—with long-standing trust, cultural proximity and informal interaction—meant that people felt safer disclosing their issues.

“It feels sometimes like [the Crisis Project is] the last chance saloon... no door, no door, no door – and then they come to us and get the support other services are not offering.”
[CAW staff member]

The following case studies, generated with client consent following interviews I held with them, demonstrate the importance and effectiveness of the Crisis Project’s service and approach.

Crisis Project Client Stories

A has been struggling with rheumatoid arthritis and psoriatic arthritis for over 15 years. Her condition has worsened significantly in the past year, making it very difficult for her to mobilise. Due to her deteriorating health, A had to stop working and became largely bedbound.

A was referred to CAW by someone at her church. She explained, *“I had somebody that I knew who worked alongside Citizens Advice... she actually goes to my church”*.

This friend connected A with a CAW Adviser, who promptly contacted her and scheduled an appointment for the following week. The CAW Adviser provided extensive support to A, helping her fill out her Personal Independence Payment (PIP) form and change of circumstances form. A said,

“She was such a big help - honestly, I can't thank her enough”. The Adviser assisted A at the CAW office, spending over two hours to complete the forms. A highlighted the importance of this support, stating, *“I needed someone to help me fill out the form because I can't really use my hands”*.

As a result of CAW's assistance, A's PIP was enhanced: *"The result of that is that I am now claiming enhanced daily living allowance and I get enhanced mobility allowance."*

This financial support has been crucial for A, who had to stop working due to her condition. While A's income is nowhere near what it was when she was working, the enhanced PIP has enabled A to access essential services and equipment to improve her quality of life. She explained, *"I've had occupational health come to my house and assess my property... I have a bed rail, a bath board, a special chair, and raised toilet seats".*

These adaptations have made a significant difference in her daily life, allowing her to manage her condition better.

A reflected on the challenges she faced before receiving help from CAW. She said, *"If I hadn't had the help from Citizens Advice Wandsworth, I have no idea honestly what I would have done, I don't even know what to tell you".*

She emphasised the importance of accessible services that are available in places that people go to, like churches, noting that her mobility issues made it difficult to seek help independently. A also appreciated the empathy and understanding shown by the CAW Adviser, stating, *"She has been very concerned, had a lot of empathy and sympathy, and she kind of understands".*

A's experience with CAW highlights the vital role that accessible, empathetic and community-based support services play in improving the lives of individuals with chronic illnesses. The assistance provided by CAW has had a profound impact on A's quality of life, enabling her to access the financial support and services she needs to manage her condition. A's story underscores the importance of continued support and accessibility for individuals facing similar challenges.

B was sent to prison in 2019. He had rent arrears before he was in prison and had telephoned Citizens Advice about them but had not found a solution. While on remand in prison, B's rent and council tax arrears built up and he was unable to contact the Council. He feared he would lose his home. B suffers from PTSD and was seeing a psychiatric nurse while in prison. The nurse got in touch with Citizens Advice Wandsworth (CAW) to seek assistance for him. The CAW Adviser worked closely with B while he was in prison, liaising with his therapist to provide the necessary support. Upon B's discharge, over a period of 18 months, the CAW Adviser helped B to reduce his council tax and rent arrears from around £10,000 to £3,900 and claim benefits. B is now paying off his arrears and has managed to keep his flat. Despite ongoing physical and mental health challenges, B has plans to set up a business.

Reflecting on the support he received, B said, *"I was unwell because of PTSD... but they really supported me. If I hadn't had support from Citizens Advice Wandsworth, I may well have ended up back in prison. It's the best service I've ever had."*

Ca type one diabetic, first contacted CAW in March 2024, when he was being harassed by his landlord and threatened with eviction. CAW gave him general advice on his options but did not help him further. C tried to negotiate with his landlord and eventually took the matter to court, representing himself. He lost the case and was evicted.

After losing the case, C found himself homeless and in need of urgent assistance. He applied to Wandsworth Council, but his homelessness application was rejected. He reached out to CAW again for help, visiting CAW's Battersea Library and Roehampton offices. This time, CAW's Crisis Project Adviser stepped in to assist C with a homelessness application, helping them appeal the rejection.

C explained, *"They helped me with my homelessness application, appealing the rejection on the grounds of my health.....the Council accepted the duty to rehouse me."* As a result, C was placed in temporary accommodation in Sutton and is awaiting social housing. Despite the uncertainty of how long he would be in temporary accommodation, C expressed relief at having a place to stay.

C acknowledged the importance of CAW's support, stating, *"If I hadn't had Citizens Advice Wandsworth's help, probably I would be back in Spain."* The assistance eventually provided by CAW was crucial in preventing C from becoming destitute.

While C's situation has improved, he noted that the process could have been handled better initially. *"Things are better now, but they could have been handled better in the first place. If Citizens Advice had helped me at first, maybe I would not have been evicted or may have been accepted as homeless earlier by the Council. But eventually the CAW Adviser did everything she could to help me."*

The case studies highlight the importance of community-based referrals in helping individuals access necessary services. People experiencing hardship crises in Wandsworth are more likely to access services through community connections. They demonstrate the role of CAW in providing crucial support to individuals in crisis, helping them access services and avoid destitution. Clients received extensive support from CAW Advisers, who helped them challenge decisions, reduce arrears, and claim benefits. This support enabled clients to access essential services and equipment, maintain their housing, and plan for their future. Clients appreciated the empathy and understanding shown by CAW Advisers, who provided support within the community.

Delivering advice within communities

A striking feature of the project has been its emphasis on embedding advice in community spaces where people already are. This represents a significant shift from traditional service models to directly address the aim that people in Wandsworth are more likely to receive advice within their communities from upskilled individuals and organisations

It important to note here that to set up and run good quality social welfare advice services requires considerable investment in training systems, quality assurance, case management

systems, professional indemnity insurance, case recording systems, information systems and obtaining the required regulatory accreditations (e.g., for debt advice and immigration advice). It is therefore unrealistic to expect that the project would lead to emergence of more than a handful of new advice services in community agencies and that these could be sustainable without on-going dependence on CAW for support.

Two agencies have been able to build their own funded in-house advice services because of the Crisis Project and the relationship built with CAW and originally facilitated by CEN. Other organisations have introduced weekly triage advice drop-ins or integrated triage advice into holistic wellbeing models, without additional funding. The ripple effects of AFA training are evident: increased confidence, clearer pathways, a sense of ownership over the support being offered. This distributed model of advice-giving offers resilience and reach—but it requires infrastructure and on-going support and follow-up training. There is a quality versus quantity dilemma here: CAW needs to focus on working with a small number of agencies very well.

The Elays (beacon of light) Network, was founded in 2003 and now works with people from a variety of backgrounds and ages, providing a network of support to the Wandsworth community and surrounding areas. As a result of Elays Network's engagement with the Crisis Project, its support now includes advice and advocacy on issues including housing, benefits, education, finance, health, immigration, social services, and crime.

Director Abdirahman Xirsi completed AFA training in February 2017 and several of his colleagues have since attended. He cites AFA as providing the platform on which Elay's Network could build a professional advice service:

“The course exposed us to good practice – a role model of how to run an advice service properly. It built our confidence as advisers and gave us the knowledge of how to keep case records and maintain client confidentiality.”

Elays Network built a relationship with CAW through the Crisis project and AFA that has built its capacity and led to other relationships and funding. The organisation's confidence in delivering advice for the community led to a trainee adviser post being funded under the [Propel funding programme](#). The adviser is now supporting 7-10 people per week. Trust for London has also funded Elays Network's advice service for five years, enabling it to support 6000 people. The organisation has also developed other relationships with advice services as a result. South West London Law Centres now runs advice sessions at its premises.

The organisation participates in the Crisis project's conferences and events. It hosted the Young Adults Network Event in February 2025. Overall, Abdirahman believes that the Crisis project is achieving its aims of connecting and upskilling organisations and enabling wider access to advice. However, he recognises that a lot rests on trusting relationships. He has used Refernet to refer clients to CAW but has sometimes been frustrated that referred clients don't always get a timely response and Elays does not get an update on the status of the referral. This can damage the trust that Elays and clients need to have in the CAW service.

Mushkil Aasaan evolved as a front-room grassroots organisation in the early nineties when a group of Muslim women shared concerns about the plight of women, children and the elderly experiencing social exclusion, isolation and a range of unmet needs. Like the Elays Network, Mushkil Aasaan practices 'Care for the Community by the Community', offering a range of homecare, counselling and advocacy services – and now welfare advice. The agency sent staff on the AFA training at the outset of the Crisis Project and one of its members of staff went on to complete full Citizens Advice Assessor training at CAW. His advice work post is now funded for two years under the Propel funding programme. Director Naseem Aboobaker also stated that CAW's support has enabled the agency to be confident in the delivery of advice and ensure that advice is provided for people in hardship and Crisis at their agency.

Naseem recounted the case of a homeless man who dropped into Mushkil Aasaan in 2023 in a very poor state of health. A Crisis Adviser was able to attend Mushkil Aasaan and advise the man there, with the help of an interpreter. When he arrived at Mushkil Aasaan, the man was destitute and had no recourse to public funds status. With the help of the **Unity Project** and Crisis Project Adviser, he was about to claim Personal Independence Payments (PIP) and Universal Credit and obtain accommodation. Without this provision in place, the man would not have received advice to address his hardship.

Tooting Community Kitchen (TCK) began in 2018 with the goal of alleviating poverty in South West London by providing hot meals and other vital resources to homeless and vulnerable people. TCK staff and volunteers serve freshly prepared hot meals at twice-weekly stalls and run various activities for their guests.

Razia Niaz, who started as a Manager at TCK in 2024, attended the Advice First Aid (AFA) training soon after joining. She was recommended to attend by a colleague and two trustees who had previously completed the training. Razia found the training to be very useful and has since implemented what she learned to benefit TCK's guests.

Razia shared that after completing the AFA course, she and her team began offering weekly advice sessions to their guests. To prepare for this, the team observed a CAW Adviser who ran an advice session at TCK. The TCK advice sessions cover various issues such as housing, benefits, and debt. They are now considering having an appointment system to manage the advice sessions effectively, especially given the limited staff available. Guests that cannot be helped by TCK alone are signposted to CAW drop-in sessions at Battersea Library.

Despite the positive impacts, Razia noted some challenges in delivering the advice service. She mentioned the difficulty in managing both the advice sessions and the regular activities at TCK. Many guests have money, benefit and housing issues. Additionally, she pointed out the need for more training on specific issues such as benefits for older people and support for students from abroad with no recourse to public funds. She has raised this with CAW who are looking into it.

"People that live in parts of Wandsworth... maybe people from some Black and Asian communities - feel they can't go to Citizens Advice. But they will engage with projects like EMHIP, so linking with such services is the key to reaching those communities." [CAW staff member]

"We've created a web of trust and understanding... that network of partners is one of the most valuable legacies." [CAW staff member]

Family Action offers two services in Wandsworth: Well Family, under which it offers up to six sessions of wellbeing support for people who are often referred by GPs, and a Foodbank Service, providing Foodbank guests with two sessions of support. The service provides emotional and practical support to adults, to promote good mental health, using a holistic, strength based and person-centred approach. People who are referred or who self-refer are often in critical and crisis circumstances and frequently have social welfare issues including housing, homelessness and debt, alongside mental and physical health, domestic violence and abuse, SEND and carer issues.

The training, networking and referral facilities that the Crisis project provides are important. Beverley, who has attended AFA training and follow-up coffee mornings, said that the personalised, human links that the project has enabled are particularly important. Knowing people in other projects and services like CAW and EMHIP, has helped to improve access to welfare advice, providing greater confidence for Family Action in making referrals.

Family Action refers clients to CAW directly to the Foodbank Advice Project, Disability and Social Care Advice Service (DASCAS) or to the Crisis project team. The Crisis team are particularly helpful if the person being assisted has housing issues. Family Action feels confident that the CAW Crisis Adviser will respond speedily to housing problems. It's helpful when Family Action gets an acknowledgement of a successful referral and an indication of how long the person referred will have to wait before seeing an adviser.

Beverley completed AFA training in autumn 2023. She said the course boosted her confidence in dealing with advice issues. Although she has attended some bite size sessions and coffee mornings, she finds it difficult to fit them into her two days a week role. She feels it may be helpful to deliver courses on-line. In person events are good but can be difficult to fit into busy schedules. Providing recordings of sessions and/or an online bank of resources and follow-up emails with new information could also help to improve access.

Sector learning and replication

The Crisis Project also seeks replication. One of its aims is that more organisations in the advice sector have awareness, knowledge and tools to replicate the Project's knowledge-sharing and upskilling partnership approach.

In this respect there is strong evidence that this objective is being achieved. Advice First Aid and the community engagement approach taken by the Crisis Project has been adopted by the [Advising Londoners Partnership \(ALP\)](#) project. (ALP) is a strategic partnership collaboration funded by Greater London Authority (GLA) to support London Legal Support Trust (LLST) and London Citizens Advice to increase the capacity of advice agencies to respond to the cost-of-living crisis and support more Londoners. The partnership funds a total of 41 advice and community agencies across London and a pan-London AFA training programme, led by CAW. There is now a pan-London AFA Community of Practice, and it is not only local Citizens Advice agencies that are delivering AFA – some Law Centres have also become involved. As the Learning Partner for ALP, I can confidently say that the Crisis Project approach is a fundamental part of ALP.

The approach has also been adopted outside London in the wider Citizens Advice Network. CAW delivered briefings at the national Citizens Advice conference, which sparked interest in the Project's approach and AFA from several other local Citizens Advice agencies. I have already drawn attention to Citizens Advice Shropshire's use of AFA. A simple web search identifies offers of AFA in Hampshire, Somerset, Cornwall and many other locations. National Citizens Advice carried out 'discovery research' in 2023 (updated in 2024), produced guidance for the Citizens Advice network on adopting the approach and has since established a national AFA Community of Practice.

The widespread use of the Crisis Project approach has inevitably meant that other agencies have adapted it for their own local circumstances and needs. This innovation has led to some new approaches from which CAW itself may learn. AFA has been shortened to a one-day course in the pan-London project. Citizens Advice Shropshire shortened the course to three hours with a focus on a three-step process:

- Ask: Listen and identify the problem
- Assist: Provide and share some initial basic help, and signposting
- Act: Understand when and how to refer us if the person needs more in-depth support

While adoption of AFA across the country is welcomed by CAW, some in the team are mindful that use of the tool may have limited impact without the other aspects of the Crisis Project – the network, the referrals facility, the AFA follow-up activity.

"The point of AFA is that you get direct contact... I don't know how that would work without a team there." [CAW staff member]

Capacity building within CAW

The latest iteration of the Crisis Project aimed for staff and volunteers at CAW to have more knowledge and skills to train community members and build mutually beneficial partnerships with community and sector partners.

There's a good understanding of the Project's unique focus within the project team.

"The crisis project aims primarily to give advice to people with debt, benefits and housing problems, but it is different... it's about outreach into the community and linking with other organisations, giving them new capability." [CAW staff member]

"We realised we weren't reaching the communities we needed to... so we developed training for community leaders who could triage and refer in." [CAW staff member]

The role of CAW has evolved because of the project. Rather than being seen solely as a service provider, it has positioned itself alongside CEN as an enabler and convener. The training team has developed new expertise and understanding of what good training looks like. Members of the team, like Sheree Pinheiro (a post shared by CAW and CEN), have become trusted figures within the community landscape. Multiple stakeholders credited Sheree's outreach with building trust:

"She turns up, she listens, she supports. That kind of consistency really matters."
[Stakeholder]

Delivery of AFA and involvement in network building is mainly confined to the Crisis Project team, but several of them are involved in AFA delivery. Other staff at CAW, but not in the Crisis Project team, also deliver AFA training.

There is scope for the Crisis Project team to get more involved in harnessing the insight of community partners about how advice can best be provided to marginalised communities. This could be via the Team's involvement in Crisis Network events, focus groups and advisory panels.



Crisis Network Conference, September 2024

7. The Advice First Aid Programme

"Advice First Aid is such a powerful tool... to empower people within the community because people in the community want to be empowered to give help and support to their community." [CAW staff member]

I was asked to specifically look at the design, delivery and impacts of AFA. We ran a survey of AFA participants in March 2025 to get feedback on the programme. The results of this are appended to this report. I also interviewed ten stakeholders who had attended AFA. Some of them had also responded to the survey.

Only seventeen responses were received to the survey, which represents a relatively small sample (10%) of all AFA attendees during the life of the project, but 52% of those who had attended AFA during the period September 2023 – April 2025. Some responses were received from people who attended AFA prior to September 2023.

For those people who responded, AFA training, plus follow-up courses, coffee mornings and a WhatsApp group has proven to be impactful and well-received, equipping participants with the confidence and skills to support their communities more effectively. The findings point to the need for greater investment in follow-up support, flexible training formats, more structured referral systems and a bank of resources and materials for AFA practitioners to access. Participants are eager for ongoing engagement, practical resources, and more accessible delivery models. The programme's interpersonal strengths—particularly through named contacts—are a standout success and should be preserved and expanded. I understand that Project Manager Sheree is currently engaged in a programme of meeting with AFA practitioners to discuss their on-going development and support needs – a welcome initiative in response to the feedback we have received.

"I think having done the advice first aid course, it would have been great to have had a bit more support in terms of then setting something up – advice sessions at the church or a referral arrangement." [Stakeholder]

Social value and organisational change

Survey results and interview feedback show that AFA has enhanced both individual confidence and organisational capacity. Over 82% of respondents to the survey felt more confident in dealing with welfare advice issues after attending. The course has a range of benefits for individual attendees and their agencies. 65% of respondents reported using their AFA skills daily or weekly. And 94% of respondents believed AFA had enhanced advice provision for their community.

"I never thought I could help someone with a housing issue. Now I know the basics, and who to call if it's beyond me." [Survey respondent]

"It was helpful understanding what kind of information we would need to gather to be able to make referrals to statutory agencies or support providers." [Stakeholder]

"They shared quite a few resources to calculate benefits and also a list of agencies where we could signpost young people." [Stakeholder]

Organisational impacts included clearer referral pathways, stronger partnerships, and in some cases, the development of new services. It is not only the course content that made an impact, but the very act of coming together with other organisations for the training:

"I found it very useful as it allowed the opportunity for all the different organisations to network and explain what sessions we all hold etc. It also gave us the opportunity to learn from each other about sign posting to other organisations we may not be aware of."
[Stakeholder on attending an AFA coffee morning]

"[I attended AFA] really to equip myself and therefore other members of the team and the volunteers with a better way of being able to answer our guests' queries and to help them. It was a good course, and it was useful to meet people from other organisations."
[Stakeholder]

I have not attempted to place a financial value on this, but the initiative is clearly of social value to participating organisations. The following case studies demonstrate how AFA is being used:

The Ethnicity and Mental Health Improvement Project (EMHIP) is a collaborative project involving the local mental health trust, Integrated Care Board and networks of BME voluntary, faith and community groups, convened by the Community Empowerment Network (CEN). It aims to reduce ethnic inequalities in access, experience and outcomes of mental health care for Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities. It arose from a recognition that to address disparities in mental health care, provision was needed in the community, led and delivered by people from the community.

Since its inception in 2019 it has helped hundreds of local people, many of whom present with social welfare advice issues, including debt, benefits, housing and employment. These issues may be a consequence or a cause of mental health issues. People will often present social welfare issues first, before disclosing mental health issues. Manager Leonie Brown says that as local people have come to trust EMHIP, they increasingly turn to the project directly for welfare advice. So, it's vital that EMHIP staff know how to help and can refer people directly to Citizens Advice.

Attending Advice First Aid is a standard part of the induction training for EMHIP staff, including community mental health workers. Leonie herself went on the AFA course soon after coming into her role in autumn 2023. She and her colleagues use the knowledge they gained daily. They also make direct referrals to Citizens Advice via the CAW website and if they have urgent issues, they contact CAW colleagues directly. Sheree tends to work as a link between EMHIP and CAW, facilitating links and trust between the two services.

Leonie uses knowledge gained at AFA training regularly as she deals with complex cases requiring multi-disciplinary and agency responses. Leonie has sometimes needed to explain why clients are not following, for example, debt advice, due to mental health issues. She

attended a useful follow-up bite size session on employment law and has also attended Crisis project conferences and events.

Leonie's suggestions for improvements include increasing the frequency of training so that staff don't have to wait so long before the next AFA course and developing online resources for AFA practitioners. These resources could include information about forthcoming events and courses, information and links to courses and new content and information about any changes.

St Michael's Church in Southfields is the hub for a network of churches including St Stephen's (East Putney), Croydon Community church, and St John the Divine (Earlsfield). It has a community transformation programme that includes a variety of activities throughout the week, including the Wandsworth Food Bank, Open House sessions for the elderly, weekly community lunches, Sparkle - intergenerational sessions - and a monthly Ukrainian supper. During the winter months, the church partners with Glass Door homelessness charity to provide hot meals and shelter on Saturday nights.

Gaby McWhinnie, Social Action and Development Manager attended the AFA training in May 2023. She found the training very useful. It has enabled Gaby and her team to better assist their guests with social welfare issues such as housing, debt, and welfare benefits. Gaby has attended follow-up coffee mornings and is part of the WhatsApp group. She plans to attend an AFA refresher soon as it is nearly two years since she did the AFA course.

The church has informal links with CAW through CAW's the Foodbank Advice Project. This has allowed the church to provide additional support to their guests who attend the foodbank sessions. Other people that the church supports are signposted to CAW and other services. The formal referrals route under the Crisis project has not been used.

Gaby would welcome training on how best to work with people whose lives are chaotic, who have mental health challenges and are mistrustful of services. A course and some buddying and networking around this issue would help.

Co-production, AFA and the Crisis Project

While the Crisis Project was initially co-designed, and co-production was an important theme, some stakeholders expressed frustration at not being engaged in ongoing development. There is an acknowledgement within the Crisis Project team also that a co-production approach to AFA and the Project has not been consciously and actively taken.

"I wouldn't say the course itself is co-produced, but everything around it—the support, events, feedback—is a shared effort." [CAW staff member]

In many ways, though, what the Project does naturally involves co-production. Co-production is a way of working where professionals and people who use services, their families, and communities work together as equal partners to design, deliver, and evaluate

services. Instead of decisions being made only by professionals, co-production values everyone's knowledge, skills, and experience, ensuring services better meet the needs of the people who use them. People are involved from the very beginning and have an active role in shaping how services work, rather than just giving feedback on decisions that have already been made.

When co-production is done well, it helps to create services that work better for the people who use them. It ensures that support is designed around real needs, not just assumptions. It also helps to build stronger, more connected communities where people feel listened to and valued.

A co-production approach in the Crisis Project is directly relevant to its design and implementation, as it seeks to empower communities, democratise advice-giving, and involve service users and partner organisations in shaping and delivering support services. The project emphasises community involvement, capacity building, and collaboration between CAW, CEN, and community and faith organisations.

AFA is a key example of co-production, where community members and volunteers receive training to signpost individuals to advice and support services. Local organisations are supported to run their own advice and triage services, strengthening the self-sufficiency of the community. The Crisis Network also regularly brings organisations together to elevate the voices of people experiencing hardship, influencing policymakers to address the root causes of crisis situations. Community members contribute case studies and feedback that inform the direction of the project.

"I've got a feeling of good faith, a lot of trust. It feels like a lot of mutual respect and trust between us." [Stakeholder]

A more conscious approach to and revisiting of co-production principles may be helpful, but project leaders are mindful of the fact that the capacity of CAW, CEN and partner organisations is severely stretched. Asking for more involvement in a process of design and delivery is challenging.

"Many clients are only reaching us because someone in their community—who they trust—was trained and knew how to refer." (CAW staff member)



AFA Training in Action

8. Conclusions

The Crisis Project has made a meaningful and sustained contribution to improving access to advice and strengthening community capacity in Wandsworth. Now in its ninth year, it has evolved from a promising pilot into an established, well-regarded model of place-based, community-led advice delivery. Its core strength lies in its responsiveness to systemic barriers, its relational and inclusive approach, and its ability to connect disparate parts of the local ecosystem through shared learning, training and action.

The Project represents a strategic and community-rooted response to the deepening challenges faced by Wandsworth residents amid economic turbulence, structural inequality and a fragmented service landscape. At its heart, the project has sought to build bridges: between communities and formal services, between voluntary sector, community and faith organisations, and between advice need and advice provision. By embedding knowledge and capability within community organisations, it has aimed not simply to expand access to advice but to reshape the way advice is delivered—decentralising it, demystifying it, and humanising it.

My evaluation found strong evidence that the project has:

- Improved access to advice for people in hardship, particularly those from marginalised or excluded communities
- Built trusted and effective partnerships between CAW, CEN, and a diverse network of community and faith organisations
- Created sustainable pathways for delivering low-level advice and effective referrals through the Advice First Aid programme
- Supported the emergence of new advice provision within community organisations – within the constraints of funding and resources available
- Contributed to the development of a more joined-up and resilient local voluntary and community sector
- Naturally entailed a co-production approach via AFA and the Crisis Network
- Inspired learning and replication across the wider Citizens Advice network, including London and other parts of England

The project also reflects the strategic ambitions of Wandsworth Council and the findings of research into community advice needs, aligning with calls for community-rooted, preventative, and collaborative responses to hardship. It sits comfortably within emerging evidence and policy priorities that emphasise trusted intermediaries, early intervention, relational models of delivery, and systems leadership.

Nonetheless, challenges remain. These include:

- Inconsistent co-production and a need to more consciously embed these principles in future development. However, while co-production remains an important principle, its application is challenged by capacity constraints within community partners, including those receiving significant funding. There are barriers to participation among under-resourced groups due to structural inequality, limited time and capacity, which the Project can challenge but does not have the power to change.
- The extent to which advice has been decentralised and the capacity of community agencies to deliver advice has been built is limited, but it is unrealistic to expect decentralisation at anything more than a small scale. Most small community agencies will struggle to develop more than triage, information and signposting services without additional funding and infrastructure. AFA is not designed to create trained advisers, but rather to improve awareness of social welfare provisions and solutions, improve triage and enable wider access to advice. Advice and casework is always likely to be mainly delivered by agencies like CAW, which is expertly trained, resourced and also regulated in certain advice areas.
- Limitations in the scale and availability of AFA training, especially for part-time staff and smaller groups – need to review AFA content, course length and delivery channel options, learning from other areas where AFA has been used.
- The need to consider the provision of more follow-up resources and support for AFA practitioners.
- Gaps in referral follow-up and communication, which can erode trust and affect continuity of care.
- A need for stronger mechanisms for tracking outcomes, capturing learning, and planning for sustainability beyond external funding.

The Project's continued success will depend on its ability to adapt to these challenges, deepen its roots in community partnerships, and embed learning and leadership more widely within the system.

9. Recommendations

Implementation of the following recommendations will depend on resources available and will need to be prioritised by CAW and CEN.

1. Sustain and deepen co-production and shared ownership

- Consider mechanisms for shaping future delivery and training content. Develop clearer mechanisms for community voices—especially marginalised ones—to influence the strategic direction of the project. This could be a revamped POP, advisory panels or focus groups involving a rotating group of partner agencies.
- The extent to which the project can do this depends on available resources and input by CAW and CEN and the capacity of community partner agencies, which is often very stretched. CAW and CEN should aim for light-touch co-production and co-design, while seeking new funding and resources to increase partner engagement capacity.

2. AFA training delivery

- Offer shorter, modular and online versions of AFA to meet the needs of smaller, part-time and volunteer-led organisations. Explore evening and weekend sessions to increase accessibility.
- Create a resource hub (digital or printed) for AFA Practitioners including signposting guides, referral forms, contact directories and checklists.
- Issue regular updates and curated resources via preferred channels (email and WhatsApp).
- Ensure clarity of expectations of and opportunities for AFA participants after completing initial AFA training.

3. Strengthen referral and feedback systems

- Develop a simple, structured referral feedback loop to keep referring partners informed and maintain trust.
- Pilot a named liaison model to offer personalised points of contact for partner organisations.

4. Enhance sustainability and legacy planning

- Work with Wandsworth Council and other funders to develop a long-term sustainability strategy, including shared resourcing of training infrastructure and outreach roles.

5. Systematically collect, celebrate and share outcomes, impact and learning

- Develop a robust monitoring and evaluation framework to collect outcome and impact data from the Crisis Project Network, AFA Practitioners and clients.

- Document stories of change from individuals, partners and trainees and use these to build advocacy and influence.
- Continue to contribute to and learn from regional and national Communities of Practice and explore peer mentoring for emerging AFA practitioners or coordinators.
- Develop a Project communications strategy and tools, with visuals, to tell its story to support buy-in from the community and funders.

6. Address capacity and access inequalities

- Identify mechanisms to support smaller and under-resourced groups to participate.
- Continue to build good quality partnerships with organisations and leaders from underrepresented communities and faith groups.

Appendix One: AFA Survey Results

A survey of AFA participants, co-designed by me as evaluator with the Crisis Project team, was issued in March 2025, with a closing date of 4th April. 17 people responded to the survey.

1. % who did AFA training between September 2023 and the time of the survey

- **52.9%** (9 out of 17 respondents)

2. Motivations for doing the training (all respondents)

Themes from responses:

- Wanting to better support clients or guests (e.g., foodbank visitors, refugees, social action attendees)
- Gaining knowledge to provide accurate signposting or advice
- Personal or professional development (career, confidence, passion for social work)
- Work requirements or role responsibilities

3. Motivations for those trained since Sept 2023

Similar themes, with emphasis on:

- Role-specific needs (managerial, client-facing)
- Desire to support specific groups (young people, refugees)
- Requirement by their role

4. % who have attended follow-up bitesize sessions or coffee mornings (all respondents)

- **35.3%** (6 out of 17)

5. % of recent trainees (Sept 2023 onwards) who attended follow-up sessions or coffee mornings

- **11.1%** (1 out of 9)

6. How confident do you feel in using the knowledge and skills gained from the AFA training?

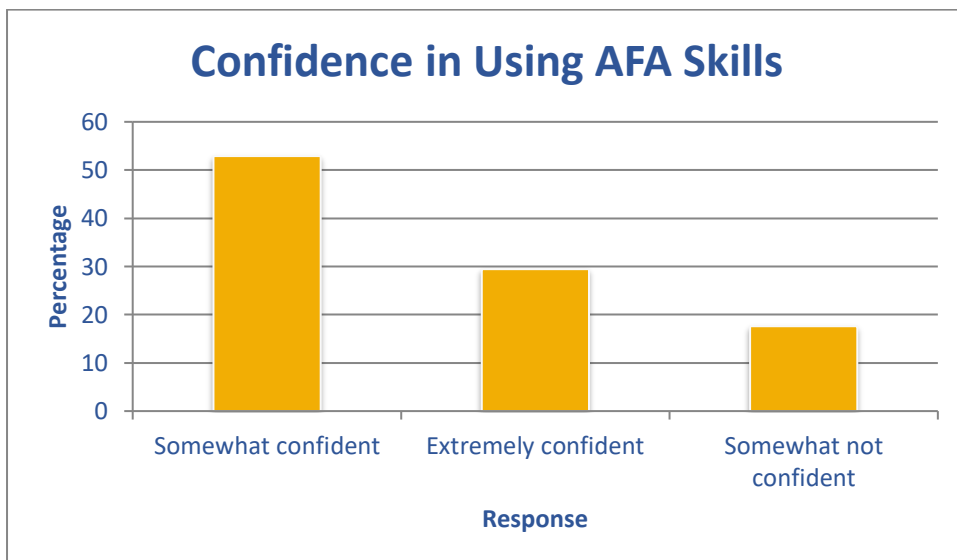
All respondents:

- **52.9%** – *Somewhat confident*
- **29.4%** – *Extremely confident*
- **17.6%** – *Somewhat not confident*

By training date:

- *Recent trainees (since Sept 2023):*
 - **33.3%** extremely confident
 - **33.3%** somewhat confident
 - **33.3%** somewhat not confident
- *Earlier trainees:*
 - **75.0%** somewhat confident
 - **25.0%** extremely confident

Those trained earlier felt slightly more confident overall, but recent trainees were more polarised.



7. How often do you use AFA skills in your role?

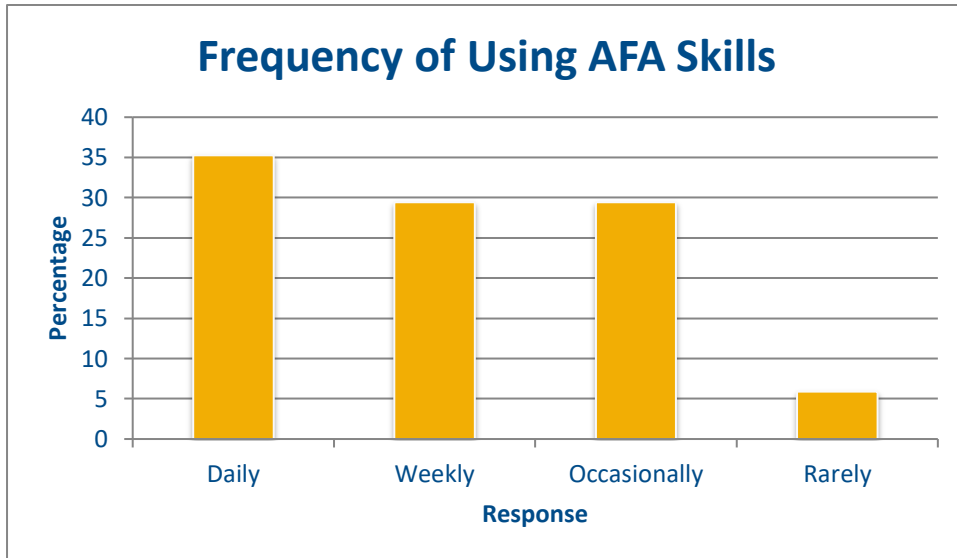
All respondents:

- **35.3%** – *Daily*
- **29.4%** – *Weekly*
- **29.4%** – *Occasionally*
- **5.9%** – *Rarely*

By training date:

- *Recent trainees:*
 - **33.3%** daily
 - **33.3%** weekly

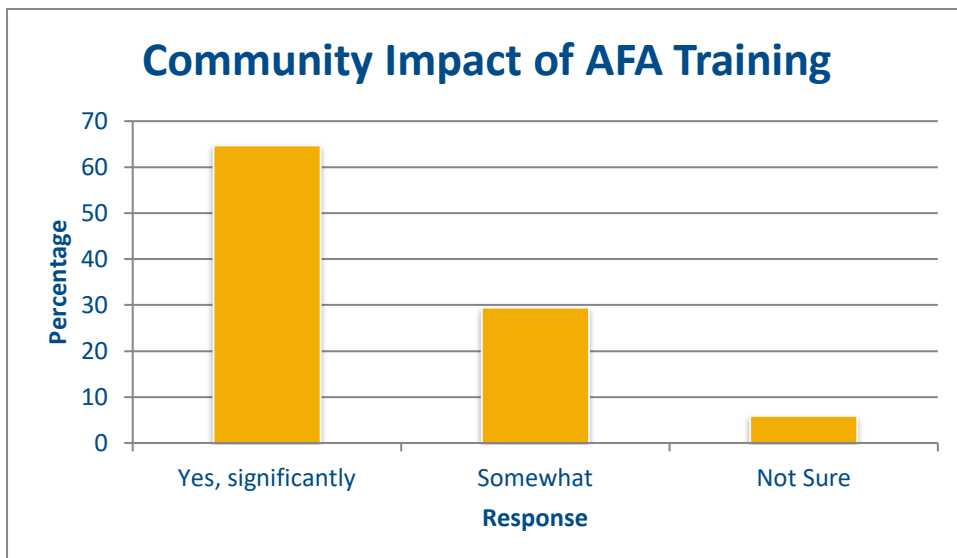
- **22.2%** occasionally
- **11.1%** rarely
- *Earlier trainees:*
 - Slightly higher occasional use (37.5%)



8. Has AFA training helped improve advice provision in your community?

All respondents:

- **64.7%** – *Yes, significantly*
- **29.4%** – *Somewhat*
- **5.9%** – *Not sure*

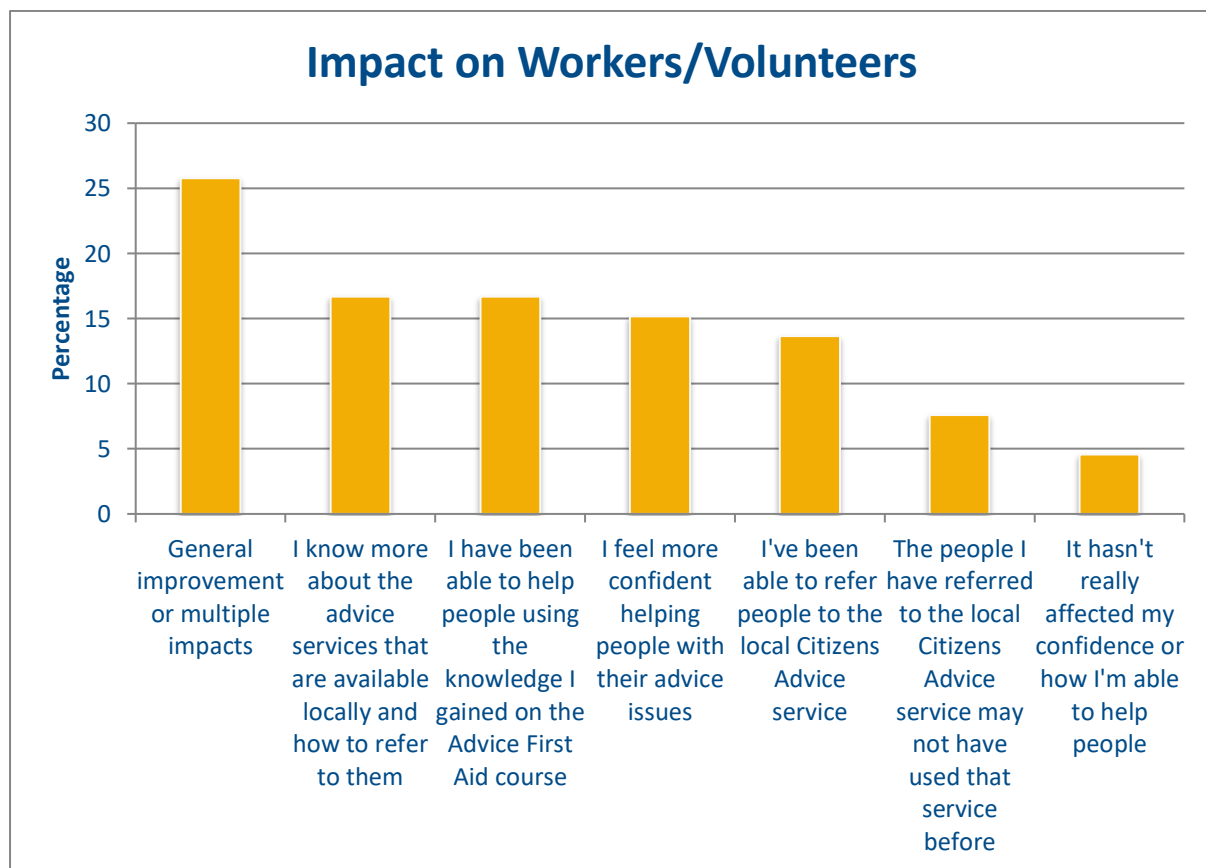


9. What impact has the AFA course had on you as a worker or volunteer?

(Multiple choice; percentages total over 100%)

Top outcomes:

- **26%** – General improvement or multiple impacts
- **16.7%** – More aware of local services and referral routes
- **16.7%** – Able to help people using course knowledge
- **15.2%** – Increased confidence in helping others
- **13.6%** – Successfully referred people to Citizens Advice
- **7.6%** – Reached new clients through referral
- **4.5%** – No change in confidence or impact



10. What impact has the AFA course had on your agency or organisation?

(Multiple choice; percentages total over 100%)

Key organisational impacts:

- **37.8%** – *General/multiple changes*
- **24.4%** – Stronger relationship/clearer referral routes with Citizens Advice

- **13.3%** – No change in relationships
- **11.1%** – Stronger links with other agencies
- **6.7%** – Receiving referrals from Citizens Advice
- **4.4%** – New advice/information service launched
- **2.2%** – Planning a new weekly advice session



11. Key themes from open-text responses

A. Challenges in referring clients to Citizens Advice Wandsworth

Themes:

- Delays or lack of follow-up from CAW
- Better contact needed across boroughs
- Generally positive but under-resourced

Quotes:

"Receive very little updates on referrals I've made..."

"Only with wait times... more funding/staff would help"

B. Challenges in accessing AFA training

Themes:

- Inconvenient scheduling (conflict with work days)
- Waiting for training slots
- Suggestions for online delivery

Quotes:

“Yes, I work part time... many have fallen on Thursdays”

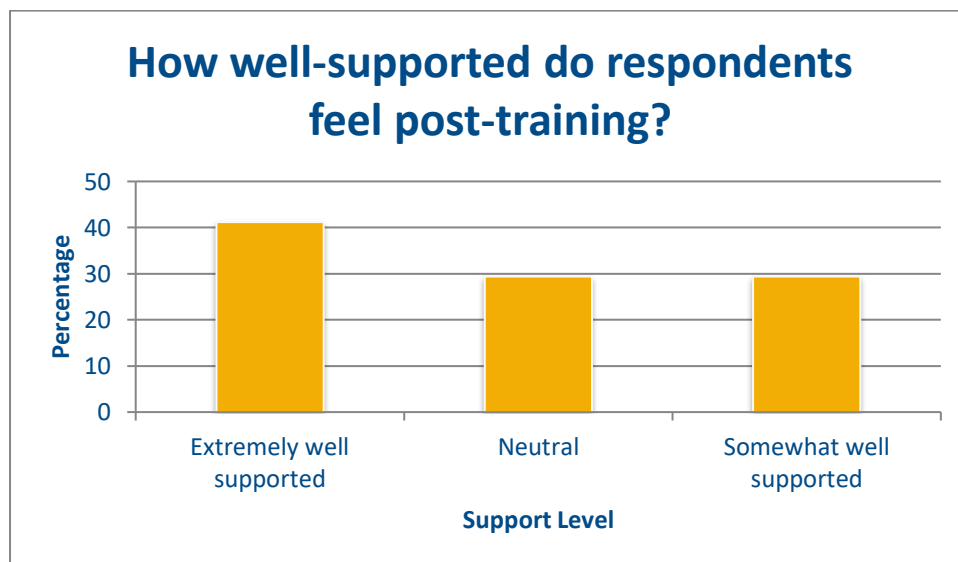
“Some sessions could be online...”

C. Support received post-training

29.4% Neutral

41.2% Extremely well supported

29.4% Somewhat well supported



D. Additional help, support, and resources requested

Themes:

- Better signposting materials or info packs
- More flexible/accessible training
- Advocacy and referral tools

Quotes:

“Knowledge of benefits they can apply for – more leaflets”

“A file that contains resources by topic”

E. Suggestions for future training topics

- **Training (5 mentions) - requests for:**
 - Refresher sessions
 - Flexible scheduling
 - Updated or topic-specific training
- **Support (3 mentions)**
 - Help implementing knowledge in practice
 - Follow-up guidance after initial training
- **Resources (2 mentions)**
 - Leaflets, contact directories, referral guides
- **Files / Templates (1 mention)**
 - Suggested toolkit/resource pack by topic area
- **Named contact / Sheree (2 mentions)**
 - Mentioned positively for her active outreach
- **CAW (Citizens Advice Wandsworth) (1 mention)**
 - Request for a nominated advisor to liaise with

Quotes

"More training on days I can attend, minutes circulated of meetings missed/absent from."

"Regular newsletter on best key contacts and referring agencies... so we can forward on our social media platforms and also share with our youth career coaches."

"Sheree from CEN has been in contact and is helping me set up a weekly service for our guests."

"I think having a file that you could create and send out containing different resources depending on the topic..."

"Refresher training."

"Knowledge of benefits they can apply for – more leaflets."

"Employment support to help the clients get a job."

"I would like to use the knowledge gained in a more meaningful way going forwards and would welcome support to do that."

AFA Survey Conclusions

1. The training is clearly valued and seen as relevant.

- **Over 80% of respondents** felt confident (somewhat or extremely) using AFA skills.
- **Two-thirds (64.7%)** said it significantly improved advice provision in their community.
- Daily or weekly use of AFA skills by **65% of respondents** shows real-world application.

2. It has a measurable impact on individuals and organisations.

- Individuals reported increased confidence, knowledge of local services, and more successful referrals.
- Organisations developed **stronger referral links**, especially with Citizens Advice, and some are **setting up new services**.

3. Follow-up engagement is a weak spot.

- Only **35.3%** had attended bitesize or coffee morning sessions.
- Among recent trainees, this dropped to **just 11.1%**, suggesting follow-up pathways need strengthening.
- There could be several reasons for this, including generally stretched and over-burdened services or unclear expectations.

Key insights and areas for improvement

1. Engagement of recent trainees is lower and more variable.

- Confidence is more evenly spread (⅓ each at high, medium, and low levels).
- They're less likely to have engaged in follow-ups, which could limit the long-term impact.

Consider offering earlier follow-up touchpoints, clearer routes to ongoing support and clearer expectations of course participants.

2. Ongoing support and practical tools are in demand.

Participants requested:

- Refresher training
- Printed or digital resources to aid signposting and referrals
- Named contacts for advice
- More flexible or online options

A toolkit of resources and clear follow-up structure could increase embeddedness of skills.

3. Scheduling and access barriers exist.

Several noted that training fell on days they couldn't attend, especially for part-time staff. Suggestions included:

- Evening or alternate day sessions
- Online delivery for flexibility

A mixed delivery model would widen access, especially for smaller or part-time organisations. Shorter courses, as used in some other localities, may be more suitable for part-time staff and volunteers.

4. Strong interpersonal relationships boost impact.

The engagement and practical help provided by Sheree was praised repeatedly:

"Sheree has been very supportive in attending our TCK lounge..."

"She's helping me set up a weekly service for our guests."

Embedding community facilitators or peer supporters into the programme could enhance uptake and practical application.

5. Referral systems need streamlining.

Challenges with Citizens Advice Wandsworth were noted:

- Lack of updates on referrals
- Unclear contact points
- Long waiting times

"Receive very little updates on referrals I've made..."

"More funding/staff would help."

Consider establishing formal referral feedback loops or liaison roles.

Preferred communications:

- Email – universally preferred
- WhatsApp – supported by a minority (23.5%) as a complementary tool

Maintain email as the core channel, with optional WhatsApp groups for bite-sized updates.

Appendix Two: Consultees

During the course of my evaluative research, I held semi-structured interviews and conversations with the following people. I'm grateful for their time and candour.

CAW and CEN Staff

- Beverley Baines – Housing Adviser (City Bridge Foundation funded, based in Crisis Project team)
- Debbie Hunte – Crisis Adviser, CAW
- Jeremy Sandell – Chief Executive Officer, CAW
- Jo Anderson – Project Lead, Crisis Project, CAW
- Katie Hearne – Crisis Adviser, CAW
- Malik Gul, Director, CEN
- Martin Ayres – Caseworker Supervisor, CAW
- Natasha Cross – Service Manager, CAW
- Sheree Pinheiro – Project Manager for CEN, employed by CAW

Local Stakeholders – Crisis Network, AFA practitioners and Crisis Project POP

- Sarah Rackham – Retired, ex-Katherine Low Settlement
- Syeda Islam - Chair of Wandsworth Older People's Forum (WOPF), Trustee of Battersea Crime Prevention Panel, Chair of Patient Participation Group and involved with Big Local and Rotary Club
- Naseem Aboobaker, Director, Mushkil Aasaan
- Lynne Capocciana, Manager Community Champion programme/Roeampton, Estate Art CIC
- Amrinder Sehgal, Senior Primary and Community Care Delivery Manager (Merton and Wandsworth Place), NHS South West London Integrated Care Board
- Beverley Wilson Blunt and Mark New, Wellbeing Coordinators, and Elizabeth Guyatt, Senior Wellbeing Lead, Family Action Wandsworth
- Leonie Brown, EMHIP Hubs Manager, Ethnicity and Mental Health Improvement Project
- Abdirahman Xirsi, Director, Elays Network
- Razia Niaz, Manager, Tooting Community Kitchen
- Julia Hamilton, Head Teacher, Swaffield School
- Gaby McWhinnie, Social Action and Development Manager, St Michael's Church, Southfields
- Aurora Arista, Senior HR and Operations Manager, Spiral Skills
- Nadine Ballantyne, Head of Family Refugee Programme, Love to Learn Team, Katherine Low Settlement
- Amelia Willis, Voluntary Sector Development Manager, Wandsworth Council
- Harriet Steele, VCS Partnership Manager, Wandsworth Council
- Melissa Watson, Head of Communities and Partnership, Wandsworth Council
- Ben Threadgold, Cost of Living Programme Manager, Wandsworth Council