



# Towards our common goal

## Annual Review 2023

RELIEVING POVERTY

ADDRESSING INEQUALITY

IMPROVING WELLBEING

FIGHTING INJUSTICE



**HARC**

Hastings Advice and Representation Centre



## WE ARE HARC

“I would have given up if it hadn't been for HARC.”  
HARC client

## HARC – Hastings Advice and Representation Centre

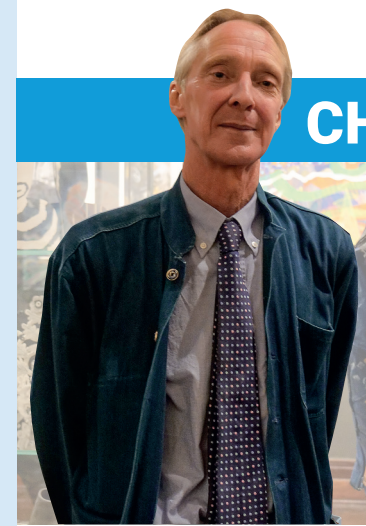
HARC is a registered charity providing specialist welfare benefit advice and representation to people of all ages in East Sussex and beyond.

**With our free and confidential service, we aim to address inequalities, relieve poverty, and improve the quality of life for vulnerable and disadvantaged people.**

HARC's team of specialist welfare benefit advisors offer an end-to-end confidential and impartial support service covering all stages of application up to and including appeal tribunal. Responding to the needs of individuals and tailoring our service, we meet their needs with face to face, telephone and remote support at a range of community venues and home visits.

HARC is strongly rooted in the community and plays an integral role in the local support network. This includes running two high street charity shops which provide valuable volunteering and work experience opportunities for local people.

It is our aim to help bring about a welfare system which is fair, accountable and recognises the issues of the individual. In doing so, we actively campaign toward positive policy change and provide specialist welfare training to ensure everyone working with and for the most vulnerable in our society have the tools they need to provide the right support.



## CHAIR'S REPORT

**Last year we celebrated our 40th anniversary with an AGM held in the Durbar Hall at the Hastings Museum. The meeting was well attended, and I want to thank all who contributed to the success of that afternoon. In my Chair's report I tried to give**

**an overview of the huge changes during those 40 years and the development and growth of HARC. This year I return to the present and focus on the day-to-day issues facing both our staff and clients.**

Unsurprisingly, for an organisation whose core offering is the provision of welfare benefits advice the dominating issue over the past 12 months has been the ongoing cost of living crisis. The demand for our services has reached unprecedented levels and despite the best efforts of staff it has not always been possible to meet this demand in as timely a fashion as we would wish.

More than ever clients are presenting with complex needs and multiple and overlapping problems. Exacerbating the situation is the fact that a number of partner agencies and statutory services are also overwhelmed and closing waiting lists, contributing to the immense pressure on our front-line advice team.

Whilst the very small reduction in energy charges in July was welcome, it did not alleviate the financial pressures faced by many – and our client group in particular.

Every two years HARC commissions an independent client survey, where 100 respondents

provide a detailed picture of their situation and experience of our services.

The 2023 survey was carried out earlier this year and the rather stark results show us that the cost of living crisis has had a greater negative impact on the mental health and general well-being of our clients than the Covid pandemic.

**But despite the strain on staff and clients alike, and the overwhelming pressure that has been brought to bear on HARC services the survey shows exceptional levels of client satisfaction.** The survey also points out that these satisfaction levels are considerably above what would be usual for an advice service.

In recognition of the diversity of our clients and staff, and to make the survey data more accessible, we have commissioned a visual scribe to illustrate the responses which you will see featured within this Annual Review.

In response to the unrelenting and increasing pressure of work we have taken time out this year to review the wellbeing of our staff and develop a more robust wellbeing strategy with practical measures to support them through these difficult times. This includes working with Advice UK to develop a meaningful reflective practice model which can be used across the sector.

Finally, I wish to express my continuing thanks to all of our staff for going above and beyond in their commitment to the centre and our clients. I also thank my fellow Board members for their input over another challenging year and hope that you find this Annual Review both informative and interesting.

**Michael Gratton LLB, Chair**





## OUR YEAR IN NUMBERS

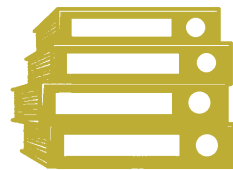
In the year to the 31st of March 2023...

A total of **18,869** clients made contact with HARC.



**1,310** client contacts were made with **vulnerable, elderly, disabled or isolated clients** at surgeries or home visits.

**665** clients were **represented** at review and tribunal...



...**626** cases were **won** – that is a **94%** success rate.



**87%** of clients who approached HARC **received support** – those we couldn't support were referred to more appropriate agencies.



**£6,580,648** was secured in previously unclaimed, enhanced or reinstated benefits, of which...



**£6,159,860** was secured for clients with disabilities and long term health issues.



In comparison it cost just **£737,049** for HARC to provide an extensive range of **advice and representation services** comprising face to face advice, telephone and email advice, secondary advice to professional colleagues, outreach surgeries, home visits, complex caseloads, advocacy and tribunal work.

## RELIEVING POVERTY

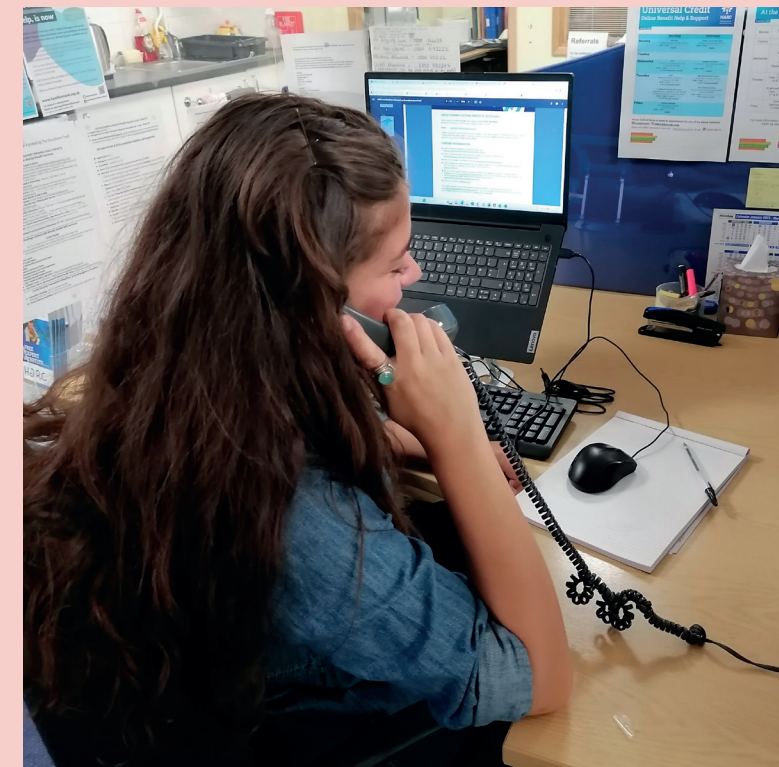
### PHOEBE

Phoebe joined the HARC team in December 2022 to help meet the increasing demand for one off advice and triage support on our helpline and at our community-based advice surgeries. Here she tells us a little about herself and her experiences so far.

I studied human geography at university and graduated in 2021. I wanted to learn about poverty eradication and theories of development in the hopes of working for a non-profit organisation in the future. My aspiration is to contribute to improving individuals' lives, in pursuit of the larger goal to diminish all poverty and improve the quality of life for those who are most vulnerable.

In my role at HARC, I feel I am working towards that goal. I am the first point of contact for many people because I answer our benefit helpline. I also go out to different venues in the community to run drop-in advice surgeries. On the helpline or out and about, I can offer clients one off advice to their queries, refer them into our service to get support from one of our specialists, or signpost to other organisations who can help for non-benefit issues.

The support HARC advisors offer with form filling and appeals, bring about tangible results for their clients which are paramount to improving people's standard of living, security and hopefully in turn their general wellbeing.



I think the most meaningful impact my role has is to provide callers and clients with a real person to talk to and listen to their problems. The reassurance and confidence we give people by explaining their rights and the processes involved in managing the complicated world of benefits is significant.

As the world progresses into a digital age and the cost of living keeps on rising, ensuring those most in need don't get left behind is more important than ever.

I am proud to be working for HARC, towards our common goal.

**Phoebe Relf**  
Welfare Benefits Advisor

### EAST SUSSEX WELFARE BENEFIT PROJECT HELPLINE STATISTICS FOR THE YEAR TO THE END OF MARCH 2023:

**9,162** calls received

**65%** of callers lived in the most deprived wards in East Sussex

**85%** of clients had long term health conditions

“Thank you for all your kindness and support. I cannot express what a huge difference you make with regard to helping understand what it is like claiming disability benefits.”  
HARC client



## FIGHTING INJUSTICE

### DEE

**Dee has been a HARC Director for eight years. Here she talks of her pride in the services we deliver and the outcomes we achieve for local people.**

Hi, my name is Dee and I have been an avid supporter of HARC since I first heard of them back in 2010, when I joined the advice sector. Over the years to follow I built up a strong working relationship with them. Particularly, during my time at the Advice and Community Hub and I was honoured to be invited to join the HARC Board back in December 2015.

I was extremely proud to be part of HARC's 40-year anniversary celebration last November. The event showcased the professionalism and high-quality advice service that would not be possible without the amazing HARC family of past and present staff, volunteers, and supporters, putting client services at the heart of everything they do!

The team dedicates themselves to supporting local people and the wider communities through welfare benefit advice and representation at all stages of the process, from helping with benefit

“

**Without HARC's support I would not have been able to appeal.”**

**HARC client**

applications to supporting individuals to appeal – which seems to be happening far too often in recent years! They achieve incredible outcomes for clients while navigating through the many challenges of diminishing funding and other recent events such as the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis.

As a charity the service relies on grants and funding streams that are becoming increasingly stretched. As need for services such as this increase so does competition for these limited funds. Every effort is made by HARC to fundraise and finance services responsibly and resourcefully. This wouldn't be possible without the hard work of the entire team, including those delivering first class customer service in our charity shops.

Not only have I benefited from HARC in a professional capacity, I have also gained personally from their warmth and generosity of friendship. Long may it continue.

**Dee Woollard**  
**HARC Director**



“

**The advisor I had could not have done any better, she talked to me like she was working for me, I could not have asked for anyone better.”**

**HARC client**

### BACKGROUND

**The percentage of households in East Sussex where children are living in low income families has increased over 2% since pre pandemic levels, and as much as 3% in some boroughs.**

Source: East Sussex in Figures



### JACKY INTRODUCES THE HARC CLIENT SURVEY

**In the 38 years I have been at HARC, I have never known our clients and staff to be under more pressure than they are right now.**

They say that the definition of insanity is to keep doing the same thing and expect a different result. Regrettably, the last three surveys have reported ongoing problems with the way health assessments are conducted.

Furthermore, this is the third survey that has shown consistent reporting of the clear flaws in the current welfare system. Rising levels of appeals, rising success rates of those appeals, parliamentary committee reports and independent research from many other organisations all also point out the repeated failings in how the health assessments are conducted.

**I wish that I could stop saying the same things, survey after survey, that there were areas of improvement I could genuinely point to in terms of how things are changing. As I cannot, I will once again ask those who read our survey and who understand the issues we are raising, whether from the people they support, or through personal experience, to raise their voices and use their platforms to advocate for change.**

I would like to thank everyone at HARC for remaining positive, focused and brilliant, in a time when our work has never been more challenging. I would like to acknowledge that many of our clients are still here because of the team and the incredible support they provide. HARC is only ever as good as our team, and the survey results show again, that we have no weak links, and we are incredibly lucky to have the team we do.

**Jacky Everard, HARC CEO**









## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The number of people in East Sussex with a limited long-term illness is projected to increase by a further 37% over the next 10 years.

The number of people in East Sussex with a disability is projected to increase by a further 27% over the next 10 years.

**Source:** *East Sussex Joint Strategic Needs Assessment* ([eastsussexjsna.org.uk](http://eastsussexjsna.org.uk))



According to the **Trussell Trust**, 14 per cent of all UK adults (or their households) experienced food insecurity in the 12 months to mid-2022, equating to an estimated 11.3 million people.

The Trussell Trust adds that the most significant cause of the financial insecurity that is driving the need for food banks is the design and delivery of the social security system, with four main issues affecting food bank users:

- lack of information about entitlements
- difficulties claiming and sustaining benefits, particularly personal independence payments
- insufficient income from benefits when they are accessed
- further reductions to income from sanctions, caps, and debt deductions

**Source:** *Trussell Trust, Hunger in the UK report, June 2023*



Summarising the key message from the three-year study which began in 2020, **CPAG** highlights that:

‘... while the digital nature of the benefit has some advantages for universal credit claimants, the way the digital systems have been designed also leads to people being left without money they are entitled to and information they need in order to challenge DWP decisions. In the worst cases claimants are forced into acute hardship because the programming and operation of this digital-by-design benefit does not align with social security legislation.’

**Source:** *Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG), You reap what you code – Universal Credit, digitalisation and the rule of law, June 2023*

5.7 million (48 per cent) low-income [UK] households are going hungry or cutting or skipping meals, while the number of households going without other essentials such as showers, transport and toiletries was 6.5 million (56 per cent)

For low income households on Universal Credit around 9 in 10 are going without essentials for the third survey in a row, despite the usual uprating of benefits with inflation and temporary cost of living payments. These levels of hardship cannot become baked in as the UK's new normal.

**Source – Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Cost of living tracker, Summer 2023**



## ROBYN

**Robyn is our Advice Manager. He is one of our longest standing members of staff so has seen first hand the massive changes that have impacted clients and staff over the years. Here he tells us more.**

Twenty odd years at HARC and truth be told things out there get worse and not better.

I jumped ship from the DWP in June 2000 if memory serves me well and back in those halcyon days clients came to HARC with an issue, be it a form that required completion or some clarification of how the benefits system worked, or assistance to dispute a decision, and in many instances a phone call could resolve the problem. Obviously not everything was so simply dealt with, but at any point during the dispute process towards an appeal hearing there could be a call from someone at the DWP who, after a reasoned and informed chat, would overturn the decision or help find a resolution.

My how things have changed. Clients now present with one issue, that slowly as you peel back the layers of the onion, turns into three and sometimes more issues, all of which require time and effort on the part of the advisor to resolve.

## ADDRESSING INEQUALITY

No longer is it possible to speak with the person who made the decision, they have become faceless and unapproachable. I doubt it is their fault, the DWP were always overworked and understaffed and that would appear to have got worse. Also, the quality of decision making is not what it was, and, in some instances, they dig their heels in and will not budge despite the simple fact that they were wrong.

**The cost-of-living crisis has made things even tougher for clients and the strain on the staff is unprecedented. It is never easy explaining to a client that some of the issues they present with are not part of our remit and sadly there is not always somewhere we can signpost them to.** That, and the sheer volume of people needing help when what we can provide is finite, places a strain on all the advisors.

It's still a rewarding job and every single soul who works for HARC deserves all the praise and respect in the world. Things are hard, harder than I have ever known them and there really doesn't seem to be a light at the end of this tunnel.

**Robyn Cleverley  
Advice Manager**

**“I would not have been able to do it on my own.”  
HARC client**

## BACKGROUND

“... there continues to be a disproportionate number of disabled people living on a low income or in poverty, disabled people experience long waiting periods for benefits eligibility decisions and are more likely to use resources such as food banks... disabled people are disproportionately affected by cost of living increases.”

**Source:** *Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), Progress on disability rights in the UK report, 2023*

**“I had real trouble with the forms. HARC supported me so much in getting these done and understanding the process.”  
HARC client**

**“...it took the stress away from dealing with a system that I didn't understand so I could focus on recovery.”  
HARC client**

**“I suffer with MS. Anxiety makes my symptoms worse. Having help from HARC reduces the anxiety.”  
HARC client**





## MICHAEL

Michael joined us in April 2023 as a Reception/Admin Apprentice. Here they tell us about their experience joining the HARC team.

I have lived locally to HARC most of my life. In 2020 I finished college but any plans I had for the future were interrupted by Covid-19. I had trouble finding work during the lockdowns. Even after Covid-19 subsided, I was very anxious about job interviews, and talking with strangers in general. I had no experience in the workplace beyond a month or so of work experience at an IT company. I really didn't know what I was going to do.

Eventually, in 2022, I got an opportunity to volunteer at HARC, and soon after I joined the team, I was offered a fully paid apprenticeship. My post has been funded for one year by the Jim Jackson Education Foundation who have committed to supporting me while I study towards my level 2 Customer Service Apprenticeship and gain valuable skills and work experience.

I've now been an apprentice at HARC for several months, and it's helping me become more comfortable in a work environment. I still feel new, and I'm still anxious, but the HARC team has been very welcoming and helped me adjust smoothly. I've gone from being unable to talk to new people at all, to warmly greeting visitors at the reception desk and dealing with their enquiries.

I have a long way to go but I see improvements week on week, and with the support of the HARC team I know I will get the most out of this experience and take my first steps towards a bright future.

**Michael Gray**  
Reception/Admin Apprentice

“The staff at HARC have been nothing but amazing from start to finish.”  
HARC client

“The advisors have been so considerate, and I have never felt judged. Each person I have dealt with has been friendly and professional has gone above and beyond. I truly thank them for everything.”  
HARC client

“Without HARC I feel that I would be close to being in the gutter or worse.”  
HARC client

“Anxiety caused by financial instability lifted.”  
HARC client

## BACKGROUND

In Hastings average earnings are **14%** lower than the national average.

In April 2023 **55.9%** of East Sussex residents are considered economically active. This is considerably lower than the **national average of 60.9%**.

Source: East Sussex in figures

## IMPROVING WELLBEING

**The increased demand on our services and the impact that has had on the wellbeing of our staff is a theme you will have seen running through this Annual Review.**

This issue is not exclusive to HARC. AdviceUK undertook an Advisor wellbeing and capacity study in 2022, the results of which were eye opening, and painted a picture of a sector where staff are overwhelmed by the sheer volume of demand, feeling burned out and contemplating leaving jobs that often they have dedicated years – even decades – to. How do you prioritise your workload when every case is urgent and every client is desperate?

But this is only part of the picture. Add to that a world where your colleagues are struggling to pay their own bills and keep up with the rapid increase in the cost of everyday essentials and it is easy to see that staff are struggling to keep afloat on a sea of increasing uncertainty. When the funding sources you rely on are stretched to their absolute limit it is hard to feel any degree of job security.

At HARC we have a very low staff turnover. Our team are the key to our success and their unwavering belief and commitment to the work we do is what keeps them here; day in day out for years, doing their best to help those most in need, those who have been turned away from everywhere else and have nobody else to turn

“It was nice to get a telephone conversation with an understanding person. As I personally have no internet connection. This was a positive and enlightening contact, which did help me in a very effective manner.”  
HARC client

to. Their resolve never falters and their empathy seems endless.

But we are all human and if we are going to protect our most valuable resource (our staff) we know we need to act now. To that end we have focused heavily on staff wellbeing this year and co-produced a meaningful and practical strategy for improving all areas of staff wellbeing. We have agreed shared principles for how HARC services will function in the future, taken practical steps to improve our working environment, and have elevated the importance of self care and its role in building resilience.

**By following the five basic principles of wellbeing as promoted by Mind:**

- Connect
- Be Active
- Take Notice
- Keep Learning, and
- Give

We want to introduce more autonomy for staff to help create a package of wellbeing support that is tailored to their individual needs. We have made good inroads into this in 2023, particularly at our Staff Away Day in August.

We are determined to create meaningful positive change and safeguard the wellbeing of clients and staff during these challenging times. Watch this space!

“It helped me feel better just by the support, reduced my stress, and made my actions clearer”  
HARC client

“It has protected my mental health ahead of my major op.”  
HARC client



# SUMMARISED ACCOUNTS

For the year to the 31st of March 2023.  
Taken from the Annual Report.

## MONEY IN

Local Authority Grants	£83,323
Magdalen and Lasher Older Peoples Project	£26,794
Magdalen and Lasher Universal Credit Support Project	£30,301
British Gas Energy Trust	£31,308
Access to Justice Fund	£31,218
Charity Shops	£135,709
Other Income	£129,356
NHS Sussex – Benefits Advice Project	£300,810
<b>Total</b>	<b>£768,819</b>

## MONEY OUT

Advice Centre Services	£614,125
Governance	£5920
Charity Shops	£117,004
<b>Total</b>	<b>£737,049</b>

“HARC has given me help and mental stability and I am trying to be optimistic.”  
HARC client

“The Service is so good. The Adviser made me feel that it was OK to go on benefits – a normal situation to help those in need of it, that’s what it is there for. I wouldn’t have been able to fill in the forms successfully and my quality of life would be very poor. The benefit money enabled me to live normally and with dignity.”  
HARC client

“... the staff are very professional and couldn’t be more helpful.”  
HARC client

“An amazing service and free, I have already recommended it and my friend was successfully helped too.”  
HARC client

## THANK YOU!

HARC staff, volunteers, clients and the wider community would like to extend our sincerest thanks to our supporters this year including:

- Access to Justice Foundation
- Big Local North East Hastings
- Blagrove Trust
- British Gas Energy Trust
- Catherine Cirket Discretionary Trust
- David Woolf
- East Sussex County Council
- Foreshore Trust
- Hastings Old Town Carnival Association
- Isabel Blackman Foundation
- Jim Jackson Foundation
- Kenward Pullen (KP Computers)
- Little Cheyne Court Wind Farm Community Fund
- London Legal Support Trust
- Magdalen & Lasher Charities
- Multiple Sclerosis Society
- NHS Sussex Integrated Care Board
- North East Hastings Big Local
- Rother District Council
- Rother Voluntary Action (HfU)
- Rye Mutual Aid
- Silver Lady Fund
- Sussex Community Development Association
- Sussex Community Foundation
- The National Lottery – Awards for All



## CONTACT US

Please contact us if you would like to learn more about HARC and our services, or want to support the work we do:

@ Email: [enquiries@harcuk.com](mailto:enquiries@harcuk.com)

☎ HARC advice line: 01424 428375

🌐 Website: [www.harcuk.com](http://www.harcuk.com)

“You were extremely helpful to me, my circumstances changed for the better, you provide an invaluable service.”

**HARC client**

There are a variety of ways you can support our work:

- Volunteering in the shops or office
- Supporting our campaigns
- Donating at Just Giving: [www.justgiving.com/hastingsarc](http://www.justgiving.com/hastingsarc)

### Hastings Advice and Representation Centre

The Advice and Community Hub  
Renaissance House  
London Road  
St Leonards on Sea  
East Sussex  
TN37 6AN

☎ Benefit Helpline: 0333 344 0681

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Registered Charity Number: 1083566

Private Limited Company Number: 04048683



# HARC

Hastings Advice and  
Representation Centre