

Citizens Advice East Herts Research and Campaigns Bulletin

No 4

April 2016 - March 2017



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1. Introduction

This is our fourth Research and Campaigns bulletin. It presents an overview of the work that advisers and the Research and Campaigns Team have been doing this past financial year. The statistics show the number of clients we advise, their issues and the amount of work we do. The BEFs describe particularly unfair issues that advisers strongly feel require further action.

We report on specific benefits and housing issues we are bringing to the attention of Citizens Advice nationally and our local MP as well as what is happening with food bank voucher numbers.

We have updated our research on Access to the Internet following on from our 2012 and 2015 surveys, showing that the “Digital Divide” continues.

There is also a brief look at other research and campaigns activity we have undertaken during the year including our Hospice research and Big Energy campaign.

Lastly but not least, a big thank you to Dick Tanner for all his hard work over the past few years having retired in August from his role as Research and Campaigns Coordinator. We are delighted that Sue Hunt and Gail Cambery have joined our team this year as our new Research and Campaign Coordinators.

Research and Campaigns Team

“There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they are falling in.”

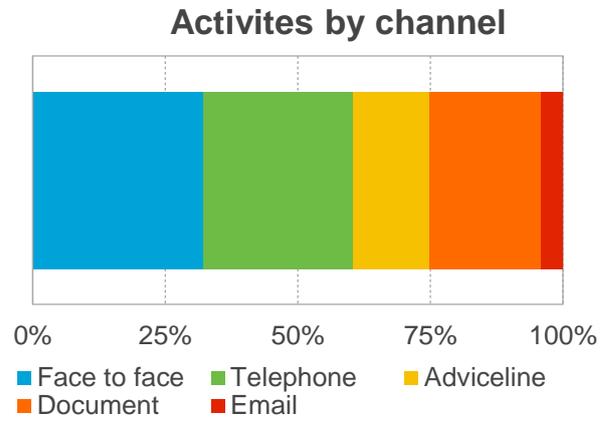
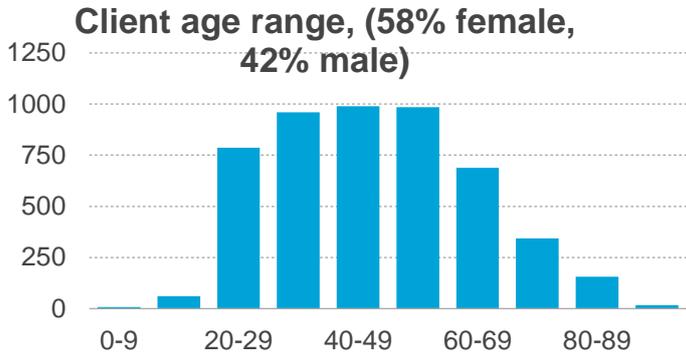
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2. Statistics, twelve months to 31st March 2017

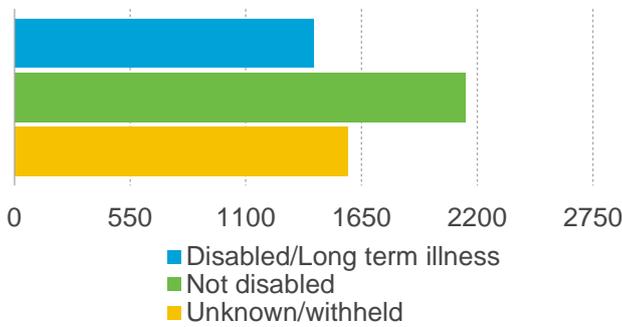
UNIQUE CLIENTS: 5,148

ACTIVITIES: 13,782

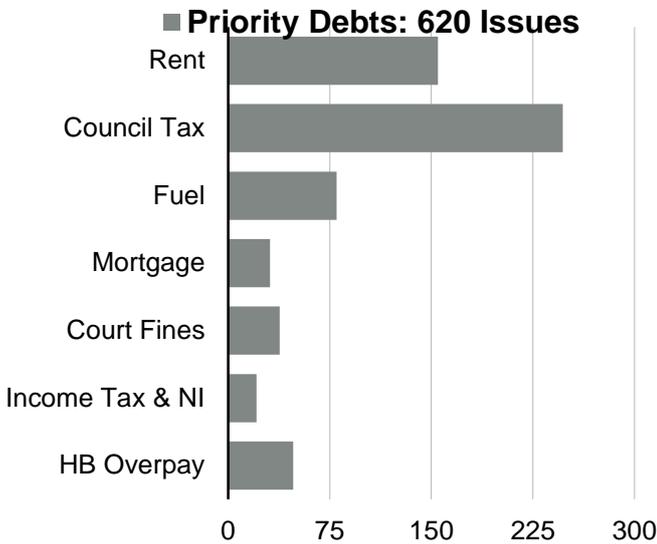
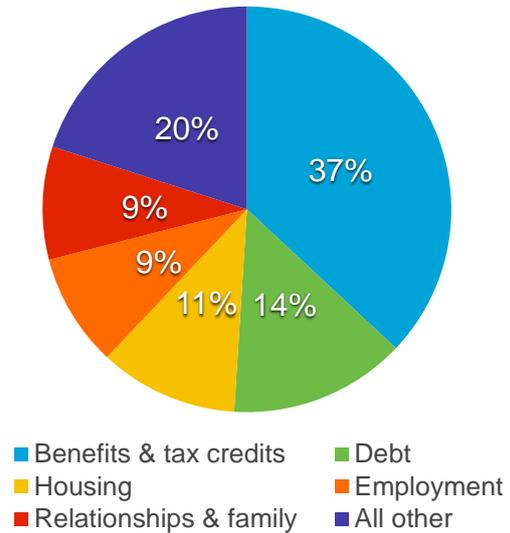
ADVICE ISSUES: 11,713



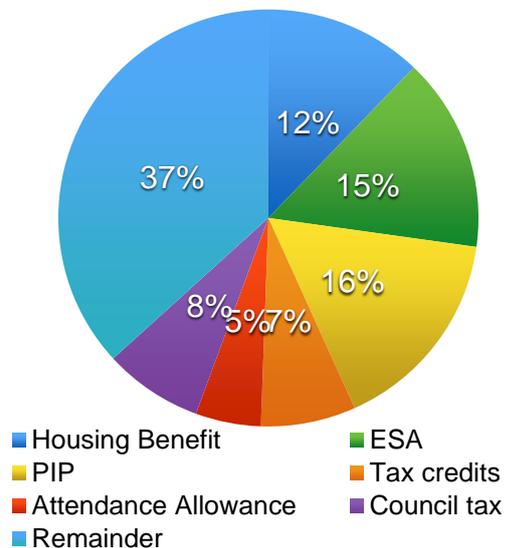
Client Disability profile



Top 5 Advice categories



4291 Benefits issues



3. Bureau Evidence Forms (BEFs)

A BEF is an electronic form completed by an adviser and shared with Citizens Advice to highlight examples of unfair practices, maladministration, or exploitation.

In the year to 31st March 2017 advisers submitted BEFs raising 108 issues. 74 issues were about benefits and tax credits. The benefits issues included 27 on Personal Independence Payments (PIP) and 21 on Employment Support Allowance (ESA). Several specific issues which we are currently following up are highlighted in sections 4 and 5 below.

4. Benefits: PIP and ESA

Personal independence payments (PIPs) are the largest cause of benefit issues raised by our clients with nearly 700 over the past 12 months. Here are two of our current concerns:

- Loss of Motability car whilst awaiting PIP appeal - We would like to see clients with Motability cars being able to retain the car until the outcome of an appeal is known, particularly where expensive alterations have been made and the car cannot be driven by another person.
- Availability of PIP Assessment appointments locally - We are continuing to see clients being asked to attend PIP assessment appointments at offices such as Ilford and Deptford, requiring difficult and lengthy journeys. We would like to see more appointments being available locally at the Ware office.

Employment and support allowance (ESA) is the 2nd highest cause of benefit issues raised by our clients with nearly 650 in the last year. We are continuing to see a range of problems with claims made under special rules for people who are terminally ill and have a certified form DS1500 in place. For example, it should not be necessary for clients to provide a separate DS1500 for each benefit and DWP office to ensure that they are properly dealt with under special rules.

5. Housing Issues

Housing is our third highest source of issues with over 500 raised by clients in the past year.

- Local Housing Allowance – In 2015 we identified that it had become virtually impossible to rent private property when relying on housing benefit. Updating the figures for 2017 shows no improvement (please see table below). As before, we would like to see a return to the LHA being a reflection of the actual rents in the rental area.

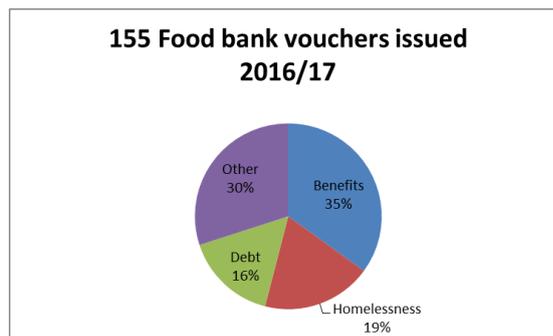
Table: The Local Housing Allowance (LHA) for two bedroom properties in East Herts and the percentage of properties for rent at or below LHA

Broad Market Rental Area	June 2010		July 2011		October 2012		August 2015		March 2017	
	LHA	% properties' rent < LHA	LHA	% properties' rent < LHA	LHA	% properties' rent < LHA	LHA	% properties' rent < LHA	LHA	% properties' rent < LHA
Ware and Hertford	£773	89%	£750	89%	£775	89%	£806	28%	£810	1%
Harlow and Stortford	£693	61%	£695	72%	£695	22%	£710	0%	£716	0%

- Housing Benefit and Real Time Information - We are seeing clients who have received reassessments of their Housing Benefit saying they have been overpaid since 2013 following the use of real time information (RTI) data to amend the income figure on their benefit claim. The client must then repay the money and/or future payments are reduced. However, there are sometimes problems with the accuracy of RTI, such as adjusting to irregular income. The client can check the revised income figure and appeal if they think it is incorrect. In practice this is difficult if they have not retained their P60/P45 and payslips for the years in question, and this is made even more difficult if they are on contracts with variable hours and pay. We would suggest that any such reassessments are limited to the previous 12 months and that benefit clients are regularly reminded of who and when to notify of changes in their income so that their benefit can be adjusted on a timely basis.

6. Food bank vouchers

Citizens Advice East Herts continues to issue food bank vouchers, with 155 issued in the past 12 months. Our data for the year ending 31st March 2017 on why the client requires food shows that 35% are caused by benefit issues such as delays in receiving benefits and benefit changes, with 19% due to homelessness and 16% due to debt problems.



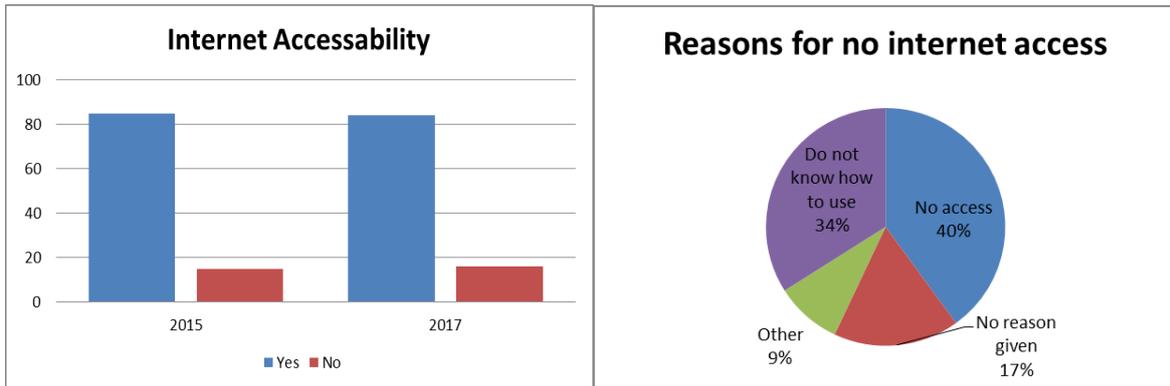
7. Digital divide

In 2012 and 2015 we surveyed clients who dropped into our offices about their use of the internet. The 2015 results showed 85% had access to the internet and 15% did not have access, a small improvement compared to the previous survey in 2012 which showed 17% did not have access. The 2015 survey also showed that lack of access to the internet was age related.

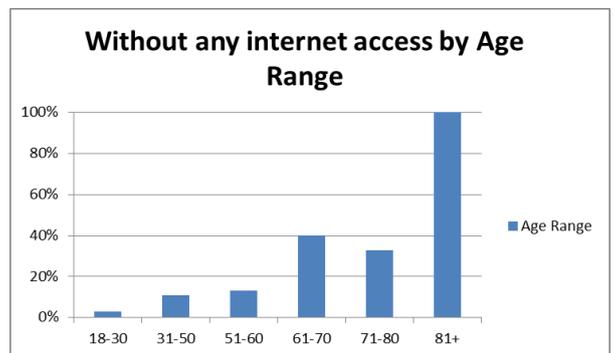
We have run a similar waiting room survey during March 2017 to determine the current position. We also asked our clients if they know how to find a cheaper supplier for broadband and mobiles using the Ofcom accredited comparison sites.

168 clients responded to our 2017 survey. Of these 141 (84%) use the internet and 27 (16%) did not, similar to the results in 2015. The reasons for not using the internet were: 34% "Do

not know how to use the internet”, 40% “Cannot access the internet”, 9% “did not want to or had medical reasons” and 17% did not give a reason.



Our 2017 survey shows that not using the internet continues to be age related. Of the clients responding who were over 60 years old, 40% did not use the internet. This compares to 9% of the 18-60 year olds. This is a worse picture than the 2015 survey which showed 35% of those over 60 years old did not have access and which we will share with Citizens Advice nationally and with our local MP.



8. Other research and campaigns activity

During the past year we have also:

- supported the Big Energy campaign. This was to help clients and members of the public understand how to check their energy costs and switch tariff; and spread awareness of the advice and support available with the Citizens Advice energy compare website tool and consumer telephone service.
- Helped raise awareness of current scams with information and a poster in our waiting rooms.
- Carried out research into five hospices across Hertfordshire to investigate what issues their clients have with PIP, ESA and special rules.
- Updated our list of letting agents who accept housing benefit clients.
- Held our R & C Group meetings, attended the National R & C Forum in London, and participated in R & C Connect.

Please contact Sue Hunt (hunts@ehcas.org.uk) if you would like any more information, or have any ideas for future campaigns or research.

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