

**citizens
advice**

Gateshead

Gateshead Investigates Bulletin: Spring 2020



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Welcome to Gateshead Investigates Bulletin: Spring 2020

In this bulletin you'll find information on the research and campaigning activity of staff and volunteers of Citizens Advice Gateshead. Research and campaigns is a key part of our strategy towards achieving our vision of a fair society for all, with lives well lived.

We will embed our voice across the wider system as an impartial and evidence-based commentator, allowing us to shape and influence commissioned services until they meet people's needs, and drive policy change to eradicate the root cause of poverty, disadvantage and inequality.

www.citizensadvicegateshead.org.uk

 @AdviceGateshead

 Citizens Advice Gateshead

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Citizens Advice are looking for private tenants to share their experiences



We are helping to creating a survey panel of renters across England for Citizens Advice's national Tenants Voice Survey.

Citizens Advice is campaigning for a better deal for renters, like ending section 21 'no-fault' evictions and making sure landlords keep to their end of the deal. But we need your help to make sure renters have a powerful voice in the housing debate and their rights don't get left behind.

**Are you a private tenant and
want to have your voice
heard?**

Tenants Voice Survey

tenantsvoice@citizensadvice.org.uk

03000 231 834

Big Energy Saving Week in Gateshead



Big Energy Saving Week (BESW) is a national awareness campaign in partnership between Citizens Advice, Citizens Advice Scotland, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and the Energy Saving Trust. From 20th to 26th of January this year staff and volunteers from Citizens Advice services across the country were out raising awareness. Here in Gateshead we set up a pop-up advice stall in the Civic Centre and in the reception of our building, we also took energy advice with us to our outreach at Blaydon Library.



Members of Citizens Advice Gateshead at Gateshead Civic Centre.

We all have the power to save energy, money and the environment through everyday actions. Simple changes such as switching energy supplier or tariff, accessing discounts or grants, and making homes more energy-efficient can make a big difference. We offered advice, and directed people considering switching to using Citizens Advice's energy price comparison tool. An impartial way of checking if you're on the best deal, at energycompare.citizensadvice.org.uk

For those not comfortable with using a computer the energy specialists in the consumer team can help. Call 03454 04 05 06.

One of our local priorities was making people aware of extra support they can get.

- The Priority Service Register: a simple way of letting your supplier know you need some extra support if you are of pensionable age, are disabled or chronically sick, have hearing or visual impairment, or are in a vulnerable situation. The register also applies if you live with children under 5. Northern Powergrid's care team helps people register, call 0800 169 2996 to enquire.
- LEAP: a local service provided by Gateshead council. They offer free services to people if they are; on low income, receiving housing benefits, receive an income or disability related benefit, or have a long term illness or disability.
- Warm Home Discount Scheme: offered by certain suppliers to those on low income, or getting the guaranteed credit part of Pension Credit. It refunds people £140 from their winter energy bill. Check with your supplier to see if they offer this, and to begin an application.



We engaged with more than 90 people across the week, with the majority interested in checking whether they could save money by switching supplier or tariff. We also heard from several people who were unsure whether a smart meter was right for them. SmartEnergyGB provides useful info about smart meters that can be found online at www.smartenergygb.org.

Further information about anything mentioned in this article can be found by calling the consumer team on 03454 04 05 06, or by visiting citizensadvice.org.uk/energy.

**BIG
ENERGY
SAVING
WEEK...**

✓ CHECK ✓ SWITCH ✓ SAVE
www.bigenergysavingweek.org.uk

Citizens Advice offices in the North-East call for changes to the 5-week wait for Universal Credit

Neil Duffy, Citizens Advice Newcastle Research and Campaigns Officer. Edited by Alex Egan.

£ Despite improvements, people are still struggling to make a claim for Universal Credit and to meet their essential living costs such as rent, energy and food during the 5-week wait for their first Universal Credit payment.

A new report – Impact of Claiming Universal Credit - published by local Citizens Advice offices in the North-East (Newcastle, Northumberland, South Tyneside, Gateshead, Sunderland and County Durham) has called for the Government to take steps to improve the Universal Credit claiming process and reduce the 5-week wait in receiving a first payment.



As part of this study, local Citizens Advice offices in the region surveyed 233 people who had sought help claiming Universal Credit between April and August last year. It found that people are still struggling to apply online and are finding the 5-week wait for their first payment difficult to manage financially. Universal Credit is a digital benefit, which is applied for and maintained online. The research identified that many claimants struggled with the claiming process.

The report also revealed the financial hardship caused by the 5-week wait between making a claim for Universal Credit and receiving their first payment. Claimants can apply for an advance payment when making a claim, but this is a loan, which needs to be paid back over a 12-month period, reducing a claimant's monthly income until this is repaid.

During the 5-week wait for their first payment, just over half (56%) of people surveyed had taken out an Advance Payment, around 1 in 3 claimants had struggled to pay for essential living costs, 1 in 3 claimants had borrowed from friends and family and over 1 in 10 needed to use a foodbank.

Citizens Advice agrees with the principals behind Universal Credit, but it is clear from our research that many of the aims of Universal Credit are being undermined as people in the region struggle to make a claim and pay for their essential living costs during the 5-week wait for their first Universal Credit payment.

The government needs to ensure that Universal Credit works for everyone and it is the anchor that secures people during an uncertain time financially.

As we have seen recently with the sudden demise of Thomas Cook, people can need the benefits system at any stage in their life. It should therefore not push people further into hardship but provide the safety net people need to bridge them back into work and the financial security needed during periods of ill health.

If the government doesn't fix the problems with Universal Credit then many families across the North-East will be put at financial risk, which can in turn put huge pressure on other local service such as health, housing and social care.

Citizens Advice Gateshead has called on our local MPs Liz Twist, Ian Mearns and Kate Osbourne to bring our new report to the attention of parliament.

If anyone requires support and advice in claiming Universal Credit, don't hesitate to contact your local Citizens Advice for help.

A full copy of the report can be found [here](#). Contact neild@newcastlecab.org.uk for more information.

Not all benefits entitle someone to free prescriptions



NHS

Are you claiming free prescriptions?

Don't assume you're entitled.

You could have to pay up to £100 – as well as your prescription charge.

Check before you tick

We've seen a number of clients recently who have received a penalty charge notice of £100 because they incorrectly ticked the box on the back of their prescription because they thought their benefits entitled them to get medication for free on the NHS.



Public Health England have launched the *Check before you tick* campaign to raise awareness of what circumstances do and do not entitle a person to free prescriptions.

You're entitled to free prescriptions if you're:

- under 16
- 16, 17, or 18 and in full-time education
- 60 or over

For those who aren't automatically entitled there are several schemes to which you can apply for help with prescription costs:

- NHS Low Income Scheme.
- NHS Maternity exemption certificate, for those who are pregnant or gave birth within the last 12 months.
- NHS medical exemption certificate, for those with a medical condition or physical disability
- War pension exemption certificate.

Visit www.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/nhs-help-health-costs or ask your doctor/NHS health professional to find out more information on any of these.

Benefit entitlement

You're entitled to free prescription if you are named on a benefit claim for:

- Income Support.
- Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance.
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance.
- Pension Credit (Guarantee Credit) paid on its own, or Pension Credit (Guarantee Credit with Savings Credit).
- Universal credit – but only if your earnings in your last assessment period were £435 or less, or £935 or less if you get an element for a child or have limited capability for work.

You're **not** entitled to free prescriptions if you are named on a claim for:

- Contribution-based Jobseeker's Allowance paid on its own.
- Contribution-based Employment and Support Allowance, paid on its own.
- Pension Credit (Savings Credit) paid on its own.
- Any benefit paid on its own not listed in the green box above, such as Disability Living Allowance, Personal Independence Payment, or Incapacity Benefit.

British Gas moving from PayPoint to PayZone may have unintended consequences for Gateshead residents



British Gas has ended their commercial relationship with PayPoint, meaning pre-payment customers have to now use Post Office or PayZone outlets to top up their energy payment cards.

According to Ofgem, British Gas are the largest supplier in the country. Their move away from PayPoint (28,000 points across the country) to Payzone (13,000 points) is likely to affect a number of Gateshead residents, especially those in the western and rural parts of the borough who already feel left behind with amenity and service closure. The move could cause increased travel costs and effort required to top-up, which will disproportionately impact the vulnerable of our community.

If you are a British Gas customer on a prepayment meter and are struggling to cope with this change, Citizens Advice Gateshead can advise you on what you could do, either at our office in Gateshead or at one of our drop-in locations.



Gateshead Citizens Advice drop-in locations

Gateshead

- Monday to Friday from 09:00 – 17:00 (18:00 on Thursdays) at our main hub, The Davidson Building, Swan Street.
- Thursday mornings, the Roma Kavárna at the Cumbric on Coatsworth Road.

Blaydon

- Thursdays from 09:30 – 12:00 at Blaydon Library.

Chopwell

- Tuesdays and Thursdays 09:30 – 13:00 at Chopwell community centre, Derwent street.

Swalwell

- Last Tuesday of each month at FACT, Fighting All Cancers Together, Clasper Way.

Appointments are also available at the Great North Children's Hospital 09:00 – 17:00 Monday to Friday.