

Gateshead Investigates Bulletin



In this issue

Covid-19 and the disabled

Millions without mail

Look ahead: Consumer rights and Talk Money awareness weeks

Mobilising knowledge: courts and tribunals during lockdown

Briefing local MP on the effects of Covid-19

Every Mind Matters – looking after your mental health

Autumn 2020

Welcome to Gateshead Investigates Bulletin: Autumn 2020

In this bulletin you will 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.

Our work has continued to adapt through the challenges posed by Covid-19, with most of our awareness work going digital. We are excited to welcome Molly, a new volunteer with a background in communications who will help us spread awareness of issues affecting our clients online.

www.citizensadvicegateshead.org.uk

 @AdviceGateshead

 Citizens Advice Gateshead

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Every Mind Matters: looking after your mental health



Having good mental health helps us relax more, achieve more and enjoy our lives more. At Citizens Advice Gateshead in the past 3 months alone we advised 322 people who suffer from mental health illnesses, and that number just includes those who chose to let us know about their mental health issues.

Every Mind Matters offers a range of resources that help spot the signs of common mental health concerns, offers practical self-care tips and guidance and, importantly, explains when to seek further support. It also has a free NHS-approved online tool the Every Mind Matters *Your Mind Plan*.

www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/

Urgent Support

If you cannot wait to see a doctor and feel unable to cope or keep yourself safe, it's important to get support – services are still open during the coronavirus pandemic.

Millions without mail

 Since 2010, 7 million people have been unable to receive their own post. This is either because they don't have an address, they're moving around frequently or someone is intercepting their post. This problem disproportionately affects marginalised people. Homeless people, survivors of domestic abuse, Gypsies and Travellers, and people living in precarious dwellings such as boats are far more likely to face these problems. Missing letters causes people significant harm. This includes missing out on health care services, benefits, housing and employment opportunities, as well as financial losses and debt.

In the past few years Citizens Advice Gateshead has contributed to this nationally led study into the harm caused by a lack of access to post.

The impact – in the last 10 years

- **Essential services:** 4.7 million people have missed appointments with key services because of missed letters. This includes financial, health and employment related services, as well as court appearances.
- **Financial:** 3 million people have experienced financial losses as a result of missed letters. On average this amounts to a £850 loss per person.
- **Health:** 3.6 million people have missed at least one, if not more, healthcare appointment because of missed letters.
- **Employment:** 1.8 million people have missed out on employment opportunities as a result of missing letters.

The solution

Citizens Advice calls on the government to invest in an 'Address & Collect' service, provided at post offices, to ensure people in unsafe or precarious living situations have equal access to post. As the agency responsible for post policy, the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) should make it a priority to ensure the postal service is truly universal.

Access to post will be essential for many people to recover from the financial shock of the coronavirus pandemic. The government should use the upcoming spending review to secure funding for an Address & Collect service and help people to get back on their feet as quickly as possible.

You can read the full report [here](#).

Look ahead: upcoming awareness campaigns

National Consumer Week



National Consumer Week (NCW) will be taking place this year on **16-22 November 2020**. This campaign is an annual opportunity to raise awareness of issues that cause consumer detriment across the country, and the protections and resources available to help people when they need it.

This year the campaign will focus on online shopping and delivery. This is a particularly timely topic ahead of the Christmas holidays, and as shopping online has unsurprisingly increased during the pandemic, there is added importance to making sure consumers know their rights when buying things online.



If you have any issues with something you've bought or with a service, the Citizens Advice Consumer Helpline can be reached on 0808 223 1133.

Talk Money Week



Talk Money Week is an annual campaign to get the nation talking about money. Talk Money Week will take place on **9-13 November 2020**.



The week provides a platform to have a conversation about money between families and friends, at work or at school or any other walk of life. Our goal is to turn talking about money from one of the UK's least favourite topics into something commonplace.

Talking openly about money is vitally important for our health, wealth and relationships. The effect of Covid-19 has made it more important than ever to start conversations about money.

Both campaigns will be publicised on our website and social media.

Mobilising knowledge: courts and tribunals during lockdown



We have continued our recent progress in mobilising our insights to make sure the voices of our clients are heard by responding to another call for evidence from government. The House of Lords Constitution Committee wanted to know the impact of Covid-19 on the courts, whether or not measures to provide “virtual proceedings” – hearings conducted by phone or online – were working, and if this new way of working should be carried forward beyond the pandemic.



At Citizens Advice Gateshead we have specialist advisers who have extensive experience in advising clients through the process of appealing benefit and housing related decisions at tribunals and in court, as well as acting as representatives at these proceedings. Their work has continued through the pandemic, as such they have first-hand experience and insight into the questions posed by the committee.

To summarise our evidence

Virtual proceedings do have a place within the court system. However, we believe use should be in a limited capacity, only for short hearings such as preliminary hearings and those relating to procedural matters. If used routinely for more in-depth hearings there will likely be unintended consequences on the effectiveness and fairness of these proceedings. A major concern is the lack of empathy from officials if they cannot see a litigant to gauge their body language and mood. As good as communication technology has become in recent years, it is still not adequate enough to replace face-to-face contact for most cases.

The committee accepted our written evidence, publishing it on their website on the 9th of September.

[You can read our submission here.](#)

Briefing local MP Kate Osborne on the effects of Covid-19 on local issues



In September we were presented with an opportunity to raise the issues our clients are facing as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic with a member of parliament when Kate Osborne, the MP for Jarrow, reached out to us for our insight. We sent her a comprehensive analysis.

She asked us about the volume of inquiries we had experienced during lockdown, and about how the advice landscape had changed in that time period.

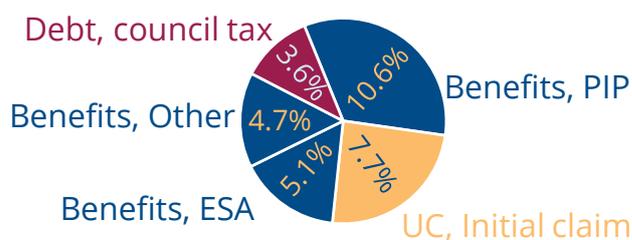
Volumes of issues

The number of clients reaching out to us dipped during lockdown but has been steadily on the rise over the summer months. While we are still seeing fewer people than this time last year, nearly 500 less in August, the 1,119 people who came to us that month brought more issues, nearly 300 more. People’s situations are more complex.

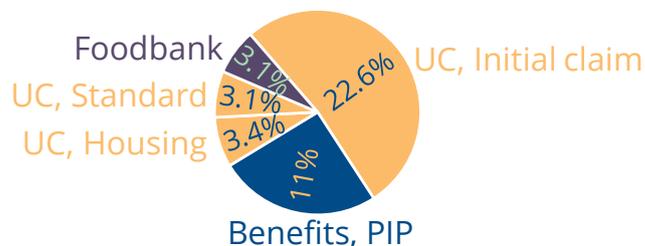
A changing picture

As we reported in our last bulletin Universal Credit (UC) inquiries rose dramatically in the initial weeks of lockdown. The increase has continued through the summer months making UC the top inquiry area. The charts below show the top 5 inquiries in the same periods of 2019 and 2020, and the proportion of each area out of the grand totals.

July - September 2019



July - September 2020



It is easy to see that UC has become the dominant inquiry area for our clients, many of whom have lost their income as a result of the pandemic’s economic impacts. We anticipate that this will only worsen in the near future, as we have seen the nature of employment inquiries changing from entitlements (such as sick leave & furlough) to redundancy and dismissal.

The impact of the Covid-19 crisis on disabled people

Niamh Storey, social policy research volunteer.



'Abandoned, forgotten and ignored: The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on Disabled people' is an interim report published by the charity Inclusion London¹ shedding light on the narratives of disabled people during the coronavirus pandemic. The study, which collected over 300 responses from disabled individuals, explores the challenges and barriers faced during the covid-19 pandemic and subsequent governmental response.



The report found that 60% of respondents had faced challenges in struggling to access basic supplies during the pandemic, such as food, household necessities and prescription medicines. Many reported feeling unsafe going into shops due to accessibility issues which were worsened by the pandemic. Despite government attempts to create a priority list for those shielding in the 'clinically extremely vulnerable' category², several respondents were unable to secure priority home delivery slots with supermarkets.

Over 35% of respondents faced increased levels of anxiety, fear and confusion due to the effects of the pandemic. Respondents suggested that this was due to feeling socially isolated, having increased emotional burden, and losing control and agency over their lives.

Over half of respondents suggested that important information from the government was not made accessible in terms of practical arrangements, as well as the fact it was confusing. This suggests that clear, concise and accessible information in various formats should be made readily available, particularly where this information is urgent or vital to people's health and safety.

Many respondents reported unequal provisions across local authority support packages offered to disabled people. As a result, respondents had issues accessing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), food or supplies. Some respondents also faced being unable to access care assistance to meet their needs during the pandemic. Even prior to the pandemic, analysis has shown that social care spending has been reduced in real terms since 2010 and does not meet current levels of demand³. As social care is the responsibility of local authorities who have been unequally affected by austerity budget cuts, this has led to a 'postcode lottery' of social care access⁴ which has become even more apparent during the coronavirus pandemic and has worsened existing social inequalities faced by disabled individuals⁵.

Respondents also suggested that the pandemic had highlighted and escalated existing discrimination faced by disabled people. Some reported being asked by healthcare professionals to sign 'Do Not Resuscitate' notices, leaving them to fear that they would be denied urgent medical care if they were to become ill. Many felt that this discrimination also became more apparent in employment contracts, with employers failing to put reasonable adjustments in place for those at high risk from the virus. A recent report on human rights suggested that disabled people were more likely to be living in poverty, unemployed or on insecure employment contracts⁵ suggesting that employment rights are of vital importance to promoting equality for disabled citizens.

Overall, respondents felt that the terms 'vulnerable' or 'disabled' were being used as strict criteria for categories of 'clinically extremely vulnerable'² which must be met in order to secure support, rather than for the purposes of promoting the rights of disabled people to access support and services which meet their needs⁶. This report highlights how the coronavirus pandemic has increased the challenges and barriers faced by disabled individuals in their everyday lives.

You can read the full report [here](#).

1 Inclusion London (2020) Abandoned, forgotten and ignored: The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on Disabled people. Interim Report - [link](#). 2 UK Government (2020) Coronavirus (COVID-19): Accessing food and essential supplies - [link](#). 3 King's Fund (2020) Social care 360: expenditure - [link](#). 4 Financial Times Adviser (2019) Social care postcode lottery revealed - [link](#). 5 United Nations General Assembly (2019) Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights - [link](#). 6 Citizens Advice (2020) What counts as disability? - [link](#).