

## Gateshead Investigates Bulletin



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## Spring 2021

### Welcome to Gateshead Investigates Bulletin: Spring 2021

In this bulletin you will find information on the research and campaigning activity of staff and volunteers of Citizens Advice Gateshead.

We have welcomed three new members of the team; Debby Nuga, Megan Carr and Peter Jones, who volunteer their time to help us research local issues and campaign for change. In this issue we highlight some of the good work they've done so far. Sadly, the team bids farewell to Ian Logan, a long serving trustee of the charity who oversaw the direction of our research and campaigns activity for the last 11 years. You will be missed Ian, thank you for everything you have done for the charity.

[www.citizensadvicegateshead.org.uk](http://www.citizensadvicegateshead.org.uk)

 @AdviceGateshead

 Citizens Advice Gateshead

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### Childcare in the pandemic



R&C volunteer Molly Hall wrote another excellent article highlighting an issue we've seen our clients struggling with over the last year – juggling children and work through the turbulent times of the Coronavirus pandemic.



**You can read Molly's article on our website [here](#).**

# Citizens Advice Gateshead research and campaigns development plan 2020 to 2023



## Research and Campaigns

*Fixing the broken pipe rather than cleaning up the leak every day*



At the start of the 2020/21 financial year we drafted an overview of our plan to develop and grow the charity's research and campaigns activity over the next three years - The R&C Development plan 2020-23.

A year on we are reviewing our plan to make sure we are setting achievable objectives that challenge us to do the best work we can in line with Citizens Advice Gateshead's strategic plan towards our vision of a fair society for all with lives well lived.

We are happy to report that despite the affect the pandemic has had on campaigning activity we have achieved meaningful results towards all 6 of our objectives this past year. This 2021 refresh to the plan will aim even higher for the coming year.

If you have any thoughts on the development of our service's R&C activity please feel free to share them with the team, we welcome any feedback or critique you may have.

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**The development plan is available on request. Anyone within the organisation can view the 2020 - 2023 document on SharePoint [here](#).**

## Raising our concerns about local adult social care to Parliament



The House of Commons Public Accounts Select Committee is conducting an inquiry into long-standing issues with the adult social care market, which Covid-19 has made worse. The committee's main goal is to hold government officials to account for the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of public spending. We have submitted our evidence to the committee regarding our client's experience with adult social care, highlighting the main problems we've seen.



When our advisers help someone whose problem has been caused by an unfair policy or by poor practices by officials, then they will raise it with the R&C team through an evidence form. R&C volunteer Megan Carr recently completed an analysis of the evidence forms submitted within the topic of health and community care in the last 2 years. This topic covers things such as hospital services, mental health care and adult social care to name a few examples.

In our submission we highlight the main problems our clients have faced with adult social care locally. We have helped 335 people with adult social care issues in the last 2 years, a person almost every 2 days. A brief summary of their main issues:

### **Access to care needs assessments.**

226 people had queries about accessing care, and 105 had problems with care availability. We highlighted 11 cases where a person was denied an assessment they felt the needed.

### **Delays to the care needs assessment process.**

64 people had issues with the wait times for assessments, 15 of these were the subject of an evidence form submission about severe delays.

### **Poor practice despite good policy.**

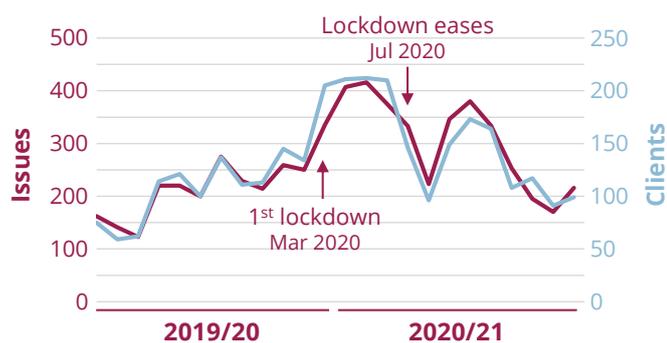
Having good policies in place is only effective if officials follow them. Particularly, communicating with people about care and support available.

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

## Employment issues during the pandemic - monitoring our evidence



In the summer bulletin 2020 we highlighted how the pandemic had caused the number of employment issues we were providing advice on to double. Towards the end of summer this peak began to fall, likely due to optimism at retail, pubs and restaurants reopening. However, as with cases of the virus nationally, we saw a second wave of issues into late 2020 that has since subsided. The chart below shows the number of issues and clients seen each month in 2019/20 and 2020/21.



Overall, there was a 30% increase in employment issues in 2020/21 compared to 2019/20. The majority of this increase was people seeking advice about the Job Retention Scheme (JRS), also known as the furlough scheme. We also saw a big increase in people seeking advice about redundancy, which is disappointing given that the JRS was put in place to help prevent large-scale redundancies.



With this big increase in clients and issues there has been a big increase in the number of cases highlighted as unfair by advisers through evidence forms. In 2019/20 employment issues were the topic of 12 forms, 7% of the total submissions. In 2020/21 this has risen to 51 forms, 13% of the total. R&C volunteer Debby Nuga has completed an analysis of these forms to enable us to monitor

issues, decide on future investigative work, and respond rapidly to calls for evidence.

### Furlough - Ineligibility, misunderstanding, and abuse of the system

The majority of evidence forms raised were about the JRS or the equivalent scheme for the self-employed.

For some, their employment status has meant they have fallen through the cracks in the scheme's eligibility - such as an agency worker we advised. Others have suffered because their employers don't understand the government guidance on furlough, don't feel obliged to use it, or worse, are trying to exploit the situation - we advised a client in May 2020 whose employer abused the system, furloughing staff while using threats of redundancy to coerce them into continuing their work from home. Effectively, they were fraudulently using the JRS to pay their workers.

We advised numerous clients whose clinical vulnerability unfairly impacted on their employment. Several cases described employers who were under the misconception that someone told to shield was only entitled to Statutory Sick Pay and not furlough, which was incorrect.

### Unusual new contract conditions

We advised a client whose employer had asked them to sign an unusual revised condition in their contract, stating they were now a "permanent homemaker" and stipulating they must seek permission to move house. As businesses look to protect themselves from crises like these in the future we must be vigilant that employee's rights aren't forgotten or ignored.

### Juggling childcare and work

Lockdowns and social restrictions meant parent's who could work from home suddenly found themselves managing their job while simultaneously becoming their children's teacher alongside everything else they already do to care for them.

During the first lockdown we advised a client who was considered a key worker, but her ability to go to work was hampered by a lack of available childcare. See Molly's [article](#) on Childcare in the pandemic for more.

**The full report is available on request. Anyone within the organisation can view the report on [SharePoint here](#).**

## Report highlight: One renter every minute - How the pandemic exacerbated existing problems and what that means for the Renters' Reform Bill

Debby Nuga, research & campaigns volunteer



Citizens Advice Gateshead contributed to a national research project into private tenants' experiences over the last year, helping to recruit local people to the survey panel. The outcome of the research was recently published [here](#).

Renters have had a hard time since the pandemic hit and the shortcomings of the private renting sector (PRS) have been exposed. Financial uncertainty has shown how unaffordable rent can be, which has created an unsustainable renting system. Renters have expressed feeling a lot of stress and anxiety with many of them unsure of how they will pay their rent. A lot of renters are living paycheck to paycheck and this causes them to feel on edge and uncertain as to how they will foot their bills. Further, renters are afraid to mention maintenance/disrepair issues in their homes because they fear retaliatory eviction.

### The problems highlighted

**Insecurity** - 1 in 3 Tenants' Voice panelists have noted that renters do not feel secure in their tenancy. They are afraid that they will be served with eviction notices at any point.

**Poor quality** - 2 in 3 Tenants' Voice representatives have recorded that renters have dealt with maintenance issues within the last 3 months. Most of the renters are afraid that if they speak up, they will be evicted as retaliation by their landlords.

**Unaffordability** - Renting is widely unaffordable and the majority of renters spend an average of 40% of their income on rent alone.

### The solutions posed

Citizen Advice recommends that Section 21 'no-fault' evictions are put to an end, so that renters are protected from retaliatory evictions.

Open-ended tenancies that improve tenancy security is advised. This is so that renters do not have to be subjected to rent hikes each year and they are not forced into fixed term contracts.

Better regulation and accountability is needed across the board to provide adequate protection for tenants.

## Investigating local housing issues

Citizens Advice Gateshead has received a number of worrying complaints/evidence forms on housing issues recently. The R&C team are working with our advisers to launch a fully-fledged research project on the issues, and are monitoring the evidence forms.

## What the Census 2021 means for our service



The census is a survey that happens every 10 years and gives a picture of all the people and households in England and Wales. People's answers to the census questions help organisations make decisions on planning and funding public services in specific areas, including transport, education and healthcare. Citizens Advice Gateshead is one of the organisations it helps.

 Office for National Statistics

**census 2021**

Last year we updated our Gateshead community profile, a document which aims to inform our work over the coming year. Alongside our annual Impact Reports, the community profile helps us to identify key areas of service development in order to meet the advice needs of the population of Gateshead, as well as helping us to focus our campaign work on the issues which are most important to the residents of Gateshead.

The new Census data will be released in March 2022. It will enable us to renew our community profile to be even more accurate.