

Gateshead Investigates Bulletin



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Autumn 2021

Welcome to Gateshead Investigates Bulletin: Summer 2021

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

The R&C team are sad to say farewell to one of our volunteers Megan Carr, who has departed to take her first steps towards what will no-doubt be a successful legal career. Megan hit the ground running with the team and contributed to our projects investigating emerging housing issues. Megan took the lead in investigating problems with disrepair in local authority housing which we highlighted to the Council. Thank you for your good work Megan, and good luck for the future.

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 Citizens Advice Gateshead

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Shaping local policy – The Nexus companion card



Helen Dick has once again ensured Citizens Advice Gateshead is an evidence-based voice for change in shaping services so that they work for everyone. This time she noticed a confusing and discriminatory policy at one of the major public transport providers in our region – Nexus, who operate the Tyne & Wear Metro.

The policy in question governed their “Companion Card” scheme which allows the holder to freely take someone with them on public transport because they need a companion to make such journeys. To qualify, the policy stated a person must be in receipt of certain parts of the disability benefits PIP and DLA (among others). The policy covers claimants of PIP very well, anyone in receipt of enhanced rate mobility component qualifies, as does anyone whose PIP award shows they struggle to plan and follow a journey, making them reliant on a companion when taking public transport. This

acknowledges that there are conditions beyond those affecting mobility that are barriers to using public transport alone. However, the policy failed to adequately support children who receive PIP's age-specific counterpart DLA. The policy only allowed children who qualify for the high-rate care component of DLA to receive a companion card, failing to account for conditions which qualify the child only for mid rate care but still make it impossible for them to take public transport alone. Helen's client was a parent of one such child, who is blind. We were confused that the policy did not show a similar level of consideration for specific conditions affecting use of public transport as it did for PIP. We therefore wrote to Nexus to challenge this policy, highlighting our concerns, and asking them to review it.



Nexus responded positively to our contact and agreed to change the policy. They asked us to help them make an informed decision about the policy amendment. We provided Nexus with a guidance document with information about DLA, its components and how it is awarded, as well as several example cases of children who would benefit significantly from a companion card but would not have qualified under the old policy. We're pleased to have been able to raise our voice as an evidence-based commentator on behalf of our client and affect positive change that will benefit people in a similar position across the North East.

Helping raise awareness of the benefits of Free School Meals



At Citizens Advice Gateshead we're proud to work together with Gateshead Council to support local people to live lives well lived. We regularly share our insights into local issues with each other so we can identify priority areas. A concerning trend was highlighted to us by Gateshead Council's Service Manager Micahel Lamb, who oversees provision of school meals among other services. Michael and his team

had seen a decrease in the uptake of school meals during the pandemic.

R&C volunteer Molly Hall interviewed Michael along with Emma Gibson, Programme Lead from Gateshead Council's public health team. They described the situation they've observed - the number of school children eligible for free school meals increased 17% over the last year however the uptake of such meals fell. This meant many eligible children were not opting for a meal at school and are therefore missing out on the benefits.

The benefits

School meals have been shown to promote healthy eating habits that last a lifetime, and there are financial benefits to both families and schools. Free school meals save families £15 per week per child, not to mention time and effort. The school receives a pupil premium, amounting to £1,500 per year, when an eligible child is registered for free meals, so each missed registration costs the school precious funding.

Molly drafted a press release which we sent to local media to boost awareness of these benefits. The Chronicle published an article based on Molly's work in late September.

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

Local advocacy - highlighting adult social care issues



Last bulletin we told you about how our local evidence featured in the Parliamentary inquiry by the Public Accounts Committee into adult social care markets, and we touched on that we were investigating more locally specific issues. R&C volunteers Niamh Story, Debby Nuga, and Wise Steps adviser Caitlin McIsaac worked together on the project.

The R&C team has prepared a report for the Strategic Director of Social Care at Gateshead Council to open up a conversation about the concerns some of our clients have expressed, particularly:

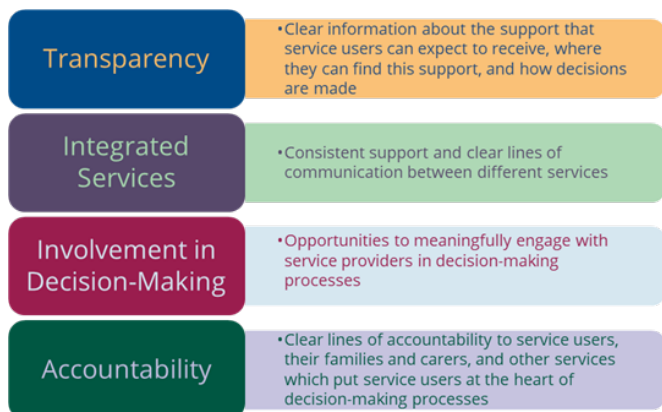
- Not having clear access to information,
- feeling left out of care decisions,
- experiences of disjointed service provision,
- and delays getting care needs assessments.

The report looked into whether these stem from problems with local policy, or their implementation.

Good policies need good practice

Our investigation found that Gateshead Council's current policy and strategic priorities in relation to social care described in the Gateshead Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2020, Gateshead's Director of Public Health Annual Report 2020, and Gateshead Council's Social Care Involvement Strategy are good, and if put into practice effectively would address our client's concerns.

The chart below, which features in the report, summarises our recommendations to the strategic director.



Our clients' problems with health-related benefits

Niamh Storey, research & campaigns volunteer



The R&C team recently finished our largest piece of work yet, looking into the problems our advisers have highlighted with clients' health-related benefits over the past 4 years.

Nobody is immune to the impacts of ill health or disability across their lifespan, although these impacts are disproportionately experienced by those from more deprived backgrounds including those living in poverty¹. With recent gains in healthy life expectancy over the past decade stalling, more people are experiencing disability for a longer proportion of their lifespan¹. The coronavirus pandemic also exacerbated many issues faced by disabled individuals who were required to 'shield' from society due to being deemed 'clinically extremely vulnerable' to the impacts of covid-19 illness². However, many disabled people have argued that these issues and challenges have existed for years, with the pandemic simply bringing them to the fore of public attention³. Disabled individuals are more likely to experience additional challenges alongside their health issues, including social isolation,

poverty, and lower wellbeing than the general population⁴.

Health-related benefits, our largest and most problematic advice area.

At Citizens Advice Gateshead, we provide advice and support to clients experiencing a range of disabilities and health issues as well as their family, friends, and neighbours who provide care and support. In 2019/20, one in every six of enquiries made to us related to disability benefits. These issues have remained a high priority despite an influx of other issues caused by the covid-19 pandemic, and were also the most likely to be flagged by our advisers as stemming from a seemingly unfair policy or practice issue.

In order for resources to be fairly distributed to those considered most in need, some way of distinguishing between 'ability' and 'disability' in society is required. Sometimes however these categories don't fully or accurately reflect the experiences of disabled people. In many cases highlighted in our report, advisers and disabled people felt that the support systems currently in place were inadequate or unfair. As such, we set out to examine the issues faced by clients who have experience with these benefits who visited Citizens Advice Gateshead in the past 4 years, using evidence forms provided by our advisers alongside analysis of existing policy documents.

Poor practice in medical assessments

We found several main themes in these evidence forms which reflected wider issues with the existing disability welfare system. Most frequently, clients and advisers highlighted examples of poor practice in medical assessments, leading to a seemingly unjust denial of benefits to disabled individuals. Face-to-face medical assessments were introduced as part of the move from DLA to PIP in 2013. However, disabled clients suggested that they felt that assessors did not fully understand their condition or its impacts upon their daily life. Others highlighted issues where special measures, put in place to provide extra support for those who struggle with the assessment process, were not being applied appropriately. Even where clients had their rejected benefits applications overturned and their benefits backdated, this caused additional and unnecessary stress and financial hardship due to the delays in receiving these entitlements. These poor practice examples had a huge impact upon disabled clients' quality of life as a result.

Poor assessments lead to a huge backlog of appeals

Another key issue highlighted in our evidence was the impact of delays in processing benefits applications and appeals. These delays were exacerbated during the pandemic, but our evidence forms suggest that these issues were already prevalent. Often, this was contributed to by a huge backlog of applications and appeals to be processed by DWP, in the absence of sufficient human or financial resources to cope with this demand. Some clients experienced waiting times of several months, and in some cases more than a year, in their journey through the application, mandatory reconsideration, and appeals processes, before being deemed as eligible for PIP. Another related issue highlighted by advisors was poor administrative practices. In some cases, clients were issued with 'renewal' forms shortly after being deemed eligible for PIP, causing undue stress and confusion, as well as wasted time for clients and DWP administrators. Another client received a request for further evidence seven months after their initial application, and some aspects of the application were not accurately recorded on DWP systems. In these cases, clients faced unnecessary delays to their applications and undue stress as they attempted to navigate the complex paperwork and processes of applications and appeals. In some cases, these issues seemed to be avoidable through more accurate recording and administrative practices.

Is policy fit for purpose?

An analysis of key policy documents showed that many of the changes made to PIP were premised upon a move from a 'medical model' towards a 'social model of disability'^{5,6}. Social models position 'disability' as arising from issues in society, for instance where public spaces are not made accessible, rather than from the individual or their health condition⁷. This change has been advocated for by disabled individuals and third sector organisations who highlight the failures of medical models, based upon diagnostic criteria, to account for the wide-ranging impacts of disability and the nuanced experiences of disabled individuals⁷. Instead, social models place the responsibility upon wider society to be more understanding, inclusive, accessible and equitable. This requires careful consideration in policy and planning and a change in attitudes towards issues of disability. It is crucial that extra financial support is provided to help disabled individuals cope with the extra

financial challenges as a result of their disability. However, disability benefits do not equalise all the challenges faced by disabled people. For instance, there are still wider issues of inequality, social stigma and prejudice, social isolation, and inaccessible public spaces which need to be tackled in order to promote a fairer society and to uphold human rights for everybody. The voices of disabled people should be key to addressing these challenges.



Looking to the future, we are hoping to utilise this evidence and the report to raise awareness of these issues and drive change towards a fairer, more representative benefits system for disabled people. These issues have previously been raised, and Citizens Advice Gateshead is well-placed to provide further space for the voices of disabled people in leading this change. One way in which we hope to do so is by contributing to an upcoming Parliamentary call for evidence which focuses upon issues relating to medical assessments used as part of the application process.

We recognise that disability is a complex issue which is intertwined with a range of wider social and policy challenges. This research suggests that further work is needed to build upon the positive changes hinted at in recent policy changes, and to further the goal of achieving a fairer society and welfare system which supports those most in need.

If you would like to read our report get in touch with the R&C coordinator (details at front).

1 Health equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On – [link](#). 2 Coronavirus (COVID-19): Accessing food and essential supplies – [link](#). 3 Abandoned, forgotten and ignored: The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on Disabled people – [link](#). 4 ONS Outcomes for disabled people in the UK – [link](#). 5 The Government's response to the consultation on the PIP assessment Moving around activity – [link](#). 6 Personal Independence Payment (PIP) Assessment First Independent Review – Citizens Advice Response – [link](#). 7 The Social Model of Disability – [link](#).