

Gateshead Investigates Bulletin

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Winter 2022

Welcome to Gateshead Investigates Bulletin: Winter 2022

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

Since our last bulleting the R&C team has bid farewell to our longest serving volunteer Niamh Storey, who started working with the team in November 2018. Since then she has been heavily involved in the team's biggest projects, bringing her valuable expertise as a social policy doctoral student. Thank you for all your hard work to help us make a difference Niamh.

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Latest research – the social welfare impacts of Long Covid



With the new year came a new project for the team. The Covid-19 pandemic has had a major impact on health and health inequalities in the UK. Although scientific understanding has advanced at an unprecedented rate there are aspects that remain poorly understood. This includes 'Long Covid', the persistence of symptoms experienced by 1 in 5 people who tested positive with Covid-19, according to The Health Foundation.

With support from the Gateshead Health NHS Foundation Trust and Gateshead Public Health we are investigating the social welfare impacts of Long Covid on households in the borough. Our main question is, what impact has 'Long Covid' had on people's work and family lives and their wellbeing?

If you or someone you know have been affected by persistent Covid symptoms, complete our survey [here](#) (until mid-February 2022).

National Energy Action's Fuel Poverty Awareness Day 2021



National Energy Action (NEA) is the national fuel poverty charity that works across England, Wales and Northern Ireland to tackle the root causes of fuel poverty and supports those experiencing it to be able to live in a Warm and Safe Home. At Citizens Advice Gateshead we share this goal. We promoted NEA's annual Fuel Poverty Awareness Day on the 3rd of December 2021.



Fuel poverty, a worsening problem

Every year, as the weather turns colder, Citizens Advice Gateshead's advisers see an increase in clients seeking help with energy problems. Last year we saw the number of energy issues across winter increase by 35% compared to the year before, as reduced incomes and rising unemployment during the height of the pandemic meant people were struggling to pay their energy bills. With the recent steep rises in energy prices the situation looks set to be even worse this winter. NEA estimate that since the record rise in energy prices in October 2021 over 500,000 more households across the country were pushed into fuel poverty, with many of these in Gateshead. Further rises to the Default Tariff price cap, set by Ofgem, are expected in early 2022 which could see the cost of gas heating in an average home doubled compared to October 2020.

Current levels of support should be expanded

NEA is calling for support to be expanded in response to the energy price crisis. Among their policy suggestions they call for the Warm Home Discount – worth £140 per year to households – to be automatically applied to those eligible, and expanding the Winter Fuel Payment scheme, currently supporting those of pension age with £100 - £300 towards their bills, to include low-income working-age households too.

We can help

At Citizens Advice Gateshead we help hundreds of people in fuel poverty every year. To find out more about fuel poverty and how we can help follow this [link](#) to our website. Citizens Advice Gateshead's advisers can provide advice on any energy-related issues that you may have.

National Consumer Week 2021



We joined National Citizens Advice's annual campaign to raise awareness about emerging consumer issues. This year the campaign asked people to **Be wise to being green.**

Going green

With steps being taken by government to encourage consumers and the country at large to achieve net-zero carbon emission targets there are many emerging ways of going green at home. New policy means 29 million homes across the UK will need to make changes, such as measures to improve energy efficiency and installing new low carbon heat technologies by 2050.

Rogue traders and green scams

There are many issues to consider when making your home more energy-efficient, such as whether they are suitable or affordable and checking if green claims are correct. With increased consumer demand come increased opportunities for fraudsters and scammers to exploit.

If you decide to implement energy efficiency measures, take time to research and find reputable traders. Rogue traders tend to get you to agree to have work done, sometimes via cold calls, which is usually poorly done and overpriced. Alternatively, they can ask for upfront payments then disappear.

Consumers should also beware of fraudsters as there are a number of green scams online. For example, if you receive an email or text about energy efficiency grants, or offers to reduce your energy bill, be wary and don't click on links. It's important to research companies before committing, and report anything that you think could be a scam. Citizens Advice found that scams were the single biggest issue people contacted us about with the Green Homes Grant, a government scheme that was available until March 2021.

We can help

Citizens Advice Gateshead hosts part of the national Consumer Service whose specialist advisers can help if you're unsure about measures you can take to "go green", or if anything goes wrong.

Call the Citizens Advice consumer service on 0808 223 1133 or visit these advice pages for support – [link](#).

Council Tax Support backdating periods, why so short?



Council Tax Support (sometimes called Council Tax Reduction) is a benefit available to anyone liable to pay Council Tax. If eligible, due to low income for example, they will get a discount on their bill.

Every Local Authority that collects Council Tax will offer a Council Tax Support scheme. It is not a centralised benefit like Universal Credit, as such there are some differences between Local Authorities (LAs). One of these differences is the backdating period.

Backdating support

Backdating is important to people who did not submit their claim to their LA immediately upon their circumstances changing to make them eligible. There can be various reasons for this, we believe one of the most common is because the person simply didn't know this support was available. In the current financial climate, with many people suddenly having lost their employment, or seen their incomes plummet, due to the pandemic we expect this will be affecting more and more people.

Why have maximum backdating periods at all?

We have looked into the maximum backdating periods of 18 LAs in the North of England, and there is a great variety. Gateshead Borough Council is among 9 LAs to have a maximum backdating of just one month, which in our opinion is arbitrarily short. Others in the region allow up to 3, 6, and 12 months but each requires "good reason" for backdating. We ask, why impose a maximum period at all? Two of the LAs we checked do not specify a time frame. Copeland and Darlington Borough Councils offer more flexibility, with Darlington's policy stating that there is an automatic backdating rule whereby claimants are paid for any period where entitlement exists, there does not need to be a reason.

We're taking this research to Gateshead Borough Council, calling on them to adopt a similar policy for their support scheme in 2022/23. A change could mean many more people get the support they need. We believe arbitrarily restricting support even when a person has been eligible will lead to financial harm likely compounding the person's money issues pushing them into poverty.

Rising problems with poor administration by DWP staff locally

Molly Hall, research & campaigns volunteer

Here at Citizens Advice Gateshead, we are seeing first-hand the social costs of the pandemic, and the culmination of the cost-of-living, housing and energy crises. We witnessed a huge jump in the number of clients in the months up to Christmas. In November 2021 alone, we helped Gateshead residents with 8,700 issues - a 40% increase on the monthly average.

As usual, Benefits and Universal Credit issues take up the largest chunk of these cases and contributed to the increase. But housing, debt, and energy issues were also on the rise. Energy-related enquiries often peak in the winter months, but we reported a 20% increase in energy cases in December 2021 compared to that month the previous year. And with the looming Ofgem price cap rise in April, we predict this to soar.

Over 500 cases of poor practice in 10 months

Concerningly, our advisers reported an increasing number of cases with poor practice by Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) staff at the core.



Citizens Advice Gateshead advisers have specifically flagged 61 cases since April 2021 with unacceptable standards of advice and admin from DWP. Delving deeper, since April 2021 clients have reported 518 issues of poor administration, helpline issues and complaints in relation to their Universal Credits and Tax Credits enquiries.

The impacts of errors and mistakes

This bad practice has real-life consequences. Delays to payments, insufficient communication, and incorrect advice causes a great deal of stress and uncertainty. Claimants, who are often the most vulnerable in society, are receiving an unacceptable level of service. Needless to say that many clients rely on their Universal Credit payments to buy food and pay to heat their homes;

they are already in financially and emotionally precarious situations.

In one instance, DWP failed to make accommodations for an individual with severe dyslexia and mental health issues. The elderly man in question received his Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) notifications by letter, despite not being able to read or understand them. He was left in a state of confusion with regard to the status of his benefits. The DWP needs to find a way to better communicate with claimants who have learning disabilities.

Another client complained after waiting six weeks for DWP to call her back regarding an error they had made with her pension payments. Her first pension payment was delayed by three months, resulting in an overpayment of pension credits to her husband, which they recovered from her late State Pension payment. The elderly lady, who spent many years caring for her disabled husband, contacted Citizens Advice frustrated that DWP had not called her as promised to get to the bottom of her case.

We helped multiple clients who received incorrect advice from DWP. One job coach advised a claimant they would be eligible for a household support fund, which we found not to be the case upon investigation. On another occasion, DWP advised an individual that she had no entitlement to benefits, despite being entitled to nESA due to her NI contributions.

Perhaps most frustrating are the number of clients whose problem arises as a direct result of poor admin. Clients came to us for help after their payments were delayed, forms went missing or were not scanned, or a backlog in assessments and appeals left them stranded without communication.

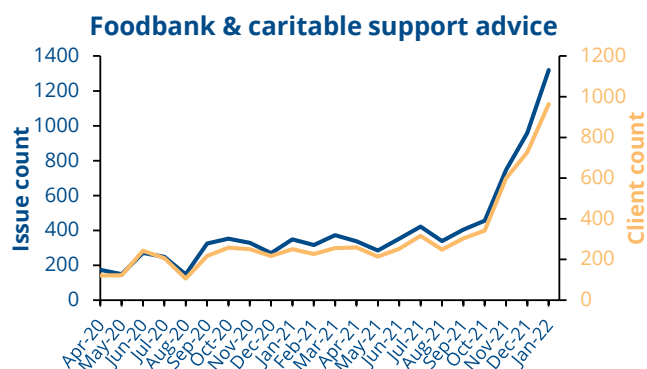
Consumers are already facing mounting pressure from the rising costs of living, the £20 cut to Universal Credit and soaring energy bills. Systematic bad practice by DWP is only serving to exacerbate the crisis.

We will be raising our concerns with our local DWP Partnership manager soon.

A glimpse of the local impact of the cost of living crisis

£ At Citizens Advice Gateshead we work closely with the local Foodbank, referring those in need so they can get something to eat. We also advise people on the various charitable organisations in the area and help people apply for the support these offer for people going through hardship and crisis, such as help with fuel poverty or to purchase working white goods for their homes.

Recent trends in our community advice work show how badly the cost of living crisis is impacting people in Gateshead, pushing them into poverty and crisis. The chart below shows the trend in the number of clients coming to us for help with accessing the Foodbank and/or charitable support locally. From April 2020 to April 2021 we were helping an average of 210 people each month. The numbers we helped gradually increased through 2021 until a dramatic rise.



In November 2021, around the time of the sudden and sharp rise in energy prices, we started to see hundreds more people in crisis each month. This trend has continued. In January 2022, we helped almost 1,000 people to access emergency food and/or apply for charitable support. That's almost 4 x more than Jan 2021.

This cost of living crisis looks set to cause even more hardship in the coming months unless the government intervenes. We are assisting national Citizens Advice by gathering evidence of the impacts on people and by joining their call on the government to implement targeted support that puts money into the pockets of those most in need.

You can read more about what national Citizens Advice are recommending [here](#).