

Research and Campaigns Quarterly report to Trustees

November 2023 to end January 2024

Access to the essentials of food and shelter dominated evidence forms this last quarter. It is a disturbing picture with no discernible solution in the short term.

The **scarcity of affordable housing** and the impact of that on our clients gave rise to 47% of all evidence forms.

Half of these cases involved section 21 or “no fault” evictions from private rented property, leaving those evicted with no access to alternative accommodation. The very low level of housing stock, the need for a rent guarantor, the rent increases as a result of the rise in mortgage rates, and the inadequate level of Local Housing Allowance have combined to create a truly desperate situation for many of the people coming to Citizens Advice with a housing issue.

The substantial gap between the Local Housing Allowance and market rents has continued to impact those renters dependent upon means tested benefits, whose income levels dropped to the point where they struggled to pay for essentials, evidenced by the numbers of people who contacted us for fuel vouchers (434 were distributed during 2023) and food bank referrals.

In these circumstances, rent arrears can accumulate, and a history of debt is an added barrier to securing private rented accommodation.

The problem of disrepair was a factor in a quarter of housing evidence forms, and the poor conditions clients were living in resulted in illness. The stress of homelessness and threatened homelessness was a major source of ill health, both physical and mental.

The **cost of living crisis** continued to affect clients and 26% of evidence forms were concerned with this issue. The need to ask for fuel and supermarket vouchers, as well as food bank referrals was the reason these clients approached Citizens Advice. Fuel voucher numbers have already been given, 188 supermarket vouchers were given out in 2023 and in the 3 months covered by this report, Lewes District Citizens Advice received 35 new requests for referral to a food bank.

Debt and poor mental health were frequently contributing factors to financial need, and the majority of these clients were in their thirties.

15% of advisers’ evidence forms were about **Health**, clients contacted us when they lost their access to an NHS dentist, and the cost of GP letters to support Attendance Allowance and Blue Badge applications was also raised.

Digital Exclusion was still a factor excluding a client from applying for work, when applications could only be made online, or increasing the difficulty for clients needing to applying for benefits without IT.

Telephone access may exist in theory but without staff to answer calls there is no service for people unable to use the internet

