

## Research and Campaigns report to Trustees Lewes District Citizens Advice

May to end August 2023

Evidence forms completed by advisers during this period have highlighted the growing crisis in the rental market, particularly for those eligible for Housing Benefit.

The **Local Housing Allowance**, which determines the amount of rent Housing Benefit will cover, has been set at 2020 levels, and our own research has shown that private rents in Lewes, Newhaven, and Seaford are now £100 to £1000 a month above LHA rates, with scarce availability. Without action to increase the LHA, current economic circumstances will widen this gap and its deleterious impact on families and individuals will intensify.

A third of Evidence Forms completed by advisers in this period focussed on this issue. The majority of these client were women, the youngest being 26, and the oldest 76, and about half were single parents.

A few were actually homeless as a result of the shortfall, some were facing eviction, and all had fallen into debt as they struggled to pay the shortfall to keep their homes.

In addition, resulting high levels of anxiety and stress took its toll on their mental health, so the possibility of increasing income through earnings became even more remote.

**Digital exclusion** continues to adversely affect many clients, both as a barrier to finding information, and as a means to contact organisations. 23% of evidence forms were about this issue. Clients were an even mix of genders, and were all over 60.

Being unable to find information covered issues from benefits to private company governance legislation. Lack of IT access prevented passport renewals, pension helpline queries, tracking down information about credit ratings, appealing parking tickets, and reporting a broken gas meter to EDF. Some of these could only be done online, others provided a telephone number, but staff were not available to answer it.

A further twist to the Digital Exclusion issue could be found in this case, when a client's difficulties with receiving an accurate bill were addressed by her energy company fitting a smart meter despite knowing that her area had no internet signal. The billing issue remained unresolved.

**Negative budgets**, where clients' incomes are too low to pay for essentials (such as rent, food, and energy) remain a constant source of despair for many people, and 17% of Evidence Forms were about new requests for help with **paying for food and energy**, the majority of clients in this group of Evidence Forms being women and single parents.

This is particularly concerning as summer is still with us, and foodbanks are having to find substantial amounts of money to support families with weekly food help.

For example, Landport Food Bank in Lewes is currently supporting 210 adults and children, with a weekly spend of £1000 to do this, together with food donations from individuals and the Landport Community Garden.

Several **employment** issues emerged in this period, all centred on unfair treatment of low paid workers: possible infringements of minimum age employment legislation, failure to follow dismissal procedures, a worker's hours reduced by almost a quarter without proportionate changes to their work schedule.

**Lewes District Council's housing admin service** was insufficient for a homeless client in very poor health, who was unable to contact the Council office in an emergency.

Another client received no information or explanation of changes to her Housing Benefit eligibility, and as a result unknowingly accrued rent arrears. Money was taken from her bank account without notice or her knowledge and the client, aged 77, became ill with anxiety.

For another **tenant in private housing**, a low income prevented a legal challenge to the landlord over a charge for disputed repairs.

Housing and employment each made up 10 % of Evidence Forms.

A topical issue just beginning to appear in calls was that of **access to an NHS dentist**. A snapshot survey was carried out amongst clients contacting Cit A , as well as clients and volunteers at foodbanks in Lewes, Newhaven, Seaford, and the outreach office in Peacehaven.

The findings, that 59 % did not have access to an NHS dentist (most of these were without any dental care) and 41% did have an NHS dentist, were communicated to Healthwatch and the office of the MP for Lewes District.

The MP was asked if the Department for Health and Social Care had responded to the findings of the Parliamentary Health and Social Care Committee, which found that fundamental reform was needed to end the "crisis of need", as being unable to see an NHS dentist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century was "totally unacceptable".

She was also asked if the Government would provide a publicly funded dental health service or whether such a service would only be available privately.

A reply has not yet been received

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31.08.32