citizens advice Lewes District

Research and Campaigns Quarterly Report to Trustees July- September 2026

During the third quarter of the year, evidence forms have highlighted the continuing impact of **housing issues** on the lives of our clients. Unsurprisingly, low incomes (or incomes which cannot match private rental rates in our area) are the driver. This may sometimes be due to external circumstances, such as family breakdown, chronic illness, or a policy decision which reduces personal income.

A rental tenancy which was viable for a family with two adults is rapidly unsustainable if one partner leaves. The reduction in income either from benefits or from employment, and the gap between the rental help paid by the DWP through the Local Housing Allowance and market rents in Lewes District, inevitably result in rent arrears. This is a pattern often reported by the clients who come to us for help and is documented by advisers in evidence forms.

A client on means tested benefits with dependent children came for help after a family member left the household, reducing the housing element of their Universal Credit and thereby increasing their private rent shortfall. Another client with two young children was faced with a rent shortfall of £500 each month, an amount which had been manageable with two partners but was beyond the resources of a single parent. Another client with a mortgage was also faced with significant debt after a relationship breakdown, and being unable to maintain the mortgage repayments - this added homelessness to worsening mental health and poverty.

Access to help with homelessness is restricted to 56 days before an eviction date. This delay is understandable from the local authority's perspective, but was the source of great anxiety for one client and their family who had received 4 months' notice of their eviction date but had to wait for more than 2 months before they could be accepted by the local authority as being threatened with homelessness.

Lewes District's **Discretionary Housing Payment**, which has previously been assessed on clients with a rent shortfall is seen to be calculated on the gap between a client's income and expenditure. The assessment also includes a client's income from health benefits, benefits excluded under other means tested rules.

We have been contacted by several clients whose DHP applications have been refused, one was left with £58 a month for daily living, another was trying to move into the area for family support after a bereavement.

For families on a critical level of income, a small reduction can have a disproportionally large effect, for example for one family, the withdrawal of the school holiday food vouchers over the summer precipitated them into continuing dependence upon a food bank. This example is typical of many families living with poverty, often single parent families, coping with poor health, insufficient income, unstable housing, and debt, a spiral of self-perpetuating disadvantage.

Unacceptable **delays in the DWP** appeal process has caused harm to clients in this quarter. Health benefit appeals are particularly stressful for clients, currently there is nearly a year's wait for an appeal to be heard, and the date can only be set after the DWP has made its submission

A client appealing a Disability Living Allowance decision was waiting for over 18 months, as the appeal process was further delayed by the DWP failing to submit its response within the month allowed, and ignoring two directives from HMCTS to do so. The stress and anxiety in this process is compounded by the financial hardship that accompanies the loss of a benefit, and debt often exacerbates an already challenging situation.

Another client lodged a PIP appeal, 2 months later, the DWP response had still not been received and therefore no date for the hearing could be set.

For another client appealing, the year's wait was almost over when they were contacted by the DWP to offer them a resolution. This could have been provided at a much earlier stage in the process and saved the client a year of anxiety.

The loss of a health benefit, particularly when the client considers their condition has worsened and feels they have evidence to prove this, can be devastating. This happened to one client requesting re assessment, who lost their entire award. The distress caused a further deterioration in health, and an increase in debt due to reduced income.

At regular intervals clients subject to the **Benefit Cap** will seek help from us. This circumstance (which limits the benefits a family can receive to £1835 unless a member of the household receives a disability benefit, when the cap isn't applied) has a particularly severe impact in an area of high housing costs such as Lewes District.

One client faced a situation where, having been placed in a property by LDC, within the Local Housing Allowance, found that their benefits were capped at £1835, insufficient to pay the rent, and with no money for food, utilities or other essentials, a situation clearly unsustainable.

Digital exclusion continues to disadvantage often more vulnerable clients. Cases recorded this quarter have hindered clients understanding benefits they were receiving or researching health benefits they may have been eligible for. Lack of reliable internet access and disability were responsible for their problems in using online information.

Kristine Bowen
Research and Campaigns Team