

The lack of affordable **housing**, section 21 “no fault” evictions, disrepair in private rented accommodation, the unsustainable gap between private rents and the Local Housing Allowance, and homelessness were the issues represented in 50% of the evidence forms completed by advisers this quarter. It is a disturbing view of a housing crisis in our district which mirrors the national picture.

Latest Government data has shown a 49% rise in section 21 evictions during 2023, and recorded homelessness rose by 14% in the same period. Lewes District Council’s website now identifies the number of years eligible applicants for social housing may wait before being offered a tenancy.

Clients approached us for housing help when they could no longer afford their rising rents, when disrepair in their accommodation rendered it unfit for occupation, and when landlords were repossessing property and there were no affordable alternatives available. Rents in the private sector were out of reach for those in work as well as those on benefits.

The disruption caused to families in these circumstances, the stress and instability which affects children losing their home is a tragedy for those individuals and the implications for society are complex and long term.

**Negative budgets**, related to benefit poverty and debt, made up 23% of evidence forms. Clients in these cases were all vulnerable, with long term health conditions, all dependent upon means tested benefits, which were sometimes further reduced by debt repayments, a difficult cycle to break free from. Each component feed the other, and clients are understandable **focussed on dealing with their** immediate crisis, rather than engaging with a longer term solution to their debts. Clients in such circumstances were almost entirely single parents, and approached Citizens Advice for material help through the Household Support Fund (currently in abeyance), fuel vouchers or food bank referrals.

Issues about **DWP actions** accounted for 15% of evidence forms, a small percentage, but issues which greatly impact the clients involved.

The DWP practice of telephoning appellants and making them an offer which has to be accepted there and then, in return for dropping their appeal came up again this time. The offer made may not represent the full value of their entitlement.

For another client it was impossible to carry out a benefit check as the DWP were unable to provide a breakdown of their award, and a further one was extremely distressed when their PIP was withdrawn without notice, and they had to cope with a sudden drop in income as well as the stress of the court appeal process.

The Carers Allowance issue, a particularly invidious/egregious combination of a cliff edge benefit, and there being no requirement for the DWP to act on a claimant’s change in pay, (information known to them) and alert a claimant that the change meant they had lost their eligibility for the benefit. Claimants are solely responsible for informing the DWP of any change in circumstance, and if this isn’t done, overpayments can quickly build up, pushing claimants into debt.

This happened to one of our clients, who didn’t realise that a rise in the minimum wage would tip them over the earnings threshold, and carried on receiving carers allowance, accumulating an over payment of £2000. The client’s income was very low, and meeting the repayment plan terms of £40 a month was extremely difficult.

The remainder of evidence forms concerned the **lack of access to IT**, often affecting older people disproportionately, with online systems as the primary route for communication with government and local authority services, and a **consumer** loophole in the used car market when there is no routine DVLA check on a car's ownership status when it is being taxed, which makes it easier for someone to unwittingly buy a stolen car, and thereby to lose the car and the purchase price.

**Youth engagement** is currently a focus for the R and C team as the low numbers of clients between 16 and 25 in our data does not reflect the numbers in this age group in the local population.

Considerable research has been undertaken both locally and nationally, comparing services in other areas of the country to identify how best to address the issue, in order to facilitate increased take up of our service by clients in this age group.

We have also taken part in the campaign to highlight the hardship faced by tenants dependent upon UC for help with their rent, as 2024 is a **53 week year**. This occurs every five to six years, when the cumulative effect of the leap year calendar adds an extra week on to the year. UC is paid monthly and makes no provision to cover the extra week, consequently tenants on this means tested benefit (the most financially disadvantaged) will have to pay the extra week's rent themselves.

Two members of the R and C team were able to attend the recent national **R and C conference** in February and brought back their insights from this to the rest of the group.

LDCA

R and C Team

5.5.24