



Surrey Welfare Rights Unit

ANNUAL REVIEW

2013 – 2014



Chair's Report

2014 has been a year of change for SWRU. The first, and most obvious change, is that Mike Hughes has retired from the Chair after 12 years. All of us are sorry to see him go and I am very grateful to him for his sound advice and unfailing support and kindness during the handover. Jenny Burnett has also retired during the year, whilst Dudley Beal and Anne Haigh have joined the Board of Trustees.

Meanwhile, changes to the welfare benefits system continue. In 2010 the government said that Welfare Reform would be completed by 2014, but now we are here, it feels as if Welfare Reform has only just started. The introduction of Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payments is happening very slowly indeed, but new announcements about further reforms continue unabated. At SWRU we are in a unique position to see how people who live in Surrey are being affected by the changes. At the beginning of the year a Work and Pensions Select Committee conducted an enquiry into Housing Costs Reform. Our manager, Maria Zealey, was invited to give evidence to the Committee after we submitted evidence of the adverse effect of changes to Housing Benefit on people in our area. Amongst other things we were able to demonstrate that the only way that some of our residents can afford a home is to move right out of the county. Our evidence was sufficiently compelling to be included in the Committee's final report.

The developments to our services announced in Mike Hughes last report have all been implemented this year. I would like to thank our funders, whose generosity has made this happen. They are all listed on page 10, but I would especially like to thank Surrey County Council and Woking Borough Council, because their support gives us the foundations we need to build the service for the county. We have been able to increase our capacity; providing expert advice through our advice line to welfare benefits advisers in Citizens Advice Bureaux and the other organisations we serve; taking on casework and expanding both the amount and range of training that we do.

And so, lastly, I wish to thank the people who make SWRU the successful, reliable organisation that it is. My fellow trustees are generous with their time, expertise and experience. The staff offer a combination of knowledge and skills that we have been fortunate to find. I look forward to working with you all in 2015.

Manager's Report

This year's political landscape was once again dominated by endless change in social security legislation. The SWRU advisers worked tirelessly throughout; ploughing through hundreds of statutory instruments and decision-maker's guidance to ensure that our consultancy line advice was full and accurate and that training courses were up-to-date. And still there are significant changes not yet implemented such as Universal Credit and the Care Act.

With additional funding from the Getwise project and commissioned courses we were able to deliver more of almost everything! We delivered more training courses, our advice line hours were extended and we undertook more research and campaigning activity. The results of the campaigning work were disappointing in that Government dismissed most of the evidence presented for consultation. For those clients affected by, for example, mandatory reconsideration or cuts to mobility allowance, they will be disheartened by the lack of influence so many consultations had in bringing positive change.

We did raise our campaigning profile by working more with MPs, councillors and Citizens Advice nationally. As a member of Citizens Advice Surrey we contributed to the Local Assistance Scheme and Healthwatch projects and presented Surrey CABx data and case studies to the Work and Pensions Select Committee when I was invited to appear as a witness.

Our job is made easier by many hard-working and cheerful partners, not just volunteers and staff in the advice sector but staff in the venues we use, our neighbours at the Depot, printers, external trainers and our funders. I would also like to thank the Unit's trustees for their support throughout the year and in particular to Mike Hughes who stepped down as Chair during this year after many years service in that role.

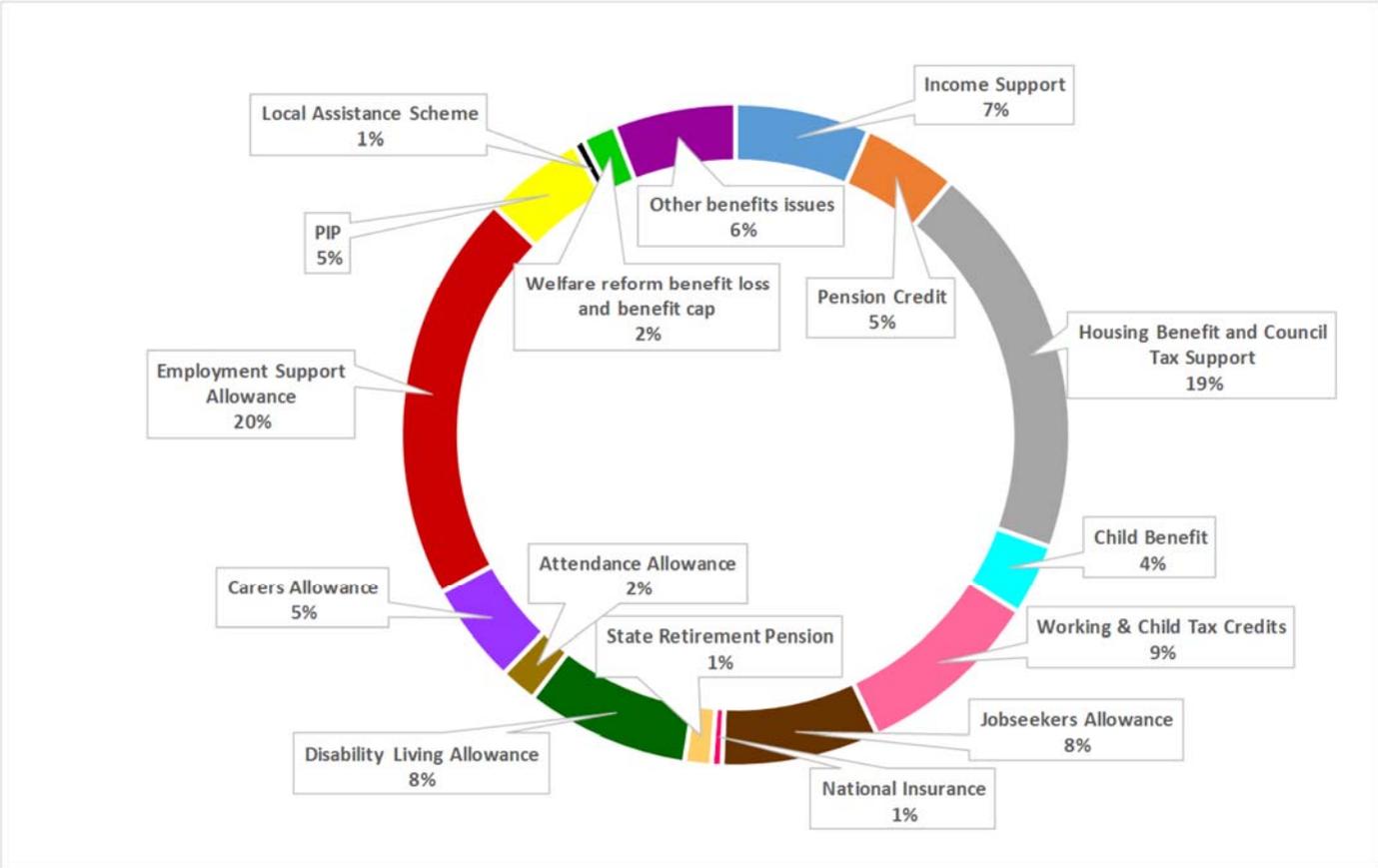
For 2014/15 we already can see that the level of enquiries and training has not relented. Several changes to EEA migrants legislation have prompted us to write a new training course. We are involved in the re-branding of Citizens Advice. Our support for Healthwatch Surrey has continued with us delivering further courses and we have forged new relationships with the finance and benefits teams within the County Council. It will be another busy year.

Social Policy

- ✍ We asked our partner organisations for evidence on the impact of the Housing and Council Tax Benefit reforms. We drafted a response to the Work and Pensions Select Committee. The Committee then invited us to attend as a witness, where we had a further opportunity to discuss Surrey clients experiencing rising levels of rent arrears, council tax debt and shortages of affordable housing.
- ✍ We wrote to our Surrey MPs and the Deputy Prime Minister with our concerns about Mandatory Reconsideration, and in particular, for ESA claimants. We are also providing evidence for the Citizens Advice national research on this issue. Mandatory Reconsideration introduced an additional stage when challenging a decision during which ESA claimants cannot continue to receive their benefit. We are concerned that until significant improvements are made to the accuracy of the medicals and ESA decision-making, this is an unjust reform which affects many very vulnerable citizens.
- ✍ A joint response was sent from SWRU and Surrey Coalition of Disabled People to Government for their consultation on the changes to the mobility component. Despite over a thousand responses opposing the reduction from 50m to 20m, the Government continued with its plan to restrict the new Personal Independence Payment.
- ✍ At a local level we continued to be active partners on several policy groups and contributed to the shaping of many important services and support for Surrey citizens including:
 - ⇒ Surrey Welfare Reform Coordination Group
 - ⇒ Surrey Welfare Reform Scrutiny Committee
 - ⇒ SCC Local Assistance Scheme Committee
- ✍ During 2013/14 we also worked closely with Citizens Advice on a number of campaigns. We raised the issue of Carers who worked 15 hours per week losing entitlement to Carers Allowance because the earnings limit did not incrementally rise with national minimum wage increases. This was dealt with by raising the earnings limit in May 2014. We like to think our evidence contributed to this amendment.

Advice Line

During this year we were able to extend the advice line hours to open 10am - 4pm Monday to Friday in order to meet increasing demand. Previously the line was closed between 12pm and 2pm.



Over 65 local organisations and teams regularly use the Advice Line. Some calls will be one-off enquiries from advisers who need background legal resources or tactics on making a challenge. Other advisers will be looking for support with their casework such as looking over an appeal statement or sourcing some supporting caselaw. We also continued to take on a limited amount of direct casework including a significant number of Upper Tribunal appeals.

For 2013/14 as a direct result of our support on the Advice Line we raised:

£425,585

Training

Training is an essential part of the service offered by the Unit, especially during a period of significant change in legislation and practice. Our programme includes courses across more than 20 subject areas, ranging from introduction level up to specialist updates. The courses are currently accredited by the Solicitors Regulatory Authority, and we collect anonymous evaluations from every delegate.

We also administer the training programme on behalf of Surrey CABx. As well as benefits training for volunteer and paid advisers, we bring in trainers to run other courses on housing, debt, discrimination, employment and other advice topics which are the norm for bureaux. We also have the administrative responsibility for CABx assessment days for potential applicants. The assessment days offer an insight into the Citizens Advice service and the level of commitment a bureau asks of a volunteer adviser.

The Unit is regularly asked to run bespoke courses for organisations across the region. We ran 34 commissioned courses. These courses have provided a vital source of income that contributes towards the advice line costs, and is an important alternative to our main training programme to ensure advisers are up to date and maintain the skill levels required for this complex area of advice. Overall, our training output significantly increased during this year:

- ◆ SWRU open programme - 25 courses
- ◆ Surrey CABx programme - 9 courses
- ◆ Getwise Project - 10 courses
- ◆ Commissioned - 34 courses

Examples of organisations who commissioned courses:

- ◆ East Sussex County Council
- ◆ Whitmore Vale Housing Association
- ◆ West Sussex CABx
- ◆ Surrey Family Mediation Service
- ◆ Surrey Leaving Care Service

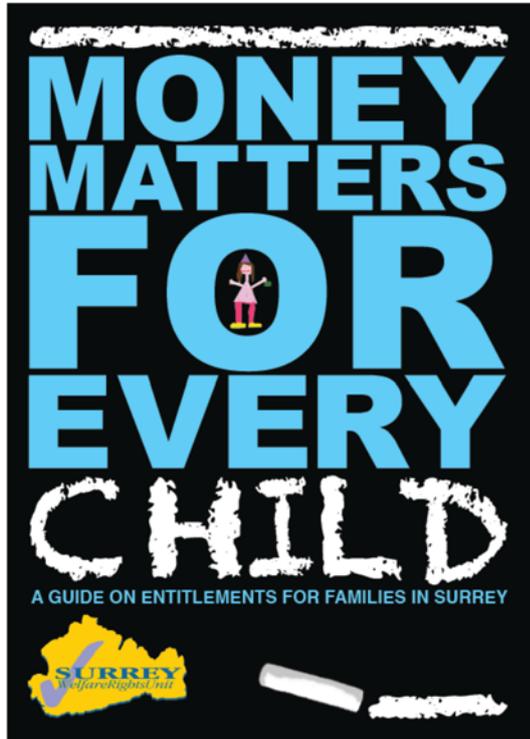
1404 advisers trained

SWRU Year

-  2013/14 was the first year of our Lloyds TSB Foundation funded Child Poverty campaign. With this funding we have been able to recruit a Family Income Caseworker, Linda Bowman, who can support families who struggle to access mainstream advice services. Linda spent the year ensuring that relevant organisations and teams were aware of the project, and how to refer families. Although Linda is part-time she assisted 48 families, undertook many workshops and talks with professionals and parents, updated our families information resources and established links with Clinical Commissioning Groups, hospices, schools and the Childrens Trust. The project continues into 2014/15.
-  2013/14 was the first year of our support to the Getwise project. As well as providing specialist support via the advice line, we have undertaken casework, provided training and distributed information resources to the six Getwise partners. Again, this support continues for 2014/15.
-  We continued to work closely with Carers and Carer Support organisations as part of our SCC grant funding. Specific Carer and benefits courses were delivered, we undertook Carer casework, including tribunal representation, and the popular Carers booklet was updated to its 17th edition.
-  In August 2013 we were able to extend the opening hours of the advice line to 10am - 4pm, Monday to Friday. This had an immediate effect on the number of calls which indicates that there previously had been substantial unmet need.
-  2013/14 was the first year of Healthwatch Surrey delivered by partners that included Citizens Advice Surrey. We were asked to support the organisation by delivering training to Healthwatch Champions, organising conferences and providing administrative support for recruitment. Much of our benefits work has some aspect of health or social care so this was appropriate activity for the Unit to undertake.
-  In June 2013 the Unit moved onto the Citizens Advice case-management system, PETRA. At first there were challenges with the stability of the IT and staff getting used to the new software. As a specialist support organisation, PETRA has been particularly useful for supporting the Surrey CABx and we can now share case records and client details, with their consent of course.

Information

The Unit produces a range of benefit information sources which are distributed across the County, not just to organisations but directly to residents also.



Surrey Welfare Rights Unit

Benefit Rates from April 2014

Income Support / Income Based JSA Personal Allowances		Housing Benefit	
Single person		As for Income Support except:	
under 25	57.35	Personal Allowances	
25 or over	72.40	Single over Pension Credit age	148.35
Lone parent		Couple one/both over Pension Credit age	226.50
under 18	57.35	Single 65 or over	165.15
18 or over	72.40	Couple, one or both 65 or over	247.30
Couple		Child Dependant	66.33
both under 18	max. 96.65	Premiums	
both 18 or over	113.70	Family premium	17.45
(seek advice if one of a couple is under 18)		Non-Dependant Deductions for HB	
Child Dependant*	66.33	Under 25 on IS/JSA(IB)	Nil
Premiums		Assessment phase ESA(IB)	Nil
Disability		In receipt of Pension Credit	Nil
single	31.85	Main phase ESA(IB)	14.15
couple	45.40	25 or over on IS/JSA(IB)	14.15
Enhanced disability #		18 or over with income of:	
single	15.55	£128 - 187.99	32.45
child*	24.08	£188 - 244.99	44.55
couple	22.35	£245 - 325.99	72.95
Severe disability #		£326 - 405.99	83.05
per qualifying person	61.10	£406 or more	91.15
Carer #	34.20	Others, 18 or over	14.15
Family*	17.45	Childcare Earnings Disregard	
Disabled child*		For HB and CTS, maximum disregards are:	
per qualifying child	59.50	One child	175.00
Pensioner couple #	112.80	Two or more children	300.00
(One under Pension Credit age)		Additional Earnings Disregard	17.10
* Non Child Tax Credits family		Council Tax Support Scheme	
Income-Based Employment and Support Allowance		See local borough or district council website for details of each local scheme or contact SWRU for CTS summary sheet.	
Basic allowances as per Income Support.			
Eligible premiums marked as #			
ESA component additions as per Contribution-Based ESA.			



Welfare Writes
Issue 40 May 2014

Benefits Update for Surrey Advisers

New requirements for JSA claimants from 28 April

From 28 April several new requirements on JSA claimants come into force:

- To prepare for their first interview with a Jobcentre Plus adviser, Jobseekers will be asked to do things like preparing a CV, setting up an email address and register for the government's new jobs website: Universal Jobmatch. This change is aimed at getting people ready to look for work before they start to claim JSA and be able to show they are serious about finding a job as quickly as possible. Failure to comply quickly with these requirements may result in a sanction.
- Some job seekers will be asked to have weekly meetings with their Jobcentre Plus adviser rather than the current fortnightly arrangement.
- All new JSA claimants will also now have a quarterly review with their adviser where they will review their progress and job goals to identify what more they can do to move into work.
- Claimants will be screened for their English speaking and could be mandated to attend English language training.

Recent figures show the number of people claiming JSA fell by over 363,000 on the year, the largest annual fall since 1998. Over 75% of people end their JSA claim within 6 months.

Urgent Call For Evidence

The Government is proposing to introduce a 7-day wait for JSA and ESA claims from October. These benefits are already paid a fortnight in arrears. The Social Security Advisory Committee is seeking responses to there consultation on this change. The deadline is

13 June 2014
<http://ssac.independent.gov.uk/>

citizens advice bureau
A Member of Citizens Advice

ags
Advice Quality Standard in Welfare Benefits Casework

The newsletter of Surrey Welfare Rights Unit

Working with Partners and the Media

An important part of our service delivery is working with partners. We are often asked to participate in events, conferences and workshops as well as contributing to local and national media. These are some of the activities undertaken during this year.

- 🗨️ Surrey Home School Linkworkers Annual Conference
- 🗨️ HMCTS Sutton Tribunal Users Group
- 🗨️ Surrey Young Carers parent group
- 🗨️ Tandridge CVS
- 🗨️ Action for Carers Surrey Annual Conference
- 🗨️ Redhill Youth Forum
- 🗨️ Homestart Elmbridge
- 🗨️ Spelthorne Older Person's Forum
- 🗨️ BBC Surrey - report on Housing Benefit under-occupancy charge
- 🗨️ Potter's Gate Children's Centre
- 🗨️ Elmbridge Parent Carer Support Group
- 🗨️ Surrey Coalition of Disabled People AGM
- 🗨️ Royal Surrey County Hospital Adult Social Care Team
- 🗨️ Sun Ash Childrens Centre
- 🗨️ Sam Beare Hospice
- 🗨️ FirstPoint CiC
- 🗨️ Carers Trust - two-week Q & A discussion event
- 🗨️ Surrey County Council Information Summit
- 🗨️ Daily Express - reader's query on capital and deprivation
- 🗨️ Your Sanctuary
- 🗨️ Wrecclesham Childrens Centre
- 🗨️ Mole Valley Housing Association
- 🗨️ Carer Support Spelthorne
- 🗨️ Richmond Fellowship
- 🗨️ Surrey Community Action
- 🗨️ Healthwatch Surrey

And finally....

The Unit Trustees and Staff would like to thank the following people and organisations who have made our work easier this year:

- 😊 Woking Borough Council
- 😊 [Surrey County Council](#)
- 😊 Tandridge District Council
- 😊 [Elmbridge Borough Council](#)
- 😊 Lloyds TSB Foundation
- 😊 [Kings Mill Partnership](#)

Company Information

Company Number: [3335128](#)

Charity Number: [1062826](#)

Registered Office: Unit 14a, Monument Way Depot, Monument Way East,
Woking. GU21 5LY

Bank: CAF Bank Ltd., Kings Hill, West Malling, Kent

Examiners: The Kings Mill Partnership, 75 Park Lane, Croydon

Staff

Maggie Ashall	Training Administrator
Linda Bowman	Family Income Adviser
Sarah Fell	Welfare Rights Adviser
Helen Haws	Welfare Rights Adviser
Carol Gibbs	Welfare Rights Adviser
Liz Graham	Finance Administrator
Maureen Prendergast	Welfare Rights Adviser
Ray Savage	Information Systems Volunteer
Maria Zealey	Unit Manager

Surrey Welfare Rights Unit is a member of Citizens Advice.

We aim to provide the advice people need for the problems they face and improve the policies and practices that affect people's lives.

We provide free, independent, confidential and impartial advice to everyone on their rights and responsibilities. We value diversity, promote equality and challenge discrimination.