

**Surrey Welfare Rights Unit
Impact Report
2016/17**



Our value to society in 2016/17

Why the need for Surrey Welfare Rights Unit?

Some problems are more complex than others. Welfare benefit problems are particularly complex, especially at a time of huge legislation change. Often households that are affected by benefit problems are on low incomes and are dealing with other disadvantages. Resolving benefit problems can prevent situations worsening, including homelessness, rising debts, poor health and loss of opportunity.

At the Unit the enquiries are increasing in complexity as welfare reforms continue at great pace. New legislation has not always been well thought out and has caused discrimination and resulted in challenges in the higher courts. We continue to support the advice sector so that they are kept up to date with new laws, case law and practical tips on how they can best help their clients during this financial squeeze on welfare support.

Surrey Welfare Rights Unit is a specialist support organisation that delivers services to over 50 local organisations. Our advisers are experts in social security law.

The advice line is open Monday to Friday 10am- 4pm.

The team undertake casework for complex issues including first-tier and upper tribunal appeals.

The Unit also runs a comprehensive training programme suitable for both new and experienced advisers across a range of topics and skills.

SWRU also provides expert support to a number of statutory and voluntary policy and network groups.

We work with local MPs, Councillors, health and social care teams and voluntary sector partners to find solutions to improve the lives of the most vulnerable local residents.

A few words from the Trustee Board

The SWRU Trustee Board is proud to present this impact report showing as it does the very valuable contribution the Unit makes to the advice sector in Surrey and elsewhere. The work of the Unit not only provides support for the advisors working in the community and grappling with the rapid pace of change in the world of welfare benefits but also uses the evidence gathered through this work to try to make a difference and influence policy across the board. It is crucial that those planning and executing legislative change are made aware of the impact of these changes on ordinary people. The Unit and the advice sector generally are in a unique position to witness this and produce evidence to work with government and local authorities. This helps to make sure the system is fit for purpose at the same time supports some of the most vulnerable people in our community. The Board is therefore determined to continue to work to ensure it is able to carry on this valuable activity.

We are profoundly grateful to all those organisations that support and fund our work.

None of the impressive results outlined in this report would be possible without the dedication, professionalism and hard work of the small team at the Unit.

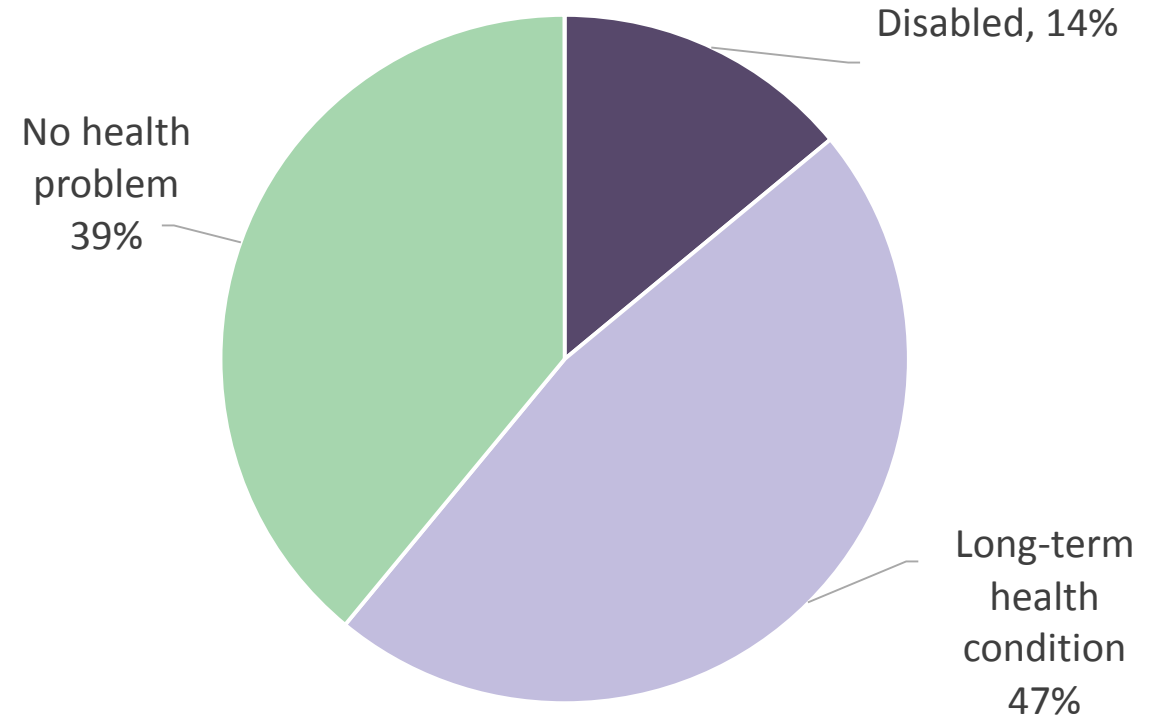
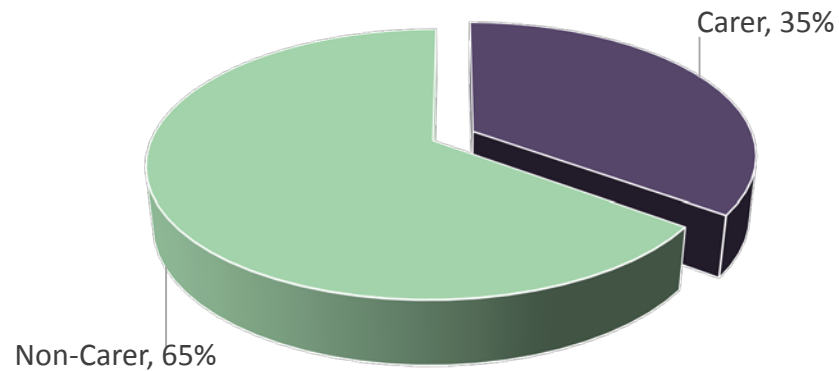
Surrey and some neighbouring areas are very fortunate to have this resource and experience on hand.



We helped those most in need

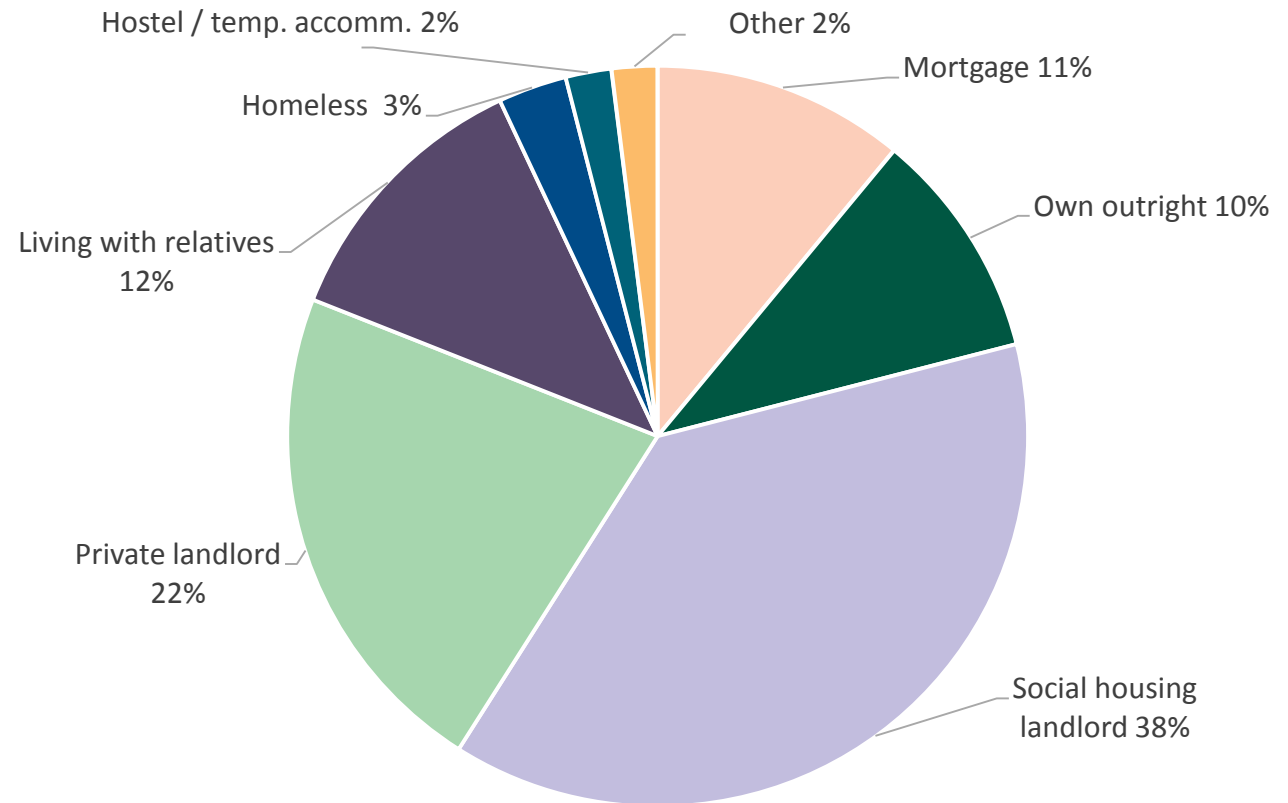
A significant number of our clients are disabled or have a long-term health condition including mental health, cancer and cardio-respiratory diseases. The enquiry statistics later in this report show that there are still significant problems with the administration of illness and disability benefits – problems which often exacerbate clients' poor health.

Unsurprisingly, with such a high proportion of clients with health conditions or a disability, 35% of all enquiries also concern a Carer and their benefits.



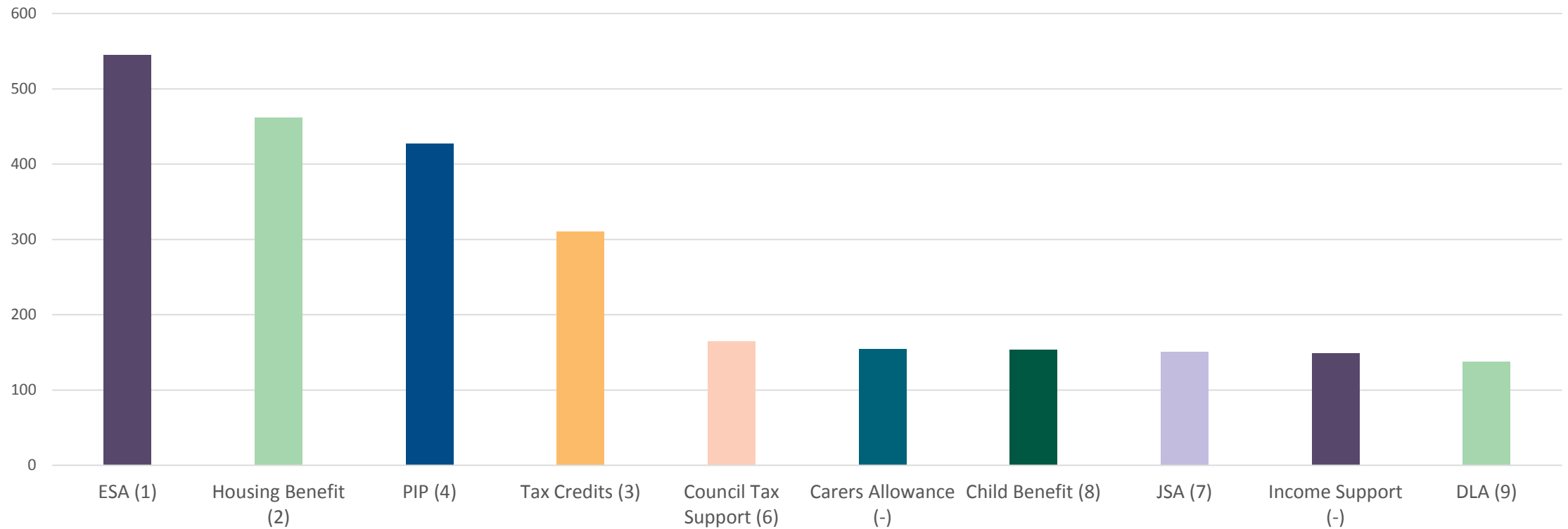
We helped those most in need

The breakdown of housing type across our clients is a very different picture from the wider Surrey population. Across Surrey 14% of local residents live in private rented accommodation. Only 11% live in social housing. Less than 1% are homeless or living in hostels. Only 1% are recorded as living in informal arrangements with family or friends. The high level of Housing Benefit enquiries and the emerging concerns on delays for Rent Support under Universal Credit mean that we will be supporting clients to remain in their homes as a priority.



.....with these benefit problems

Top Ten Benefit Issues
(2015/16 position in brackets)



In total our advice had this much value



Fiscal Benefit: Reducing demand on local health services, homelessness services and out-of-work benefits.

Our Fiscal Benefit was £103,589



Public Value: Improvements in health, well-being, participation and productivity.

Our Public Value was £1,079,579



Financial Outcomes: Individual income gains through benefit claims, successful appeals and overpayment write-off's.

**Financial Outcomes secured by SWRU:
£3,273,679**

**For every £1 of funding SWRU
generated £19.13 for clients**



How we work out our value

Citizens Advice help us calculate our value using a Treasury approved cost-benefit tool. Four key variables are considered.

Affected population: Number of people receiving advice about a specific issue

Impact: Impact of advice on a specific outcome

Deadweight: What would have happened anyway without our advice

Optimism bias: Accounting for best practice, timeliness and independence of research

We know from the feedback from our users that the expertise of the Advice Team is extremely valued. It saves advisers time and ensures the right advice is given from the start of an enquiry; so avoiding unnecessary challenges and appeals. By supporting advisers with their advice and casework, and by providing ongoing opportunities for training, these skilled staff and volunteers go forward to help many thousands more local residents.

Furthermore our research and campaigning has raised issues on behalf of our clients at local and national level. A local council changed their online information about Hardship Payments because of our evidence; we wrote to all Surrey MPs about restricting benefits to two children retrospectively, and earlier this year we were invited to discuss the lower benefit cap on BBC Radio. Currently we are collating evidence on Universal Credit and supporting the Citizens Advice campaign to pause the roll-out until the most serious problems with the system have been resolved.

Part of a bigger picture

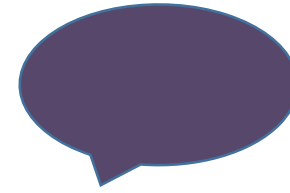
There is no resting on laurels here. We are now in year 6 of significant welfare reform which is challenging, frustrating and exhausting all at once. Our challenge is to ensure that all local services who support vulnerable clients are kept informed and up to date with the changes. The biggest upheaval, Universal Credit, is still to come in summer 2018. We know from the early adopter areas that this new system is causing severe concern, especially the number of weeks that clients are waiting before their first payment; often relying on the patience of a landlord who needs the rent. We continue to improve and grow our Universal Credit training courses, and as the Citizens Advice Universal Credit Intelligence Hub for this area, we are in a good position to gather and share emerging issues and develop tactics for coping with UC for our clients.

Locally the advice sector is under pressure. Our recent survey across the sector revealed that 33% of local organisations had insufficient resources to help clients challenge wrong benefit decisions, and 65% had insufficient resources to represent clients. Clients who need legal advice for complex benefit cases are limited in their options. Welfare benefits casework is no longer supported by legal aid, the advice sector is shrinking with many services closing just in the last 12 months, and those that remain are dealing with clients who have multiple, serious issues that stretch those organisations resources; particularly the efforts of volunteer advisers.

Funders ask why the local Citizens Advice service can't help the clients we support. The answer is that local Citizens Advice offer generalist advice; and those services are excellent. Most have no funded casework service and those that do are restricted by geography or funder priorities. The Unit's services are part of the advice services landscape. We exist to provide justice for clients who face the most discrimination, the most intractable benefit problems and to ensure our advice partners can get on and help their clients.



What they said.....



“It’s always a pleasure to work with you and learn more about welfare rights”

“Without Surrey Welfare Rights Unit we would have been at a loss”

“I am extremely grateful for the assistance I have received, without which I would have found the legal knowledge a real difficulty... and probably would have given up”

“Thank you for all your help – I could not have managed the submission without all your expert help and guidance”

“Many thanks for your excellent advice which has saved ML close to £3.5k”

“SWRU provide excellent specialist resource to enhance the service we provide our clients. The training also provides updates and skills needed by our advisers.”



Training the advice sector

24 SWRU courses delivered

185 local advice workers trained

12 commissioned courses delivered

216 local staff and volunteers trained

26 workshops, talks and information events delivered

688 local residents and professionals attended



Working with others for better client outcomes

Valuing People Surrey

Surrey and Borders NHS Trust – Occupational Matters

Surrey and Borders NHS Trust – Quality Action Group

Surrey and Borders NHS Trust – Engage programme

Surrey Homeless Panel – East and West

Catalyst

Surrey Community Action

Surrey Minority Ethnic Forum

Surrey Coalition of Disabled People

Surrey Gypsy Traveller Communities Forum

YMCA East Surrey

North West Surrey CCG

Disability Initiative

Young People Supported Accommodation Providers

Surrey County Council Welfare Reform Coordination Group

Surrey Local Assistance Scheme

Surrey Care Leavers Service

Surrey Youth Support

Citizens Advice Surrey

Surrey Local Citizens Advice Bureaux

HMCTS

Jobcentre Plus

Surrey Members of Parliament

Action for Carers Surrey

Who we are

Staff

Sarah Fell – Welfare Rights Adviser

Carol Gibbs – Senior Welfare Rights Adviser

Helen Haws – Welfare Rights Adviser

Maureen Prendergast – Welfare Rights Adviser

Ray Savage – Administrator

Maria Zealey – Unit Manager

We would like to thank

Surrey County Council

Surrey Clinical Commissioning Groups

Woking Borough Council

Tandridge District Council

Elmbridge Borough Council

Guildford Borough Council

Trustees

Anne Haigh – Chair

David Booth – Treasurer

Alison Cox – Secretary

Jane Bourgeois

Roger Hurcombe

Henk Van Roest

Margaret Hurcombe

John Fairley

Sophia Platts

Surrey Welfare Rights Unit aims 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.

Surrey Welfare Rights Unit
Company Number: 3335128
Charity Number: 1062826
FCA Number: FRN 617760
OISC Registered
AQS Standards in Welfare
Benefits Casework and
Telephone Support