



Surrey Welfare Rights Unit Impact Report 2018/19

Our value to society in 2018/19

Why the need for Surrey Welfare Rights Unit?

This was the year Universal Credit finally reached households in Surrey and it certainly made an impact. The emerging picture of delayed payments, errors in awards and problems with accessing the system have led to widespread criticism and challenges in the courts, some of which resulted in further changes such as the Severe Disability Premium Gateway. This change alone has made advising clients much more complex. Now, rather than a binary case of legacy benefits vs Universal Credit, it has opened up a whole raft of “what if” situations, all of which have to be explored before the client can make an informed decision about next steps.

In addition to the “Gateway”, mixed age couples are now affected by Universal Credit, which potentially could mean a halving of financial support when compared to Pension Credit. Also, the damaging 2-child limit on payments to families mean that many families who are impacted by poor health, bereavement, redundancy or taking on a caring role, will not have sufficient financial support if they have more than two children. Rising child poverty will not be slowing any time soon.

During the year we saw an increase in the number of organisations using our services, especially the advice line. We delivered many more courses, both within Surrey and across neighbouring counties. The majority of these courses were Universal Credit.

At the time of writing we are already seeing the impact on our services of the new Help to Claim service being delivered by local Citizens Advice. Undoubtedly more Universal Claimants in need of support will have access to local help, but for clients with complex circumstances, we are experiencing increased demand on our resources. This will need addressing in the coming months so that the quality of our advice is not negatively impacted by rising numbers.

We are also seeing more enquiries about the new settled status scheme, how it interacts with EU residence rules and the impact on benefit entitlement.

A few words from the Trustee Board

2018/19 proved to be a busy year as both our Unit staff and Trustee Board grappled with the ongoing impact of Welfare Reform on all our client groups. The continued rollout of Universal Credit brought its own challenges and the expected increased workload.

As ever the staff in the Unit, under the leadership of our Chief Officer, Maria Zealey, rose to the challenge and continued to do their utmost to provide the advice and support necessary for our clients and client organisations. Evidence of the impact of welfare reform was provided to Citizens Advice and others. The Trustee Board is extremely proud of the hard work of all the staff and very grateful for their continued dedication and professionalism. Our organisation and the advice it delivers received the highest grade from the Citizens Advice Governance Audit and Quality of Advice Assessment.

The Board would also like to express its gratitude to all our funders and supporters particularly in this more difficult financial climate. One of our primary goals this coming year will be to continue to work with funders old and new to ensure our service continues at its present level.

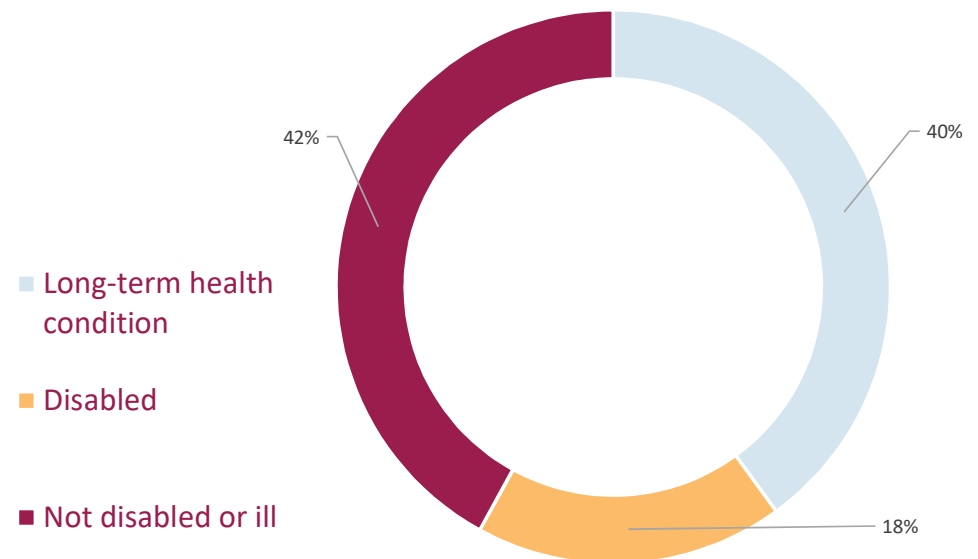
Thank you to all our funders and supporters for your continued support and to all our staff for their hard work and dedication.

We helped those most in need

The arrival of Universal Credit halfway through this year had a huge impact on calls to the advice line, and increased complexity of those enquiries. Universal Credit queries increased by 345% compared to the previous year. Before the end of the 2018/19 period the Government had introduced the Severe Disability Premium Gateway and had made changes to the controversial two-child limit for benefit payments.

The poor administration of both ESA and PIP continues and is reflected in the high number of our clients who have a disability or long-term health condition and the benefit problems they face. ESA queries continued to rise, 23% compared to 2017/18 and PIP increased by 19%. Often, benefits for the Carer and Cared for person are fundamentally linked and advice has to fully consider the impact of claims for both individuals. 30% of all enquiries were from Carers or Carer households.

All enquiries



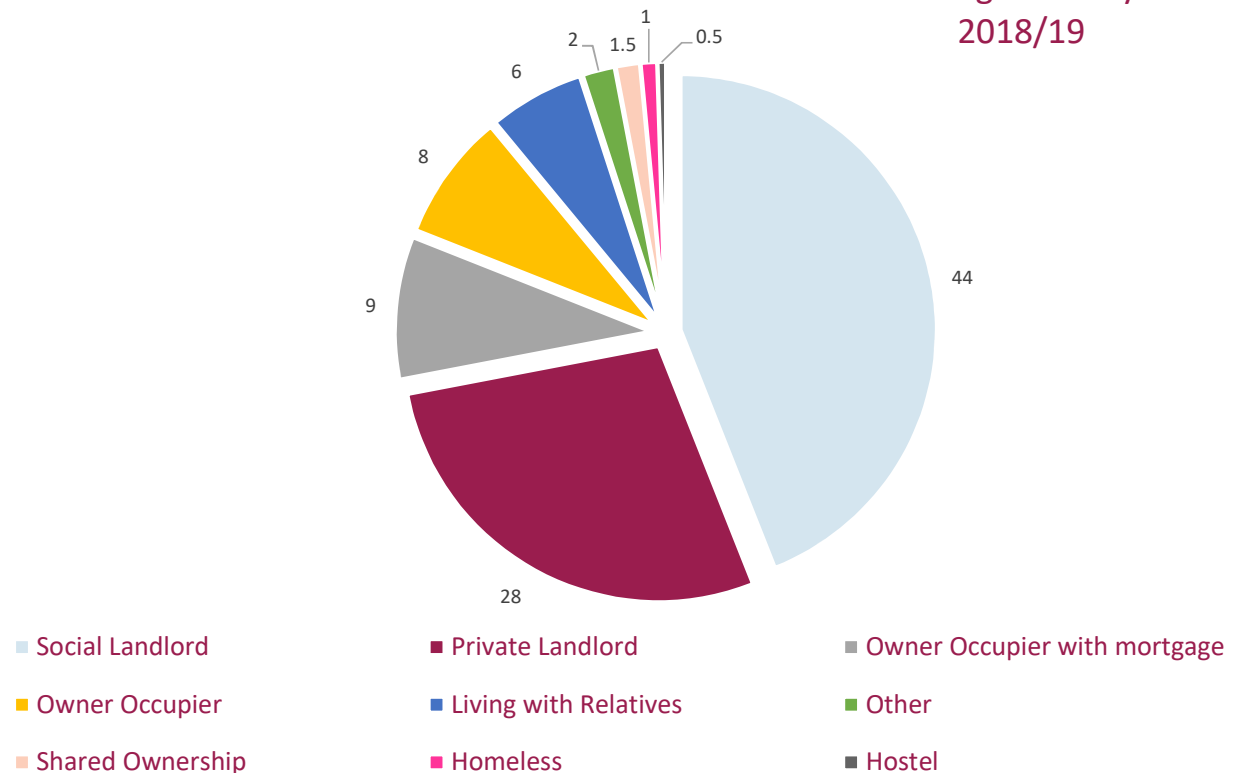
We helped those most in need - continued

The breakdown of housing type across our clients is a very different picture from the wider Surrey population. Across Surrey 13% of local residents live in private rented accommodation, 28% of our clients are private sector tenants. Only 11% live in social housing, but 44% of our clients have a social landlord, an increase from 39% the previous year. Overpayments of Housing Benefit was the second highest Debt category recorded during this year.

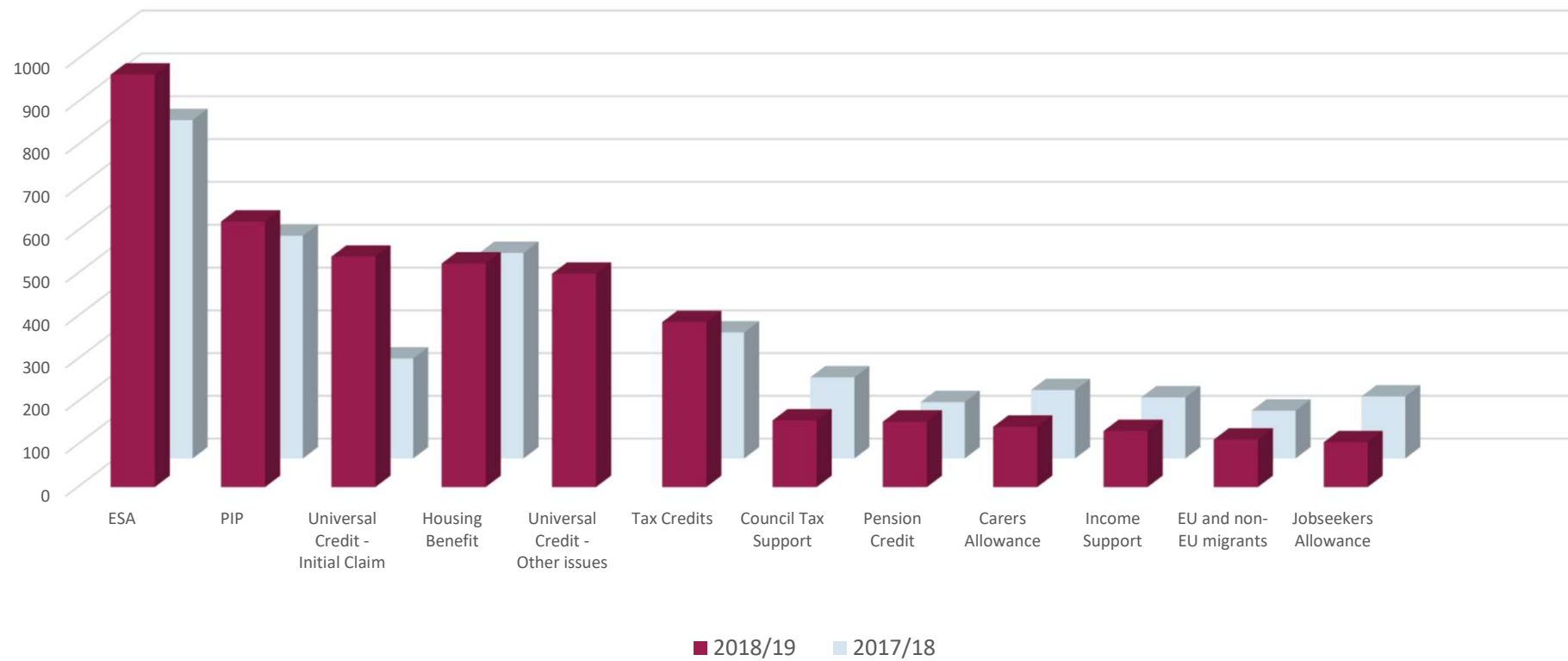
In total benefit debt queries rose by 13% during the year.

Throughout the year we supported clients who were destitute, fleeing domestic violence, at risk of homelessness and those who were facing end of life illnesses. In these circumstances the very last thing vulnerable clients have energy for is to fight for their rights to receive benefit payments.

Housing status by %
2018/19



.....with these benefit problems



In total our advice had this much value



Financial Outcomes direct and indirect

£4,253,249

Client benefit gain confirmed £646,354

Overpayments written off £41,546

Health, social care and other gains

£8127

Our Fiscal Benefit was £128,268

Saving to NHS £40,335

Saving to DWP £35,479

Keeping people in work £2,782

Homelessness prevention savings £13,349

Our Public Value was £1,615,638

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

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.

Our research and campaigning work included providing expert advice to local inquiries into bus pass schemes, food poverty in Guildford, and several Overview and Scrutiny committees looking at the impact of welfare reforms and in particular Universal Credit. We produced Budget Updates following the Chancellors announcements, and presented to the Chief Executives Group and the District and Boroughs Children Services Leads Group.



Part of a bigger picture

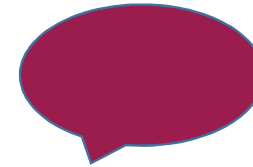
Funders ask why the local Citizens Advice service can't help the clients we support. The answer is that local Citizens Advice offer generalist advice; and those services are excellent. Most have no funded casework service and those that do are restricted by geography or funder priorities. The Unit's 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.

Many of the organisations we support are not advice services. But they know their clients and when they have a benefit problem, they are best placed, with support from the Unit, to help their clients resolve those issues. There is little point in only focussing on housing conditions, debts or mental health support if that person's benefit has been stopped. Poverty affects every corner of a person's life. Not just physical and mental health. It stops participation, motivation, and if essential costs cannot be met, then a spiral of debt and third party recovery can quickly follow. Early action is essential. The years of welfare reforms have, in part, shifted the risks onto the claimant. There are some safeguards that can help mitigate these risks but most of these require advice and for vulnerable clients, support. The emerging picture of Universal Credit is that, for clients with complex needs, the additional commitment and reporting requirements put burdens on clients. If things go wrong, getting quick resolution is often precluded due to Helpline barriers and online journals that have been locked. Rectifying these systemic failures should be a priority and would instantly improve clients being able to cope.

For this year we will be assessing the impact on our services from Universal Credit and the Help to Claim service being delivered by local Citizens Advice. We will strive for closer working with both the County Council and district and borough councils as we share many clients and resources are limited. As the only local specialist benefits service we need to ensure that our staffing and finances cope with the rising demand from our partners.



What they said.....



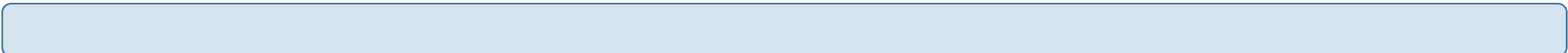
“I spoke to front line practitioners very briefly and they all agreed they had learnt loads. A massive thumbs up from all of us at SCC” – Children’s Services

“I think without your help I would have had a breakdown or given up the appeal. So thank you again.” – Parent Carer

“The win means so much more than the extra financial support...it’s being believed. It’s a huge relief” – PIP appeal client

“If we hadn’t been referred to SWRU it is most likely we may not have received PIP” – casework client

“Excellent, friendly, professional service. Our benefits advice would be considerably poorer without SWRU advice to advisers. Training also invaluable and of a high standard. Thanks!” – annual User Survey



Training the advice sector

20 SWRU courses delivered

306 local advice workers trained

229 trained in previous year

25 commissioned courses delivered

450 local staff and volunteers trained

198 trained in previous year

26 workshops, talks and information events delivered

444 local residents and professionals attended talks or received one-to-one advice at local events



Working with others for better client outcomes

Surrey and Borders NHS Trust – Engage programme

Surrey Coalition of Disabled People

YMCA East Surrey

Surrey Choices

Your Sanctuary

Voluntary Action South West Surrey

Surrey County Council Welfare Reform Coordination Group

Surrey Care Leavers Service

Surrey Families Service

Citizens Advice Surrey

Local Citizens Advice in Surrey, Hampshire and Sussex

Citizens Advice – National Office

HMCTS

Jobcentre Plus

Surrey Members of Parliament

Action for Carers Surrey

Surrey District and Borough councils

Valuing People

Disability Empowerment Network

Community Connections

Surrey Learning Disability Partnership Board

Community Mental Health Recovery Service



Who we are

Staff

Kieran Anderson – Welfare Rights Adviser

Karen Creeth – Welfare Rights Adviser

Sarah Fell – Welfare Rights Adviser

Carol Gibbs – Senior Welfare Rights Adviser

Helen Haws – 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

Elmbridge Borough Council

Guildford Borough Council

Trustees

Anne Haigh – Chair

David Booth – Treasurer

Alison Cox – Secretary

Jane Bourgeois

John Fairley

Roger Hurcombe

Anne Pirie

Sophia Platts

For
everyone,
for 80
years

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.

We are a member of the Citizens Advice service which is 80 years old in 2019.

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