

Surrey Welfare Rights Unit Impact Report 2019/20



Our value to society in 2019/20

Why Welfare Rights Provide Justice

The year did not end as expected. Throughout most of 2019/20 we were grappling with rising Universal Credit enquiries, and in particular, the emergence of specific issues relating to earnings, reclaims, accessing work capability assessments and partners who had no recourse to public funds. The queries were far more complex, reflected in the number of issues per client that we advised on. A number of lead higher court judgements also meant that throughout the year, UC guidance and systems were frequently having to change to remain lawful.

By the end of the year we found ourselves speed learning about furlough, the job-retention scheme and having to keep up with almost monthly changes to sickness benefit rules. We became experts in writing website content so that advisers and local residents could access the information they needed quickly, rather than trying to piece it together from across the multiple websites. Several partners helped us promote the new Covid-19 webpages including the County Council, Surrey Coalition of Disabled People and Surrey Heartlands.

Once again, we dealt with some harrowing cases where local residents had lost all benefit payments through no fault of their own, or clients who had gone years with incorrectly paid benefits. It is misleading to think that social security is being simplified as we are heading into a legislative unknown for thousands of EEA nationals who live in Surrey, huge backlogs of assessments for ill and disabled people, and still the huge migration project of moving legacy benefit claimants onto Universal Credit, which still has significant flaws in its design.

Face to face training was delivered for most of the year until March, focussing on training new advisers, and keeping experienced advisers up to date with changes in law and practice. We are now delivering e-training online which has been well received. Once again, we are focussing on the immediate issues that the local advice services need, such as social security changes as a result of Covid-19.

We are also still finding time to work with policy makers and both local and national partners, in the hope that we can make the experience for future benefit claimants a bit better.

A few words from the Trustee Board

The Trustee Board are very proud of the work summarised in this Impact Report for 2019/20. Over this period of unprecedented upheaval, change and worry our team, under our Chief Officer, Maria Zealey's calm and efficient leadership, have overcome all sorts of challenges and obstacles and continue providing an excellent service to all our clients without any compromise on the quality of the advice given.

The need for advice around welfare benefits has continued throughout the year despite or perhaps enhanced by the pandemic and the changes to so many people's circumstances. This again reinforces the need for clear, timely and impartial advice for everyone to empower them to make the best of their circumstances.

Training across all sectors is a significant part of our service and we have faced enormous challenges since the Covid crisis. I am very pleased to report that our staff have been able to develop and deliver all our training online. Not only standard courses but also to address the significant and ongoing changes to the welfare system introduced since March.

Our grateful thanks go to all our staff and our supporters and funders for everything they have achieved over the last year. As Chair I have also been grateful for the Trustee Board's adaptability and continued hard work on behalf of the Unit.

In 2019/20 our excellent Treasurer, David Booth has decided to retire. The Board would like to express their thanks for his service, support and professionalism over the last 16 years.

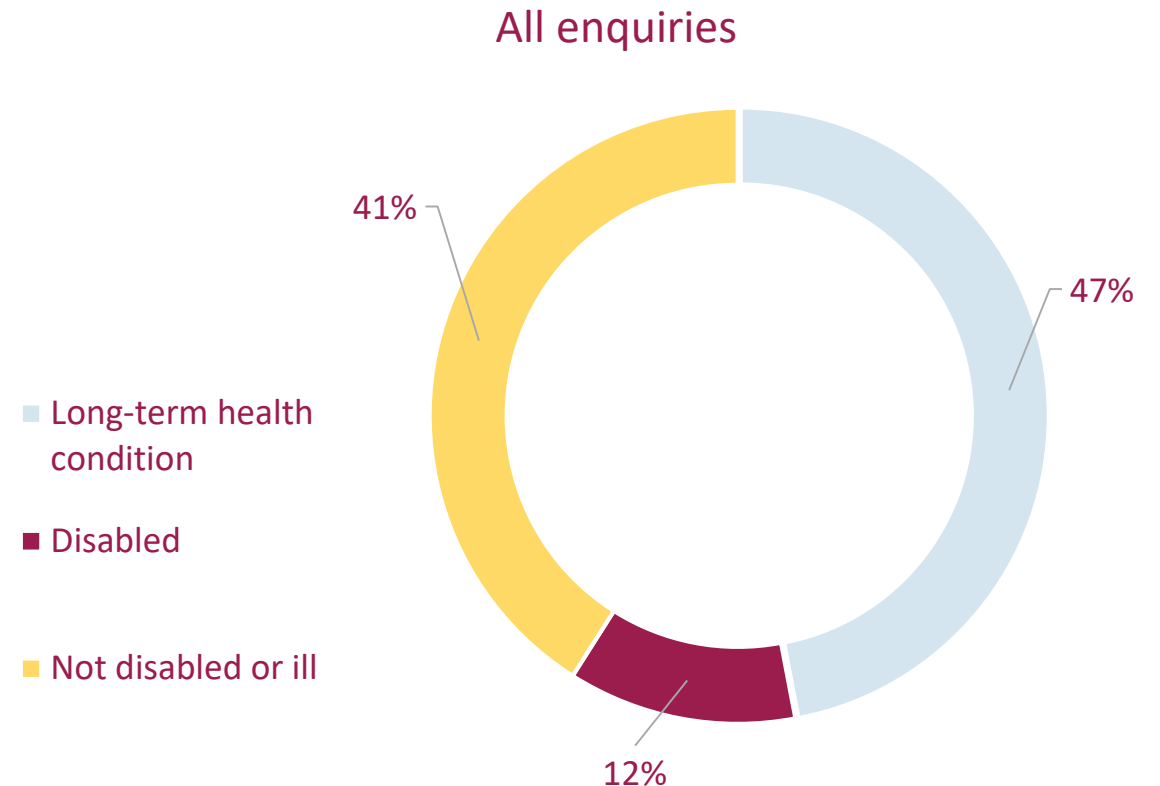
Anne Haigh

Sept 2020

We helped those most in need

The disproportionate percentage of SWRU clients who are disabled or have a long-term illness, when compared to the wider population, is an indication of the additional complexities of claiming sickness and disability related benefits. This problem is wider than just ESA or PIP. Disability premiums, claimant commitment, permitted work and other tricky areas of advice add up to a far more confusing benefit landscape for this client group. It is therefore unsurprising that many people do not fully understand their entitlements, or come unstuck if they fail to adhere to the set of rules for each benefit in payment.

If a sickness or disability benefit is stopped, this often means a domino-effect works its way through the other household income such as Carer's Allowance, Housing Benefit or Tax Credits. Supporting advisers to see the whole picture is an important part of our work. Several scenarios might have to be considered, and in some cases, looking ahead to any future changes in entitlement or legislation. This particularly applies at the moment where Universal Credit or legacy benefits have to be considered alongside each other, especially if there could potentially be financial losses for disabled people.

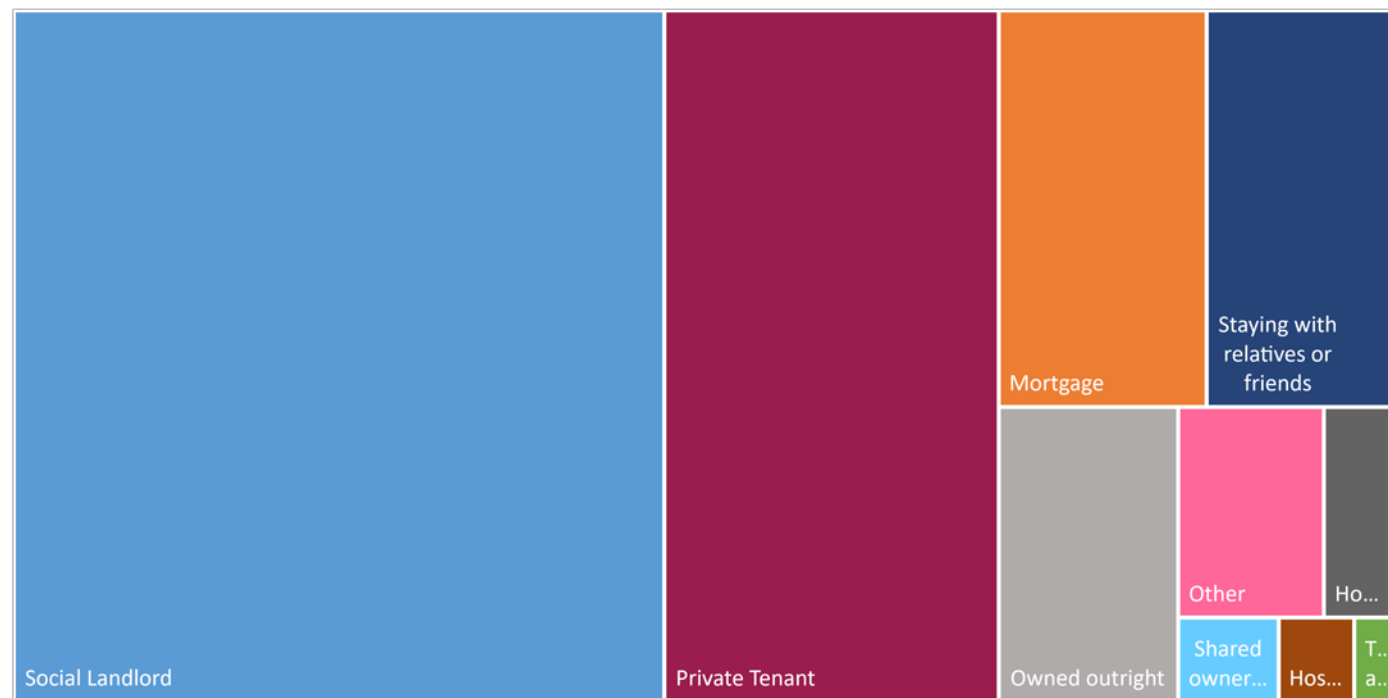


We helped those most in need - continued

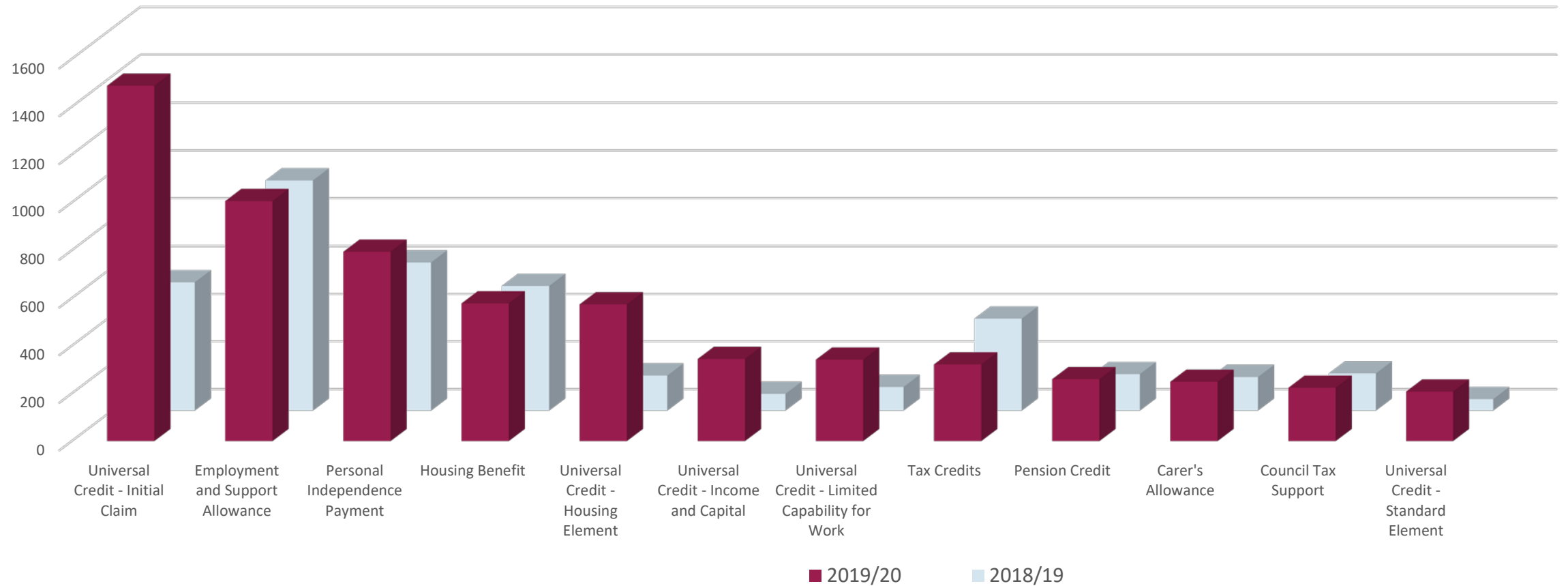
We are able to capture a rich set of data from most of our clients. During this year 64% of all clients helped were female. 15% declared their ethnicity as non-white. The number of clients who are tenants is a far higher proportion than the general Surrey population, suggesting that social and private sector tenants disproportionately have more problems with benefit payments.

9% of clients supported were non-British. 202 issues related to settled status, no recourse to public funds, right to reside and other similar rules. 198 queries were from clients who had benefit debts, in particular Housing Benefit, Council Tax Support, Tax Credits and ESA.

- Owned outright
- Shared ownership
- Social Landlord
- Staying with relatives or friends
- Homeless
- Mortgage
- Private Tenant
- Tied accommodation
- Hostel
- Other



...with these benefit problems (enquiry totals)



In total our advice had this much value



Financial Outcomes direct and indirect £5,803,602

Client benefit gain confirmed £656,556

Overpayments written off £40,810

Health, social care and other gains
£2,545

Our Fiscal Benefit was £259,085

Saving to NHS £73,445

Saving to DWP £99,579

Keeping people in work £6,356

Homelessness prevention savings £25,657

Our Public Value was £3,917,992

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

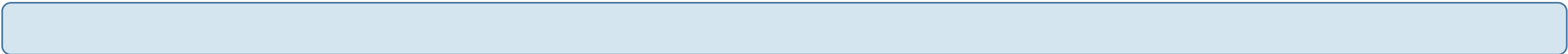
Impact: Impact of advice on a specific outcome

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, skilled staff and volunteers go forward to help many thousands more local residents.

We produced Budget Updates following the Chancellor's announcements, and advised on council tax support, supported housing and PIP decision making policies. We supported the Guildford Borough Council's report on local food poverty and participated in local mental health transformation events.



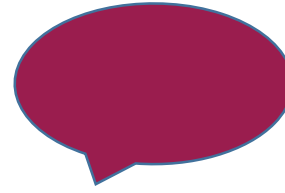
Part of a bigger picture

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 in the most efficient and effective way.

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. 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 current pandemic has meant swift and frequent changes to social security. It has been challenging even for the experienced team at SWRU. We have focussed on getting information and support out to all our partners using new channels such as website content and e-training.

Next steps will be to assess the demand from partners created by suspending and queuing work capability and disability assessments. Also, we know that Universal Credit will begin its planned roll out at some point. And of course we will be keeping a close eye on regulations and guidance that will shape benefit entitlement beyond December for our local EEA nationals.

What they said...



“A great service, gives me a different perspective on client issues at times. Vital as the UC changeover occurs as it's a minefield.”

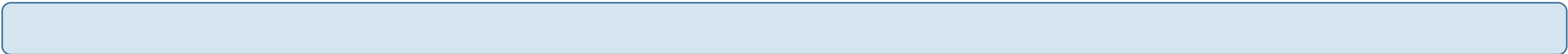
“The staff are always very thorough in their advice. Although my clients don't always find they are entitled to more money in benefits, it is good to assure them they have all the correct information.”

“Would be absolutely lost without SWRU.”

“I have been really impressed with the service provided by SWRU. Your knowledge is second to none and I would be lost without having advice line.”

“I think the advice line is an amazing resource.”

“SWRU is indispensable as far as I am concerned. Always excellent for clarification.”



Training the advice sector

12 SWRU courses delivered

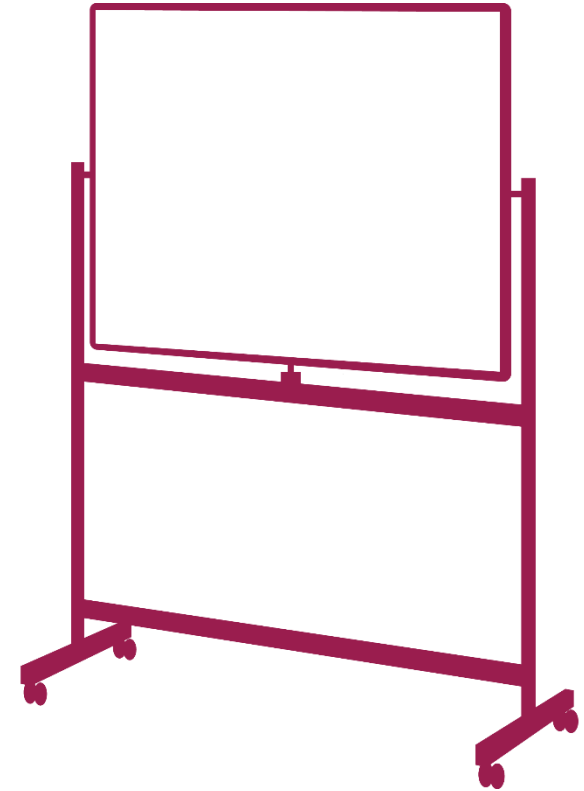
137 local advice workers trained

14 commissioned courses delivered

230 local staff and volunteers trained

13 workshops, talks and information events delivered

216 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

Surrey Coalition of Disabled People

Family Voice Surrey

Surrey Choices

The Children's Trust

Voluntary Action South West Surrey

Surrey Care Leavers Service

YMCA East Surrey

Citizens Advice Surrey

Local Citizens Advice in Surrey, Hampshire and Sussex

HMCTS

Jobcentre Plus

Surrey Members of Parliament

Action for Carers Surrey

Surrey District and Borough councils

Alzheimer's Society

Citizens Advice – National Office

Woking Borough Council – Housing

Guildford Inter-Agency Network

Surrey Supported Accommodation Providers network

Work and Pensions Select Committee

Carers World Radio

Who we are

Staff

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 – Chief Officer

We would like to thank

Surrey County Council

Surrey Clinical Commissioning Groups

Woking Borough Council

Elmbridge Borough Council

Guildford Borough Council

Tandridge District Council

Trustees

Anne Haigh – Chair

David Booth – Treasurer

Alison Cox – Secretary

Jane Bourgeois

John Fairley

Roger Hurcombe

Anne Pirie

Sophia Platts

Suja Subramanian

**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 was 80 years old during this year.

**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**