

Citizens Advice East Herts Research and Campaigns Bulletin April 2020 - March 2021

Welcome

This is our eighth annual Research and Campaigns bulletin. It presents an overview of the work that Advisers and the Research and Campaigns Team have been doing during the 2020/2021 financial year.

We could not have foreseen the impact Covid-19 would have globally, and in our local community. So it is not surprising that this year the impact of coronavirus on our clients has been the main focus of our Research & Campaigns activity. Casebook (our internal reporting system) data and reports have been produced on a regular basis to show the impact on client numbers, issues, channel, and client profile. This has shown how our support has increased on key issues, such as benefits, employment/redundancy, housing and relationships.

We also report on our usual features such as our local research projects and campaign activities, including where we have supported National Citizens Advice, the vital insights provided by our Advisers' evidence forms and how we share our evidence.

We also take a quick look at our Research and Campaigns activities for the next twelve months.

Research & Campaigns Team

"There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they are falling in."

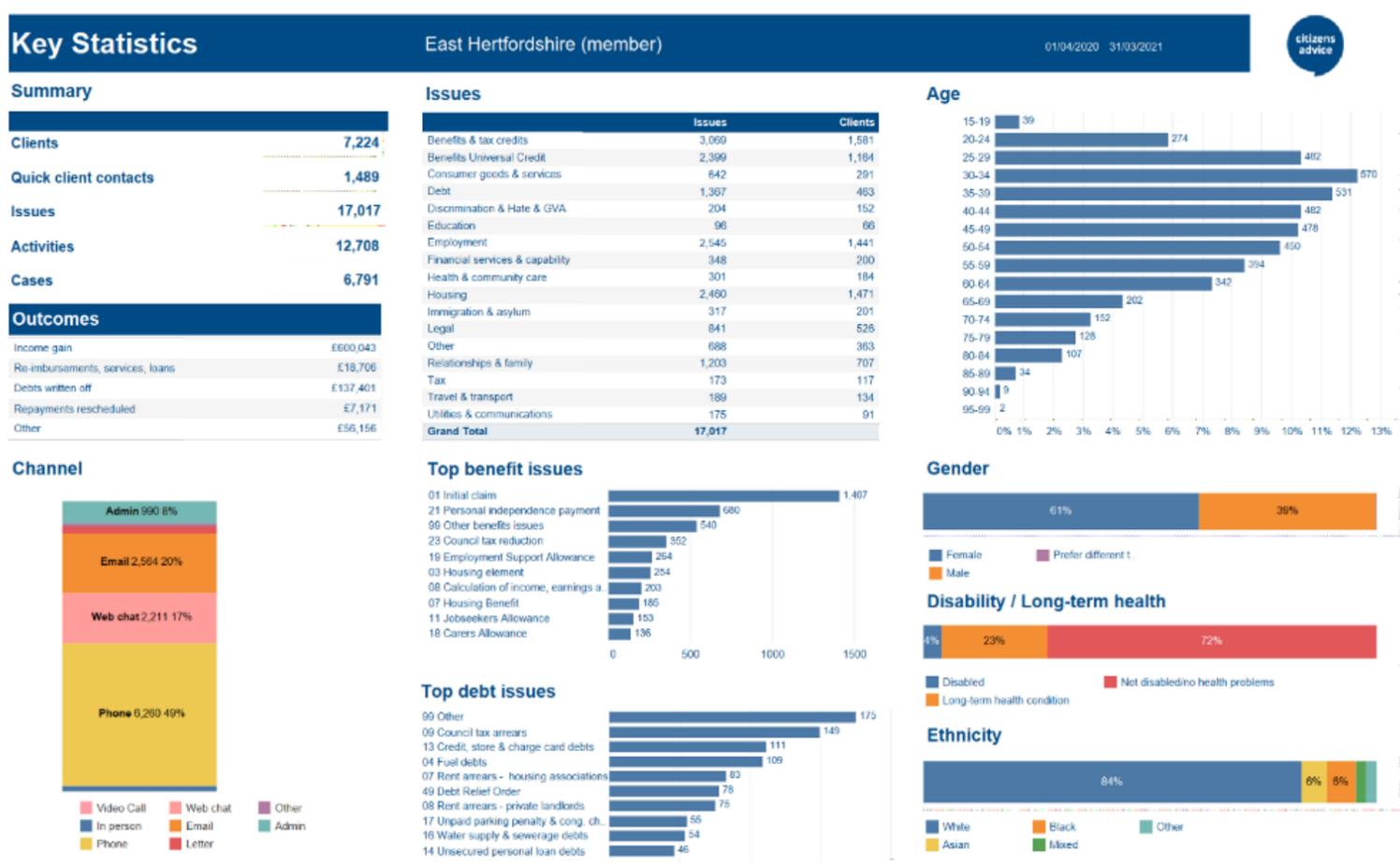
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Statistics: 1st April 2020 - 31st March 2021

Over the past 12 months we helped over **8,700 clients** (34% increase on previous year) with over **17,000 issues** (19% increase). The top issues we helped clients with were:

- Benefits and tax credits **32%**, of which Universal Credit was **14%**
- Employment **15%**
- Housing **14%**
- Debt **8%**

Please see the key statistics chart below for further information:



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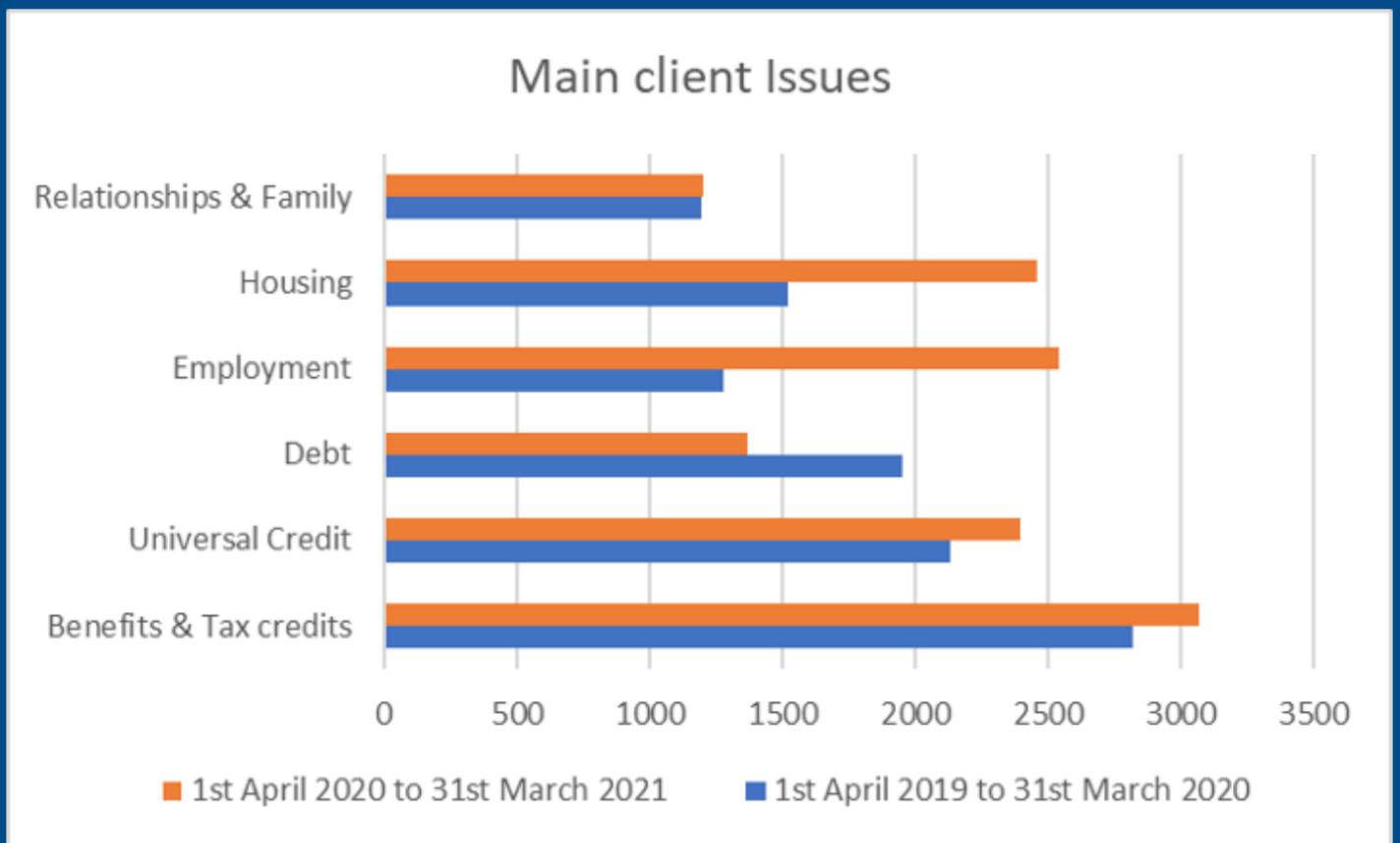
Coronavirus



Whilst our offices closed and our face-to-face drop-in service stopped in response to the first lockdown on 23rd March 2020, our support continued and we switched to a home working service within 48 hours. Our volunteers have been amazing in adapting to giving advice by phone, email, webchat, Facebook Messenger and video.

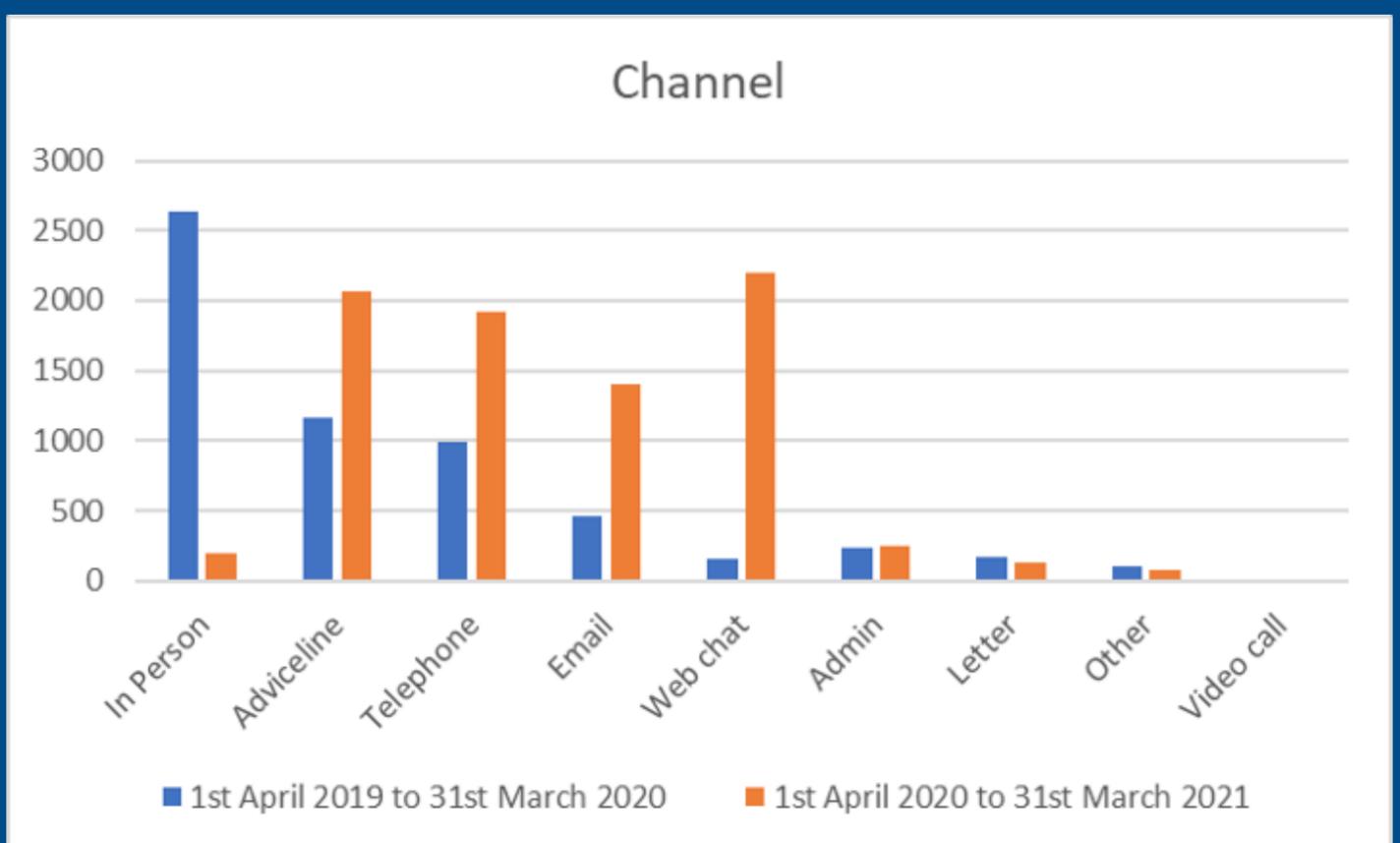
Our key statistics above show that we have helped **34% more clients** than for 2019/20 with **total issues up by 19%**. Of note is that **employment issues are up by 99%**, and **housing by 62%**.

Please see the chart below:



We have helped over **4,000 clients by Adviceline/telephone** with over **2,000 clients using webchat**, and nearly **1,400 by email**.

Please see the chart below:



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Client feedback continues to be overwhelmingly positive.

Key statistics also show some changes in our client profile:

- **72% reported that they had no disability** or long-term health issues compared to 57% in 2019/20 (please bear in mind that it is more difficult to capture special category data such as disability when advising clients by telephone, webchat and email)
- Gender breakdown is **61% Female/39% Male** in 2020/21, similar to 2019/20 with 58% Female/42% Male
- Age profile also shows differences with a younger profile overall - **the age group with most clients is 30-34 years** compared to age group 55-59 years in 2019/20

Universal Credit



Our Best Practice Lead worked on two national Universal Credit (UC) research projects. The first one looked at how Citizens Advice can best support people in preparing for their first UC appointment. This highlighted barriers linked to: language and literacy; immigration status; digital exclusion; DWP; joint claims; health and disabilities; and housing and homelessness.

The second project was “Improving Client Outcomes Measurement”. This aimed to develop good quality evidence about the extent to which Citizens Advice is achieving our intended outcomes for clients, and a consistent approach to outcomes measurement and recording by Help to Claim services. (Intended client outcomes are: More people making a successful Universal Credit claim at the right time; People who aren’t eligible or who would be better off on other benefits understanding their options; People feeling more confident about maintaining their claim and managing on Universal Credit.) The research included 257 online survey responses, together with 39 interviews all from either Help to Claim Leads or Help to Claim advisers from 11 Best Practice Districts across the national network. Secondary research was also conducted with reviews of external organisations, using 25 secondary sources and 5 case studies, to identify best practice and principles for outcomes measurements.

Local Research Projects

We’ve been really fortunate to have additional capacity this year with some great student volunteers and several new R&C volunteers who have joined the team. This has enabled us to complete projects on:

- Advice Needs Analysis update
- Local Housing Allowance - Housing Benefit
- Client needs on benefit issues
- Impact of Covid on personal debt and mental health
- Access needs and preferences
- Digital Divide
- Health and wellbeing - Employment and Mental health
- Domestic Abuse – pre and post Covid
- Fuel poverty
- Covid and young people
- Food insecurity



These projects have been shared internally and externally where appropriate (e.g. via social media).

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Campaigns



We supported the annual National Citizens Advice Scams awareness campaign which ran from 15th to 28th June 2020. This year's campaign focused on raising awareness of COVID-19 related scams. We also carried out a local Scams awareness project which included:

- Running virtual training sessions for advisers.
- Sending out Scams advice via partners, social media, newspaper features and directly to
- c.15,000 households via the online neighbourhood watch distribution
- Bite size audio and video advice has been shared with local radio and posted on our website, social media and YouTube.

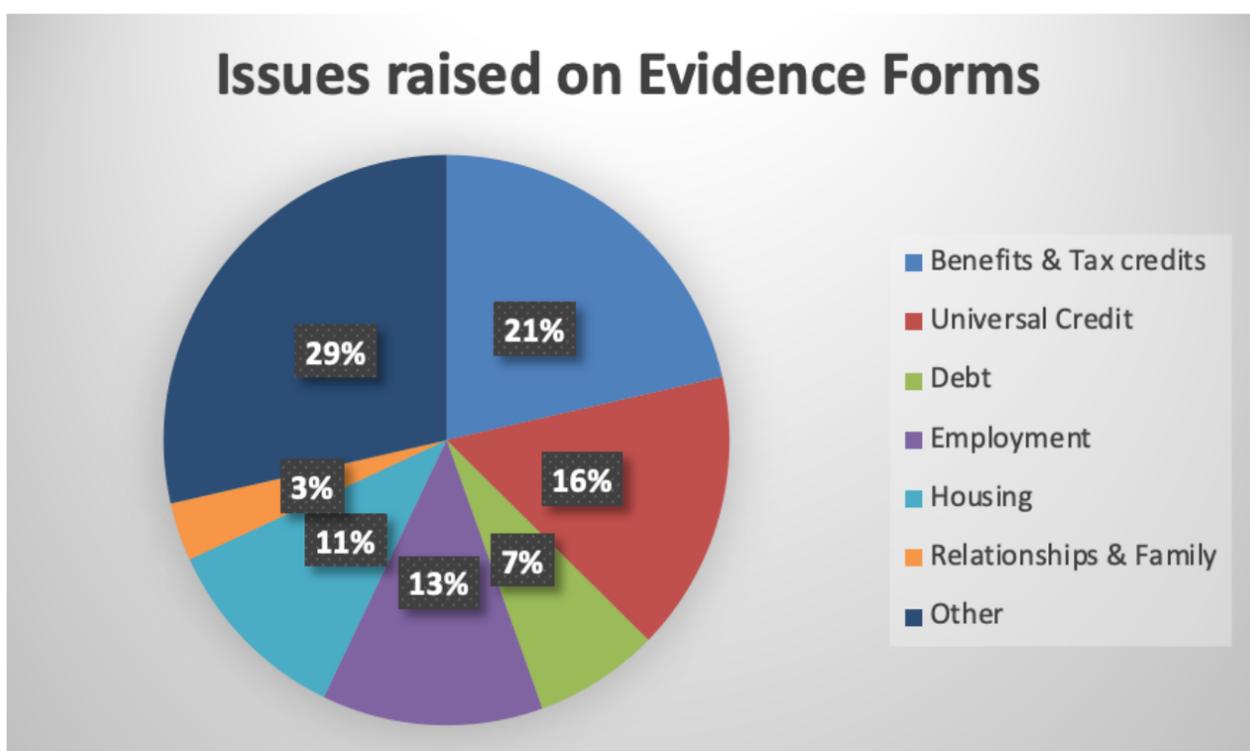
We supported **National Consumer Week** in November with a press release in the Bishop's Stortford Independent and information sent out via the OWL (neighbourhood watch) e-network and posts on social media.

We supported the **Big Energy Saving Winter Campaign** which ran from November 2020 to January 2021. We sent material out to vulnerable groups via the Hadhams community hub (with whom we are now working closely on a number of issues) and are sharing regular advice and tips via digital media.

We supported **Keep the Lifeline** in January 2021 with letters to our local MPs asking for their support in keeping the £20 Universal Credit uplift. We also sent press releases to the local papers and ran a social media campaign on it. (The Chancellor confirmed a 6 months extension in the March budget following a dedicated campaign by Citizens Advice and other charities).

Evidence Forms (EFs)

Evidence forms (EFs) completed by our Advisers continue to provide a vital insight into situations where clients have been unfairly treated, illustrating the impact on the individual and can help show how other people can also be affected. This evidence is used at a local, regional and national level to inform our campaigns and identify new and emerging issues. Our Advisers have completed over 120 EFs for 2020/2021 to highlight specific issues. Over a third (37%) relate to benefit issues of which Universal Credit alone is 16%. Please see chart below:



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Examples include:

- **Benefits:** Client not able to be put in new style Employment Support Allowance (ESA) support group as a result of their health condition worsening because of postponed face to face assessments. Client left in limbo because of this. Client then faced ESA stopping and client had to submit a mandatory reassessment.
- **Universal Credit:** Client was struggling to survive on benefit income. With no additional income beyond Universal Credit, and carrying debts (fuel and water) which Client has arrangements to pay off monthly, Client struggled to survive month on month during winter months.
- **Employment:** Incorrect calculation of furlough by employer resulted in Client being underpaid. Client had a zero hours contract and had worked for the employer for several years. Their employer appeared to have failed to follow guidance and calculate average earnings based on the 2019/20 tax year. Instead they used average hours between furlough periods.
- **Housing:** Client had a working partner, now split up meaning their name had come off the tenancy which ends in a few months. However, Landlord was unwilling to renew tenancy as Client now on benefits. Client said they had been turned down by other landlords because income was only benefits.
- **Debt:** Client had suffered a heart attack and client's spouse is heavily disabled. They are having difficulty paying their rent, but are currently up to date. When they informed the letting agent they made veiled threats about bailiffs which have caused distress to client and their spouse.

Sharing Our Evidence



The evidence we collect from our research using casebook data, Evidence Forms and our local surveys is shared with other local Citizens Advice, National Citizens Advice, Local Authority policy officials and our local MPs. This helps to highlight the problems our clients face and bring them to the attention of policy makers.

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We met (virtually) with Julie Marson MP (Hertford & Bishop's Stortford) in July 2020 and again in January 2021. We discussed a range of issues which as a service we are supporting clients with and took the opportunity to highlight areas where change is needed. We shared our analysis of the current and future pressures facing clients as well as specific issues raised by Advisers.

The Next Twelve Months



As a local charity supporting local people we're proud of how we've adapted and stepped up to the challenges presented over the past year. The impact of Covid will continue to influence much of our R&C activity over the next 6+ months. For example, resources permitting, we aim to produce a Covid 'one year on' report with more research and campaigns projects underway/planned including:

- Food insecurity
- Disability and social inequality
- Employment tribunals
- Housing - Private Rented Sector
- Debt - Council tax

Please don't hesitate to contact us here at Citizens Advice East Herts if Research and Campaigns is something that you would also be interested in volunteering to do.

Email: comms@citizensadvicееastherts.org.uk

For further information on our services please see www.citizensadvicееastherts.org.uk