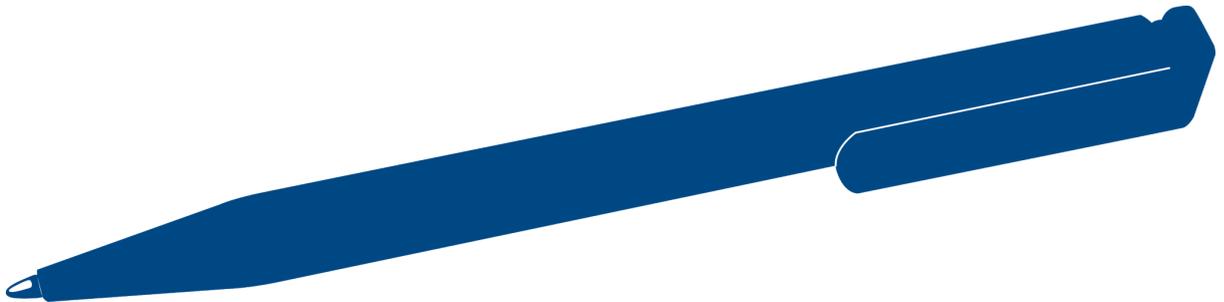


Research and Campaigns 2020-21

How we've continued to deliver during the pandemic



Introduction

Each year, the Citizens Advice network of 266 local services, helps give millions of people the knowledge and confidence to find a way forward in an increasingly complex world.

We do this by firstly providing practical advice, education and support for individual clients.

Secondly, we use the evidence gained from working with clients to influence the policies and practices that affect them and wider communities and this is known as Research & Campaigns. Research and Campaigns is therefore our twin aim as a national network and a local office.

Citizens Advice Reading's Research and Campaigns (R&C) development Plan is produced annually by the R&C sub-committee. It outlines and reviews the work completed in the previous year and sets out our plans for the future.

As you will see in the following pages, CAR is proactive in its support for and contribution to the wider picture both locally and nationally. There are many excellent examples of campaigning done for local issues, such as Council Tax collection and enforcement, and bigger picture work done around energy and scams awareness, for example.

I hope that you will agree that such work adds significant value to the help we provide for our clients as I like to think it helps 'level the playing field' and promotes change for good for those who, for whatever reason, do not access our services directly. It's also good to capture such work, which seems like a natural product of what we do as a service, so that it can be fully appreciated as part of what CAR achieves each year for and on behalf of our local community.

I very much look forward to what future years bring for our R&C work.

If you would like to know more about or are interested in the issues above or the work we do in general please contact me at CEO@citizensadvicereading.org.uk

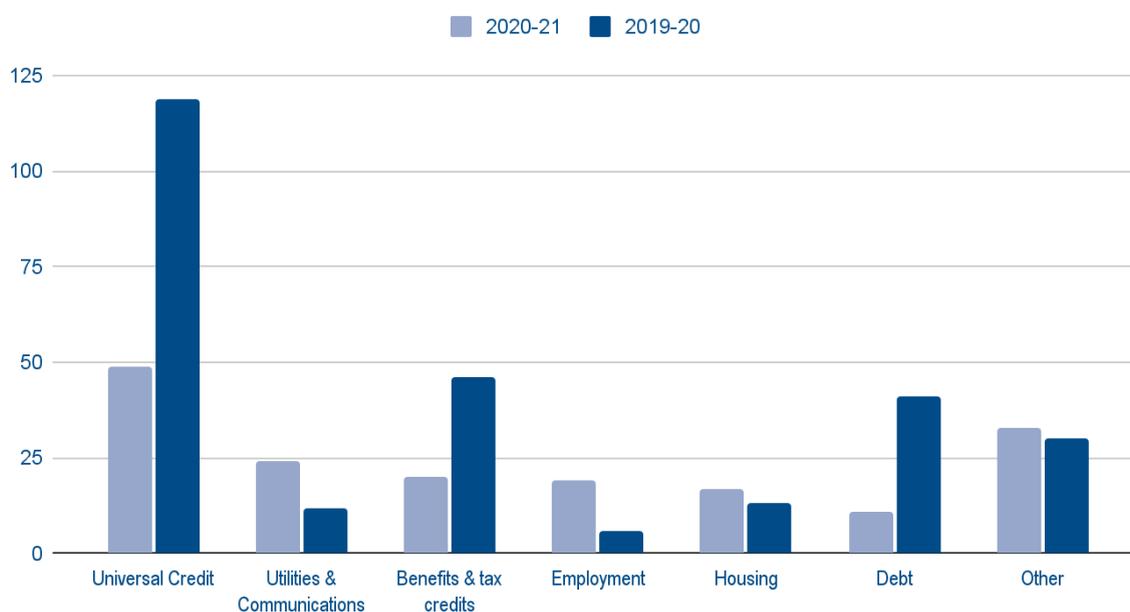
Tina Stevenson CEO, Citizens Advice Reading

Gathering evidence

As well as helping our clients directly, our team of advisers gather anonymous evidence about some of the concerns we are seeing, to share with National Citizens Advice. Information from these evidence forms from us and our partner services across England & Wales, helps the national team to see trends and understand what is happening locally and nationally across a range of topics.

In the last year, CAR's advisers sent in a total 173 Evidence Forms to National Citizens Advice. Universal Credit continues to be the largest area of concern for our clients, with Utilities & Communications moving to 2nd place. The number of forms completed fell significantly, but this is likely to be related to changes in the way we have been working because of the pandemic and also a reduction in the number of advisers during this time.

Evidence forms raised



As well as collecting information generally, we also focus on specific issues sometimes and currently we are particularly looking at our clients' experience of using fuel vouchers.

During the pandemic, National Citizens Advice worked closely with the government and other organisations to ensure people received the best support

possible by sharing what we know and can share evidence of, to feed information into the Downing Street dashboard.

How we help people with their energy bills

At this particularly difficult time in the energy market our **Energy Team** have been busy tackling energy poverty particularly as part of the Europe wide STEP (Solutions to Tackle Energy Poverty) project.

We have produced [eleven videos](#) showing how to be energy efficient in the home, including hints on draught-proofing doors and chimneys, ways to reduce the cost of cooking, and how to be smarter with your electronic gadgets. They are freely available on CAR's YouTube channel. These have also been used by National Citizens Advice as part of their national training programme for all Local Citizens Advice and are regularly promoted on social media by other interested organisations.

We have also produced online [training for both consumers and frontline workers](#) which provides free comprehensive training for frontline workers and full information and guidance for consumers on how to tackle energy poverty. Understanding tariffs and how to switch, understanding support and benefits available for those in fuel poverty and understanding how to be more energy efficient in the home and use government grants are key parts of this training.

We were able to promote these energy saving ideas when Astrid and Jenny from the energy team appeared on hospital radio at the Royal Berkshire Hospital.

CAR also received funding from the Energy Redress Fund to deliver fuel vouchers to local residents in need. It focused on people with prepayment meters who were struggling to pay their bills and had been affected by Covid. By working with trusted partners, we delivered **£10,500** in fuel vouchers to help people in Reading keep warm in this difficult time when people were at home more often in cold weather.

National Campaigns

We took part in several national campaigns including the Big Energy Saving week, Scams awareness fortnight, and National Consumer week which focused on buying online.

We also participated in the **Save the Lifeline** campaign aimed at retaining the £20 Universal Credit uplift which helps the poorest in society and boosts local economies. We created a local campaign called "#Eatfor20" to highlight the impact of the removal of the temporary uplift in UC. A Pilot was carried out among CAR staff and trustees in May, followed by a full campaign in July.

Good quality and affordable **housing** has long been an issue in Reading. We took part in **Tenants Voice**, a yearlong survey sponsored by Nationwide which asked tenants in the private sector for their experiences of renting. We encouraged our clients to participate, particularly directing them to the relevant website to sign up.

Working with the Department of Work & Pensions (DWP)

Our Macmillan team, who support people with cancer, was invited by the DWP to take part in a review of their service users' experience of the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) claims process. The team highlighted that this process hadn't been adapted for cancer patients in the same way that it has for other benefits, such as Employment Support Allowance (ESA) and Universal Credit (UC). For example, claimants who expect to have, are having, or have had chemotherapy or radiotherapy treatment don't have to have an assessment for the Limited Capability for Work-Related Activity (LCWRA) if the DWP is satisfied about the effects of the treatment in their ability to work. .

They were also invited to comment on the DWP's new digital process for claiming PIP and how it would relate to their clients. The team attended a two hour session with the DWP who shared the proposed pages with them and they were able to give feedback on each page from their clients' perspective.

Working with Reading Borough Council

We liaise regularly with Reading Borough Council (RBC) on other issues we might identify. For example, our Advice Services Manager (ASM) worked with RBC and the DWP to produce a more proactive procedure for identifying severely disabled people who might be missing out on extra money because they hadn't claimed benefits they may qualify for (Attendance Allowance or the Severe Disability Premium element of their means tested benefits).

Help to Claim service update

During the pandemic the Help to Claim service continued to provide practical help to clients claiming Universal Credit, although we have been restricted to a telephone service. Clients are supported in making an online claim, and if this is needed, those who have special needs or circumstances, are helped to make a non-digital claim (usually by setting up a 3-way phone call with the client, our adviser and the DWP). Since April 2020, we at Reading have helped a total of 248 clients as at 9th December 2020. The total income gained for our clients during this time was £869,798 an increase of over £100,000 on last year's total, which makes such a difference to the claimants who rely upon this income.

Free, confidential advice. Whoever you are.

We help people overcome their problems and campaign on big issues when their voices need to be heard.

We value diversity, champion equality, and challenge discrimination and harassment.

We're here for everyone.



rcab.org.uk

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