

Figures in brackets relate to the previous quarter and are for comparison purposes

Overview of service delivery

In Quarter 4 of 2016-17 Citizens Advice Northumberland assisted 4,981 (4,813) clients across the county. Of these clients, 19% (18%) were helped through our Hexham office (including the Prudhoe and Haltwhistle offices). 171 (174) clients helped by the service were from Prudhoe wards.

What problems are we helping with?

In Quarter 4 of 2016-17 advice workers assisted Prudhoe clients with 538 (565) different problems of which 46% (56%) related to welfare benefits and tax credits compared to 42% (41%) for Citizens Advice Northumberland as a whole. 17% (19%) related to debt compared to 26% (27%) for Citizens Advice Northumberland as a whole. The other main subject areas included employment and housing both at 5%.

The top 3 areas of welfare benefits advice for Prudhoe residents continue to be -

- Personal independence payments (particularly eligibility and making claims)
- Employment support allowance (particularly challenging decisions and appeals).
- Housing benefit (particularly eligibility).

The top 3 areas of debt advice for Prudhoe residents related to -

- Credit, store and charge card debts
- Council tax arrears
- Unsecured personal loans.

Along with other local Citizens Advice, we are continuing to gather information about the issues people on Universal Credit are experiencing as the new system beds in. Advisers are reporting that wrong or conflicting information from Jobcentres, the general complexity of the new benefit and delays in initial payments, are resulting in a high number of people with increased rent, debt and fuel arrears. This in turn is leading to increased use of foodbanks. The information we collect is shared with Citizens Advice nationally who use it in monthly discussions they hold with the DWP.

General Case Study

Client A was a single parent who has been self-employed for 5 years and claimed Working Tax Credit with child care costs throughout. The client came to Citizens Advice because he had received a new decision from HMRC saying that he was no longer entitled to Working Tax Credit because his business was not operating on a commercial basis. This decision reduced the client's income by £115 per week.

HMRC were contacted by phone on behalf of the client and a list of evidence required to establish the commercial nature of the client's business was agreed. The client collected the evidence and returned to the office where the adviser collated it and prepared a statement to go with a mandatory reconsideration request.

HMRC reconsidered their decision and 5 weeks later the client's Working Tax Credit was reinstated. The client was very relieved as without tax credits he was unable to afford child care for his children and so could not have continued to work.

Updates and future developments

Following a recent review of the organisation, 2017-18 will see the start of a programme of change which will modernise our services, enabling us to maintain our reach across the county and respond more effectively to changes in demand.

In the last 12 months, the number of people trying to access our services by telephone or digital channels, rather than through the traditional face-to-face method, has increased by more than 40%. In order to respond effectively to this change, we need to revisit our current model of delivery.

To keep reaching as many people as possible, as well as remaining cost effective and competitive for our funders, we will be developing our telephone and digital services, whilst delivering a more flexible and responsive face-to-face service.

Moving with the times and responding to demands for different ways of accessing information and advice will help us to continue to deliver the service our clients need, when and where they need it.

Currently we are in discussion with our staff and volunteers to finalise the details of the new service model and following completion of those discussions we will be contacting relevant stakeholders to discuss our plans in more detail.

Moira Macfarlane
Chief Executive

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