

# Citizens Advice Newcastle

Annual Report and Accounts  
2023 - 2024



**citizens  
advice**

**Newcastle**

**Providing free, confidential  
and independent advice to people in  
Newcastle since 1939**

# Volunteers, Staff and Trustees

## Volunteers

Marilia Adamaki  
Daisy Agar  
Daniel Anderson-Laing  
Cesur Basoglu  
Jack Bedford  
Russell Bell  
John Booth-Carey  
Jack Butler  
Christine Carroll  
Kenneth Clarke  
Owen Cooper  
Baird Cross  
Caroline Dean  
Daisy-grace Dobbing  
Martin Donkin  
Barbara Duff  
Tabitha Dunn  
Mark Edwards  
Richard Evens  
Nell Fabian  
Setareh Farhiktehnia  
Kathy Germain  
Karen Gillie  
Imogen Goulding-Douglas  
Isabel Hartley  
Rosa Hartley  
Sheila Heppel  
Frances Hill  
Daniel Howe  
Chris Hull  
Alexandra Ibbetson  
Isabel Jones  
Emmanuel Kasiemobi  
Iftikhar Ahmad Khan  
Muntaha Khan  
Nagham Maaz  
John Mcconnell  
Carol McMullen  
Lola Mclean  
Alex Michelmores  
Hussain Ali Mirza  
Lela Murati  
Juliana Nnaji  
Paul Nnaji Nnachetam  
Obianuju Okeke  
Beth Orange

Slavka Polokova  
Irene Riley  
Colin Robson  
Gilly Robson  
Meghan Roseblade  
Barbara Rouse  
John Salter  
Eloise Satchell  
Olha Savchuk  
Anna Seddon  
Samir Selimovic  
Nick Sharing  
Ruby Simcock  
Louise Sweeney  
Elaine Taylor  
Denise Tepace  
Benjamin Urding  
Ewan Wellwood  
Louis Wood

## Law in the Community Volunteers

Alex Boddy  
Christian Bowers  
Ella Chapman  
Randilyn Chen  
Mica Coley  
Cara Corrigan  
Taylor Cuthbertson  
Eeman Dad  
Macy Dixon  
Aaron Gordon  
Tyga Hennessey  
Veronica Hoh  
Jessica Horne  
Daniel Kesete  
Qharrazy Khan  
Eva Kottati  
Ionnis Koutsouridis  
Jezebel Lee  
Ivan Loke  
Marcus Mahadeva  
Ryan Marshall  
Aimee Young

Will McGarry  
Ionna Michalaki  
Tom Miller  
Callum Nolan  
Olivia Ozdyk  
Ella Postlethwaite  
Alisha Rahil  
Izzy Robinson  
Kate Robson  
Emily Saull  
Bhvan Singh  
Serena Soo  
Freya Suter  
Laura Sutton  
Ceridwyn Thurston  
Krystie Teo  
Aman Toor  
Thiviya Vejayabalan  
Jackson Wright  
Celine Yew  
Ethan Yuan  
Tristen Zuzartee

## Staff

Tracy Armstrong  
Russell Bell  
Georgia Blenkinsop  
Sylvia Campbell  
Lesley Childs  
Hannah Cooper  
Kenneth Harrison  
Barbara Hepple  
Thomas Hockley  
Lynne Hunter  
Claire Iredale  
Iftikhar Ahmad Khan  
Zakia Khatoon  
Shahab Khuro

Linda Mael  
Lauren Mills  
Ellie Muddiman  
Claire Mulgrove  
Krithik Nair  
Martina Pokutova  
Kiran Singh  
Gayle Purves  
Thomas Roose  
Kyle Seymour  
Denise Telfer  
Susan Wakenshaw  
Craig Wallace  
Abigail Watson  
Larissa Whitfield  
Peter Wilson

## Trustees

Angela Carver  
Anthony Crawley  
Hani Fawzi (res 19 Oct 23)  
Richard Harris  
Oliver Holmes  
Claire Irving  
Sangeet Jaidka  
Arshdeep Kaur (aptd 6 Dec 23)  
Ian Mackintosh (res 1 Feb 24)  
Tribe Mkwebu (aptd 26 Jan 24)  
Stuart Parker  
Christine Purdon (res 20 Mar 24)  
Keith Reed  
Gillian Roll  
Suzanne Wood (aptd 19 Jan 23)  
Clare Maclaren (res 15 Dec 23)

**WITHOUT THE DEDICATION AND HARD WORK OF ALL OF  
YOU CITIZENS ADVICE NEWCASTLE WOULD NOT PREVAIL  
WE WOULD LIKE TO THANK EACH AND EVERY ONE OF YOU.**



# Chair's Annual Report

2023/2024



2023 - 2024 proved to be an extremely busy year. The need for our services was very high - the cost of living crisis and high fuel prices contributed to very trying circumstances for our clients.

We also were still not up to pre-COVID levels of service - we were open for fewer hours; some of our volunteer advisers hadn't returned following the pandemic. Despite this we dealt with large numbers of clients (22,000) and produced phenomenal results - £4.3 million brought back into the local community.

That we were able to produce such excellent results is testimony to Citizens Advice Newcastle staff and volunteers. I can't praise them highly enough for the work they carried out despite the pressures they worked under. My thanks, as ever, go to all staff and volunteers for their excellent work and commitment to Citizens Advice Newcastle.

I would also like to thank the Trustee Board who work tirelessly in the background to ensure that Citizens Advice Newcastle can continue to provide an essential and excellent service for our clients. They have been a great support and made my role very easy.

Of course, this work can't continue without the support and help of our brilliant funders. They are all detailed in the report but I'd particularly like to thank several of our funders; Newcastle City Council who have provided funding and general support for many years; Northern Powergrid fund an essential project to help clients who are having issues paying their fuel bills and Millfield House Foundation who fund our research and campaigning work which ensures we help not only those clients we see but also other residents in Newcastle and, in some cases, nationally.

Going forward we are looking to extend our services by increasing our outreach sessions and opening other routes for advice by telephone and online. This should extend our service to more clients and ensure we continue to meet the needs of our local community.

Keith Reed  
**Chair**



## Our Service

Citizens Advice Newcastle has existed since 1939 to help people, especially those who are most vulnerable, to navigate complex issues and campaign for positive change. We strive for a society free from poverty, injustice and inequality. We are a charity and a voluntary organisation that relies on grants from funders.

We provide local services to local people, and we make a difference to people's pockets through our benefits and financial capability work. We are a voice for local people, and we support other community organisations in the work they do.

### Our advice is

**Free** - no-one has to pay for the services we provide.

**Confidential** - we don't disclose anything a client tells us, or even the fact that they have visited us, without their permission.

**Independent** - we always act in the best interest of our clients, without influence from any outside agency.

**Impartial** - we don't judge our clients or make assumptions about them. Our service is open to everyone, with priority given to those who are least able to help themselves.

We continue to provide a face-to-face drop in service Monday's to Friday's between 10am - 12pm from our main office in the City Library. These sessions are primarily run by volunteers with some staff assistance should the need arise. We have advisers in some community venues and a good chunk of the service we provide is through our digital advice service by online self-referrals, email and telephone.

## How we help

In the last year, people accessed us in different ways:



**28%**

by face-to-face



**25%**

by phone



**40%**

by email and  
webchat

\*The percentages may not add up to 100%, because the same client could contact us in multiple ways and be counted multiple times. Clients can also access our services through sending letters and other means which are not shown here.

## Our Specialist Projects

These specialist projects provide our clients with the extra help and support they needed during 2023 - 2024.

### Debt Advice

Our Money Advice Team provides assistance to clients who are experiencing financial hardship, providing advice in respect of strategies for dealing with their debts and income maximisation.

### Yorkshire Building Society Outreach

Our Yorkshire Building Society outreach provides local, free and confidential advice through appointments at the Newcastle branch of Yorkshire Building Society.

### Energy Advice

Our Energy Advice Project assists vulnerable customers of Northern Powergrid with fuel poverty advice including income maximisation, benefits and energy advice related matters.

Our Energy Redress Project provides energy advice to residents and frontline staff in organisations around Newcastle and North Tyneside with some outreach sessions.

### Advice in Schools

Our advice in schools project through a partnership with Stockton and District Advice and Information Services, provides holistic advice including around benefits, money and housing issues in 4 schools: Hawthorn Primary School, Moorside Primary School, St Marks Primary School, St Paul's Primary School.

### Family Welfare Advice in the Community

Our Family Welfare Adviser, through a partnership with Action for Children, provides advice on a whole range of issues to families through outreaches in the Galafield Centre, the Haven, Wesley House and St Vincent Support Centre.

### Walker Foodbank Welfare Advice

A partnership with Walker Foodbank and the Trussell Trust enables two advisers to provide advice to clients affected by the cost of living crisis at The City of God Christian Centre.

## We are Citizens Advice Newcastle

Every year thousands of people come to us for help solving their problems.

This means we are an important part of the community, with a credible understanding of local needs. We use this to tailor our services and help improve local policies and practices that affect people's lives.



# £326,006

saved by the Local Authority by preventing homelessness, housing evictions and mental health services.

# Chief Officer's Report

As an organisation that provides essential support and guidance to individuals facing financial challenges, we continued to experience high demand for our services in 2023 - 2024. The cost of living crisis has significantly impacted residents of Newcastle with rising costs for essentials like food, energy and housing that have strained household budgets, especially among lower income families and vulnerable communities with debt being the highest issue and energy advice coming a close second.

In 2023 - 2024, we helped over 22,000 people, both unique and repeat clients, assisting with a massive 38,000 different issues and achieving overall outcomes of £4.3 million back to the communities we work with.

Much of this work comes through our core channels, which is funded primarily by Newcastle City Council. Many of the clients we see would struggle to find alternative sources of advice and we are grateful for this regular source of income.

The government's Household Support Fund initiative allowed many people to have extra income to cope with the cost of living crisis, especially those with negative budgets. During 2023 - 2024 we were actively involved in assisting people to apply for Newcastle City Council's discretionary hardship scheme for residents in significant financial difficulty.

We regularly receive some small pots of funding from the Rothley and Handley Trusts and whilst these are small amounts they are vital to the core services we provide and we would like to thank them for their continued support.

Our Energy Redress Project continued during 2023 - 2024 providing energy advice to residents and frontline staff in organisations around Newcastle, through some new outreach sessions across Newcastle. We also provided advice to some North Tyneside residents. This project is in collaboration with Stockton Advice and Information Service.

As a result of partnership working, we worked with Stockton Advice and Information Service in providing some statistics and data about child poverty. Following this, Stockton Advice and Information Service were successful in securing funding to enable a collaboration between Stockton, as lead, Middlesbrough, Newcastle and Darlington local Citizens Advice offices. The aim of the project is to demonstrate the benefits of partnership working between schools and Citizens Advice local offices to deliver targeted welfare advice and support to households that will reduce child poverty. We managed to retain a skilled adviser who had been made redundant from the Wise Steps project.

Our successful partnership with Action for Children continues to thrive with funding to provide an adviser in 3 locations: Benwell, Newbiggin Hall and Kenton and we are grateful to Action for Children for providing further funding for these sessions.

Our partnership with Walker Foodbank and the Trussell Trust goes from strength to strength and towards the latter part of the year was extended to provide a further outreach worker for two days per week due to the extremely high demand for advice and food vouchers at this session.

Our Law in the Community Project has grown in 2023 - 2024, with a further 51 students coming to work with us to obtain access to real client cases and advice training. The students are able to put in place what they have learned so far on their degree and experience advice in practice.

In early 2023 we learned that our debt advice project would continue for an extended period until March 2025. We had one vacancy in the team and this was filled by a member of staff who had been made redundant from another project.



We were fortunate to have our Northern Powergrid Project extended for a further 11 months in partnership with Leeds and North Yorkshire Citizens Advice offices, and we assisted over 2,000 people with over 8,000 issues and secured financial outcomes of nearly £1.3 million for clients through this work. We have seen the highest number of clients needing and receiving fuel vouchers on record this year.

Yorkshire Building Society (YBS), who had an initial pilot project with our National Association for a co-location service with 4 branches based in Yorkshire, expanded this service. This meant that YBS in Newcastle were interested in the co-location project to collaborate with Citizens Advice Newcastle to provide an adviser one day per week. This project started in July 2023 and goes from strength to strength with an extremely good working relationship with the staff.

We were lucky to procure some funding from our National Association to enable us to provide some paid staff advice on our adviceline services. This funding was time-limited to a year.

We continue to benefit from a three-year funding arrangement through the Sir James Knott Trust, which helps our core service and some community funding to enable us to provide translation services for deaf clients and those with English as a second language.

In 2023 - 2024, through our research and campaigns work, we found that the Healthy Start Scheme launched in 2006 with the aim of providing a nutritional safety net and improving access to a healthy diet for low-income families in Newcastle were missing out on nearly £300,000 worth of support. We were successful in securing a small amount of funding through the Community Foundation to enable us to increase the uptake and work with some families to apply through the online portal.

Through our research and campaigns work we receive funding from Millfield House Foundation and were extremely delighted to have secured this funding for another 3 years from September 2024.

Towards the end of the calendar year we applied to the National Lottery Cost of Living Fund which was a one-off grant for organisations that support people and communities in England under severe pressure because of the increased cost of living. With this, and a small amount of money from the Debt Modernisation Fund, we were able to replace our clunky IT equipment which enabled us to increase productivity.

We are profoundly grateful for the generosity and unwavering support of our funders and partners. Your belief in our mission has empowered us to continue making a meaningful difference in the lives of those we help. As we look to the future, we are excited for the opportunities ahead, and we know that with our funders continued support, we can accomplish even more. Thank you.

Without a doubt, we couldn't do the great work we do without the time, commitment and dedication of all of our fabulous volunteers. They bring with them vibrancy, diversity, skills and lived experience which helps our service to thrive. Last year 12,228 volunteer hours were given to the charity, equivalent to staff costs of £146,736. I would like to thank them for their hard work over the last year.

Our Service Management and Customer Service Team do a brilliant job of supervising the very busy face to face sessions, and I want to thank them for their continued support. I would also like to thank staff who assist with the sessions by taking the overflow when they are busy with project work, they help to cement the team environment and make sure that clients are assisted in a timely fashion.

Citizens Advice Newcastle is very lucky to have the staff team that we do, each and every one of them plays a vital role in our success and their efforts do not go unnoticed. Thank you for your support and your continued dedication over the last year.

Last but by no means least, our Trustee Board provide the direction of the organisation and govern how it is managed. We have had some new additions to the Board and some resignations over the last year. They have been a great support to me and I thank them.

Tracy Armstrong  
**Chief Officer**

## Our Value to Society

For every **£1** invested in our service in 2023/2024, we generated:

**£3.75**

in savings to  
government and  
public services  
(fiscal benefits)

**Total:**

**£3,068,237**

**£28.92**

in wider economic  
and social benefits  
(public value)

**Total:**

**£23,650,750**

**£14.11**

in financial value to  
the people we help  
(specific outcomes  
to individuals)

**Total:**

**£11,540,263**

## How we Calculate our Financial Value

It's impossible to put a financial value on everything we do – but where we can, we have.

We've used a **Treasury-approved model to do this.**

From our robust management information, we've also separately considered the financial benefits to the people we help.

Our services also have wider impacts:

- Keeping people in employment or helping them back to work
- Preventing housing evictions and statutory homelessness
- Reducing demand for mental health and GP services
- Improving mental wellbeing and positive functioning
- Improved family relationships



## Our Value to People

# £1,247,074

worth of debt was written off for our clients.  
That is nearly £9,376 per debt client.

# £2,367,424

worth of income was gained by our clients by  
helping to apply for additional benefits,  
increasing the value of their benefit  
entitlements, budgeting changes and other  
types of financial gains.

This is only a fraction of our true impact.

- 60% said they felt less stress, depressed or anxious as a result of the help they received from us.



- 40% had a more secure housing situation.



- 40% found it easier to do their job or find a job.



## Local Delivery

At Citizens Advice Newcastle, we have specialist advice programmes, including our energy advice service and debt advice service.

## 2,182

individual  
clients  
accessed  
our energy  
advice  
service



## 1,215

unique  
clients came  
to us to help  
manage  
their debts



## Core Service

This financial year we received funding through Citizens Advice to deliver two remote advice contracts. This has meant that we have been able to employ two remote advice workers, one full time and one part time to answer telephone enquiries on our Advice Line as well as responding to online enquiries. This has been a big boost to our remote services as during the last financial year we only had one part time remote adviser responding to online enquiries and no paid staff designated for phone enquiries. Consequently, our statistics show that the number of Advice Line calls taken during this year was fourteen times more than last year.

Like other local Citizens Advice offices, we have always had difficulty running a full phone service with volunteer advisers. Very few volunteer advisers opt to carry out this role as the vast majority want to take part in face to face advice sessions. Therefore, having paid staff is essential for this role to make our service more efficient and accessible.

On the other hand, our face to face service is mainly operated by volunteer advisers. Our morning sessions are often very busy and continue to serve those who are digitally excluded. There is only a small difference between the issues that our clients bring to the face to face sessions and those that our remote clients contact us about. The greatest number of issues for all of our core service continues to be welfare benefits and housing. However, as expected, there is some difference in age groups contacting us by comparing the different channels of advice. Remote clients tend to be younger and our face to face service sees more clients for whom English is a second language. The fact that we have a high number of people with English as a second language reflects the difficulties they have accessing other services and our face to face advice service becomes their only option to help them to access benefits, housing and education services.

This year we have seen our number of volunteers increase and we managed to recruit 66 new volunteer advisers. Our adviser numbers and capacity were increased by over 50 law students from Northumbria University during the spring and we have also had student placements from Teesside and Sunderland Universities and a full-time student placement for one year from Newcastle University.

A partnership with the North East Refugee Service gave us a trainee adviser for one day a week as did an agreement with Citizens Advice and both these secondments have worked very well. Our service also benefited from school community service placements and someone on the Duke of Edinburgh Scheme.



## Key Statistics

Citizens Advice Newcastle

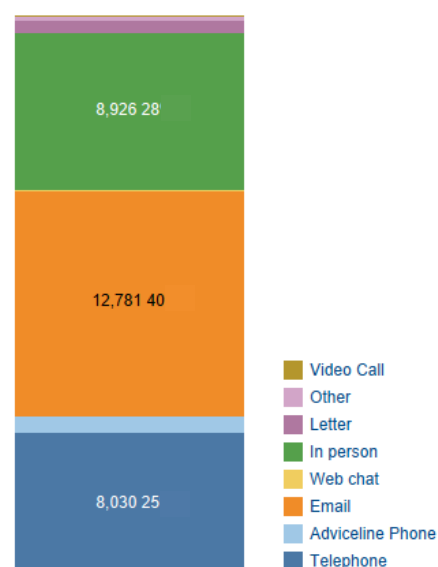
### Summary

Clients	8,185
Quick client contacts	1,023
Issues	38,525
Activities	31,656
Cases	13,273

### Outcomes

Income gain	£2,367,424
Re-imbursements, services, loans	£101,093
Debts written off	£1,247,074
Repayments rescheduled	£44,193
Other	£542,883

### Channel



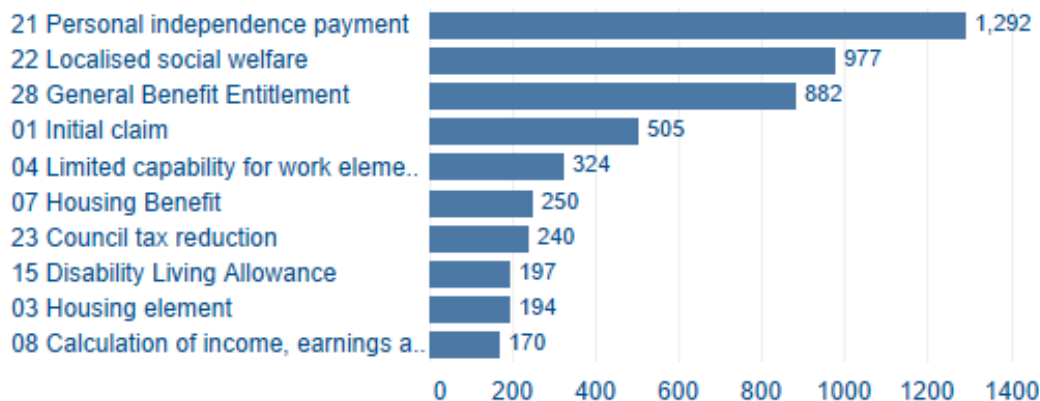
## Issues

	Issues	Clients
Benefits & tax credits	4,993	2,481
Benefits Universal Credit	1,744	836
Charitable Support & Food Ban..	3,001	1,028
Consumer goods & services	2,669	2,070
Debt	11,170	1,215
Education	159	105
Employment	825	501
Financial services & capability	1,946	710
GVA & Hate Crime	76	50
Health & community care	146	103
Housing	2,390	1,413
Immigration & asylum	906	559
Legal	1,907	654
Other	207	104
Relationships & family	879	523
Tax	188	147
Travel & transport	305	212
Utilities & communications	5,014	1,942
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>38,525</b>	

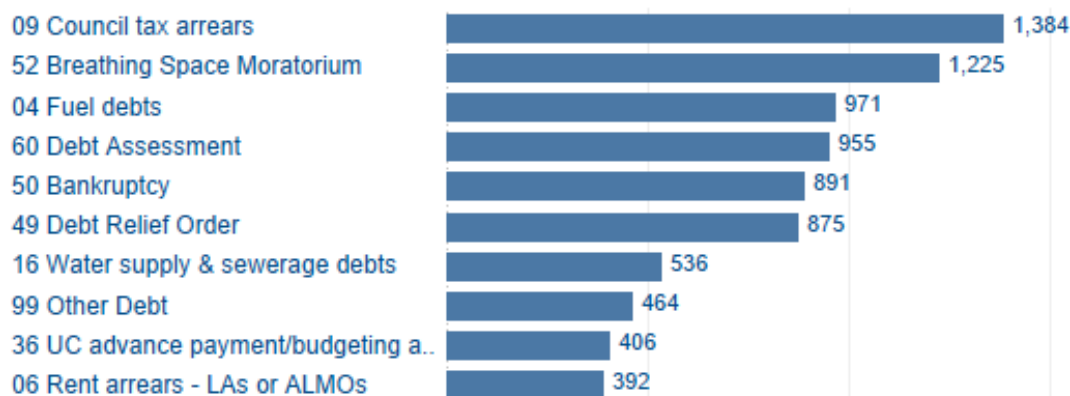
01/04/2023 31/03/2024

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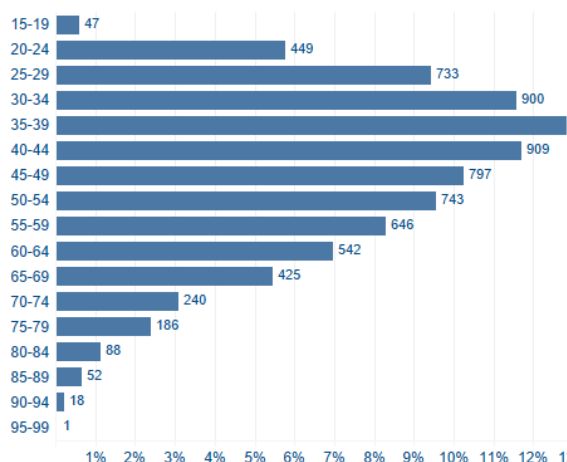
## Top benefit issues



## Top debt issues



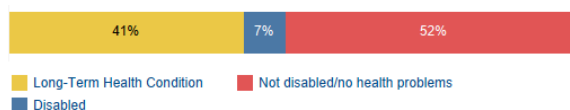
## Age



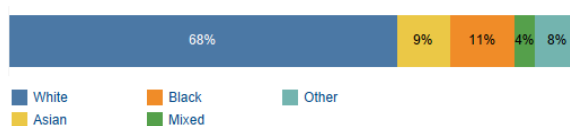
## Gender



## Disability / Long-term health



## Ethnicity





# Customer Service Team

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Here we are again, another year and another annual report!

Not much has changed for us as a team but what has stayed the same and what is so important to us at Citizens Advice Newcastle is helping our local community.

The community relies on us because we are a local independent charity, providing confidential and totally impartial advice. The Customer Service Team are usually the first point of contact for most clients and this gives us an insight into the problems and issues that many people are facing today and current trends of advice.

We strive to provide a good customer service to our clients and we constantly review our procedures to enable us to achieve this.

We also help with the allocation of clients to our various specialist services who come to us through our face to face service, by phone or through our various email addresses. This helps clients receive the help and advice they need by being referred to the correct team/service which hopefully makes the whole client journey a positive one.

We are still growing as a service with our various outreaches and working partnerships to ensure that our services reach as many clients as possible. All being well this will result in clients being given the knowledge and confidence to find their way forward and receive the level of support they require or need.

I think that we as a team at Citizens Advice Newcastle, which includes all of our volunteer advisers, have a lot to be proud of.

We hope that, funding permitted, we are allowed to continue to provide this service for many years to come as we are looking forward to celebrating Citizens Advice's 85th year next year.

Our Customer Service Team is an integral part of providing all of the above and again my thanks go to Linda Mael and Susan Wakenshaw for their hard work over the year and dedication to the service.

Claire Iredale  
**Office Manager**



# Northern Powergrid Energy Advice Project

Northern Powergrid (NPG) have funded Citizens Advice Newcastle to provide energy advice to those in fuel poverty since 2015. The project has continued to grow and this year our staff numbers have grown from four to seven; five energy advisers, a benefit specialist and a manager of the team. Our telephone and webchat portal in conjunction with Citizens Advice Leeds continues.

Freephone number: 0800 448 0721, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm.

During 2023/24 our advisers helped 2182 clients with energy related issues amassing £1,312,268 in financial gains, a significant increase on the previous year.



Our outreach work also developed during this time. We visit the West End Foodbank at St James Church, Benwell weekly. Other monthly visits to West Denton Foodbank, Building Futures East in the East End, Walker Foodbank, Society of St Vincent de Paul and the Bread and Butter project in Benwell have added to our ability to reach a new group of people needing energy advice.

During this time, from May 2023 onwards we have worked on a collaborative project with Northern Powergrid in conjunction with Citizens Advice Leeds with the idea of developing a service with a longer-term contract arrangement. We are happy to say that the agreement did happen.

## Case Study #1

A client attended on behalf of their son, who has disabilities after suffering a stroke. They are their son's carer. Their son was already on the Priority Services Register so their medical situation was already known to the supplier; their son had signed a Form of Authority for their father to speak on their behalf.

The client's son had been pursued by their fuel supplier over the last three years for a gas bill for £324 and debt collectors had attended their property twice recently despite them being on the Priority Services Register. The client's son only uses electricity in the house, the gas meter was installed pre-covid without their permission.

After negotiations through an adviser the meter was removed and the supplier agreed to write off the debt and pay compensation. Both the client and their son said they couldn't have got this result without our help.

## Debt Advice Team

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2023/2024 continued to present many challenges for our debt advice team. The ongoing cost of living crisis has compounded financial hardship and poverty in the borough with families being unable to meet the rising costs for essentials such as food, energy and housing. This, in turn, has resulted in our debt advice team experiencing unprecedented demand owing to the volume of clients seeking our services and increasing complexity of cases for our debt team to deal with.

Over financial year 2023/2024, our debt advice team assisted 1215 clients with 11,170 debt related issues which has amassed an income gain of £339,502 and debt write offs of £1,247,074.00 for residents of Newcastle – a significant increase on the previous financial year. Our debt advice team's top issues for 2023/2024 are Council Tax Support and Council Tax arrears.

In addition, our debt team, alongside colleagues at Citizens Advice Sunderland, met with the DWP third party debt helpline team after raising issues with them about the lack of information being provided. The DWP's policy changed in December 2023, restricting how much information they could share which was detrimental to vulnerable clients who we are acting on behalf of as many of our vulnerable clients are unable to provide us with the information requested to finalise their budget owing to being digitally excluded or being unable to understand the information being requested either due to health conditions or English not being their primary language. Following a face to face meeting with the DWP at their office in Sunderland, we have now ensured that those calling the helpline will get additional information about a client's case to make it faster to get the information needed when supporting our clients with DWP debts. This includes giving a summary of any/all outstanding DWP debts as well as a summary of a client's Universal Credit claim.

Finally, it was announced during the Spring Budget that the government is to abolish the £90 fee for Debt Relief Orders from 6th April 2024. This is a very welcome change amongst the industry as the fee has historically been a barrier to low income/vulnerable households seeking a long term debt solution. We are however anticipating that this will drive an even larger increase in the demand on our service throughout the next financial year as more and more households become eligible to proceed with and access a Debt Relief Order as a strategy for dealing with their debts following the changes effective from 6th April 2024 and 28th June 2024.



## Case Study #2

The client is a single parent, living in a two bedroom social housing property. The client's income consists solely of welfare benefits as the client is unable to work owing to their health conditions. At the time that the client presented to our service, the client's pre-existing mental health conditions were being exacerbated by the volume of correspondence they were receiving from creditors. It had reached the stage where the client had ceased opening letters as they were being hounded by debt collection agencies.

The client presented with debts of £23,600, of which £5,000 were debts for priority bills such as fuel arrears and Council Tax. We firstly applied for the Statutory Breathing Space Scheme for the client to provide up to 60 days' protection from enforcement of their debts to alleviate any further distress being caused to the client pending their application for a Debt Relief Order (DRO) being submitted and approved. The client's DRO was submitted and approved within 3 months' of the client accessing our service. The client has confirmed that they feel better able to cope with their finances and are now opening correspondence as the pressure and distress of unpayable debts has been alleviated by the application for a DRO.

## Case Study #3

The client is a single parent, living with their two dependent children, one of them in receipt of Disability Living Allowance. They live in a three bedroom social housing property and they are a full-time carer for their son and have their own long term health conditions.

The client had previously approached a different debt advice service in the past, but their debt issues remained unresolved. By the time they approached our service the client had over £27,300 in debt, £7,000 of which were priority bills such as rent, fuel and Council Tax arrears. We applied for the Statutory Breathing Space Scheme for the client to provide up to 60 days' protection from enforcement of their debts to alleviate any further distress being caused to the client pending their application for a Debt Relief Order being submitted and approved. The client's DRO was submitted and approved within 3 months' of the client accessing our service which provided the client with great relief as the client had advised they'd waited in excess of 12 months for help. The client has confirmed that they feel better able to cope with their finances as the pressure and distress of unpayable debts has been alleviated by the application for a DRO.

The client also had a separate issue regarding suitability of their housing; prior to the client moving into the property, the client had been assured that a bathroom would be fitted owing to their child's needs. Unfortunately, after the client moved into the property the landlord refused to install a bathroom as previously agreed on the basis that the client had signed the tenancy agreement. The client advised that they felt pressured to sign the forms on the promise that a bathroom would be fitted and also owing to having been informed that if they don't accept the property then the duty to rehouse the family will be discharged.

We contacted the social housing provider to escalate the matter and a bathroom has now been installed as originally agreed with the family, ensuring that the property now meets the households' needs. The client confirmed that they are very happy with this outcome as they had been trying to resolve the matter themselves since they moved into the property without success.



# Research and Campaigns

Research and campaigns is one of the twin aims of our service. It aims to improve the policies and practices that affect people's lives.

As a service we have a huge amount of insight and data about the problems our clients and their wider communities face. Through research and campaigns work, we use this insight to focus on 5 key priorities as well as working collectively with other local Citizens Advice offices across the region and feeding into national policy work. These priority areas are: The Living Wage, Universal Credit, Debt, Housing and the Healthy Start Scheme.

We are incredibly thankful to have secured a further three years of funding from the Millfield House Foundation which provides our team with security, stability and support to help us to make a real difference in the North East.

## Our Team's Awards

This year, the Research and Campaigns Team have been awarded the 'Volunteer Team of the Year 2024 Award' by National Citizens Advice. We are delighted to have received the award and it has given our team some valuable recognition for their work which makes a huge difference to our organisation, the city of Newcastle and the wider region.

Moreover, our placement student Nell has been awarded the 'Placement Student of the Year 2024 Award' by Newcastle University for her contributions over the past year.



## What we have achieved this year?

### The Living Wage

We are incredibly proud to announce that our joint work has resulted in Newcastle becoming a Living Wage City! Together, with the Council and other partners, we are now planning to significantly increase the number of Living Wage employers in Newcastle over the next three years. Our launch event in March 2024 was a highlight of the year and resulted in 7 new living wage accreditations and a further 26 employers enquiring about accreditation.



We are involved in the Tyne and Wear Citizens Cost of Living Group which aims to work with the newly elected North East Mayor to push towards a Living Wage region as well as a living wage for care workers. At our Mayoral Assembly, all candidates agreed to these asks and we look forward to working with Mayor Kim McGuinness moving forwards.



## Debt

Our debt team, alongside colleagues at Citizens Advice Sunderland, met with the DWP third party debt helpline team after raising issues with them about a lack of information being provided over their helpline. Their policy recently changed, restricting how much information they could share, making the helpline almost useless to our advisers. We have now ensured that those calling the helpline will get additional information about a client's case to make it faster to get the information needed when supporting our clients with DWP debts. This includes giving a summary of any/all outstanding DWP debts as well as a summary of a client's Universal Credit claim. Many local Citizens Advice offices as well as the Expert Advice Team at National Citizens Advice were unaware of the helpline as a tool for our clients, so we have also promoted this widely for the benefit of the service.

## Healthy Start Scheme

Over the last year our joint efforts have increased the uptake of the Healthy Start Scheme from 68% to 83% in Newcastle. We have also secured around £2800 from the Community Foundation to enable our advisers to complete Healthy Start Scheme applications on behalf of our clients. There are often multiple barriers to claiming support and this funding hopes to remove some of these barriers.

Our evidence was also used by Catherine McKinnell MP in parliament to highlight the numbers of parents and children missing out on this essential support. This is feeding into work to promote automatic enrolment of the Healthy Start Scheme for those eligible.



## Universal Credit



There are many issues that our clients face in relation to Universal Credit, but the main one is insufficient income for those both in and out of work. In November 2023, we were invited to meet with the top civil servants at the DWP, to discuss key issues we are seeing across all departments, but particularly for Universal Credit claimants. Hannah, Cesur and Ewan provided a thorough, well-evidenced presentation that focused on three key themes of communication, conditionality and processes and resources.

At this presentation, we urged DWP directors to use their influence to ensure that key benefits such as Universal Credit are uplifted in line with inflation for the 2024-25 financial year as well as pushing for Local Housing Allowance, which covers people's housing costs, to be unfrozen to the bottom 30% of rent prices for any given area. We were successful and the Chancellor announced this in the 2023 Autumn Statement.

Following this success, we are continuing to build relationships between ourselves and partners in the DWP. We have set up a regional DWP and local Citizens Advice forum to discuss issues and work together.



## Fuel Poverty Research

We have worked with National Energy Action, researching the state of fuel poverty across the region. Our report aims to shine a light on how the energy crisis is affecting fuel poverty in the region, focusing on three key issues: prepayment meters; energy debt; and damp and mould. The report concludes with recommendations for policy and practice and it has been used to launch an Against Fuel Poverty Coalition for the region.



## Cluster Group Research

Hannah, our Research and Campaigns Manager, chairs the North East Cluster Group. This is a group formed of local Citizens Advice representatives from the region that work together on research and campaigns issues.

This year, we conducted a survey with almost 500 families around free school meals. We have partnered with Northumbria University to conduct focus groups and interviews to understand more about the barriers and challenges of accessing free school meals as well as discovering parents/carers views of auto-enrolment for free school meals.

94.1% of survey respondents indicated that they would support auto-enrolment of free school meals. Our aim from this research is to ensure that families are receiving the support that they are entitled to.

## Housing

This year we have been investigating Section 21 'no fault' eviction practices in Newcastle. Nell, Tracy and Hannah met with Chi Onwurah MP and Nick Brown MP about the Renters Reform Bill that is set to scrap Section 21 evictions. Subsequently, Nick Brown pushed for the second reading of the Bill, which has since passed through Parliament. However, there have been detrimental changes to the Bill and so Nell provided a written consultation response to these changes. Section 21 evictions are now due to be scrapped under the next government.

We also responded to Newcastle City Council's budget consultation, which proposed cuts of £1.6 million to homelessness prevention services. We met with several councillors around our response to the budget. Following this, the decision to halve the homelessness prevention service was reversed. This is welcome news and we are seen as a strategic partner in the development of any new strategy moving forwards.

Finally, Gayle and Nell have established a new housing campaign group for the region, through our work with Tyne and Wear Citizens. At the Mayoral Assembly, the housing team were able to get commitments from all candidates to create a good landlords charter that will hold landlords accountable and ensure decent standards for private rented homes as well as working with us to ensure newly built houses in the region are affordable.





## Our Partners/Funders







## Free, confidential advice. Whoever you are.

We help people to find a way forward with 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.



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