



Leeds

VOICE

**UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES
SPEAKING UP FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE**

SPRING 2024

ENERGY

We support calls to Ofgem and the Government to establish Social Tariffs for low-income households

See Page 4

HOUSING

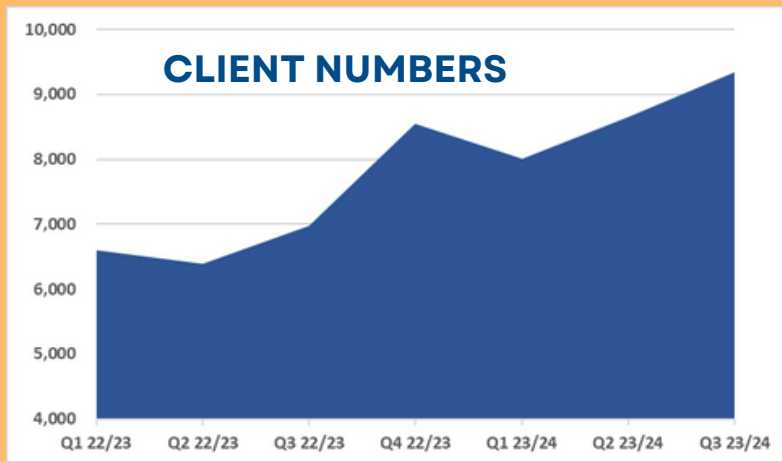
Rented properties falling into disrepair as Renters Reform Bill delays lead to increase in 'No Fault' evictions

See Page 2

BENEFITS

Delays in PIP appeals heighten support needs for clients with disabilities and long-term health concerns

See Page 3



SURGE IN DEMAND

Citizens of Leeds are coming to us in record numbers for help with more problems, which are deepening in their complexity

The Cost of Living crisis has resulted in growing demand for our advice services, with the numbers of people contacting us for help each month going up from an average of 2,571 in 2022/23 to 3,107 since April 2023, an increase of more than 20%. Our dedicated teams have worked hard to respond to increased demand, doubling the number of calls answered per month. Despite this, we're still not able to respond to everyone who needs our help.

Alongside our help for clients, Citizens Advice has a role in identifying the underlying causes of individual problems, and how policy changes could help resolve them. This briefing focuses on some of our work on housing, energy and benefits problems, and provides an insight into the increasingly distressing situations in which many of our clients find themselves.

You can find more information about our work on our website

www.citizensadviceleeds.org.uk and the national Citizens Advice website www.citizensadvice.org.uk/policy/

HOUSING CRISIS BITES

HOUSING

1,000 more people contacted us for housing advice in 2023, compared to the previous year

HOMELESSNESS

Enquiries increased by 52%

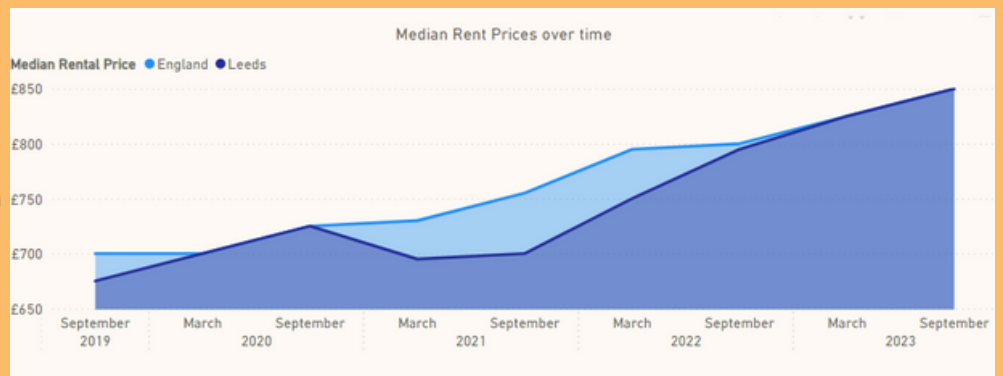
FOOD BANKS

Clients needing a food bank referral nearly doubled on the previous year

RENT

Average rents in Leeds increased by 25% in 4 years

The average rent in Leeds increased by £175 per month over 4 years



The average rent paid by Leeds residents has increased by £175 per month in 4 years. Before the pandemic the median rent was £675 per month, but by September 2023 it had risen to £850 per month, a sharp rise of 21% in just 2 years. Meanwhile, more clients are coming to us for help with Section 21 'no fault' evictions, disrepair complaints, and revenge evictions.

The gap between escalating rents and Housing Benefit/Universal Credit payments has also increased during that time, leading to more people unable to meet their rental costs and facing possible eviction. Local Housing Allowance needs urgent reform so that it better supports those in private rented property.

The Renters' Reform Bill currently going through Parliament will provide some protection to tenants from unfair eviction, which is why we're disappointed that the Bill has still not been passed, more than 4 years since it was first proposed, and that it contains loopholes that could still lead to Section 21 evictions 'through the back door'.

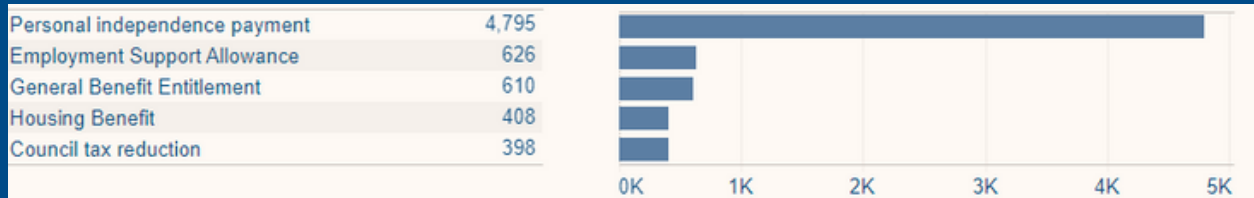
HOUSEHOLD SUPPORT FUND EXTENDED FOR 6 MONTHS AS THE COST OF LIVING CRISIS REMAINS 'ACUTE'

The Household Support Fund provided over £14 million of vital support for Leeds residents in 2023/24. We were pleased to work with the Council to help distribute these funds to some of the most vulnerable households in the city.

We supported Leeds City Council's call to government to extend the Household Support Fund and we're very pleased that a 6 month extension was announced in the Budget statement. However we expect that many people will still be facing hardship in 6 months, and longer term solutions are needed.

PIP APPEALS UP BY 23% LAST YEAR

Helping a client to challenge a decision not to be awarded PIP typically takes around 10 hours of adviser time. This includes asking the DWP to review the decision, considering their reasons, writing the appeal, and preparing the client for the hearing. If the issue is complicated, and involves researching caselaw or consulting an expert, it can take many more hours.



CITIZENS ADVICE LEEDS 2023

Sick and disabled people are facing increasing barriers to accessing the financial help they need, as indicated by the Department for Work & Pensions' (DWP) own figures. Personal Independence Payments (PIP) are intended to help with the additional costs of daily living and mobility incurred by people in poor health, but increasing numbers of claimants are having to go through a lengthy appeals process to obtain the help they're entitled to.

In 2022 over 60% of appeals against DWP decisions not to award PIP were overturned. Even more concerning is that in 59% of cases, the decision was based on the same evidence already seen by the DWP.

At Citizens Advice Leeds, providing help with PIP applications and appeals is the biggest Benefits issue we advise on, with around half of all our clients having a disability or long term health condition. The appeals process can take months to be completed, causing additional stress and anxiety and pushing people into poverty, as illustrated by the experience of one of our clients shown below.

This situation has been deteriorating for years, and concerted action is now needed by the DWP to improve the standard of decision making, shorten the time taken to process appeals, and provide additional funding for specialist welfare rights advice.

SELMA'S STORY

Selma is a widow who has several health problems including osteoarthritis and depression. When her health deteriorated she lost her job and she was advised to claim PIP by her GP. When her application was turned down by the DWP she contacted Citizens Advice Leeds for advice. We helped Selma to write her appeal, gather evidence and prepare for the hearing, which resulted in the tribunal overturning the DWP decision and awarding her help with daily living and mobility costs, backdated to the start of her claim.

Without help to make her case, Selma would have been worse off by nearly £5,000 a year and struggling to pay her heating and housing costs.

FUEL POVERTY

Leeds is disproportionately affected by the sharp rises in energy costs. In 2021, it was reported by the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero that 15.9% of households in the city were in fuel poverty, compared with the national average for England of 13.1%. With the average household bill having gone up by £500 since then the number of households which cannot afford to adequately heat their home is expected to be even higher when the latest figures are released this spring.

At Citizens Advice Leeds we believe that Social Tariffs should be introduced for low income households, along with scrapping the daily standing charge and reviewing the Warm Home Discount scheme (see our client's story below). This would set energy unit prices at an affordable rate and help reduce rates of self-disconnection in winter.

We also call on Ofgem and the government to introduce financial obligations for all energy companies to improve outcomes for those in fuel poverty, including funding debt advice and offering a greater range of resolutions to customers in financial distress.

Our Energy Affordability Helpline, delivered in partnership with Northern PowerGrid, is a West Yorkshire-wide service which supports 3,200 households a year with energy problems



DEFICIT BUDGETS

Despite the energy price cap reducing in April, bills will still remain well above pre-pandemic levels. Energy debt is one of the main contributing factors to the sharp rise in negative budgets our debt advisers are seeing. As well as the introduction of social tariffs, expanded energy bill support, and reform of Local Housing Allowance rates, Citizens Advice are calling for benefits and the minimum wage to be updated in line with inflation, to lift millions out of poverty.

RICHARD'S STORY

Changes to the Warm Homes Discount (WHD) scheme have resulted in many people losing vital help with energy costs this winter. A new requirement to have an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC), costing £60-£140 to obtain, has excluded those who cannot afford the upfront cost.

That includes people like Richard, who struggles to get by on disability benefits and could not afford to get an EPC, although he meets the other criteria for the scheme. He and others in similar circumstances have lost out on £310 of financial support at a time when fuel costs are still double pre-pandemic levels.

Citizens Advice Leeds is a free, confidential and impartial service



Adviceline: 0808 278 7878

Energy Affordability Helpline: 0800 448 0721



www.citizensadviceleeds.org.uk