

Research and Campaigns Trustees Report
February 2025 to April 2025

Report by: Jacqui Clack

Date: 2nd May 2025

Training: A couple of training courses run by Citizens Advice have unfortunately been cancelled by the Business Team. However, I will sign up again if they are rearranged.

Contact with Elected Officials: On 9th April Alison and I had a meeting, accompanied by Lynn Hannah (CEO of Reigate & Banstead Citizens Advice), at the offices of Chris Coghlan MP. Unfortunately, Chris Coghlan was unable to attend the meeting but we did meet with Bradley Nelson (Chief of Staff for Chris Coghlan MP) and other members of his team.

Alison gave a presentation on the work of Citizens Advice and the multiple issues clients face, in addition to the value of the service provided.

After the meeting an email of appreciation was sent by Bradley Nelson who stated ***“Thanks again for visiting us last week, it was a great insight, and we will be taking the feedback, particularly the point on digital exclusion and ensuring we are appealing to those who you work with often.”***

Additionally, a letter has been sent to both Chris Coghlan MP and Helen Maguire MP regarding the changes to welfare benefits for those who have health issues, set out in the Government’s “Support to Get Britain Working Green Paper”. We have had a response from Helen Maguire MP thanking us for raising the issue with her. She shared with us a copy of the letter she and colleagues have sent to the Secretary of State, Liz Kendall.

Local Housing Allowance (LHA) Data Gathering: From the monthly research I have been conducting there continues to be a huge gap between actual rents charged across all types of accommodation, in Leatherhead and Dorking, and the amount the Government agrees is affordable for those on benefits or low income.

The impact of this ongoing issue means families in private rented accommodation are more likely to slip into debt as they try to cover the shortfall in rent out of income that is meant to cover basic necessities of life.

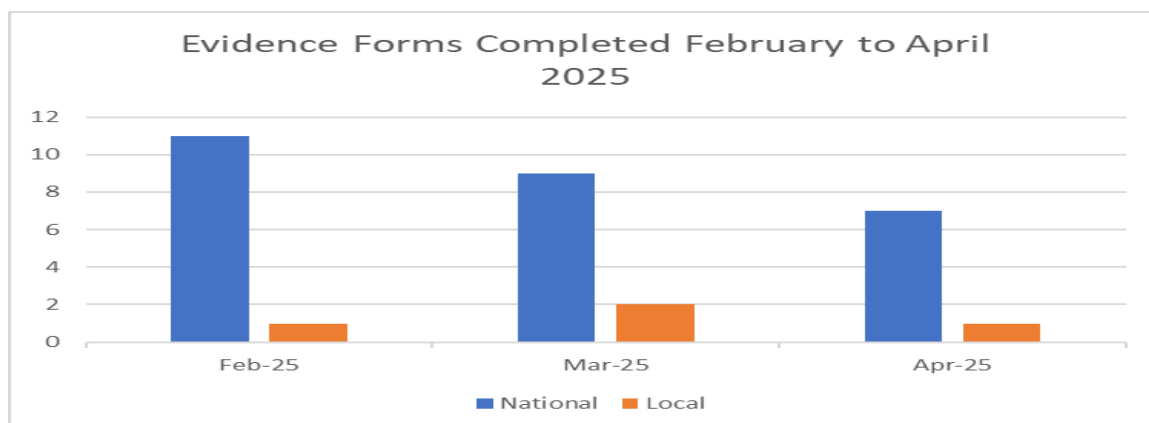
We shared the results for March with the Surrey Research & Campaigns Group and are awaiting the results of the Surrey wide data gathering.

Surrey Research and Campaigns Group: I attended the meeting of the Surrey Research and Campaigns Group on Wednesday 12th March via Zoom. The group agreed the following areas for research.

- **Council Tax Support influencing campaign.** It was suggested we all gather information about our local Council Tax Support schemes and how they differ from each other to put together a joint proposal for how a cross-county scheme could operate within the new Unitary Authorities.
- **Water Bills.** The unaffordability of water bills was raised. Similar rises in cost is seen across both metered and unmetered bills. It was pointed out that there is no provision for water bills within benefits, although all water companies are obliged to offer social tariffs. It has been suggested that all offices in the area raise calls for evidence on this matter.

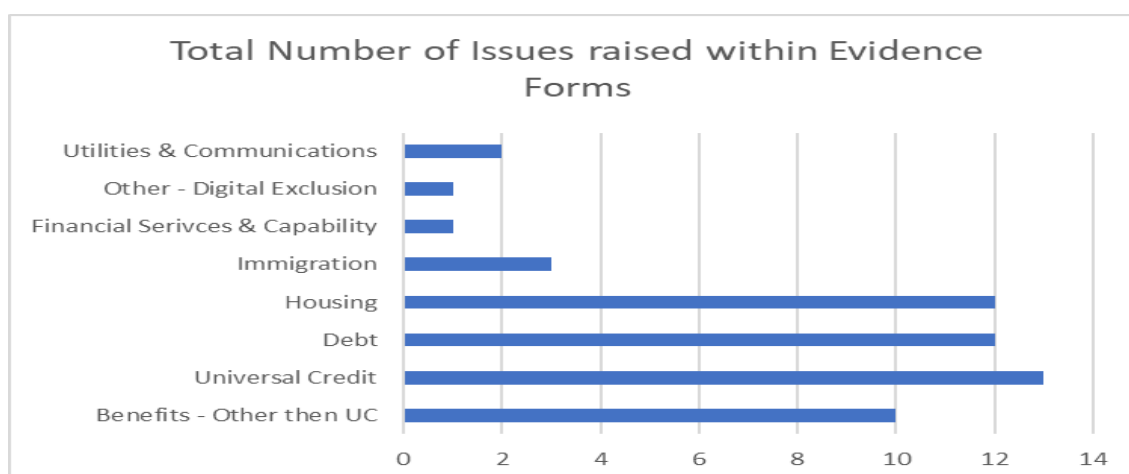
Issues and Evidence Forms: I am pleased to report that from April 1st 2024 to 31st March 2025 a total of 128 evidence forms were completed by the team of advisors. This is a 400% increase on the total for the previous year, which was 32 in total.

From 1st February to 30th April a total of 31 evidence forms were submitted. The chart below indicates the number of evidence forms completed related to calls for evidence on national issues of concern compared with local issues.



As multiple problems clients are facing can be recorded within a single evidence form, the total number of issues recorded from 1st February to 30th April 2025 added up to 54

The key areas where evidence forms were raised by advisors were welfare benefits, Universal Credit, debt and housing. Digital exclusion appears low but this is due to the fact that it appears to be picked up under other areas like applying for benefits or managing a claim. A reading of the actual evidence forms would increase the number of digital exclusion issues from 1 to 13.



Weekly staff meetings and monthly newsletters continue to have a regular section reminding advisors of the key issues where evidence forms need to be completed.

Local Research & Campaigns concerns

A total of 4 evidence forms were completed related to local issues in the Mole Valley area.

- Digital exclusion issues when applying to the Mole Valley Housing Register. One of our advisors stated that it "would be virtually impossible for a client with limited tech experience to navigate."

Three issues related to local Housing Associations, one of which is Clarion.

- One issue was related to the removal of flooring from an empty property and the new tenant not being able to afford carpeting.
- Issues with how the housing association divided rent from service charges on the rent account, potentially creating an overpayment of Universal Credit because the division was not clear, potentially putting tenant into rent arrears.
- Delays by the Housing Association to log requests in a timely manner onto their system with regard to a direct debit mandate for rent, thereby placing the tenant into rent arrears.