



Campaigning Update 15 — April 2022

CitizensAdviceRichmond.org

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We helped 935 local people in Richmond with 2,740 advice issues during March 2022. Benefits (750 issues) and housing (316 issues) generated the most enquiries, while debt and money (300 issues) was close behind. Last month we helped local people gain £245,000 they were due.

Years of poor administration by government department leave vulnerable man destitute

Citizens Advice Richmond advises many vulnerable and disabled Richmond residents who face poor administration and huge delays in trying to access the benefits they need to buy essentials. The government body responsible is the Department for Works and Pensions (DWP), which administers benefits in the UK. Every week our advisers flag up examples of delay and administrative error which cause avoidable hardship to vulnerable people.

The delays and systemic administrative lapses we see are reminiscent of the 2016 film *I, Daniel Blake*, which was about a man who suffered a heart attack, appealed DWP's decision to deny him the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) benefit and spray painted "I, Daniel Blake, demand my appeal date before I starve" on the side of the DWP building.

Daniel Blake was fictional, but one of our clients has had a similar experience. We'll call him **Brett**. He has long-standing health problems, is very vulnerable and relies on charity hand-outs and food vouchers since he cannot work because of his illness and has no other source of income. He was getting the ESA benefit, which people can claim if they have a disability or health condition that affects how much they can work. Brett came to us for advice in 2019 because DWP had stopped his benefits based on factually incorrect information about a change in his income. He asked DWP for a Mandatory Reconsideration to review the decision because the facts were wrong. DWP stood by its original decision to stop his benefits.

Brett has been waiting since 2019 for DWP to reinstate his benefits

A further request for review a month later was ignored for 4 months, so after 6 months Brett made a formal appeal. It took **over 2 years** for this appeal to be heard, but it found in Brett's favour, overturning DWP's original decision, and requiring them to restart ESA payments at the beginning of 2022. DWP then failed to make any response, neither lodging an appeal against the decision, nor reinstating Brett's benefits. We then lodged a formal complaint with DWP which was not acknowledged. Brett called DWP on several occasions, was promised call-backs, but these didn't happen. We emailed a second complaint to DWP on Brett's behalf. 11 weeks after the appeal decision, there remained no response from DWP. Following an intervention by Brett's MP, DWP did finally respond to say that they were looking into the situation. But at the time of writing, Brett was still not receiving the benefits he should be getting.

Brett's MP tabled a written question to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in March 2022 to ask how long it should take after a successful appeal for payment of ESA to be resumed. The reply was "we aim to resume payment within 48 hours".

Based on our experience, there are systemic faults in the way DWP delivers public services to benefit claimants:

- Decision making is frequently glacial, and this appears normal and accepted by DWP
- It took 3 Mandatory Reconsideration letters over 6 months before Brett was allowed to lodge a formal appeal with a tribunal
- It took a further 2 years for the tribunal to meet, but even though the appeal was successful, DWP has not reinstated payment, even though months have passed since the appeal (and significantly longer than the 48 hours the Minister said was DWP's policy)
- DWP's published phone numbers are staffed by people who are unable to help
- Citizens Advice Richmond and Brett were unable to approach the Independent Case Examiner Service because they have no jurisdiction until a complaint has been rejected by the body concerned. DWP frustrated this by continuing to ignore the complaint rather than rejecting it.

Our Call for Action

This is but one example of many cases we see that indicate that DWP's administration of benefits, particularly disability benefits, is not fit for purpose. We are calling on the DWP urgently to reform its administrative processes. It is unfair and unjust that vulnerable people face severe hardship because of systemic poor administration.

MPs and councillors support our campaign to End Benefit Prejudice



We were delighted that Sarah Olney MP, Munira Wilson MP and Cllr Jim Millard, lead member for Housing at Richmond Council, all voiced support for our campaign to end benefit prejudice in the private rental sector. Sarah Olney MP and Cllr Jim Millard were interviewed for our campaign videos, which attracted thousands of views on social media.

You can read more about our

campaign, and watch the videos, here: [End Benefit Prejudice Campaign](#)



In the next phase of the campaign, which will start after Easter, we will be publishing a list of local estate agents who have told us that they do not discriminate against people receiving benefits. We will also be updating the reference materials our advisers use to help people receiving benefits to find accommodation in the private rented market, and to help them complain about prejudice.

Our other current campaigns

Cost of living crisis – Energy costs are soaring. In Richmond nearly 1 in 9 people cannot afford to pay their energy bills without cutting back on essential spending. We continue to support Citizens Advice's national campaign to focus more resources on people who are struggling on low incomes.

Social housing tenants' issues – We are working with local housing associations in Richmond to address recurrent problems with tenants' rent arrears, repairs, and neighbour harassment issues.

Feedback: We welcome feedback and suggestions – campaigns@citizensadvice-richmond.org

Free advice: Please call us on Freephone 080 82 78 78 73 or fill in the form [here](#).

Benefit calculator: Find out what benefits you can claim [here](#).

Partner organisation referrals: Refer clients to us via [this form](#).