

June 2021



Spotlight



On Research and Campaigns

Welcome to another packed edition of Spotlight, highlighting the important work that we have been doing to support South Lincolnshire communities.

I was really pleased with the energy event that we hosted, which had some great speakers and interesting discussions about how we can all work together to support people who are struggling with their energy bills. We will be taking forward those discussions in the coming months.

The article about digital exclusion is really important, particularly for people that might have struggled to access services over the last year. We are keen to look at ways in which we can help tackle that problem in our local area.

As I write this, it has been announced that restrictions will be in place for another four weeks. We will be re-opening our face-to-face services when restrictions are finally lifted. We know that many people will be needing our help. We are seeing a rise in demand – a 20% increase in telephone calls asking for help over the last couple of months -- and we expect this to increase further.

We will be here to help, whatever issues people are facing.

Thank you for your support.

Please do get in touch if you have any questions or ideas for future work.

Simon Richards

Chief Officer

Citizens Advice South Lincolnshire



Bringing organisations together to talk about ‘Helping Alleviate Fuel Poverty in South Lincolnshire’.

(Juliet)

We are delighted to say what an excellent event our ‘Helping Alleviate Fuel Poverty in South Lincolnshire’ was, held over Zoom on 12th May.

Our goal was to begin discussions early in the year, well in time to make a start in thinking about provision for those in fuel poverty before the poor winter weather begins, grants lapse, and advice is late instead of timely.

Members of Citizens Advice South Lincolnshire were joined by local and parish councillors and representatives from care organisations, churches, and local charities. There were short presentations from: our Chief Officer who set the context of wider poverty from which many of our clients approach us for help; and speakers from Utilita, National Energy Action and national Citizens Advice who brought us up to date with recent initiatives in the provision of funding to relieve fuel poverty and the delivery of energy advice. These talks were followed by a wide-ranging discussion examining some of the difficulties partner organisations have faced, especially over the past year, and proposing some ways we could work together to help resolve them.



Simon Richards, Citizens Advice South Lincolnshire Chief Officer, set the scene by explaining that Lincolnshire is the most sparsely populated county in the country with an older than average population, above average child poverty and greater than average digital poverty. Low incomes, lack of benefit take up, poor housing, insecure employment, and debt lead to poverty of all kinds, including fuel poverty. These problems have, of course, been exacerbated by Covid-19 and more than a year of social and employment restrictions.

We heard, from our external speakers, about the central dilemma for those in fuel poverty. Whether to heat the home and run into fuel debt - or not heat the home and risk housing disrepair and condensation. Ultimately, either choice proves problematic because both can lead to physical and mental health difficulties. With the 35,000 excess deaths that happen during winter, fuel poverty has a significant negative influence. The link between Covid and cold weather illness, social isolation, reduced access to warm public spaces and changes in patterns of health and social care use has had a further negative effect.



*Action
for
Warm Homes*

Citizens Advice statistics showed us that 4 million people were in fuel poverty in 2020/2021 and that 1 in 7 people had fallen behind with their essential bills – including energy. Nationally, Citizens Advice Energy Service will offer:

- Awareness and guidance through year-round Energy Campaigns
- Tailored digital advice.
- Personalised advice and casework by 2023.

In South Lincolnshire, we want to:

- Do more to help more people.
- Strengthen our hold on energy advice.
- Integrate it more into everyday advice.
- Be recognized as the place where people come to get help with energy bills.
- Work in partnership
- Develop long-term solutions – to strengthen our communities.

Some of the issues raised in the discussion included these. The difficulty for some of those who have a different first language than English in accessing the information they need to make informed decisions about energy access and use. The problem for those who are digitally excluded in accessing competitive energy deals and grants etc. The energy information and advice provided at the start of tenancies. Reaching and supporting those who are hard to reach in, for example, especially rural areas. The number of people seeking fuel help who also experienced food poverty during last winter and the possibility of providing fuel information in food parcels.



We are extremely pleased to have furthered our contact with some organisations and developed links with others in matters of fuel poverty. This has already begun to facilitate the wider distribution of information and guidance for people in need of fuel help via leaflets and newsletters. We look forward to more discussions on all these important issues relating to fuel poverty in our area. We also look forward to more future collaboration with our partner organisations in improving client access to fuel help for the coming winter.

Energy for homes.

(Peter)

Particularly in a time of hardship for many families over the last year, access to electricity and gas has been a problem. At Citizens Advice, we have helped by using the various fuel voucher schemes over the winter, which have allowed our clients to avoid being unable to top up their meters. Without access to such schemes many families may have lost the means to provide light, heat and power for their homes.



Several clients told us about problems with their energy company.

- A female client was shocked to receive a £520 bill from EON for gas supply. She had moved into a new build house which, although it had a gas supply, was fitted with an all-electric heating system. The client phoned EON to say that the bill must be wrong because she did not use gas. EON said that the meter showed gas use and she must pay. When the client contacted Adviceline, an adviser managed to speak with someone at EON who investigated the problem and discovered that the builders had muddled the meter numbers assigned to each house number, resulting in incorrect bills being sent. The client was relieved that the problem had been resolved, but it should not have needed the intervention of Citizens Advice before her problem was taken seriously.
- A disabled elderly client rang Citizens Advice, worried about paying off arrears on his electricity bill for his bungalow. Scottish Power were charging the client just £24 per month, but this abruptly increased to £300 per month, then to £600. It appears that Scottish Power had failed to take regular meter readings and had been working on an estimate. The potential debt has caused the client much distress.
- A client who contacted the Migrant Worker helpline said that Bulb Energy had asked the client to pay an additional £600 due to an error with his meter reading. It appears that a problem had arisen when a smart meter was fitted. The adviser managed to contact Bulb and got the bill corrected. Bulb gave client £90 as a good will gesture.
- A client was paying £80 per month to Shell Energy. His account was migrated to First Utility in January 2021, and he was told he had an arrears of £866. It appears that Shell was trying to recover money owed from 2019, saying they had charged the wrong tariff. The client was advised to complain as this kind of debt is not usually recoverable on fuel arrears over 12 months old.
- A local carer is a customer of AVRO Energy. The company put up her monthly repayments to £450, which was far in more than she can afford. It seems the company was trying to recover an arrears in payment. However, it required the intervention of one of our debt caseworkers to challenge the monthly amount and get it reduced to a more reasonable sum.
- A client said that Scottish Power had contacted him to say that they were visiting his house to install a smart meter. The client told them that he did not want his meter changed. Scottish Power wrongly insisted that smart meters are compulsory.



In future we should look forward to greener forms of energy being fitted into our homes.

- A client from the CASL area had an air-source heat pump fitted in her home by the Housing Association landlord. This was to replace conventional heating. The client says she is struggling to afford the increased electricity bills which have averaged £150 per month.

Citizen Advice aims to help people resolve problems with their energy supply through Adviceline 08001448848, or our dedicated Consumer helpline 08082231133.

The Green Homes Grant Scheme

(Peter)

The Green Homes Grant scheme was introduced in September 2020. It was intended to allow homeowners or landlords to get financial help with the cost of improving the energy efficiency of their homes. The scheme has now closed with only an estimated 14,500 successful applications. Citizens Advice have recently published an analysis as to why this scheme has had to be closed early. The main points gathered from evidence from clients shows:

- The scheme was difficult to access and required the use of the internet. Many potential applicants without digital skills had to seek help from organisations such as Citizens Advice to make applications.
- The complexity of the application process confused potential applicants, who were required to get multiple quotes for the work.
- Applicants found it difficult to find approved installers to quote them for the work.
- The scheme was open to scammers. When seeking quotes, clients reported they had been asked for upfront fees of £200 to £1000 for the installer to handle the application with a promise of a refund when the work was done, even though there was no guarantee the application would succeed.
- Scammers were mis-selling products such as gas boilers on the false promise of a grant to help pay. Clients found themselves entering into credit agreements to cover the cost and no grant.



If you wish to read the complete report, use this link, <https://wearecitizensadvice.org.uk/why-did-the-green-homes-grant-fail-49a686b41ca5>.

Citizens Advice Scams Awareness Fortnight

(Sean)

This year, Scams Awareness Fortnight takes place from the 14th-27th June. The focus is on financial scams, with a particular emphasis on the type of scams that victims have been duped by during the pandemic.

As with all our campaigns, there will be lots of material posted to our social media channels. We will also be sending posters and flyers out to our partner organisations for display and distribution and contacting our local councillors regarding the fortnight.



This year, we have reached out to other organisations for their contributions to a combined scams awareness video. We want to bring together the ideas of different groups about three aspects of scams: the worst coronavirus scam; scams aimed at organisations; and the best piece of 'Stay safe from scams' advice. The final video will be posted to our YouTube channel.

Within Citizens Advice South Lincolnshire, the National Trading Standards' Friends Against Scams team will be providing a scams awareness refresher at our next volunteers meeting in July. This will update our advisers on what to look out for in scams during

2021 and provide them with further information to help them in their work with clients.

Our Festival of Social Justice Showcase Video.

(Amelia & Juliet)

Please have a look at the latest video on our YouTube channel: our take on the work we do at Citizens Advice South Lincolnshire

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r_HCEtNW7AI&t=2s



Digital Inclusion/Exclusion 2020

(Nick)

We are concerned about the level of digital exclusion in our area and wanted to understand the national and local data available before taking our research further. This report provides some of our main findings and then looks at what we are intending to do next.

Our Data Sources

We looked at information taken from the three sources:

1. The 2011-2018 report from the ONS called Exploring the UK's Digital Divide
2. The Internet Users 2020 update also from ONS (upto Feb 2020).
3. The Lloyds Bank Consumer Digital Index report May 2020.



Together these provide a baseline of digital inclusion/exclusion from 2018 to early 2020. As more data is published, it will be particularly interesting to see what effects the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown has had.

Out of necessity, will older people have used the internet more or will the existing barriers to digital inclusion become more entrenched? Will those with access to the internet but poor digital skills have increased their skills during the pandemic? Will those disadvantaged by disability or low income have caught up or will the divide become greater. Will more people have fallen into

poverty or become sick thus expanding this group?

Main observations from the 2018-2020 baseline.

Positives

- The number of internet users has increased overall.
The number of non-internet users (including those that haven't used it in the past 3 months) has declined from 20% of the adult population in 2011 to 10% in 2018 and the latest figures for 2020 suggest the figure is 5-7% or 2.5-3.5 million adults.
- An additional 1.2m adults have gained the necessary Foundation skills to get online by themselves between 2019 and 2020

Negatives

- Approximately 16% of the adult population cannot perform basic digital tasks e.g. connecting to the internet, using websites, opening and using an app without help, and approx 22% of adults do not have the sufficient skills needed for everyday life.
- There is a much greater level of exclusion among those over 65 (11%), and particularly over 75 (39%). Only 7% of over 70s are likely to have the capability to shop and manage their money online, with 77% of this age group having 'Very Low' digital engagement. 52% between 60 and 70 years old are also technically under-equipped.

- Those regions with more rural isolation and/or poverty tend to have lower internet use.
 - In 2018 the E Midlands had fewer people with the 5 basic digital skills (71%) than all other regions apart from Wales (66%). The UK average is 79%.
 - In early 2020 this has increased to 77% but the E Midlands in general and Lincolnshire in particular lags behind most other regions.
 - In Lincolnshire 13% of people have not used the internet within 3 months (national average 5-7%).
- Often, it is the most vulnerable and disadvantaged who are the most likely to be digitally excluded.
 - People with an impairment are 25% less likely to have the skills to access devices and get online by themselves
 - People with an annual household income of £50,000 or more are 40% more likely to have Foundation digital skills, than those earning less than £17,499
 - 4-in-10 benefit claimants have Very Low digital engagement

Other factors

- Ethnicity doesn't appear to be a major factor in digital inclusion/exclusion
- Although the gap is narrowing, women still tend to have lower digital skills than men, particularly in older age groups.



Why digital exclusion matters

Those who are digitally excluded are likely to be paying up to £350 more per year on household utilities, and data suggests that digitally enabled manual

workers earn over £2000 more per year. Digital skills could unlock productivity in the workforce. 17.1 million (52%) people in the workforce lack digital skills.

Digital skills can be a lifeline for people and have been even more important since March 2020. Over 80% of people feel better connected to friends and family and more able to organise their life and around 50% of people say it helps with physical and mental wellbeing and makes them feel part of their community.

Digital skills are also needed to access a range of new Benefits, particularly Universal Credit..

Barriers to digital inclusion

Data shows that a lack of interest is the most commonly quoted reason for people not being online, as well as fear of how companies use or misuse their data and the risk of online scams. 48% of those who are offline said 'nothing' would get them to go online.

Among the the other 52%, the top 5 things which would encourage them to access the internet are:

- The ability to stop organisations using personal data
- Getting support from from someone else to help
- More information on how personal data is used by organisations
- Cost of broadband and devices (roughly 50% of those offline struggle financially)
- Ease of use of websites and apps

Lloyds bank conducted an additional survey on attitudes during 2020 and found that 78% of people agreed that the pandemic has increased the need for digital skills and 80% agreed that technology has been a vital support to them, particularly social media and video chat services, but also aspects like being able to help children with schooling. 57% of people said that they had increased their skills during the lockdown and the same percentage said they will carry on increasing their skills.

Who can help?

There are several organisations working closely with government agencies as well as companies such as Lloyds Bank and charities who are involved in promoting, encouraging and supporting digital inclusion. Some are workforce focussed but have information to help all sectors of society.

<https://futuresdotnow.uk/>

Is a coalition of companies, charities and other organisations focussed on increasing digital skills in the workforce.

<https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/insights/a-national-wake-up-call-on-digital-skills/>

Is government sponsored and provides information, networks and training materials for individuals or groups to increase their digital skills.

<https://theskillstoolkit.campaign.gov.uk/>

Digital skills online courses provide by the government. The Computer Essentials courses link back to the Learn My Way course content provided by the Good Things Foundation above. These and other courses are also linked from

<https://2aspire.org.uk/learning-at-home/learning-for-digital-skills/> provided by 2Aspire in conjunction with

Lincs CC

<https://lincsdigital.org.uk/>

Charity based in Horncastle which provides community based learning across Lincs



Further work to combat digital exclusion at Citizens Advice South Lincolnshire

We are currently looking at what support groups and classes are available in South Lincolnshire to help people learn and develop the digital skills which will advantage them in their day to day lives. We hope to liaise with organisations who champion the spread of digital skills and will examine how our advisers may best be helpful in signposting clients and/or in providing direct support for specific needs like benefit applications.

Find us on Social Media.

(Sean).

The month of May has seen our social media audience increase. We are now followed by close to 692 people/organisations on Twitter and our content has reached over 9000 people. Our Facebook page was 'liked' a further 5 times between 01 May and 28 May taking the total number of people who like or follow the page to 121.



From April 2020 to March 2021 our Twitter reach increased by a really pleasing 54,000 compared to the same period from the previous year.

In addition to this, our Facebook and Twitter are still important in sharing information about developing Research and Campaigns issues through our very own bulletins. Our 'stay safe from...' bulletin about Caller ID fraud was seen over 100 times.



You do not need to have an account to see either our Twitter or Facebook pages. They can both be accessed at www.citizensadvicesouthlincs.org.uk by clicking on the speech bubbles in the 'connect with us' box on the website home page.

People have also been looking at our website for longer recently. There have been 4463 page views from 1st-30th May (a 22% increase from April). There have also been a greater number of visitors to the website this month (2301- a 22% increase). Finally, there has been a 4% decrease in visitors leaving the site after only viewing the homepage.

Evidence forms April & May 2021.

These are forms filled in, electronically, by our assessors/advisers after interviewing any client who comes to us with an issue of unfairness. The forms are monitored both by the CASL Research and Campaigns team and by national Citizens Advice. The issues are in order of number of Evidence Forms received.

Type	Number
Universal Credit	58
Other (all food bank)	21
Immigration	20 (15 EU Settlement Scheme)
Employment	9
Benefits	9
Debt	9
Consumer	8
Housing	5
Education	3
Utilities	3
Finance	2
Legal	2
Travel	2
Health	2
Relationships	1
Tax	0
Discrimination	0
Total	154

Contact us.

We hope you found this edition of Spotlight of interest. If you wish to contact the Research & Campaigns team with questions or comments, please use the email, randc2@citizensadvicesouthlincs.org.uk.

Juliet