

Help to Claim

Arun and Chichester Citizens Advice

Financial year 2020/21



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Introduction and purpose

Building on the success of the previous year, we continued to deliver our Help to Claim service this year.



With the pandemic hitting just before the start of the financial year, the HTC service has proven more needed than ever, with a record number of people needing to claim Universal Credit. When the Prime Minister called for a national lockdown, a huge proportion of the population found that they were no longer able to work and were forced to rely on the benefits system for the first time in their lives.

Demand for the HTC service has fluctuated throughout the last year and consequently, the KPIs set by the national team has also varied. Previously only paid staff were allowed to answer the phone line and webchat, but this guidance was removed. We decided to keep the paid staff focussed on these channels as demand had also increased on our core services with a reduced number of volunteers.

The focus was drawn away from specific client numbers with a recognition that we would not be delivering face-to-face services but continuing the push on quality (which had to stay at 80%) and asking clients for consent for feedback. The direct referral route from the DWP was removed but we created a third-party referral form for all other professionals to refer clients through if they would struggle to contact us themselves.

We retained 2 of the original HTC advisers from the pilot, meaning the level of knowledge within the team reached an expert level. We had some gaps in staffing but were pleased to see HTC staff members going on to work within the law and social justice sectors.

What the service looked like



Given the “work from home” message, our service was adapted to be delivered through telephone and web chat only. All of our advisers worked from their homes and used Microsoft Teams to connect with the full team at the morning briefings and seek help from their supervisors throughout the day. Feedback from the advisers suggests that they have felt more connected to the team working from home and have been able to build a better network of peer support.

As the government continued to update policies around furlough, self-employment schemes and Universal Credit rules, the team were reviewing the news daily and ensuring we always used current resources. We continued to consider whether a client would be better off on legacy benefits, Universal Credit or new-style benefits. A vital part of our service was being able to promptly advise clients on whether they should claim UC or not.

We continued to monitor social policy issues, some of which have continued into the next year, including the benefit uplift and Minimum Income Floor rules. With more people than ever having to claim UC to survive, the flaws in the system have affected even more people. In particular, we saw a huge impact with the DWP itself initially not having enough staff to process the claims. Our direct adviser line was staffed by those without full knowledge of UC which made it difficult for those needing to start a telephone only claim and clients were often not called back to complete their claim, meaning their payment could be delayed or claim cancelled.

As the Help to Claim telephone and webchat services cover England and Wales, clients may not be from the local district, so we’ve learnt more about how services operate in other areas. Workplace has become an important tool for connecting with the Expert Advice Team and other offices, to understand local connections and reporting when there are system issues. We joined the online Trussell Trust system, allowing us to create food vouchers for clients both in our local area and around the country.

We’ve continued to offer booked appointment telephone slots every day for internal referrals, third-party referrals and follow up work with clients.

Summary

- 941 clients helped – this is down by 42 from last year but includes gaps in staffing and no particular client goals this year
- Recorded financial outcomes of **£2,026,314** (up by £1,346,763 from last year) (for 360 clients – an average of £5,628.65 each)
- 100% of clients rated their overall experience as ‘very good’ (up from 97% good/very good last year)
- Jobcentre signposting dropped as the source of referral from 41% to 17% with signposting from other agencies up to 34% and self-referral at 33%

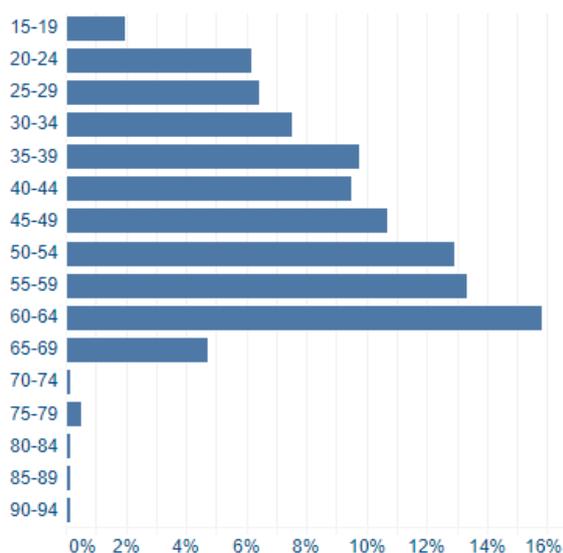


Who we helped

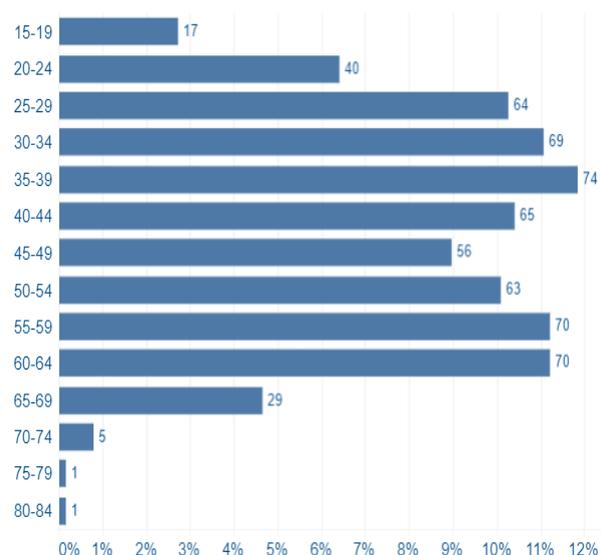
Jobcentre Area	Number
Bognor	37 (-85%)
Chichester	31 (-83%)
Littlehampton	31 (-61%)
Other	455 (+185%)

As the channels shifted to telephone and online-only, our client demographic also changed. The most striking difference is the number of clients out of the area. The “single queue” approach of the HTC service that has been implemented from day 1 means that clients can be helped by whichever adviser is next available, rather than waiting in a queue for a local adviser. The following table shows that fewer local clients were helped by the HTC service this year but this seems to be linked to local demand as all services show a reduction also. The figures also show that we are supporting nearly a third more clients than our local demand.

Client district	2019-20 HTC	2020-21 HTC	2019-20 all funders	2020-21 all funders
Arun	473	374	5,107	3,861
Chichester	297	278	3,361	2,451
Total	770	652	8,468	6,312

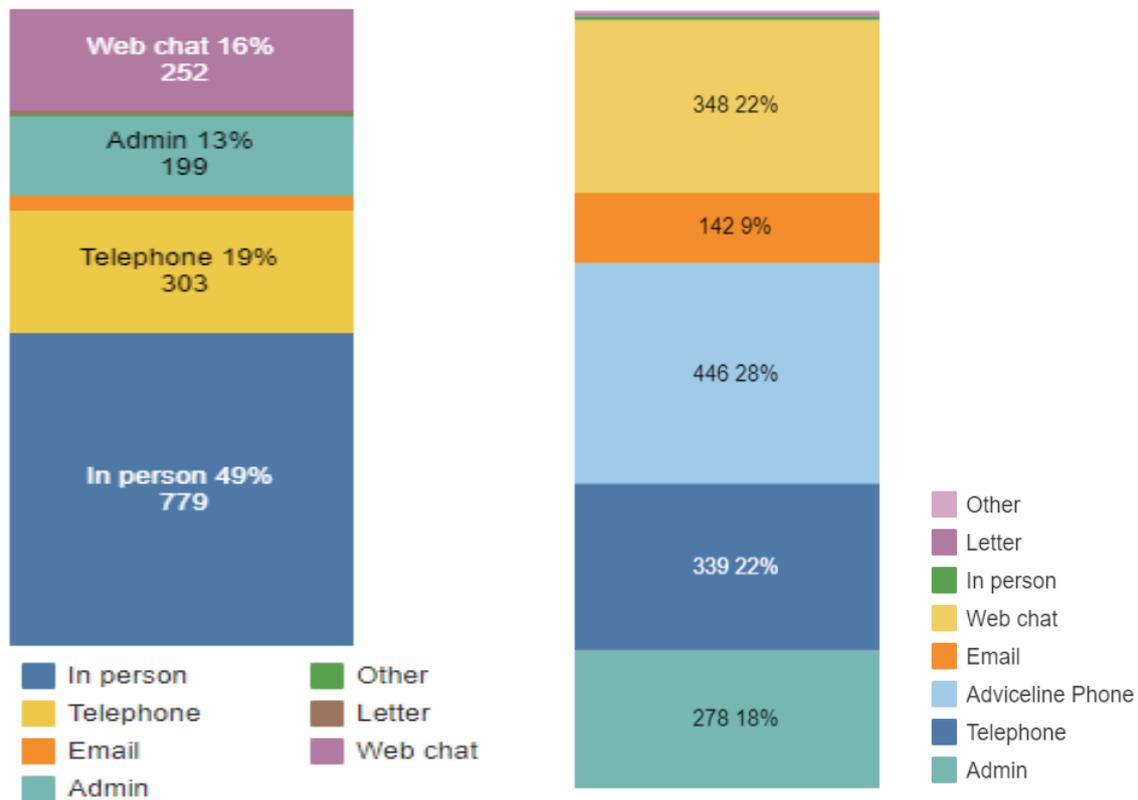


2019-20



2020-21

The year-on-year client age comparison shows that a larger proportion of clients helped by our HTC team were under 40 than in the previous year. However, overall, the age split is more balanced than previously where we saw a trend of more people seeking help the older they were (up to 64). This is likely to be a direct impact of the pandemic on employment which was felt across all working-age groups.



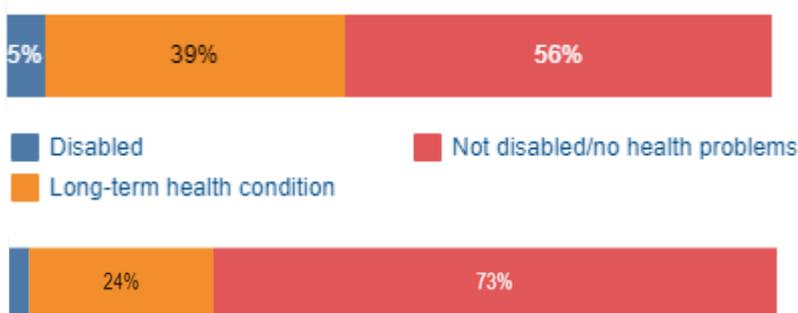
2019-20

2020-21

The clear difference for this year is the lack of face-to-face delivery. Admin has increased from 13% to 18% and also email contact has increased; this will encompass our follow up work with clients and summary advice emails which may have replaced printed documents given to clients in the office. "Other" includes video chat which we hope to expand upon in future.



The gender split remained similar from last year with females remaining the larger gender group of HTC clients.



A clearer difference in our client demographic this year is the reduction in clients recorded with long-term health conditions and disabled clients.

The significant change does give some food for thought in terms of considering whether the HTC access routes have been accessible for disabled people/those with long-term health conditions. Whilst we cannot directly change the whole service, we can offer alternative local routes and speak with our HTC account manager and Best Practice Leads.

What we helped with

Triage	95%
Support to start a claim	39%
Support to complete a claim and get ready..	15%
Client used a public access computer (PAC)	0%
A Eligibility	51%
AL Understanding UC payments	18%
AQ Better-off calculation	11%
A General benefit entitlement	20%

As previously highlighted, one of the key parts of the HTC service is establishing whether someone should make a claim or not, rather than actually helping with the claim. This is evidenced

in just 39% of clients needing support to actually start the claim but 51% discussing eligibility, and 31% being supported with understanding their benefit entitlement/better-off calculation.

We kept the client journey as seamless as possible by allowing face-to-face clients to stay in the room where they were seen by a generalist/HTC adviser and the adviser would introduce the next adviser as soon as possible

2019-20		2020-21	
	Issues		Issues
Benefits & tax credits	564	Benefits & tax credits	569
Benefits Universal Credit	2,086	Benefits Universal Credit	2,102
Debt	37	Consumer goods & services	1
Discrimination & Hate & GVA	2	Debt	32
Employment	51	Discrimination & Hate & GVA	5
Financial services & capability	7	Employment	49
Health & community care	2	Financial services & capability	5
Housing	38	Health & community care	3
Immigration & asylum	20	Housing	28
Other	52	Immigration & asylum	20
Relationships & family	15	Legal	2
Tax	2	Other	32
Travel & transport	3	Relationships & family	15
Utilities & communications	1	Tax	2
Utilities & communications	1	Utilities & communications	1
Grand Total	2,880	Grand Total	2,866

2019-20

2020-21

The same themes remain from last year in terms of advice issues supported or identified by the HTC team, as well as the number of issues supported. Not included within this number is out-of-scope queries that are transferred straight to a generalist adviser, consumer team or debt team.

Outcomes

The HTC team have recorded far more outcomes this year making the overall total of financial outcomes achieved by the team a huge **£2,026,314**, the majority of which was achieved through helping client successfully claim or reinstate their benefit award.

Another area of financial award was helping clients to provide additional evidence to support their claim. That could be concerning their immigration status, housing costs, ID or fitness for work.

Over £30,000 was achieved in having a benefit put back in place following revision or appeal; although HTC does not usually help a client all the way to appeal, a client is supported until the first correct payment is received and, in some cases, a client can be waiting months for the first correct payment.

Some of the non-financial outcomes for the client include claimant commitment amended (meaning they may not have to seek work for as many hours per week), successfully completing the verification process and becoming familiarised with how UC works and what it means for them.

Our team have successfully trained in the ongoing changes to UC and have become a point of support for other team members also. We continue to identify social policy issues associated with UC, such as administrative issues, lack of awareness around the Flexible Support Fund and clients failing the Habitual Residence Test.

Our quality scores have remained consistently high in both QAA and dip checks and we continue to maintain an excellent relationship with our HTC account manager.

Case Study

The client's profile

The client was aged 24, unable to work due to health and temporary living in a caravan.

Why the client made contact

The client originally got in touch regarding help with heating and support for fuel. There was also mention of her Universal Credit claim stopping which is why the client was referred to the Help to Claim team, as a new claim had been made.

The challenges

The client was not informed as to why they had to re-verify her ID for Universal Credit, 9 months after making the initial claim and receiving regular payments. Failing to do so on time, the client's claim was then closed and the DWP re-opened a new one. The client was facing around £2,938.52 of debt which they were told they owed to the DWP and the DWP continuously failed to clarify what went wrong with her previous case, as well as what the debt was for. Due to their health issues, the client found it hard to correspond with the DWP to get the above matter resolved.

Other services involved

The client had support from the Winter Grant Scheme and the client also received advice about their housing situation and budgeting from a core service volunteer.

Immediate outcomes

Food voucher, 2 gas bottles (£116), application to local authority homelessness department

Long-term outcomes

A new UC claim was started to get the client back in payment. The client moved into alternative accommodation. The client is challenging the debt and requesting a back payment of one month to cover the payment gap. They have been informed about claiming PIP.

Learning

1. The effect of the pandemic has been felt across all age groups and consequently, people from all different backgrounds have needed to access the HTC service. This reinforces the message that the HTC service isn't just for people who struggle with IT but is for anyone new to the benefits system and unsure where to start.
2. With so many clients needing to access us through telephone or webchat, we believe these channels will remain more popular than previously and we must maintain coverage on these channels.
3. We have been able to take on team members who have only ever worked remotely and they have still been able to complete the training programme and connect with support as needed.
4. We can maintain a high-quality service whilst working remotely and we have not become less productive.
5. Our dip checks have successfully been completed by peers as well as Independent File Reviews and this has provided useful feedback for the team and learning from each other.



Conclusion

We have learnt new ways of working throughout the year and feel confident in supporting clients remotely. This is likely to impact year 3 of delivery in terms of the number of contacts through each channel.

With the removal of restrictions on the horizon at the end of the financial year, it is expected that the number of UC claimants will once again drop, as workplaces reopen. However, with businesses unsure about how stable their future is, the ending of the furlough scheme and other COVID-19 financial support measures, it may be that people are dipping in and out of the benefits system for some time.

The impact of Brexit will be significant with the closure of the EU Settlement Scheme at the end of June. Already we have highlighted issues with clients being refused benefits for failing the Habitual Residence Test and this will likely continue for those who have not gained Settled Status.

Our remote working has been key to continuing to support people during this year but we cannot forget the digitally excluded. We must retain an offer of face-to-face services and make it clear how clients can access them.

During the next year, it'll be expected that advisers take on 2 simultaneous webchats. This does cause concerns about quality but our advisers are ready to take on the challenge. As well as this, the QAA will now be included in the local sample each month so it is likely that we will have more quality reviews.

We've committed to spending at least 50% of our time on the telephones and webchat service as we feel the demand is more likely to be there than in person but we'll still have the option available to those who need it.

We'll continue to highlight that interpreter services are available with webpages and posters also translated into other languages used in our local community to ensure our service is accessible to all. This includes our new BSL video interpreter service.

We'll continue to expand our use of video calling to help clients through screen sharing and further build clients' confidence in how to navigate their accounts and journal so they feel empowered to take action themselves in future.