

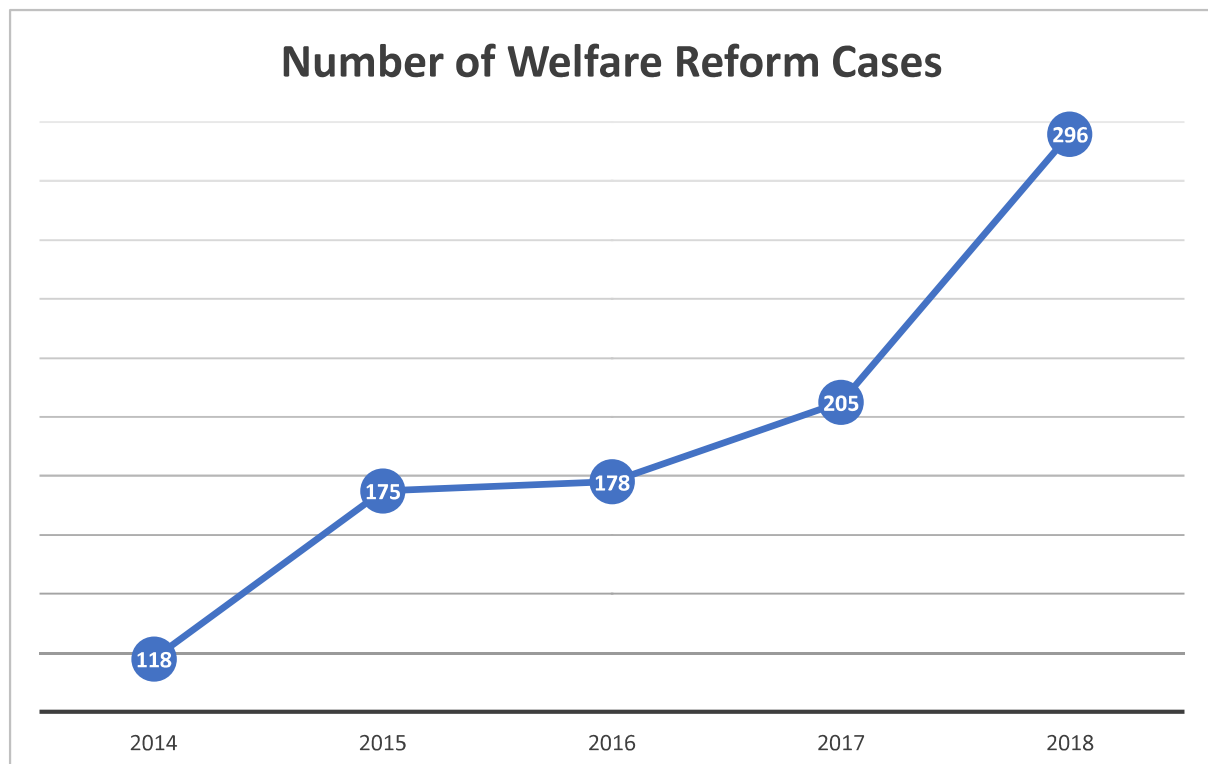
## **CAPS Independent Advocacy Welfare Reform Report 2017-2018**

CAPS provides independent advocacy for adults with experience of mental health issues living in East Lothian or Midlothian. Our aim is to help people to express their views and have a stronger voice. Our individual advocacy service provides short term, 1:1 issues-based advocacy to people to help them navigate particular issues in their lives.

Dealing with the benefits system is now the most common issue people approach us for support with. For the past five years we have received a small amount of specific funding to help us to do this work. This report explains the work undertaken and why access to independent advocacy is so needed around this issue.

At CAPS we have a Welfare Reform Individual Advocacy Worker who prioritises working on this issue and takes the lead in attending external groups and events. However due to the high level of demand all our individual advocacy workers support people with welfare reform issues in order to provide the capacity needed.

In the past five years demand for individual advocacy around benefits has increased hugely:

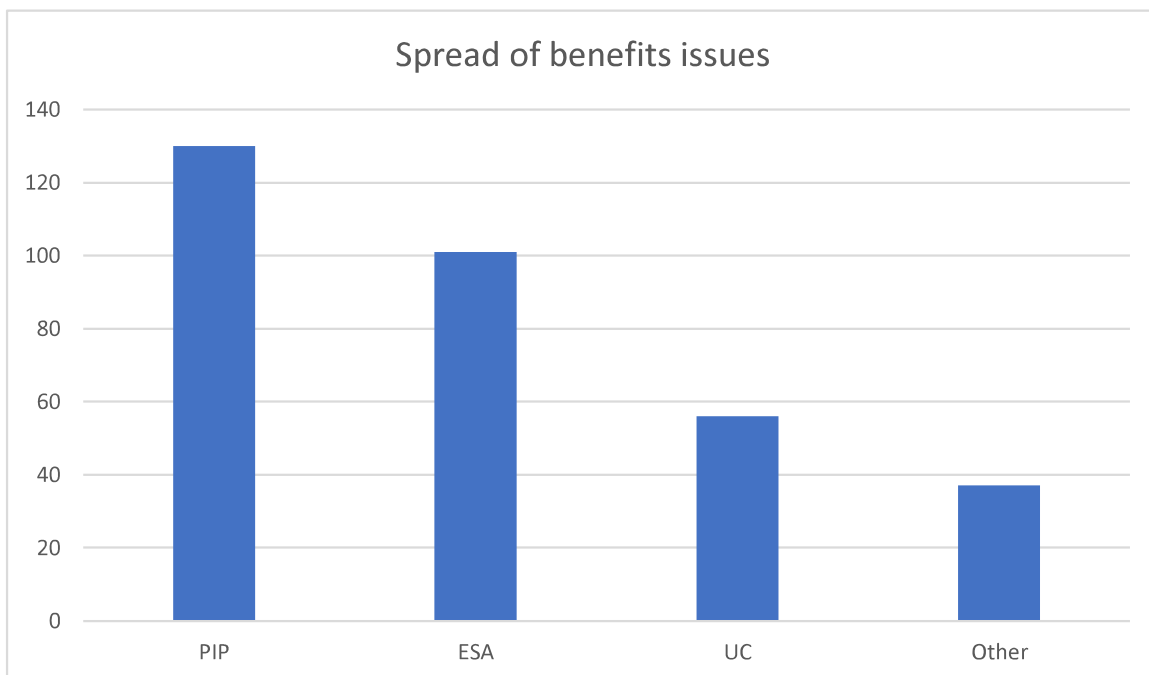


## WHAT WE'VE BEEN DOING

In the past five years since the beginning of the project demand for CAPS individual advocacy around welfare reform has more than doubled, an increase of **151%**. This means over the lifetime of the project we have now supported people with **972** benefits issues.

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5 (17-18)
<b>No. of welfare reform cases</b>	118	175	178	205	296
<b>East Lothian</b>	51%	53%	53%	54%	55%
<b>Midlothian</b>	49%	47%	47%	46%	45%

Since last year alone our caseload increased by **44%**. This increase can in part be attributed to the roll out of Universal Credit Full Service in Midlothian from 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2017 and the continuation of UC in East Lothian. This meant 2017-18 was the first full year in which we had UC Full Service in both local authority areas.



PIP is the largest single benefit people approached us for support with. However, the work-related benefits (ESA and UC) added together are even larger. Once everyone is migrated to UC it therefore looks like this might be the biggest part of our caseload. Since UC cases are generally more complex and require more of an advocate's time this gives an idea of how our caseload might increase further.

We support people with any issues they may have at all stages of the benefits process but as with previous years, the main things we have been asked to support people with are assessments for PIP, ESA and UC and also more generally managing a claim for universal credit, which will be specifically discussed further below.

## HEALTH ASSESSMENTS

People are often asked to attend assessments to assess their entitlement for PIP, ESA and UC. Having an advocacy worker present at an assessment can support someone to get all the information about their health across to the assessor in what is a difficult and nerve-wracking setting. The issues discussed in last year's report are ongoing:

- **Long waits to be seen** and **assessments cancelled at short notice** have continued to be an issue for people we support. We have experienced waits of up to 1 hour 45 minutes with people. Cancellations are particularly difficult for those who are travelling into the centre from further away as they often don't get the phone call to say their assessment has been cancelled until they are well on their way in.
- There are still **no assessment centres** locally in East Lothian or Midlothian and most assessments are held in Edinburgh. This year we have noticed more people being asked to attend PIP assessments in Galashiels and Berwick-upon-Tweed. This makes providing advocacy support more difficult due to the large distance.
- Another change is that **the waiting room** at the ESA and UC assessment centre in Argyle House has been made much smaller. At busy times this can leave the waiting area now feeling cramped and overcrowded which people we have supported have said they found difficult, especially when asked to wait for a long time.

What people said this year about having a CAPS advocate at their assessment:

*"I left a message with CAPS Advocacy, [advocacy worker] phoned and talked, met me on the day of assessment – he was great, made me feel comfortable, helped me when I couldn't talk etc. Thank you"*

*"It was helpful to have someone with the expertise and experience with me during my PIP assessment."*

*"I will shut down at these interviews and not say what I need to, the person from CAPS helps with this, by reminding me"*

*"I am sure that it is because of [advocacy worker]'s help that I got dealt with compassionately at my UC assessment."*

*"I was very scared about my fit for work medical assessment, not only did [advocacy worker] come with me but she skilfully guided me through the process – filling in the gaps made the difference"*

*"I could never have gone through assessment without aid of CAPS Advocacy."*

## **UNIVERSAL CREDIT**

With PIP and ESA, people generally approach us for support with the assessment process as well as for support accessing advice and representation to challenge a decision. People also come to us for help with these things in Universal Credit, however, as well as this they often need much more support throughout the process of making and managing a claim.

### **Supporting someone to make a claim can be time intensive**

This usually means support at a minimum of three appointments: one to set up the claim online, then two at the jobcentre to verify identity and go through the claimant commitment. We also often help people to gather information needed to set up the claim e.g. get a fit note from GP or open a bank account. Helping someone to deal with the initial stages of a universal credit claim can therefore be quite a time intensive process.

### **Increased conditionality in the early stages of a claim**

UC is also different from ESA in that if you aren't well and provide a fit note, prior to having your Work Capability Assessment you are still asked to keep in touch with a work coach and attend 'work search review' appointments at the jobcentre. Some of these can be conducted by telephone however this is at the discretion of the work coach. People often find this process very stressful and ask us for support at these meetings. As it can be quite a long time until people are assessed this can also mean quite a lot of advocacy support needed. This is another example of how the new system is changing the work we do and is only set to increase as more people are moving onto Universal Credit.

### **Work coach discretion**

We have noticed that people are treated inconsistently in these early stages of universal credit. This is because of the amount of work coach discretion involved in drawing up someone's claimant commitment. Although people may provide a fit note from a GP stating they aren't fit for work it's up to the work coach whether they ask people to do other kinds of work preparation or just attend health appointments and report changes of circumstances as their commitments. Work coaches can adjust the official number of hours 'work search' people are supposed to spend on these commitments and we have seen people in similar circumstances with a GP fit note whose commitment is the full 35 hours, a reduced amount, or turned off entirely. We can support people to discuss this and try to negotiate manageable commitments however different work coaches have different approaches to this.

### **Inappropriate language**

Another concern is with the language used in universal credit. Universal Credit is meant to cover all kinds of situations, for people looking for work as well as those not well enough to do so. However the language used is not flexible and is entirely focused around work. Advisers are called 'work coaches' and your appointments with them are called 'work search reviews'. Your commitments revolve around a certain number of hours 'work search' even if none of the things you're being asked to do are about work. This language can be anxiety inducing and excluding.

## Level of digital skills required

Digital skills remain a barrier for many people we work with and approaches to this differ hugely between work coaches and jobcentres. People are expected to manage their claim themselves online even after saying very clearly this would be difficult for them. The amount of support provided with this is variable. You can use computers in the job centre and there are staff available to answer questions but they are quite 'hands off' in the support they are able to provide.

In East Lothian there is an outreach worker from the Jobcentre who visits local libraries that people can approach for support. This service is now being reduced and there is nothing equivalent in Midlothian.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

We have seen demand increase as our service becomes more well known, as well as due to the roll out of universal credit. Due to the extra complexity of universal credit, as more people are transferred over from legacy benefits we only anticipate this demand increasing further.

With the new Scottish Social Security system being developed we will see further changes to the system. The effects of this are as yet unknown. It could be a huge opportunity for improvement of the system or it could result in further complexity as there will then be two benefits systems running in parallel to each other.

We do our best to meet demand and work with everyone who asks us for support. Unfortunately, there have been several occasions when there was no worker available as all our advocacy workers were already busy supporting others, particularly when someone has been asked to attend an assessment at short notice. There are also regularly times now when we ask people to consider rescheduling their assessment for a later date so that a worker might be available to support them.

The amount of work we do around welfare reform already far outstrips the specific funding we receive for this area of work. The 296 welfare reform issues we worked on accounted for **43% of the 684 issues we supported people** with in the year. However, the funding we receive to mitigate the effects of welfare reform equates to an individual advocacy worker post of just 18 hours per week, **less than 11% of the total weekly staff hours** in the team of 168.25 in 2017-18. The huge demand for this service compared to its funding is quite clear.

As CAPS' overall funding has not increased for a number of years while associated costs have gone up, we have had to reduce staff hours for the year 2018-19. Unfortunately we therefore expect that there will only be more occasions in the future when despite our best efforts we simply are not able to meet the level of demand that exists for our service.

*"A great help with everything I been through. Opening doors for me in regards to different needs that I might be entitled to. Great support when I been assessed by different people."*

*"The lady that helped me was a power of strength, I was made to feel normal. Wonderful people, need more of them"*

*"[Advocacy worker] was lovely, very easy to talk to such a lovely lady, good at her job"*

*"They made me comfortable and at ease and made my case more bearable."*

*"Prompted if I missed important information"*

*"You all make a huge difference to people like myself. You understand what we need. Have recommended people like myself in your direction"*

*"They put my point of view across because I wouldn't have much confidence on my own"*

*"I felt I had to email to thank you personally for the support one of your advocacy workers has just provided to a lady I made a referral for. I made a call a week ago, and was contacted quickly by the advocate, who then took the steps to support [the person] to her PIP assessment. I have just spoken to her and the difference your service has made to her is enormous and I can't thank you enough for doing such a good job in a very short timeframe"*

*"I know if in the future I need help I will contact you first. Thanks again for all your help as [advocacy worker] went out all the way to help me"*

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