Citizens Advice East Sussex Cost of Living Report August 2023



Introduction

At the start of the pandemic in 2020 demand for Citizens Advice services increased significantly. We were hearing from an entirely new cohort of clients - younger people mainly in the 30-40 age group with employment related issues, many of whom were asking about whether they were entitled to benefits for the very first time.

Our advisers needed to answer many employment related enquiries especially when the government support schemes like furlough were not applied correctly (or at all) by employers. Also there were many enquiries where employers had not followed the redundancy procedure and had treated their staff poorly, resulting in additional financial detriment.



From our perspective as a service, demand has continued at the same increased level since the pandemic restrictions were lifted earlier in 2022, flowing directly into cost of living related issues. For our clients and staff, the economic pressures have been continuous.

We've focused on two specific aspects in this report which stand out for our service users: digital exclusion and the impact of disabilities and long-term health conditions on people's financial stability. As you'll see from the data we've provided, people with disabilities and health conditions are disproportionately affected by the cost of living increases and therefore need more advice and support to resolve these problems.

Digital exclusion continues to affect many of the most vulnerable people in our communities. The financial support schemes made available by the government and other sources are a very positive step but the question arises - are these funds going to the people in the greatest need? Access to benefits and grant funds through online applications has been expeditious for many people but a lot of our advisers' work is about helping people who do not have access to computers or mobile phones and who often do not have enough knowledge or confidence to use digital access platforms.

Remaining as a constant block of work for our service over the past few years has been Personal Independence Payment (PIP). There are two main types of enquiries which explain the steady level of demand: 1 our advisers identify more people who may be eligible for PIP and don't realise it, most often in the course of advising on a different issue. Often these are people with mental health difficulties which relate to the stress of their overall situation including financial problems like debt; 2 advise on challenging decisions by the DWP to refuse PIP. These can become lengthy areas of casework, usually taking months to go through the appeal process. We continue to see people with serious multiple health problems being refused benefits like PIP (and considered fit to work by Universal Credit) and after a protracted period appealing these decisions the majority of people have their decision overturned and benefits are awarded, often resulting in significant back payments.

Energy related issues are at the centre of people's difficulties. As well as numerous issues which are simply about increased costs we encounter many enquiries where the client's problem is more complex and leads to a dispute with the energy company, who have often not followed their own code of conduct especially regarding support for vulnerable people. These cases are often caused by problems with metering and subsequent difficulties for people in contacting energy companies to agree solutions. We're seeing an increasing number of cases going to the Energy Ombudsman and these can become protracted and difficult to resolve. We've had debt and benefit specialist caseworkers but this new area of energy disputes appears to need it's own specialist resources.

Citizens Advice have continued to support people during our most difficult times and our

dedicated team of staff and volunteers are determined to help people through the current crisis. Our work generates significant financial benefits for both individuals and by extension to the local community.

We are the only service which approaches people's situation holistically and looks to find solutions for all aspects, either through our own resources or in partnership with others. Our resources do not expand immediately when a crisis occurs but the expectations of our service seem to grow. We do our best to stretch our capacity to respond to increased demand and over the past few years we've continued to innovate and adapt to changing circumstances with new access methods which we continue to explore.

Income maximisation is one of the main ways we can help our community get through the current crisis and build resilience which will last long term. We do this through benefit checks and calculations, helping people to make applications, help to apply for grants and to access immediate charitable support like food and fuel vouchers.

We add to this budgeting advice, reviewing people's spending and helping them make savings where possible. Combined with debt advice, addressing emergencies and focusing on priorities, we alleviate current financial pressures and help people regain control of their finances. The effect on people's mental health is considerable. We offer housing advice and prevent homelessness. By giving people advice at the earliest stages of difficulty we prevent greater problems from forming.

We are the only service which can offer all this "under one roof". With continued support we will continue to do so and hopefully help even more people.

Alan Bruzon Chief Officer Citizens Advice Eastbourne

Five Key Cost of Living Issues



Energy Energy debts Personal independence payment



Since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, we saw an initial reduction in enquiries as people accessed the furlough scheme and other forms of government support. In the following months, we saw a significant increase in employment enquiries. Since October 2020 we've seen a steady increase in cost of living related enquiries. One subject which has remained steady throughout is Personal Independence Payment (PIP). This is the main benefit people of working age can claim if they have a disability or long-term health problem including mental ill-health. Our work on this subject is partly identifying where people can claim this benefit by meeting the eligibility criteria and also helping those who have applied to challenge decisions to refuse PIP, either through mandatory reconsideration or appeal. Our success rate at appeal stage is over 90% and this area of our work has remained a problem for many clients since we first reported on this in 2017

Citizens Advice services in East Sussex have compiled a report on the experiences of our clients claiming PIP and ESA. The title of the report <u>It's Just Not Fair</u> summarises our clients experience.

Their stories show a system that is simply not fit for purpose - medical assessment processes that can humiliate and prejudge, delays of over a year in resolving claims and processes that seem almost designed to make applicants give up. In short when a claim for PIP or ESA goes wrong, the time it takes to resolve it and the impact on clients, who by virtue of their health or disability are in need of additional support, are more significant than for any other benefit.

Water, Energy and Energy Debts



Since October 2021 we have seen an increase in demand for debt advice on fuel debts - gas, electricity, oil and coal etc. The timing of people seeking debt advice doesn't necessarily indicate when a person begins to get behind with their bills as it can take someone a fair amount of time to decide to approach us for advice on debts and it is still an uncomfortable subject for many to broach.

The overall trend remains upward for enquiries about fuel as people come to terms with the announced increases to the price cap and what this will mean for them. Many people ask us for clarification of the various forms of government support which are available and most who do, find the selection puzzling, including which they need to apply for and which are automatic.

This all creates more work for advisers as they help people navigate the maze of options. We have seen this advice make a great deal of difference to people's state of mind as it reduces fears which are propagated by the media.

We can see enquiries about fuel reduced in April and May 2023 as the warmer weather reduces people's consumption and heating bills go down. The summer will be a brief respite before more people are affected and we anticipate a high level of demand as we go into winter 2023-24.

Once a person is in arrears with energy bills their financial situation can deteriorate as this starts to affect other essential spending like food, rent or mortgage etc.

Energy year on year

This shows cumulative energy clients by year with trend lines. The trend line for the current year inicates how many clients we might see later in the year based on historic data.



This includes a range of issues, including energy bill affordability, debt recovery action, issues with billing and customer service

In our database we have separate coding for energy advice issues when treated as a consumer issue. Energy can be defined as:

- Debt for Gas or Electricity bills
- Affordability and comparison of tariffs and costs .
- Billing and meter issues including pre-payment meters .
- Fuel vouchers
- Customer Service including complaints to the energy Ombudsman service
- Energy saving measures .

This graph shows the steady increase in demand for advice on these aspects other than debt advice and how the level of demand is expected to remain high for the rest of 2023.

Crisis Support Year on Year

This shows number of people coming to us because they can't afford to eat or need other financial assistance. The trend line for the current year inicates how many clients we might see later in the year based on historic data.



Crisis | Charitable support & foodbanks & Localised social welfare

Figures for crisis support represent the number of people Citizens Advice helps with either referrals to food banks' or other charitable support (covers any emergency financial support or support in kind people need to make ends meet) and localised social welfare

This chart is very stark in it's message. Referrals to foodbank and other forms of social welfare support - such as charitable grant funds - are increasing steadily and the projection for the months to come show this will continue to the point where we (CAB) will be helping 3500 clients per month.

We have limited staff and volunteer capacity to help people make applications to charitable trusts for financial assistance and this is often time consuming, with some requiring a full financial statement as evidence of need.

Nevertheless this is a key function for our team and can provide financial support for many clients which helps them avoid crisis and is potentially life changing.

The nature of accessing charitable support such as Foodbanks has changed considerably since they were first established. Charitable support had been a way to protect people during a crisis which was short-term and happened only occasionally. Nowadays, long-term support has become the norm for many clients and even following advice interventions we are not always able to help people become entirely financially independent as daily living costs remain unaffordable.

Costs of living / Disability and Long-term health conditions

Cost of Living

Non cost of living

Disability LTH Disabled & Long-Term Health Condition Not disabled/no health problems 700 650 600 550 500 450 400 Clients 350 300 250 200 150 100 50 0 Dec 20 Apr 21 Dec 22 Apr 23 Dec 20 Apr 21 Dec 21 Dec 22 Apr 23 Aug 21 Dec 21 Apr 22 Aug 22 Aug 21 Apr 22 Aug 22

This data set clearly shows that amongst our client group, people with disabilities or long term health conditions are more often contacting us for advice on issues related to cost of living:

benefits, debt, energy etc. compared to people without disabilities or health problems.

This supports our experience which is that people with disabilities and health conditions are more adversely affected by the cost of living increases because:

1. they have limited scope to increase either income through taking on additional employment and

2. they face higher costs for daily living due to mobility and care needs and are less able to economize on these aspects.

CASE STUDIES ENERGY POLICY ISSUES

SWITCHING VULNERABLE CLIENTS TO A PRE-PAYMENT METERS (PPM)

Miss L, has mental health issues and learning difficulties. She is on ESA and is living alone. She came to us for help over a £632 arrears to her utility company. The utility company is threatening to put her on a PPM, which terrifies her. Miss L's benefits (with deductions for various loans) and, including the housing element, amounts to £850 per month. Her rent has just been increased from £600 to £700.



Miss L used to pay her electricity, quarterly by cash. She stopped paying in June and opted to use the money instead to cover the shortfall in her rent. She received the demand letter from the utility company requesting payment within 28 days or she would be switched to a pre-payment meter. Ms. S knows the pitfalls of a PPM and does not want to be transferred onto a PPM. She does not have sufficient income to pay the arrears or cover her heating costs on an ongoing basis.

Mr. T is on ESA. He is unable to work due to health issues. Mr. T used to pay his electricity through a fixed term tariff at £44 per month. He only has electricity and he has a SMART meter. He thinks what he was paying for was reasonable. In April, with the first price cap increase, Mr. T's monthly direct debit was adjusted and increased to £105. Mr. T tried to pay until August when he had to cancel the direct debit because he was unable to afford it.

In October, Mr. T received a demand from his utility company to pay total arrears of £400 within 28 days or he will be switched automatically to a pre-paid meter. Mr. T contacted his energy company to try to negotiate an affordable monthly payment plan but wasn't able to. His utility company switched him over to a PPM.

Mr. T knows that a PPM is a very costly alternative and felt aggrieved by the automatic switch. He contacted the utility company and complained. The utility company reversed their decision and Mr. T is in the process of negotiating an affordable payment plan to pay off his arrears. He has been switched to a standard variable tariff.

REJECTING A CLIENT'S OFFER FOR AN AFFORDABLE PAYMENT PLAN

Mr. and Mrs. B are a couple with 2 minor children. They are receiving a joint UC and PIP. Mrs. B suffered from a stroke recently. The couple were paying their utility company through a fixed term tariff the total amount of £160 for their gas and electricity. In September, the couple cancelled the direct debit because the utility company increased it to £232 a month, on account of the energy cap increases. The couple do not have a smart meter but submit meter readings.

On the 3rd October, the utility company demanded the payment of £800 in arrears. When contacted, the utility company explained that the arrears covered the difference between the actual direct debit payments and the current unpaid increases in the standing charges. Using the actual meter reading, we requested that Customer Service compute the consumption from the 3rd October to the 27th. The computation generated the amount of £145.

Explaining that the clients would like to arrange an affordable monthly payment plan, we were transferred to the Financing Department. The client declared that that the maximum amount they could offer towards the arrears and monthly usage was £180. The utility company rejected the offer outright saying that it could only accept the amount of £404.

A grandmother with learning difficulties and guardian to her 4 young grandchildren was struggling with significant energy debt in excess of £4,000.

The energy provider had written to the client a number of times about the debt. The client, however, due to her learning difficulties, was unable to read the correspondence and didn't deal with it. Normally the client would ask her daughter to read the letters to her, and she would know then what to do. Unfortunately, mother and daughter had fallen out and so this coping mechanism wasn't available to the client any longer.

Meanwhile, she continued to build further arrears in paying for her energy use. The client knew there was a problem but didn't know its extent or what to what to do about it. She came to Citizens Advice very worried she would have her supply cut off and that she would be unable to cook for her grandchildren and they would be cold. She was quite distressed.

We reviewed her circumstances and explained the position to her. Unable to work due to ill health, our client's only income was means tested benefits. In fact, she was in fuel poverty meaning that after heating her home, her residual income put her below the official poverty line.



We completed a benefits check and looked at ways to maximize her income as the basis for finding a way forward to pay her arrears. We helped the client contact the energy provider and navigated a very complicated process to apply to its hardship fund on her behalf.

The energy provider awarded the client £1000 towards her energy arrears and a manageable payment plan was agreed. The client was greatly relieved to have her debt reduced and to be able to maintain the security of her energy supply.

DEBT BREATHING SPACE AND CHARITABLE SUPPORT

The client lives in council accommodation. He has been diagnosed with a serious health condition of the spine, which adversely affects his mobility. The client is also diagnosed with bi-polar disorder.

The client was working part time for eight hours a week, but had an accident in February 2022 that necessitated operations on his leg, and a long recovery period. The client received statutory sick pay, and is in receipt of ongoing benefit income of ESA, PIP, CTR and HB. The client has not yet received the mobility element of PIP but this has been applied for. The client sought help to manage his household income and multiple debts. The client was overwhelmed by his debt issues and wished to manage them effectively to minimise debt enforcement action, as the prospect of this was causing him great anxiety.

The client was placed in a Breathing Space Moratorium and Citizens Advice wrote to all of his creditors to request write off of debt, or a nominal repayment plan to manage his debt on compassionate grounds. The creditors were sent a standard financial statement to illustrate the client's household budget and medical evidence from his GP/consultant to support the medical information provided.

During the period of the client's Breathing Space (60 days) there was some response from creditors to the request for the write off/nominal repayment plan. Most of the creditors did not respond and Citizens Advice wrote again to the creditors after the end of the breathing space period.

The client and Citizens Advice continued to maintain contact with the client's creditors over a matter of weeks. Six of the client's creditors agreed to write off the client's debts on compassionate grounds. Four agreed to a £1 repayment plan with a future review of client's circumstances, and the client set up payment plans for these. Citizens Advice arranged for the client to have support with fuel vouchers to help pay his utility bills, and supermarket vouchers for support with groceries.

HOUSING AND WELFARE BENEFITS ISSUES

The client is 27 years old, a lone parent, living with her three children, one of whom has additional needs. She is a housing association tenant. The client experienced chronic and severe domestic abuse, the resulting trauma has contributed to her being diagnosed with PTSD; Generalised Anxiety Disorder and Bipolar Disorder. There is a prohibited steps order in place against her ex-partner, the perpetrator of the domestic abuse.



The client approached Citizens Advice for housing advice. The police investigation has identified that her ex-partner has been stalking the client for five years, following the end of their relationship. The client felt extremely unsafe in her home, and wanted to move to new accommodation but was concerned about her capacity to make the application for housing.

Citizens Advice supported the client through homelessness application, signposted the client to specialist legal advice and support services for survivors of domestic abuse and provided the client with benefits advice. The client is moving from legacy benefits to Universal Credit, and advised client regarding how to make and manage a Universal Credit claim; on her son's Disability Living Allowance claim, which is being renewed.

The client is sixty-five years old, with multiple and substantial physical health conditions: The client is living in a specialist supported housing placement for individuals with physical disabilities. The client needed support with his Personal Independence Payment (PIP) claim. A review had been submitted prior to the client's most recent stay in hospital, during which his right leg had been amputated, meaning client became a double rather than single amputee. Supported client in contacting the DWP, who advised his current review could be updated to reflect this change, rather than submitting a new one.

From comprehensive exploration of client's income and circumstances, identified further benefits advice and support beneficial to client. The adviser contacted local district council on client's behalf to ensure his housing benefit claim was updated with correct financial information, and supported client to renew his blue badge.

A benefits calculation identified that as client would not reach state pension age for another year, he could claim Universal Credit, standard element. The adviser supported client in making online claim for Universal Credit, providing general advice on the benefit and how to make and manage the claim. Additional advice was provided on preparation for the Jobcentre interview.

DIGITAL EXCLUSION

Wealden Citizens Advice have an adviser working at the foodbank, funding by Trussel Trust, to advise clients and look at income maximisation.

The client cannot use a computer. The client also suffers with depression, anxiety and grief from losing family members. She tried access Cruise help and Health-in-mind but they offer mainly online support and the client has struggled to get face to face or phone support. The client needed help with a PIP form, but didn't know where to go for help as she was not able to access online info. The Citizens Advice adviser helped her to apply for PIP, a potential entitlement of Enhanced rate DLA and standard rate mobility.

The client called in for help applying for pension credit. The client is digitally excluded. She does not have IT skills or computer to access online applications. The client only gets £750- 4 weekly state pension and cannot afford all of her bills. The adviser helped the client to apply for pension credit, completing the application online with client. This will also give passporting benefit entitlement.



OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

LOCAL

- Benefit uptake campaign eligibility, help to apply, increased resources
- Digital Inclusion work—expand this by supporting existing agencies and targeting advice towards those in need
- Council support systems review Household Support fund, DESS scheme etc
- Blue Badge scheme—review application and renewal process to ensure maximum accessibility

NATIONAL FINANCIAL INCLUSION

- Personal Independence Payment—we need a system which is fair and efficient for all applicants
- Universal Credit rates / eligibility— these need to be reviewed to enable more people on low incomes to receive support and to provide better rates of financial support to those who are not in work.
- We need a commitment in the social security system that benefit rates will always be enough to protect people from destitution. This support is needed not just in a national crisis, but every day.
- Review of Local Housing Allowance rates: As the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) is much lower than the cost of local rents, many of our clients are thrown into dire financial difficulty and debt by their housing costs. We would recommend more regular reviews of local LHA rates, in order to ensure these are better matched with up-to-date local rent prices.

DIGITAL INCLUSION

- There should always be an alternative to digital communication e.g. phone number or paper form.
- Using non-digital means of application should not be a disadvantage e.g. phone lines should be adequately staffed, phone lines free to consumers
- If people are to be encouraged to use digital services then websites need to be safe, clear and efficient, systems and processes need to work.
- No one should be prevented from accessing the financial support which is available because of they cant use digital systems.

Citizens Advice East Sussex The value of our work - 2022-23

Annual Income gained through Benefits Advice £16,537,560 Clients with one-off benefits awards Total Annual value £1,351,999 880 clients Average value per client £1,536

Clients with on-going benefits awards Total Annual Value £15,185,561 2,364 clients

Average Value per client £6,424

Value of Debt advice Total debts written off £5,126,986

378 clients





Total Estimated Debt managed £18,947,106

2,469 clients Average debt per client **£7,674**

Value of Consumer Advice Refunds, Compensation etc £464,269





Value of Consumer Advice 3,924 clients

Proportion who reported financial gain 59%

Average Benefit per client £424

Citizens Advice East Sussex Our financial value to society 2022-23

Our Overall value (advice and volunteering)

Fiscal value total	£5,772,165
Public value total	£43,205,235
Value to the people we help total	£22,128,815

For every £1 invested:

For every £1, £x in fiscal value	£3.17
For every £1, £x in public value	£23.76
For every £1, £x in value to the people we help	£12.17

Local authority- by preventing homelessness and evictions & mental health services

 Savings to local authority total (fiscal value)
 £573,684

 Savings to local authority total (Council tax Arrears repayment scheduled)
 £47,517

 *N.B. Most local Citizens Advice do not breakeven on their LA funding - this is because we only put a financial value on preventing homelessness.
 financial value on preventing homelessness.

NHS - by reducing use of mental health and GP services, and keeping people in work

Reducing use of health services	£829,863
Keeping people in work	£154,643
Total saving to NHS	£984,506

Our value to other government departments

Department of Work and Pensions (by keeping people in work)	£2,422,746
Criminal Justice System (by preventing housing evictions and homelessness)	£69,177
Housing Providers (by preventing housing evictions)	£1,719,694

Wider economic and social benefits

Public value of improving clients' wellbeing (emotional wellbeing,	
family relationships and positive functioning)	£31,600,708
Public value of volunteering (part of public value total)	£1,245,838





If you are struggling to afford to keep your home heated to at least 18°C...

Plan to keep just one or two rooms warm safely

- Check out the best way to use your heating system
- Use your heating controls and thermostatic radiator valves (TRVs)

visit: warmeastsussex. org.uk/ keep-warm/diy

 Maintain ventilation and air flow to avoid damp and mould

Keep yourself warm

- Wear several light layers of warm clothes
- Keep active indoors
- Have hot drinks and meals
- Use hot water bottles or wheat bags

visit: <u>moneysavingexpert.com</u> <u>/utilities/heat-the-</u> <u>human-not-the-home-</u> <u>save-energy</u>

Ask us for help, advice and financial support

East Sussex Warm Home Check service offers free advice, along with home energy efficiency visits for eligible households: warmeastsussex.org.uk or 0800 464 7307 or text WARM to 80011 Citizens Advice offers energy advice, financial support and fuel vouchers:

citizensadvice1066.co.uk or 01424 869 352

East Sussex Fire & Rescue Service offers free home safety visits and electric blanket safety advice: esfrs.org or 0800 177 7069

Social Housing Providers Optivo: optivo.org.uk or 0800 121 60 60

Orbit: <u>orbit.org.uk</u> or 0800 678 1221

Details of other organisations and sources of cost of living support eastsussex.gov.uk/costofliving gov.uk/help-for-households

Cold Homes Kill

Beware of heating risks

- Reduce fire risk from open fires and portable heaters
- Un-swept chimneys or damp wood can start chimney fires
- Install a carbon monoxide monitor
- You can ask the fire service for a free home safety visit
- Check your electric blanket is safe to use.

Damp and mould

- Causes breathing problems
- Makes asthma worse
- Can cause damage to possessions and buildings
- You can deal with damp and mould by following the steps provided on our web page. If you rent your home, you can also alert your landlord.

visit: <u>warmeastsussex.org.uk/</u> keep-

warm/condensation

Cold causes blood to thicken and blood pressure to rise, increasing the risk of stroke and heart attack

Heat your home to at least 18°C

Did you know?

- Below 16°C breathing becomes more difficult
- Below 12°C there is strain on the heart and risk of heart attack
- Below 9°C can cause hypothermia and risk of death

visit: warmeastsussex.org.uk 0800 464 7307 Text WARM to 80011 Apply for a Warm Home Check

Check out the information on how to stay warm and well in cold weather on the other side of this leaflet and at: <u>www.warmeastsussex.org.uk</u>

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visit: <u>esfrs.org/your-</u> safety/home-safety-visits 0800 177 7069

citizens advice Tackling Fuel Poverty Together

Check if something is an energy scam

Energy scams are on the rise.

Scammers have different ways of getting hold of personal information or bank details. For example, by pretending to:

- be a supplier offering a refund
- be from Ofgem asking for information so you can get the £400 energy rebate
- be a debt collector asking for money owed to a supplier that's gone bust
- offer green home improvement grants
- offer energy investment opportunities
- offer cheap prepayment meter top up keys or cards
- offer energy-saving devices

Check if something is a scam.

Visit

https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/consumer/scams/check-if-something-might-be-a-scam/

You can also contact our scams advisers if you:

- think you might have found an online scam
- need advice about scams
- want to report an online scam

Talk to a scams adviser.

You can contact an adviser by calling the consumer helpline.

Telephone: 0808 223 1133

Monday to Friday, 8am to 6pm - except on public holidays.

Calls are free from mobiles and landlines.

You can also chat with an adviser online. Our chat service is available 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday. It's not available on public holidays. Visit:

https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/consumer/scams/get-help-with-online-scams/



EASTBOURNE

0808 144 8848 Freephone

eastbournecab.co.uk

Unit 6 Highlight House 8 St Leonards Road EASTBOURNE East Sussex BN21 3UH

Citizens Advice 1066 (HASTINGS & ROTHER)

01424 869 352 citizensadvice1066.co.uk

HASTINGS The Magnet Centre Alfred Street St. Leonards-on-Sea TN38 0HD

WEALDEN DISTRICT

0808 278 7811

Wealden (Crowborough) Citizens Advice Croham Lodge

Croham Road CROWBOROUGH

Wealden (Hailsham) Citizens Advice

Southview Western Road HAILSHAM East Sussex BN27 3DN

0808 278 7892

lewesdistrictcab.org.uk

Newhaven 15 - 19 Chapel Street NEWHAVEN BN9 9PN

LEWES DISTRICT

Lewes Southover Road Lewes BN7 1AB Peacehaven Meridian Centre Meridian Way BN10 8BL

BEXHILL

TN40 1JB

40 Saint Leonards Road,

BEXHILL-ON-SEA

Seaford 37 Church Street SEAFORD BN25 1HG

To contact by email visit www.eastsussexcab.co.uk

For Help to Claim Universal Credit phone 0800 144 8444 For Consumer Advice phone 0808 223 1133

wealdencitizensadvice.org.uk

Wealden (Uckfield) Citizens Advice Uckfield Library Library Way High Street UCKFIELD TN22 1AR