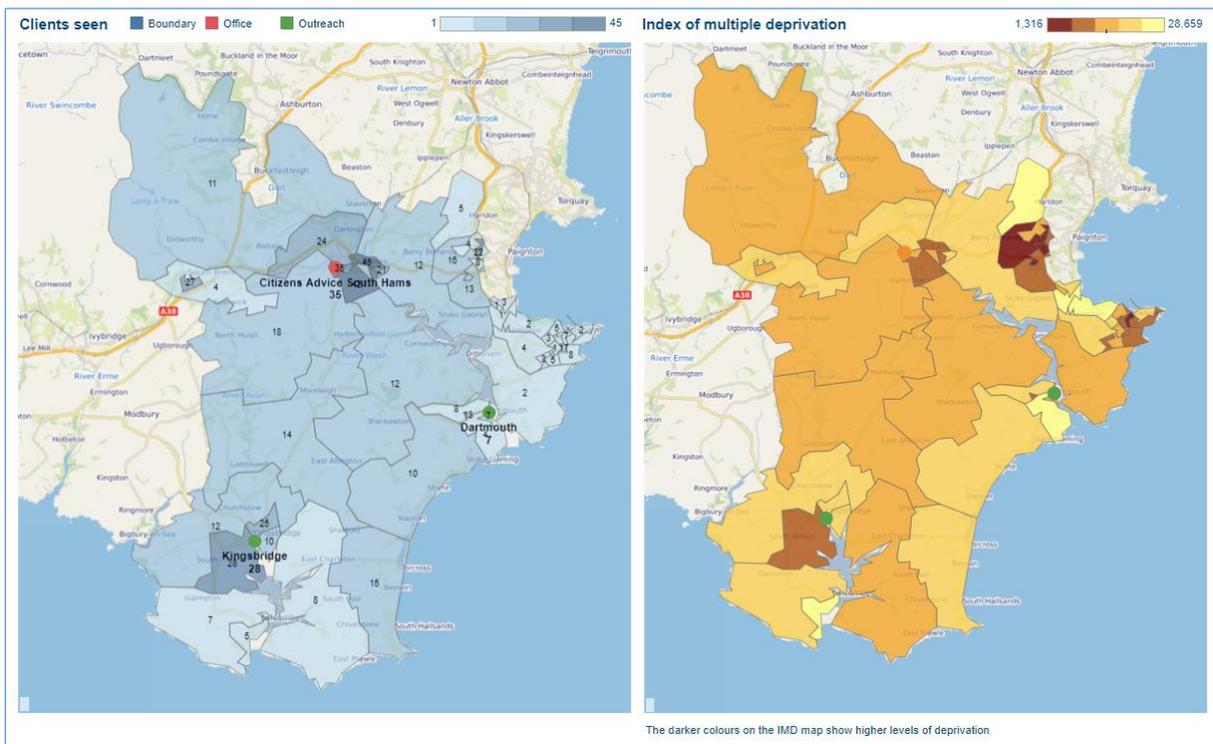


PIP and ESA Assessment Process Report

Personal Independence Payments (PIP) and Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)

PIP and ESA are consistently the top benefit issues we help clients deal with. During 2018-19 Citizens Advice helped people living within the Totnes constituency with 813 issues regarding PIP and 616 issues with ESA. The situation within Totnes constituency reflects the inadequacies of the system at national level.

Map of Totnes Constituency showing 1) clients helped with PIP and ESA issues and 2) levels of deprivation



We have been aware of inadequacies of the system for some time. We therefore undertook a review of our local Evidence Forms, and interviewed a selection of clients to further our understanding. This report outlines our findings.

Our Findings

Clients were contacting Citizens Advice for help throughout the entire process from eligibility to Mandatory Reconsideration (MR) and the appeals process. A common theme running through the Evidence Forms was the fact that clients felt a distinct difference between their experience of the assessment compared with the assessor's report and subsequent decision by the DWP (Department for Work and Pensions) on their application.

"Client feels assessment did not match her experience with the assessor."

"Client feels the report completely misrepresented her comments at the assessment."

"Client believes that her assessor misrepresented her comments and the report contained a number of errors, which contradicted the submitted clinical evidence."

Mental health

There appears to be a gulf in the quality of assessment reporting between recognised physical illnesses and those suffering from mental health problems. This calls into question the training and expertise of the health professionals employed by the contracted assessment services. Whether they are adequately equipped to determine the effects of mental health and if they are trained in how to effectively interact with vulnerable persons. A significant proportion of clients were found to be suffering from mental health issues, often reporting an increase in anxiety around the assessment, with waiting times and appeals processes exacerbating their condition.

One client receiving ESA was called to medical assessments every 6 months which left her feeling fearful, anxious, and in a constant state of unsettlement.

Many expressed they felt the extent of their illness was inaccurately reported by the assessor. In one case, a client who suffered from serious chronic mental health problems was reported as being unwell twice a year, when in fact they had been describing how they suffer a serious mental breakdown twice a year in which they are bedridden for up to four weeks and are constantly unwell all year round.

Clients suffering from mental health issues can also find the rigidity of the appointments with the assessors or at the Job Centre difficult to cope with and have felt a lack of empathy when having missed appointments due to their mental health.

Learning difficulties

Similarly to mental health awareness, clients or those assisting clients in the process reported a lack of assessor understanding with regard to learning difficulties.

The father of a client with autism felt the assessment did not take into account the significance of his son having autism and what this meant in terms of the care and support needed.

Again, this calls into question how prepared the health professionals are to understand conditions which may be complex to explain or evidence.

Several clients were contacting Citizens Advice for initial help in completing the PIP form due to learning difficulties.

Waiting times

Clients reported several issues regarding waiting times and delays. This understandably has financial impacts as well as stress and potential worsening of mental health conditions. In one case a client did not receive an assessment until 4 months after their initial application.

Another client after having put in a supersession, i.e. a change of circumstances of her PIP award decision, did not receive a reply for nine months. Her case then went to mandatory reconsideration adding further delays.

Not only are these waiting times having a severe impact on client's lives but they also reported a lack of adequate communication during this time leaving many feeling left in the dark about the status of their application/ appeal. Several clients reported issues with reaching the DWP via their helpline or existing client line, with delays of up to an hour not uncommon.

Severe financial impacts

The drop in income from a reassessment or loss of a certain component can have a significant impact on the client's ability to meet their needs. This can lead to reliance/strain on family members, debt or food bank referral.

One client had her daily living allowance reduced from enhanced to standard, meaning she lost approximately £30 a week from her income. This left her struggling to pay for the assistance she needed to cope with her disability and she resorted to paying with her credit card thereby incurring debt.

Another client had her mobility payments stopped and was seeking a referral from Citizens Advice to the food bank in order to financially manage additional pressures for herself and her child.

Assessment location

Assessments can take place in either a local assessment centre or at the client's home, although home assessments are normally only offered if the client receives home GP visits. In one case a client received the assessment in their own home, even though they did not request it and found this rather confusing.

Advisors remark how often clients prefer to have the assessment at the centre as they can then retire to the comfort of their home. Having an assessment at home, although necessary for some, can cause distress when an assessment has a negative outcome. The client would have liked to have had the choice as to where to be assessed.

Conduct of the assessor

Citizens Advice advisors have commented on the varying quality of assessors and client experience. The majority of clients have a negative view of how the assessment was conducted, often remarking that the questions are formulaic and give little scope for describing the impact of their health conditions on their day-to-day life. One client felt the assessor was not prepared to listen and only wanted them to answer specific questions, the client subsequently had their benefits stopped. Another client, who was accompanied by a sibling for the

medical assessment felt neither of them were given the opportunity during the assessment to explain the full impact of the client's health problems on her daily life and mobility. This undoubtedly leaves clients feeling unheard or not fully represented.

One client commented on the brevity of the assessment, stating it was 'completed in just 10 minutes and was poorly done and inaccurate'.

There appears to be little uniformity on the length of assessments, despite the DWP stating they will take around an hour. Such a short assessment time is concerning as it seems unlikely an assessor would be able to gather all the evidence needed for a thorough assessment in this time.

In one case a client was left shocked and upset by the behaviour and attitude of the assessor who failed to pause the assessment despite the client suffering seizures and asked the client if they had contemplated suicide. This is further concerning evidence regarding training provided and assessor awareness surrounding dealing with complex physical and mental health problems.

Inaccuracies in the scoring system

Clients often feel the assessor has overstated their capability to perform tasks or their degree of mobility from an observed performance of physical exercise.

In one instance, a client's assessment stated the client was 'observed to walk 15 metres with no problems and could therefore be assumed to walk more than 20 metres ok'. This client was not observed to walk 15 metres; he opened the door to the assessor from his chair, a maximum of 3 metres.

Clients understandably therefore contest certain elements of their scoring when they feel they were not observed to do the tasks listed and feel the assessor has made an inaccurate judgement.

Conclusions

In summary, our findings demonstrate severe inadequacies within the benefit assessment process. It is our view that if the assessment procedure could reach

the correct decision at the initial consultation stage it would save both the applicant and the DWP time and money. As well as an emotional stress for clients, the unnecessary mandatory reconsideration process is lengthy and costly to the tax-payer.

The assessment providers should therefore reconsider the assessment training offered to their staff so as to ensure the quality of the assessment. In particular we recommend that training provided to assessors specialises in interacting with people with mental health conditions, complex health conditions and learning disabilities. Consideration should be given to:

- How long are assessors expected to spend with applicants to ensure a proper detailed assessment
- Can applicants be assured the assessor has read all their contributory evidence prior to the assessment
- Applicants also being entitled to audio record the assessment process, therefore eradicating any potential contradictions or discrepancies which arise post-assessment and providing a simple method for quality control.

**Report compiled by Citizens Advice South Hams Social Policy Team
on behalf of Citizens Advice South Hams and Citizens Advice Torbay
July 2019**

Further Reading

Citizens Advice Exeter, *'Appealing for Common Sense: Benefit appeals and their impact'*, February 2018.

Citizens Advice Exeter, *'Interim Report - PIP assessment client experience survey'*, March 2018.

Citizens Advice South Hams Benefits Team, *'The case for abolishing the 'mandatory reconsideration' stage when challenging benefits decisions'*, March 2018.

Citizens Advice Torbay, *'The Impact of Benefit Appeals: How are our clients affected during the process of appealing their Personal Independence Payment Award'*, April 2018.

House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, *'PIP and ESA assessments'*, Seventh Report of Session 2017-19, February 2018.