



Background

Reading Welfare Rights was established in 1988 to provide free advocacy, support, advice and guidance to people about their rights to state benefits. We specialise in providing this support to people who have the most complex needs.

We have recently secured a nationwide contact with HM Courts and Tribunals Service to provide online support to people who are appealing initial decisions regarding Personal Independence Payments – a non means tested benefit for people with significant physical and/or mental health conditions.

We now seek to extend our catchment area beyond the borough of Reading and are seeking additional funding to offer our full range of services to local residents in your area.

How we work

We can be reached by phone, email, through our website and social media platforms. When possible, we run outreach events which we advertise with residential leaflet drops in the locations where they are to be held. This is an important part of our communications strategy, as it helps us to connect with those who are digitally excluded and so may find it hard to access support.

The present team

This comprises a CEO, 1 full time caseworker, 3 part-time caseworkers, 4 volunteers and a team of 7 Trustees. Our paid team is comprised of 3.8 full-time equivalent members of staff working 147 hours each week. The CEO post is presently 100% funded by our National Lottery grant, as is 50% of our full-time caseworker.

Currently, we have to signpost 20% of those who ask us for help to other organisations, as our team are fully occupied helping existing clients. We therefore need to expand our service to support the increasing number of people now coming to us for help, including those from outside of Reading whom we want to start supporting, which is why we are seeking additional funding.

Current financial position

Since 2016, our capacity was depleted, year-on-year, due to severe Government cuts to our principal funder Reading Borough Council. We also came to the end of a substantial, long-term grant from a local charity. This required us to reduce 40% of the working hours of our staff and inevitably, our level of service to clients.

However, since 2019, we have been rebuilding capacity through; a large grant from the National Lottery Community Fund, various smaller grants from local funders, additional innovative fundraising activities, such as crowd funding and most recently from a government contract to help digitally excluded people to appeal benefit decisions online.

We need to continue securing funds because the current economic situation and the cost of living crisis is reaching crisis point for our most vulnerable citizens.



Our impact

We support clients from initial application for benefits such as Personal Independence Payments, Attendance Allowance, Pension Credits and Universal Credit, through to appeals and tribunal advocacy. We help clients secure benefits they are due, so helping provide them with the financial security to get on with their lives. This is demanding work, as clients often lack the skills to navigate the increasingly complex, digital benefit system themselves and so need a great deal of support from us. We often have to intervene at a critical moment when people are in real crisis, but always strive to help them become more financially secure and to grow their confidence in managing their own money, where possible.

Between June 2021 and May 2022, we supported 1,087 new clients who presented us with **1,640** complex, time consuming issues. Over this 12-month period, we secured **£546,210.74** in benefits for our clients.

The need

The demand from vulnerable people for help in claiming benefits constantly increases and adverse changes in benefit regulations have left many people with their benefit awards being withdrawn. These people are often the least able to understand the benefits landscape, yet are the most deserving and appropriate recipients of that support.

We presently have to ask some clients to wait until we have capacity to support them, which is often difficult as benefit appeals are date specific. Our team have to juggle their challenging workloads to meet these deadlines. We are also seeing a steady increase in client numbers, particularly now in regard to people with mental health conditions. This has been partly driven by the impact of both Covid and the current cost of living crisis on those who were already really struggling, but now just cannot cope at all: and for whom life will soon become even harsher when energy prices increase, yet again

Brief case study

Mrs J, 74, came to one of our outreach surgeries. She was extremely distressed and traumatised by what had happened to her. She needed time to trust us, but eventually disclosed that she had suffered significant psychological and physical abuse by family members. Fearing for her life, following death threats from her husband, with help, she fled the home, which she jointly owned, to a safe house, but had lost her home - and access to her bank account.

Mrs J had tried to apply for Pension Credit by phone, but was told that as a home owner she would not qualify for the benefit. We applied online for her and advised the Department for Work and Pensions that we were acting as her advocate. When briefed about the domestic violence that this lady could not express and its impact on her, the Department was then fully supportive and arranged for Mrs J to receive the Pension Credit that she so desperately needed to start her new life.

Our request for financial help

We need skilled, experienced caseworkers to help people like Mrs J – and more capacity to meet increasing demand in general. The cost of one hour of support from our caseworkers is £16, including all on-costs. £116 therefore pays for ten hours of support, which is a significant contribution. Clearly, the larger the donation, the more people we will be able to help.

How many caseworker hours can your organisation donate to help us to help more vulnerable people?

August 2022