



Richmond

## Campaigning Update No.6 2021

CitizensAdviceRichmond.org

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In June 2021 we helped nearly 1,000 Richmond people with advice about 2,500 issues. Benefits (770 issues) and housing (350 issues) generated the most enquiries, while debt (190 issues) featured prominently. In just one month we helped local people gain £180,000 to which they are entitled.

### Unlawful “no DSS” policies restrict housing options



Too many private landlords and their agents in Richmond discriminate against people who receive benefits. These so-called “no DSS” policies are not only unlawful but prevent many Richmond people on lower incomes from renting properties they can afford. For example, one of our clients wants to move from an overcrowded and damp flat to a

larger property. Several potential landlords have refused to deal with her because she claims benefits — even though she can afford the rent.

**Our Call for Action:** “No DSS” policies are unlawful, unfair and must stop. People on benefits can be good tenants, and it is possible for rents to be paid direct to landlords by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) or the Council. In our campaign against “no DSS” policies we plan to publicise the support from various Richmond Council schemes which can help alleviate many landlord concerns. We also plan to help tenants to understand how to show that they can afford the proposed rent, challenge discrimination when they find it, and complain if all else fails.

### Poor communication about Universal Credit debt causes unnecessary stress



The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) sometimes deducts money from Universal Credit to pay back debts. Debts can arise when people have been paid too much benefit in error, or to repay an advance payment. DWP policy is that people should be able to find out why money is taken off their payment by looking at their online

account. But this does not always happen, and it can cause confusion and stress. One of our clients, who has serious mental health issues, could find no information about why money was being taken. We helped her find details by calling DWP, but this took a long time. Another client, who is disabled, had over £80 a month deducted and could not find out why by looking at her online account. Without this basic information the client is unable to challenge the deductions, which she thinks are too high.

**Our Call for Action:** People claiming Universal Credit should be able to find out why deductions are being made by looking at their online accounts. This is what is meant to happen. Making it difficult to obtain basic information is not only inefficient but causes unnecessary stress to benefit claimants, who are often vulnerable.

## Our Current Campaigns

- **Adequacy of welfare support** – We are researching the extent to which local people who receive benefits can make ends meet and the impact of Richmond’s high housing costs on people on lower incomes. This local information will form part of Citizens Advice’s national #KeepTheLifeline campaign to retain the £20 a week uplift to Universal Credit beyond September 2021.
- **Social housing tenants’ issues** – We are working with local housing associations in Richmond to address recurrent problems with tenants’ rent arrears, repairs and neighbour harassment issues. We have regular meetings with the major social landlords in Richmond to find practical ways to address these concerns.
- **Stop “no DSS” policies** – We are developing a campaign to increase private landlords’ awareness that it is unlawful to discriminate against prospective renters because they receive benefits. We would like to see a greater awareness and uptake of Richmond Council’s Rent Deposit Guarantee Scheme.
- **Housing benefit loophole** – We have become aware from recent casework that some unscrupulous landlords (private and social housing) appear to be exploiting a loophole in the way Housing Benefit and the housing element of Universal Credit are calculated for single people aged over 35. We are assembling evidence on this issue with other local Citizens Advice charities with a view to contributing to a national campaign to prevent this cynical exploitation of vulnerable people.
- **Freeing up underoccupied social housing** – There is a shortage of social housing in Richmond, particularly for families. In June we discussed with Richmond Council and local housing associations additional ways to help tenants to move from underoccupied properties where they wish to do so to free up larger properties for families on Richmond’s homelessness and housing registers. We will discuss with the Council’s Communication team how more might be done to publicise the Council’s Sponsored Moves Scheme. We will also ensure that our advisers signpost clients to the various national mutual exchange websites.

### About Citizens Advice Richmond

Citizens Advice Richmond gives free, impartial and confidential advice to anyone who lives, works or studies in Richmond borough, or cares for someone who lives in the borough. As well as providing advice, we aim to spot emerging problems affecting local people, and to set out new ideas to improve policy and delivery for all.

**Feedback:** We welcome feedback and suggestions – [click here](#).

**Free advice:** Please call us on Freephone 080 82 78 78 73 or fill in the form [here](#).

**Benefit calculator:** Find out what benefits you can claim [here](#).

**Partner organisation referrals:** Refer clients to us via [this form](#).