

Possability People

Stories from our Advice Centre

January to September 2017

Caroline's story

Caroline is 55 and has uncontrolled epilepsy. She experiences multiple seizures a week. After a Work Capability Assessment, she lost her entitlement to ESA, which she had received for a number of years. She challenged the decision but it was upheld following a mandatory reconsideration.

Our Advice Centre helped Caroline to appeal, and she was supported at the subsequent tribunal by Possability People's Advocacy Service. The tribunal upheld her appeal, and reinstated her ESA within the Work Related Activity Group. She received a back payment of benefit.

From appealed decision to tribunal:
4 months, 26 days.

"Disabled people continue to be marginalised in our society. They are asked to jump through hoop after hoop in order to access the allowances and benefits they need to survive, a process which can often take many months during which time they have no money.

"Possability People's Advice Centre hears their stories day after day, and works tirelessly to do what it can to help. But it's a sad reality that the cases in this report are the tip of the iceberg; we see hundreds of people every year and the picture is the same in towns and cities all over the country.

Geraldine Des Moulins, Chief Officer





Possability People is a Sussex charity which supports disabled people to live independently.

Its Advice Centre supports hundreds of people each year who face losing the benefits and allowances that enable them to manage. For those clients, the difficulties and stresses of their conditions are compounded not only by the fear of losing their income, but also the process of dealing with a system which can often feel as though it is set up to discourage them.

Joan's story

Joan is 68 years old. With widespread arthritis, respiratory disease and a hearing impairment, she is reliant on a range of aids and appliances in her home to manage day to day life.

She has support from her daughter (herself disabled), a carer and a Motability car, which means she can get out and about.

She came to the Advice Centre when she needed help to complete a PIP application when moving from DLA. But after her benefits assessment, she was awarded a much lower amount, with nothing for the mobility component. This meant she could no longer afford her carer, whilst the prospect of losing her car (her lifeline) loomed. Possability People helped her to appeal this decision, and supported her at the subsequent tribunal. The tribunal found in her favour, awarding PIP at the enhanced rate for both daily living and mobility.

The judge stated that the length of the award reflected the nature of her conditions, and said: "it is remarkable that the assessor overlooked [her] use of hearing aids".

From appealed decision to tribunal: 3 months, 19 days.

50% of our clients went to their GP more often while waiting for mandatory reconsideration of benefit decisions.

For disabled people who rely on a Motability car, its loss can lead to loneliness and isolation, which in turn often has exacerbates people's conditions.

*We have changed clients' names to preserve their anonymity. Cover image posed by model.

Peter's story

Peter is 57. He has complex mental health issues including post traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, social phobia and body dysmorphia, all of which severely limit his ability to engage with other people and to get around on his own.

Our Advice Centre helped him to apply for PIP, but following assessment, his benefit was refused. The Advice Centre assisted him to request a mandatory reconsideration and, when this was upheld, we helped him to lodge and prepare an appeal and to obtain supporting medical evidence.

At the subsequent tribunal, Peter was awarded PIP at the enhanced rate for ten years. He received a back payment of benefit of more than £7,000.

From appealed decision to tribunal: 7 months, 21 days.

Disabled people pay, on average, an extra £550 a month on the extra costs relating to their condition.

*Papworth Trust

A day in the life of our Advice Centre

9:30 Advisors arrive and prepare for the day, checking emails and actions from yesterday, catching up on admin, planning the day. There are two staff advisors working in the office, two drop in volunteers, one desk volunteer and one advisor delivering outreach sessions in the community. There is also a student starting their university placement with us. At drop ins, we dedicate 15 – 20 minutes to each person. There's already someone at the drop in which doesn't start till 10; they wanted to be first in line.

9:45 Two more people arrive for a drop in.

10:00 Drop in and phone lines open. First two clients are being seen while desk volunteer takes calls and replies to emails. Person who waited from 9am has a critical issue. His Employment and Support Allowance, his only source of income, stopped suddenly and he doesn't know why. He has no money in the bank and it is Friday. Advisor calls DWP: client is being moved from Contribution Based to Income Related benefit (ESA rules are very complicated). He was asked to submit bank statements. DWP confirm they received statements but failed to process them in time. Client will receive a call back within 24 hours (this is standard procedure) from local job centre. There's nothing else we can do. Advisor makes a food bank referral so client will have enough food to see them through the next few days. The advisor notes the meeting; they have no time to put it in the computer system now; there are three more people waiting to be seen.

11:00 We let everyone in the waiting room know we're working as quickly as we can. We check everyone knows we won't be able to fill out long benefit forms. One of the clients was waiting for that; we book them an appointment instead.

A volunteer arrives; he commits at least nine hours a week to support disabled people in the area, even though he has multiple health issues himself.

12:00 All appointment rooms are full so someone must be seen in the open plan office. The enquiry is complicated, client is thinking about reducing their working hours and wanted to know if they need to tell anyone. They get tax credits. The advisor notices that the client lives in a Universal Credit area; the change would push them out of their current benefits and onto Universal Credit. Volunteer handling the case has completed relevant training and has the necessary knowledge to advise client on options and the consequences.

Another client comes in worried about a text. They are agitated. It's a generic text about PPI (bank fees refund). The client panicked as they confused it with PIP (disability benefit they rely on to pay for extra costs arising from their disability). Volunteer takes time to calm them down and explain the difference. Client says that thanks to us they will be able to sleep tonight.

13:00 Shift handover. There are a few unread emails and a number of people to be called as we couldn't reach them in the morning. We do not give up easily; mornings can be difficult

if you are living with a health condition or an impairment that makes everyday activities (like getting up) harder.

Client arrives for appointment for help filling in an ESA form. Second advisor works on the submission to a tribunal, it has to be sent today. They receive good news: medical evidence requested has arrived just in time. Medical evidence can make all the difference in supporting an appeal.

15:00 Drop in closes, one person is still being seen by the volunteer. They are on the phone to DWP, they have already been waiting for 40 minutes but the call is urgent. Client's PIP was stopped over 3 weeks ago but because of their mental health problems, they find it hard to deal with letters. They've only just opened it and now only have a couple of days to start an appeal. If they lose their benefit, one of the things they will also lose is their car and the independence that comes with it. The volunteer talks through the appeal process and explores the options with their vehicle and when they finally get through, they register Mandatory Reconsideration.

16:00 Advice Centre closes. We saw 12 people between 10am and 3pm, and supported a client with completing benefit forms. We made a food bank referral, an application to the Discretionary Social Fund and submitted an appeal. We've answered multiple calls, responded to emails, answered questions from colleagues and supported volunteers on shift. The Advice Centre opens again on Monday.

For the period January - September 2017

The average number of enquiries received each month is 404 (includes, phone calls, appointments, drop ins and emails.)

80% of these enquiries are about welfare benefits.

We see an average of 12 people per day at our drop in sessions.

This is a 9% increase on the same period last year.

We've seen a 5.5% increase in drop in sessions compared to the same time last year.

We have three part time advisors and six volunteers (not all working at the same time)

Glossary

DWP	Department for Work and Pensions Government department responsible for welfare, pensions and child maintenance policy.
ESA	Employment and Support Allowance money you receive if you can't work because of illness or disability.
MC	Mandatory reconsideration An internal review by the DWP of a benefit decision. Must be requested before an appeal can be made.
Motability	A charity which enables disabled people to lease a car, scooter or powered wheelchair in exchange for their mobility allowance.
PIP	Personal Independence Payment Benefit for people who need help with mobility or care costs. Replaced Disability Living Allowance.
WCA	Work Capability Assessment test used by the DWP to decide if someone is eligible for benefits.
WRAG	Work Related Activity Group The DWP decided your condition limits your ability to work but there are things you can do to improve this.

"My adviser was very kind and helpful. It was good to have someone supporting me. Possability People do great work and help people.

"Financial situation improved. You helped me get backdated payments from employer and the DWP. Sorting out my financial issues took away the stress and improved my physical and mental health.

"It's a great help with filling out forms, which I have trouble understanding and find hard to do.

"Try to keep doing what you're doing!

Contact our Advice Centre

Email: advice@possabilitypeople.org.uk

Telephone: 01273 89 40 50

Textphone: 07774 910064

www.possabilitypeople.org.uk

Possability People, Montague House,
Montague Place, Brighton BN2 1JE.

Registered charity No 1114435 Company number 05706441