



Impact of COVID-19 on the advice sought from the Scottish Citizens Advice Network – March 2020

21 April 2020

Introduction

Throughout March 2020, the Scottish Citizens Advice network has seen substantial changes in the types of advice sought and also how people were accessing this advice. These changes are a culmination of the environment we are now working in and new measures being introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. What our statistics show are the changes in advice needs from Citizens Advice Bureaux (February to March 2020) and on the public advice site (March 2019 to March 2020). This publication focuses on employment and benefits.

During March 2020, almost 78,000 pieces of advice were provided by the 59 Citizens Advice Bureaux (CABs) across Scotland. Given the substantial shift from face to face advice provision to primarily telephone based advice that has occurred as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, this figure is a small decrease from the 85,000 pieces of advice provided during February 2020. There has also been a substantial increase in the amount of visits to our public advice site, with employment-related advice being the most sought after. In spite of the short time scale, changes in advice sought from CABs are also evident. Between February and March 2020, we have seen employment-related advice double as a proportion of all advice provided by CABs.

March 2020 - impact of COVID-19

All **59**
Citizens Advice Bureaux now
delivering phone and web-based advice



77,949
pieces of advice issued by local CABs



6,874
new benefits and employment clients
- 15% increase on number of new
clients from February 2020



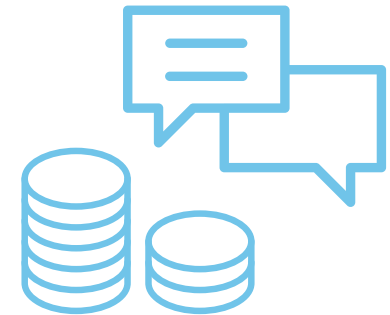
23,814
pieces of advice given in relation to benefits
by local Citizens Advice Bureaux

Includes:
6,438 on Universal Credit
696 on Jobseekers Allowance



4,153
pieces of advice on employment

Includes:
1,074 on pay and entitlements
566 on terms and conditions of employment



46%
of all people seeking employment
advice were under the age of **34**
(excludes prefer not to say)



435,898
total visits to our online advice site
Advice for Scotland
22% increase on March 2019



Coronavirus - what it means for you' was the
second most-visited page on our online advice
advice site after the home page with



31,760
unique page views

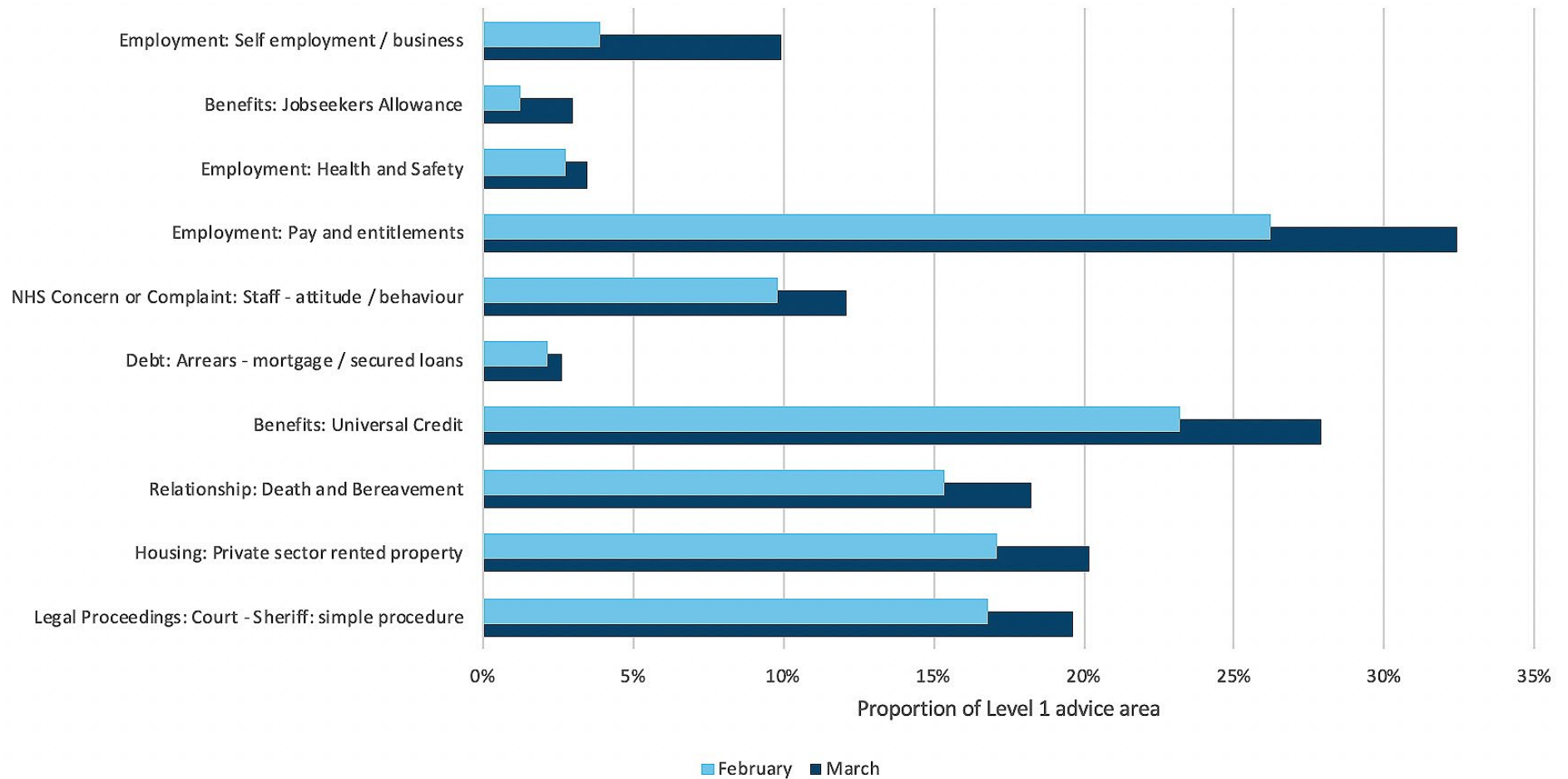


Surge in demand for on-line advice

We have seen changes in the advice needs of CAB clients.

Chart 1 outlines the Top 10 advice areas showing the most notable changes between February and March 2020.

Chart 1: Top 10 shifts in proportion of advice provision February to March 2020 (in order of largest proportional change to the smallest)



Note: Chart 1 shows the ten advice sub-categories (e.g. 'Jobseekers Allowance', 'Health and Safety') that have grown most as a proportion of their associated main advice category (e.g. 'Benefits', 'Employment'). Advice sub-categories recorded less than 100 times in March 2020 are omitted.

What advice people are searching for on-line

Total page views across the public advice site have increased throughout March 2020 and into April in comparison to the same period in 2019. Total views reached 96,377 by Monday 23 March and increased by 21% to 116,919 by Monday 30 March. A further increase of 18% to 137,380 page views had occurred by Monday 6 April.

Similar to the pattern shown in Chart 2, the number of new visitors to the public advice site have increased across the same period. Between Monday 16 March and Monday 23 March there were 35,261 new visitors which increased by 12% to 39,544 by the end of the following week. Across March 2020 there were 159,870 new visitors in total, a 25% increase on the same month last year (127,964).

Chart 2: Visits to the public advice site

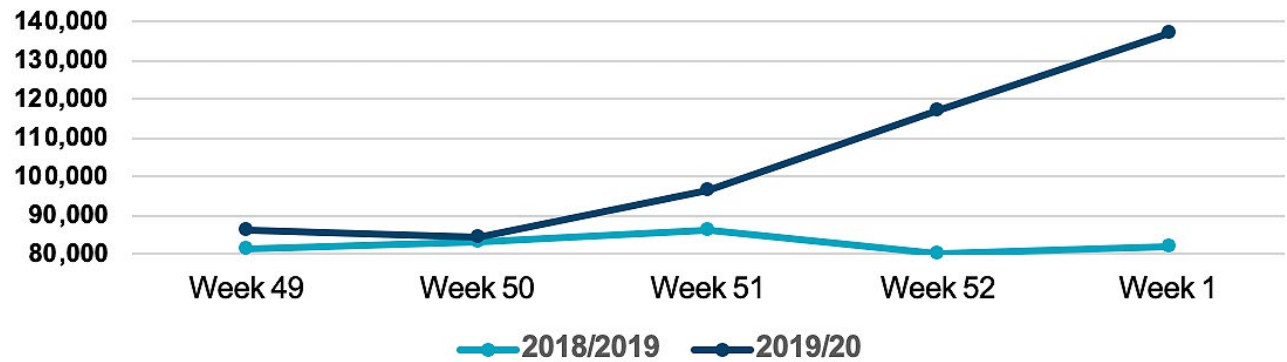
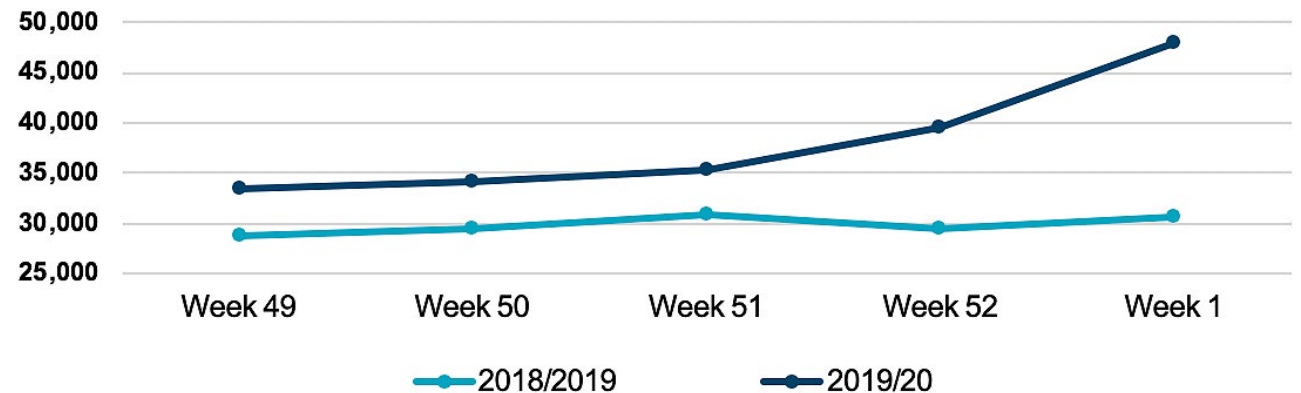


Chart 3: New visitors to the public advice site



The most commonly visited COVID-19 related pages on the public advice site are those related to health, with these having seen considerable increases over March.

Shifts are also evident in the search terms being used on the public advice site in recent weeks with, unsurprisingly, those related to 'coronavirus' and 'COVID 19' showing the largest increase.

Chart 4: Visits to the COVID-19 health related pages on the public advice site

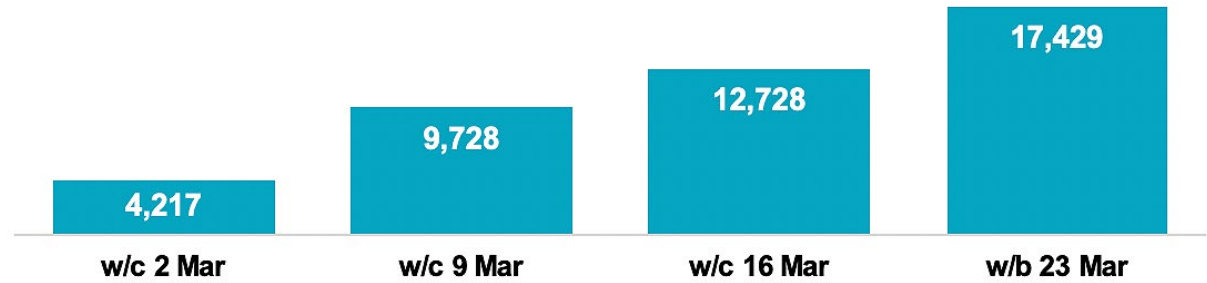
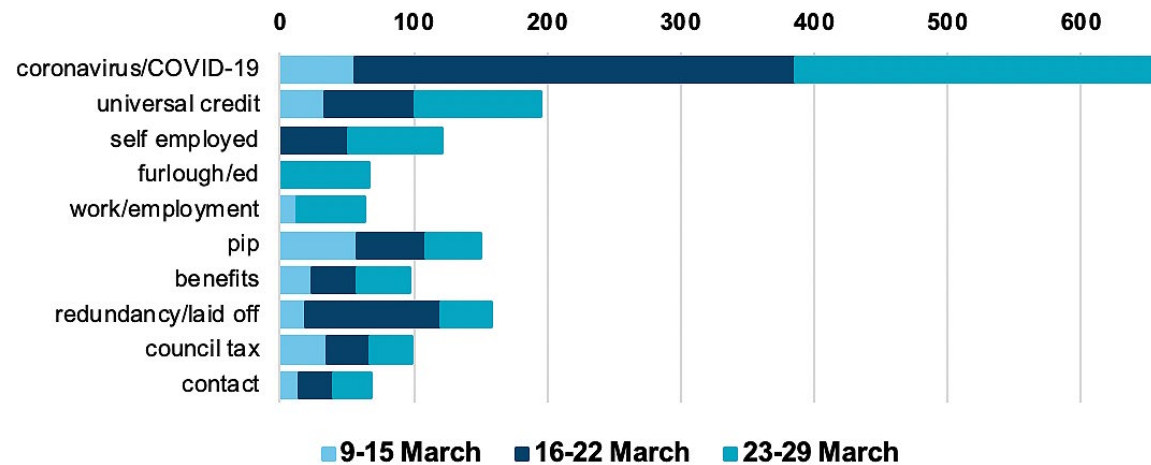
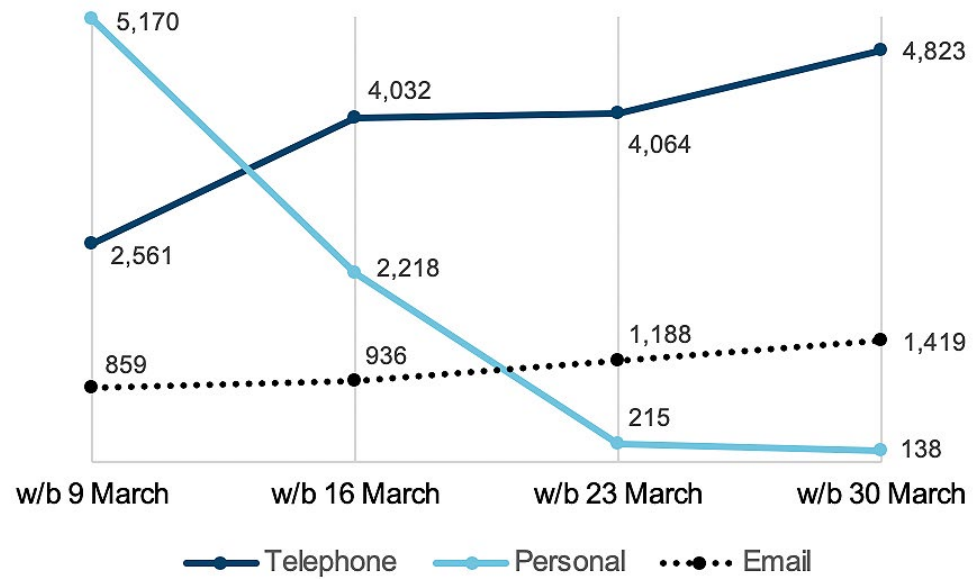


Chart 5: Search terms used on the public advice site



Changes in CAB working practices are also clear. As can be seen in Chart 6, a considerable increase in contacts by phone is mirrored by a decrease in face-to-face contacts.

Chart 6: Number of contacts, by top contact channels, across March 2020



Data Evidence - employment & social security

1. Employment

The most obvious early trend we can see from Citizens Advice Bureau data in Scotland is an increase in the provision of advice relating to employment. In February 2020, before the UK saw any significant impact from coronavirus, employment advice made up 4% of all advice given by CABs that month. In March, that doubled to 8%, coinciding with the first wave of guidance and restrictions issued by both UK and Scottish Governments. [Chart 7]

The most notable increases in employment-related advice from February to March 2020 were in relation to self-employment; health and safety at work; and pay/entitlements. [Chart 8]

Chart 7: Change in advice sub-categories as a % of primary category

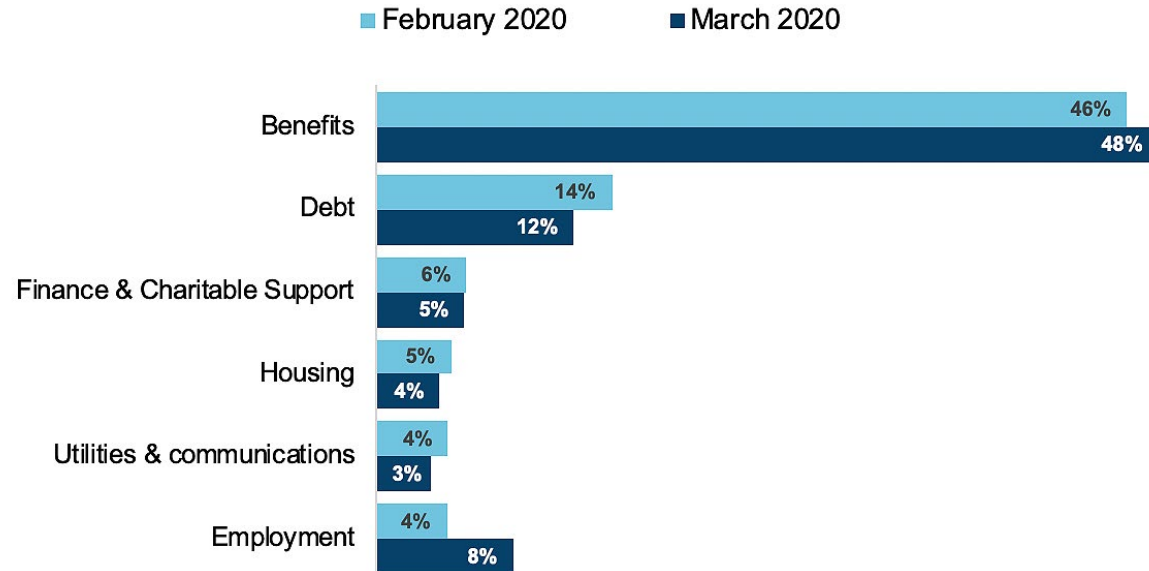
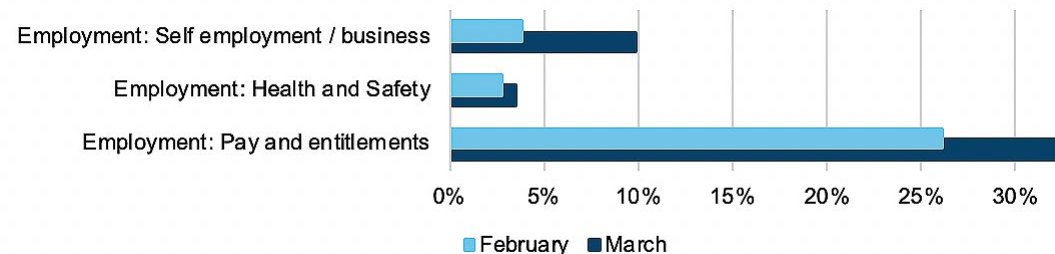
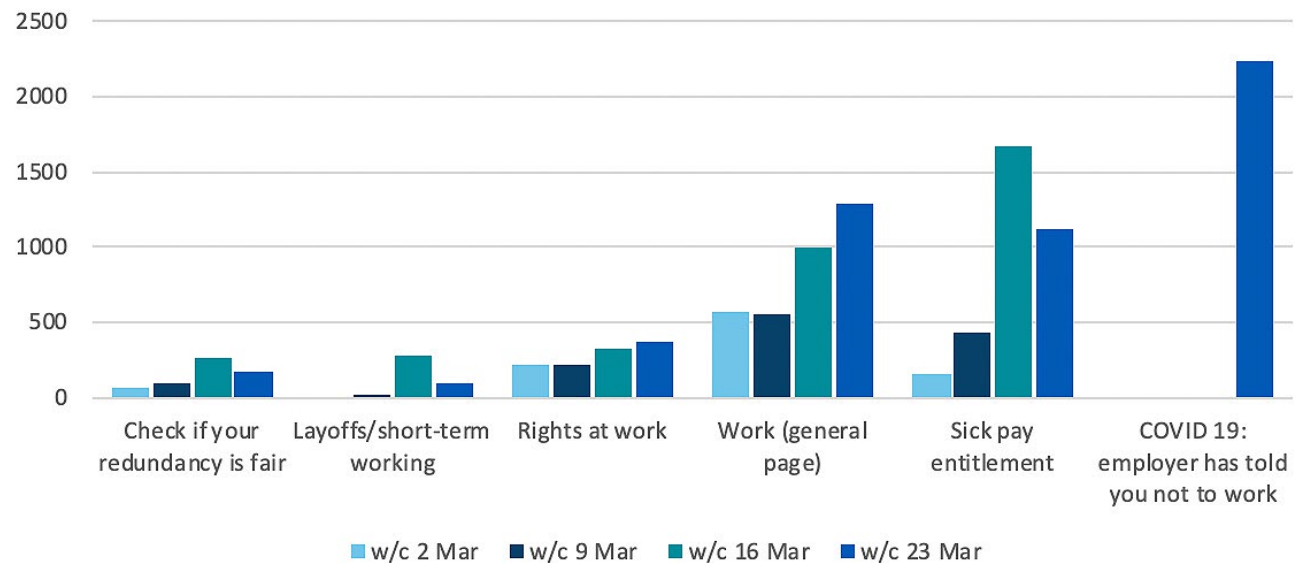


Chart 8: Changes in employment-related advice from February to March 2020 (by proportion of all employment advice)



People accessing our public advice site also clearly had employment concerns. Visits to our general “work” landing page grew from 561 in the first week of March to 1,294 in the last week of March. Specific pages on sick pay entitlement, layoffs and redundancy spiked between 16th and 22nd March, reflecting a flurry of Government announcements that week including school closures, restrictions on mass gatherings and closure of non-essential businesses. [Chart 9]

Chart 9: Top employment-related pages visited on the public advice site



Comments

Other than the pandemic itself leading to general anxiety and uncertainty, the rise in employment and self-employment related issues across our network would also suggest that:

- > People were unclear on their rights and entitlements as workers - particularly in relation to the new forms of support announced by Governments, and needed further help and advice to understand their options.
- > As time goes on, for those unable to access coronavirus-specific Government support, we are likely to see an increased reliance on our social security system and problems with debt emerging, as people cope with vastly reduced incomes.
- > Citizens Alerts are cases submitted by CAB advisers¹ that give us some of the stories behind the numbers. This Citizen Alert show that some employment queries could be a result of employers refusing to furlough workers.

¹ All names are changed to preserve anonymity

! Citizens ● ALERT

Jane is in her early twenties and was working full time until her employers dismissed her due to coronavirus restrictions. Following the announcement of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme Jane contacted her employers asking to be reinstated in furlough. Her employers have refused, saying they are reluctant to make staff redundant, but the government support won't come through for at least six weeks and the employers cannot afford to cover 80% of wages in the meantime. Jane is 17 weeks pregnant so is concerned about finding another job during the crisis, as well as the impact of her unemployment on statutory maternity pay. Some employers appear to be unclear on the availability of loans for this situation or are reluctant to take them up.

Data Evidence - employment & social security

1. Social security

Advice on benefits also grew between February and March this year, but from a much higher starting point, and by fewer percentage points. In February benefits related advice made up 46% of all advice given, in March it had grown slightly to 48%. [Chart 10]

Specific social security advice that became more common between February and March included advice on Job Seekers Allowance and Universal Credit, which we can link to the employment issues noted above, shown in Chart 11.

Chart 10: Top advice topic changes, February to March 2020, by proportion of all advice provided

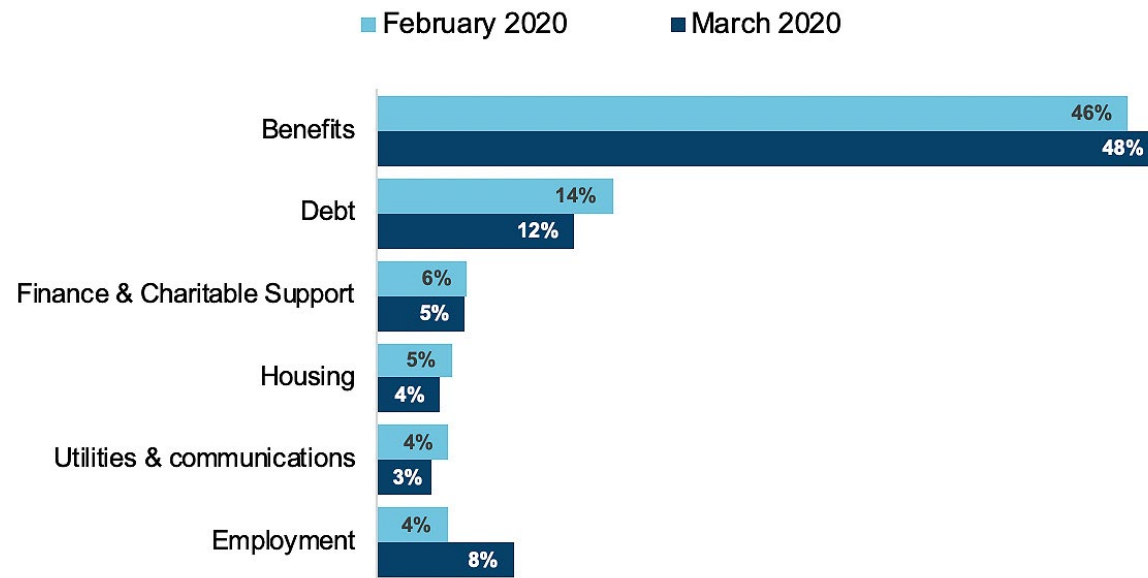
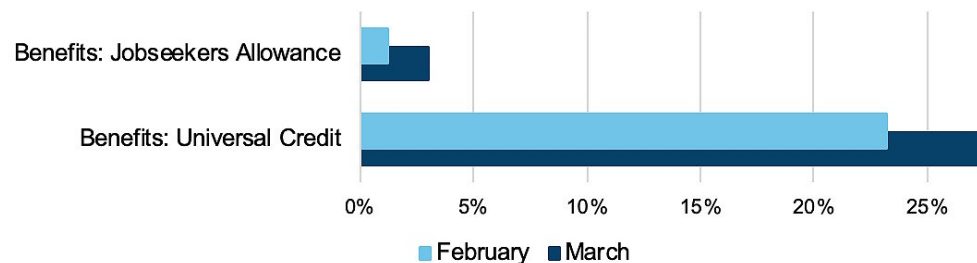
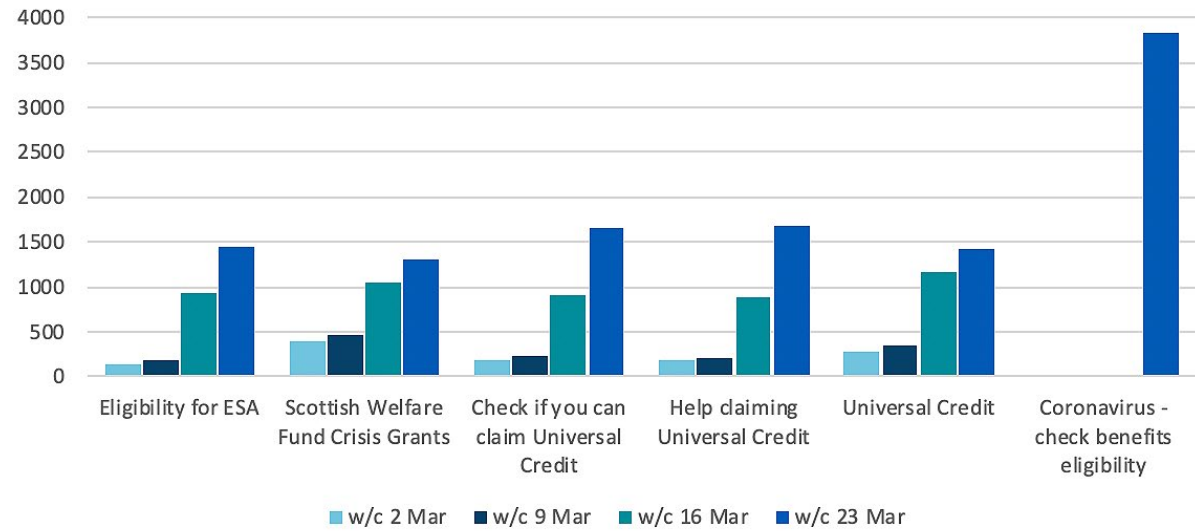


Chart 11: Changes in benefits-related advice from February to March 2020 (by proportion of all benefits advice)



This was reflected online where three of the top six social-security related pages visited on our public advice site were related to Universal Credit, and all six saw a large increase in visits over the month. Our “Check if you can claim Universal Credit” page, for example, went from less than 250 visits in the first week of March to around 1,600 visits by the last week. [Chart 12]

Chart 12: Top benefits-related pages visited on the public advice site



Comments

The economic upheaval caused by the pandemic and the necessary strategies to tackle it have led to many people losing work or having to work in a vastly different way. Being at home more, especially with children and young people who would normally be at school, may lead to rising energy bills and other new costs.

Our data shows that people are turning to the state's safety net as their situation becomes clearer, and starker, but they may not know what they're entitled to or how to access that safety net without support.

But this may only be the start. For many, April - not March - will be the first full month without a regular wage, but with most of the same bills to pay. We can expect enquiries about accessing social security to continue increasing for some time yet.

! Citizens ALERT

Alan contacted a CAB after struggling to apply for Universal Credit. His wife was the household's main earner up until the COVID-19 outbreak, but she can no longer work as a result of the pandemic's restrictions. While his wife successfully set up her account, Universal Credit must be claimed jointly by households so as Alan is dyslexic and doesn't have strong digital skills, he was assisted by his son in making a digital claim. Alan succeeded in creating an account, verifying his email address and completing his details before being placed in a queue for GOV.UK Verify. At that point, the queue was reported as being 50,000 long. At 3.a.m, his son received a GOV.UK Verify code but when Alan noticed his place in the queue was 12 minutes away from the front, he waited, only to be told that his code had expired.

Alan has now forgotten his log in details and on accessing the ""forgot your username"" he is met with another email code that is not being accepted. He tried to contact the UC Helpline several times but on reaching the one hour wait mark, Alan's call was disconnected.

Key points

This data drawn from across the Citizens Advice Network in Scotland highlights a number of issues:

- > Demand for our advice continues in the current climate despite advice now being provided in different ways. While face to face advice provision has dramatically reduced because of Government restrictions the Citizens Advice Network in Scotland is still supporting substantial numbers of people with their advice needs during this difficult time whether this be over the phone or via our public advice site.
- > More people are using our public advice site and the most frequently visited pages relate to COVID-19, Universal Credit, and Self-Employment. Numbers of new visitors to our public advice site are higher than this time last year and continue to grow.
- > During March 2020, almost 78,000 pieces of advice were provided by CABs across Scotland. This only represents a small decrease in the number of pieces of advice provided during

February 2020 and is testament to the network's ability to adapt to different ways of working and of delivering advice.

- > During March 2020 there was a two-fold increase in advice sought relating to employment and of this advice on self-employment grew most as a proportion of employment advice.
- > In March 2020 benefits related advice grew slightly to 48% of all advice given, up from 46%. In terms of the specific social security advice that became more common in March 2020, this included advice on Job Seekers Allowance and Universal Credit, which may be linked to the increase in advice related to employment issues.

The Citizens Advice Network in Scotland is continuing to provide free, confidential and independent advice across Scotland during the corona virus pandemic. Advice can be accessed through your local Citizens Advice Bureaux which you can find at www.CAS.org.uk/bureaux. People can also access advice online through our public advice site www.citizensadvice.org.uk/Scotland or through Scotland's Citizens Advice Helpline which is free to call on 0800 028 1456.

Who we are

Scotland's Citizens Advice Network empowers people in every corner of Scotland through our local bureaux and national services by providing free, confidential, and independent advice. We use people's real-life experiences to influence policy and drive positive change. We are on the side of people in Scotland who need help, and we change lives for the better.

www.cas.org.uk



The Scottish Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux - Citizens Advice Scotland. Scottish charity (SC016637) and company limited by guarantee (89892)