

The 'angel of Denbighshire' helping Universal Credit claimants

The Covid-19 crisis has seen a rush of applications placing extra demands on a service set up to help benefit claimants

From the outside, residents in rural North Wales appear to live in a bucolic idyll.

But appearances can be deceptive: behind the beauty often lies poverty and a lack of services.

When Pauline Murfitt, 61, moved from [Cerrigydrudion](#) to Clawdd Poncen, a small village near [Corwen](#), she found herself in financial crisis.

She had to wait a year for Universal Credit and, at times, she felt she would have "done myself in" but for the help she received.

Her saviour was Kristen Sedgwick, a welfare benefits caseworker at Citizens Advice [Denbighshire](#) (CAD).

For the last 16 months she has helped Pauline secure a fortnightly income to keep her afloat.

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"Kristen has helped me no end," said Pauline.

"She's an angel and I don't know how many times I've cried in front of her."

For the past two years CAD has teamed up with the [South Denbighshire Community Partnership](#) (SDCP), a grant-funded community charity, to reach out to the people of Edeyrnion.

Aware that many residents were elderly and unable to travel, the two organisations wanted to ensure these people were not losing out on unclaimed benefits.

The arrangement meant that, instead of people having to travel to [Ruthin](#), CAD's Kristen Sedgwick was able to visit Corwen.

Twice a week she has been hosting surgeries in Canolfan Ni and visiting surrounding communities, helping isolated people make claims online.

"Some people were owed over £10,000," said SDCP chief officer Margaret Sutherland.

"In one case there was £24,000 in back-dated claims."



CAD caseworker Kristen Sedgwick has helped people in the Edeyrnion area claim almost £500,000 extra in benefits (Image: Mandy Jones)

Already this year CAD has helped residents claim more than £130,000 – a vital lifeline as the Covid-19 lockdown squeezes the rural economy.

So far the running total is approaching £500,000, far in excess of the initial target of £295,000 over four years.

Moreover, 70% of this money likely to be spent locally, a big boost to the area's economy.

Lockdown casualties

Kristen said a lot of benefit money goes unclaimed every year because people aren't aware of their entitlements.

However lockdown has made her job more tricky. "Many people don't have access to the internet or even mobile phones," she said.

The [Covid-19 crisis](#) has also seen a new group of people needing Kristen's services.

In the past six weeks demand for Universal Credit has rocketed.

"Many of these people just fell through the cracks in government schemes," said Margaret.

"Their income had just dried up and they didn't qualify for rates relief or other benefits."

For lockdown casualties, claiming benefits for the first time was a big and often difficult step.

As it takes weeks for claims to filter through, SDCP provided food hampers to keep them going.

Kristen said it has been a worrying time. "We are now seeing a slightly different cohort, often the self-employed, who have never negotiated the system before and don't really know what they're entitled to," she said.

"However they've paid in all their lives so it's only right they should be able to claim."

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