

SURVIVING THE RECESSION



The effects of the recession can be devastating for you and your family. You may lose your job or be asked to go on short-time working. You may be struggling to keep your home. Older people living on their savings have seen prices soar whilst their income decreases. Your debt problems may seem out of control. But however the economic situation may be affecting you, there are ways to help yourself and there are organisations that can help you cope if you are struggling.

Citizens' Advice can provide advice and guidance on the whole range of issues but, since it is our aim to advise and assist, it is also useful for clients, or potential clients, to be aware of the various sources of help that are available.

The following are top tips on surviving the recession. We have given information and advice on main themes and contact details for national and local government offices and other agencies. Our Bureaux will have many useful booklets and leaflets on these issues and you can call in and pick them up free of charge. There is currently a particularly helpful booklet produced jointly by the TUC with Citizens' Advice called **Coping with economic downturn: a practical guide for working people and their families**. It gives information about:

- redundancy
- benefits you can claim
- how to deal with debt
- looking for a new job
- getting training.

You can download a copy of the guide from the TUC website at: www.tuc.org.uk or call in and collect a copy from your nearest Citizens' Advice Bureau.

These are our simple tips to help you get on top of things.

1. Don't bury your head in the sand

Ignoring a problem will only make it worse. Don't ignore calls or letters from anyone you owe money to - your **creditors**. Contact them to explain why you're having problems. The sooner you do this, the more options you'll have for solving your financial problems. Explain how your income has been affected by the recession and what you have available to meet your debts. Use one of our Income & Expenditure forms – called Personal Budget Sheets - to set out in detail exactly what your household has coming in and going out each month and

what you can reasonably afford to pay off your debts. In reaching agreement on an affordable repayment plan for your debts you can ask your creditors to stop adding charges and to freeze the interest being charges so that everything you are paying is reducing your debt – not simply paying the monthly interest charges. However, be warned, if you fail to honour the arrangements you make, your creditors will not be understanding or forgiving so do not promise what you cannot afford.

2. Get advice

There are many organisations which offer free and independent advice such as Citizens Advice, Shelter, National Debtline and the Consumer Credit Counselling Service. Their advisers can assess your situation and work out the best course of action for you.

Some useful local numbers:

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| Community Legal Service (CLS) Direct | 0845 3454345 |
| Community Credit Counselling Service | 0800 1381111 |
| National Debtline | 0800 7812251 |
| Norfolk Debtline | 01603 679678 |
| Pay Plan | 0800 716239 |

3. Pay your priority debts first

If you have debts, there are some you need to pay first before others, because the consequences of not paying them can be much more serious. For example, mortgage or rent debts are a priority because if you don't pay these, you could lose your home. Debt advisers can help you plan your budget and pay your priority debts first.

Work out a budget. Work out how much money you've got coming in and going out of your household on essential expenses like food, bills and travel to work. In England, Wales and Scotland, you can download a personal budget sheet from the Citizens' Advice website – www.adviceguide.org.uk to help you do this or call in to one of the Bureaux and get a paper copy. Check to see if you can save money on your bills and whether you are claiming all the benefits to which you are entitled. When you've drawn up your budget, work how much you've got left over to pay creditors. If you can't afford to pay back all the money you owe, work out how much you can afford and offer to pay this. A debt adviser can help you do this.

5. Check to see if you can save money on your bills

If you're on a low income, you may be able to save money by getting help with your health costs such as prescription charges and dental costs. Apply on form HC1, from your local Jobcentre Plus office, and

send it to the address shown in the envelope provided or phone 0845 6101112 to be sent a copy. You may be able to claim help with education costs such as school meals and clothing. Contact the local education authority or the school's governing body.

You may be able to get a grant to help you pay for things like fitting home insulation and improving energy efficiency. Some people can get free help. This can help cut down the fuel bills. Pick up a Warmfront leaflet from a Citizens' Advice Bureau or, to find out if you qualify for additional benefits, and possibly a Warm Front Grant, please contact the Benefit Entitlement Check team on telephone: 0800 072 9006 or email: bec@eaga.com. Call 0800 3162805 to apply for a Warmfront Grant.

Your gas and electricity supplier may be able to help you if you have fuel debts. To find out if you can get help, visit the British Gas Energy Trust website at: www.britishgasenergytrust.org.uk or the EDF Energy Trust website at: www.edfenergytrust.org.uk. You may qualify for cheaper tariffs, called social tariffs. Check with your fuel company. You might also get a better fuel deal with another company.

There are some charities which give grants to people to help pay their bills or buy essential items. You can find details of these charities on the Turn2Us website at: www.turn2us.org.uk.

6. Check whether you can get benefits

Are you getting all the money you're entitled to? There may be benefits or tax credits you can get which you haven't claimed.

If you are in work, you might get Working Tax Credit even if you don't have children. If you have children, are you claiming Child Tax Credit? Even people with quite large salaries are entitled to this benefit. You may be able to get Council Tax Benefit or Housing Benefit to help you pay your council tax and rent. You don't necessarily have to be out of work to get these.

If you lose your job, go to your local Jobcentre Plus office and start claiming benefits as soon as you can. You might be entitled to benefits like Jobseeker's Allowance which could automatically entitle you to other benefits like Council Tax Benefit or Housing Benefit. You can also get help with your mortgage interest after a few weeks of becoming unemployed.

In some cases, whether you are in or out of work, you can make a backdated claim for benefits, that is, you can get money for a period in the past. In some cases, you can work for a few hours a week without your benefits being cut.

If you want to know about your entitlement to benefits call in on one of the Citizens' Advice Bureaux and ask them to carry out a benefit check. At some Bureaux you can pick up a form asking for a check and they will post the results to you with advice on the claiming process.

Some useful numbers:

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| Social Fund claims | 0800 1695198 |
| Income support/Jobseekers allowance | 0800 0556688 |
| Employment and Support Allowance | 0800 0556688 |
| Tax credits helpline | 0845 3003900 |
| Child benefit helpline | 0845 3021444 |
| Pension Service | 0800 991234 |
| Carers Allowance | 01253 856123 |
| DLA and attendance allowance helpline | 0845 7123456 |

7. Think twice about taking out a loan to pay off your debts

If you take out another loan, you may end up paying back a lot more than you borrowed and at very high interest rates. You may not be able to afford the repayments and the loan may be secured against your home which you could then lose.

Make sure you understand exactly what a new loan might mean for you and get advice before you sign anything.

8. Don't ignore your mortgage problems

There are rules about the steps that mortgage lenders must take before they can start court action against you – so try and get advice as soon as you start getting into difficulty with your mortgage.

Selling your home and renting it back might seem like a quick fix to your debt problems. But many mortgage rescue schemes offer very little security. You could end up paying very high rent or even being evicted. Get advice before you sign up to one of these schemes.

If you are struggling with mortgage repayments, you may be tempted to send the keys to your lender or abandon your property. Don't do this without advice. You could still be responsible for the debt on the property and may be chased for it years later.

Always attend any court hearings yourself, with an adviser if possible. Court proceedings do not mean that you will automatically lose your home. The court process acts as a final check to make sure repossession is the last resort. Some courts have advice desks which can provide last-minute assistance.

9. Check your rights if you lose your job

Make sure your employer gives you your legal rights if you lose your job. You might need advice about your employment rights. For example, you must not be dismissed unfairly and you must not be chosen unfairly for redundancy. You may have the right to a redundancy payment and other money you are owed, like unpaid holiday pay.

You can get help to look for another job. You can get advice on how to fill in application forms and prepare for job interviews. There's extra support if you're a lone parent, disabled, over 50, leaving school or college, or if you've been unemployed for a long time. Learning new skills could improve your career prospects for when the recession ends. Some courses are free, or you may be able to get financial help.

You can get free, confidential career and training advice if you phone: 0800 100 900. You can also contact ACAS on 0845 7474747.

10. Get help if you lose your home

Your local authority has a legal duty to provide help to certain people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. You may qualify if you are in priority need. This could be because you have dependent children or are pregnant. Or it could be that you are vulnerable because you're elderly or have a physical or mental illness or disability. Get expert advice about how to make an application for housing if you lose your home.

Some useful numbers:

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| Breckland District Council | 01362 656870 |
| North Norfolk District Council | 01263 513811 |
| Broadland District Council | 0845 3312323 |
| Peddars Way Housing | 01362 694858 |
| Broadland Housing | 0303 3030003 |
| Wherry Housing | 0845 6001518 |
| Shelter | 0808 8004444 |
| Stonham Floating Support | 0845 1550390 |
| Salvation Army Dereham | 01362 696341 |

There is also the real possibility that these difficult times are causing great strains on **personal relationships**. If your relationship is in difficulties and you need help then it can be useful to contact **RELATE**. There are counsellors based in Watton – 01953 488937, Holt – 07786 748924 and Dereham – 01362 668979 and you can find other contact details on the Relate website. If you are past the stage of counselling but need help in mediation then try the Norfolk Family Mediation Service on 01603 620588.

There to help is, of course, the **Citizens' Advice Bureau**. There are Bureaux in the following locations which operate a drop-in service, without the need for an appointment, with the following opening hours:

Dereham Office

In the Assembly Rooms, Ruthen Place
Monday, Tuesday and Friday from 10.00 to 15.00 and Tuesday evening from 17.00 to 19.00

Watton Office

In the portakabin by the Community Centre
Wednesday from 10.00 to 15.00

Holt Office

At Kerridge Way, next to the Community Centre
Monday, Tuesday and Friday from 10.00 to 15.00 and Monday evening from 18.00 to 20.00

Swaffham Office

At the Campinglands Community Centre
Monday from 10.00 to 13.00

Thetford Office

At Breckland House, St Nicholas Street
Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday from 10.00 to 15.00

Attleborough Office

At the Town Hall, Queens Square
Tuesday and Thursday from 10.00 to 16.00