

Benefit Bulletin: Big benefit changes and news

Produced by the Active Inclusion Service, Newcastle City Council

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Council Tax Reduction in Newcastle consultation

Council Tax Reduction is a local scheme that helps people to pay their Council Tax bill depending on their income and other factors.

Newcastle City Council are consulting on proposals on two options for the 2018/19 scheme for working age applicants.

Option 1 will be to retain the existing means tested scheme on 85% of the council tax liability with all working age applicants paying a minimum of 15% before their entitlement to Council Tax Reduction

Option 2 is to move to a banded income scheme at 90%, 85%, 50% or 25% assistance depending on household income for the applicant and if applicable, their partner.

Residents can either complete the online questionnaire on [Let's talk](#) or for those without access to the internet, paper questionnaires can be requested by emailing deborah.wake@newcastle.gov.uk or phoning 0191 277 7644.

The consultation closes on **13 December 2017**

Please note the proposals only affect working age applicants, those applicants who will have reached the qualifying age for Pension Credit on 1 April 2018 will not be affected by these proposals and will continue to have their claims calculated in accordance with the government's Prescribed Council Tax Reduction Scheme.

[More details including worked examples are available via the City Council Webpage.](#)

The plan to limit Housing Benefit for social sector tenancies limited to private sector Local Housing Allowance levels – planned for April 2019, not to go ahead.

The Government will outline its plans on the future of supported housing on 31 October 2017

On the 21 October, the Prime Minister told Parliament that the Government's model to support and sustain supported housing will be published on 31 October 2017, and:

"...as part of our response to the review, we will not be applying the local housing allowance cap to supported housing; indeed, we will not be implementing it in the wider social rented sector. The full details will be made available when we publish our response to the consultation."

For more information, see the [Prime Minister's statement](#) in Parliament and a [Supported housing update](#) from gov.uk.

Support for mortgage interest (SMI) in benefits ends on 5 April 2018 - for all. Claimants can claim a loan instead. Letters going out now.

It is important to note that this change does not just apply to new claimants from that date. It also applies to those already getting SMI in their benefit. They will get a letter telling them their SMI will end with the option to apply for a loan instead.

At the moment, certain means tested benefits like Income Support and Universal Credit can include an amount to help with mortgage interest payments.

From 6 April 2018, that support will be replaced by an interest accruing loan provided by a 'third party provider', secured by a second charge on the claimant's property and repayable for example, on the sale of the property. It will apply to new claims from that date and existing recipients will be told the support will come to an end and they will have to apply for help under the new scheme.

For a copy of the letter and the booklet that goes with it, please see our [changes for housing related benefits](#) web page. For more details of this change, see the [July 2017 Benefit Bulletin](#).

Jobcentre Plus office closure and support for claimants

As reported in the last Benefit Bulletin, the Government have announced the closure of many jobcentres around the country, including Newcastle West Jobcentre.

A recent government [update on the future of DWP jobcentres](#) confirmed that Condercum House on the West Road will close on 2 March 2018. That jobcentre is due to be merged with Newcastle City Jobcentre in Cathedral Square in the City Centre.

This date was changed from a previously announced date so for the latest information on this, including available support, visit www.newcastle.gov.uk/benefitcontacts or sign up to receive the weekly Active Inclusion Newcastle information update by emailing activeinclusion@newcastle.gov.uk.

In a [debate in Parliament](#) about Jobcentre Plus office closures and changes, the Minister for Welfare Delivery, Caroline Nokes MP, said that:

- "Where claimants are required to sign on more frequently than fortnightly we will look to reimburse costs"
- "Where claimants will have to travel for over an hour by public transport, we are considering what arrangements we can put in place, including claiming by post."
- "Of course, many disabled claimants access our services very successfully online, but, as I have said, the DWP has a home visiting service which we can extend to all disabled claimants who ask for it when their circumstances make it difficult for them to go to a jobcentre".

Newcastle City Council Cabinet discusses welfare reforms

On the 16 October, the Council's Business Cabinet considered the latest report on welfare reforms including Universal Credit and the benefit cap. You can see the documents on the [City Council website](#).

Work capability test can be ‘switched off’ for some

To decide whether someone is sick enough to receive Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) or the equivalent element in Universal Credit, most claimants have to undergo a Work Capability Assessment by a health professional.

The DWP have said that this assessment will not apply to those with greater health problems in the following way:

Those in the ESA support group and equivalent in Universal Credit who have a work capability assessment after 29 September 2017 will be told they will not be reassessed again if they:

- have a severe, lifelong disability, illness or health condition
- are unlikely to ever be able to move into work

For more details, see [‘Employment and Support Allowance and Universal Credit: changes to the Work Capability Assessment’](#) from gov.uk and [the guidance on the new criteria](#) from [Disability Rights UK](#).

Top tips

Some simple advice about avoiding benefit problems and helping people get their correct benefit entitlement.

Getting evidence to support a claim

In the last Benefit Bulletin, we emphasised the importance of medical evidence to support claims for sickness and disability benefits. This time we describe what kinds of evidence can be used, when and from whom.

Doctors may be the obvious source but may be too busy to provide a full letter to support a claim. Of course, it depends on the person’s conditions but to help reduce burdens on GP’s then:

1. **For a new claim**, ask the person what **evidence of their condition** they already have which includes/proves their condition(s). That may include appointments with the GP or consultant, follow up letters from GP, list of medication and so on. If you don’t think it will suffice, then the GP or practice manager may do a print out of their conditions.
2. **For a challenge, like mandatory reconsideration or appeal** then it is useful to ask the GP, consultant or other health professional to provide evidence of their conditions and importantly, how they satisfy the conditions for the benefit. For PIP and ESA its about scoring points so in some ways, makes its easier!
3. Medical evidence is necessary but a letter **from a non-medically qualified person** like a support worker, describing the claimant’s difficulties in relation to the assessment criteria is also very useful.

For further information on this, see our factsheets on ESA and PIP on our [benefit information webpage](#).

How to get a national insurance number

If you want to work or claim benefits you must have a national insurance number. This [guide from the Low Incomes Tax Reform Group](#) tells you how to get one.

Universal Credit

At the time of writing, there is a lot of activity about the roll out and impact of Universal Credit in the media, parliamentary debates and the [Work and Pensions Committee enquiry into Universal Credit](#). Here are some recent announcements and information.

Roll out continues

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, David Gauke has confirmed the accelerated roll out of Universal Credit from this October would continue as planned. See the [Commons debate on the roll-out](#), a recent [DWP press release](#), [guidance Memo ADM 23/17](#) and the [Universal Credit transition to full service schedule](#). The number of households claiming Universal Credit is expected to increase from 8% in September to 13% in March 2018.

Advance payments available earlier

Mr Gauke [also announced](#) that “Guidance to DWP staff will be updated to ensure that **anyone who needs an advance payment will be offered it up-front**. Claimants who want an advance payment will not have to wait six weeks. They will receive this advance within five working days. And **if someone is in immediate need, then we fast track the payment, meaning they will receive it on the same day.**” See the [new guidance to Jobcentre Plus staff](#).

Advanced payments can be requested whilst waiting for a payment of Universal Credit but the claimant must show how getting an advance payment will prevent damage to them or their family’s health or safety. [More details on UC advanced payments from Citizens Advice](#) which may be updated after Mr Gauke’s announcement.

Phone call concession

Mr Gauke told the Commons [Work and Pensions Committee enquiry into Universal Credit](#) on 18 October 2017 that the government would make the Universal Credit phone number free to use "over the next month" and all DWP phone lines will be made free by the end of the year. See also this [DWP press release](#).

Parliamentary enquiry into Universal Credit

The [Parliamentary Work and Pensions Committee](#) has re-started its enquiry into Universal Credit and its roll out and has asked the Government to [reduce the standard waiting time for a first payment of Universal Credit following a claim from six to four weeks](#).

Universal Credit research and latest figures

Many organisations are providing research and information on the introduction of Universal Credit and its impact. For example, the DWP ‘[Research into families claiming Universal Credit](#)’ and the Smith Institute ‘[...impact of Universal Credit on tenants and their rent payment behaviour...](#)’

In Newcastle, there were 10,286 people on Universal Credit in September. That’s a 60% increase since April. You can find more DWP statistics on benefits and sanctions via these webpages: [Universal Credit statistics](#), [quarterly](#) and [do it yourself](#) statistics.

More information on Universal Credit

See our [Universal Credit webpages](#) including [support for Newcastle residents](#).

News from the Department for Work and Pensions

The DWP produce [Touchbase](#) – news for advisers and intermediaries. The latest includes information on:

- The updated guidance on Universal Credit for landlords
- Free job search mentoring
- Work placement opportunities for NEETS - young people not in education, employment or training
- The Disability Confident scheme
- A call for more employers to offer more work opportunities
- Warm Home Discount for winter 2017/18

Also see their [useful benefit information](#) on gov.uk.

Two important benefit cases

A disability benefit award can only be changed if set grounds are shown

To change an existing award of a benefit like Personal Independence (PIP), the DWP must show that grounds (under the ‘supersession’ rules) to make the change exist such as:

- there has been a relevant change of circumstances since the last decision, or
- the last decision was made in ignorance of facts

A [recent court case](#) has reminded the DWP and tribunals that this test cannot be bypassed and it was wrong to assume the appearance of a new PIP medical assessment report meant the existing award could be changed.

Even if a request for a mandatory reconsideration has been refused for being outside the month time limit, an appeal to an independent tribunal can be made

The request for the mandatory reconsideration (which is actually a ‘revision’ request), can be made up to 12 months after the normal one-month time limit so long as reasons can be shown. And then an appeal can be made against that decision.

The [three judge panel decision](#) has been quickly followed up with [DWP guidance](#) explaining the decision.

Care leavers and the benefits system

A [report by the Children’s Society](#) has made various recommendations following its survey of the experience of care leavers and the benefits system, which found for example that care leavers are three times more likely to be sanctioned than their peers.

Two-child limit update

From 6 April 2017, a two-child limit was introduced for Child Tax Credit and Universal Credit. The details were described in the [April 2017 Benefit Bulletin](#), including the exceptions and when it would apply for new claims.

Recently, the organisation Child Poverty Action Group has been granted permission to apply for a judicial review to test whether this new rule “unlawfully discriminates

against a number of different groups including, but not limited to, children with multiple siblings, large families and those with a religious or moral objection to the use of birth control.” Details and a template letter for those who want to request a reconsideration on such grounds can be found on the [CPAG website](#). Please note that the outcome is unknown and there could be a long wait till the final decision.

Further support, information and training

For more information on benefit changes, see our web page [Changes to the benefits system](#) which includes a [timeline of the main benefit changes](#).

More details about benefits can be found on [our welfare rights and money advice web pages](#), including the benefits mentioned above, benefit self-help factsheets and ‘Where to get advice in Newcastle’.

This Benefit Bulletin was written by the Active Inclusion Service, Newcastle City Council. It is provided bi-monthly and at times of important benefit changes and news. It is as accurate as possible at the time of writing. The bulletin is part of the Active Inclusion Newcastle support to professionals, which includes **‘Introduction to benefits’ training**. You may also be interested in the **Debt Bulletin** which is produced quarterly. [For more details, see our web page for professionals and volunteers](#).

We also produce a weekly **Active Inclusion Newcastle e-bulletin** which provides a brief update on financial inclusion and homelessness prevention issues. If you want to receive this, or for more details, email activeinclusion@newcastle.gov.uk