

Benefit Bulletin: Big benefit changes and news

Produced by the Active Inclusion Service, Newcastle City Council

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Where to get advice in Newcastle - updated

Like everywhere else, advice services have changed the way people can access them due to coronavirus (COVID-19). Most of them have changed to telephone and other remote methods but, based on recent government announcements, they may be changing again. We have updated our document **Where to get advice in Newcastle** with their latest details, which can be found on the Newcastle City Council website page: [Benefit advice services in Newcastle and benefit offices](#).

We will update this document as services change, so keep checking.

Professionals can get direct help from [the council's Welfare Rights' consultancy line](#)

Special Newcastle City Council website pages on coronavirus and benefits

We have produced these three website pages:

[Coronavirus and benefits – what the changes mean for you](#) describes the main measures, explains what they mean for you and provides more detail including any potential issues

[Coronavirus and benefits – news](#) includes the latest announcements and changes, so you can see them as they happen rather than being hidden in the detail

[Coronavirus and benefits – guidance and legislation](#) provides background resources, with guidance from the government and independent sources and the legislation that has brought in some of the measures

There is no need to reproduce all that information in this bulletin. Instead, here are a few quick tips and highlights that may help you or the people you work with. If any of these items change, we shall update them here and in the above website pages.

Quick tips on coronavirus and benefits

Think before you claim Universal Credit!

You could be better off claiming Universal Credit but you may also be worse off.

Claiming Universal Credit could end your Tax Credit award immediately – as well as some other benefits. Those who are already on the benefits that Universal Credit is replacing (like Tax Credits) need to decide whether they are better off remaining on those benefits or claiming Universal Credit.

A court case has found it illegal not to provide transitional protection where someone ended up on a lower amount of Universal Credit and unable to return to their previous benefits. *See further details below under 'Other benefit news and issues'.*

For more information see under the heading Universal Credit on [coronavirus and benefits and you](#). Also find out which is your best option from a [Newcastle advice service](#) or [do the calculation yourself](#).

More details about [Universal Credit](#).

Are you missing out on other help?

You should also check if you are entitled to other help such as the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme. More details from [government guidance](#) and the [Low Incomes Tax Reform Group \(LITRG\)](#).

If you are sick or affected by coronavirus (COVID-19), you may be entitled to claim the sickness benefit – **New Style Employment and Support Allowance** or if unemployed – **New Style Jobseeker’s Allowance**. Both depend on your National Insurance contributions. You may be entitled to means-tested benefits on top.

Check if you are entitled to **Council Tax** help from Newcastle City Council’s website page [Coronavirus - Information relating to Council Tax](#).

Again, find more information on our page [Coronavirus and benefits – what the changes mean for you](#).

Some work-related activity is suspended but for how long?

The specific requirements for claiming benefits like Universal Credit of having to look for work and being available for work was suspended but the Jobcentre may still expect you to respond to their questions and you may still need to do some other work-related activities. Those on Universal Credit still need to check their journals and their ‘to dos’.

These easements, along with suspension of most face-to-face visits at the Jobcentre, were introduced on 23 March 2020 for **three months**, which takes us to 22 June. We await government news on this. So please check our [Coronavirus and benefits – news](#) website page for any updates.

Help with finding work

At the moment, Jobcentre Work Coaches are conducting phone calls with claimants to talk about returning to work. They are also keeping in touch with Universal Credit claimants using their journals to let them know about the opportunities available. These are all voluntary at present. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) say “there are still job opportunities for people who are able to work. Look on the [Find a job](#) service.” See also [jobhelp](#) from the Jobcentre which offers essential advice to those looking for work, about how to make the best of transferable skills and how to secure a new role.

Disability and health benefits processes – suspensions to continue

In March the Government suspended, for three months, face-to-face assessments and award reviews and reassessments. On 22 June the Government told Parliament “Reviews and reassessments remain suspended while we review what activity we can gradually start reintroducing in line with the latest public health advice”.

See more details about this on our page [Coronavirus and benefits – what the changes mean for you](#) and check our page [Coronavirus and benefits – news](#) for any updates.

Speaking to DWP on the claimant’s behalf – is possible

The advice on the Government’s Personal Independence Payment (PIP) [website page](#) says: “Someone else can call on your behalf, **but you’ll need to be with them** when they call.” However, this may not be possible during coronavirus (COVID-19). A conference call or three-way call is a possible alternative where you need to speak to the DWP on behalf of someone.

For a conference call you dial a number (on your smartphone) and then once the person has answered and you want to add another person you press the 'add call' icon on your phone screen, then dial the next number. When the next number answers there is an arrow icon on your phone saying 'merge call' – press that and the three-way conversation should start.

However, not all phone networks enable this. So, for example, EE don't but have [Group Calling](#) instead. Apparently, HM Revenues & Customs (HMRC) do not accept conference calls but try anyway as it may have changed.

For **Universal Credit**, you can try the above but there's also this government guidance:

[How Universal Credit claimants can give consent for their information to be shared with another person or organisation to help them deal with their claim](#)

[Contacting DWP on behalf of someone else](#)

Appointeeship – Of course, an appointee can act on someone claiming benefits behalf. See how to [Become an appointee for someone claiming benefits](#) from gov.uk.

Benefit scams

The DWP are asking people to be on guard against fraud as it appears to have been on the increase since the outbreak, to report any suspicious activity and to respond to any requests to get in touch with DWP in their Universal Credit journals or via their usual way of getting in touch. See also [Citizens Advice Scams Awareness Fortnight 2020](#).

For those who are deaf, hard of hearing or speech impaired

See the item below on **British Sign Language (BSL) benefit videos and 'video relay service'**

Free school meals – reminder to claim and help over summer

A reminder that some families need to claim free school meals and that schools will be giving free school lunch vouchers over the summer. See this [government guidance](#) and details on the [COVID Summer Food Fund](#).

Here is also [guidance on the temporary extension of free school meals eligibility to some children of groups who have no recourse to public funds](#), which includes a sample application form that councils or schools can provide to carers for assessing eligibility. More details about this from [law firm DPG](#).

Reports on coronavirus and benefits

Many of these are reported on our [Coronavirus and benefits – news](#) but of note is the Child Poverty Action Group [regular updates and briefings](#) on the issues thrown up by coronavirus and the gaps in support.

Sign up for weekly information related to coronavirus

Newcastle City Council's Active Inclusion Service produce a weekly email which covers homelessness prevention and financial inclusion services and information relating to coronavirus. To receive this, email activeinclusion@newcastle.gov.uk and ask to be added to the mailing list for the 'Active Inclusion Newcastle information update'.

Other benefit news and issues

Wrongly advised to claim Universal Credit and find you are worse off?

Universal Credit is replacing six other means-tested benefits like Tax Credits, which are referred to as 'legacy benefits.' Sometimes people on those benefits have been advised to claim Universal Credit and found they are worse off. For these people there is no present rule to top them up, called 'transitional protection', but there are some developments on this issue.

The Court of Appeal has ruled that the failure to provide transitional protection for claimants who transferred to Universal Credit following an incorrect legacy benefit decision was unlawful. CPAG said "In this case, our clients (including a single mother with a disabled daughter) had no choice but to claim Universal Credit when their previous benefits had been wrongly stopped. When it was then found that their benefits shouldn't have been stopped in the first place, they were stuck on Universal Credit with less support". For more details see the [CPAG press release](#) and a [link to the case](#).

On 5 May the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Therese Coffey MP, [told Parliament](#) the Government is "actively looking" at what can be done for Tax Credit claimants who have lost entitlement due to applying for Universal Credit".

This issue was reported by the [BBC](#) with news of further legal action in the [Guardian](#) and from [Leigh Day solicitors](#).

We await news from the Government on this.

Court of Appeal finds Universal Credit monthly income rules unlawful

Universal Credit takes income into account on the date it was paid – not for the period it was for (as in legacy benefits). In this case, monthly paid workers occasionally had two of their monthly wages paid in the same Universal Credit monthly assessment period, which stopped their Universal Credit etc. The [Court of Appeal found this irrational and unlawful](#). See the commentary by [the firm who took the case](#), [CPAG who worked on the case](#) and a report by the [Guardian](#).

The Government have [told Parliament](#) they [will not challenge this decision](#) so we await their remedy.

An independent benefit advice company has made a 25 minute [YouTube video](#) explaining Universal Credit assessment periods, the flaws and a solution.

Universal Credit roll out

The Government now expects the rollout to complete by September 2024. However, the [Office for Budget Responsibility](#) believe the date will be more likely to be September 2026. See more information below on the roll out pilot. It is also difficult to know how the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic will change this estimate.

It also believes that full Personal Independence Payment rollout is also delayed by a further two years, until July 2023.

For more information about Universal Credit

See our [Universal Credit website page](#) and [News from the DW P](#) below.

April 2020 benefit uprating – notable changes

Usually benefit amounts are increased each April. For the past few years this has not happened for many working age benefits due to the welfare reforms. However, this year's uprating sees the unfreezing of two benefits, as follows.

Local Housing Allowance (LHA)

LHA is Housing Benefit or Universal Credit housing costs for private tenants. The rent that is eligible for Housing Benefit is capped at various levels depending on the household make up. These amounts were temporarily frozen by Budget 2015 and '[reset](#)' to a higher amount from 6 April 2020.

Here are the new 'cap' amounts in the broad market area of Tyneside:

	A	B	C	D	E
2019	£61.80	£90.90	£103.56	£115.07	£149.59
2020	£70.19	£97.81	£109.32	£126.58	£182.96

Where:

- A = One-bedroom shared accommodation**
- B = One-bedroom self-contained accommodation**
- C = Two-bedroom accommodation**
- D = Three-bedroom accommodation**
- E = Four-bedroom accommodation**

There are lots of rules (and exceptions) which determine which category you fit under. Example: The appropriate LHA for a single parent with one child is category B. They would only get Housing Benefit of £97.81. If their rent is £120 a week, they would have to make up the shortfall to the £120, even if they were entitled to full help because the help is capped at £97.81. [More details about LHA from Shelter](#).

Carer's Allowance earnings limit

One rule that stops you getting Carer's Allowance is if you earn a certain amount. This has increased from £123 to £128 a week.

£20 a week extra for Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit

This extra help is due to coronavirus (COVID-19) and lasts until next March. The problem is that the benefit cap bars many Universal Credit claimants from this increase and the £20 extra has not been applied to other legacy benefits. [Find out more about the benefit cap.](#)

The benefit uprating details can be found on our [benefit information](#) website page and in the DWP guidance memos: [ADM Memo 3/20](#) and [DMG Memo 5/20](#).

People from abroad and ‘no recourse to public funds’ case

No recourse to public funds is a status people from abroad may have on their immigration papers or passport. It means they cannot normally claim benefits. Very recently a High Court found this to be unlawful. [Click here for details including the judgement.](#)

This report [A Lifeline for All](#) by The Children’s Society highlights how no recourse to public funds and further strict immigration policies are leaving thousands of children growing up in long-term poverty, trapped in cycles of homelessness, destitution and mounting debt and segregated from their communities and peers. See also this House of Commons briefing [Coronavirus: Calls to ease No Recourse to Public Funds conditions](#), which summarises who is subject to the conditions, how it is applied and what state support and concessions might be available for those affected during the coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis.

Reminder for European Union citizens to claim settled status – see our [October 2019 Benefit Bulletin](#) for some details.

British Sign Language (BSL) benefit videos and ‘video relay service’

DWP have produced a range of **BSL videos on coronavirus and benefit changes**. These include new content for Universal Credit, Access to Work, Personal Independence Payment (PIP), Carer’s Allowance and Child Maintenance and Statutory Sick Pay. You can view these videos on the [DWP YouTube Sign channel \(link is external\)](#).

A **Video Relay Service** is now available to assist people who are deaf, hard of hearing or speech impaired for calls to the following DWP helplines and services:

- Attendance Allowance
- Access to Work
- Disability Living Allowance
- Personal Independence Payment
- Employment Support Allowance
- Universal Credit ([press release](#))
- Jobcentre Enquiry Line
- Jobseeker's Allowance
- Income Support
- Fraud
- Debt Management
- Compensation Recovery Unit
- [Complaints procedure](#)

Tax Credits renewals – mostly automatic this year

From this year, HMRC will automatically renew all Tax Credits claims apart from a small number they have identified as needing some more information from. These customers will receive an auto renewal pack and they will only need to contact HMRC if their details differ from those quoted in the renewals pack. Approximately 150,000 customers who HMRC need some more information from will be sent a reply required renewal pack. These people will need to complete their renewal by 31 July 2020 in the normal way (online, using HMRC's app, by telephone or by post). For more details see website [revenuebenefits](#).

More guidance, including renewing Tax Credits online, is available on the [GOV.UK website](#).

Support for funeral expenses has increased

From 8 April 2020, financial support helping families meet the costs of funeral expenses such as coffins and funeral directors' fees increased from £700 to £1,000. See the [DWP press release](#) for more details.

Parental bereavement leave and pay

From 6 April 2020, employees who suffer the death of a child aged under 18 years old, or a stillbirth after 24 weeks of pregnancy, will be entitled to two weeks of leave and pay if they meet certain rules. Details from [ACAS](#).

Personal Independence Payment (PIP) review period extended for some

For PIP claimants whose condition is unlikely to change, a minimum review award length of 18 months will take effect from June 2020. This measure was announced in the [Budget 2020](#).

Two-week benefit run-on of 'old' benefits when claiming Universal Credit

From July 2020, when someone claims Universal Credit they will be able to keep two weeks' worth of their Income Support, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance or income-related Employment and Support Allowance. This follows the 'run-on' measure that was introduced for people receiving Housing Benefit in April 2018.

TV license for over 75s to be means tested

Those aged 75 years old or over can get a free TV license. From 1 August 2020, the BBC will add an extra rule where they or their partner have to be on Pension Credit to get the free license. The date for this change was delayed from 1 June due to coronavirus (COVID-19). [More details from the BBC](#).

To claim Pension Credit go to www.gov.uk/pension-credit which also has a Pension Credit calculator

Note: The proportion of households that do not claim their Pension Credit entitlement is 40%. [DWP figures](#) show that £2.5 billion of Pension Credit is not being claimed by around 1.2 million households.

Benefits if you are terminally ill

See this [guidance from the DWP](#)

Further support, information and training

The DWP produce useful items for professionals in [Touchbase: DWP news about work, working-age benefits, pensions and services](#).

Find our **earlier Benefit Bulletins** on our [website page for professionals and volunteers](#) and for **more information on benefit changes**, see our website page [Changes to the benefits system](#) which includes a **timeline of the main benefit changes**.

More details about benefits, including those mentioned above, can be found on [our welfare rights and money advice website pages](#), including benefit self-help factsheets.

Find '**Where to get advice in Newcastle**' on the [benefit advice services website page](#).

For details of our **e-learning modules**, such as 'Introduction to benefits' and 'Universal Credit', see our [website page for professionals and volunteers](#).

This Benefit Bulletin was written by the Active Inclusion Service at 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.

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.