

Benefit Bulletin: Big benefit changes and news

Produced by the Active Inclusion Service, Newcastle City Council

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let's talk
money

Autumn Budget 2017 benefit highlights

Here are the benefit announcements in the Autumn Budget:

Seven waiting days in Universal Credit to go

When someone makes a new claim for Universal Credit, there is no entitlement for the first seven days (although some people are exempt). This seven-day waiting period will be removed from February 2018. It means the first Universal Credit payment will arrive, at the earliest, after five weeks rather than six.

Improvements to advance payments

Advance payments of Universal Credit are loans that can be paid if there is hardship due to the delays in a Universal Credit payment.

- From January 2018, claimants can get a full months' worth of Universal Credit within five working days
- In the meantime, claimants can get 50% of their Universal Credit
- From Spring 2019, people will be able to request an advance payment online
- The repayment period can be extended from six to twelve months - if this is what a claimant wants

Two weeks' worth of Housing Benefit for new Universal Credit claimants

When people who are on Housing Benefit claim Universal Credit, their Housing Benefit stops and the inbuilt delay in waiting for their first payment of Universal Credit can cause problems with rent not being paid. From April 2018, they will receive the equivalent of two additional weeks of Housing Benefit early on in their Universal Credit claim.

Help with paying rent

Some private tenants have their Housing Benefit paid direct to their landlords. New guidance will advise Universal Credit staff to offer a continuation of this when they claim Universal Credit.

Temporary accommodation

A problem with Universal Credit being paid monthly is that some people stay in temporary accommodation for a shorter amount of time than they receive housing costs for through Universal Credit. To fix this, the government have decided that from April 2018 people can claim Housing Benefit (HB) for periods in temporary accommodation - just like those in supported accommodation and other 'specified accommodation'. [DWP guidance](#) says: "From April 2018 any new claims for Universal Credit from claimants in temporary accommodation (TA) (not just emergency temporary accommodation) will have their housing costs met through HB. Existing TA claimants on Universal Credit will also move to HB."

Two child limit for Universal Credit delayed

Most people with three or more children are not able to claim Universal Credit and have to claim 'legacy benefits' instead. This temporary rule was to apply until November 2018 but has been extended to January 2019.

Universal Credit roll out delayed - after Christmas

The accelerated roll out that started in October will be slowed down from February 2018 and then speeded up from May 2018. Here is the [new timetable](#).

Universal Credit and other benefit phone lines to become freephone numbers

It was announced in the budget that the Universal Credit and other benefit office contact numbers would become freephone numbers. See the [DWP press release](#) and [below for the list of freephone numbers](#).

New claims for 'live service' Universal Credit to end

'Live service' is a limited kind of Universal Credit - available to new claims from single people. From 1 January 2018, no new claims for it will be allowed but existing recipients will continue to get it. Until 'full service' Universal Credit is introduced in an area, any new claims will instead have to be made for 'legacy benefits'. [DWP guidance provides more information](#).

This does not apply to Newcastle (the area covered by the three Newcastle Jobcentres) as it is a 'full service' Universal Credit area.

Plan to apply private sector Local Housing Allowance rates to social housing abandoned

Some time ago, the government planned to apply Local Housing Allowance rates - which is Housing Benefit for private sector tenants - to the social rented sector and supported housing from April 2019. However, it is no longer progressing with this change.

Funding for supported housing

Connected with this announcement, the government also published its [response to the Communities and Local Government and Work and Pensions Committees' joint report: Future of supported housing](#)

In summary the government outlined a 'new approach' which included three funding groups:

- A 'sheltered rent' for sheltered and extra housing - funded in the welfare system
- A Local Grant Fund for short term and transitional supported housing funded locally
- Housing Benefit and Universal Credit to continue funding 100% of housing costs (rent inclusive of eligible services charges) for long term supported housing

For more information see [Funding for supported housing](#) from gov.uk and [UC bulletin](#).

For more details about the budget, see the [Autumn Budget 2017](#) web page and Secretary of State for Work and Pensions David Gauke's [statement in the commons](#).

Benefits and help over Christmas and New Year

Short of money?

If the residents you are working with find themselves without enough income or in financial difficulty, the information on these web pages may help:

- For **short-term** and one-off help from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), visit [Benefit information](#)
- For **advice** on how to manage money, our Crisis Support Scheme and foodbanks, visit [Managing your money](#)
- For **Universal Credit** 'advance payments' for delays and extra help and support, visit [Universal Credit more detailed guide](#)
- For **contact details** for benefit offices and 'Where to get advice in Newcastle', visit [Benefit advice services in Newcastle and benefit offices](#)

Jobcentre Plus benefit office opening times

These offices are normally open from Monday to Friday. Over the Christmas and New Year period, their offices and phone lines will be closed on Christmas Day, Boxing Day, Wednesday 27 December 2017 and Monday 1 January 2018.

Note:

27 December 2017 phone lines open for urgent calls about payments only.

2 January 2018 phone lines and local offices open for urgent enquiries about payments only.

When will claimants be paid?

The DWP and HM Revenues and Customs have announced when benefit and tax credit payments will be made early. For example, those expecting a payment between 22 and 26 December should get it on 22 December.

For details see the following gov.uk web pages:

[How-to-have-your-benefits-paid](#)

[When-is-your-next-tax-credits-payment](#)

[Universal-credit/how-you're-paid](#)

[Child-benefit-payment-dates/bank-holidays](#)

Note that for those who have just made claims for Universal Credit, the six to seven-week delay will still apply so people who are struggling should ask for a [Universal Credit advance payment](#).

See also below for a [list of the new benefit freephone contact numbers](#) and [more details from gov.uk](#)

Top tips

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

Tips on Universal Credit claim and avoiding problems

Personal Security Number - don't lose it

This is a 16-digit number that is issued to the claimant at the initial interview with the work coach at the Jobcentre (following the online claim) and provides an additional layer of security for people accessing their online Universal Credit account from a PC or device. Claimants should keep it safe and take it with them to appointments at the Jobcentre in case they need to access their account while they are there.

Avoid a claim being 'closed down'

There are certain things a claimant has to do as part of the Universal Credit claim. If they are not done within a certain period of time, their claim may be 'closed down.'

One example is agreeing to the Claimant Commitment.

At the initial interview, the Claimant Commitment is drawn up by the work coach and claimant. It is important that the claimant must then agree to it online. The claimant has seven days to do this but it may be advisable this is done straight after the interview, while still in the office if possible.

The Claimant Commitment is a tailored list of work related activities that the claimant is expected to do. [More details about the Claimant Commitment.](#)

More information on [what is required of the claimant and the rules about closing a claim.](#)

Rent mismatch - get it right

If the claimant and the landlord are giving different rent amounts to the Jobcentre, the Jobcentre asks the claimant to check it and get back to the Jobcentre. If this isn't done the Jobcentre may not pay the housing element (to help with the rent).

Keep contact details up to date

Claimants tell the Jobcentre how they want to be contacted - such as by text. If their mobile number changes but they don't tell the Jobcentre (via their online journal) then the claimant may miss important notices.

Generally, it is important to let the Jobcentre know of any changes that may affect a benefit claim.

Other changes and news

Improvements to help with funeral costs

Following a consultation, the government have [announced](#) it will make the following improvements to the Funeral Expenses Payments scheme next year:

- allowing recipients of a Funeral Payment to receive contributions from relatives, friends or charities without it being deducted from the payment
- extending the claim period from three to six months from the date of the funeral
- allowing applicants to submit evidence electronically to speed up the processing of claims and get decisions to claimants sooner
- introducing a shorter application form for children's funerals

More details on the [Funeral Expenses Payment](#) scheme.

Benefit rates for 2018/19

Highlights include:

- The basic and new State Pension will be uprated in line with Consumer Price Index (CPI) which is 3%
- Benefits linked to disability and for carers will go up with CPI
- Most working age benefits will continue to be frozen at their 2015/16 levels for four years

See the [benefit rates](#) and the [Tax Credits and Child Benefit rates](#) for 2018/19.

Inquiry into medical assessments for Personal Independence Payment and Employment and Support Allowance

This is an ongoing investigation by the [Work and Pensions Select Committee](#), which has considered submissions from claimants and those responsible for the assessments and reported that “the Department for Work and Pensions has announced that its target for upholding original PIP and ESA decisions at the first stage of appeal, known as Mandatory Reconsideration, will be dropped”.

News from the Department for Work and Pensions

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

- Providers for Work and Health Programme announced
- Get to know your (workplace) pension
- Unclaimed Pension Credit. Four in ten could be missing out - an average of £2,000 a year for those not claiming it
- The [ESA health and work conversation](#) - a mandatory (unless exempt) work focussed interview that takes place around four weeks after a person makes an ESA claim

New Universal Credit bulletins

Will be produced ‘as and when’ for local authorities and will mirror Housing Benefit circulars etc. [Bulletin UC1/2017](#) provides, for example, information on the Universal Credit announcements in the budget, trusted partners and the landlord portal.

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

Statistics

Universal Credit

In Newcastle, there were 11,995 people on Universal Credit in November. That's a 86% increase since April 2017. You can find more DWP statistics on benefits and sanctions via these webpages: [Universal Credit statistics](#), [quarterly](#) and [do it yourself statistics](#).

The “bedroom tax”

As of May 2017, over two thirds of tenants that have had “bedroom tax” reductions include a disabled family member according to an [answer](#) in the House of Commons, and in another [answer](#), 9% of social rented households were subject to the “bedroom tax”.

Welfare reform

Research conducted by Child Poverty Action Group with the Institute for Public Policy Research looked at the impact of changes to benefits over the last decade. See [The Austerity Generation: the impact of a decade of cuts on family incomes and child poverty](#)

Foodbanks

The Trussell Trust recently reported that referrals to foodbanks have increased by 30% in areas where Universal Credit full service has been introduced and 43% of all referrals are caused by benefit problems. See [Foodbank demand soars across the UK](#).

See links to [Newcastle's foodbanks and other kinds of support](#).

Important Personal Independence Payment court decision and DWP trawl

In March 2017, a court decided that when assessing whether a person can carry out an activity safely, it is necessary to consider both the likelihood of the harm occurring and the severity and nature of the harm that might occur. The same approach applies to the assessment for a need for supervision.

Following this, the DWP are going to change how they assess PIP decisions and also review their decisions since March 2017 to remedy any wrong decisions. See the DWP guidance to its officers on this [ADM Memo 29/17](#) and [ADM Memo 30/17](#).

The organisation Disability Rights UK (who produce the Disability Rights Handbook) has [written to the Minister for Disabled People on how this is being handled](#). One of the issues was that the DWP guidance only gave examples where the new interpretation doesn't apply, so [in this reply](#), the DWP have provided examples of when it does apply.

The new interpretation of the law has been incorporated into the DWP's [PIP assessment guide](#).

For more information on PIP see the [factsheets on our benefit information web page](#).

Benefit office freephone numbers

In the Autumn Budget 2017, the Chancellor announced that the Universal Credit and other benefit contact numbers would become freephone numbers. Below are some examples.

For future reference, our [benefit information web page](#) lists each benefit with a link to further information on the gov.uk website - including their contact phone number(s).

Universal Credit

Full service: Telephone: 0800 328 5644

Live service: Telephone: 0800 328 9344

Textphone: 0800 328 1344

Universal Credit sanction line: Telephone: 0800 328 9744

'Full' and 'live' service is explained on our [Universal Credit webpage](#).

Other Jobcentre Plus benefits

Local Jobcentre Plus offices administer benefits like Jobseeker's Allowance, Income Support and Employment and Support Allowance as well as Universal Credit.

The Jobcentre Plus general freephone number is:

Telephone: 0800 169 0310 (Textphone: 0800 169 0314)

Here are some other specific Jobcentre Plus benefit numbers:

Jobseeker's Allowance and Income Support

Because Newcastle is a Universal Credit 'full service area' the number is:

Telephone: 0800 055 6688 (Textphone: 0800 023 4888)

Employment and Support Allowance

Because Newcastle is a Universal Credit 'full service area' the number is:

Telephone: 0800 328 5644 (Textphone: 0800 328 1344)

Disability benefits

Attendance Allowance

Telephone: 0800 731 0122 (Textphone: 0800 731 0317)

Disability Living Allowance

Telephone: 0800 121 4600 (Textphone: 0800 121 4523)

Personal Independence Payment

Telephone: 0800 121 4433 (Textphone: 0800 121 4493)

Carer's Allowance

Telephone: 0800 731 0297 (Textphone: 0800 731 0317)

More contact details for [disability benefits](#) and [Carer's Allowance](#)

Others

Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit Enquiry Line

Telephone: 0800 121 8397

State Pension & Pension Credit Enquiry Line

Telephone: 0800 731 0469

International Pensions Enquiry Line

Telephone: 0800 731 0341

Winter Fuel for non-benefit customers

Telephone: 0800 731 0160

DWP Warm Home Discount Scheme

Telephone: 0800 731 0214

Debt Management Enquiries

Telephone: 0800 916 0647

Tax Credits helpline

This continues not to be a freephone number

Telephone: 0345 300 3900 (Textphone: 0345 300 3909)

Stop press – new “bedroom tax” case

At the time of writing we have heard of a recent and significant “bedroom tax” case where the suitability of a bedroom must be judged by reference to actual category of occupants. We await DWP guidance to local authority Revenue and Benefit staff but in the meantime, [here is a link to the full decision](#). We will provide further information as it becomes available.

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