



## Benefits and Financial Inclusion Update—Edition 20

### Winter Fuel Support Scheme – deadline to make an application is 28<sup>th</sup> February 2022

An urgent reminder for you to ensure that none of your clients misses out on the £200 payment for people on working-age means-tested benefits who are responsible for paying fuel bill as explained in our previous update.

The Welsh Government have doubled the amount of the payment (from the original £100). People who had already applied and received their payment before the increase was announced on the 1<sup>st</sup> February will automatically receive the additional £100 and do not need to make another application.

We know that not all the people in Swansea who are eligible for this payment have applied yet and do not want anyone in need to miss out. We ask you to help us get this information out to help prevent fuel poverty in Swansea this winter.

You can apply [here](#).

### Switched On – the new Energy Awareness Hub

[Switched On](#) opened in the town centre ([13 Nelson Street](#)) on 20/01/22 and is being run by the Environment Centre to provide unbiased, free advice to people struggling to pay fuel bills. They will also provide information on how to better insulate your home, switching energy providers and how to access further support.

You can also pop in to purchase some of the Environment Centre's eco-friendly products.

The hub is open Thursdays (noon-6pm), Fridays (10am-4pm) and Saturdays (9am-3pm).

You can find out more about the Environment Centre [here](#).

### Tenancy Hardship Grant

The Welsh Government have extended the period that the Tenancy Hardship Grant can cover Covid-19 related rent arrears accrued from 01/03/20 to 30/06/21 and can now include arrears accrued up to 31/12/21. The grant is also no longer restricted to only tenants in the private rented sector.

Julie James MS announced on 12/01/22 that:

*This means that tenants who lost their jobs following the removal of the furlough scheme in September, or who suffered a significant decrease in income when the Universal Credit uplift was removed by UK Government, and who were not in receipt of housing related costs, will be included.*

*I have also decided to extend the grant to include all social housing tenants who were not in receipt of housing-related benefits when they built up Covid-19 related rent arrears.*

The full written statement is [here](#).

This grant is available to people who cannot afford to pay off their rent arrears. If you were in receipt of Housing Benefit or UC housing costs for the period you accrued the arrears, then you would not be eligible for a grant for that period.

Instead, you could apply for a [Discretionary Housing Payment](#) to help with any shortfall between benefit levels and your rent.

The grant is for people whose finances have been affected by the pandemic and as a result they have built up rent arrears which they cannot afford to address and as such are at risk of homelessness. The guidance gives examples of situations that may have resulted in people being unable to afford their rent as:

- Increase in utilities due to spending more time at home
- Increase in food bills due to dependants spending more time at home (e.g. school closures)
- Being furloughed, or the furlough scheme ending
- Only in receipt of Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) whilst isolating or experiencing Covid-19
- Working fewer hours than usual (due to being on a zero hour contract, or closure of the employer)

This list is not exhaustive and the local authority can use their discretion and consider individual circumstances.

If you have a client who may be eligible contact [housing options](#) for full details of the eligibility criteria and an application form.

## **DWP Advanced Customer Support**

Liz Jewson from the Advanced Customer Support service in Wales has kindly provided us with an outline of the service they provide:

*I'm delighted to have an opportunity to tell you about the role of Advanced Customer Support Senior Leader for DWP in Wales.*

*There are two of us, Lorraine Davies and myself, Liz Jewson. We aim to provide support for vulnerable customers where the usual service provision and help is not resolving risks or concerns. We bring together colleagues from across DWP to work on support for these customers, Universal credit, Jobseekers allowance, Employment and support allowance, Retirement pensions, Personal Independence payment, Child Maintenance Group etc.*

*We also make/maintain contact with a range of external organisations so that we can ensure good signposting for customers in need and understand the range of support available.*

*Our headline responsibilities look like this...*

- *Be the point of contact for vulnerable customer cases, involving serious hardship or risk, across our area.*
- *Work with partners and DWP colleagues to find resolutions for customers, ensuring that our responsibility to pay the right money on time is a priority.*
- *Work with all DWP business areas to ensure complex or concerning customer issues are visible, then support colleagues in understanding how approaches can be revised, within policy, to create beneficial changes in service.*

*If you have a customer who is vulnerable and about whom you are concerned, please try all of the usual means of resolving their issue with our normal business processes. If those do not work, or the case is particularly concerning, you can email Lorraine or I, via our shared mailbox- [acs.walesadvancedcustomersupport.gov.uk](mailto:acs.walesadvancedcustomersupport.gov.uk)*

Please try to resolve benefit problems for your vulnerable clients with help from the Welfare Rights Advice Line first; however, you can contact the Advanced Customer Support if the matter is urgent and the Advice Line is not open.

## **Statutory Sick Pay**

Just to confirm that as of the 27<sup>th</sup> January 2022, employers are again able to request a fit note (what a sick note is called) when an employee has been off sick for 7 days. The temporary short term measure due to Omicron of an employer not being able to request one until after 28 days ended on 26/01/22.

## Exception from needing to accept a claimant commitment for terminally ill claimants of UC and ESA

From 15/02/22 the basic requirement to have accepted a claimant commitment in order to claim UC and ESA will no longer apply if the claimant is terminally ill. An exception was previously only for claimants who lack the capacity to accept a claimant commitment and where there are exceptional circumstances in which it would be unreasonable to expect a person to accept a claimant commitment.

The new rule means that it is no longer down to the discretion of work coaches to decide whether an exception should be applied on a case by case basis if a claimant is terminally ill. This should make the claiming process easier for claimants in these circumstances. No guidance has been published yet on how this exception will be applied in practice, however we expect that a DS1500 form (the form used for medical professionals to confirm their patient fits the criteria of terminally ill for benefit purposes) will be required.

The claimant commitment sets out your responsibilities when claiming, including work-related requirements and the duty to report changes in circumstances. In the statement from the Minister for Disabled People explains that this will ‘streamline the process and provide certainty to those approaching the end of their lives’.

On a practical front, this will make it easier for someone to submit a claim on the behalf of a claimant in this situation without them having to personally agree to a claimant commitment.

In the statement the Minister also confirmed that:

*Further to the changes we are making today, we will be bringing forward regulations shortly to replace the current 6-month rule for determining eligibility for the Special Rules for Terminal Illness with a 12-month, end of life approach in Universal Credit and Employment and Support Allowance with changes to Personal Independence Payment, Disability Living Allowance and Attendance Allowance being made when parliamentary time allows.*

## Help to Claim Service

The Government have announced that funding for the Universal Credit Help to Claim Service will be given to Citizens Advice to continue the service until March 2023.

The announcement states that:

*Trained advisers provide advice for anyone who requires support to make a new Universal Credit claim, including those moving from a legacy benefit, such as how to collect the relevant evidence and fill in the application. They can also help with additional advice such as preparing for a first jobcentre appointment.*

Prior to the pandemic restrictions the Help to Claim Service could offer a face to face service, this is not included in the new contract. The announcement states that:

*People will be able to access Help to Claim support from Citizens Advice via its [website](#) and through the free phone service by calling 0800 144 8444 for England, 0800 023 2581 for Scotland and 0800 024 1220 for Wales.*

*The service is free and confidential. Advisers are available 8am to 6pm, Monday to Friday.*

## Way to Work

[Way to work](#) is a new campaign launched by the DWP on the 27<sup>th</sup> January aims to get half a million people in the UK into work by the end of June 2022.

The announcement starts by saying:

*As we move out of the pandemic, with restrictions lifted and life returning to normal, the ‘Way to Work’ campaign will focus on getting job-ready people off Universal Credit and into work, rapidly filling vacancies which are at a record high.*

However, the Government's own statistics show that 40% of UC claimants are in work. The number of claimants whose work requirements mean they are required to search for work has fallen from 35% in July 21 to 32% in October 21 and 13% of people in this group are already working, but the level of their earnings means they are required to search for additional work.

The announcement states that new UC claimants who are in the all-work requirements claimant commitment group will only have the first four weeks of their claim to look for work in their previous occupation or sector and after this they will have to look for any work.

The regulations currently allow a claimant to limit their work search to their previous occupation/sector for a maximum of three months, but also state this is allowed *'for such period as the Secretary of State considers appropriate, but only if the Secretary of State is satisfied that the claimant will have reasonable prospects of obtaining paid work in spite of such limitation'*. Therefore legally the DWP have always been able to reduce this period if the limitation would mean a claimant would find it hard to get a new job.

Realistically if a new claimant can find suitable jobs to apply for in the sector where they have recent experience, this is not much of a change, as their work coach should be satisfied that they are taking all reasonable efforts to find work. It is also worth remembering that UC claimants will still be able to place limitations on the work they are looking for due to physical or mental health problems and the expected hours they should be available for and seeking work can be limited by caring responsibilities and health problems.

Although the announcement states that claimants *'will be supported in this with more time spent face to face with a Work Coach to receive better, tailored support'*, locally any move to more face to face appointments with work coaches will follow the guidance from the Welsh Government on coronavirus restriction measures.

If you have a client who needs help getting back into work, refer them to [swanseaworking](#) for personalised help.

If you do have any clients who are sanctioned, always contact the Welfare Rights Advice Line for advice on whether there are grounds for the sanction to be challenged.

#### **Online tool to help clients with multiple debts - [IE Hub](#)**

This is a free online service which allows people to complete an income and expenditure form, keep it updated and declare vulnerability and use this to arrange affordable repayments.

This was mentioned as a way of assisting clients during a presentation by PennySmart which is a debt advice agency for people in North Wales.