



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Research and Information Service Information Leaflet

CG/01

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Welfare Changes in Northern Ireland: Key Resources for Constituency Casework

The purpose of this information leaflet is to signpost MLAs and their staff to a range of relevant online information on social security and welfare reform-related issues. An electronic copy of this leaflet is available on the Research and Information Service (RaISe) page of the Assembly Intranet (AssISt) - <http://assist.assemblyni.gov.uk/business-areas/raise/>.

1 Where can I find information on the changes?

Two of the most significant changes to social security benefits in Northern Ireland are the introduction of Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payment. Further information on these new benefits as well as information on changes to other benefits can be found on the NI Direct website:

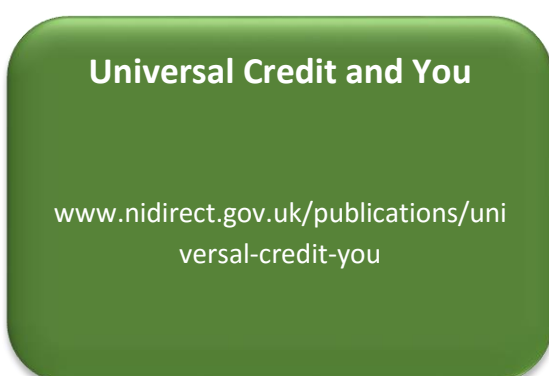
- **General information on welfare changes in NI** - www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/welfare-changes
- **Universal Credit** - www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/universal-credit
- **Personal Independence Payment** - www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/personal-independence-payment
- **Employment and Support Allowance (time-limiting contributory ESA)** - www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/changes-to-employment-and-support-allowance

- **Changes to Housing Benefit (the Social Sector Size Criteria) -** www.nidirect.gov.uk/changes-to-housing-benefit
- **Benefits Cap -** www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/the-benefit-cap
- **Changes to the Social Fund ('Finance Support') -** www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/finance-support
- **New fraud and error powers -** www.communities-ni.gov.uk/articles/new-fraud-and-error-powers
- **Welfare Change helpline contact details -** www.nidirect.gov.uk/contacts/contacts-az/welfare-changes-helpline

It is also important to be aware that changes have also been introduced to Child Tax Credit (CTC). From 6 April 2017, people in Northern Ireland will not be able to claim Child Tax Credit for third or subsequent children or qualifying young person born on or after 6 April 2017 (there are a limited range of exceptions). This change also applies to Universal Credit. Further information is available at:

- **Rules on the two child limit is available at -** www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/universal-credit-two-child-limit and www.gov.uk/child-tax-credit/new-claim
- **Tax credits helpline contact numbers, including information on opening hours is available at -** www.nidirect.gov.uk/contacts/contacts-az/tax-credits-helpline-and-tax-credit-office

The NI Executive and the Department for Communities has published a range of **leaflets and booklets** on welfare changes – links to some of these are enclosed below:



2 Where can I find information on the mitigation measures and supplementary payments?

There are significant differences to the implementation of welfare reform in Northern Ireland in comparison to Great Britain. The *Fresh Start Agreement* (www.communities-ni.gov.uk/articles/department-communities-implementation-its-fresh-start-agreement-commitments) set out the Northern Ireland Executive's agreement to provide funds to 'top up' the UK welfare arrangements in Northern Ireland. The Executive further agreed that a working group, led by Eileen Evason, would develop a mitigation scheme to assist vulnerable people in Northern Ireland from the immediate impact of welfare reform. The report of the working group which includes details of the various mitigation measures and supplementary payments is available at www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/publications/welfare-reform-mitigations-working-group-report.

A summary of the Welfare Supplementary Payments is available from the Department for Communities website at www.communities-ni.gov.uk/articles/administrative-welfare-supplementary-payments

Further information on the mitigation measures and supplementary payments is available on the NI Direct website at www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/support-for-those-affected.

Contact information for the Welfare Supplementary Payments Team is available at www.nidirect.gov.uk/contacts/contacts-az/welfare-supplementary-payments-team

Further information on welfare supplementary payments for PIP; for the loss of DLA; for carers; and for loss of disability premiums is available from **Citizens Advice** at www.citizensadvice.org.uk/nireland/benefits/welfare-supplementary-payments-ni/welfare-supplementary-payments/welfare-supplementary-payments-for-loss-of-disability-living-allowance-ni/

3 How can I help my constituents?

This section provides links to information that are perhaps the most recurrent issues for constituents, i.e. challenging a benefit decision (through Mandatory Reconsideration and appeals); benefit sanctions and appealing those sanctions; financial support; budgeting and debt advice; and organisations that can provide assistance.

Mandatory Reconsideration

If a constituent believes that a decision about their social security benefits is wrong, they can ask the office that made the decision to explain it. This is known as 'mandatory reconsideration'. Further information on mandatory reconsideration is available from the NI Direct website at www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/appealing-against-a-benefits-decision

A number of charities advice organisations have published their own information on mandatory reconsideration. A few examples set out below:

- **Citizens Advice: 'Challenging a PIP decision'** - www.citizensadvice.org.uk/nireland/benefits/sick-or-disabled-people-and-carers/personal-independence-payment-ni/pip-appeals-ni/challenging-a-pip-decision-ni/
- **Citizens Advice: 'Challenging an ESA decision'** - www.citizensadvice.org.uk/nireland/benefits/sick-or-disabled-people-and-carers/employment-and-support-allowance-ni1/while-youre-getting-esa-ni/challenging-an-esa-decision-ni/
- **The National Autistic Society: 'Challenging a Personal Independence Decision?'** - www.autism.org.uk/about/benefits-care/benefits/pip/challenging.aspx

Appeals

Should a person wish to appeal a social security decision following the outcome of Mandatory Reconsideration they must send their appeal directly to the Appeals Service (TAS). Information on the appeals process, including advice on what to include with an appeal form and how to prepare for an appeal, is available from the NI Direct website at www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/appealing-against-a-benefits-decision#toc-2

Advice on appeals is also available on the Citizens Advice website at www.citizensadvice.org.uk/nireland/benefits/benefits-introduction/problems-with-benefits-and-tax-credits/challenging-a-benefit-decision-ni1/appeals-ni/appealing-against-a-dfc-benefit-decision-made-on-or-after-23-may-2016-ni/

Sanctions and appealing sanctions

Members and their constituency staff may receive requests from constituents for assistance in respect of benefit sanctions. Information on sanctions is available from the NI Direct website at www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/benefit-sanctions

A guide published by the Welfare Reform Support Project Consortium (Law Centre, NI, Citizens Advice and Advice NI) providing advice on supporting benefit claimants who are at risk of being sanctioned, or have been sanctioned, is available at

www.lawcentreni.org/news/recent-news/38-featured-slideshow/1443-sanctions-guide-2018.html

A number of leaflets on benefits and sanctions is available on the Department for Communities website:

Universal Credit: Sanctions information leaflet

www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/universal-credit-sanctions-information-leaflet

ESA: Sanctions information leaflet

www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/employment-and-support-allowance-sanctions-information-leaflet

JSA: Sanctions information leaflet

www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/jobseekers-allowance-sanctions-information-leaflet

Income Support and Sanctions Leaflet

www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/income-support-sanctions-information-leaflet

Finance Support

'Finance Support' is available from the Department for Communities to support people in times of financial crisis or need. Finance Support can provide help through:

- Short-term Benefit Advances
- Discretionary Support
- Budgeting Loans
- Sure Start Maternity Grants
- Funeral Payments
- Cold Weather Payments

Further information including eligibility criteria and contact details is available at www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/finance-support

Budgeting advice

Members may be approached by constituents impacted by welfare changes who are seeking help and advice on debt and budgeting. A number of useful resources include:

- **NI Direct advice on budgeting** - www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/budgeting and dealing with debt problems www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/dealing-debt-problems
- **Citizens Advice: 'Getting help with your debts'** - www.citizensadvice.org.uk/nireland/debt-and-money/help-with-debt/get-help-with-your-debts/get-help-with-your-debts/
- **The Money Advice Service: budget planner and debt advice** - www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk/en
- **Step Change Debt Charity: offers free advice on debt and debt consolidation** - www.stepchange.org/how-we-help/debt-advice.aspx
- **Advice NI: offers money management advice and training** - www.adviceni.net/money-management
- **Housing Rights: Help with debt and repossession** - www.housingadviceni.org/help-debt and mortgage debt advice www.housingadviceni.org/mortgage-debt-advice
- **Northern Ireland Housing Executive: 'Making your money work: a practical guide'** - www.nihe.gov.uk/index/advice/advice_for_housing_executive_tenants/avoiding_debt.htm

Advice organisations

On 1 November 2016, the Department for Communities in conjunction with the **Welfare Reform Advice Services Consortium** (comprising Citizens Advice, Advice NI and the Law Centre) launched a number of services to support anyone needing help or advice relating to any of the changes to the welfare system.

This includes the following:

- An **independent Welfare Changes helpline** – Freephone **0808 802 0020** (9.00am to 5.00pm)

- **Additional independent advisors** across all 11 local council areas in Northern Ireland and located in local **Citizens Advice** (see and **Advice NI** offices to provide face to face assistance to anyone impacted by the changes. The location and contact details for Citizens Advice is available at www.citizensadvice.org.uk/nireland/about-us/get-advice-ni/ and for Advice NI at www.adviceni.net/advice/local; and
- **Additional specialist legal advice** from the **Law Centre**. Contact details for the Law Centre are available at www.lawcentreni.org/about-us/contact-us.html

These services are free for anyone who needs help or advice relating to any of the changes to the welfare system.

- **Advice NI** provides advice on money and debt; tax and benefits; and welfare changes – www.adviceni.net
- **Citizens Advice Northern Ireland** – a network of local Citizens Advice offices provides advice on a range of issues including social security, welfare reform, employment, housing and finance and debt. Information on the location and contact details of each office is available at www.citizensadvice.org.uk/nireland/about-us/get-advice-ni/
- **Law Centre NI** provides specialist legal support to organisations and disadvantaged individuals on a wide range of issues including society. It provides information on benefit rights and entitlements in ‘Encyclopedia of Rights’ (see www.lawcentreni.org/EoR/).

In addition to this, specialist housing advice is available from:

- **Housing Rights** which provides advice and information on homelessness and a wide range of other housing problems in Northern Ireland - <http://housingrights.org.uk>

The Housing Rights website contains a range of resources including information on welfare reform and benefits www.housingadviceni.org/

The Housing Rights housing and debt helpline number is **028 90245640**

There are a wide range of other organisations providing advice and support to individuals and families in crisis. Contact details for these organisations is available from the **Family Support NI** website www.familysupportni.gov.uk/ and the **Helplines Network NI** website www.helplinesnetworkni.com/

4 Assembly Library resources

The Assembly Library also has a range of useful resources on social security benefits and tax credits:

Welfare benefits and tax credits handbook	R 362.582 CHI
Disability rights Handbook:	R 362.4 GRE
Benefits for Migrants Handbook	R 368.4 WAL
Student Support and Benefits Handbook	R 378.3 MAL
Child Support Handbook	R 362.8282 CHI

E-Resources

The Assembly Library has a subscription to the Child Poverty Action Group's handbook on welfare benefits and tax credits. For login details MLAs and their staff can contact the Assembly Library Issue Desk on 028 905 21250.

This information is provided to MLAs in support of their Assembly duties and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. Whilst we strive to ensure that the information provided here is up to date, the information provided by external websites referred to may change frequently. This leaflet should not be relied upon as providing legal or professional advice, nor as a substitute for it. A suitably qualified professional should be consulted if specific advice or information is required.

The Research and Information Service is available to discuss the content of this briefing with Members and their staff, but not with the general public.