

Benefits and welfare

we need your help to campaign
for a fairer system



job
centre
plus



For better
mental health

Benefits and welfare

The Coalition Government is introducing a raft of changes to the system of benefits and welfare which will have a dramatic effect on the lives of millions of people. At Mind, we are working to ensure that these changes do not have a negative impact on people with experience of mental distress.

We're campaigning around welfare changes by:

- investigating the possible impacts of planned changes to the system on people with mental health problems
- listening to the experiences of people with mental health problems who currently use the benefits and welfare system
- telling the Government where the system is not working and where their plans may have a negative effect on people
- running campaigns in parliament and the media to voice our concerns over current problems and proposed changes.

However, the most powerful way of campaigning on these issues is for people directly affected to speak out, so that those in charge really understand the importance of a benefits and welfare system that gives fair and equal support for people with mental health problems. It is also vital to emphasise the devastating impact on real people's lives when the system fails.

You can make a real difference by taking some of the actions described below. Together we can convince the Government not to make changes to the benefits and welfare system that will have a negative impact on people with mental health problems.

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Introduction to the key issues

The Government is set to make a number of significant changes to the welfare and benefits system which may have an impact on you or people you know. Below are some brief introductions to what these changes are and what impact they might have.

Within each briefing, we have included a summary of the issue and our concerns with it. You may wish to print these briefings out to help you with your campaigning. Some of these issues may seem more relevant to you than others, in which case it is best to focus your campaigning on these areas.

The Work Capability Assessment

What is it?

Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) is the new out-of-work benefit for people with disabilities or substantial barriers to working. Since 2008 new applicants for out-of-work disability benefits have been directed to ESA. The shift in focus between previous incapacity benefits and ESA was supposed to be about looking at what people can do rather than what they can't.

Eligibility for ESA is decided principally by the Work Capability Assessment (WCA), which involves the applicant filling out a form about their disability and then attending a medical assessment. In the assessment, applicants score points based on various 'descriptors' relating to physical and mental health. Following this assessment a government 'decision-maker' will allocate the applicant to one of three groups:

- 'Fit for work' means they can only apply for Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and will be required to seek work and meet the requirements of this benefit.
- 'Work-Related Activity Group' means they receive ESA but are required to engage in activities that will help them prepare for a return to work.
- 'Support Group' means they receive a higher rate of ESA and are not required to look for work or engage with work-related activity.

What is changing?

Most people currently claiming one of the existing incapacity benefits will be transferred to the new ESA system between October 2010 and early 2014. This will involve the majority of existing claimants of incapacity benefits being reassessed via the WCA.

An Independent Review of the WCA, published in November 2010, heavily criticised the process for being "impersonal and mechanistic" and often leading to "poor decision-making". The review made recommendations for improving the assessment, which the Government accepted. Professor Harrington, who led the review, also asked Mind, Mencap and the National Autistic Society to suggest changes to the parts of the test about mental health and learning disabilities, and these will be presented to ministers soon.

An internal review of the WCA in 2009 made recommendations on changing the content of the test which will be implemented in April 2011.

What does Mind think?

We believe the WCA is not a fair or effective tool for assessing the impact of mental health problems on people's ability to work. The Independent Review vindicated many of our criticisms and we support its recommendations. We believe that the Government should not go ahead with migration of IB claimants until the system is working fairly and effectively. People need to be placed in the right group to ensure they receive the right support.

We believe that many of the recommendations from the previous, internal review will make the assessment less fair and effective and these should be reversed. We ask that our joint proposals with Mencap and NAS to improve the content of the assessment are adopted by the Government.

Disability Living Allowance

What is it?

Disability Living Allowance (DLA) was designed to recognise the extra costs faced by disabled people because of their circumstances. It is split into two components: 'care' for the additional costs of social and medical care, and 'mobility' for the additional costs of getting around. Many people with mental health problems use DLA to pay for social activities that are of great benefit to their condition, as well as for basic needs and transport.

What is changing?

The Government is planning to change DLA to the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) and wants to cut the future budget by 20 per cent through introducing an "objective assessment" of eligibility by 2013-14. People claiming PIP will be reassessed more frequently than under DLA.

The planned changes also involve changing the 'Care' component to 'Daily Living', to recognise that people may face extra costs from their disability beyond simply paying for care; and reducing the number of rates of payment for this component from three to two in order to simplify the system.

The Government is also considering ending the payment of the mobility component to people in hospitals and care homes because they believe these costs should be covered by other sources of funding.

What does Mind think?

Although we are not against reform of DLA in principle, we are strongly opposed to the proposed budget cut. DLA is thought to be under-claimed and is seen as vital by those who receive it. The decision to cut the future budget by 20 per cent seems to be entirely arbitrary and will undermine the creation of an 'objective' assessment.

We are particularly concerned that people with mental health problems on lower rates of DLA will lose out on vital support and that the Government has not considered the potential knock-on costs for health and social care if these people lose this vital income.

Housing benefits

What is changing?

The Government is introducing a cap on benefits meaning that claimant's housing benefit will be reduced if they are receiving more than a certain amount in total benefit claims. They are also changing rules so that people can only claim housing benefit to live alone if they are over 35 years old, where previously claimants only needed to be 25 years old.

What does Mind think?

We are very concerned that these changes may mean that people with mental health problems will have to move into unsuitable circumstances and may be detached from their social, health and support networks. This could have a devastating effect on many individual's mental health.

Universal Credit and the Work Programme

What is it?

Universal Credit will be the new system for paying and withdrawing benefits. It will mean that people get all the benefits they are entitled to in one payment, from one source, so that these can be withdrawn at a steady and gradual rate as people return to work.

The Work Programme is the new back-to-work scheme for people who are deemed to be “far from the workplace” . This group may well include people who have struggled to find work because of a mental health problem. Those eligible for support from the Work Programme will include people in the Work-Related Activity Group of ESA, anyone migrated from IB, and those who have been claiming JSA for more than a year.

What is changing?

The Government is planning to bring in the Universal Credit system over the next few years. Benefits that claimants currently receive in separate payments, such as ESA, DLA and child benefit, will be paid in one lump sum which will be steadily reduced if the claimant returns to work.

The Work Programme will replace all current back-to-work schemes such as Pathways to Work. It will be introduced in summer 2011 with different private providers overseeing various regions of the country. These providers will be free to follow the approach they think is most effective for getting people back to work and will be paid based on the success of their work.

Within the Work Programme and Universal Credit there will be an increased number of requirements that claimants have to meet in order to receive benefits (such as attending training courses). Claimants will be denied their benefits for increasing periods of time if they break these conditions.

What does Mind think?

Although we welcome the principles of Universal Credit – to simplify the system and ensure that work pays – we want to be sure that people with mental health problems are no worse off as a result of this system and that it fully recognises the barriers people face in finding work.

Similarly, we welcome the Work Programme if it means that people receive substantial support that is tailored to their needs in terms of getting back to work. However, we are concerned that there will not be sufficient expertise within the system to ensure that people with mental health problems are treated well and that their circumstances are fully understood.

We do not believe that increasing conditions and sanctions within the benefits system is an effective way to help people with mental health problems back to work. Such measures can worsen someone’s existing mental health problems by increasing anxiety and stress, and may lead to people having insufficient resources to live and manage their health on.

What we're calling for

The ultimate goal of our campaigning on benefits and welfare is to create a system that treats people with mental health problems fairly, with respect and dignity, and helps them to find suitable employment, where possible. However, in the short-term, our priority is to improve the system where it is not working and prevent any changes that will make the existing system worse.

Below are some specific changes or reforms that Mind is pushing for. Some of these changes are related to the Welfare Reform Bill that is going through Parliament, but others are not included in the Bill and need to be addressed separately. We need your help to raise these issues with your MP and in your local media.

Changes to the Welfare Reform Bill

- We don't think DLA should be reformed on the basis of making a 20 per cent saving. Access must be based on need and any new assessment needs to be able to recognise the impact of mental health.
- We don't believe that numerous conditions and harsh sanctions are an effective way to help people with mental health problems return to work and there need to be safeguards to protect such people.
- We need to be sure that people with mental health problems are not left worse off under Universal Credit. The system must recognise the barriers these people face and supports them effectively.

Wider changes

- The WCA needs to be working fairly and effectively before people are moved from IB to ESA. The Government should reverse the recent changes to the assessment from the internal review.
- The Work Programme needs to effectively support people with mental health problems return to work at a pace that is suitable for them. There needs to be sufficient mental health expertise within the system.
- Any changes to Housing Benefit must ensure that people with mental health problems are supported effectively and are not forced to move away from their networks of support or live in unsuitable conditions.

Contacting your local MP

Now that you know what the main issues are and what changes we are calling for, it is time to get campaigning locally. Since most of these issues relate to decisions made in parliament, the best place to start is by getting in touch with your local member of parliament (MP).

- **Find your MP:** you can find out who your MP is by entering your postcode on findyourmp.parliament.uk
- **Write to your MP:** you can send a letter to your MP to let them know what issues you are concerned about and how these changes might affect you. We have prepared a model letter below for you to use as the basis for your letter.
- **Ask to meet your MP:** to have the most impact it's best to also ask to meet your MP. This will really help to convey the impact that these issues might have on you and why they should call for the type of changes discussed above. MPs hold 'local surgeries' where constituents can go and discuss these sorts of issues with their representative. Our model letter includes a request to meet your MP. Someone from their office should get in touch with you to arrange this.
- **Prepare for your meeting:** you may wish to take someone with you to the meeting for support. You may also wish to take notes about your concerns to ensure you remember the key points.

[insert name of MP]

House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

[insert your name, address and phone/email here]

[insert date]

Dear [insert name of MP]

My concerns about the changes to benefits and welfare

As a constituent of yours, and somebody with experience of mental health problems and the benefits system, I wanted to let you know how concerned I am about the many changes to welfare currently taking place.

Some of the changes that worry me are taking place as part of the Welfare Reform Bill such as:

- A cut in the future budget of DLA and a new assessment for claimants
- New conditions and sanctions on those claiming benefits
- A new system for calculating, paying and withdrawing benefits called Universal Credit.

Other changes are not included in the Bill but are still very important such as:

- Changes to the system for assessing capability for work
- The new Work Programme for getting people back into jobs
- Changes to housing benefit.

I am concerned that many of these changes will have a negative impact on people like me who have mental health problems and use benefits.

[insert some of your experiences of the benefits and welfare system here]

I would really appreciate the opportunity to meet with you to talk about my concerns and to explain how this Bill could be improved for people with mental health problems. I look forward to hearing from you to arrange a date to meet.

Yours sincerely,

[enter your name or sign the letter here]

Contacting your local media

As well as meeting with your MP, it is a good idea to try and publicise these issues and the campaigning you are doing by contacting the media. The best place to start is one of your local newspapers.

You can highlight issues that you are concerned about and explain that you have been to see your MP about these issues (if this is the case) by writing to the editor of a local paper. We have prepared a model letter below that you can use as the basis for your letter.

The Editor

[insert the address of your local paper here]

[insert your name, address and phone/email here]

[insert date]

Dear Editor,

I am writing to you to highlight my concerns about a number of changes to the welfare and benefits system that will affect many people in this area who experience mental health problems. I have recently visited local MP [insert name of MP here] to raise these concerns.

Some of the changes that worry me are taking place within the Welfare Reform Bill such as:

- a cut in the future budget of disability living allowance and a new assessment for claimants
- new conditions and sanctions on those claiming benefits
- a new system for calculating, paying and withdrawing benefits.

Other changes are not included in the Bill but are still very important such as:

- changes to the system for assessing capability for work
- the new work programme for getting people back into jobs
- changes to housing benefit.

I am concerned that many of these changes will have a negative impact on people like me who have mental health problems and use benefits.

[insert some of your experiences of the benefits and welfare system here]

I would appreciate if you could publish my concerns in your paper and investigate further what the impact of these changes might be on local people. I would be happy to discuss these issues with you further and look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

[enter your name or sign the letter here]

Raising awareness and other actions

Once you have started campaigning using the ideas suggested above, you may want to look for more ways to raise these issues locally to try and ensure that as many people as possible are aware of the impact they will have on people with mental health problems.

Here are some more ideas for how you can campaign:

- **Contact your councillor:** as well as contacting your MP you may wish to get in touch with one of your local councillors to make them aware of these issues and see if there is anything they can do to campaign for an improved system.
- **Other media opportunities:** after contacting your local newspaper, you could look into whether there are other local media outlets you could get in touch with to raise these issues such as local radio stations.
- **Using social media:** you may wish to publicise your campaigning and get others aware and involved by using social media such as Facebook, Twitter or a blog. Tell others what you're concerned about and what you are doing.
- **Get others involved:** you could look to organise a meeting or set up a group for people who may be affected by these changes to discuss how you can campaign locally to publicise these issues and call for changes.

Tell us about your experience

If you do decide to take action on these issues, we would be really keen to hear back from you about how you have found the experience and what impact you feel your efforts have had.

On the following page is a feedback form where you can tell us what you have been doing. Please return this form to action@mind.org.uk or post to Mind (Policy and Campaigns Team), 15-19 Broadway, Stratford, London, E15 4BQ. You can also use these contact details for telling us about your experience of benefits and welfare.

We will use any information we receive from you to help us shape how we campaign on these issues and to demonstrate to decision-makers how much people care about these issues and how dramatic the impact on people's lives could be.

Benefits and welfare – local campaigning feedback form

What is your name?

What are your contact details?

Address:

Email:

Phone:

What actions have you taken locally?

What was the response?

(Please send copies of letters, emails, media coverage etc)

What did you find useful about the toolkit and what would help you to better campaign?

Thank you again, please keep in touch by regularly checking www.mind.org.uk