

Stop penalising Universal Credit claimants

Tenants transferring to Universal Credit from other benefits, such as Job Seekers Allowance, are being penalised as a result of the way the new system is being introduced. Because they are treated as new claimants and have to wait for their claim to be processed, **people living in rented accommodation have their housing benefit or local housing allowance stopped.** If they have no savings they face 6 weeks minimum without their rent being paid. They are immediately pushed into rent arrears or into debt if they borrow to pay it. There is nothing more stressful than the fear that you may lose the roof over your head.

UC Rent arrears

As of December 3rd 1080 council tenants in Swindon were on UC. **Of these, 829 (76%) were in rent arrears. The average arrears was £845.09.** This is nearly double the average amount for council tenants in arrears. This level of arrears will take a long time to overcome. Worryingly nearly 3,000 more council tenants are faced with being transferred over to UC which is likely to drive up arrears.

Prescription charges

Somebody who is receiving free prescriptions for a medical problem loses them during the period when the UC claim is being processed. If a repeat prescription falls due during this period they will have to pay for their medication or go without, despite the potential risk to their health. Anybody with more than one medication will find themselves having to shell out multiples of £8.60 per item, if they can afford to.

Concessions

The callous and punitive nature of UC has created something of a backlash nationally. So much so that the government felt obliged to make some concessions in the budget. They announced they would:

- end the seven day wait (everybody currently loses one week's payment);
- guarantee a 'pre-payment' (in fact a loan) after five days, with a payback period of 12 months instead of six;
- provide 2 weeks housing benefit to be

paid to the landlord.

However, these concessions are insufficient and will not be introduced until the new year; April in the case of the HB payments. Loans will only extend the period of financial stress that people suffer. Why should they lose money simply because a new system is being introduced?

“No claimant should be thrown into debt or placed at risk of eviction, simply because they are being transferred from one benefit to another”

You can claim a refund when you start receiving UC but that doesn't help you during the period when you have little or no income.

What sense does it make to risk the health of claimants? If they fall ill as a result of not taking medication then the NHS will pick up any costs of having to treat them. This anomaly is a genuine risk to the health of a claimant left in limbo for six weeks or more.

No claimant should be thrown into debt

No claimant should be thrown into debt and placed at risk of eviction, simply because they are transferring from one benefit to UC. In our opinion the easiest way to deal with the problems resulting from the waiting period *is to end it.*

Claimants transferring to UC should continue to be paid their existing benefits until their claim is processed and they start receiving their UC payments.

This would ensure that they would not be thrown into rent arrears and those qualifying for free prescriptions would be able to continue receiving them. If any adjustments need to be made they can be when the claimant starts receiving their UC payment.

Swindon Tenants Campaign Group has written to our council and our MPs calling on them to press the government to pay existing benefits until UC claims are processed.

Please add your voice to this demand by emailing: Council Leader David Renard at drenard@swindon.gov.uk and our MPs at robert.buckland.mp@parliament.uk justin.tomlinson.mp@parliament.uk