

CAMPAIGNING ON BENEFITS AND WELFARE – WE NEED YOUR HELP

Contents

1. Introduction to the key issues
2. What we are calling for
3. What you can do
4. Tell us about your experiences

No 1. INTRODUCTION TO THE KEY ISSUES

The government is introducing big changes to the welfare benefits system, which will have a dramatic effect on the lives of millions of people. Arthritis Care is working to ensure that these changes do not have a negative impact on disabled people.

We are currently campaigning around welfare changes in a number of ways.

- Listening to the experiences of disabled people who use the benefits system.
- Telling the Government where their plans may impact negatively on them.
- Campaigning in Parliament to voice our concerns over current problems.

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 system that gives fair support for people with arthritis, and to emphasise the devastating impact on real people's lives when the system fails.

We have set out below some of the key problems with the bill.

Employment Support Allowance

On the 4th April 2011 the government started the process of re-assessing all Incapacity Benefit claimants to see if they will qualify for Employment Support Allowance (ESA), the new benefit that replaces Incapacity Benefit. It is anticipated that 20% of current IB claimants will not qualify for the new benefit. The new system has been the subject of much controversy and concern, particularly amongst groups representing people with disabilities and long term conditions.

What's different about the ESA?

Many will be required to undergo a new test to see if they are eligible for the benefit, called the "Work Capability Assessment" (WCA). The WCA is a more stringent test than the old test for IB. For example, the physical ability tests are tougher than the corresponding test for IB.

Successful claimants are separated into two groups: those who are expected to undertake activities to get them ready for work in return for their benefits (the Work-Related Activity Group), and those who are not (the Support Group).

If a claimant is not entitled to ESA their current benefit will stop (Incapacity Benefit, Income Support, or Severe Disability Allowance), and their only remaining option will be to claim Job Seekers Allowance.

What does Arthritis Care think?

We have been critical of the WCA since it began as it is not a fair or effective tool for assessing the impact of disabilities on people's ability to work. An independent review vindicated many of our criticisms and we support its recommendations. We believe that the government should not go ahead with moving existing IB claimants to ESA until the system is working fairly and effectively.

Universal Credit and the Work Programme

What is it?

Universal Credit will be the new system for paying out benefits. It will mean that people get all the benefits they are entitled to in one payment.

Benefits that claimants currently receive in separate payments, such as ESA, Disability Living Allowance (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 is the new back-to-work scheme, for people who have struggled to find work because of a disability; includes people in the Work-Related Activity Group of ESA, and those who have been claiming JSA for more than a year. It will replace all current back-to-work schemes such as Pathways to Work.

Within the Work Programme and Universal Credit there will be more requirements that claimants have to meet in order to receive benefits (e.g. attend training courses). Claimants will be denied their benefits if they don't meet these conditions.

What does Arthritis Care think?

Although we welcome the principle of ensuring that being in work pays more than being on benefits, we want to be sure that people with arthritis will genuinely be 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 disabled people's circumstances are fully understood.

We do not believe that increasing conditions and sanctions is an effective way to help disabled people back to work. Such measures can increase anxiety, and may lead to people having insufficient resources to live and manage their health on.

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.

The Mobility component is paid at two rates, lower and higher. The Care component into three rates: lower middle and higher.

What is changing?

The Government is planning to change DLA to the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) and wants to cut the money allocated to the benefit by 20% by making eligibility for the benefit tougher. People claiming PIP will also be reassessed more frequently than under DLA.

The planned changes also involve reducing the number of rates of payment for the care component from the current three to just two, in order to simplify the system and save money. This may well mean that those who currently get the lower rate of DLA will not be entitled to PIP at all.

What does Arthritis Care 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% seems to be entirely arbitrary and will prevent the new assessment for PIP from being fair.

We are particularly concerned that disabled people 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.

No 2. WHAT WE'RE CALLING FOR

The ultimate goal of our campaigning on benefits is to create a system that treats disabled people fairly, with dignity, and provides them with the right support to find employment where appropriate. However, in the short-term our priority is to improve the current system and prevent any changes that will make it worse.

Below are some specific changes or reforms that we are pushing for. Some of these changes are related to the welfare reform bill that is going through Parliament at the moment, 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% saving. Access must be based on need and any new assessment needs to be able to recognise the impact of disabilities.
- We don't believe that numerous conditions and harsh sanctions are an effective way to help disabled people return to work and there need to be safeguards to protect such people.
- We need to be sure that disabled people are not left worse off under Universal Credit. The system must recognise the barriers these people face and support them effectively.

Other changes that are not part of the bill

- The Work Capability Assessment for ESA 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 disabled people's return to work at a pace that is suitable for them. There needs to be sufficient expertise within the system.

No 3. WHAT YOU CAN DO

We would like you to take action on these issues locally. Don't worry if they seem complex, if you want to take action on them, contact us and we'll give you more information and advice on what to say and write. Email us on campaigns@arthritiscare.org.uk

Contact your local MP

We want you to campaign locally. Most of these issues relate to decisions made in Parliament, so you need to contact your local Member of Parliament (MP).

- **Find your MP:** enter your postcode on findyourmp.parliament.uk
- **Write to your MP** to let them know what you think. We have prepared a model letter below for you to use as the basis for your letter.
- To have the most impact it's best to also ask to **meet your MP**. MPs hold local surgeries where constituents can go and discuss these sorts of issues. See our model letter requesting to meet your MP. You may wish to take someone with you to the meeting for support, and to take notes with you to ensure you remember the key points you want to discuss.

[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 disability welfare benefits

As somebody with experience of disability and the benefits system, I wanted to let you know how concerned I am about the many changes to benefits currently taking place.

Some of the changes that worry me are part of the welfare reform bill. These include:

- a cut in the future budget of, and eligibility for, Disability Living Allowance
- new conditions and sanctions on those claiming 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

I am concerned that many of these changes will have a negative impact on people like me who have arthritis 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 disabled people. I look forward to hearing from you to arrange a date to meet.

Yours sincerely

[enter your name or sign the letter here]

Contact your local media

It is a good idea to try to publicise the campaigning you are doing by contacting the local media, and your local newspaper is a good place to start.

You can highlight issues that you are concerned about and (if appropriate) explain that you have been to see your MP about them by writing to the editor of your local paper. You can use the model letter below as the basis for your letter.



Hardest Hit Campaigning Pack

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 changes to the welfare benefits system that will affect many disabled people in our area. I have recently visited local MP *[insert name of MP here]* to raise these concerns.

Some of the changes that worry me include:

- a cut in the future budget of Disability Living Allowance
- new sanctions on those claiming disability benefits

(These two changes are found in the welfare reform bill).

- changes to the means of assessing disabled people's capability for work

I am concerned that many of these changes will have a negative impact on people like me who have arthritis 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]

NO 4. TELL US ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES

If you do decide to take action on these issues we would be really keen to hear back from you. You can use the feedback form below, and return it by email to campaigns@arthritiscare.org.uk

or by post to:

Arthritis Care
Freepost
RLZG-XKUC-ELAA

You can also use these contact details to tell us about your experience of disability benefits. We will use any information we receive to demonstrate to politicians how dramatic the impact on people's lives these changes could be.



Hardest Hit Campaigning Pack

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?



Hardest Hit Campaigning Pack

Thank you again, please keep in touch by regularly checking:
<http://www.arthritis.org.uk/Campaigns>