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| **Universal Credit Update**:  The key changes that the recent budget will bring are:  **Universal Credit Announcements**  On 23 November the Chancellor of Exchequer, as part of the 2017 Autumn Budget, outlined some changes for Universal Credit. This was followed up on 24 November by a speech in the House of Commons from David Gauke MP, then Secretary of State for DWP outlining some further changes that will be coming into effect shortly. Below is a summary of the changes that have been announced.  **Abolishing Waiting Days**  From February 2018, we are removing the seven-day waiting period for new Universal Credit claimants, reducing the length of time claimants wait to receive their first full payment.  Subject to satisfying the conditions of entitlement, all new claimants will be eligible for Universal Credit from the first day they claim it.  **Increasing Universal Credit Advances**  Presently in Universal Credit, claimants are entitled to an advance of up to 50% of their estimated entitlement which can be repaid over a period of up to six months. A claimant’s Universal Credit payments will be adjusted to account for this.  From January 2018, we are increasing the amount a claimant can receive from 50% to 100% of their estimated entitlement. In practice, this means that new claimants in December 2017 can receive an advance of up to 50% of their overall entitlement, and may receive a second advance to take it up to 100% in the New Year. Taken with the first payment, this means that claimants in need could receive nearly double the money they would usually get, helping them to make the transition on to Universal Credit.  We will also be making all payments of advances recoverable over a period up to 12 months (if this is what claimants want) regardless of the level of the advance claimed, making it easier for claimants to manage their money. In addition, from spring 2018, we will be making it possible to apply for an advance online; further increasing accessibility for those who need it.  **Support with Housing Costs**  From April 2018, claimants who were previously receiving Housing Benefit (HB) and are transitioning on to Universal Credit will receive a transitional payment; an extra two weeks support. This will be unrecoverable, automatic and received early in the first assessment period.  This payment will be made by LAs and will not require any additional intervention from the claimant, unless they have a change of circumstance such as moving address, in which case they will need to inform their local authority.  **Alternative Payment Arrangements for Landlords**  From December 2017, new guidance will be issued to DWP staff to ensure that claimants in the Private Rented Sector, who have managed payments to landlords for their legacy HB, are offered this option when they join Universal Credit, provided the relevant criteria continue to be met. This gives additional continuity to claimants when they join Universal Credit.  **Temporary Accommodation Housing Support**  This measure is expected to help LAs, who currently see a significant funding shortage when they are placing people into temporary and emergency accommodation in Universal Credit full service areas. From April 2018 any new claims for Universal Credit from claimants in temporary accommodation (TA) (not just emergency temporary accommodation) will have their housing costs met through HB. Existing TA claimants on Universal Credit will also move to HB.  **Helping Claimants Progress in Work**  In addition to these measures, the government has allocated £8 million over four years to conduct a suite of tests and trials to support development of the evidence about what works to help people progress in work. This includes women who are returning to work and those who are in insecure work.  **Universal Credit Full Service Rollout**  To complete the necessary system changes for the Universal Credit full service, our rollout schedule will now be completed by December 2018 rather than September 2018.  The rollout up until February 2018 will progress as previously announced. From February 2018 and up to and including April 2018 we will be rolling out to 10 Jobcentre areas per month, increasing to 41 in May 2018 and around 60 thereafter, with a firebreak in August 2018. This means that Ely and Wisbech Jobcentres will now roll out in September 2018 and Cambridge and Huntingdon Jobcentres in October 2018.  An updated rollout schedule can be found on GOV.UK at  <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/universal-credit-transition-to-full-service>  **Universal Credit Live Service**  To allow all the policy changes (mentioned above) to be implemented, we will be closing the Universal Credit live service to new claims from 31 December 2017.  This means that unless claimants are living in a Universal Credit full service area, new claimants will be asked to claim legacy benefits or tax credits.  Those already on the Universal Credit live service will remain unaffected until they transition to Universal Credit full service once it has been rolled out in their area.  The gateway direct for new claims for families with more than 2 children onto legacy benefits will also be extended from October 2018 to January 2019.  **Free Helplines for Universal Credit Claimants**  All DWP Universal Credit phone lines are now free and nobody will be charged when they need to call to get help with their Universal Credit claim.  The key Universal Credit Freephone numbers include:   * Universal Credit live service: 0800 328 9344   (this replaces 0345 600 0723)   * Universal Credit full service: 0800 328 5644   (this replaces 0345 600 4272)  Anyone calling the old numbers will hear a message informing them of the change and the new number to call. Freephone numbers for other DWP benefits and services are set to follow, with all numbers switched over by the end of 2017.  Further information can be found on GOV.UK at  <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/free-helplines-for-universal-credit-claimants>  **Trusted Partner and the Landlord Portal**  Following successful pilots of the ‘Trusted Partner’ scheme and the ‘Landlord Portal’, DWP will rollout both initiatives together.  The Trusted Partner scheme allows Social Rented Sector (SRS) landlords to play a key role in engaging with their tenants who are Universal Credit claimants by helping those who can’t manage their housing payments to access the support available.  The Landlord Portal provides SRS landlords with the ability to submit information directly to the Universal Credit online system, which supports timely and accurate payment of housing costs to Universal Credit claimants.  Landlords who are given access to the Landlord Portal will also be given ‘Trusted Partner status’ which will enable them to make recommendations on whether an Alternative Payment Arrangement (APA) should be put in place. All APA recommendations from Trusted Partner landlords will be implemented in good faith by DWP.  We are currently in the first phase of implementing the Landlord Portal and Trusted Partner status, enrolling the largest landlords in those areas where UC full service is rolling out during October to December 2017.  In line with the UC rollout plan, we will use the January 2018 pause to assess and learn lessons from rollout and to determine the next set of landlords for the second phase of implementation between February and April 2018. As we implement the Landlord Portal, we will ensure that staff are trained to operate the Trusted Partner status that sits alongside it, identifying vulnerable tenants who need support with their rent payments and putting that support in place.  An independent review of the Trusted Partner pilot identified many benefits of this approach. This is the link to the published report:  <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/universal-credit-and-social-landlords-review-of-the-trusted-partner-pilot>  **Universal Credit Statistics**  Universal Credit statistics are published monthly and can be accessed on GOV.UK at  <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/universal-credit-statistics>  Recently some ad hoc statistics have been published covering Universal Credit payment advances and Universal Credit payment timeliness. Both of these publications can be accessed on GOV.UK at  <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/ad-hoc-statistical-analyses-2017#ad-hoc-statistical-publications>  **NHS charge notices for prescriptions for claimants on Universal Credit**  There has been an increasing number of reports that claimants receiving Universal Credit, and are entitled to free prescriptions through the NHS, have been receiving penalty notices stating that they have incorrectly claimed free prescriptions. Some of the penalty charges have been as much as £150.00.  At the moment there is no tick box on the reverse of the prescription form for claimants to declare they are exempt from charges because they receive Universal Credit. The current guidance states that (if a Universal Credit claimant’s earnings are below the thresholds) the claimant should tick the box stating that they are on JSA (IB). This has been agreed with the Department of Health (DH) and the NHS Business Services Authority (the organisation that processes prescription forms for the purposes of reimbursing pharmacists for dispensing the medication and also operates the Prescription Exemption Checking Service on behalf of NHS England). Communications and guidance has been issued nationally to pharmacists.  We are working with DH to find a permanent solution and will update you on progress.  Claimants will qualify if, **on the date they claim help with health costs**:  **a)** they receive Universal Credit, and either had no earnings or had net earnings of £435 or less in their last Universal Credit assessment period;  or  **b)** receive Universal Credit, which includes an element for a child, or they (or their partner) had limited capability for work and work-related activity, and either had no earnings or net earnings of £935 or less in their last Universal Credit assessment period.  For couples, the net earning threshold applies to the combined net earnings.  Claimants can visit the NHS website for information on Health Costs and Universal Credit <https://www.nhs.uk/NHSEngland/Healthcosts/Pages/nhs-low-income-scheme.aspx>  Or call on one of the helpline for further information - 0300 330 1343. |