

Touchbase

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Guaranteed extra help for people unemployed for six months

More support to help jobseekers back into work was announced by Secretary of State, James Purnell at an Employment Summit led by the Prime Minister.

The package includes a £0.5bn investment by DWP and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills over two years, and is targeted at people who have been out of the job market for six months or more.

As well as extra funds for Jobcentre Plus to provide more support, the package also includes:

- *Employers' Golden Hellos*: incentives of up to £2,500 paid to employers to recruit and train unemployed people
- New training places: extra funding for training places to help unemployed people get new skills and gain employment
- Work-focused volunteering options: opportunities to volunteer to help people back into work
- Money and support to help set up a business: advice on creating a business plan, plus funding for the first months of trading.

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Speaking to employers at the Summit, James Purnell said: *“Today we have unveiled the next stage of help for jobseekers. There are still over half a million jobs available, and employers are still recruiting – we will do everything we can to get people into those jobs.”*



“The half a billion pounds announced today will be used to guarantee extra support to everyone who reaches six months unemployment – we are determined to provide real help to people in these tough times. Our message is simple, the longer a person is out of work the harder we will work for them.”

This extra support is in addition to the £1.3bn already being invested so that anyone who loses their job can access help and support on the first day they become unemployed and make a claim.

Prime Minister Gordon Brown told the audience that the Government was investing *“to extend real help now to those who lose their jobs. And my message is simple: we won't give up on you; but in turn you must not give up on work, on skills, and on training.”*

The new package will come into effect from April 2009.

Further information

www.dwp.gov.uk/publications/dwp/2009/jobseekers-handout.pdf

Find your way back to work

The DWP *Find your way back to work* communications campaign was launched in November 2008. It signposts people who have recently lost their job, or who are under threat of redundancy, to the help available to them from Jobcentre Plus, across government, and from local authorities.

As part of the campaign, we have:

- run adverts in the local press, co-ordinated nationally, and used online banner adverts to drive customers to the Jobcentre Plus website where they can find out more about how to use Jobcentre Plus services
- issued the *Find your way back to work* leaflet and poster to all Jobcentre Plus offices, detailing the relevant channels for looking for work and claiming benefits
- updated our Jobkit, which is filled with helpful advice on looking for work, and changed it to a more sustainable booklet format
- sent the leaflet and Jobkit directly to employers such as Woolworths and MFI, as part of the Rapid Response Service, to help staff who were about to lose their jobs
- set up a dedicated telephone number – for newly unemployed people and stakeholders – to ensure that people without access to a computer are able to obtain their copy of the leaflet.



We have revised the *Find your way back to work* leaflet, following consultation with stakeholders and other government departments.

The leaflet now provides more information on the benefits people may be eligible for, should they lose their job, and advises people to tell HM Revenue & Customs, if this happens, in order to avoid overpayments.

To ensure advisers are equipped to help our new and potential customers, Jobcentre Plus External Relations Managers will distribute the new leaflet and poster during your regular meetings and events. However, if you need copies before then, do please ring **0845 850 88 80**.

A wider government leaflet, *Real help now for people and businesses*, which provides a range of practical information and advice including help with housing, training and skills, jobs and benefits, is also available. At present, this is an online leaflet only – from www.direct.gov.uk – but we are assessing the need for a stakeholder version and your Jobcentre Plus External Relations Manager will advise you if this becomes available.

City Strategy tackles worklessness

The City Strategy aims to increase employment and reduce social exclusion in some of the most deprived communities in the UK.



Becky Bell

The 15 pathfinder pilot areas are testing:

- how best to combine the work of government agencies, local government and the private and voluntary sectors into a concerted local partnership to tackle disadvantage by supporting those most in need of help to find and progress in work
- whether local stakeholders can deliver more by combining and aligning their efforts behind shared priorities, along with more freedom to try out new ideas and tailor services in response to local needs.

The pilots, launched in 2006, have been extended for a further two years, until March 2011.

Becky's story

Becky Bell, a lone parent on Income Support, needed training and qualifications so she could get a permanent job but wasn't sure where to turn.

Then she was introduced to local partnership, Workroutes, an initiative to help people find the best route back to work and overcome obstacles such as childcare or training.

Becky started by attending courses on complimentary therapies and first aid, and a confidence-boosting group. Before long she had passed a Level 1 Literacy and Numeracy course with flying colours!

Other courses followed: Stress Busters, Going Places, CV and interview skills, and an employability workshop – most of which took place in a local community centre. She was then ready, willing and able to apply for jobs.

With the help of Workroutes, and weekly jobsearch drop-in sessions, Becky soon got a permanent part-time job at a local bakery and is now bursting with confidence.

"I am buzzing about getting a job. It's great! I found it very difficult to get a job before going to Workroutes. I had no confidence. Since then, I've gained lots of confidence and new skills through training courses and have reached my goal of getting a job, which will benefit both me and my family. Workroutes was great – it gave me all the tools I needed."

For further information visit:
www.dwp.gov.uk/welfarereform/cities_strategy.asp

Employment and Support Allowance

– four months on...

More than four months have passed since Employment and Support Allowance was introduced, on 27 October 2008. As we reported in December, the launch went smoothly and any minor issues were quickly corrected.

Early indications suggest that customers who have experienced the claiming and assessment procedures are, generally, very positive about them.

Philip's story

Philip is a fully trained nurse. He was diagnosed with bowel cancer in 2001 and has undergone surgery eight times. Philip estimates that the surgery, and the recovery time required after each operation, has prevented him from working for nearly four years.

Having been made redundant from his previous job, and also being unable to work, Philip claimed Employment and Support Allowance in late 2008. He said: *"While recovering from surgery, I can't work, so my first priority is to keep a roof over my head and to be able to pay the bills. Claiming Employment and Support Allowance has helped with that and allowed me to claim mortgage relief so that I don't lose my house."*

Claiming the new allowance was straightforward: *"I claimed by phone, and received my medical assessment form quickly. It was easy enough to fill in because I knew what information was needed. I went to my Work Capability Assessment and got my report, having agreed what support I need to get back to work. I'll take that report to Jobcentre Plus to talk through with my personal adviser."*

Philip has been actively looking for work and is hoping to start a new job as a nurse again this Spring. He believes that a positive approach is vital: *"My feeling is that as long as you have your health, everything else is a bonus. I'm looking forward to starting work and I know that I can ask my personal adviser for support if I need it."*



Jobcentre Plus personal adviser and customer

Further information

www.dwp.gov.uk/esa

Making benefits simpler:

A reminder about changes to pay periods

As we reported in September 2008, as part of our aim to deliver more efficient and effective services, we are simplifying the process of paying working age benefits.

From April 2009, Jobcentre Plus will align and lengthen payment periods for the majority of working age benefits, assign a 'single pay week-ending day' to each customer and pay benefits fortnightly in arrears. (Pay week-ending day is the term used to describe the last day of the period covered by your benefit payment.)

This means that if a customer is in receipt of any of the benefits covered by the new rules, they will be paid up to the same day regardless of which benefit they receive.

This will simplify the payment process and make it easier for customers to move between benefits.

The three key changes, which will take place at once, are:

- a move from payment in advance to payment in arrears

- all benefits to be paid a minimum of fortnightly in arrears
- customers to have a common benefit week ending day.

The day of the week the customer will be paid benefit to will be determined by the last two digits of their National Insurance number:

NI Number	Day
00 – 19	Monday
20 – 39	Tuesday
40 – 59	Wednesday
60 – 79	Thursday
80 – 99	Friday

All new and repeat claims will be subject to the new arrangements from 6 April 2009.

Existing claims will start to move across to the new system from 6 April 2009. It is expected the move will be completed by the end of March 2011.

Further information

E: sheffield.paydayproject@jobcentreplus.gsi.gov.uk

More ESF support for unemployed people

On 17 December, the Government announced it is making available an extra £79m from the European Social Fund (ESF), and has put in place extra help and support, to ensure everyone who becomes unemployed stands the best chance possible of getting back to work.

The extra ESF is part of a £158m package of funding to respond to the current economic challenges. The Learning and Skills Council will use the £79m of ESF funds to provide skills training for people at risk of losing their job or who have very recently lost their job.

In and Out of Work

Roll out is well under way of the new In and Out of Work processes, which provide quicker and easier access to benefits and credits for customers as they move in and out of work. As part of the new processes, Jobcentre Plus acts as a central point for collecting information then shares it with HM Revenue & Customs and local authorities.

A further ten local authority areas have now joined the original six pilots: Scottish Borders, West Dunbartonshire, Clackmannanshire, Inverclyde, Southwark, North East Derbyshire, Kings Lynn & West Norfolk, Guildford, Plymouth and Caerphilly. Further areas plan to go live by the end of March, once they have a live Government Connect Secure eXtranet connection (the Government's preferred method of exchanging data securely).

The new processes continue to prove popular with customers and staff from across all three organisations.

"I am surprised at how quick and easy it is to sort out my entitlements", said one customer of the improved system.

While Simon White, a Benefit Assessor from Sedgemoor local authority, said the processes *"have strengthened the working relationship between the local authority and Jobcentre Plus. We receive decision notices sooner, which means we can assess entitlement to Housing and Council Tax Benefit much quicker."*

Further information

www.dwp.gov.uk

Improving basic State Pension

Pension reform will make the State Pension fairer, more generous and more widely available. But there are still people – mainly women and carers – who will not get a full basic State Pension because their National Insurance record is incomplete.

Some of our customers pay voluntary Class 3 National Insurance contributions to make up the gaps in their records. However, these usually have to be paid within six years. People with gaps in their contributions from earlier in their working lives often find they have missed the boat.

Following a high profile campaign by Baroness Hollis, a new Government measure in the Pensions Act 2008 will mean some people can pay up to six additional years of Class 3 contributions dating from as far back as 1975.

The measure will apply to people reaching State Pension age between April 2008 and April 2015, provided they already have 20 qualifying years, taking into account years of Home Responsibilities Protection. Around 110,000 people are expected to take up the offer.

The new legislation will come into force in April 2009.

Further information

www.thepensionservice.gov.uk/state-pension/basic/faqs.asp

Changes to State Pension age for women

– letting people know

As we have previously reported, State Pension age for women will increase gradually from 60 to 65 between 2010 and 2020, so it is the same as for men. This affects all women born between 6 April 1950 and 5 April 1955.

As a reminder, the increase will be phased in over ten years, with women's State Pension age rising by one month every two months between 2010 and 2020. All women born in the same month of the relevant year (between the 6th of the month and the 5th of the following month) will reach State Pension age on the same date. Women born on or after 6 April 1955 will have the same State Pension age as men.

From April 2009, we will start writing to all those women affected by this gradual increase. As promised in the last edition of Touchbase, here is more information about the letter we will send them.

In the letter, we will tell each woman the date she will reach State Pension age. We will also enclose a leaflet: *State Pension changes and what they mean for you*. This gives other information about the main changes to State Pensions, answers some frequently asked questions and signposts other useful sources of information about the changes.

We will send out letters every three months, over a period of three years. The last letters will be sent out in January 2012. We will write to women in the order of their date of birth – so those women who reach State Pension age first will be contacted first. All women will be sent a letter well before their 60th birthday.

We have put in place arrangements to handle calls from women who contact us directly about changes to their State Pension age.

Further information

www.thepensionservice.gov.uk

Pension Credit

Changes to the assessed income period

Depending on their circumstances, Pension Credit customers may be set an assessed income period. If so, they do not have to tell The Pension Service about changes to pensions, savings or investments during the specified period unless this could mean they get more Pension Credit.

From 6 April 2009, new Pension Credit legislation comes into effect which allows us to extend an assessed income period indefinitely for some customers aged 80 or over.

Customers do not have to claim this entitlement; we will identify them and notify them by letter.

The Pension Service anticipates that around one million existing customers will be entitled to an indefinite assessed income period from April 2009.

Further information

Gary Taylor on 0113 232 7754

Customer Representative Forum programme

Our series of customer representative forums is aimed at advisers, intermediaries and other professionals who work with DWP customers on the 'front line', with the objectives of:

- providing information about our services and new initiatives
- hearing feedback about our service on the front line
- consulting about proposed changes to our service.

Our last two events have been the Scottish Forum in Glasgow last November and the Welsh Forum in Cardiff in January.

At both of these events, the keynote speaker was Paul Gerrard, HM Revenue & Customs, Director for Child Benefit and Tax Credits Operations. Paul's presentation was followed by a plenary session with senior officials from Jobcentre Plus and the Pension, Disability and Carers Service.

The afternoon workshops were on a wide variety of topics, including Employment and Support Allowance, Accessing Jobcentre Plus services, Working with representatives, and Lone Parent changes.

The next events in the programme are the North & Midlands Forum in Birmingham in May, and the DWP Annual Forum in July. Invitations will be sent out to all those who have previously attended our events, but if you have not attended and would like to do so, please email jill.gillatt@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Improving access to DWP services

DWP has developed the online benefits adviser service, as part of its commitment to improving customer access to our services.

The online service, available via the Directgov website, provides information and entitlement advice on 28 benefits, pensions and credits.

Customers answer simple questions about their circumstances in order to find out what financial support they could be entitled to. They are also directed to contact details that will help them make a claim and are provided with links to access information already available on the Internet, such as online claim services, jobsearch and State Pension forecasts.

The benefits adviser service is something our customers have told us they want – the ability to use online services to find out which benefits they are entitled to whenever and wherever it suits them. It means that customers using it are better informed about our services and, in some cases, more straightforward requests for information can be answered without the need for them to contact us. The service also means our staff have more time to work with those customers who need one-to-one support or have more complex queries.

So far, feedback from customers is good and indicates they are able to find all or part of the information they are looking for.

Take a look at the service at www.direct.gov.uk/en/MoneyTaxAndBenefits/index.htm

Online access to our services

Many DWP customers are happy to access a range of information, goods and services online. Many have also said that they would like to be able to claim benefits or search our job bank in the same way, so we are changing our online services to enable them to do so.



All government departments and agencies have their own websites, as do local councils. But, because their roles often overlap, it can be difficult to find out exactly who to contact. In 2004, the Government launched Directgov to make public service information available in one place.

DWP, along with all other government departments, is beginning to provide more and more online services through Directgov, which is available on the Internet, on satellite and cable TV, and on some mobile phones.

The Pension Service website will close in Autumn 2009, and the Jobcentre Plus website in Spring 2010. By this time, all the information currently available on those websites will have moved to Directgov, or Business Link, the Government's site for businesses and employers.

But customers can find a lot of help on Directgov right now. They can search for jobs, and get help with interview techniques, job applications and CVs. There is information on benefits, including an interactive benefits adviser (see page 9) and

some customers can even apply for benefits. (Customers without access to the Internet at home can get free access in libraries.)

The improvements we are making to our online services are based on detailed research with customers, some of whom want to help themselves online. Encouraging those people to do that means our advisers can spend more time, through our existing services, helping disadvantaged customers or people who are not comfortable with, or able to use, the Internet.

The main DWP website (www.dwp.gov.uk) is also changing in April 2009. The site will have a fresh design and a new layout. Advisers and other professionals will still find specialist guidance, news and consultations on the site, but customer information on benefits and services will be on Directgov, The Pension Service or Jobcentre Plus websites.

Further information

www.direct.gov.uk

Learning from complaints

The Department for Work and Pensions understands the importance of listening to customers. Compliments can tell us what we are doing right and encourage us to do more of the same. Complaints give us the opportunity not only to put things right for the individual, but also to help us understand how we could improve our service for everyone.



Here are a few examples of improvements we have made in response to customer complaints.

Disability and Carers Service

- Developed a 'telephone techniques' course to improve the way staff ask sensitive questions.
- Provided advice to staff on dealing with complaints about more than one DWP agency. This means customers receive a comprehensive response to their complaint without having to contact more than one part of DWP.

The Pension Service

- Introduced a new customer call back procedure to make sure that staff ring customers back within the agreed timeframe.
- Is prioritising its State Pension deferral cases to make sure they are dealt with quicker.

Jobcentre Plus

- Now advises staff to signpost customers enquiring about a Funeral Payment to bereavement and other benefits that are available to them at this vulnerable time.
- Ensured that its fraud officers are fully aware of what is required of them and that they clearly identify themselves to customers.

While the Department is not always able to make changes – for example, regarding complaints about policy or legislative requirements – we do want to make improvements wherever possible. For information on how to give feedback to any of our businesses, please visit the following websites:

www.thepensionservice.gov.uk/contactus/making-a-complaint.asp

www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk/JCP/Aboutus/Contactus/Yourcomments/contactus.aspx

www.dwp.gov.uk/lifeevent/benefits/dcs/how_complain.asp

Local Housing Allowance

Rates for properties with more than five bedrooms

Local Housing Allowance (LHA) was introduced for Housing Benefit customers in the de-regulated private rented sector who made new claims from 7 April 2008, and for existing customers who changed their address.

Under the current regulations, there is no upper limit to the size of property customers can claim for.

They are entitled to claim for one bedroom for:

- every adult couple
- any other adult aged 16 or over
- any two children of the same sex
- any two children, regardless of sex, under the age of 10, and
- any other child.

Rent officers provide monthly LHA rates to local authorities for properties up to five bedrooms. These rates are also published on the rent service website. Where there are claims for large properties containing six or more bedrooms, local authorities ask the rent officer to provide the appropriate LHA rate for the area and the property being rented.

Following concerns raised in the media and the subsequent announcement by the Secretary of State, we have reviewed the policy on Housing Benefit payments for large properties.

Our proposals are that all new claims made on or after 6 April 2009 will have their LHA rates capped at a maximum rate for five bedroom properties.

This will mean that no new customers will receive Housing Benefit for properties containing six or more bedrooms.

The new proposed regulations will apply to:

- existing customers who move address
- existing customers receiving LHA for six or more bedrooms when their claims are reviewed – usually at the anniversary date of their claim. Their new LHA rate will be based on the five bedroom rate. To ease their move to the new rate, these customers will continue to receive their current rate of benefit for 13 weeks before it is changed.

Housing and Council Tax Benefit

– review of new backdating rules

Since 6 October 2008, the rules on backdating Housing and Council Tax Benefit (HB/CTB) have changed.

People who have reached the qualifying age for State Pension Credit can have their claim treated as if it was made three months earlier (reduced from 12 months). Working age customers can apply for up to six months backdated payment (reduced from 52 weeks).

The Government plans to introduce a common period of three months for all customers but will introduce the changes in stages. This is in response to concerns from the Social Security Advisory Committee, amongst others, about the possible negative impact it may have on some working age customers.

The policy will be reviewed at the end of 2009, using a variety of evidence and information to help inform any decision. As part of this process, welfare charities and organisations, as well as local authorities, are invited to complete a questionnaire, to let us know the impact of the change on individual HB/CTB customers. We are primarily seeking information about the effect on working age customers, but there is also space on the questionnaire to include comments about the rules for pension age customers, too.

The questionnaire, along with further information, will be published on www.dwp.gov.uk soon.

You can email or post your completed form to:

Richard Grennan
Department for Work and Pensions
Housing Benefit Strategy Division
Caxton House, Tothill Street
London SW1H 9NA.

E: HB-CTB.backdatingcases@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

The deadline for returning questionnaires is 31 August 2009.

We value your comments and very much welcome your input. All of the information received will be analysed and used to help review the new policy.

Further information

T: 020 7449 5328

E: richard.grennan@dwp.gsi.gov.uk



Exchange of Housing Benefit information

DWP has been looking at quicker and more secure ways of transferring information about Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit claims to local authorities (LAs).

At the moment, Jobcentre Plus staff print out claim information and send it to the LA – usually by post or courier. In the DWP e-transfer project information will be transferred electronically, instead.

This will not only help to improve customer service, by reducing processing times (the LA will receive the claim information the following day) but also simplify the system for staff.

At first, claim information will be sent in portable document format (PDF) so it can be printed or automatically uploaded into the LA's document management system. In the future, selected claim information will also be sent in a format (xml) which allows the information to be uploaded direct to their benefit processing system.

DWP has worked closely with LAs and Government Connect* to ensure a smooth roll out, which is being staged over 12 months in order to address the differences between the various IT systems.

- **Phase 1** – Jobcentre Plus claim information from March 2009
- **Phase 2** – Pension, Disability and Carers Service claim information from July 2009
- **Phase 3** – Jobcentre Plus Employment and Support Allowance claim information from Autumn 2009
- **Phase 4** – Selected data in xml piloted from Autumn 2009.

*Government Connect is a £33m initiative to provide a common cost-effective infrastructure for secure electronic interaction between local authorities in England and Wales, and central government. Scotland already has a secure network in place.

Turn2us

helps people
in financial need



Research by the charity Turn2us shows that people are six times more likely to increase their borrowing from banks than seek help from charities, when experiencing financial difficulty.

If they lost their income or were unable to pay their bills, 25% of respondents said they would borrow from banks and 14% would use credit cards. By comparison, only 4% said they would think of seeking help from a charitable source, despite the existence of over 3,300 charities that give grants to people in financial need.

Jolanta Lasota, Chief Executive of Turn2us, had this to say: "People need to be aware of all the sources of financial help available to them when experiencing problems, so they are equipped to make the right decisions to tackle their immediate crisis and ensure their long-term financial health."

Turn2us is launching its expanded online service www.turn2us.org.uk that helps people struggling with money to maximise their income through welfare benefits, tax credits and charitable grants.

The website contains new, comprehensive information and tools, produced by experts. The welfare benefits and charitable grants searches help people to find out what money is available based on their personal need. They can contact grant-giving charities on and offline and find an adviser or organisation to support them further with benefits applications.

A new dedicated service for intermediaries is also available on the site, helping advisers and support workers manage online enquiries to grant-giving charities on behalf of clients through their own Turn2us account.

Turn2us is urging both intermediaries and grant-giving charities to visit www.turn2us.org.uk and sign up to use the free service, and to signpost it to anyone with money problems.

Aneta's story

After more than 20 years in banking, Aneta Waldron suffered an injury that meant she was unable to work and it became a struggle to make ends meet. She simply didn't know what help was available. Aneta made an online enquiry through www.turn2us.org.uk and discovered she was eligible for support. So far, she has received £1,600 from the Bankers Benevolent Fund, which has helped her with vital house repairs and heating costs.

Further information

www.turn2us.org.uk



The Publicity Register

Touchbase is published on the DWP website: www.dwp.gov.uk/advisers

It is also mailed free of charge to anyone who joins the Publicity Register. The Publicity Register is a mailing list of advisers, intermediaries and other professionals who want to receive **Touchbase** and other relevant information about government services.

When to contact the Publicity Register

Contact the Publicity Register to:

- change your address or contact details
- obtain your own copies of **Touchbase**
- cancel your copy of **Touchbase**.

Join the Publicity Register by making contact using any of the methods below:

Online: www.dwp.gov.uk/advisers/publicity_register.asp

Letter: The Publicity Register
Freepost Plus RRUU-HSKS-ZEYT
LBM House
Atlantic Street
Altrincham
WA14 5FY

Email: publicityregister@coi.gov.uk

Obtaining leaflets and posters

The online catalogue of DWP products www.dwp.gov.uk/advisers/cat1 gives details of how to order leaflets and posters. These cannot be obtained from the Publicity Register or DWP Corporate Customer Affairs.

Comments about Touchbase

(not distribution queries)

The **Touchbase** editorial board is always pleased to receive comments about the style and content of **Touchbase**. We want to ensure it meets your needs. If you have any comments, questions or suggestions, please contact:

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Although every effort has been made to ensure that the contents of this newsletter are correct, it gives general guidance only and should not be treated as a complete and authoritative statement of the law. Wherever this may be important to you, you should always check details with your social security or Jobcentre Plus office, or pension centre.