

# All about Universal Credit

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## What is Universal Credit?

Universal Credit is a benefit, which combines in and out of work benefits whilst supporting employed claimants with childcare and housing costs.

Universal Credit is replacing:

- Income Support
- income-based Jobseeker's Allowance
- income-related Employment and Support Allowance
- Housing Benefit
- Working Tax Credit
- Child Tax Credit

Universal Credit is assessed calendar monthly and is paid monthly in arrears regardless of the number of days in that month.

## **Claimants moving to Universal Credit**

All claimants moving onto Universal Credit voluntarily, or because of a change of circumstances, will not be able to:

- withdraw their claim for Universal Credit so that it has retrospective effect
- reclaim the previous Legacy benefit

Claimants must normally:

- be over 18
- be under State Pension Age
- be resident in Great Britain
- not be in full-time education or training
- not have savings and capital over £16,000
- have accepted a Claimant Commitment

Some exceptions to the above may apply.

Young people aged 16 and 17 will not usually be able to get Universal Credit in their own right, because their parents or the care system should be providing support. They are also expected to be in education or training, except for young people in Scotland where there is no requirement to stay in education or training until aged 18.

For further information, see [Under 18s](#), [Students](#) and [What is a couple claim](#).

## **New Style Jobseeker's Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance**

New Style Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) can be claimed with Universal Credit or independently.

If New Style benefits are claimed with Universal Credit, it is known as a dual claim and the claimant will only be required to have one appointment to confirm their identity.

If the dual claim includes New Style ESA, only one Claimant Commitment is required and the Work Capability Assessment for Universal Credit can be used for both benefit decisions.

For further information, see [New Style Employment and Support Allowance Only claims](#) and [New Style Jobseeker's Allowance Only claims](#).

## **Universal Credit Service**

Universal Credit is an interactive service which claimants and staff use to build and maintain accounts for Universal Credit.

The Universal Credit online service is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and 365 days a year.

The Universal Credit Online Service will work on mobile devices as well as on a desktop computer. This makes it easier for claimants to access the Service in a way that suits them.

The Universal Credit Service is available to all claimant types, for example:

- singles
- couples
- families
- people out of work
- people in work
- self-employed people
- people who are sick
- carers

Claimants apply directly online to register and create an account and are able to maintain and update their account themselves, including any changes of circumstances.

It is important that a claimant completes any actions they are required to carry out. Some of these actions are time bound, for example where they need to book an ID verification and or evidence appointment. They must do this within 1 calendar month from the date the request for the evidence was made.

In order to complete a Universal Credit claim, a Claimant Commitment must be accepted. If the claimant does not take action to discuss and accept their Claimant Commitment, their Universal Credit claim may be closed immediately or within 7 days.

Claimants can use GOV.UK Verify to let the Universal Credit Service know they are who they say they are.

Work coaches and case managers can see the same information on the single system.

Claimants and staff can access the 'entitled to' benefit calculator via GOV.UK to get an estimate of how much Universal Credit the claimant may be entitled to receive. See [Benefits Calculators](#).

## **Self-serve**

Universal Credit is a digital service. Where appropriate, and where a claimant has the ability, they will update their own online account and self-serve for information about their Universal Credit claim.

Self-serve means that a claimant will use their online account to:

- see information (for example, payment statements and outstanding 'to-do' actions)
- update information (for example, some changes of circumstances)

Self-serve also means that a claimant will use the internet to:

- access other benefit information through Gov.uk
- use social media to find work (for example, [Find A Job](#) and the [Jobcentre Twitter service](#))

In order to self-serve, a claimant needs to be familiar with their account and be able to use the 'Home' screen to complete 'to-dos' and use the journal.

A claimant who contacts Universal Credit where a self-serve option is available, must be referred to self-serve if they are able to do so. Alternatively, they should be coached to self-serve as part of the telephone call, journal communication or face-to-face contact relating to their initial enquiry. However, a common-sense approach must be taken in this regard.

There will be certain actions that a claimant won't be able to complete themselves. A DWP agent will be required where the functionality of the Universal Credit service does not allow a claimant to self-serve.

Other claimants will initially be unable to self-serve and may require additional support to self-serve in the future. These claimants are supported by Assisted Digital.

Certain claimants will always be incapable of self-serving (for example, due to physical or mental ill-health or disability) and will require a DWP agent to assist them. See Non-digital relationships.

In some circumstances where a claimant is unable to self-serve, the agent must consider if appointee action is appropriate. See Appointees, Personal Acting Bodies and Corporate Acting Bodies.

## **Proof of benefit**

Universal Credit does not provide proof of benefit letters as it is an online service and all notifications are made through the claimant's online account. No clerical

letters are issued. A claimant can print their payment award notice from their online account where such facilities exist.

## **What is Assisted Digital?**

Assisted Digital supports claimants who are not able to access the Universal Credit Service through the standard process.

If a claimant is having difficulty using the online service, assistance with access will be provided in a way that is appropriate for their needs. The following options are available:

- support from family or friends
- telephone support when using the online channel
- in-house coaching in the Jobcentre
- Help to Claim provided by Citizens Advice and Citizens Advice Scotland
- home visit
- agent as proxy (only in extreme circumstances)

Universal Credit agents must not enter information on a claimant's behalf unless it is in exceptional circumstances and where the agent is acting as proxy. The information entered, and the accuracy of this information, is the responsibility of the claimant.

For further information, see Assisted Digital.

## **What is a couple claim?**

If a claimant lives with their partner and both are eligible to claim Universal Credit, they will receive a single payment that covers them both.

A basic Standard Allowance is based on both of their ages.

The Upper Age Limit does not apply if the person over State Pension age is in a joint claim and their partner has not reached that age.

Both adults are eligible for Universal Credit provided they meet conditions of entitlement.

Generally, mixed age couples must claim Universal Credit until both members of the couple have reached Pension Credit qualifying age. However, there are exemptions to this, see Eligibility for Universal Credit and Ineligible partner.

The partner who is over Pension Credit qualifying age is exempt from work-related requirements and is placed in the No Work Related Requirements regime.

Both members of a couple have access to the journal so this must be considered when written entries are made, as both claimants are entitled to protection of their personal information.

If 2 existing claimants become a couple, the earlier assessment period of the 2 claimants is automatically selected for the new joint claim award. This may result in one of the claimants being paid earlier than their previous assessment period.

This is expected to happen and is not considered to be:

- an overlap of benefit
- a payment error
- a recoverable overpayment

A change of circumstances Advance may be requested when a single claimant moves in with their partner resulting in a joint claim.

If arrears of Universal Credit are owed for a period of a couple claim and the couple then separate, the arrears are to be split equally between both partners.

If one member of the couple has not made a claim or cannot be contacted, 50% of the arrears owed must be paid to the claimant with the live claim and the remaining 50% withheld until the other partner makes a further claim.

## **What is the Labour Market Offer?**

Universal Credit supports claimants to get work, move closer to work or get more work.

The majority of claimants will be self-sufficient and expected to work more, earn more or prepare for work in the future. Each claimant will be provided with support tailored to their individual needs.

A claimant will be allocated to one of 6 Labour Market regimes depending on individual circumstances, for example their level of earnings, caring responsibilities and health conditions. These regimes are:

- Working Enough
- No Work Related Requirements
- Work Focused Interview only
- Work Preparation
- Light Touch
- Intensive Work Search

If a claimant happens to fall into more than one regime, the regime with the lowest conditionality will apply.

A claimant can be allocated to a different regime if and when their circumstances change, for example an increase or decrease in earnings.

For further information, see Labour Market regimes.

### **What are the claimant's responsibilities?**

When the claimant makes a claim to Universal Credit, they must:

- accept a Claimant Commitment tailored to their circumstances
- be responsible for paying their own housing costs where appropriate
- report changes in circumstances through their account
- manage their monthly payments and budget monthly
- seek additional work and increase their earnings if they are working part-time and able to earn more
- carry out any actions to which they have agreed to move them in to work unless they have a good reason not to do so

Claimants can get more information online at [GOV.UK/universal credit](https://www.gov.uk/universal-credit)

### **What are the claimant's commitments?**

A Claimant Commitment is an agreement which sets out what the claimant has agreed to do to prepare for and look for work, or to increase their earnings if they are already working.

A claimant must accept their commitments in order to receive Universal Credit.

The claimant will be asked to commit to work-related activities that are relevant to their circumstances and regime. If these are compulsory, the claimant may have their Universal Credit amount reduced (sanctioned) if they fail, without good reason, to carry out any of these activities.

On an ongoing basis, the commitments will be reviewed, updated and a new Claimant Commitment must be accepted in order to keep receiving Universal Credit.

For further information, see Claimant Commitment.

### **What is the first assessment period?**

The first assessment period starts on the date the claimant makes their Universal Credit claim unless the claim is backdated. An assessment period is a period of 1 calendar month. At the end of each assessment period, the claimant's Universal Credit for that month is calculated.

It is during the first assessment period that most 'to-dos' are created. It is essential that the claimant, work coach and case manager complete all the

activities correctly and in the specified time. If this doesn't happen, the claimant will not be paid correctly or on time and may result in more journal entries, telephone calls, queries and complaints for us to deal with.

For further information, see New claims and initial evidence.

## **How are claims managed in Universal Credit?**

Because of the complexity of different claimant groups and claims in Universal Credit, a structured approach has been developed in order to case manage all claims. This ensures the best possible customer service and also supports colleagues to:

- identify the priority of their work, and
- take all actions possible to progress a case regardless of the reason they have accessed it

More information can be found in Case Management.

## **What is the journal?**

The journal is the main method of communication between the claimant, work coach and Service Centre.

## **What is the claimant 'to-do' list?**

The claimant's 'to-do' list informs the claimant of all the actions they must carry out to move their claim forwards.

Once the claim has been established, these 'to-dos' may also include actions to help the claimant improve their chances of moving closer to work or increasing the earnings they already have. Failure to carry out a 'to-do' will usually have an impact on the progress of their claim.

These 'to-dos' can be generated automatically by the Universal Credit Service or manually by case managers or work coaches.

Claimants are able to upload childcare costs to be verified and CVs with covering letters that they have asked to be reviewed as part of their Work Search Review.

Once a 'to-do' is completed, summary information is automatically moved to the claimant's journal page so they can see what has been completed.

## **How are payments made?**

Universal Credit is paid into a bank, building society or credit union. These are ideally in the claimant's name and if they do not have their own account, they are required to open one.



For further information, see Payment and Sanctions: Payments

Each month, the payment amount is calculated depending on the claimant's circumstances and earnings for that period. This is called the assessment period.

Payments will usually be made on the same date each month or earlier if the date falls on a weekend or bank holiday.

### **What is money guidance?**

Some claimants may have difficulties setting up their claim and taking the required actions to ensure that their first payment is correct and on time. In Great Britain (England, Wales and Scotland), claimants can access the new Citizens Advice Help to Claim service to help with any difficulties they may have.

Help to Claim assists claimants to provide evidence, use their account to clear 'to-dos' and to request financial products such as Advances and Alternative Payment Arrangements.

Claimants who require further money guidance or debt advice must be referred to further support by Help to Claim or by Universal Credit agents.

### **What is the Benefit Cap?**

The Benefit Cap is a limit to the amount of benefit a claimant can receive.

The Benefit Cap for a single claimant is different to that applicable for a couple and single parent benefit unit.

The Benefit Cap applied nationally for couples, lone parents and single claimants without children is different to that applied for the same claimants living in Greater London which is slightly higher.

The Benefit Cap may reduce the amount of Universal Credit a claimant receives.

There are exemptions to the Benefit Cap, for more information see Benefit Cap guidance.

### **What is the Earnings Taper?**

To ensure claimants are better-off in work, Universal Credit tops-up their wages each month for as long as this is needed.

As the claimant earns more, Universal Credit payments will gradually reduce. This is known as the Earnings Taper. If the claimant's job ends or their earnings reduce, their Universal Credit payments will increase.

Once a claimant is earning enough money through work, they will no longer receive Universal Credit. The Universal Credit Service will automatically notify a claimant if this is the case and the claim will be closed.

### **What is a sanction?**

If a claimant fails to meet the responsibilities they have agreed to in their Claimant Commitment, their Universal Credit will be reduced. This is called a sanction.

The period of reduction will increase the more times they fail to meet similar requirements. In Universal Credit there are 4 sanction levels:

- higher
- medium
- low
- lowest

For further information, see Sanctions.

### **Mandatory Reconsideration**

Mandatory Reconsideration is the process for reviewing a decision following a request by the claimant. The request is sent to a decision maker for consideration.

It is not possible to appeal to HM Court and Tribunal Service (HMCTS) without first having had a Mandatory Reconsideration.

The request for a Mandatory Reconsideration must be made within 1 calendar month of the date on the decision notice. However, in certain circumstances this may be extended.

If a claimant requests a Mandatory Reconsideration, but this is not within the time limit and the reason(s) for being late is not accepted, the claimant has no right of appeal in relation to the original decision. However, this would be an exceptional case.

For further information, see Mandatory Reconsideration

### **What is Council Tax Reduction?**

Council Tax Reduction (CTR) is also known as Council Tax Support and is a reduction to the claimant's council tax liability. A claimant may be entitled to this if they are on a low income or claim benefits.

Each local authority runs their own CTR schemes so there may be difference in eligibility and the level of support give.

Depending on where the claimant lives, CTR may be a discount:

- worked out as a percentage of the Council Tax bill
- of an amount set out in the scheme
- equal to the whole amount of the Council Tax bill so that the amount payable is nil

It is necessary for Universal Credit and local authorities to share information to support the delivery of CTR schemes.

Claimants can apply for CTR via [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk). This will direct the claimant to the relevant page on their local authority's website and inform them of the steps they need to take.

For those claimants not able to apply for themselves, someone else is able to apply on their behalf (for example, an appointed attorney or appointee).

## **Post**

If a claimant is required to send information to Universal Credit by post, the following are the 2 addresses to be used.

For Special Delivery and signed-for post:

UCFS Post  
Canterbury BSC  
Nutwood House  
Chaucer Road  
Canterbury  
Kent  
CT1 1ZZ

For all other post (wording needs to be written exactly as below):

Freepost  
DWP UNIVERSAL CREDIT FULL SERVICE

When mail is not addressed correctly, there is a risk the post will be sent to the wrong place and this could result in delays to claims being processed and paid.

## **What is Universal Credit guidance?**

Universal Credit guidance is developed according to user need and design priority. Guidance is designed to support staff by providing an overview of topics. It is not instructional or process led.

The development of guidance is subject to ongoing 'test and learn' principles as topics are added.