



Talking Benefits

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What is the Government doing?

The Government is planning to make big changes to the benefits system through the Welfare Reform and Work Bill.

These changes will affect lots of people with a learning disability and their families in a bad way.

We need MPs to help change the Government's plans so this does not happen.

This campaign guide tells you all you need to know about the plans and what you can do to help make them better.

It has been found that lots of families with a disabled person in them do not have enough money to live on. This is not right and shows that the Government should be putting more money in benefits support and not less.

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What are Mencap's worries?

There are 3 big changes that we are really worried about.

One of the biggest worries we have is the plan to cut the money that people in the Work-Related Activity Group (WRAG) of **Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)** get by almost **£30.00 a week**.

This cut will only affect people who are new to ESA from April 2017.



We believe this could leave thousands of people with a learning disability and their families with not enough money to live on.

Another big worry we have in the Bill is the plan is to lower the **Benefit Cap**.

The maximum amount of money families can get in benefits is currently £26,000 a year, but the Bill would change this to £23,000 a year in London and £20,000 in other places.

The Benefit Cap mainly affects people who get Housing Benefit and this low limit could leave many families finding it harder to pay their housing costs.

The Bill also says to **'freeze'** a lot of benefits. This means keeping these benefits at the same level for the next four years.

This means people getting less money each year as the cost of living goes up, including the price of food, rent or mortgage payments, and bills.

We only have a few months to stop these worrying cuts as the Bill will become law in Spring 2016.

So we must act now!



How can I get involved?

Mencap and lots of other organisations will be campaigning to stop these worrying cuts. You can join us!

We need to make sure that the voices of people with a learning disability, their families and carers are heard. Voices like yours.

We want MPs and the Government to see what these cuts would mean for people with a learning disability.

Email your MP

The first thing you can do is go to the **Hear my voice website**: <http://www.hear-my-voice.org.uk/>

From here you can **email your MP** to tell them what you think about benefits cuts.

Meet your MP

If you want to do more than email your MP, you can meet them to talk to them face-to-face.

There are two main ways of arranging a meeting with your MP:

- Booking an appointment at one of their constituency surgeries for a one-to-one meeting



- Inviting your MP to meet with your group if you have one.

To find out who your MP is and how you can contact them, go to the Parliament website: <http://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/mps/>.

It is important to contact your MP's office a few weeks before you want to meet them as they are very busy!

What should I say to my MP?

Once you have a meeting booked with your MP or they are coming to visit your group, you need to decide what you want to say to them.

If you have a personal story about how benefits have helped you or about how you have struggled with the benefits system, they will want to hear this.

The questions below might help you think about what you want to say:

- Do you think people with a learning disability find it harder than most people to get paid work?
- Do you think people with a learning disability who aren't in work should benefits support?
- Have you had any problems with getting benefits?



- How would you feel if your benefits were cut by £30.00 a week?

Tell your MP what you think about the cuts in the Bill.

Don't forget the 3 big issues are:

1. £30.00-a-week cut in the ESA Work-Related Activity Group (WRAG)
2. Lowering of the Benefit Cap
3. 4-year benefits freeze.

There is a plan at the end of this guide which has more details on the Bill and what Mencap wants to see changed. You can give this to your MP.

Tell them what you want them to do

Now you have told your MP what you think, you need to get them to do something!

Ask your MP to write to the Minister for Employment, Priti Patel, to tell her about their concerns around the Bill.

Priti Patel is the person in charge of the Bill for the Government.

There is a template letter to Priti Patel in the plan at the end of this guide.

What should you do next?

You should let your MP know there will be other ways for them to help us improve the Bill over the next few months.



If they would like to know more about what Mencap is doing on the Bill and how they can get involved, they can contact Alan Milner, Parliamentary Officer, on alan.milner@mencap.org.uk or 0207 696 6009.

Tell Mencap what you've done!

Mencap would really like to hear how you get on with your MP.

It's important for us to know which MPs have had meetings with campaigners, and what they said, so we can follow up with them.

You can contact us by email on campaigns@mencap.org.uk

or by telephone on **0 207 696 5583**.

The Plan (in case your MP would like to know more)

What are the changes Mencap want to see in the Welfare Reform and Work Bill?

Mencap is very worried that the Welfare Reform and Work Bill will cut a number of working age benefits which people with a learning disability are likely to get.

These include Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), Housing Benefit (HB), Tax Credits and the new Universal Credit. This will have a big effect on people with a learning disability and their families, many of whom are already living in poverty.

The main changes we want to be made to the Bill are:

1. Taking away the plan to cut £30.00 a week for new people in the Employment Support Allowance Work Related Activity Group (WRAG).
2. People with a learning disability and their family carers being free from the Benefit Cap.
3. People with a learning disability and their family carers being free from the benefits freeze.

Cut to ESA WRAG

Mencap along with other disability groups are strongly against the cut of £30 a week for new people in the Employment and Support Allowance Work Related Activity Group (ESA WRAG).

Currently there are close to half a million disabled people in the Work Related Activity Group (WRAG), 248,040 of them have a 'Mental and Behavioural Disorder' which includes people with a learning disability.

The Government has said that it believes the £30 is putting off disabled people in the Employment Support Allowance Work Related Activity Group from working. This is wrong as these people have been found by people who do the tests as not fit for work. No information has been shown to support the Government's thinking.

We believe it is wrong for the Government to cut benefits for people with a learning disability by £30 a week, with no evidence that doing it will help more people get into work. We want to see this plan taken away.

The Benefit Cap

The Government claims to have kept disabled people and their families free from the Benefit Cap, but this has not been done properly and some people with a learning disability will still be affected by it.

Mencap welcomes that families with a disabled member getting Disability Living Allowance (DLA) or the new Personal Independence Payment (PIP) will not be affected by the Benefit Cap.

However, many people with a learning disability, particularly those with a mild learning disability, may not be getting Disability Living Allowance (DLA) / Personal Independence Payment (PIP), but will be getting a number of other working age benefits such as Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), Housing Benefit and Tax Credits.

Mencap believes that people with a learning disability should be free from the Benefit Cap.

The Benefit Cap also affects a small number of carers who live in a different 'benefit household' to the person they care for. This means they are caring for someone called a 'non-dependant' in the benefits system. This is often a parent caring for a disabled adult son or daughter.

Mencap believes that people who get Carers' Allowance or who receive the carer element of Universal Credit should be free from the Benefit Cap.

The benefits freeze

We welcome that Disability Living Allowance (DLA) / Personal Independence Payment (PIP) are free from the four-year benefits freeze. However, not everyone with a learning disability gets DLA or PIP and many people and their families get benefits like Job Seeker's Allowance and Housing Benefit, which will be frozen for four years.

ESA would also be affected by the freeze. While the Government has taken away the support part from the freeze (around £35 per week) the basic rate of the ESA payment (£73.10) is not free from this.

Mencap believes this is not in line with the Conservative Party manifesto promise which said: *'We will freeze working age benefits for two years from April 2016, with exemptions for disability and pensioner benefits – as at present'*.

Mencap want to see people with a learning disability free from the benefits freeze.

Mencap is worried that there has been no look at the effect of all these policy changes on people with a learning disability and their families.

This is worrying because they are directly affected by the Bill's plans because they are more likely to be out of work and in need of benefits.

We need the Government to change the Bill as said in the text above to make sure people with a learning disability and their families are protected from the cuts.

Template letter to Priti Patel MP

Dear Minister,

I'm writing to you to tell you about my worries about some parts of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill.

I believe that the planned cuts to the Work-Related Activity Group (WRAG) of Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), the lowering of the cap on benefits, and the four-year freeze on benefits such as ESA, Tax Credits and Universal Credit, are unfair and will hit many people with a learning disability and their families hard.

I've met with some of people who live in my area who have personal experiences of these issues who are very worried about the Government's planned changes to the benefits system. I believe we should be doing more and not less to help people with a learning disability and their families who need benefits support.

I'm pleased that you and this Government are promising to halve the disability employment gap. I believe that the main issue of this big problem is a lack of support for disabled people to find and keep work.

A Work Programme for disabled people, particularly people with a learning disability who are less likely to be in paid work than other disabled people, would be a fantastic step towards sorting out this problem.

My worry is that until a programme is made that works for people with a learning disability, cutting their benefits will only damage the lives of this group of people.

No changes to benefits should be made until the problem of the disability employment gap has been looked at properly.

I'm asking you to make sure that the right changes are made to the Bill so people with a learning disability and their families are not directly affected. We should do all we can to help protect the most vulnerable people in our society.