



# Talking Benefits





## Introduction

# Hear our voice on benefits

In the run-up to the 2015 General Election, Mencap ran the Hear my voice campaign to get learning disability issues higher up the political agenda.

Thousands of people with a learning disability, their families, friends and supporters took part in the campaign – sending personal messages to their election candidates and asking them to say “I’m listening”. Over 800 candidates supported the campaign, leading to 151 MPs in the new Parliament signing up to listen to people with a learning disability.

Now we need MPs to take action. The Government is planning to make big changes to the benefits system – changes that will hit people with a learning disability and their families hard. We need our MPs to influence the Government’s plans so this doesn’t happen.

This is where you come in. This campaign guide tells you all you need to know about the Government’s plans, and what you can do to make them better.

**We need politicians to hear our voices on benefits.**

## Benefits

### The story so far

Benefits support is crucial for many thousands of people with a learning disability and their families.

Even though many want to and can work, most people with a learning disability do not have paid jobs. This is due to a lack of support to help people find and keep work, and also to employers being unwilling to give people jobs who need that extra support. This means they rely on benefits support to have enough money to live. Family carers of people with a learning disability often have to give up work to do the most important job of caring for their loved one, so for them as well benefits support can be a lifeline.

Previous changes to the benefits that many people with a learning disability get – such as the Bedroom Tax and the transfer from Disability Living Allowance (DLA) to Personal Independence Payment (PIP) – have caused lots of problems.

Shockingly, Government statistics show that 30% of households with a disabled member are in poverty. This is completely unacceptable and shows that the Government should be investing more money in benefits support, not less.

## The Welfare Reform and Work Bill

Through the Welfare Reform and Work Bill, the Government is planning on making many changes to the benefits system.

In July the Government introduced this Bill, with changes which will affect people who claim benefits such as Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), Housing Benefit, Tax Credits and Universal Credit.

There are 3 big changes that we are most worried about:

### 1. Cut to Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)

One of the biggest concerns we have with the Bill is that it proposes to cut the amount of money people in the Work-Related Activity Group (WRAG) of ESA get by almost £30 a week, so it is the same as Job Seekers' Allowance (JSA). We believe this could leave thousands of people with a learning disability and their families in poverty.

## 2. The Benefit Cap

Another big concern in the Bill is the proposal to lower the Benefit Cap. The maximum amount of money families can claim in benefits is currently set at £26,000 a year, but the Bill would change this to £23,000 a year in London and £20,000 elsewhere. The Benefit Cap mainly affects people who get Housing Benefit, and this lower limit could leave many families struggling to pay their housing costs.

## 3. Benefits freeze

The Bill also introduces a 'freeze' on lots of benefits for people who are out of work, which means keeping those benefits at the same level for the next four years. This is effectively a reduction each year as the cost of living rises, including the price of food, rent or mortgage payments and bills.

## When would the changes come in?

**If these changes go ahead they will happen at different times.**

At the moment the Government plans to freeze benefits and lower the Benefits Cap from April 2016.

If the Government's plans to cut the amount of money given to people in the Work-Related Activity Group (WRAG) of ESA go ahead, they would start for new claimants only from April 2017. People who currently get ESA and who are in the WRAG would not be affected.

The Bill started being debated by Parliament in September, so our chance to stop these changes starts now. We only have a few months to influence decision-makers and stop these worrying cuts, as the Bill will become law in early 2016.







## What can I do to stop these cuts?

Mencap and lots of other organisations will be campaigning to improve the Bill and 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.

### Tell your MP what you think

We want MPs and the Government to see what this Bill would mean for real people. We believe if they see the reality they will work with us to improve the Bill so disabled people and their families are not unfairly targeted.

There is strength in numbers and working with Mencap and other groups to campaign sends the message that thousands of people are against the changes. We need to make sure that when MPs vote on the Bill, they vote to protect the benefits disabled people need.

The first thing you can do is tell your MP what you think about benefits and, if relevant, how the changes in the Bill would affect you. You can do this on the Hear my voice website:

**[www.hear-my-voice.org.uk/](http://www.hear-my-voice.org.uk/)**



## Meet with your MP locally

One really good way of influencing MPs is for them to meet their constituents face-to-face. We saw this in the Hear my voice campaign – when MPs meet people directly affected by an issue, they are much more likely to be convinced on that issue.

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

Contacting your MP's office and booking an appointment at one of their constituency surgeries

Inviting your MP to meet with your group or attend an event.

To find out who your MP is and how you can contact them, go to the Parliament website:

**[www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/mps/](http://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/mps/)**

## When are MPs about?

Most MPs spend Monday to Thursday in Westminster and are in their constituencies on Fridays. Most MPs run surgeries on Friday where constituents can meet them and they are most likely to be available on Fridays to come to see your group or attend an event.

You should get in touch with your MP's office to organise when you can attend their surgery or to invite them to your group or event. It is important to do this quite far in advance of when you want to meet them as their diaries can get very busy!

If you haven't heard back you should call them. MPs get hundreds and hundreds of emails and letters so it is a good idea to call as well!



## 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.

### 1. Tell them your story

The most important thing is to tell them what you think about the changes in the Bill. 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 following questions 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 deserve benefits support?
- Have you had any problems with claiming benefits?
- How would you feel if the amount of money you get was cut by £30 a week?

### 2. Tell them what you think about the Welfare Reform and Work Bill

You can look again at the explanation of the changes in the Bill (page X) to help you tell your MP what you are most worried about.

Don't forget: the 3 key issues are the £30-a-week cut to ESA WRAG, the lowering of the Benefits Cap, and the 4-year benefits freeze.

Also included at the end of this guide is a more detailed explanation of the proposals in the Bill and what Mencap wants to see changed, in case your MP would like to know more about specific parts of the Bill.

### 3. Tell them what you want them to do

Now you have made your case to your MP – 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.

If your MP asks for your help with what to write, you could give them the more detailed explanation of our concerns around the Bill and the template letter to the Minister included at the end of this guide.



## Tell us what you've done

We 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 and have the maximum impact.

You can contact us by email on **[campaigns@mencap.org.uk](mailto:campaigns@mencap.org.uk)** or by telephone on **0207 696 5583**.

We can also help you publicise what you've done in your local media if you want. This can give your group some good publicity.

You can find some guidance on working with your local media, including a template press release, on the Mencap website:

**[www.mencap.org.uk/pressguide](http://www.mencap.org.uk/pressguide)**





## Extra information for MPs

Mencap is very concerned that the Welfare Reform and Work Bill legislates to cut a number of working age benefits, which people with a learning disability are disproportionately likely to receive. These include Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), Housing Benefit (HB), Tax Credits and the new Universal Credit.

This would have a detrimental impact 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. scrapping the proposal to cut £30 a week for new claimants in the ESA Work Related Activity Group (WRAG)**
- 2. an exemption for people with a learning disability and their family carers from the Benefit Cap**
- 3. an exemption for people with a learning disability and their family carers from the benefits freeze.**

## Cut to ESA

Mencap, along with the disability sector as a whole, strongly opposes the cut of £30 a week for new claimants in the ESA Work Related Activity Group (WRAG). Currently there are close to half a million disabled people in the ESA WRAG, 248,040 of whom have a 'Mental and Behavioural Disorders' which includes people with a learning disability.

The Government has stated that it believes the £30 is disincentivising disabled people in ESA WRAG from working. This is misleading as these people have been found by an independent assessor as not fit for work.

Furthermore no evidence has been presented to back up the Government's assumption. We believe it is unacceptable for the Government to cut benefits for people with a learning disability by £30 a week, with no evidence that doing so will increase work incentives.

Therefore we want to see this proposal scrapped completely.

## The Benefit Cap

The Government claims to have exempted disabled people and their families from the Benefit Cap, but this has not been done properly and some people with a learning disability will still be hit by it. Furthermore we – and the Government – do not know what the impact of the proposed lower level of the Benefit Cap will be on people with a learning disability and their families. Indeed there has been no thorough analysis of the impact of the current Cap on people with a learning disability and their families, let alone the proposed lower Cap. It is irresponsible for the Government to introduce this cut without knowing what the impact will be.

Mencap welcomes the exemption for families with a disabled member receiving Disability Living Allowance (DLA) or the new Personal Independence Payment (PIP) from the Benefit Cap. However, many people with a learning disability, particularly those with a mild learning disability, may not be in receipt of DLA/PIP, but will be in receipt of a number of other working age benefits such as Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), Housing Benefit and Tax Credits. Therefore they will see a reduction in income due to not being in receipt of DLA/PIP.

In addition, people claiming ESA, a benefit specifically for disabled people and people with health and medical conditions who have been found not fit for work, would also be subject to the Cap.

Therefore we believe that people with a learning disability should be exempt from the Benefit Cap.

Furthermore the Benefit Cap affects a small but significant number of carers who live in a different 'benefit household' to the person they care for, i.e. they are caring for someone termed a 'non-dependant' in the benefits system. This is often a parent caring for a disabled adult son or daughter.

Therefore we believe that people who are in receipt of Carers' Allowance or who receive the carer element of Universal Credit should be exempt from the Benefit Cap.

## Benefits freeze

We welcome the exemption of people in receipt of DLA/PIP from the four-year benefit freeze. However, the Bill would freeze other key working age benefits that many people with a learning disability and their families receive, for example JSA and Housing Benefit.



## Hear my voice

The basic rate of ESA, a benefit specifically for people who have been found not fit for work, would also be subject to the freeze. While the Government has exempted the support component from the freeze (around £35 per week) the basic rate of the ESA payment (£73.10) is not exempt.

We believe this is inconsistent with the Conservative manifesto commitment which stated: 'We will freeze working age benefits for two years from April 2016, with exemptions for disability and pensioner benefits – as at present'.

Therefore we want to see people with a learning disability entirely exempt from the benefits freeze.

Mencap is concerned that there has been no thorough analysis of the impact of all these policy changes on people with a learning disability and their families. This is worrying considering they are disproportionately affected by the Bill's proposals because they are more likely to be out of work and in need of benefits.

**We urge the Government to amend the Bill as outlined above to ensure people with a learning disability and their families are protected from the changes.**



## Template letter/email to Priti Patel MP

Dear Minister,

I am writing to you to express my concerns about some of the proposed changes in the Welfare Reform and Work Bill.

I believe that the proposed 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 very hard.

I have met with some of my constituents who have personal experiences of these issues and who are very worried about the Government's proposed changes to the benefits system. They, and I, believe we should be doing more – not less – to help people with a learning disability and their families who need benefits support to avoid poverty.

I am pleased that you and this Government are committed to halving the disability employment gap, and I believe that you are right in thinking that at the heart of this problem is lack of support for disabled people to find and maintain work. An effective, specialist Work Programme for disabled people – particularly people with a learning disability who are even less likely to be in paid work than disabled people as a whole – would be a fantastic step towards addressing this problem.

*However my concern is that until such a Programme exists and has been proven to work for people with a learning disability, cutting their benefits will only further impoverish and damage the life chances of this group. Therefore no changes to benefits can responsibly be made until the problem of the disability employment gap has been solved.*

*I urge you to ensure that the necessary amendments are made to the Bill so people with a learning disability and their families are not adversely affected. We should do all we can to protect the most vulnerable people in our society.*

*Thank you for taking the time to listen to my concerns.*

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**.



## Contact us

### **Royal Mencap Society**

123 Golden Lane  
London EC1Y 0RT

Telephone: **020 7696 5583**

Fax: **020 7608 3254**

Email: **[campaigns@mencap.org.uk](mailto:campaigns@mencap.org.uk)**



**@mencap\_charity**



**facebook.com/Mencap**