

## 'Keep Universal Credit lifeline' urges Citizens Advice Lewisham

Thursday 2 September, 2021

- Benefits cut of £20-a-week set to hit 1 in 5
- Local charity warns of increased debt and hardship if 'lifeline' ends in October

Citizens Advice Lewisham is urging the government against a cut to Universal Credit that would impact 1 in 5 working-age people within the borough.

According to the latest available figures, approximately 31 % of residents set to see their benefits drop are families with children and 38% are already in work.

Staff and volunteers at the local charity have helped over 868 people with Universal Credit since March last year and it says the £20 a week increase has been a 'lifeline' supporting people who were already struggling before the pandemic as well as those hit by Covid job losses.

Cases seen by frontline advisers include

Aliyah, who is struggling to find a job because of the pandemic, and paying back deductions for an advanced payment and also outstanding council tax debt. Their flat is in poor condition and many of their household appliances are broken. Aliyah already struggles with poor mental health and is worried that removing the £20 increase will make this worse and lead to her having to rely on foodbanks to eat.

They are also seeing an increase in clients who have had to take time off work after catching coronavirus, which exacerbated their existing health conditions. They fear they will fall into housing debt without the £20 a week increase. Along with single parents who are only just able to pay for after school childcare costs while they work thanks to the £20 increase. This has helped them stay in their job and pay essential bills.

The charity warns a cut to the benefit this autumn - as energy bills rise with the colder weather - will see many struggle to afford their essential costs. It fears a drop in income could be particularly difficult for new benefits claimants who may be unaware of the looming cut.

Gary Jones, Chief Officer of Citizens Advice Lewisham, said:

"Every day, our staff and volunteers see the difference the increase to Universal Credit has made to families. As an organisation we have supported over 24,000 clients in the last year and for many of them, Universal Credits has been a key factor in helping them keep their heads above water. Without that extra money, we fear we'd see more people coming to us in debt, unable to pay their bills or turning to food banks because they can't afford the essentials. As we look to rebuild our borough through the ongoing impact of COVID , the government must invest in the benefits system and keep this vital lifeline."

-ends-

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