

Children First
Northamptonshire

JOINT WORKING PROTOCOL FOR CARE LEAVERS

CHILDREN FIRST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE AND

JOB CENTRE PLUS

jobcentreplus

Introduction and purpose

Young people leaving care are one of the most vulnerable groups in society and often lack the support of a family that many of us take for granted. For these young people the transition to independent adulthood can be overwhelming, particularly the prospect of coping with new financial responsibilities.

In Northamptonshire we believe that all young people deserve the best possible chance to become successful, independent adults and achieve their potential. This protocol between Children First Northamptonshire (CFN) and Job Centre Plus (JCP) aims to ensure that care leavers have the best possible support in accessing the state benefits to which they are entitled, and that any barriers to them taking up fulfilling employment, education and training opportunities are minimised. Universal Credit (UC) is fully rolled out in Northamptonshire and is therefore the main focus of this protocol.

Principles of the protocol

1. Care leavers' access to Universal Credit (UC) is timely, well supported and as seamless as possible.
2. The unique vulnerability of care leavers is acknowledged and accounted for through robust pathway planning from CFN and enhanced support from JCP.
3. By default young people are expected to actively seek sustainable employment, education and training and fully understand their benefit claim commitments.
4. CFN and JCP staff have a working understanding of each other's roles and communicate effectively for the benefit of young people leaving care.
5. Benefit sanctions are only imposed as a last resort after all avenues of support are exhausted.

Universal Credit claim process

A note on explicit consent:

At the earliest possible opportunity, the Personal Adviser (PA) should obtain consent from the young person to act on their behalf with their UC claim. For UC claims, such consent should be set out on the claimant's online UC journal as a preference as this means the JCP can view the consent almost instantly.

Guidance from the Department of Work and Pensions:

The claimant must provide explicit consent before information can be disclosed to a representative. Explicit consent can be provided by the claimant using the most appropriate channel in their circumstances, whether that is through the UC journal, in writing, over the telephone or face to face.

For consent to be lawful the claimant must state:

- that they give consent for their personal information to be disclosed;
- what information they want to be disclosed;
- why the information is needed;
- the relationship to the claimant where the representative is a family member or friend; and
- the name of the representative and the organisation, including the branch where applicable.

If the claimant cannot provide the name of the representative, they need to be as specific as possible, for example the representative's job role or team name within the organisation.

Explicit Consent does not last indefinitely and it will cease when a specific enquiry is resolved.

Once provided by the claimant, it only lasts until either:

- the specific request for information is resolved or
- the end of the assessment period after the one in which the consent was given.

The consent expiry date must be entered in the claimant's history every time.

1. Prerequisites. By the age of 16 and 6 months the young person will have a CFN Personal Adviser (PA). The Social Worker and PA will ensure that by the age of 17 young people leaving care have the following:

- A National Insurance Number
- Relevant identity documents, including photographic
- A bank account and ISA

- An email address
- A pathway plan which includes education, employment and training aspirations.
- A letter confirming the young person is estranged and their legal status.
- If applicable, written confirmation of the young person's tenancy arrangements.
- If applicable, a letter from the young person's educational establishment, setting out the details of their course.

2. Timing of claim. Within a 28 day window prior to the young person's 18th birthday, the young person's PA or Social Worker will assist them with creating a UC claim online. The young person's care leaver status should be communicated to the JCP.

3. Meeting with the JCP. It is recommended that the young person's PA accompany them to the first one or two meetings at the JCP. The PA's contact details should be included in the claimant commitment, along with specific support arrangements. The meeting should consider how best to communicate with the young person, eg through text message. However the young person should understand the importance of the UC online journal as a primary means of communicating with the JCP. The PA and JCP worker must ensure that the young person fully understands the conditions of their claim and to never share their login details.

4. Noting the care leaver's status. JCP will ensure the young person's care leaver status is pinned as a note in the journal under Universal Credit.

5. Payment arrangements and advances. Like any other claimant, care leavers are entitled to apply for an advance payment which must be repaid over a period of up to 12 months. Requesting an advance should be regarded as a last resort however. Advances are interest free and a claimant can request one at a later time. Types of advances are as follows:

- New Claim Advance.
- Change of Circumstances Advance.
- Benefit Transfer.
- Budgeting Advance.

By default the JCP will implement an Alternative Payment Arrangement (APA) for the first three months of the claim, whereby the young person's landlord is paid directly by the JCP. This arrangement is reviewed regularly.

6. Debt avoidance during the assessment period. CFN should ensure that care leavers do not have to endure hardship or debt while waiting for the first UC payment (usually 5 weeks). This may entail implementing financial or other support, which must be detailed in the young person's pathway plan in accordance with NCC's financial policies.

UC payments are usually paid monthly, however it is possible for more frequent payments to be made depending on the individual's circumstances and this is considered to be in the young person's interest due to a particular vulnerability such as substance misuse or gang involvement. Such arrangements should be monitored closely.

7. HMRC Help to Save. CFN and JCP should make relevant young people aware of the HMRC's Help to Save scheme¹. The scheme is open to people claiming Universal Credit earning over a set threshold from paid work in their last monthly assessment period. The scheme allows people to save up to £50 per calendar month, with a bonus of 50p for every pound they save over 4 years.

Additional commitments:

CFN and JCP will:

- communicate effectively and work together to help the young person to meet the conditions of their claim and find sustainable and fulfilling employment, education and training opportunities.
- work in a coordinated manner and make every effort to implement support to avoid the risk of sanctions. JCP early warning systems should always be applied to care leavers and any sanctions should only be made with the agreement of senior JCP and CFN representatives.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/get-help-savings-low-income>

JCP will:

- treat care leavers as vulnerable, with the relevant support entitlements this brings. This support includes consideration of 'easements' such as turning off claim commitments when in education/training or reducing the hours the claimant is expected to look for work, depending on individual circumstances.
- In the event of a missed appointment, the Work Coach will contact the young person's PA, or the Leaving Care Duty Worker.
- offer training sessions to nominated CFN staff around Universal Credit and the extra support available to vulnerable clients. Such training sessions are expected to last around 2.5 hours, delivered to two CFN staff at a JCP venue.

CFN will:

- offer training to JCP staff around care leavers and their needs, and attending staff meetings.
- follow the JCP Escalation Route if normal channels do not resolve any queries. All PAs will be made aware of the Route. Note each JCP venue has its own Route, with relevant contact details for each.
- consider sharing with the JCP anonymised data around the number of care leavers in each JCP area, likely to be pursuing a benefit claim.

Notes:

Certain groups of children in care and care leavers aged 16 & 17 are eligible to claim Universal Credit (lone parents and sick and disabled young people). Where this applies, the young person must be engaged with the Prospects service and support should be provided as per this protocol.

Note that if a claimant attempts to make a claim to UC and are in receipt of the Severe Disability Premium (there is a box asking this question) they will be prevented from progressing the UC claim and redirected / provided with information on how to make a claim to 'New Style Employment Support Allowance.'

Children in care and care leavers who are also unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are entitled to the same allowances as any other looked after child or care leaver. However,

allowances to this group of young people may be affected and limited because of their immigration status. Every effort must be made to clarify young people's immigration status as soon as possible in order to develop clear plans for their future.

Signed:

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DATE: