



What is a 53 Week Year and why does it matter?

Citizens Advice Briefing

This is a leap year which means that in 2024/5 there will be 53 Mondays. It is a quirk of our calendar system that every 5-6 years there is a year with 53 Mondays. For those who pay their rent weekly, that means they have to pay an extra week's rent that has accumulated - and it will not be covered by Universal Credit.

If you're on Housing Benefit you will be unaffected, because Housing Benefit is paid weekly.

The problem arises for those on the housing element of Universal Credit (UC), whereby UC calculates rent monthly, not weekly, meaning that someone on UC will be given 52 weeks of rent but must meet the cost of 53.

Citizens Advice North Lancashire is deeply concerned about this and believes this is administratively unjust. There are thousands of residents affected by this and they tend to be those on the lowest incomes.

Omar

citizens
advice

North
Lancashire



We anticipate that many residents will struggle to afford this additional week's rent.

Omar Jouzdan is a carer for his wife Maha, who is disabled. They receive Universal Credit and will be affected by the demand for an extra week's rent. Like many others in similar situations, they do not have spare money to pay for the additional charge.

Comment

"While researching a housing problem our caseworker realised that this is a 53 week year. The Caseworker was in disbelief that this is actually the rule because she found it hard to explain to the client that they would have to find a whole week's rent out of nowhere. She asked me to investigate, and having liaised with the Council, local third sector and researched the UK Parliament database, I had to confirm that simply because it is a Leap Year, a significant number of local residents will have to find money they are unlikely to have."

"This is a relatively complex issue to explain but the upshot is that 1,470 council house tenants will have to find rent they may not be able to afford"

Caroline Robertson, Research and Campaigns Lead, Citizens Advice North Lancashire

What will happen in April 2024?

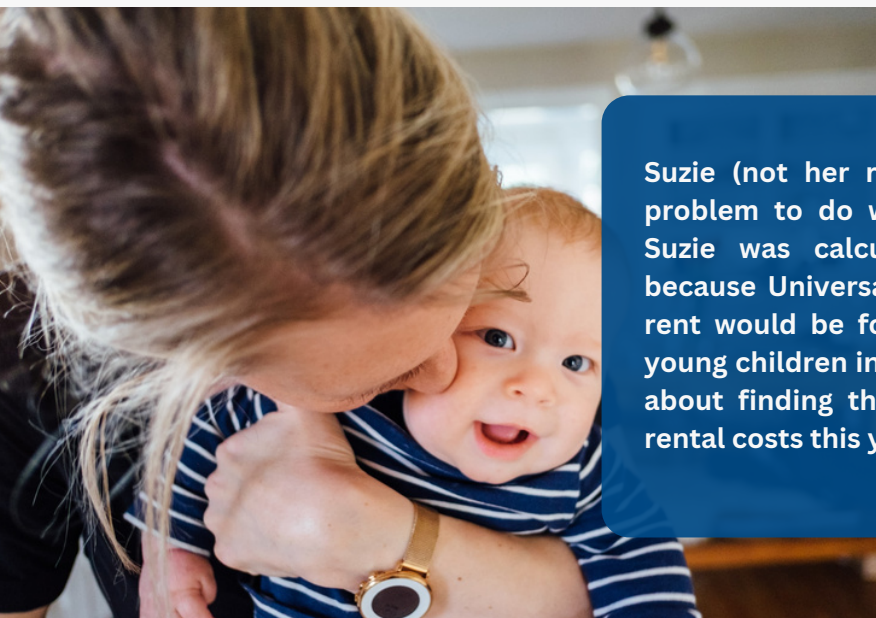
The additional week of rent becomes due in April 2024 for 1,470 Council tenants who are in receipt of the housing element of Universal Credit. If the Household Support Fund is not extended beyond April it creates a perfect storm for charities and others trying to help people on the lowest incomes. Without it, there will be limited localised welfare assistance to combat a large cohort of people who may be unable to pay an additional week's rent.

Lancaster City Council's housing department are fully aware of the situation and have communication plans in place for all tenants, and have been extremely helpful with providing information for us to explain to concerned residents who will encounter this issue.

A parliamentary question was asked about this subject in November 2023 as you can read [here](#). Citizens Advice North Lancashire does not believe the response from the Minister is adequate as it does not address the financial shortfall and stress that the extra week's payment will likely cause for those who are affected.

The Minister has confirmed that residents may be able to apply for a Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) where they are affected but this creates more hoops for residents to jump through, and is not guaranteed to be awarded. This will also affect the DHP budget for 2024/5 which is a limited resource for protecting people from homelessness.

Suzie



Suzie (not her real name) came to us with a housing problem to do with rent arrears. It became clear that Suzie was calculating her housing costs incorrectly because Universal Credit did not match what her actual rent would be for 2024. Suzie is on a low income with young children in her household and is extremely worried about finding the extra money she needs to meet her rental costs this year.

Comment

"It's not good enough to shrug this off as an unfortunate yet rare administrative occurrence. This will likely affect those on the lowest incomes in our District at a time when household budgets are already stretched. Residents on lower incomes are unlikely to have an extra week's rent to spare. It is only right that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) amend the calculation in 53 week rent years so that we avoid this happening again. The cost of living crisis is still with us. This will have an impact on wider services in the community including Citizens Advice and other charities such as our Food Banks who are all under considerable pressure."

Joanna Young, CEO, Citizens Advice North Lancashire

Morecambe Bay Foodbank



"People on Universal Credit are already being stretched beyond their means. We know that even on the full amount, people don't have enough for the essentials.

Additional pressure around rent due to the leap year is only going to cause more stress in an already fragile system.

A further surge in people being referred to the Food Bank because of this issue, would mean that we will need more donations in order to keep providing emergency food to people in the area."

Briony Scott, Manager, Morecambe Bay Foodbank

What's the solution?

Citizens Advice North Lancashire is calling for the Universal Credit system to be altered in 2024 by way of a payment adjustment and that a change is made so that this does not arise again in subsequent 53 week years. We ask that the DWP amends their calculation of the housing costs element for weekly payers to ensure that residents claiming Universal Credit **receive their full entitlement based on the rent charged.**

Citizens Advice North Lancashire



In 2023, local charity Citizens Advice North Lancashire helped over 7,000 residents who had over 23,000 different problems. The service is confidential, impartial, independent and free of charge.

People come to see our staff and volunteers for all sorts of reasons. The main ones are financial crisis, localised social welfare (such as foodbank referrals), help from the Household Support Fund, benefit questions, housing problems, employment issues, family law and debt.

Caroline Robertson, Research and Campaigns
Team Leader can be contacted at

caroliner@northlancashirecab.org.uk
07942 096 774