



A local network
for people
working in
money and
benefits advice
services

Grampian Advice Forum

Benefits Bulletin



March 2026

New Support for People Fleeing a Crisis

Social Security Scotland has introduced new, long-term rules to ensure people who come to Scotland because of a crisis in another country can access financial support quickly and fairly.

Previously, emergency legislation had to be created each time an international crisis occurred. These new permanent rules remove delays and make sure people get help as soon as they arrive, during what is often an extremely distressing period.

Who the changes apply to

The new rules apply to people who:

- fled a country where the UK Government advised people to leave
- were evacuated by the UK Government, or
- were granted permission to enter or stay in the UK for humanitarian reasons

Most people must arrive in the UK within 26 weeks of advice to leave or evacuation starting. Support can then continue for up to 52 weeks (or 39 weeks for babies under six months).

There is no time limit for people granted humanitarian leave. A specific exemption also applies to people who were living in Oman before 4 March 2026 and who arrive in the UK by 3 September 2026.

Faster access to benefits

People covered by the new rules can access certain benefits immediately, without having to show:

- habitual residence in the UK, or
- a minimum period of past presence

This applies to disability benefits, carer benefits, Best Start Grants and Best Start Foods.

Protection if people are stranded abroad

If someone cannot return to the UK during a crisis because it is unsafe or travel routes are closed, the temporary absence limit for disability and carer benefits is extended from 13 to 26 weeks. This helps prevent people losing payments due to circumstances beyond their control.

More help for expectant families

Eligible families can now receive the [higher rate of Pregnancy and Baby Payment](#), even if their older children were born before they arrived in the UK. This recognises that families fleeing crises often lose belongings and baby essentials.

Why this matters

Without these changes, people arriving in Scotland could face waits of up to six months for support, while help elsewhere in the UK is available immediately. The new rules ensure fairness, consistency and timely help when people need it most.

[New rules to support people arriving in Scotland - Social Security Scotland](#)

ACC Benefit calculator

Our benefits calculator will help you find out what benefits you can claim. The calculator is free to use, and the details you provide are anonymous.

Before you start, make sure you have information about your savings, income, pensions and existing benefits (for you and your partner).

If you run out of time, you can save your calculation and come back to it later, and pick up right where you left off.

- *Should take 10 minutes to complete*
- *Please complete all fields with an asterisk(*)*

[START >>>](#)



HMCTS Tribunal User Group – Key Updates for Advisers

Recent discussions at the HMCTS Tribunal User Group highlighted several developments with important implications for advisers working on Universal Credit Work Capability Assessment (WCA) and Limited Capability for Work and Work-Related Activity (LCWRA) cases.

HMCTS anticipates a noticeable rise in WCA and LCWRA appeals over the coming year, largely driven by forthcoming legal and policy changes. From April 2026, the LCWRA element for new Universal Credit claimants will be almost halved, meaning that decisions which refuse LCWRA—or fail to place claimants within protected or transitional groups—will carry significantly greater financial consequences for households.

This increased impact is compounded by a range of overlapping reforms, including stricter evidential expectations, the introduction of the Severe Conditions Criteria, and complex transitional deadlines that determine eligibility for protection. These interacting changes heighten the risk of errors, disputed classifications, and failures to apply transitional protections correctly. As a result, advisers should expect higher volumes of challenges, mandatory reconsiderations, and appeals relating to WCA outcomes and LCWRA entitlement.

The meeting also reinforced practical guidance for supporting clients at tribunal, particularly for **remote hearings**. Appellants should be assisted to join hearings from quiet, private environments with reliable internet or telephone access wherever possible. Poor hearing conditions can undermine a claimant's ability to give evidence, especially in cases involving mental health issues, cognitive impairment, or fatigue. Advisers were encouraged to discuss hearing arrangements early and to request reasonable adjustments where appropriate.

Finally, HMCTS addressed the increasing use of **AI tools in tribunal submissions**. While their use was acknowledged, strong warnings were issued that all AI-assisted content must be thoroughly checked for accuracy. Inaccurate or fabricated case law or citations may be treated as professional misconduct, with responsibility for accuracy remaining firmly with the representative. The group also noted ongoing research—particularly involving Glasgow University—into tribunals, disadvantage, access to justice, and the impact of remote hearings, with findings expected to influence future practice.

The infographic features a dark blue header with a white scale of justice icon on the left and a white gavel icon on the right. The title 'HMCTS Tribunal User Group Update' is centered in white. Below the header, the content is organized into four main sections, each with a colored banner and an icon:

- Surge in WCA/LCWRA Appeals Expected** (Warning icon):
 - LCWRA payment for new claimants **HALVED** from April 2026.
 - Stricter evidence rules & new Severe Conditions Criteria.
 - Increased financial impact & complex transitional changes.

Illustration: A clipboard with a red 'APPEAL' stamp, a stack of gold coins, and a document.
- Remote Hearings Guidance** (Warning icon):
 - Join from quiet, private space
 - Ensure a stable connection

Illustration: A house with a Wi-Fi signal icon and a green checkmark.
- AI Risks Highlighted** (Warning icon):
 - Fact check all AI submissions
 - Beware of false citations & errors

Illustration: A blue robot head with a magnifying glass and a red warning sign.
- Research & Disadvantage Studies** (Warning icon):
 - Glasgow University Leading Studies on Tribunals & Access to Justice

Illustration: A large, historic stone building with a tower.

At the bottom left, there is an illustration of a tribunal building with the word 'TRIBUNAL' on its facade. To its right, a yellow banner reads: **Advisers: PREPARE FOR MORE APPEALS!**

Why Universal Credit may not be fit for the future

Universal Credit (UC) now supports over eight million people, making it the UK's main working-age benefit.

A recent BBC In Depth article raises questions about whether a system designed more than two decades ago is still suited to today's economic and social realities.

Why Universal Credit Was Created

Universal Credit was developed in the early 2000s following a visit to Easterhouse in Glasgow by then Conservative leader Iain Duncan Smith.

Its core aim was to “make work pay” by simplifying six benefits into one monthly payment and reducing financial barriers to employment. The intention was that UC would act as a bridge into work rather than a long-term destination.

A Long and Costly Rollout

Although Universal Credit has now largely replaced legacy benefits, its rollout has taken many years longer than planned and cost significantly more than expected.

Over this period, claimants have faced austerity measures, a prolonged freeze in benefit rates, the Covid-19 pandemic, and a sustained cost-of-living crisis.

A Changing Claimant Group

One of the article's key points is that the profile of UC claimants has changed. Today, close to half of incapacity-related claims involve mental or behavioural health conditions.

There has also been a rise in graduates claiming benefits and in people unable to work due to long-term ill health. These trends highlight how different today's challenges are from those UC was originally designed to address.

Growing Costs and Pressures

Spending on health- and disability-related benefits is expected to rise sharply in the coming years. Anti-poverty groups argue that earlier policy choices—particularly benefit freezes—have reduced the real value of Universal Credit, contributing to financial hardship and increased use of food banks.

Where the System Falls Short

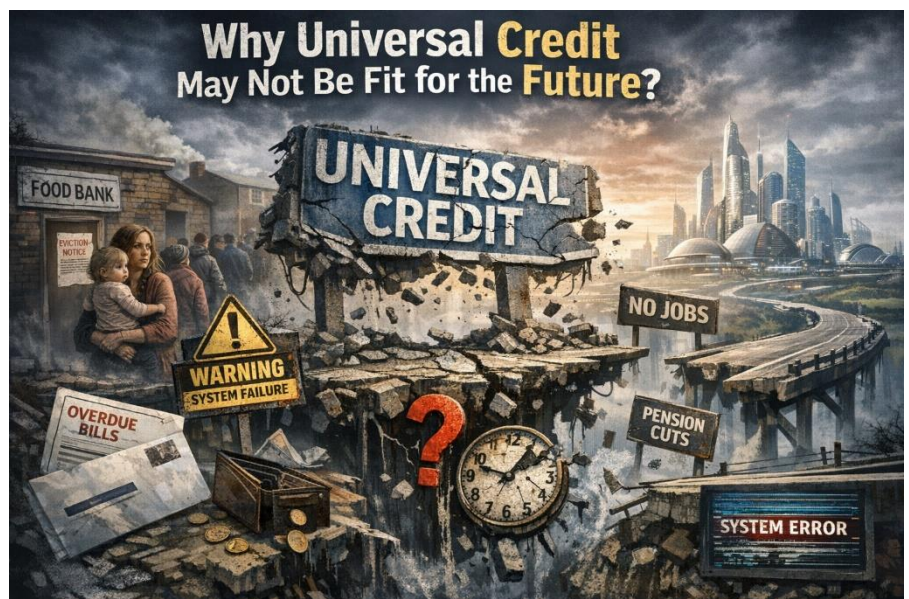
The BBC notes that UC works reasonably well for claimants who are digitally confident, in stable housing, and able to manage monthly payments. However, many others struggle—especially people with disabilities, mental health conditions, caring responsibilities, insecure work, or limited digital access.

Looking Ahead

While Universal Credit has simplified the benefits system and coped with major shocks such as the pandemic, the article concludes that it may no longer reflect the realities faced by many claimants.

With rising ill health, insecure work, and growing demand for support, there is increasing debate about whether substantial reform is needed to ensure Universal Credit is fit for the future.

[Universal credit: Why it may not be fit for the future - BBC News](#)



Universal Credit Severe Conditions Criteria

What is this?

The Severe Conditions Criteria protect people on Universal Credit who have very serious, lifelong health conditions.

If you meet these criteria, you will:

- Get the higher Universal Credit health payment, even **after April 2026**
- Not be reassessed again unless your health improves

Why is this important?

- From April 2026, many people who are assessed as unfit for work will receive a **lower** health payment.
- However, people who meet the Severe Conditions Criteria are fully protected and keep the higher payment.

Do I meet the Severe Conditions Criteria?

You must meet all four points below.

- ✓ 1. Your condition affects you all the time
 - You cannot work or prepare for work
 - This is not temporary or occasional – it applies all the time
- ✓ 2. Your condition is lifelong
 - Your condition will last for the rest of your life
 - It is not expected to go away or be cured
- ✓ 3. There is no realistic chance of improvement
 - Doctors do not expect your ability to function to improve enough for work
 - This is based on current treatments, not future possibilities
- ✓ 4. Your condition has been clearly diagnosed
 - Diagnosed by a qualified doctor or specialist
 - Properly investigated and well understood

Examples of conditions that may qualify

Each case is considered individually, but examples can include:

- Motor neurone disease (MND)
- Advanced Parkinson's
- Severe autism
- Dementia
- Huntington's disease
- Severe brain injury

Who decides?

- The decision is usually made during your Work Capability Assessment
- The healthcare professional makes a recommendation

What happens if I meet the criteria?

- ✓ You get the higher UC health payment
- ✓ You do not need future assessments
- ✓ You do not have work-related requirements
- ✓ This continues unless your health improves

What should I do?

- Make sure UC knows how serious and permanent your condition is
- Provide medical evidence if asked
- Get advice if you are unsure or if a decision seems wrong.

Info from the quarterly Grampian Advice Forum meeting on Thurs 19th March 2026



Numerous organisations were represented, including Aberdeen City Council, Aberdeenshire Council, Citizens Advice, Shelter, Hillcrest Homes, Maggie's, ACVO, Grampian Housing, Langstane Housing, Housing associations, Windrush Engagement Team, GamCare, Advice Direct Scotland, and others.

Presentation 1 – Advice Direct Scotland

Speaker: Craig Tobin (Craig.Tobin@advice.scot), Head of Impact, Advice Direct Scotland

Short Summary

Advice Direct Scotland has taken over delivery of the **Independent Advocacy Service**, operating through advocacy.scot to ensure a clear separation between advocacy and advice, as required in Scotland. The service is underpinned by a statutory right to advocacy within the Social Security system and is experiencing growing demand as Social Security Scotland services mature. Key priorities include co-design, accessibility, digital development, and expanding face-to-face provision, supported by strong partnership working. Advocacy support covers a wide range of benefits, includes home visits across Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire, and is available up to and including tribunal stage.

Resource: Presentation - [Stakeholder Slides](#)

Presentation 2 – GamCare (Women's Gambling Harms Awareness)

Speaker: Rod Smith, GamCare (rod.smith@gamcare.org.uk)

Short Summary

The presentation highlighted the often hidden nature of gambling harms, particularly among women, who may use gambling to cope with stress, trauma, loneliness, or boredom. GamCare provides support to anyone affected by gambling harms, including family members, noting that while 2.7% of adults meet criteria for harmful gambling, around 10% of the population is affected directly or indirectly. Growing concerns were raised about online gambling, competition-style websites, and targeted advertising, alongside increased risks linked to cost-of-living pressures and neurodivergence.

Resource: Presentation - [Women-and-Gambling-Harm.pdf](#)

Presentation 3 – Windrush Engagement Team (Home Office)

Speakers: Sharron, Pauletta, and Lloyd

Short Summary

The Windrush Engagement Team outlined their national outreach work to raise awareness of the **Windrush Status Scheme** and **Windrush Compensation Scheme**, noting that many eligible people—particularly in Scotland—remain unaware they can apply. The team is increasing engagement, with planned outreach events in Aberdeen in May. The Status Scheme is a free service helping people prove their lawful right to live and work in the UK, while the Compensation Scheme provides redress for a wide range of losses experienced by those affected by the Windrush scandal. Speakers highlighted ongoing challenges, including digital E-Visa issues and barriers for older applicants.

Key Link: [Apply to the Windrush Compensation Scheme – Apply to the Windrush Compensation Scheme](#). Info video - [Windrush Support Explained: Status, Compensation & Guidance](#)

Presentation 4 – Complex Needs and Universal Credit

Speaker: Stuart Reid

Short Summary

The presentation highlighted the importance of correctly recording *complex needs* on Universal Credit to safeguard vulnerable claimants. Accurate recording helps protect claimants from sanctions, ensures access to reasonable adjustments, supports safeguarding, and promotes consistency across DWP staff. Stuart outlined common complex need categories, where DWP records this information, and practical steps advisers can take to ensure needs are properly noted. Case studies illustrated real-world impacts, alongside practitioner insights on avoiding errors—particularly for phone-only claimants and during UC migration.

Key Resources: Presentation - [Supporting-Vulnerable-Claimants-Complex-Needs.pdf](#)

Example Request Form - [Additional-Needs-Status-Request-Form.pdf](#)

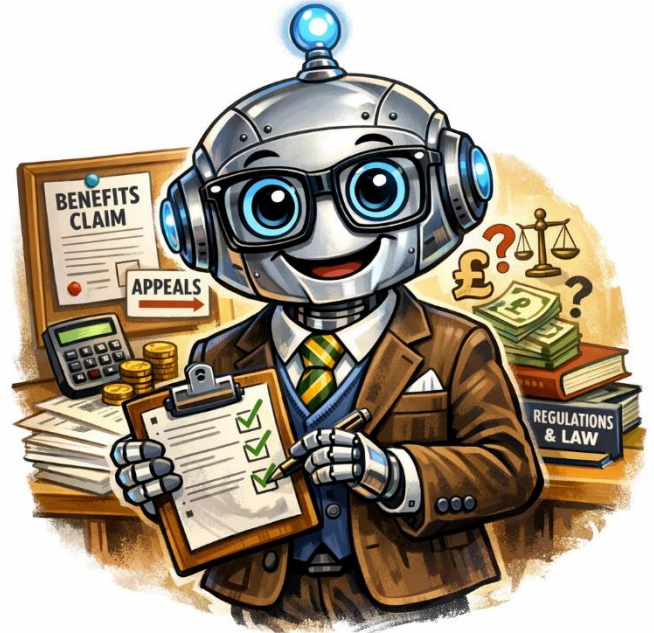
AI and Advice: Why Caution Matters for Welfare Rights

A recent [NAWRA](#) session explored the fast-growing use of artificial intelligence (AI) in advice, law and public services — and why advisers should remain cautious. While AI tools can be impressive and are already being used to draft text, analyse data and suggest benefit entitlements, they are not truly “intelligent”. They rely on patterns in data and can confidently present information that is wrong, outdated, or entirely fabricated.

Real-world examples showed AI “hallucinating” legislation, inventing case law and misquoting regulations — including repeated errors when asked about Disabled Facilities Grants and tribunal cases. Even when challenged, AI systems often doubled down with further inaccuracies. This poses real risks for advice work, where accuracy, citation and professional judgment are essential.

AI may reduce barriers for claimants by making applications, complaints and appeals easier — potentially leading to surges in demand that public bodies are not prepared for. At the same time, advisers are likely to see more clients arriving with “AI-generated answers” that still need careful checking from first principles.

The key message: AI can be a useful tool, but it is not an adviser. It does not prioritise official sources, cannot apply discretion, and should never be relied on without human oversight. For now, the role of skilled advisers — interpreting law, spotting errors, and applying judgment — is more important than ever.



Scottish Tribunals Annual Report 2024 – 2025

The Scottish Tribunals Annual Report 2024–25 highlights a sharp rise in cases across Scotland’s devolved tribunal system, placing sustained pressure on judicial and administrative resources while tribunals continued to prioritise fair and timely decision-making. The President of Scottish Tribunals, Lady Wise, commends tribunal members and Chamber Presidents for maintaining standards despite operating with reduced capacity in some areas.

The report covers activity across all chambers, including the Social Security Chamber, and notes continued development of the Upper Tribunal for Scotland alongside efforts to improve systems and administration. It also flags an upcoming leadership change, with the Social Security Chamber President due to step down in 2025, and ongoing commitments to judicial training, ethics and governance.

Key themes relevant to advisers

- Rising demand for tribunal services, including in the Social Security Chamber, with knock-on effects for waiting times and capacity.
- Continued emphasis on fairness, judicial independence, and quality decision-making, despite resource constraints.

[scottish-tribunals-annual-report-2024-25.pdf](#)