

Factsheet

Extra help with essential costs if you're on a low income

If your income is low, it can be hard to meet unexpected essential costs. You might be able to get help with some of these expenses from your local council, the government's Social Fund or a charity grant.

This factsheet explains some of the options, whether you might qualify and how to apply.



Call free on 0800 319 6789

Visit www.independentage.org

About Independent Age

Whatever happens as we get older, we all want to remain independent and live life on our own terms. That's why, as well as offering regular friendly contact and a strong campaigning voice, Independent Age can provide you and your family with clear, free and impartial advice on the issues that matter: care and support, money and benefits, health and mobility.

A charity founded over 150 years ago, we're independent so you can be.

The information in this factsheet applies to England only.

**If you're in Wales, contact Age Cymru
(0800 022 3444, ageuk.org.uk/cymru)
for information and advice.**

**In Scotland, contact Age Scotland
(0800 12 44 222, ageuk.org.uk/scotland).**

**In Northern Ireland, contact Age NI
(0808 808 7575, ageuk.org.uk/northern-ireland).**

In this factsheet, you'll find reference to our other free publications. You can order them by calling **0800 319 6789**, or by visiting **www.independentage.org/publications**

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1. Extra help if you're on a low income

If you're living on a low income, it can be hard to budget for emergency or unexpected costs, such as a broken-down washing machine, home repairs or a funeral.

The good news is that you may qualify for a one-off grant, loan or other type of help, depending on your income or what benefits you claim. This factsheet looks at what help you might be able to get and how to apply for it.



Good to know

It's a good idea to check if you qualify for any benefits. You could be missing out on extra money you're owed. Try our online calculator at independentage.org/benefit-calculator or call our Helpline on **0800 319 6789** to arrange a free benefits check.

If you are experiencing financial hardship because of the coronavirus pandemic, you may be able to get help from your council – see chapter 2. You may also be able to get additional support from energy suppliers if you're having trouble paying your bills – see chapter 6.

2. Local welfare assistance schemes – council help with unexpected costs

If you need help in an emergency, ask your local council if they have a local welfare assistance scheme. These are designed to provide help with unexpected or emergency expenses to people on a low income.



Good to know

If you're in financial difficulty because of the coronavirus (COVID-19), you may be able to get help from your local council's hardship fund to pay for essential items such as food or medicines. This is additional funding from the government to cope with the pandemic. You'll only qualify if you have no savings and no other way of getting support.

You may also be able to get help from the hardship fund to pay your Council Tax if you're on a low income and under State Pension age. If you're over State Pension age, contact your council to find out what other support may be available.

Schemes vary from area to area and not all councils run them. Some councils use the money allocated for this to support local schemes, such as food banks, credit unions and homelessness prevention schemes. In some areas you may be able to apply directly to the council for help, which is usually in the form of:

- vouchers
- food parcels
- pre-payment cards
- furniture
- white goods.

You can't usually get cash.

You're not automatically entitled to help, so contact your local council to find out what's available and whether you qualify.

Your council will also know what other help may be available in your area, such as:

- food banks
- community hubs that provide hot food
- vouchers for fuel
- places to get second-hand furniture.

How do I find out more?

To find out what help is available in your area, contact your local council. You can find their contact details in the phone book or on [gov.uk/find-local-council](https://www.gov.uk/find-local-council).

You could also use the postcode search on the Shelter website to help you find your local scheme, if there is one ([england.shelter.org.uk/housing_advice/debt_and_money_problems/cash_in_a_crisis](https://www.england.shelter.org.uk/housing_advice/debt_and_money_problems/cash_in_a_crisis)).

For help applying for local welfare assistance, speak to an organisation like Citizens Advice (**0800 144 8848**, [citizensadvice.org.uk](https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk)) or your local Age UK (**0800 169 6565**, [ageuk.org.uk](https://www.ageuk.org.uk)).

If you're turned down

If you've been turned down, get advice from an organisation like Citizens Advice (**0800 144 8848**, [citizensadvice.org.uk](https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk)).

The decision letter should explain how to ask for the decision to be looked at again, and how long you have to do this.

These schemes are discretionary, so you can't appeal if you're turned down.

3. Short-term benefit advances

If you're waiting for your first payment of a benefit and you're in urgent financial need, you can apply for an interest-free, short-term benefit advance. If you qualify, you'll usually get the advance the same day or the next working day.

You can ask for an advance if you have recently applied for:

- Pension Credit
- State Pension
- Carer's Allowance
- Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA)
- Income Support
- Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)
- Universal Credit.

How do I apply?

Depending on the benefit you've applied for, call:

- Pension Credit or State Pension – **0800 731 0469**
- Carer's Allowance – **0800 731 0297**

- Income Support, Employment and Support Allowance or Jobseeker's Allowance – **0800 169 0310**
- Universal Credit – **0800 328 5644**.

How much money you get will depend on your circumstances.



Remember

Think carefully about how repayments will affect your future income before you take out a benefit advance. You'll have to repay the advance – some money will be taken from your benefit each week until it is paid back.

If you're turned down

You can ask for the decision to be looked at again. Contact the office that made the decision. They should tell you how to do this and how long you have. You can't appeal against the refusal to award a short-term benefit advance.



To do

If you're on a low income or have a disability, there may be extra money you can claim. If you haven't already done so, make sure you're claiming all the benefits you're entitled to. Call our Helpline on **0800 319 6789** to arrange a benefits check or try our online benefits calculator (independentage.org/benefit-calculator).

4. Budgeting Loans and Budgeting Advances

A Budgeting Loan is an interest-free loan to help with essential one-off expenses that are difficult to budget for, including:

- furniture and household equipment, such as a cooker or washing machine
- clothes and footwear
- rent in advance
- moving costs
- essential travel expenses within the UK
- home improvements, maintenance or security
- funeral costs.

You can apply for a Budgeting Loan if you or your partner have been getting one of the following benefits for at least six months, either consecutively or with breaks of no more than 28 days:

- Pension Credit
- Income Support
- income-based Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA)

- income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA).

If you have moved from Universal Credit to Pension Credit, any time that you were claiming Universal Credit will count towards the six months.

If you get Universal Credit, you'll have to apply for a Budgeting Advance instead of a Budgeting Loan.



Good to know

You will have to repay any Budgeting Loans, Budgeting Advances and short-term benefit advances (chapter 3) you receive. You don't have to repay Funeral Expenses Payments (chapter 5), Cold Weather Payments (chapter 6) or Winter Fuel Payments (chapter 6).

If your repayments have been temporarily suspended during the coronavirus pandemic, the DWP will let you know when they will start again. Other repayments continue as normal. If you're struggling to repay a loan or advance, call the DWP Debt Management contact centre on **0800 916 0647**.

What might I get?

The smallest amount you can ask for is £100. You can get up to:

- £348 if you're single
- £464 if you're part of a couple
- £812 if you have a child.

The amount also depends on whether you:

- can pay the loan back
- have any savings over £1,000 (or £2,000 if you or your partner are 63 or over)
- have any other Budgeting Loans.

You normally have to repay the loan within two years. The repayments will come from your benefits.

You can't owe the Social Fund more than £1,500.

How do I apply?

Apply online ([gov.uk/budgeting-help-benefits/how-to-apply](https://www.gov.uk/budgeting-help-benefits/how-to-apply)), or complete form SF500, which you can:

- download from [gov.uk/government/publications/budgeting-loan-claim-form](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/budgeting-loan-claim-form)
- pick up from your local Jobcentre Plus office ([gov.uk/contact-jobcentre-plus](https://www.gov.uk/contact-jobcentre-plus))

- request by calling **0800 169 0140**.

Your claim can take between 7 and 31 days, depending on whether you apply online or by post.

If your claim is successful, you must accept the loan offer before you can get the money. You can do this online or by post.

You'll get your money within 7 days if you accept online or within 25 days if you accept by post.

If you get Universal Credit, contact your local Jobcentre Plus work coach to apply for a Budgeting Advance instead ([find-your-nearest-jobcentre.dwp.gov.uk](https://www.find-your-nearest-jobcentre.dwp.gov.uk)).

If you're turned down

You can ask for the decision to be looked at again. To do this, you must write to the benefit office that made the decision within 28 days of the date on the decision letter, explaining why you think the decision was wrong.

You will then receive a reviewed decision. If you're still unhappy, you can ask an Independent Case Examiner to investigate. You must have asked the benefit office to review the decision before you can do this. You can find out more from [gov.uk/government/publications/budgeting-loans-how-to-ask-for-a-further-independent-review](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/budgeting-loans-how-to-ask-for-a-further-independent-review) or by calling **0800 414 8529**.

5. Help towards the cost of a funeral

If you're on a low income and responsible for paying for a funeral, you may qualify for a Funeral Expenses Payment.

Who can claim?

You can claim a Funeral Expenses Payment if you or your partner receive one of the following benefits:

- Pension Credit
- Income Support
- income-based Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA)
- income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)
- the disability elements of Working Tax Credit
- Housing Benefit
- Child Tax Credit
- Universal Credit.

You might also qualify if you're getting a Support for Mortgage Interest loan.

You can still make a claim if you've applied for one of these benefits and you're waiting for a decision.

You must have had a close relationship with the person who died – for example, they may have been your partner. If they were a close relative or friend, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) will check whether you're the most appropriate person to pay for the funeral or whether another relative (who isn't receiving one of the benefits listed above) could pay instead.

You must make a claim within six months of the funeral.

You don't have to repay a Funeral Expenses Payment, but if there's any money left from the estate of the person who died, it may have to be repaid from this.

What can I claim for?

The Funeral Expenses Payment can help to pay for:

- burial or cremation costs, including the cost of the doctor's certificate
- a return journey to arrange or go to the funeral
- the reasonable cost of moving the body within the UK, for the part of the journey over 50 miles
- up to £1,000 for other funeral expenses, such as a coffin, flowers or funeral director's fees.
- death certificates and other documents.

If the person who died had a pre-paid funeral plan, you will only get £120 for items not covered by the plan. The amount you get may also be affected if they had an insurance policy.

A Funeral Expenses Payment will only help with the basic costs of a funeral. You will have to pay any extra costs yourself. You may be able to apply for a Budgeting Loan or a Budgeting Advance to help with the cost as well.



Good to know

The amount you get from a Funeral Expenses Payment varies, but usually won't cover the full cost of even a simple funeral.

How do I claim?

You can claim by calling the Bereavement Service helpline on **0800 731 0469**. To claim by post, complete form SF200, which you can download from [gov.uk/funeral-payments/how-to-claim](https://www.gov.uk/funeral-payments/how-to-claim).

The Funeral Expenses Payment is usually paid directly to the funeral director. If they've already been paid, the money will be paid into your account.

If you're turned down

You can appeal if you disagree with the decision, but you must ask for a mandatory reconsideration first unless the decision letter tells you that you can appeal straightaway. You must do this within one month of the date of the decision. It's a good idea to get advice – speak to Independent Age (**0800 319 6789**) or your local Citizens Advice (**0800 144 8848**, citizensadvice.org.uk).



Good to know

Our factsheet **What to do after a death** has more advice on how to pay for a funeral and keep the costs down.

6. Help with heating costs

Winter Fuel Payment

Winter Fuel Payment is an annual payment to help with heating costs during winter. You may qualify for a payment in winter 2021/22 if you've reached State Pension Age. You can check your State Pension age at [gov.uk/state-pension-age](https://www.gov.uk/state-pension-age) to find out when you qualify.

If you qualify, you'll receive a Winter Fuel Payment automatically if you or your partner receive State Pension or certain other benefits. You should get the payment by mid-January. If you don't, contact the office that pays your benefits.

If you qualify but don't get it automatically, you'll need to make a claim by calling the Winter Fuel Payment helpline on **0800 731 0160**. You only need to claim once and then payments will be made every year as long as your circumstances don't change. You'll get between £100 and £300 depending on your age and who you live with.

You may still be entitled to receive a Winter Fuel Payment if you live in Switzerland or certain EEA countries and receive a State Pension.

Cold Weather Payments

Cold Weather Payments help people with a low income with increased heating costs when it's very cold. You may be eligible if you or your partner receive Pension Credit, certain other means-tested benefits or a Support for Mortgage Interest loan.

You'll get an extra £25 each time the average temperature in your area has been, or is predicted to be, 0°C (32°F) or below for seven days in a row between 1 November and 31 March.

You don't need to make a claim as payments are made automatically. If you don't receive your Cold Weather Payment, contact the Pension Service on **0800 731 0469** or your local Jobcentre Plus ([gov.uk/contact-jobcentre-plus](https://www.gov.uk/contact-jobcentre-plus)). If you receive Universal Credit, contact their helpline instead on **0800 328 5644**.

Winter Fuel Payment and Cold Weather Payments won't affect your other benefits.

See our guide **Winter wise** for more information about looking after yourself in winter.

Call us on **0800 319 6789** to arrange a free benefits check, or use our online benefits calculator at independentage.org/benefit-calculator.

Help with energy bills

If you're having problems paying your energy bills, some energy companies have grants or trusts that can help. You can apply to them even if you're not their customer. Contact your own supplier first to find out if they have grants available. You could also try the following:

- British Gas Energy Trust, which helps people with gas or electricity debts (**0121 348 7797**, [britishgasenergytrust.org.uk](https://www.britishgasenergytrust.org.uk)). You must get debt advice from a recognised organisation before you apply (see chapter 7 or visit [britishgasenergytrust.org.uk/Home/AdviceServices](https://www.britishgasenergytrust.org.uk/Home/AdviceServices))
- the Let's Talk resource from Charis Grants can direct you to organisations that can help with energy debts (**01733 421 021**, lets-talk.online). If you're on certain benefits, you may also be able to get funding from Charis Grants to pay for white goods, such as a washing machine or cooker
- Simple Energy Advice, which has an online energy grants finder and advice about energy efficiency (**0800 444202**, simpleenergyadvice.org.uk)
- Local Energy Advice Partnership (LEAP) is a free energy and money saving advice service (**0800 060 7567**, applyforleap.org.uk). You may

qualify for help if you're on a low income or certain benefits, or you have a health condition or disability

- NEA's Warm and Safe Homes Advice Service (WASH) (**0800 304 7159**, nea.org.uk/advice/wash-advice) also provides free advice and support.



Good to know

You may qualify for a £140 discount on your electricity or gas bill if you receive Guarantee Pension Credit or you're on a low income. Contact your energy supplier or the Warm Home Discount Scheme to find out more (**0800 731 0214**, gov.uk/the-warm-home-discount-scheme).

If you can't pay your energy bills because of the coronavirus

If you're struggling to pay your energy bills (for example, if you're self-isolating and can't top up your meter, or because you can't afford to pay), your energy supplier must support you at this time. Contact them as soon as possible. If you need help with this or you can't get through to them, call the Citizens Advice Consumer Helpline on **0808 223 1133** and ask to be referred to their Extra Help Unit.

7. Debt advice

If you're having debt problems, you can get free specialist advice from the National Debtline (**0808 808 4000**, nationaldebtline.org) or Stepchange (**0800 138 1111**, stepchange.org). It's never too early or too late to get help with debts, and these charities will offer confidential, practical help. You can also contact your local Citizens Advice (**0800 144 8848**, citizensadvice.org.uk).

If you're facing repossession or eviction, you should get advice as soon as possible. Contact Shelter (**0808 800 4444**, shelter.org.uk) or the organisations above for specialist debt advice.

Money worries can make you feel stressed and anxious, which in time may affect your mental health. If you need advice, contact Mind (**0300 123 3393**, mind.org.uk) or the online Mental Health and Money Advice service (mentalhealthandmoneyadvice.org).

Make sure you're claiming all the benefits you're entitled to. Contact our Helpline (**0800 319 6789**) to arrange a benefits check or use our online benefits calculator (independentage.org/benefit-calculator).

8. Grants from charities

Before you apply

Most charities will only help if you're already receiving all the benefits you are entitled to. Some charities won't contribute towards the cost of items or services that should be provided by your council, the NHS or a government scheme. Before you make an application, make sure you do the following, if applicable:

- check if there are any benefits you can claim – use our online benefits calculator (independentage.org/benefit-calculator) or call our Helpline (**0800 319 6789**) to arrange a benefits check
- check what assistance your local council or the Social Fund can provide (see chapters 2–6)
- get debt advice (see chapter 7)
- if you need money towards work on your home, apply for any other sources of funding, such as council or government grants. You should also check whether your landlord should be paying for the work or if home insurance will cover any damage. See our factsheet **Paying for home maintenance and repairs** for more information

- if you're applying for disability equipment, check whether your local council can help. If they can't, your doctor or occupational therapist should provide details of why you need the equipment and why it isn't provided by your local council. See our factsheet **Adapting your home to stay independent** for more information.

What sort of help could I get from a charity?

There are many charities that provide different types of help if you can't get support elsewhere.

You may be able to get:

- a small one-off payment or voucher for things like food or clothes
- larger amounts for household goods, such as a cooker or washing machine
- a one-off grant to cover an emergency or unplanned expense
- a grant towards a holiday or respite care
- disability equipment and aids
- help towards housing maintenance, repairs or removal costs
- travel costs.

Charities won't pay for items that are considered luxuries, foreign holidays, legal fees or debt.

Most charities will need proof, such as a receipt, to show that you've used the grant as intended.

Some charities offer small regular weekly or monthly grants to help with ongoing expenses. This shouldn't affect any benefits you are claiming, but it's a good idea to let your benefit office know so there won't be any problems with your benefit in the future.

You may be able to get small regular payments to help pay a top-up towards your care home fees, but this is rare. See our factsheets **Paying care home fees** and **Paying care home top-up fees** or call our Helpline if you have a question about care home fees (**0800 319 6789**).

Finding the right charity to apply to

Charities, benevolent funds and trusts have specific criteria for who they will help. Some charities will only consider applications from certain areas of the country, or from people of particular age groups or backgrounds. You may have to provide quite detailed information about yourself when you apply.

Turn2us can help you find a charity to apply to. Call them on **0808 802 2000** or use their online grant search tool at **grants-search.turn2us.org.uk**

There are often books with details of charities in the reference section of local libraries too, such as the annual **Guide to Grants for Individuals in Need** published by the Directory of Social Change.

Most charities support people in financial need who have something in common, such as:

- a profession, trade, job or industry
- religion or faith
- membership of a society, club or trade union
- a medical condition, illness or disability
- living in or coming from a specific geographical area.

Some organisations only have one fund. Others have different funds for specific purposes. Many funds also help the dependents of the people they support, such as partners or children. You may also be eligible for help through a partner's connection to a charity, for example, if they worked in a particular trade.

Depending on the charity you apply to, you may be asked for information about your education, employment history, social situation or background. If you can't remember all the details of your work history, you can ask HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) for a record (**0300 200 3500**, [gov.uk/get-proof-employment-history](https://www.gov.uk/get-proof-employment-history)).

For details of organisations that may be able to support you if you have a long-term health condition, see our guide **Living well with long-term health conditions**. For example, Macmillan Cancer Support can make small payments to help people with costs related to living with cancer (**0808 808 0000**, **macmillan.org.uk**).

If you served in the armed forces, including National Service, or the Merchant Navy, you or your family may qualify for support from:

- the Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen's Families Association (SSAFA) (**0800 260 6767**, **ssafa.org.uk**)
- the Royal British Legion (**0808 802 8080**, **britishlegion.org.uk**)
- the Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund (RAFBF) (**0300 102 1919**, **rafbf.org**)
- Seafarer Support (**0800 121 4765**, **seafarersupport.org**).

Most charities only have the resources to provide small grants. If you're trying to raise a large amount of money, you may need to apply to several charities at the same time. There are hundreds of charities out there, so it's worth doing some research.

How to apply

Each charity will have its own application process. Contact your chosen charity to ask them how to apply.

You may have to apply through an application form or online form, or by writing a personal letter. In some cases, you may have to apply through an intermediary. The charity will say if this is the case. An intermediary may be a GP, a social worker, an advice worker or an organisation, such as a disability charity, Mind or Age UK.

The charity may ask for evidence that you've been turned down for other sources of funding, such as the local council, government schemes or other charities that might be more suitable.

Some charities have case workers or welfare officers who will handle your application. They may be able to help you apply to other charities, especially if the charity can't fund the full amount you need.

You can also get help to apply through organisations such as Turn2us (**0808 802 2000**, [turn2us.org.uk](https://www.turn2us.org.uk)) or Citizens Advice (**0800 144 8848**, [citizensadvice.org.uk](https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk)), or other advice organisations that work with people in financial need.

When to apply

Charities set their own timetables for processing applications and awarding grants. Some charities have committees who meet to process applications, which may mean it takes longer to get a decision. If you need funding urgently, look for charities that process applications and make decisions quickly.

If you're turned down, you don't normally have any right to appeal. Being eligible doesn't mean you'll automatically get help. You may be turned down due to limited funding, even though you meet the charity's criteria, although this means you may be able to apply again to the same charity in the future.

Charities don't have to help you and, if they provide regular payments, can review or withdraw this help at any time. However, they should write to let you know about any changes to your payments.

9. Food banks

Food banks provide emergency boxes of food to people in need. They may also offer personal hygiene items, such as toilet paper, soap and other toiletries, and pet food. Some food banks run advice sessions to help you access other support and they may offer hot meals as well.

How to get help

To get help from a food bank, you'll need a voucher or a letter from a professional, such as your GP, or an organisation like Citizens Advice. Ask your local food bank where you can get a voucher. They should be able to put you in touch with the organisations they work with.

Food banks are run by the charity Trussell Trust (**01722 580 180**, trusselltrust.org/get-help/find-a-foodbank) and a number of other smaller organisations. You can use the Independent Food Aid Network map to find them (foodaidnetwork.org.uk/independent-food-banks-map) or contact your local council.

Your local council should be able to give you information about places that offer free food in your area, including food banks, soup kitchens and

community hubs. You can find their contact details in the phone book or at [gov.uk/find-local-council](https://www.gov.uk/find-local-council)

If you're struggling to make ends meet, make sure you're claiming all the benefits you're entitled to. Use our online benefits calculator (independentage.org/benefit-calculator) or call our Helpline (**0800 319 6789**) to arrange a benefits check.

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The sources used to create this publication are available on request. Contact us using the details below.

Thank you

Independent Age would like to thank those who shared their experiences as this information was being developed, and those who reviewed the information for us

How did we do?

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Contact us

Call us 0800 319 6789

Email advice@independentage.org

Visit www.independentage.org