



ISSUE 12

A2B: THE
FIRST 22
MONTHS

- 15,090 valid benefit checks completed
- 1,689 older people helped into previously unclaimed benefit
- £22m+ in unclaimed benefit calculated
- £4.48m a year in unclaimed benefit applied for

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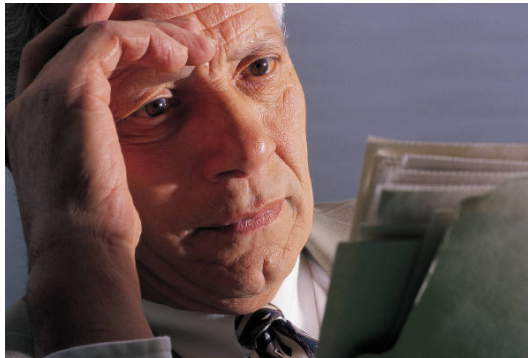
access to benefits circular

www.a2b.org.uk

OCT 2010

How government spending plans affect over 60s

The Chancellor George Osborne has announced the Comprehensive Spending Review. Below is a summary of what 'the cuts' mean for older people in Northern Ireland.



Many older people are anxious to know what impact government spending plans will have on their income

It is important to note that these cuts will impact here in two ways – firstly, cuts to the 'block grant' will impact across our departments. Secondly, cuts to the welfare system, which is paid for directly from the Treasury, will also impact on incomes here. It is therefore more vital than ever to our local economy that people claim all the benefits they are entitled to.

It was also announced that proposals will be set out for a Universal Credit for benefit claimants of working age and will be brought in over the course of this parliament. Its aim is to ensure that claimants will always be better off in work. A cap on household benefits will be introduced which will be equal to the average household income. This will not apply if the household receives Disability Living Allowance or Working Tax Credit.

While this Spending Review announcement could have in many ways been worse, the real impact is yet to be seen as the NI Executive will now have to consult on its own draft budget. It is anticipated that £4bn of the block grant will be lost over 4 years. We are therefore yet to see local cuts to health, social care, further education, transport and many other areas of spending which impact on our older people.

AT A GLANCE

- **Retirement Pension**, currently linked to the RPI, will rise by around £4.49 next April. From then on, it will rise by either the CPI (which is lower than RPI), average earnings or 2.5%
- **State Pension Age** will gradually rise to 66 for both men and women by 2020
- Maximum **Savings Credit** element of **Pension Credit** will be frozen for four years
- **Winter Fuel Payment**, **free travel** and **free TV Licences** for over 75s to stay.
- **Cold Weather Payment** will remain at £25 permanently
- Basic and 30-Hour elements of **Working Tax Credit** will be frozen but Child element of **Child Tax Credit** rise.
- Contribution-based **Employment Support Allowance** will only be payable for up to a year.
- No further changes will be made to **Child Benefit** but **Education Maintenance Allowance** is to be replaced.
- £200m is being made available to help people who lost out from the collapse of the **Presbyterian Mutual Society**.

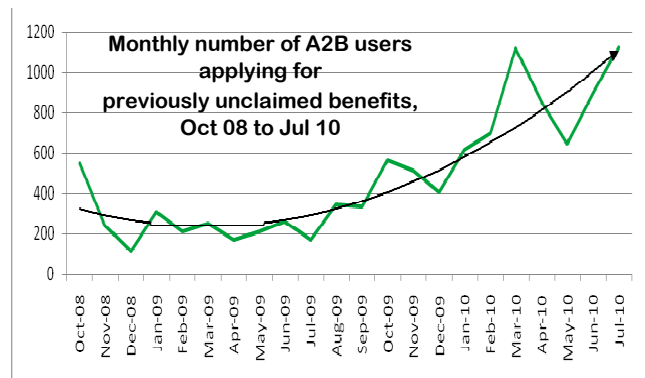
Demand swells for A2B Benefit Checks

The number of people using A2B's free and anonymous online benefit calculator has seen significant increases in the last 6 months. By July 2010, the monthly average number of users completing valid benefit checks had increased from 462 to 889, whilst the value of annually recurring benefits identified and applied for every month had grown to £275,000.

A2B Chief Executive Patrick Minne explains that there are a number of factors that explain the increases: "Our continuing commitment to community development on the ground has increased the size of our Partnership Network to 200 organisations, leading to more assisted benefit checks. Apart from that, the increasingly gloomy economic forecasts are prompting more people to carry out their own entitlement 'health checks' on our website at a2b.org.uk to optimise their incomes. Additionally, our rural outreach project with the Public Health Agency (PHA) and Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has also kicked in boosting the number of home-based benefit calculations."

Maximising Access

This PHA-led project, 'Maximising Access', has started targeting 4,200 rural homes



around Northern Ireland with home visits intended to provide holistic health and benefit checks. 220 enablers, managed by 10 different organisations, are delivering the checks and signposting people into much needed services and entitlements they were not previously aware of.



A2B Training Officer Amanda Boyd with the 'Maximising Access' PHA Project Manager Teresa McGarvey at its launch

They provide benefit checks using both a paper-based version of the A2B Benefit Calculator questionnaire, and a Digital Pen version, which stores answers on a specially designed pen. You can read more about that at the end of the newsletter.

Where we are in the coming months...

Community Safety Partnership event in Ballymoney

With Armagh and Newtownabbey councils

AgeWell events in Magherafelt and Bready

Safe and Sound events in Dunluce and Ballycastle

Country Comes to Town festival in Portadown

Make a Difference events (for signposters and enablers)

Electric Blanket Roadshows at Banbridge, Newry, Warrenpoint and Lurgan

Rural Roadshows in Castleterg, Hilltown, Mayobridge, Attical, Forkhill, Dungannon and Ballygawley

HAP (Home Accident prevention) event in Belfast

Benefits Day in Lisnaskea

Mobile Information Unit parked at Antrim Tesco and Dunvale Ballymena

Check it Out event at Kilkeel

Safety of Seniors event in Bangor

A2B with LPS in UK Top 3 for Social Inclusion



IRRV Performance Awards 2010
FINALIST
EXCELLENCE IN SOCIAL INCLUSION

Earlier in the year, A2B was entered into the annual awards programme of the Institute of Revenues, Rating and Valuation. Its 'Excellence in Social Inclusion' award recognises new and effective models of benefit uptake in the UK. The IRRV were interested in the work A2B had done around Rate Relief and Lone Pensioner Allowance uptake with its partners in Land and Property Services, but were further impressed at the range of up to 70 entitlements which the A2B benefit calculation service covers.

The awards ceremony took place in Harrogate at the end of September and A2B were able to exhibit at a stand in the 'Awards Village' during the national conference. A2B was delighted to be awarded a top-three position.

More importantly, it was a great opportunity to have had our work recognised more widely, and to learn from the experiences of social welfare practitioners in Great Britain. Nearly 50 organisations returned our questionnaire about how they conduct benefit checks and how they see technology fitting into that function.

Our thanks in particular go to John and Margaret Stone and to Michael Bower for contributing to the pre-award A2B inspection visit in Belfast.

A2B's Zoe Anderson with CEO Patrick Minne (centre) and LPS Ops Director Iain Greenway at A2B's IRRV stand



Had your free training yet?

Over 200 groups have now availed of the free training from A2B in how to carry out entitlement checks using the Benefit Calculator. These include groups in towns right across the province such as Carnlough, Coleraine, Castlederg, Irvinestown, Cookstown, Mullabane, Killeel and Newtownards.

If you are an organisation which works with the public, in particular older people, and you have internet access on your premises, you may be interested in availing of the free training which will allow you to carry out benefit calculations for your service users and others in your area.

Training on the A2B Benefit Calculator lasts approximately 2.5 hours and comprises of:

- A brief background explanation about A2B
- A demonstration of relevant features on the A2B website
- A demonstration of the Benefit Calculator, the questions asked in it and the results page
- An opportunity to use the calculator and run through sample cases

In addition all participants are provided with a Training Manual and can use this as a helpful guide when doing calculations in the future.

To find out more or to book a training session, contact our Training Officer Amanda Boyd at amanda@a2b.org.uk or on 028 9075 4070.

A2B provides a solution for organisations who want to the convenience of its online Benefit Calculator, combined with the ability to capture the client's answers it needs at home or in an outreach setting, but who don't want to lug around laptops.

The unique digital pen 'records' the answers provided on a 7 page, pen and ink questionnaire. The pen can then be docked with a computer, say back at the office, and the Calculation run automatically, allowing the answers to be quality checked, but without the need to rekey.

A2B now has 25 pens in use by partner organisations across Northern Ireland. If you're interested in deploying it for your own organisation, drop us a line at a2b@a2b.org.uk

A2B Releases Digital Pen and Paper Solution



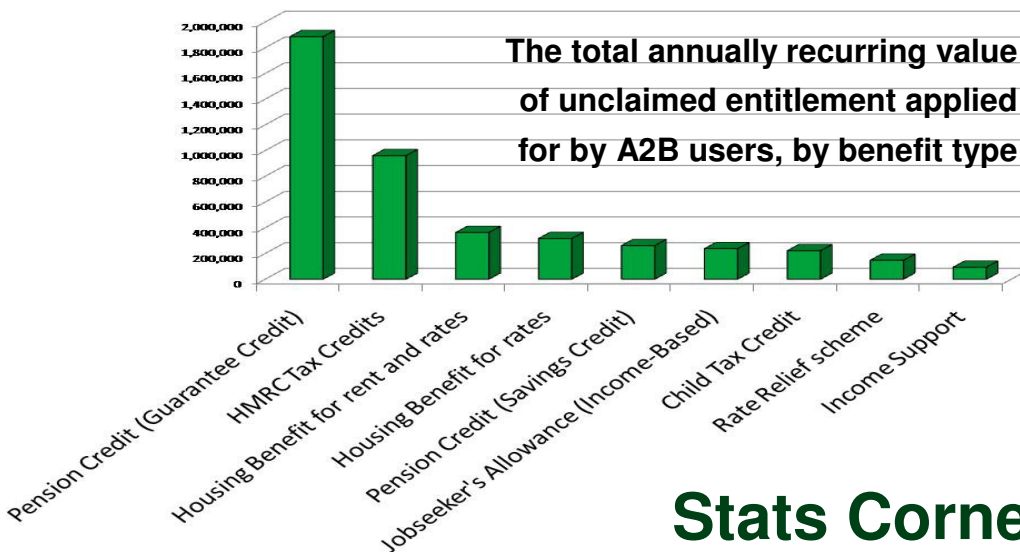
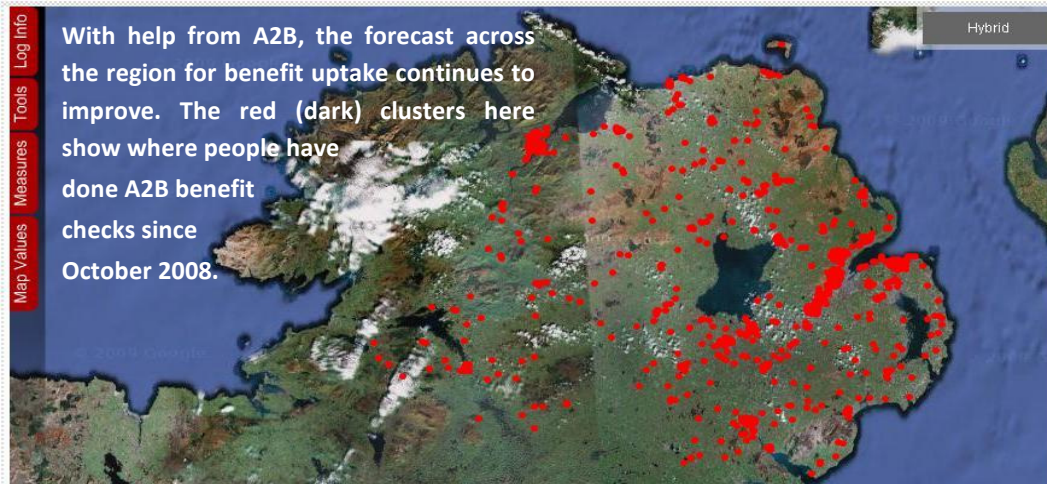
Other News

Since September, 2 exciting new projects have launched. 'Kestrel', run by GEMS NI, will enhance employment opportunities for older people. The second, 'Unltd' will encourage older people into social entrepreneurship.

September saw better service delivery to older people come a step closer as the OFMDFM Committee agreed the Commissioner for Older People Bill.

DSD Minister Alex Attwood has outlined his concerns that government benefit cuts will have a disproportionate effect on vulnerable people in Northern Ireland, and since meeting Works and Pension Secretary, Iain Duncan Smith, has pledged to continue pressuring Westminster ministries to take NI's needs more into account.

Alarm has been expressed that the DHSSPS is considering ending free prescriptions, home help and nursing care, and introducing a £20 GP visit fee, in response to impending budget cuts.



Stats Corner

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