



United Utilities extends online debt support service to everyone in the North West amid ongoing cost of living crisis

We just wanted to let you know that the Hardship Hub has now been opened up to everyone across the North West, bringing together hundreds of financial aid schemes in one place so that people can find help for free.

As you know, the Hardship Hub was created back in 2019 following our very first Affordability Summit, creating an online portal exclusively for debt advisors to find out about the range of support services available across the region, making it quicker and easier to direct clients to appropriate help.

Now, as many households struggle to make ends meet due to the ongoing cost of living crisis, the website is being opened up so that everyone can get direct access and find out what help is available to them.

The schemes listed on the site include energy and utility companies, local authorities, housing agencies, charities, and advice and community groups from across the region. There are details on a range of support and advice offerings, from help with utility bills to guidance on applying for housing support.

The Hardship Hub is open to anyone and there's no need to register or provide any personal details.

There are around 600 schemes listed on the site, covering national, regional and local initiatives, and the listings can be searched by location or type to help people find appropriate services for where they live and their situation.

Michelle Atkinson, Revenue Director at United Utilities, said: "We've seen a 74% increase in the number of customers filling out our 'struggling to pay' form online, and we know that it won't just be water bills that people are worrying about but other household costs too, so that's why we wanted to open up the Hardship Hub.

"This will give everyone right across the North West direct access to a vast range of information of financial advice and support services that could make a real difference in their lives.

"The hub has been well used by debt advisors over the past few years, but we know that not everyone wants to speak out about their problems, so making the Hardship Hub available like this will allow people to search for support in their own time."

The Hardship Hub website has undergone a rigorous testing process to ensure that the information is accessible to people with different needs. It is available in multiple languages, the font size and colour can be changed, and there is a speaking service available too. Warrington Disability Partnership has been involved in this process as part of its ongoing collaboration with United Utilities to support vulnerable customers.

Dave Thompson MBE DL, Chief Executive Officer of Warrington Disability Partnership, said: "United Utilities always goes above and beyond to support vulnerable customers, so it is a natural next step to open up the Hardship Hub to everyone in the North West.

"We know that many people feel embarrassed to reach out for help, so having this information available for free will hopefully mean that more people can get support to improve their lives.

"There are numerous options on the site to make it accessible to all, and we'd encourage anyone who knows someone without internet access who may need this kind of information to lend them a hand - it really could make a big difference."

Please recommend the Hardship Hub to any clients, or even friends and family who you feel would benefit from knowing more about the financial support schemes available in the North West.



You said, we did!

Following our affordability conference earlier this year, we've been focusing on three action areas to help deliver a range of improvements to our affordability service.

Direct referral service: we've set up a dedicated phone line specifically for the debt advisor community to make it easier to contact us to discuss our support schemes. This phone line is now live – the number to call is [0800 912 7236](tel:08009127236) and it's available now if you'd like to get in touch.

Build specific sector partnerships: as well as keeping debt advisors updated on our affordability service via this newsletter, we've now opened the Hardship Hub to all customers to increase the amount of people who could benefit from this service.

Data sharing: we've been working with Jigsaw Homes on a targeted campaign aimed at tenants who could be eligible for a lower capped bill if they receive Pension Credit.

Chris Lea, affordability manager said: "The debt advisor community is really important for us as they are meeting customers every day who may be struggling with their water bills. The three areas we've been focusing on this year are therefore trying to deliver benefits for both debt advisors and our customers. For example, we hope the new helpline will become an important channel into our business

so that advisors can pick up the phone to us if they have any queries about our support schemes or how we can help their clients who are finding it difficult to make payments."



Working together to help raise awareness

Nikki Carney, our new outreach & engagement manager, has been out and about over the last few months, helping to raise awareness of our affordability schemes across the North West.

"I've had a great response since taking up the role earlier this year", said Nikki. "I've been working with lots of different organisations to explain how we can support people struggling with their bill payments including North West Fuel Poverty, Venus Charity in Merseyside, Cumbria Council and Blackpool Council. We've also been working closely with Jigsaw Homes, encouraging tenants who receive Pension Credit to apply for a cheaper water bill.

"I've also visited a number of Job Centres across the region to speak to customers direct about all the ways we can make their bills more affordable.

"I'm really keen to make contact with as many organisations as possible this year, so please get in touch if you'd like to know more about our affordability support."

If you would like Nikki to get in touch with your organisation please complete our online form using the link below.

[GET IN TOUCH](#)

You play a key role in identifying and supporting people across the North West who are struggling with debt and we hope that by working together, we can provide support to even more customers who need help with their water bills.

To catch up on our previous emails please visit our [website](#).

Many thanks

Michelle Atkinson
Revenue Director



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United Utilities Water Limited
Haweswater House, Lingley Mere Business Park, Lingley Green
Avenue, Great Sankey, Warrington, WA5 3LP
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