

## Research Briefing

By Matthew Keep

3 May 2023

# The welfare cap

## Summary

- 1 What is the welfare cap?
- 2 How does the welfare cap operate?
- 3 Pre-Autumn Statement 2016: the previous welfare cap
- 4 OBR formal assessment of previous welfare cap
- 5 Public finances background to the cap
- 6 OBR welfare forecast

### **Disclaimer**

The Commons Library does not intend the information in our research publications and briefings to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. We have published it to support the work of MPs. You should not rely upon it as legal or professional advice, or as a substitute for it. We do not accept any liability whatsoever for any errors, omissions or misstatements contained herein. You should consult a suitably qualified professional if you require specific advice or information. Read our briefing [‘Legal help: where to go and how to pay’](#) for further information about sources of legal advice and help. This information is provided subject to the conditions of the Open Parliament Licence.

### **Feedback**

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in these publicly available briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that briefings are not necessarily updated to reflect subsequent changes.

If you have any comments on our briefings please email [papers@parliament.uk](mailto:papers@parliament.uk). Please note that authors are not always able to engage in discussions with members of the public who express opinions about the content of our research, although we will carefully consider and correct any factual errors.

You can read our feedback and complaints policy and our editorial policy at [commonslibrary.parliament.uk](https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk). If you have general questions about the work of the House of Commons email [hcenquiries@parliament.uk](mailto:hcenquiries@parliament.uk).

# Contents

<b>Summary</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1 What is the welfare cap?</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2 How does the welfare cap operate?</b>	<b>8</b>
2.1 How is the cap set?	8
2.2 When will we know if the cap is met?	9
2.3 What happens if the cap is exceeded?	10
2.4 Has the welfare cap operated differently in the past?	10
<b>3 Pre-Autumn Statement 2016: the previous welfare cap</b>	<b>12</b>
3.1 Setting the previous cap	12
3.2 How did we know if the previous cap was met?	12
3.3 What happened if the cap was exceeded?	13
<b>4 OBR formal assessment of previous welfare cap</b>	<b>14</b>
4.1 Autumn Statement 2014	14
4.2 Autumn Statement 2015	14
4.3 Autumn Statement 2016	16
4.4 Autumn Budget 2017	16
4.5 Post Autumn Budget 2017	17
4.6 Spring Budget 2020	17
4.7 Post Spring Budget 2020	18
<b>5 Public finances background to the cap</b>	<b>19</b>
5.1 Fiscal consolidation	19
5.2 Control of public spending	19
5.3 Is the cap effective?	20
<b>6 OBR welfare forecast</b>	<b>21</b>



---

## Summary

The welfare cap is a limit on the amount that government can spend on certain social security benefits and tax credits. The cap aims to better control spending in an area that can be difficult for government to control.

Around half of total welfare spending is included in the cap. It excludes pensions and those payments most sensitive to the economic cycle.

The cap was first introduced in [Budget 2014](#) and the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) – the UK’s fiscal watchdog – first reported on whether the cap had been met or exceeded alongside [Autumn Statement 2014](#). The operation of welfare cap is laid out in the [Charter for Budget Responsibility](#) – the document that sets government policy and targets for the public finances.

### How is the cap set and assessed?

Spending on relevant welfare must be within a cap and a margin in a single year, all of which are chosen by the Treasury. The cap is only formally assessed at the first Budget or first fiscal update of each new Parliament.

### Latest formal assessment and level of the cap

[Spring Budget 2020](#) was the first fiscal event of the current Parliament. The OBR therefore made a formal assessment of the cap and judged that it was being met. The Treasury also set a new cap and pathway for the cap as it must do at or before the first fiscal event of the Parliament. The Treasury said that the welfare cap will apply in 2024/25.

[At Autumn Budget 2021](#), the Treasury proposed that the welfare cap should be reset. The reset was approved by the House of Commons on 10 January 2022. It has since been adjusted for “fiscally neutral classification changes”, which don’t require Parliament’s approval. The cap in 2024/25 will be £135.4 billion, with a margin of 2%. It will apply in 2024/25.

## Welfare cap vs. the household benefit cap

The **welfare cap** on specified elements of social security spending is not to be confused with the **household benefit cap** – introduced in 2013 – which limits total household benefits. The Library briefing [The Benefit Cap](#) has more on this.



# 1 What is the welfare cap?

The welfare cap is a limit on the amount that government can spend on certain social security benefits and tax credits. The cap aims to better control spending in an area that can be difficult for government to control.

Welfare spending within the scope of the cap and welfare spending outside of the cap are outlined in the following table from Autumn Budget 2021.<sup>1</sup> Around half of total welfare spending is included in the cap.<sup>2</sup>

**Table A.2: Benefits in scope of the welfare cap**

In scope	Not in scope
Attendance Allowance <sup>1</sup>	Benefits paid from DEL <sup>2</sup>
Bereavement benefits	Jobseeker's Allowance (and its passported HB)
Carer's Allowance	Northern Ireland social security outside welfare cap
Child Benefit (including Guardian's Allowance)	State Pension (basic and additional)
Christmas Bonus	Transfers within government (e.g. Over 75s TV licenses)
Disability Living Allowance <sup>1</sup>	Universal Credit payments to jobseekers <sup>3</sup>
Employment and Support Allowance	
Financial Assistance Scheme	
Housing Benefit (except HB passported from JSA)	
Incapacity Benefit	
Income Support	
Industrial injuries benefits <sup>1</sup>	
Maternity Allowance	
Northern Ireland social security in welfare cap	
Other DWP benefits < £0.1 billion pa in welfare cap	
Pension Credit	
Personal Independence Payment	
Personal tax credits	
Severe Disablement Allowance <sup>1</sup>	
Social Fund – Cold Weather Payments	
Statutory Adoption Pay	
Statutory Maternity Pay	
Statutory Paternity Pay	
Tax-Free Childcare	
Universal Credit (except payments to jobseekers)	
Winter Fuel Payment	

<sup>1</sup> Including linked Scottish Government block grant addition.

<sup>2</sup> These payments are subject to firm spending control through the usual DEL process.

<sup>3</sup> Claimants in 'Intensive Work Search' conditionality group

Source: HM Treasury.

Source: HM Treasury. [Autumn Budget and Spending Review 2021](#), 27 October 2021, Table A.2

<sup>1</sup> HM Treasury. [Autumn Budget and Spending Review 2021](#), 27 October 2021, Table A.2. The cap now also includes Statutory Sick Pay and Tax Credit Transferred Debt (see OBR, [Economic and fiscal outlook – March 2023](#), Supplementary Table 3.7. The cap doesn't include cost of living payments – see [HCWS136 \[on Cost of Living Payments and the Welfare Cap\], 23 June 2022](#)

<sup>2</sup> OBR, [Economic and fiscal outlook – March 2023](#), supplementary table 3.22

## 2

# How does the welfare cap operate?

The operation of the welfare cap (the cap) is set out in the [Charter for Budget Responsibility](#) (the Charter).<sup>3</sup> The Charter performs a few roles, one of which is setting out the Government's targets for the public finances, including the welfare cap. The Charter sets out how and when the welfare cap is set, how and when it will be assessed, and what happens if it is breached.

The Library briefing [The UK's fiscal targets](#) discusses the Charter and the targets for the public finances in more detail.

## 2.1

### How is the cap set?

The Treasury sets the level of the cap and the year in which it will apply, at or before the first fiscal event of each new Parliament. At the same time the Treasury sets a pathway for relevant welfare spending in each year running up to year of the welfare cap. The Treasury also sets the percentage margin for the cap and pathway in each year.

The Treasury set a new cap and pathway at Spring Budget 2020, as it was the first fiscal event of the Parliament.<sup>4</sup> The Treasury said that the welfare cap will apply in 2024/25.

At Autumn Budget 2021, the Treasury proposed a reset to the level of the welfare cap and its margin. This reset was part of a wider set of changes to the Government's targets for the public finances.

Making changes to the year of the cap, level of the cap, the margin, or the items of spending included in the cap requires the approval of the House of Commons.<sup>5</sup> The House of Commons approved the reset to the level and margin of the cap on 10 January 2022.<sup>6</sup>

The cap was reset using the OBR's October 2021 forecast. At the time, the cap in 2024/25 was set at £138.3 billion, with a margin of £2.8 billion, making an effective cap of £141.1 billion. In the year of the cap – 2024/25 – this margin is 2%.

---

<sup>3</sup> For more on the Charter see the Library briefing [The Office for Budget Responsibility and Charter for Budget Responsibility](#)

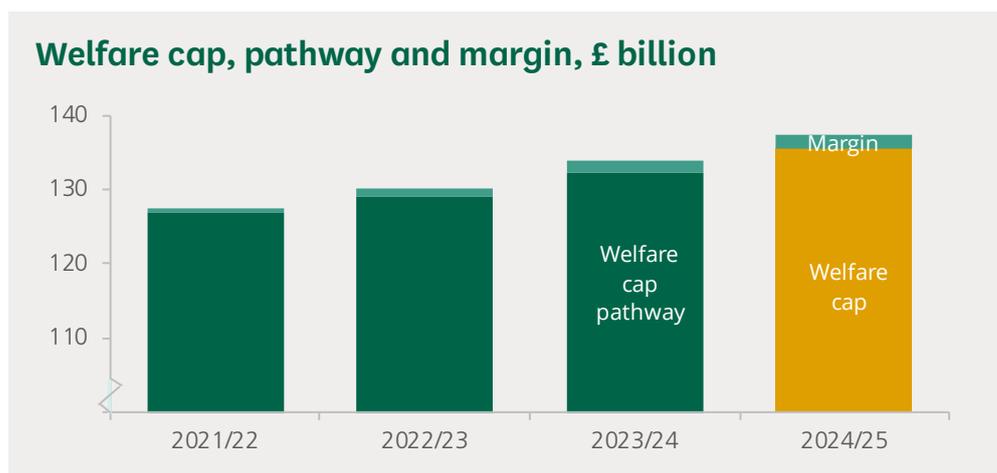
<sup>4</sup> HM Treasury. Budget 2020, March 2020, [paras 1.74-1.77](#)

<sup>5</sup> Para 3.33 of the Charter for Budget Responsibility provides an exemption if there is a significant economic shock that causes the UK's fiscal targets to be suspended.

<sup>6</sup> [HC Deb 10 January 2022 \[Charter for Budget Responsibility and Welfare Cap\]](#).

The OBR report that “The new cap is £11.6 billion higher than the one it replaces. But it provides a smaller margin of 2 per cent rather than 3 per cent, so the effective cap (i.e. the cap plus margin), is £10.5 billion higher than the one it replaces.”<sup>7</sup>

The cap has subsequently been reset for “fiscally neutral classification changes”.<sup>8</sup> Such changes do not require Parliament’s approval. Following the change, the cap in 2024/25 will be £135.4 billion, with a margin of £2.7 billion, making an effective cap of £138.1 billion. In the year of the cap – 2024/25 – this margin is 2%.



Source: OBR, [Economic and fiscal outlook – March 2023](#), 15 March 2023, Table 5.2

## 2.2

### When will we know if the cap is met?

The cap is formally assessed by the OBR at the first Budget or fiscal event of each new Parliament. The cap is only officially breached in this formal assessment if spending in the cap year is above the level of the cap and margin.

The Charter says that when the OBR assesses the cap it should adjust its spending forecast to remove the impact of changes in inflation, according to a methodology of the Government’s choosing.<sup>9 10</sup>

The OBR monitors welfare spending against the pathway in each of its biannual forecasts leading up to the formal assessment, but this does not constitute a formal assessment of the cap. For instance, at Spring Budget 2023, the OBR forecast that the welfare cap is on course to be breached by

<sup>7</sup> OBR, [Economic and fiscal outlook – October 2021](#), para 4.16

<sup>8</sup> HM Treasury, [Charter for Budget Responsibility Autumn 2022 update](#), 26 January 2023, para 3.33; HM Treasury, Autumn Statement 2022, [para 1.20](#); HM Treasury, Spring Budget 2023, [para 1.51](#)

<sup>9</sup> HM Treasury, Charter for Budget Responsibility, [para 3.26](#), January 2017

<sup>10</sup> HM Treasury, [Removing the impact of changes in inflation from the welfare cap](#), March 2017

£4.1 billion. This wasn't a formal assessment, so the Parliamentary process discussed below hasn't been triggered.<sup>11</sup>

## 2.3 What happens if the cap is exceeded?

If the OBR's formal assessment shows that the welfare cap is breached, then the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions will either:

- lay a paper before the House of Commons proposing government policy measures which will reduce welfare spending to within the level of the cap; or,
- the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions will explain to the House of Commons why a breach of the welfare cap is considered justified.

A vote will then be held in the House of Commons, normally within 28 sitting days, on the suitability of the Secretary of State's response to the breach.

## 2.4 Has the welfare cap operated differently in the past?

The current operation of the welfare cap was introduced at Autumn Statement 2016.<sup>12</sup> A previous version of the welfare cap – established at Budget 2014 – operated up to Autumn Statement 2016.<sup>13</sup>

Section 3 discusses the previous welfare cap. The key similarities and main differences between the current and previous approaches to the cap are summarised below:

- The same welfare spending is included in both approaches.
- The OBR assesses performance against the cap in both approaches.
- The welfare cap only applies in one year under the current approach. The welfare cap covered each year of the OBR's forecasts under the previous approach.
- The only formal assessment of the cap, in the current approach, will be made by the OBR in the first Budget or fiscal update of each new Parliament. A formal assessment was made at each Autumn Statement under the previous approach.

The current approach allows the margin to be used for general pressures on welfare spending, as well as changes in the forecasts. The margin under the

---

<sup>11</sup> OBR, [Economic and fiscal outlook – March 2023, 15 March 2023](#), paras 5.12-5.14

<sup>12</sup> HM Treasury, Autumn Statement 2016, [paras 1.59 – 1.61](#). The new approach came into force when the House of Commons [approved](#) a new Charter for Budget Responsibility (Charter).

<sup>13</sup> HM Treasury, [Budget 2014](#), 19 March 2014, para 1.76, p26

previous approach could only be used for volatility and fluctuations in the forecasts.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) – a public finances think-tank – has said that the ways in which the current welfare cap is different to the previous version makes it easier to meet:<sup>14</sup>

First, the level of the cap is higher than the old one, with the level set at the current forecast level of spending plus 3%, whereas previously spending could only exceed the (then lower) current forecast by 2%.

Second, under the old target, welfare spending could only use up the 2% margin due to forecasting changes. The new 3% margin can apply to forecasting or policy changes.

Third, the OBR will be asked to take into account inflation forecast changes and adjust the level of the cap accordingly.

Fourth, the new target is only to be assessed once every five years (rather than every year), and not until 2021–22. The previous target applied, and was assessed, in every year.

---

<sup>14</sup> IFS. Green Budget 2017, [Box 3.1](#)

---

## 3 Pre-Autumn Statement 2016: the previous welfare cap

The previous version of the welfare cap was introduced in [Budget 2014](#) and the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) first reported on whether the cap had been met or exceeded alongside [Autumn Statement 2014](#).

### 3.1 Setting the previous cap

The Treasury was required to set the level of the cap at or before the first Budget of each new Parliament. At the same time the Treasury would specify a margin above the cap to allow for volatility and fluctuations in the forecast.

The cap was set for a five-year period. The Treasury set a cap for an additional year each time the OBR added an additional year to its forecast, so that a five-year period was always covered.

If the Treasury wanted to change the list of benefits included in the cap, approval of the House of Commons was required.

### 3.2 How did we know if the previous cap was met?

The cap was a limit on the amount forecast to be spent, not the actual amount spent.

At the time of each Autumn Statement, the OBR assessed whether the welfare cap was being met in each year of its forecast.

If the forecasts were higher than the cap for any of the years to which the cap applied, then the cap was judged to have been exceeded.

If spending within the scope of the cap was forecast to be above the level of the cap but within a pre-set margin (set at 2% above the cap level), and this was due to forecast changes rather than discretionary policy action, then the cap was not deemed to be breached. The OBR assessed whether any breach was due to forecast changes or policy action.

## 3.3

### What happened if the cap was exceeded?

If the cap was judged to have been exceeded, then the government was to:

- Propose policy measures to reduce welfare spending
- Seek approval for the cap level to be increased
- Explain why a breach of the cap is justified.

A votable motion would follow in the House of Commons within 28 sitting days seeking approval for these actions.

## 4 OBR formal assessment of previous welfare cap

### 4.1 Autumn Statement 2014

The welfare cap was initially set in the 2014 Budget. The OBR made its first formal assessment around 9 months later at Autumn Statement 2014.

The OBR assessed that the Government were on course to meet the welfare cap. The OBR's forecast higher welfare cap spending – compared with its forecast at Budget 2014 – in 2015/16 and 2016/17. However, as this was because of forecast revisions and was within the permitted forecast margin the OBR were able to assess that the Government were on course to meet the welfare cap.<sup>15</sup>

### 4.2 Autumn Statement 2015

Alongside the Autumn Statement 2015, the OBR stated that relevant welfare spending would breach the cap in 2016/17, 2017/18 and 2018/19. The OBR found that relevant spending would observe the cap in 2019/20 and 2020/21. The OBR stated that the breaches were due to the cancellation of proposed changes to tax credits that had been proposed in the Summer Budget 2015.

Note that the welfare cap includes a 'forecast margin' which allows for breaches of 2% when changes to forecast mean relevant welfare spending exceeds the cap.

#### OBR assessment of welfare spending in cap at Autumn Statement/Spending Review 2015

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Welfare cap set in Summer Budget 2015	115.2	114.6	114.0	113.5	114.9
Plus 2% forecast margin	117.5	116.9	116.3	115.8	117.2
Forecast welfare spending in cap	119.2	117.7	115.9	115.3	117.1
Cap breached or observed?	Breached	Breached	Breached	Observed	Observed

Source: OBR, Economic and Fiscal Outlook November 2015, Table 5.3

<sup>15</sup> OBR, *Economic and Fiscal Outlook*, December 2014, [para 1.41 – 1.42](#)

The OBR assessment of performance against the cap by year is set out below:<sup>16</sup>

- 2016/17: Relevant welfare spending will be £4.0 billion above the cap level and £1.7 billion above the forecast margin, so the cap is set to be **breached**.
- 2017/18: Relevant welfare spending will be £3.1 billion above the cap level and £0.8 billion above the forecast margin, so the cap is set to be **breached**.
- 2018/19: Relevant welfare spending will be £1.9 billion above the cap level but £0.4 billion below the forecast margin. However, the OBR judges that the spending above the cap is due to policy decisions and is not driven by forecast changes, and therefore, the cap is set to be **breached**.
- 2019/20: Relevant welfare spending will be £1.8 billion above the cap but £0.5 billion below the forecast margin. The OBR judges that the cap is set to be **observed** because policy changes actually reduce relevant spending in that year. The technical breach of the cap is the result of classification changes.
- 2020/21: Relevant welfare spending will be £2.1 billion above the cap level but £0.2 billion below the forecast margin. The OBR judges that the cap will be **observed** because policy changes reduce relevant welfare spending, and technical breach is again due to classification changes.

A breach of the cap meant that the matter was debated in the House of Commons, as set out in the Charter for Budget Responsibility:<sup>17</sup>

If the welfare cap is found to be breached in one or more of the years in which it applies, there will be a debate on a votable motion led by the Department for Work and Pensions, normally within 28 sitting days, giving an assessment of the reasons for the breach. The Department for Work and Pensions will:

- propose government policy measures which will reduce welfare spending to within the level of the cap;
- seek approval for the level of the welfare cap and/or margin to be increased, along with an explanation of why this is considered to be justified; or
- explain why a breach of the welfare cap is considered justified.

The following motion was [debated in the House of Commons](#) on 16 December 2015:

That, pursuant to the Charter for Budget Responsibility: Summer Budget 2015 update, which was approved by this House on 14 October 2015, under Section 1 of the Budget Responsibility and National Audit Act 2011, this House agrees that the breach of the Welfare cap in 2016-17, 2017-18, and 2018-19 resulting from the decision not to pursue proposed changes to tax credits, as laid out in

---

<sup>16</sup> OBR, *Economic and Fiscal Outlook*, November 2015, pp 192,193

<sup>17</sup> HM Treasury, *Charter for Budget Responsibility*, December 2014, para 3.30, p10

the Autumn Statement 2015, is justified and that no further debate will be required in relation to this specific breach.<sup>18</sup>

## 4.3 Autumn Statement 2016

The OBR assessed new forecasts of spending within the previous cap alongside Autumn Statement 2016. The assessment was carried out, despite the government's proposed revised welfare cap having been announced, because this was the version of the welfare cap included in the latest Charter for Budget Responsibility to be approved by the House of Commons.

The OBR's assessment was that the cap will be breached in each year of its forecast.<sup>19</sup>

### OBR assessment of welfare spending in cap at Autumn Statement 2016

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Welfare cap set in Summer Budget 2015	115.2	114.6	114.0	113.5	114.9
Plus 2% forecast margin	117.5	116.9	116.3	115.8	117.2
Forecast welfare spending in cap	119.2	119.6	120.1	120.5	123.2
Cap breached or observed?	Breached	Breached	Breached	Breached	Breached

Source: OBR, Economic and Fiscal Outlook November 2016, Table 5.3

A breach of the cap meant that the matter was debated in the House of Commons. The following motion was [debated in the House of Commons on 12 December 2016](#):

That pursuant to the Charter for Budget Responsibility: Autumn 2015 update, which was approved by this House on 14 October 2015, under Section 1 of the Budget Responsibility and National Audit Act 2011, this House agrees that the breach of the Welfare Cap in 2019-20 and 2020-21, due to higher forecast inflation and spend on disability benefits, is justified and that no further debate will be required in relation to this specific breach.

## 4.4 Autumn Budget 2017

The OBR carried out a formal assessment of the welfare cap at Autumn Budget 2017. The cap assessed was that set in Autumn Statement 2016, which applied in 2021/22. The OBR deemed that the cap was met. Describing the table below the OBR said:

<sup>18</sup> [HC Deb 16 December 2015 c1633](#)

<sup>19</sup> OBR, *Economic and fiscal outlook – November 2016*, 23 November 2016, [para 5.30](#)

It shows that we have revised up spending since the cap was set a year ago, so that it is above the cap and the pathway to it from 2018-19 onwards. But the terms of the target have been met, with spending below the cap or pathway plus margin in all years, with or without the small adjustments for revisions to our inflation forecast.<sup>20</sup>

### OBR assessment of welfare spending inside cap at Autumn Budget 2017

	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
<b>Welfare cap</b>					126.0
Welfare cap pathway	119.6	120.1	120.5	123.2	
Margin (per cent)	1.0	1.5	2.0	2.5	3.0
Margin	1.2	1.8	2.4	3.1	3.8
Welfare cap and pathway plus margin	120.8	121.9	122.9	126.3	129.7
<i>Inflation adjustment</i>	0.0	0.2	0.0	-0.3	-0.3
<b>Latest forecast and update on performance against cap and pathway</b>					
November forecast	119.3	120.9	122.1	123.8	126.9
November forecast with inflation adjustment	119.3	120.8	122.1	124.1	127.2
Difference from:					
Cap and pathway	-0.3	0.7	1.6	0.9	1.3
Cap and pathway plus margin	-1.5	-1.1	-0.8	-2.2	-2.5
Cap breached or observed?					Observed

Source: OBR, Economic and Fiscal Outlook November 2017 Table 5.3

## 4.5 Post Autumn Budget 2017

There was no further formal assessment of the welfare cap until Spring Budget 2020. Nevertheless, the OBR reported on progress against the cap at Spring Statement 2018,<sup>21</sup> Autumn Budget 2018<sup>22</sup> and Spring Statement 2019.<sup>23</sup> On each occasion, the OBR said that their forecast indicated that the cap would be “comfortably met”.

## 4.6 Spring Budget 2020

As Spring Budget 2020 was the first Budget of the 2019 Parliament the OBR made a formal assessment of the welfare cap. The OBR judged that the terms

<sup>20</sup> OBR. Economic and fiscal outlook – November 2017, [para 5.14](#)

<sup>21</sup> OBR. Economic and fiscal outlook – March 2018, [paras 5.14-5.16](#)

<sup>22</sup> OBR. Economic and fiscal outlook – October 2018, [paras 5.15-5.18](#)

<sup>23</sup> OBR. Economic and fiscal outlook – March 2019, [paras 5.18-5.20](#)

of the cap had been met. Relevant welfare spending was forecast to be £0.5 billion higher than the cap in 2022/23 but £3.4 billion below the cap-plus-margin once the adjustments for changes in inflation and devolved welfare spending had been applied.<sup>24</sup>

### OBR assessment of welfare spending inside cap at Spring Budget 2020

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
<b>Welfare cap</b>				131.1
Pathway	122.0	124.7	127.8	
Margin (per cent)	1.5	2.0	2.5	3.0
Margin	1.8	2.5	3.2	3.9
Welfare cap and pathway plus margin	123.8	127.2	131.0	135.0
<b>Latest forecast and update on performance against cap and pathway</b>				
March 2020 forecast	119.0	122.6	124.3	127.0
Inflation adjustment	-0.1	0.0	1.0	1.1
Scottish welfare block grant adjustment	0.3	3.1	3.3	3.4
<b>March 2020 forecast after adjustments</b>	119.2	125.8	128.5	131.6
Difference from:				
Cap and pathway	-2.8	1.1	0.7	0.5
<b>Cap and pathway plus margin</b>	-4.6	-1.4	-2.5	-3.4
Cap breached or observed?				Observed

Source: OBR, Economic and Fiscal Outlook March 2020, Table 4.3

## 4.7 Post Spring Budget 2020

There has been no further formal assessment of the welfare cap since Spring Budget 2020. Nevertheless, the OBR reported on progress against the cap at Spending Review 2020, Spring Budget 2021 and Autumn Budget 2021.<sup>25</sup> On each occasion, the OBR said that their forecast indicated that spending was on course to breach the cap in 2024/25.

<sup>24</sup> OBR. Economic and fiscal outlook – March 2020, [para 1.44](#)

<sup>25</sup> OBR. [Economic and fiscal outlook – November 2020](#), para 4.4; OBR. [Economic and fiscal outlook – March 2021](#), para 4.4; OBR. [Economic and fiscal outlook – October 2021](#), para 4.3.

---

## 5 Public finances background to the cap

Beyond the political arguments for capping spending on welfare, there are fiscal reasons as to why the Coalition Government and current Government have employed a welfare cap.

### 5.1 Fiscal consolidation

Ensuring the sustainability of the public finances and reducing government borrowing – often described as the deficit – was at the heart of the Coalition Government and subsequent Conservative Government’s objectives for managing the public finances.

Controlling spending across government has been a high priority and the cap on welfare spending is one measure that has been taken in order to achieve this.

### 5.2 Control of public spending

Government spending is classified as either Departmental Expenditure Limits (DEL) or Annually Managed Expenditure (AME):

- DEL is spending which departments have direct control over and includes most elements of predictable spending, such as teacher’s salaries, or money used to fund most policy programmes.
- AME is the less predictable elements of expenditure, such as spending on debt interest and spending on social security. All of the spending within the scope of the welfare cap is classified as AME.

Historically, DEL has accounted for a greater proportion of public spending than AME. In recent years this has been reversed; AME now accounts for over 55% of public spending.<sup>26</sup>

By setting a cap on a significant portion of AME spending it is hoped that it will be easier to control AME spending more easily in the future.

---

<sup>26</sup> OBR, [Economic and fiscal outlook – March 2023](#), supplementary table 3.3

## 5.3

### Is the cap effective?

The OBR has questioned whether the welfare cap has any meaningful impact on spending plans and outcomes:

Since it was introduced in 2014, the Government has changed the level of the cap several times and its design once. It was lowered substantially in July 2015, alongside a package of welfare spending cuts, but then raised substantially in November 2016, at which point the previous cap was set to be exceeded by more than 7 per cent in the year in which it applied. As such, it is not clear that the welfare cap has any meaningful impact on spending plans and outcomes.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> OBR. Fiscal risks report – July 2019, [para 5.13](#)

## 6 OBR welfare forecast

**Table 1. OBR March 2023 forecast of welfare spending, £ billion**

	Outturn	Forecast					
	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27	2027-28
<b>Welfare cap</b>							
DWP social security	96.0	103.9	115.7	127.5	132.9	136.0	140.6
of which:							
Housing benefit (not on JSA) <sup>1</sup>	15.4	14.4	14.2	14.0	11.1	10.4	10.4
DLA and PIP	20.7	23.6	28.6	32.3	34.8	37.1	39.7
Incapacity benefits <sup>2</sup>	12.7	12.4	13.3	12.6	11.5	10.7	10.3
Attendance allowance	5.3	5.7	6.7	7.4	7.6	7.7	7.8
Pension credit	4.9	4.9	5.4	5.7	5.6	5.4	5.1
Carer's allowance	3.1	3.3	3.9	4.3	4.5	4.7	5.0
Statutory maternity pay	2.6	2.6	2.8	3.0	3.0	3.1	3.1
Income support (non-incapacity)	0.9	0.7	0.6	0.5	0.1	0.0	0.0
Winter fuel payment	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.1	2.1	2.2	2.1
Universal credit	27.5	32.6	36.1	43.6	50.6	52.9	55.1
Other DWP in welfare cap	1.0	1.7	2.1	2.0	2.0	2.0	1.9
Personal tax credits	10.9	8.9	7.3	4.0	0.3	0.0	0.0
Child benefit	11.4	11.6	12.6	13.0	12.9	12.6	12.5
Tax free childcare	0.4	0.5	0.6	0.7	0.8	0.8	0.8
NI social security in welfare cap	4.2	4.5	4.9	5.3	5.3	5.2	5.2
Paternity pay	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
<b>Total welfare cap</b>	<b>123.1</b>	<b>129.5</b>	<b>141.2</b>	<b>150.6</b>	<b>152.3</b>	<b>154.8</b>	<b>159.2</b>
<b>Welfare spending outside the welfare cap</b>							
DWP social security	118.0	120.5	139.4	152.4	160.3	164.2	166.9
of which:							
State pension	104.3	110.0	124.3	134.7	140.4	144.5	147.3
Jobseeker's allowance	0.5	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.1
Housing benefit (on JSA)	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Universal credit	12.9	10.0	14.8	17.5	19.7	19.7	19.6
NI social security outside welfare cap	3.2	3.2	3.7	4.0	4.2	4.3	4.4
Cost-of-living payments	0.0	8.4	10.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
<b>Total welfare outside the welfare cap</b>	<b>121.1</b>	<b>132.1</b>	<b>153.4</b>	<b>156.4</b>	<b>164.5</b>	<b>168.5</b>	<b>171.3</b>
<b>Total welfare</b>	<b>244.3</b>	<b>261.5</b>	<b>294.5</b>	<b>307.0</b>	<b>316.8</b>	<b>323.3</b>	<b>330.5</b>

Notes:

\* less than £0.1bn

1 Housing benefit (not on jobseeker's allowance) is made up of a number of claimant groups. The main claimant groups are pensioners, those on incapacity benefits, lone parents, and housing benefit only claimants.

2 Incapacity benefits includes incapacity benefit, employment and support allowance, severe disablement allowance and income support (incapacity part).

3 Other cost-of-living payment benefits include Jobseeker's allowance, Industrial injuries benefits, Armed forces independence payment, and certain Ministry of Defence benefits.

Source:

OBR. [Economic and fiscal outlook – March 2023](#), Supplementary Table 3.7

The House of Commons Library is a research and information service based in the UK Parliament. Our impartial analysis, statistical research and resources help MPs and their staff scrutinise legislation, develop policy, and support constituents.

Our published material is available to everyone on [commonslibrary.parliament.uk](https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk).

Get our latest research delivered straight to your inbox. Subscribe at [commonslibrary.parliament.uk/subscribe](https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/subscribe) or scan the code below:



 [commonslibrary.parliament.uk](https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk)

 [@commonslibrary](https://twitter.com/commonslibrary)