

Update on Changes to Social Security in Response to Coronavirus (COVID-19) in Northern Ireland

There has never been a more important time for up-to-date and accurate information on changes to social security law and practice. With an increased demand on advice services and a quickly changing landscape, it is crucial that advisers keep up to speed with efforts to support existing claimants and protect new claimants.

The Law Centre NI Social Security hub has put together a list of key changes and commitments, following meetings with Department for Communities officials.

Please be aware changes are happening on a daily basis. We will endeavour to keep this information as up-to-date as possible within this context.

If you need any further help clarification, you can contact our social security team on (028) 9024 4401.

Personal Independence Payment:

- Welfare Supplementary Payments (WSPs) for Personal Independence Payment (PIP) appeals will be extended.
- There has been a commitment to review cases with further evidence received via The Appeals Service (TAS) to potentially avoid appeals that are deemed to be unnecessary at this time.
- Face to face assessments have been cancelled and replaced by 'telephony assessments' where possible.
- The Department for Communities (DfC) are currently exploring whether audio recording of telephone assessments will be possible.
- A commitment has been made to ensure that no one will be disadvantaged if forms not returned on time, by offering extensions.

Employment and Support Allowance:

- Face to face assessments have been cancelled and replaced by paper and telephony assessments.
- Work is being conducted to make Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) claim form available online.
- There has been an acknowledgement that there has been some difficulty getting through by phone.

Work Capability Assessments:

- Work Capability Assessments (WCAs) have been suspended.
- ESA Claims connected to Coronavirus (COVID-19) will automatically be placed in the Work Related Activity Group Component (WRAC) group without medical evidence.
- Universal Credit claims connected to Coronavirus (COVID-19) will automatically be placed in the Limited Capability for Work (LCW) group without medical evidence.

Universal Credit:

- Face to face appointments have been cancelled, with engagement being conducted online or by phone.
- Telephony claims will be accepted if a claimant is unable to use the online service and there is reported high demand.
- Universal Credit stated their preference for online journal contact with telephony available if necessary – additional resources are being moved to telephony to meet demand.
- Work is being done to explore how to treat those who cannot claim through the means above but a commitment has been made to treat the first contact as the first date of the claim.
- In exceptional circumstances, where the claimant is unable to use the telephony service or access online UC will assist the individual on a face-to-face basis at their local office. This will be kept under review.
- There is a significant increase in claims. The claimant commitment that is usually agreed face to face will be agreed online or by phone.
- The stated priority is to ensure people can make a new claim and that payments are issued.
- Verification is to be conducted by telephone by answering with a need for the claimant to answer two out of three security questions.
- The National Insurance Numbers for National Asylum Support Service (NASS) claimants' will be verified by phone.
- Uploaded evidence will be accepted and trusted (ie. childcare arrangements or tenancy etc.)
- Advanced payment debts can currently be deferred for a three month period when a claimant is in financial hardship.

Job Seekers Allowance and Income Support:

- The stated priority to receive and process claims.
- The telephony service will receive claims and the call the claimant back to complete the form electronically over the phone.
- The Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) claim form is also available on NI Direct.

- A triage system is in place to identify, at the outset, if claimants meet the contribution conditions, and if not to signpost them to UC.

Discretionary Support:

- There is a proposal to insert a paragraph in regulations around Coronavirus (COVID-19) to enable a grant without the restriction of a maximum three loans / one grant per twelve month period – ie. more than one grant will be available during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis.

Other:

- Facilities are being put in place to aid communication – ie. ‘Big Word’ calls for non-English speakers and offices being opened if necessary.
- Legislation has not changed regarding income and capital.
- There has been no change to the five week wait. It is anticipated that enhanced discretionary support, contingency fund and advances will deal with this.

Further actions suggested by Law Centre NI:

- Suspend benefit debt recovery.
- The triage function should be applied to UC claimants to check their entitlement to new style JSA/ESA. Capital and couples with one partner working have been suggested as key groups for this.
- Universal Credit should remind staff that claimants who have lost their job may have retained worker status and therefore have right to reside for benefits.
- Universal Credit decision makers should consider permanent residence and UC staff should have access to National Insurance records before making a determination on right to reside.
- Remove the income ceiling for the purposes of Discretionary Support grants.
- Consider providing an automatic grant from the Universal Credit Contingency Fund for all those who are claiming UC for the first time.
- Provide an additional payment for families who have children and who are impacted by the two-child limit. This will help protect against a significant increase in child poverty.
- Support private renters who may face eviction because of loss of income due to Coronavirus (COVID-19) by temporarily reinstating support which was available under Housing Benefit (HB) and which has been removed under UC.



Department for
Communities

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