

Your Questions Answered

This Frequently Asked Questions sheet provides an overview of what government advice and support is available for workers during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

For tailored advice on any of the issues discussed in this FAQ or any other aspect of employment law, please call (028) 9024 4401 and ask to speak to an employment law adviser.

What is the current government advice for people in work?

The UK is currently in the 'delay' stage of its Coronavirus response plan. This means that extraordinary measures are being taken in order to contain the spread of the virus. For workers and employees, the principal advice is to work from home wherever possible. If this isn't possible, you should take additional precautions.

These include:

- Avoid busy commuting times on public transport.
- Avoid gatherings of people, whether in public, at work or at home.
- Frequently clean and disinfect objects and surfaces that are touched regularly (such as tills, computer mice, desks, tools and machinery controls).
- Do not shake hands with those you meet.
- Wash your hands thoroughly and regularly.
- Catch sneezes and coughs in tissues or sleeves.

What if I start to feel ill in work?

If you become ill with a new, continuous cough or a high temperature, you should go home. You should stay there and 'self-isolate' for seven days from when your symptoms started. If you live with others (family or housemates), they must also stay

at home for fourteen days from this date. For healthcare advice or guidance, please use the [NHS 111 online coronavirus service](#).

Does my employer have to pay me while I self-isolate?

If you have to take time off work due to the Coronavirus – whether because you are sick or because you have to self-isolate and aren't able to work from home – you should check to see what financial support is available to you. If your employer has a COVID-19 policy in place, it may provide information on the support they are prepared to provide. Alternatively, you should check to see if you are entitled to contractual sick pay – this is sick pay, over and above the statutory minimum, guaranteed by your employment contract.

Even if your employer hasn't committed to providing contractual sick pay, you will be eligible for Statutory Sick Pay, provided you meet the requirements. These are:

- You must have a contract of employment with your employer, and
- You must earn, on average, £118 per week.

Normally, you would only be eligible for Statutory Sick Pay after 4 days of your illness. However, the UK Government has announced that sick pay will be paid from day one of illness or self-isolation. You should tell your employer that you are ill or self-isolating as soon as possible.

If you are eligible for Statutory Sick Pay, your employer will be required to give you £94.25 per week during your illness or self-isolation.

What if I'm not eligible for Statutory Sick Pay?

You may not be eligible for Statutory Sick Pay if you don't meet the earning requirements, or for a variety of other reasons. If this is the case, you should consider applying for Universal Credit and for Employment and Support Allowance. Please note that benefits are very complex. We would strongly encourage you to seek advice before applying for any of these benefits, particularly if you are already claiming other benefits. You can access free, specialist advice on benefits from Law

Centre NI by calling **(028) 9024 4401** and speaking to one of our social security advisers.

Universal Credit is a payment to help you with your living costs. It is paid monthly, but you will have to wait five weeks after you submit your application before you will start receiving payments. You can apply for a grant from Northern Ireland's Universal Credit Contingency Fund to help you through this period. There is also the possibility of seeking an advance of your Universal Credit payment – however, unlike the Contingency Fund, this advance must be repaid.

How much you receive under Universal Credit will depend on your circumstances and those of your partner, if applicable. You may be able to get more money if you meet other criteria, for instance if you have children, or if you have a disability. You will not be eligible for Universal Credit if you or your partner has over £16,000 in savings.

'New Style' Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) is a benefit which gives you help with living costs if you are unable to work. You can access it if you:

- Are under the State Pension Age – [you can check if this applies to you here](#).
- Have paid enough National Insurance contributions in the last 2 to 3 years.

While your claim is being assessed, you'll receive an 'assessment rate' of ESA. This will be up to £73.10 per week if you are older than 25, or up to £57.90 per week if you are under 25. After this, you are likely to receive up to £111.65 per week.

You can [apply for Universal Credit here](#). To apply for ESA, you should contact the Northern Ireland Employment and Support Allowance Centre on 0800 085 6318. More information on making an ESA claim [can be found here](#).

My employer doesn't believe I need to self-isolate. How can I prove it?

If you need to provide evidence to your employer, you can get an Isolation Notice from the [NHS 111 online coronavirus service](#).

I believe I am particularly vulnerable to the virus. What does my employer need to do?

The Government has issued guidance that strongly advises people who are at a higher risk of catching coronavirus to take strict social distancing measures. This includes, but is not limited to, those who:

- Have a long-term health condition, for example asthma, diabetes or heart disease, or a weakened or suppressed immune system.
- Are pregnant.
- Are aged 70 or over.
- Care for someone with a health condition that might put them at a greater risk.

Employers must be especially careful and take extra steps for anyone in their workforce who is vulnerable to the virus. If your work can be done from home, this should be permitted. It would be best to write to or talk with your employer about this. Alternatively, your employer should take steps to make the workplace as safe as possible. These could include adding extra parking spaces, so employees don't have to use public transport or instituting flexible working so employees don't have to commute at the busiest times.

If you still don't want to go in to work, you might be able to arrange with your employer to take the time off as holiday or unpaid leave. Your employer does not have to agree to this and if you don't come into work without your employer's consent this could lead to disciplinary procedures being started against you.

Business has been bad and I'm worried my job may be at risk, what can I do?

The UK Government and NI Executive have announced measures to support businesses, including rates and taxation relief, a loan scheme and a grant scheme to fund salary costs. You should make sure your employer is aware of the support available. Information on the range of support available to businesses in Northern Ireland [can be found here](#).

My employer has told me they plan to furlough me during the outbreak. What does this mean?

Furloughed workers are workers who have had their employment suspended for a specified period. It is not the same as being laid off or made redundant – you will be kept on your employer’s payroll and retain employment benefits, with the intention that you will resume paid employment at the end of the period.

While you are furloughed, your employer will be able to pay you up to 80% of your usual wage (up to a cap of £2,500 per month) using a grant from the UK Government. Your employer can ‘top this up’ to your usual salary level if they wish, but they are not obliged to do so.

This funding comes from the UK Government’s [Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme](#). The scheme is due to run for at least 3 months from 1 March 2020, but will be extended if necessary.



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