

## 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 (DfC) 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.**

### 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 (UC) stated their preference for online journal contact with telephony available if necessary.
- Additional resources are being moved to ensure online journal entries are dealt with in order to free up telephony availability for more vulnerable clients who cannot use online service.
- 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.
- Also if you are assisting a vulnerable client who is unable to process a claim please contact Law Centre NI with the client's consent and we can seek an intervention to assist them to make a claim.
- 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.
- UC will phone back clients usually within a couple of days to confirm verification. Please note that UC calls will appear as a withheld number. If necessary a verification telephone appointment can be booked by phoning 0800 012 1331.
- The National Insurance Numbers for National Asylum Support Service (NASS) claimants' will be verified by phone.
- Most 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.
- Payment in lieu of free school meals is ignored as income.

## Universal Credit Advances

- Verification is needed before seeking an advance.
- Advances can be deferred for up to three months if the claimant is experiencing hardship – deferral requested via journal.
- Standard UC allowance increased by £87 per month, therefore DfC believe people more equipped to repay advance at average rate of approx. £50/mth

## Contingency Fund

- Funding is available and there is no need to take out an advance before applying.
- There is no repayable grant if the claimant faces hardship while awaiting their first UC payment.
- It is not possible to apply online – Tel: 0800 587 2750.

## Discretionary Support:

- Resources are being added to telephony and decision making to meet demand.
- The criteria for grants have been expanded beyond normal crisis circumstances.
- Awards are now possible for living expenses if a claimant or their family have been impacted by Coronavirus (COVID-19) or they are having to self-isolate.
- It is possible to make claim related to this online, if the telephony capacity has been exceeded.

## Debt Recovery

- There appears to be a will to suspend debt recovery but this seems to be operationally difficult while using the Department for Work Pensions (DWP) system without DWP input.
- It is still possible for individual requests based on hardship.
- New debt recovery will not be added during the crisis.

## Employment and Support Allowance:

- Face to face assessments have been cancelled and replaced by paper and telephony assessments.
- Work is being conducted to make the 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 (UC and Employment and Support Allowance):

- 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.
- Non Coronavirus (COVID-19) based claims still require a medical certificate **but** if the claimant is unable to obtain this in the current circumstances then the claim will still be processed and paid.

## Job Seekers Allowance and Income Support:

- The stated priority is to receive and process claims.
- The telephony service will receive claims and then 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.

## 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 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 are not returned on time, by offering extensions.
- Any award due to end in the next three months will be extended.

## **Attendance Allowance**

- Any claims due to end in next three months will be extended.

## **Disability Living Allowance (Children)**

- There will be no invitations to claim PIP as a child approaches 16 years of age.
- Existing awards will continue until the child is invited to claim PIP and a decision has been made.
- Therefore awards will not cease.

## **Industrial injuries Disablement Benefit**

- Awards that are due to end in next twelve weeks will be extended.

## **Child Benefit**

- Individuals who have not claimed Child Benefit (CB) or who had previously ceased claims for CB may now wish to claim if income has dropped below £60,000 for the higher earner.

## **Tax Credits**

- The basic element has been increased by £20 per week.
- Some claimants who were in receipt of Tax Credits but claimed Universal Credit before becoming furloughed workers may have been financially better off not claiming Universal Credit. This could be an area of challenge but DfC are taking pro-active steps to try to address this issue before it impacts on too many people. This is an area still in development and we are awaiting further update.
- 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 UC 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.

## Useful links and contacts:

- [New Style JSA Form](#)

Email Address for form: [HOLYWOODROAD.JSAONLINE@NISSA.GSI.GOV.UK](mailto:HOLYWOODROAD.JSAONLINE@NISSA.GSI.GOV.UK)

- [Discretionary Support Form](#)

Email Address for form: [DS.evidencegathering@dfcni.gov.uk](mailto:DS.evidencegathering@dfcni.gov.uk)

- [Finance Support \(Contingency Fund\)](#)

Tel: [0800 587 2750](tel:08005872750)



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