

## **SUPPORT FOR BENEFIT CLAIMANTS**

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#### **1. PEOPLE WHO NEED TO MAKE A NEW CLAIM FOR FINANCIAL SUPPORT**

The DWP have said they appreciate people who are required to stay at home or are infected by coronavirus may need financial support, and quickly.

Those affected by coronavirus will be able to apply for Universal Credit and can receive up to a month's advance up front without physically attending a Jobcentre.

The 7 waiting days for ESA for new claimants will not apply if they are suffering from coronavirus or are required to stay at home – so it will be payable from day one

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/coronavirus-support-for-employees-benefit-claimants-and-businesses>

#### **NEW No-one making a new claim for Universal Credit needs to call the DWP**

The DWP has launched a new 'Don't call us - we'll call you' initiative that proactively calls claimants if they need to check any of the information provided as part of the claim, as well as messaging them on their online journal to confirm details.

This is in response to the huge volume of calls to the Universal Credit phone lines that has resulted in people being faced with an engaged tone or being left waiting for several hours.

Calls from the DWP may come through from a withheld number and claimants are encouraged to answer their phones, if it is not DWP or someone else you need to speak to, you can terminate the call.

The quickest and most direct way for Universal Credit claimant's to contact the DWP is through the online Journal.

## **2. CHANGES TO JOBCENTRE APPOINTMENTS**

Starting from Thursday 19 March 2020, people receiving benefits do not have to attend Jobcentre appointments for at least 3 months. People will continue to receive their benefits as normal, but all requirements to attend the Jobcentre in person are suspended.

People can still make applications for benefits online if they are eligible.

Jobcentres remain open to continue to support people who are not able to use phones and online, including homeless people.

People should not attend the Jobcentre unless directed to do so for an exceptional purpose, for example to collect Payment Exception Service vouchers.

The DWP announced further measures to minimise footfall in Jobcentres on 24 March 2020.

- Jobcentres will be closed to all but vulnerable cases and other related transactions which cannot be completed through any other channel in order to receive a timely payment.
- Inside Jobcentres, strict social distancing measures will be in place.
- Signs will be placed in windows asking everyone to claim online and / or over the phone.
- A number will be provided for those who want to speak to a colleague in the Jobcentre.

## **3. PEOPLE ALREADY CLAIMING SUPPORT**

The Government announced additional financial support for claimants on 20<sup>th</sup> March. The following benefits are due to increase on 6<sup>th</sup> April in addition to the planned increases on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020:

- Universal Credit standard allowances by £1000/yr for 12 months.
- Working Tax Credit by £1000/yr for the next 12 months. The new working tax credit basic allowance would be up to £2,960/year

In real terms, this means both benefits increase by £20 per week on top of planned annual uprating. This will apply to all new and existing Universal Credit claimants and existing Working Tax Credit claimants.

<https://www.understandinguniversalcredit.gov.uk/coronavirus/>

To ensure people are not missing out on a Universal Credit award, claimants in work already claiming Universal Credit and staying at home on Government advice should report this in the usual way via their online journal. If working fewer hours, the amount of Universal Credit awarded will adjust as earnings change.

**NEW - There is updated guidance for those requiring further information at Gov.uk**

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): what to do if you're already getting benefits](#)

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): what to do if you're employed and cannot work](#)

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): what to do if you were employed and have lost your job](#)

#### **4. SUSPENSION OF BENEFIT REVIEWS AND REASSESSMENTS**

On 24<sup>th</sup> March 2020 Work and Pensions Secretary of State Thérèse Coffey said:

*“We are automatically extending all awards and reassessments for health and disability benefits to provide reassurance to those in receipt of them.”*

- There will be no new reviews or reassessments across all benefits for 3 months – this includes Universal Credit (UC), Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), Personal Independence Payment (PIP), Disability Living Allowance, Attendance Allowance and Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit.
- People who need to claim ESA or Universal Credit because of coronavirus will not be required to produce a fit note.
- Claimants who are staying at home as a result of coronavirus will have their mandatory work search and work availability requirements removed to account for a period of sickness.
- The Minimum Income Floor (an assumed level of income) will be suspended for all Self-employed claimants claiming Universal Credit.

#### **5. NEW SOCIAL SECURITY REGULATIONS**

In addition to those highlighted, the new regulations in force from 30 March 2020, *the Social Security (Coronavirus) (Further Measures) Regulations 2020* (SI.No.371/2020) also provide -

- that work search requirements for claimants of Universal Credit or new style JSA are not imposed for a period of 3 months, and that any existing work search requirement no longer applies so that the requirement to be 'able and willing immediately to take up paid work' no longer applies;
- for claimants who have an award of old-style JSA to be treated as available for work and actively seeking employment for at least the next 3 months;
- for any period during which a JSA claimant is infected or contaminated with coronavirus disease, is in isolation or is caring for a child or qualifying young person in their household who is infected, contaminated or in isolation, to not count towards a period of sickness that might otherwise have led to them losing entitlement to their JSA; and

SI.No.371/2020 is available from [www.legislation.gov.uk](http://www.legislation.gov.uk)

## **6. TEMPORARY SUSPENSION OF DEBT RECOVERY FROM DWP BENEFITS**

In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, the Department for Work and Pensions has temporarily paused the recovery of benefit overpayments, for three months. This will stop recovery action associated with benefit overpayments, tax credits debt, and social fund loans.

There is a recorded message on its Debt Management telephone line (0800 916 0647, Option 3), the DWP says that due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak -

*'... We will no longer start to recover any new debts and will be suspending repayment of any debts already being recovered. This includes deductions for the repayment of benefit overpayments, tax credit debt and social fund loans from all benefits, direct debit plans, and repayments made to employers.*

*You do not need to speak to an adviser to ask us to do this, we have arranged this on your behalf.*

*If you currently make repayments through a bank standing order, please contact your bank to cancel your arrangement. If you currently make repayments by bank giro credit, please suspend these payments immediately. If you currently make repayments through online banking, please suspend these payments immediately."*

- Note recovery of Advances by deduction from Universal Credit payments will continue.
- Local Authorities will suspend referral of Housing Benefit overpayments.
- The transfer of Tax Credit debt from HMRC has already been suspended.
- Many activities will cease immediately but others may take longer to implement.

- For citizens who are not on benefits, we have directed private sector debt collection agencies to stop their activity for Debt Management customers.
- We are also suspending voluntary debt repayments and recovery by Direct Earnings Attachments.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/recovery-of-benefit-overpayment-suspended>

## 7. SOCIAL SECURITY SCOTLAND

The Scottish Government has delayed the introduction of devolved disability benefits for an indefinite period.

Disability Living Allowance (DLA) and Personal Independence Payments (PIP) which were to be devolved to the Scottish Parliament and replaced by Disability Assistance has now been delayed for an indefinite period.

Job Start Payment due to be introduced in March has also been delayed.

There are seven benefits currently administered by the Scottish Government. These are listed below and linked to mygov.scot where there is more information about them and where people can make applications.

- [Carer's Allowance Supplement](#) – this will be paid automatically in June 2020 to anyone who was getting Carer's Allowance from the Department of Work and Pensions on 15 April 2020
- [Best Start Grant - Pregnancy and Baby Payment](#)
- [Best Start Grant - Early Learning Payment](#)
- [Best Start Grant - School Age Payment](#) – this reopens on 1 June 2020
- [Best Start Foods](#)
- [Funeral Support Payment](#)
- [Young Carer Grant](#)

**The following statement was made on <https://www.socialsecurity.gov.scot/news/social-security-scotland-service-throughout-covid-19-1>**

“By following Scottish Government guidance, we are having to adapt some of our ways of working. These are unprecedented times and it is a fast changing situation.

If you have a general enquiry, please check [mygov.scot](https://mygov.scot) before calling and, if you are able to, please submit your application online. This will help to ease any additional pressure on our phone lines at this time and protect the telephone service for those who cannot access our support online.

We are now also taking general enquiries via our [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) accounts.

We are currently unable to answer incoming calls to our Freephone helpline. However, you can leave a voicemail with us between 8am and 6pm Monday to Friday and we will aim to call you back within 48 hours. We will call you back between 8am and 6pm and we will try to reach you three times.

During this time we are continuing to process applications and make payments. However, this could take longer than usual. We will write to you once we have reached a decision on your application. We are grateful for your patience.”

**NEW** The introduction of the Scottish Child Payment will also be delayed due to the coronavirus outbreak.

The Scottish Government has stated that their aim is to now start taking applications by the end of 2020 with payments being made from 2021.

### **NEW Extension of Social Security Timescales in Scotland**

Social Security timescales in Scotland have been extended where a delay is as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak.

The changes are provided for by the Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020 which amends the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 to provide that:

- Late applications for assistance through any of the devolved benefits will be accepted where the lateness is due to coronavirus - In addition, the amendments allow for a late application to be accepted and considered where a person has passed the age limit for assistance, and would otherwise lose their entitlement to assistance, where the application could not be made earlier due to coronavirus;
- reasons relating to coronavirus will be accepted as 'good reasons' for extending the time limit for redeterminations and appeals by one year; and
- the timescale for Social Security Scotland to complete redeterminations is extended by nine weeks on top of the current 16 working days.

*(Section 11 of the Act provides for the new measures to expire on 30 September 2020 unless the Scottish Parliament extends this date, by way of regulations, to 31 March 2021 or 30 September 2021.)*

## **NEW 8. INCREASED HELP WITH FUNERAL PAYMENTS**

The maximum additional amount within funeral expenses payment has been increased from £700 to £1,000. This payment is in addition to existing allowances that pay for funeral necessities, such as burial or cremation fees.

## **NEW 9. TEMPORARY PROVISIONS FOR CARERS ALLOWANCE IN SCOTLAND**

Carer's Allowance claimants in Scotland will be treated as being engaged in caring duties during temporary breaks due to Coronavirus.

From 3 April 2020, the Carer's Allowance (Coronavirus) (Breaks in Care) (Scotland) Regulations 2020 (SSI.No.117/2020) make a temporary adjustment to entitlement rules to Carer's Allowance. This allows carers to retain their entitlement if they have a temporary break in caring as a result of isolation due to, or infection or contamination with, coronavirus of either the carer or the person cared for.

The regulations also disregard the normal requirement to have provided care over a certain number of weeks in order to continue to qualify for Carer's Allowance during a break in care.

**If you have any further questions about any of the above topics,  
or if you require Housing Advice or Information**

**Email [advice@ayrhousingaidcentre.com](mailto:advice@ayrhousingaidcentre.com) or call, text or whatsapp us on 07549 603895 /  
07760750256 or contact us via facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/ayrhac>**