

Update on issues affecting benefits related to Covid-19 – 2 April 2020

Since the last update on 24 March 2020, further information has now been added regarding the **DWP Home Visiting Service**; **HMRC** new helpline number; **Attendance Allowance** date of claims and renewals; **Pension Credit** claim line hours; and **Council Tax Support** (England hardship fund).

General

- People receiving benefits **do not have to attend jobcentre appointments** for three months, starting from 19 March 2020. 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 will remain open, and will continue to support people who are not able to use phones and online, including homeless people.
- DWP has **suspended all face-to-face assessments** for health and disability-related benefits (including Universal Credit, ESA and PIP). If a claimant already has an assessment appointment arranged, they do not need to attend. The assessment provider will contact them to discuss their appointment and explain the next steps. For more information see www.gov.uk/government/news/face-to-face-health-assessments-for-benefits-suspended-amid-coronavirus-outbreak
- There will be **no new reviews or reassessments across all benefits for three months**, starting from 24 March 2020. This includes Universal Credit, ESA, PIP, DLA (including DLA to PIP reassessments), Attendance Allowance and Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit. Where awards are due to expire, they will be extended during this period so that claimants continue to receive benefit at their current rate. Any change of circumstance should still be notified to DWP in the normal way. For more information see www.gov.uk/government/news/coronavirus-update-benefit-reviews-and-reassessments-suspended
- **If a new claim has recently been made** for Universal Credit, ESA, PIP or Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit but no date has been set for an assessment appointment, claimants do not need to do anything. They will be contacted by telephone or letter to let them know what will happen next.
- New claimants to Universal Credit or ESA because of coronavirus will **not be required to produce a Fit Note**.
- Anyone having to stay at home or who has been diagnosed with coronavirus will **not be sanctioned for not complying with work requirements** as long as they have notified DWP (eg. through their online journal for Universal Credit). DWP will review any conditionality requirements to ensure they are reasonable. Work search and work availability requirements will be removed to account for a period of sickness.

- **DWP Home Visiting Service** has suspended all routine face-to-face home visits but will be prioritising visits for customers who are most vulnerable, ensuring that benefit payments can be made or safeguarding checks undertaken. For partners who make referrals to DWP Home Visiting, you can continue to do so in the same way. For all visit referrals, DWP will undertake a risk-based assessment to decide the best way to support the claimant. This may involve the claimant being contacted by telephone or letter if possible.
- **HMRC** have noticed some strain on their network provider and have now changed their helpline number to ensure those needing help and support can keep reaching their advisers. The new helpline number is 0800 024 1222 and is open from 8am to 4pm Monday to Friday. Calls to the old helpline number will be redirected, but please refer customers to the new helpline number where possible.

Attendance Allowance

- In response to our questions about relaxing the rules around the 6 week limitation on date of claim for AA the DWP have responded to say that “With regards to the return of AA claim forms, we have introduced an immediate easement, to support flexibility on dates for returning claim forms. This will ensure no customer will be disadvantaged due to self-isolation guidance. **To support us in delivering this change, we would appreciate if you could note the claim form advising there has been a delay in its return due to Covid-19, this will support and speed up the decision making process.**”
- The DWP have also confirmed to us that all new awards of AA will be indefinite awards and any renewals due on existing AA claims will be identified by DWP and will "have their entitlement 'knocked on' i.e. awarded for an indefinite period without the requirement to complete/send a claim form". The DWP have confirmed that these changes are for a temporary period to deal with the challenges of the coronavirus.
- **Coronavirus and questions about AA** – see appendix at the end of this document. Sally West in the policy team has drawn up some Q&As in response to questions we have been receiving.

Pension Credit

- We have been advised by the Pension Service that the Pension Credit claim line (0800 99 1234) hours are currently restricted to 9.30am – 3.30pm due to staff shortages as a result of some self-isolating.

Universal Credit

- Those affected by coronavirus will be able to apply for Universal Credit and can receive an advance payment without having to attend a jobcentre first.

- Self-employed claimants on Universal Credit who are required to stay at home or are ill as a result of coronavirus will not have a Minimum Income Floor (an assumed level of income) applied for a period of time while affected. This means that self-employed people can access Universal Credit at a rate equivalent to Statutory Sick Pay for employees.
- The Universal Credit standard allowance will increase by £1,040 over the tax year 2020/21 for all claimants, new and existing (the equivalent of £20 a week). The same increase applies for the **Working Tax Credit** basic element.
- For renters, there will be an extra £1 billion of support by increasing **Housing Benefit** and Universal Credit, so that the Local Housing Allowance will cover at least 30% of market rents in a claimant's area. For more information see www.gov.uk/government/news/complete-ban-on-evictions-and-additional-protection-for-renters
- For more information see www.gov.uk/universal-credit and www.understandinguniversalcredit.gov.uk/coronavirus

New Style Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)

- The seven waiting days for New Style ESA for new claimants suffering from coronavirus or required to stay at home will not apply, it will be payable from day one.
- For more information, including how to make a claim, see www.gov.uk/employment-support-allowance

Statutory Sick Pay

- People who cannot work due to coronavirus and are eligible for Statutory Sick Pay will get it from day one, rather than from the fourth day of their illness. DWP intends to legislate so this measure applies retrospectively from 13 March 2020. It will be payable to people who are staying at home on Government advice, not just those who are infected.
- Employers have been urged to use their discretion about what evidence, if any, they ask for. If employees need to provide evidence to their employer that they need to stay at home due to coronavirus, they will be able to get an 'isolation note' from NHS 111 Online instead of having to get a Fit Note from their doctor. For more information see www.gov.uk/government/news/online-isolation-notes-launched-providing-proof-of-coronavirus-absence-from-work
- For more information see www.gov.uk/statutory-sick-pay

Council Tax Support

- English local authorities will be allocated a hardship fund worth nearly £500 million to deliver relief to council tax payers in their area. The guidance to

local authorities is that a household containing working age people should receive a further reduction in their annual Council Tax bill of £150 if they receive Council Tax Support (CTS). If someone's outstanding amount of Council Tax is below £150 then their bill will be reduced to £0, they would not receive the remaining part of the £150. For more information see [COVID-19 hardship fund 2020-21 – Local Authority Guidance](#)

More information about benefits and claims can be found [online](#) or in individual [factsheets](#).

Regularly updated information about coronavirus and claiming benefits can be found at www.understandinguniversalcredit.gov.uk/coronavirus

Appendix: Coronavirus and questions about Attendance Allowance

This section provides some information in response to questions that have been raised around AA. If you have further questions that aren't covered elsewhere that you would like us to raise with the DWP please contact Sally West, in the Policy Team who will contact the team responsible for AA. sally.west@ageuk.org.uk

New claims

Are the DWP still sending our new claim forms for AA by post?

- Yes, AA claim forms are continuing to be sent out by post as normal. However, the DWP have temporarily suspended issuing Renewal Claim forms (Renewal claims are normally sent to people who have a limited length of award and are invited to claim again 6 months prior to their award end date).

Can advisers sign forms on behalf of clients who cannot get out to post their claim?

- No, due to legal reasons it is not possible for an Age UK to sign on behalf of the customer. However, as set out in the main section of this briefing above, the DWP has said it will be flexible about the date of return.

Will DWP accept an Age UK's own version of an AA form completed over the phone and sent to the client to return with the pack?

- No, but you can download the AA claim form which DWP advise that you use rather than creating your own version.

Can we send special rules DS1500 claims forms via email ?

- Yes, DWP have told us they can receive PDFs of DS1500s via email as a temporary easement.

What happens if someone needs help to complete a form and we cannot offer our normal visiting service?

- You may be able to do this by video link or telephone. See Age UK guidance to completing AA forms remotely by video conferencing link. Some of the overall processes set out in this may also be useful if you are helping a client over the phone. As above you will still need to send the form to the client to sign and return.

Can people still ask for a review if their circumstances have changed?

- As above the DWP have suspended reviews and reassessments. However, people are still encouraged to contact the DWP if their needs have changed (got better or worse). So, for example, if someone is getting the lower rate of AA and their needs have increased they can still ask for a review.