**Northumberland, Tyne and Wear District External Partner Newsletter**

The coronavirus pandemic is a fast moving emergency, that has significant impacts for the department, our customers, our colleagues, employers and partners.

There is, as a consequence, exceptional demand on DWP services at this unprecedented time and action is being taken to provide extra support to service delivery colleagues maintaining vital services to our customers.

Our priority is ensuring people get their benefit payments and protecting vulnerable people who need our support most. We are taking urgent action to boost capacity, including moving 10,000 existing staff to help on the front line and work on new claims and we’re recruiting more.

Consequently, we have had to make some changes to our services.

This Newsletter contains details of those changes as well as some useful links to information, advice and guidance designed to support our customers, employers and partners.

We will be regularly publishing further updates to keep our customers and partners aware of any further changes, advice and support

**Access to Jobcentre Services - Keeping our Customers Safe**

At this unprecedented time, to support the critical efforts to reduce unnecessary travel, increase social distancing, additional steps are now in place to protect our customers and protect our colleagues.

With a rise in new claims, and with demand for support over the phone increasing, the Department for Work and Pensions is taking unprecedented action to make sure people can get the support they need.

In line with recent Government guidance and to best serve those who need support, the Work and Pensions Secretary has taken the decision to limit access to Jobcentres.

**From Tuesday 24th March** members of the public will not be admitted into Jobcentres unless they are directed to do so with a booked emergency appointment. Only the most vulnerable claimants who are unable to contact us, access DWP Services online or by telephone or who need to complete transactions which **cannot** be completed through any other channel in order to receive timely payment will be invited to attend, with the public urged to use online services

People receiving benefits do not have to attend jobcentre appointments for at least three months, starting from Thursday 19 March 2020.

People will continue to receive their benefits as normal, but all requirements to attend the jobcentre in person are suspended.

Customers can continue to access support online [www.dwp.gov.uk](http://www.dwp.gov.uk) where telephone services are also listed.

For those who are already registered, we would ask that they try to log onto their account out of peak times, so we can ensure we can get new claims onto the system as quickly as possible. Between 11:00am and 2:00pm is the busiest time for making claims. You can apply for Universal Credit online 24/7.

DWP national telephone lines are now open 9.30am to 3.30pm.

As you will understand we are experiencing a significant increase in the number of calls from people who need to make a new claim for financial support with Universal Credit claims having increased nationally by 500%. With such a huge increase in claims there are pressures on our services, but the system is standing up well to these and our dedicated staff are working flat out to get people the support they need. However, customers may **experience some extended waiting times. We appreciate how frustrating this is and we are working to improve the situation** but in the meantime we ask that customers display patience and we will endeavour to answer all calls as quickly as possible.

Inside Jobcentres, strict social distancing measures will be in place. Signs and posters will be placed in windows asking everyone to claim online and / or over the phone. A number will be provided on the notice for those who want to speak to a colleague in the Jobcentre.

By taking this action, we protect customers and communities as we comply with government advice on social distancing; and maximise the processing capacity of Jobcentres to support new claims made online or via the phone.

Universal Credit claims have increased by 500%. As such, the payment of benefits is our main priority and our staff are working working extremely hard to process claims at pace and supporting millions of people across the country. As we need to focus on the processing of claims, we will not be checking if people are looking for and available for work for the next three months – because of that there will be no sanctions during that time.

While we have unprecedented numbers of claims but we are mobilising our staff and are clearing huge volumes of claims each day and making payments, including advances, at the soonest possible date.

We do, however, want claimants to continue to look for work where they are able. Even in these difficult times, new jobs are being created. Retailers, for instance, have announced tens of thousands of new jobs across the country in response to the coronavirus outbreak and I would urge claimants to explore these opportunities and others, where they are able to do so.

Our twitter feed @JCPinNTW continues to post those key worker jobs across our region and we encourage people to follow that feed.

**DWP and CORONAVIRUS – Summary of Information**

I’ve tried to collect the recent announcements below. It is a changing picture and so we encourage everybody to check [the gov.uk coronavirus pages](https://www.understandinguniversalcredit.gov.uk/coronavirus/) regularly for the latest information.

* The Prime Minister has announced that Statutory Sick Pay will be made available from day one when self-isolating, instead of day four – see [here](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/sick-pay-from-day-one-for-those-affected-by-coronavirus?utm_source=08428d62-b7a9-4c35-81eb-927dae713db6&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_content=immediate)
* Details about some of the latest DWP Coronavirus announcements can be found in the [full budget report](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/budget-2020-documents). Below is a sample taken from this report:
1. New style’ Employment and Support Allowance will be payable for people directly affected by COVID-19 or self-isolating according to government advice for from the first day of sickness, rather than the eighth day
2. People will be able to claim Universal Credit and access advance payments where they are directly affected by COVID-19 (or self-isolating), without the current requirement to attend a jobcentre
3. The requirements of the minimum income floor in Universal Credit will be temporarily relaxed for those directly affected by COVID-19 or self-isolating according to government advice for duration of the outbreak, ensuring self‑employed claimants will be compensated for losses in income
* More information on the range of extra support and measures which will be in place to help workers, benefit claimants and businesses affected by coronavirus is [here](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/coronavirus-support-for-employees-benefit-claimants-and-businesses?utm_source=37472ed5-c0b4-4625-8801-549259dc908d&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_content=immediate)

For up to date information see link below

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

* Click here to find out about [Face-to-face health assessments for benefits suspended amid coronavirus outbreak - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/face-to-face-health-assessments-for-benefits-suspended-amid-coronavirus-outbreak?utm_source=7cc76f5e-e139-4202-ad22-cac7b08d9597&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_content=immediate)
* The Chancellor announced various measures last week, **one of which was to increase UC and Working Tax Credits by £20 per week from 6 April 2020**, when benefits were due to increase under the annual benefit uprating. This additional £20 is on top of the uprating previously announced. This will apply to all new and existing claimants.
* For UC this means that a single person aged 25 or over will see their standard allowance increase from the current £317.82 to £409.89 per month for their first full assessment period after 6 April 2020.
* For Working Tax Credits payments will be increased by £1,045 to £3,040 per year from 6 April 2020 to 5 April 2021. The amount a claimant or household will benefit from will depend on their circumstances, including their level of household income. However, the increase could mean up to an extra £20 each week.
* People are being urged to use online services before turning to the telephone for help with their benefit claim **-** [**Claimants are asked to apply online as jobcentres limit access - GOV.UK**](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/claimants-are-asked-to-apply-online-as-jobcentres-limit-access)
* **Coronavirus and New Style ESA Claim Process**– instead of completing a claim form for New Style ESA please advise our customers to ring 0800 328 5644 and an agent will take the claim over the phone. [Gov.UK](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/new-style-employment-and-support-allowance?utm_source=2e621aec-2383-4b0a-a914-01c178974607&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_content=immediate) pages have been updated with new advice

**DS1500 – Notification of Terminal Illness Form Changes**

* For the attention of staff in Local Authorities involved in benefit advice or similar work. In light of the difficulties faced by many working from home DWP has opened up an email facility to allow the DS1500 to be emailed to the Department rather than needing to be printed and posted in. The DS1500 will only be accepted if it sent in from a .gov.uk email address – forms received from personal or non .gov.uk email addresses will not be actioned. The DS1500 should be sent to the following email address: pip.e-ds1500@dwp.gsi.gov.uk (link sends e-mail)
* **Benefit Appeals information**- [Coronavirus (COVID-19): courts and tribunals planning and preparation - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-courts-and-tribunals-planning-and-preparation)
* **Coronavirus and Child Benefit claims**- HMRC advised that claims should be made as normal ([see Gov.UK](https://www.gov.uk/child-benefit/how-to-claim)) and, if they are unable to register the birth, they should attach a covering letter giving that information so the claim could be processed. Contact details for HMRC Child Benefit can be found [here](https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-revenue-customs/contact/child-benefit)
* **DWP Third Party Payment Teams telephony**: As a result of the increased measures the Government have put in place to limit the spread of Coronavirus, the DWP Third Party Payment Helpline is currently operating at a reduced level. When contacting the Helpline, we ask that you display patience and we will endeavour to answer your call as quickly as we can.

As a reminder, listed below are the types of queries that the Third Party Helpline can help with:

What DWP Third Party Payments Telephony Team are able to do:

* deal with queries from creditors/suppliers relating to payment schedules (date of first payment, amount, assessment period)
* issue duplicate schedules if not received after 5 working days
* give general advice to third parties on how set up deductions
* provide advice on changing creditor details via the creditor handbook on GOV.UK
* complete referral to set up electronic schedules
* refer complex queries regarding schedule issues for investigation
* stop a payment at request of DWP colleagues

Please can we ask before you call us for queries relating to payment schedules, you check with your Finance teams to see if they have details of the schedule you are enquiring about. You may get the answer you need without having to consider contacting us.  Thank you

* **Habitual Residency Test** (HRT**)**: Due to the current Coronavirus outbreak HRT face to face contact with claimants has been temporarily suspended, in line with the Department’s contingency approach. Work Coaches (WC) will continue to do the HRT interviews but by phone instead of face to face in Jobcentres
* **National Insurance number** applications have been suspended for at least 3 months from 17 March 2020. Please call **0800 141 2075** to arrange an appointment after this period has ended. You can start work without a National Insurance number if you can prove you can work in the UK. There is more information on [**www.gov.uk/prove-right-to-work**](http://www.gov.uk/prove-right-to-work)**.** You can apply for a National Insurance number as part of your application for benefit. You will not need to call the National Insurance number application line; Your benefit advisor should make your application for you. They have a form and information on how to do this. You can find more information about how to claim benefits and getting a National Insurance number on **www.gov.uk/browse/benefits**
* **DWP home visiting** has been suspended, with the exception of those customers who are most vulnerable – who will only be visited where it is safe to do so. Revised special procedures will be followed when appointee action is needed
* Chancellor gives support to millions of **self-employed** individuals – more information [here](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/chancellor-gives-support-to-millions-of-self-employed-individuals)
* Reminder….here’s the link to get up to date information about Coronavirus and claiming benefits [Understanding Universal Credit](https://www.understandinguniversalcredit.gov.uk/coronavirus/).  Please do not print off the guidance as it is constantly being updated as new information is announced

**PERSONAL INDEPENDENCE PAYMENT (PIP)**

* Coronavirus Contingency Advice from PIP: For PIP claimants who have received a PIP2 form but is struggling to return it in time as they are struggling to get assistance with completion, or leave their property to post it back…. the claimant will be given an extension to 90 days from when the form was issued.
* Coronavirus Contingency Advice from PIP: PIP renewals – Form AR1 received but the PIP claimant can’t return it as they cannot get assistance to complete the form or leave their property to post it back to us. The PIP claimant does not need to do anything. PIP will extend your current award and contact them at a later date to re assess the PIP claim

**Finally, in case you missed it….**

* [Coronavirus – Changes to Veterans UK Services - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/coronavirus-changes-to-veterans-uk-services)
* [Government confirms £500 million hardship fund will provide council tax relief for vulnerable households - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-confirms-500-million-hardship-fund-will-provide-council-tax-relief-for-vulnerable-households)
* [Coronavirus update - benefit reviews and reassessments suspended - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/coronavirus-update-benefit-reviews-and-reassessments-suspended)
* [Plans set out to support pupils eligible for free school meals - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/plans-set-out-to-support-pupils-eligible-for-free-school-meals?utm_source=e9bb4fc7-703b-4e40-9412-bfb14e68a90c&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_content=immediate)
* [£3.2 million emergency support for rough sleepers during coronavirus outbreak - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/3-2-million-emergency-support-for-rough-sleepers-during-coronavirus-outbreak)
* [Government agrees measures with energy industry to support vulnerable people through COVID-19 - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-agrees-measures-with-energy-industry-to-support-vulnerable-people-through-covid-19?utm_source=42a6f8ed-fe40-4953-8338-7172308f7bd4&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_content=immediate)
* [Complete ban on evictions and additional protection for renters - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/complete-ban-on-evictions-and-additional-protection-for-renters)