

# **Toolkit: Benefits advice for those affected by Covid19**

**Prepared by Financial Inclusion Team, North Lanarkshire Council**

This toolkit is designed to assist those affected by Covid19 who are seeking advice about potential benefits they can claim/impact on benefits.

If you've been affected financially by coronavirus you might be able to claim benefits or get more money on your current benefits.

## **Statutory Sick Pay(SSP):**

You might be able to get SSP of £94.25 per week if you have coronavirus or you're following the government guidance to self-isolate. You cannot get SSP if you're self-employed. To qualify for SSP, you need to be an employee under a contract of employment and earn more than £118 per week. People on zero hours contract can still get Statutory Sick pay if they meet the conditions. It is possible your employer may also pay you contractual sick pay, but you will need to check the terms of your employment contract. If have coronavirus symptoms or live with someone who does you can be paid SSP from the first day feel ill or began self-isolating. It will be paid in the same way as your wages. From Friday 20 March onwards, those who have COVID-19 or are advised to self-isolate will be able to obtain an "isolation note" by visiting NHS 111 online and completing an online form, rather than visiting a doctor.

<https://111.nhs.uk/covid-19>

## **New-style Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)**

If you are not entitled to SSP because you are self-employed or because you are an employee who usually earns less than £118 per week you might be able to claim new-style ESA of £73.10 per week if you have coronavirus or if you are self-isolating. Entitlement is based on your National Insurance contributions in the previous 2 tax years. For 2020 the relevant tax years are 2017-18 and 2018-19. If you can get new-style ESA it will be paid from the first day you were sick or self-isolating.

## **Universal Credit (UC)**

You might be able to claim UC as well as SSP or, if you are already in receipt of UC, the amount you receive may increase if your earnings reduce.

**N.B People who need to claim UC or ESA because of coronavirus will not be required to produce a fit note or an isolation note.**

For those in receipt of tax credits (TC) however they will only see an increase in their tax credit award at this time if their income falls by £2,500 across the tax year, which runs from 6 April to 5 April. They can report this reduction to HMRC for an in-year calculation so that their ongoing award is adjusted. If this is reported and then their income does not fall by this amount they will, come the end of the tax year, be in an overpayment situation.

If you are in receipt of Housing Benefit (HB) and/or Council Tax Reduction (CTR) you may be eligible for an increase in the help available if your income has dropped.

**Employees - Coronavirus job retention scheme:**

Businesses are to be given grants to cover the wages of employees who are currently unable to work because their employers are struggling as a result of the coronavirus outbreak. The scheme will cover 80% of salaries up to a maximum of £2,500 per month. This allows employers to keep employees on (i.e. furlough them) while waiting to be able to apply to the scheme. As an employee this scheme is aimed at improving the chances of you being able to keep your job and continue receiving wages.

For those who have already lost their jobs due to coronavirus and their employers are not willing to take them back on and 'furlough' them so that they can benefit from the coronavirus employee retention scheme - they can apply for UC or if they are already in receipt of UC they can receive an increased amount. They can also apply for CTR.

If they are already in receipt of tax credits they may be able to get an increase in the amount of tax credits being paid rather than claiming UC. However if they need help with housing costs for the first time (i.e. they do not get any housing benefit at present) they will have to claim UC to get any help towards their rent. They can also apply for CTR.

UC claims are made online and the claimant needs to set up an email address prior to claiming.

To make a claim for UC the claimant (and their partner if they have one) need to have all the following information to hand:

- Address and Post Code
- National Insurance number(s)
- Bank details
- Details about the type of accommodation you have, e.g. private rent, council tenant, or housing association tenant
- How much your rent is
- Your landlord's address and contact number
- details of any savings or capital you have
- details of any unearned income you receive such as other benefits or pensions
- details of how much you earn – check your recent payslip if you are unsure
- Details of any children you are responsible for who will be included in the claim. You will need to know the child benefit reference number(s). This reference will be on any letters you have from child benefit office. If you cannot find the number then call the Child Benefit Office on 0300 200 3100 for assistance with this.
- details of any childcare providers and childcare costs that you incur to enable you to work

**Attending face to face appointments at Job Centre or Medical Assessment Centres:**

- As of Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> March 2020 people receiving benefits do not have to attend jobcentre appointments for a three month period.
- People will continue to receive their benefits as normal but all requirements to attend the jobcentre in person are suspended.
- Applications for benefits can still be made online or over the phone where online claims are not possible.
- New UC claimants will have to make an appointment for a new claim interview. This interview will take place by telephone with a work coach. You will be given the number to call to book this appointment when you have submitted your claim online.
- If you're already claiming UC and think you may have been affected by coronavirus, please contact your work coach as soon as possible via their online journal.
- All face-to-face health assessment in relation to health and disability-related benefits are also temporarily suspended

- If you already have an assessment appointment arranged you should not attend. The assessment provider will contact you to discuss your appointment and explain the next steps to you.
- If you have made a claim for Personal Independence Payment (PIP), Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), UC or Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit (IIDB) but do not have a date for an assessment appointment, you do not need to do anything. You will be contacted shortly by telephone or letter to let you know what will happen next.
- If you are already receiving PIP, ESA, UC or IIDB you will continue to receive your current payments as normal
- If you wish to make a new claim DWP will continue to take claims for all benefits.

**N.B Please note re PIP in order to be eligible there is a 3 month backwards looking test (i.e. you must have had the needs for 3 months prior to claiming) and a 9 month prospective test. If this does not apply you will not be entitled to receive PIP.**

**Other changes to benefits due to Coronavirus:**

- The Standard Allowance of UC has increased by £20 per week in addition to the planned annual uprating. This is a temporary increase for one year only and begins on 5 April 2020.
- The basic element of working tax credit has also been increased by £20 a week for one year from 5 April 2020.
- Local Housing Allowance rates are being increased to the 30th percentile of market rents. This will apply to all private renters who are either new or existing UC claimants and also to existing HB claimants.

## **Self-employment Income Support Scheme**

### **What is it?**

The Self-employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) will support self-employed individuals (including members of partnerships) whose income has been negatively impacted by COVID-19. The scheme will provide a taxable grant to self-employed individuals or partnerships, **worth 80% of their profits up to a cap of £2,500 per month.**

The scheme will be open for an initial three months with people able to make their first claim by the beginning of June.

### **To be eligible for the scheme you must meet all the criteria below:**

- Be self-employed or a member of partnership;
- Have lost trading/partnership trading profits due to COVID-19;
- File a tax return for 2018-19 as self-employed or a member of a trading partnership. **Those who have not yet filed their return yet for 2018-19 now have until 23 April 2020 to do so)**
- Have traded in 2019-20; be currently trading at the point of application (or would be except for COVID 19) and intend to continue to trade in the tax year 2020 to 2021
- Have trading profits of less than £50,000 and more than half of your total income come from self-employment. This can be with reference to at least one of the following conditions:
  - Your trading profits and total income in 2018/19
  - Your average trading profits and total income across up to the three years between 2016-17, 2017-18, and 2018-19.

### **How do I access it?**

Individuals should not contact HMRC just now. HMRC will use existing information to check potential eligibility and invite applications once the scheme is operational. HMRC will then pay the grant directly to eligible claimants' bank account.

### **Other assistance available**

The government has already announced other measures to help self-employed people who may or may not be eligible for the above:

- Deferred tax payments such as VAT for 3 months and Income tax until January 2021.
- Business continuity loans.
- Grants for business that pay or don't pay business rates.

Self-employed people may also be eligible for the following benefits:

- Universal Credit (UC) - The SEISS will be treated as earnings for UC meaning you UC payment will adjust in response to changes in your earnings.
- New style ESA.
- Crisis Grants from the Scottish Welfare Fund.

## **Frequently asked questions?**

### **Am I entitled to any benefits?**

This will vary depending on your circumstances including the household income, any savings you have over £6000, whether you rent or own your home and whether anyone else lives with you. You can call FIT on 01698 332551 and ask for a benefit check and someone will be in touch within 2 working days to carry a benefit check out for you over the phone

### **I am not able to go to work due to coronavirus or self-isolating and I am only getting Statutory Sick Pay. Am I entitled to any benefits?**

You may be able to get a top up of income by claiming UC but this will depend on whether you have any other income, whether you have savings above £6000, what your housing costs are and whether there are other people living with you. If you are in a crisis situation and unable to meet essential needs you can apply for a crisis grant by calling 0300 555 0405.

### **I am self isolating and only getting statutory sick pay but my partner is still working. Is there anything I can claim?**

Potentially you could be entitled to some UC to top up your household income. This depends on how much your partner earns, your household costs and the household composition.

### **I have had my hours significantly reduced and have considerably less money for coming in now. Will this affect my current benefit entitlement?**

Report changes of circumstances as soon as you reasonably can and your benefit entitlement will be recalculated.

### **How can I apply for benefits?**

Many benefits can be applied for online. Where an online claim is not available the claim may be made over the telephone or, where there is not possible, a paper based claim form will be available which at this current time will need to be sent via post to the relevant office (given office closures).

### **I cannot access the internet at home- how else can I apply?**

Some benefits can be claimed over the phone. Call the relevant office for the benefit you wish to apply for (e.g. DWP/ HMRC/ Housing and Council Tax or SSSCA) and explained you cannot get online. If the claim cannot be made over the phone then the relevant office can post a form out to your home address which you can complete and post back to them.

### **My employer has reduced my hours but my partner is still working full time is there any help available?**

As mentioned above entitlement to benefits UC will vary depending on your circumstances including the household income. As your income has reduced due to your hours been reduced you should have a benefit check carried out to see if you will be entitled to any UC to top up your income and to check if you will qualify for any council tax reduction.

**I am struggling to afford food and pay my gas and/or electricity bill, is there any help available?**

If you are in a crisis situation and unable to meet essential needs you can apply for a crisis grant by calling 0300 555 0405. You can also contact your energy supplier directly and see if they can offer any support at this time.

**I am not able to pay my rent due to losing my job. Is there any benefits I can claim to help with my rent?**

If you are getting housing benefit at present then call them on and let them know that there has been a change in circumstances. They can then recalculate your entitlement to housing benefit and council tax reduction. New claims to housing benefit will only be available to a limited number of people (i.e. claimants who have reach state pension age, claimants who get a severe disability premium within an existing income based benefit or claimants who live in supported, sheltered or temporary accommodation.

Most people who are not already getting HB and now need help with the rent will not be able to claim housing benefit and will instead have to apply for apply for UC. The amount of rent you pay will be taken into account when calculating how much, if any, UC you will be entitled to. You can still apply for a CTR in addition to claiming UC.

**I was told I would have to pay a high tax charge if I claimed child benefit so I chose not to apply. My wage has now reduced significantly. Can I now apply for child benefit?**

If your (or your partner's) individual income is over £50,000 you will be will be taxed on child benefit. This is known as the High Income Child Benefit Tax Charge. You need to fill in a Self-Assessment tax return each tax year and pay what you owe. Once you earn £60,000 you lose all of your child benefit through tax. If your income for April 2020 – 2021 is going to be below £50,000 you will not be taxed on the child benefit. You can print the claim form here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/child-benefit-claim-form-ch2> or call Child Benefit on 0300 200 3100 and ask for a claim form to be posted out.

**How long will it take to receive my benefit payments?**

The timescales vary:

Payments of new-style ESA and new-style JSA should be received within 2 weeks from the date of claim.

UC has a 5 week waiting period for the first payment however when you make the claim you can, if you require, be paid an advance of your benefit, which will be recovered back from future UC payments.

HB can be paid from the date of claim and backdated for up to 1 month where you have good cause for not applying earlier.

**Will I have to go to the job centre to complete my claim?**

The government has postponed all face-to-face benefits assessments or appointments at the Jobcentre Plus until at least 19 June 2020. This means you will not be required to go to:

- interviews if you're starting a claim for JSA, ESA or UC
- medical assessments for ESA, UC or PIP
- appointments with your work coach

The Jobcentre might still ask to talk to you by phone.

**I am struggling to afford essentials for my children as we are spending more at home with the schools being closed. Is there any help available?**

You should have a benefit check carried out to check if you qualify for any income based benefits including free school meals. If you are unable to meet essential needs for yourself or your children you can apply for a crisis grant by calling 0300 555 0405. You should also check whether you are entitled to receive any one off grant payments via The Scottish Social Security Agency Best Start Grant Scheme. You could get a payment if, for example you receive a qualifying benefit and have a baby under 6 months or a child aged between 2 years and 3 years 6 months old. Applications for school age payments will open on 1 June 2020. You could also qualify for best start food vouchers. More information about the scheme, including details about the qualifying benefits, are available online at: <https://www.mygov.scot/best-start-grant-best-start-foods/>. Claims can be made online or by calling 0800 182 2222.

**I am have a funeral to pay for and I have no savings. Can I get any help with this?**

You may be eligible for some help towards the cost of the funeral if you qualify for a Funeral Support Payment. These payments are administered by Scottish Social Security Agency. You can apply online at <https://www.mygov.scot/funeral-support-payment/how-to-apply/> or over the phone - 0800 182 2222. To qualify you must be in you live in Scotland, be in receipt of a qualifying benefit, apply within 6 months from the date of funeral and be responsible for the funeral. This means you are named on funeral bill in addition to being the nearest relative to the deceased person

**My partner has passed away recently and I am struggling financially. Is there any benefits that I can apply for?**

You should have benefit check carried out to check if you are entitled to UC or any other income based benefits but regardless of your income or savings you may also be entitled to bereavement support payment (BSP) if your partner was under state pension age and has paid National Insurance contributions for at least 25 weeks. You will receive a lump sum of either £3500 or £2000 and then up to 18 monthly payments of either £350 or £100. The higher amount is paid to those who are entitled to child benefit. You must claim within 3 months of your husband, wife or civil partner's death to get all 18 monthly payments. You can claim up to 21 months after but your payments will be less. At the time of writing unmarried parents' were not eligible to receive BSP but applications should still be made and challenged as there is a case progressing through the legal system at present which challenges this.

**I am off work sick due to coronavirus can I claim any benefits during this time?**

You will be treated as unfit for work if you are following government guidance and will receive Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) (paid from day one of sick leave) if you are normally entitled to it. If you are not entitled to SSP then you may be eligible to claim either new style (ESA) or UC. New style ESA is a non means tested benefit, this is based on your own national insurance contributions and doesn't consider other household members income. You can claim new style ESA by telephone on 0800 328 5644. If you don't satisfy the contributions for new style ESA then you may be eligible to claim UC. UC is a means tested benefit therefore considers all household income/capital/composition (including potential

help with rent costs). Depending on household income/composition you may be eligible to claim UC in addition to new style ESA. Claims can be made online at: <https://www.understandinguniversalcredit.gov.uk/coronavirus/> or alternatively by calling 0800 328 5644.

### **I am self-employed but unable to work due to self-isolating. Can I claim any benefits?**

Self-employed workers are **not** entitled to SSP. If you are already in receipt of Tax Credits (TC) or Housing Benefit (HB) then you should contact the paying office to report the change in circumstances. If you are not in receipt of these benefits please consider a claim for new style ESA or UC as detailed above. You may also be able to benefit from the self-employment income support scheme but any income from this scheme will count as earnings for the purposes of calculating UC entitlement. Any new claims to UC/ESA on the grounds of being affected by COVID-19 will not require a fit note.

### **I have been paid off at work and my employer is unwilling to furlough me?**

If you are temporarily paid off or advised to take unpaid leave due and your employer is not prepared to furlough you then you require evidence in writing from your employer to confirm this and you can then make a claim for new style Job Seekers Allowance (JSA). New style JSA is a non means tested benefit, this is based on your own national insurance contributions and doesn't consider other household members income. You can apply online at [www.gov.uk/jobseekers-allowance/how-to-claim?step-by-step-nav=e7b3ea75-05d5-4341-b27a-be3b767b1e3f](http://www.gov.uk/jobseekers-allowance/how-to-claim?step-by-step-nav=e7b3ea75-05d5-4341-b27a-be3b767b1e3f) or by telephone on 0800 055 6688 for new style JSA. Depending on your household income/composition you may also be eligible to receive some UC in addition to new style JSA.

### **I have been offered overtime at my work. Will my benefits be affected if I do extra work?**

Any additional income you are paid as a result of working extra hours will be taken into account for UC. This will be treated the same as earnings in the assessment period with the next payment of UC reduced to take account of additional income. For those in receipt of tax credits it is slightly different as any additional earnings will be calculated at the end of the financial year and so will not impact them immediately but could result in an overpayment of tax credit when these are recalculated based on your P60 at the end of the financial year. For all other means tested benefits remember you have a duty of care to notify the paying office as additional income must be reported to avoid overpayment situations. It is also important to note that if you are paid Carers Allowance there is an earnings limit of £128 per week (from 6<sup>th</sup> April 2020). If you are paid anything above £128, in any given week, you will not be entitled to any carers allowance in that week.

### **I am pregnant and self-isolating so have been put on to Statutory Sick Pay but I am not sure how being off work affects my maternity leave and/or pay entitlement?**

If you are pregnant and your work or pay has been affected as a result of coronavirus and you wish for a benefit check to be carried out then please call the Financial Inclusion Team on 01698 332551. There is also some helpful information available at **There is some useful advice available online at** <https://maternityaction.org.uk/covidmaternityfaqs/>.

## Websites with information to help through coronavirus

- <https://www.northlanarkshire.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=27625>

Give NLC links for benefit and money advice. Also provides link on how to claim benefits direct from the council such as the Scottish Welfare Fund and Council Tax Reduction.

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

Link for UK government advice and assistance regarding benefits such as UC and Statutory Sick Pay. Also explains government scheme to pay 80% of wages and help for business.

- <https://www.gov.scot/coronavirus-covid-19/>

Scottish government advice and updates regarding corona virus.

- <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus---school-and-elc-closures-guidance-on-critical-childcare-provision-for-key-workers/>

Advice from the Scottish Government about key workers and child care arrangements.