

Coronavirus update – benefit reviews and reassessments suspended

This temporary measure, effective from tomorrow, is being taken to reassure vulnerable people about the continuity of their benefits during the coronavirus outbreak and to ensure the Department's resources are focused on enabling access to financial support for new claimants. This follows on from a previous announcement to suspend all face-to-face assessments in order to safeguard potentially vulnerable claimants.

Work and Pensions Secretary of State Thérèse Coffey said:

“As this country ramps up its efforts to support people through coronavirus, we will do whatever it takes to protect claimants and our staff.

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

What this means for claimants:

- There will be no new reviews or reassessments across all benefits for three months – this includes Universal Credit (UC), Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), Personal Independence Payment (PIP), Disability Living Allowance, Attendance Allowance and the Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit.
- As previously announced, face-to-face assessments for all sickness and disability benefits have been suspended for the next 3 months including for any new claims.
- For PIP, if an assessment has already taken place this will continue to be processed. If an assessment has been scheduled, claimants will be contacted by the assessment provider to discuss how this will be taken forward.
- For ESA and UC, claimants whose cases have been referred to the provider will be contacted to take this forward.

Additional information for claimants:

- The suspension will be kept under regular review and extended if necessary.
- If people experience a change in their needs they are still encouraged to contact the Department to ensure they are receiving the correct level of support.
- Where awards are due to expire, we will be extending end-dates so that claimants continue to receive financial support at their current rate during this period.

On Thursday (19 March) it was also announced 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 appointments in person are suspended.

People can still make applications for benefits online if they are eligible. Jobcentres remain open, and will continue to support people who are not able to use phones and online, including homeless people.

Media enquiries for this press release – 020 3267 5144

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Traffic Commissioners require electronic communication during COVID-19 outbreak

The Traffic Commissioners for Great Britain are currently faced with the difficult task of providing ongoing support and service to the transport industry, during a time of unprecedented disruption. Our roads need to be kept safe for essential deliveries, but the regulators are reviewing their processes and making essential adaptations as the COVID-19 situation develops.

The recent Government guidance on remote working means that the processing and despatching of paper documents is not a sustainable way of working, so operators are being urged to use electronic communications such as email and online portals, wherever possible.

To help reduce potential delays, most correspondence you receive from the Office of the Traffic Commissioner (OTC) will now be delivered via email, therefore keeping your email address up to date is vital.

Please contact the OTC electronically wherever possible by:

Please sign up to our [news alert service](#) for regular updates as the situation develops.

Extra protection for businesses with ban on evictions for commercial tenants who miss rent payments

- Commercial tenants unable to pay rent because of coronavirus will be protected from eviction
- Measures support ongoing conversations between landlords and tenants about voluntary arrangements
- Latest measure builds on the unprecedented package of support for businesses already announced

Commercial tenants who cannot pay their rent because of coronavirus will be protected from eviction, the government has announced.

Many landlords and tenants are already having conversations and reaching voluntary arrangements about rental payments due shortly but the Government recognises businesses struggling with their cashflow due to coronavirus remain worried about eviction.

These measures, included in the emergency Coronavirus Bill currently going through Parliament, will mean no business will be forced out of their premises if they miss a payment in the next three months.

This builds on the unprecedented package of support announced for businesses who are affected by coronavirus.

As commercial tenants will still be liable for the rent after this period, the Government is also actively monitoring the impact on commercial landlords' cash flow and continues to be in dialogue with them.

Communities Secretary, Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP, said:

We are protecting both people and their businesses by providing the urgent support they need.

We know many commercial landlords are already setting a great example by working closely with tenants and offering rent deferrals or holidays.

However, these new measures will provide reassurance to businesses struggling with cashflows and ensure no commercial tenant is evicted if they cannot pay their rent because of coronavirus over the next three months.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak MP, said:

We are taking unprecedented action and doing so at unprecedented speed, because we know that businesses and their employees need help now.

That is why we are taking steps to change the law so that no company can be forced out of its premises due to loss of income. Alongside our support for workers and £330 billion of business loans and guarantees, this will help make a real difference to firms across the country trying to protect jobs.

Business Secretary, Alok Sharma MP said:

This measure will provide companies with an essential safeguard in these highly unusual times as they deal with the impact of coronavirus.

This is part of the unprecedented package of support we have put in place to protect jobs and livelihoods right across the country.

Mike Cherry, Federation of Small Businesses National Chairman, said:

Small businesses will wholeheartedly welcome the decision to ban evictions for commercial tenants for three months.

This will give piece of mind to millions of small businesses who are desperately struggling with their cash flow.

We know sensible conversations between landlords and commercial tenants are taking place – but having this legislative backstop to prevent evictions during the worst of the crisis will provide much needed peace of mind for many small businesses.

The Coronavirus Bill also includes new measures to ensure that Business Improvement Districts (BID) are equipped to continue their vital role in managing the impact of the crisis on local economies and helping town centres and high streets recover.

To ensure no area loses its Business Improvement District at this critical time, emergency legislation will allow a delay to ballots between now and 31 December 2020 until March 2021. This will ensure that they are conducted in a safe and effective way.

Simon Quin, High Streets Task Force Executive Director, said:

These are important steps that will strengthen town centres and commercial areas as they prepare for the future.

They will encourage retention of occupancy and ensure Business

Improvement Districts can focus on support for their local areas through the emergency and into recovery. This will make places more resilient.

The amendment to the Coronavirus Bill on commercial leases will apply to England, Wales and Northern Ireland. It applied to all commercial tenants.

We will, of course, be working with the Devolved Administrations, including Scotland, across our coronavirus response.

The change will come into force when the Coronavirus Bill receives Royal Assent. It will last until 30 June, with an option for the government to extend if needed.

The new business information campaign has gone live with [updated information available](#).

[Foreign Secretary advises all British travellers to return to the UK now](#)

The Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) advises against all British travellers to return to the UK now. Read our latest [coronavirus travel advice](#).

- all British travellers abroad who are usually based in the UK advised to return now
- international travel is becoming highly limited with the further closure of air routes, land borders and domestic restrictions introduced daily
- British travellers should contact their tour operator or airline now. Commercial flight options are still available at present

All British tourists and short-stay travellers currently abroad should return to the UK where and while commercial flight options are still available, the Foreign Secretary announced today.

Last week, the [FCO announced an unprecedented change in travel advice to advise against all but essential international travel](#), initially for a period of 30 days. Today's update reflects the pace at which international travel is becoming more difficult with the closure of borders, airlines suspending flights, airports closing, exit bans and further restrictions being introduced daily. Further closures to air routes may come in the next 48 hours, possibly without notice.

Some British tourists abroad are already finding difficulties returning to the UK because of international travel restrictions and domestic policies

around the world. The FCO is working around the clock to support all British travelers in this situation come back to the UK.

The UK government is working with airlines to keep routes open and is calling for international action to keep air routes open for a sufficient period of time to enable international travellers to return on commercial flights.

Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, said:

We are strongly urging UK travellers overseas to return home now where and while there are still commercial routes to do so. Around the world, more airlines are suspending flights and more airports are closing, some without any notice.

Where commercial routes don't exist, our staff are working round the clock to give advice and support to UK nationals. If you are on holiday abroad the time to come home is now while you still can.

Transport Secretary, Grant Shapps, said:

This is a very difficult time for British citizens travelling overseas, or those with families and loved ones abroad. We're in close contact with airlines, who are working tirelessly to ensure British citizens travelling overseas can safely return to the UK. We are also working closely with other government departments, including the FCO to ensure airlines are able to operate to bring people back home.

British travellers should contact their tour operator or airline now to arrange a commercial flight if they want to leave. There is an unprecedented demand on the FCO's consular services so all British tourists abroad should go online for the latest in-country advice.

This advice is aimed at British people travelling abroad, rather than those who are permanent resident overseas who are urged to follow the advice of the local authorities in their host country.

- the FCO updated its COVID-19 Exceptional Travel Advisory Notice to include the following: If you live in the UK and are currently travelling abroad, you're strongly advised to return now, while there are still commercial routes available. Many airlines are suspending flights and many airports are closing, preventing flights from leaving.'
 - further instructions for British travellers to return home can be found on the [coronavirus travel advice page](#)
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Universities told not to alter applicants' offers

Universities should act to maintain the stability of the university admissions system to ensure students' best interests are safeguarded, the Universities Minister has said today (23 March).

Michelle Donelan is asking providers to refrain from changing their offers made to undergraduate students for the next two weeks, such as converting conditional offers to unconditional offers or changing entry requirements.

Since exams were cancelled – including A levels, BTECs and other Level 3 qualifications – a small number of universities have changed a significant proportion of their offers to undergraduate students from 'conditional' to 'unconditional' in a bid to secure their attendance for the 2020/21 academic year.

This practice risks destabilising the admissions system, increasing financial uncertainty and volatility for all institutions at a time when universities are already facing significant pressures.

The Minister is urging universities to act responsibly to maintain the integrity of the higher education system, and avoid actions which might not be in students' best interests, simply to maximise their intake over other universities'. The Minister's message aims to create a period of stability and support the financial health of the system as a whole.

Universities Minister Michelle Donelan said:

We are facing unprecedented circumstances as a country, but it is essential that we create a period of stability for both students and universities.

As universities seek to secure attendance for the next academic year, I would ask them to refrain from changing existing offers to unconditional offers as it risks destabilising the entire admissions systems.

We must also look out for students too, who in these uncertain times may be feeling anxious about their futures. I want to reassure students that we will provide them with the grades they need. No student should feel pressured into making a quick decision which may end up not being in their best interest.

I am asking for a two week pause while we work with the sector over this period on admissions arrangements.

Supporting the announcement on university admissions, Office for Students

chief executive Nicola Dandridge said:

It would be quite wrong for any university or college to respond to the coronavirus crisis by making unconditional offers that may undermine the sustainability of the university system and increase the financial pressure on other providers.

Many universities and colleges have been responding to the enormous challenges of coronavirus with innovation and ingenuity. But it is critical that every university and college puts the student's interest first in these difficult times.

So, I want to make it very clear to any university or college – and its leaders and governors – that if any university or college adjusts any offer to students, or make any unconditional offers, during this two week moratorium we will use any powers available to us to prevent such offer making on the grounds that it is damaging to students and not in their interests.

Universities UK Chief Executive Alistair Jarvis said:

Universities are doing all that they can to support students with great examples across the country. It is important that these efforts are not undermined by inappropriate admissions practices increasing worry and pressure for applicants.

It is vital that the admissions process remains fair, consistent, and in the best interests of all students – who have a right for their work and performance to date to be fairly reflected.

We support today's call and believe universities will respond positively to ensure that no student feels rushed into a decision at what is already a difficult time.

The request from the Universities Minister will apply to unconditional offers being made by universities, as well as existing conditional offers being amended.

The two week period will allow time for further advice to given to students and providers about how the new system of awarding A-Level grades will work, and how the admissions arrangements will work.

The Government's priority is to ensure affected students can move on as planned to the next stage of their lives, including starting university, going on to employment, or starting an apprenticeship in the autumn.

Students who accept an unconditional offer will be able to release themselves as part of the UCAS self- release process to explore other options during Clearing. This process was introduced last year to support student choice and

promote flexibility, and nearly 30,000 students used this functionality.

Work will continue between the Government and the higher education sector over this two week period to provide further clarity on the best way to support applicants and HE providers to ensure that the admissions system remains fair and equitable.

While this request applies to institutions in England, government would welcome other nations to follow the same approach.