

COVID 19 - Universal Credit, Financial Assistance and Sources of Advice for our Citizens

“On 1 March, the number of adults on the live caseload claiming Universal Credit here was 70,000. By 26 April, those numbers had risen by 80% to 126,000. The number of applications during those 8 weeks totalled 65,700, with a tenfold increase in new claims recorded at the height of the [COVID] crisis in mid-March.”

(Department for Communities Press Release, 6th May 2020.)

The economic fallout from the ongoing COVID-19 is being felt acutely by citizens in our community who have lost their jobs or are facing job uncertainty as a direct consequence of the pandemic.

As the crisis deepens more and more constituents will be turning to their elected members for advice about benefits and other supports available at this time.

This short signposting bulletin provides information on financial assistance and advice available to citizens who have lost their jobs or have reduced earnings as a result of COVID-19.

Department for Communities and NI Direct

The Department of Communities and NI Direct have a plethora of information online and as the COVID-19 situation evolves, are updating information about the arrangements for accessing Universal Credit and Benefits during the ongoing pandemic.

The most up-to-date information about COVID-19 and the DfC's various Benefits services including:

- Employment and Support Allowance
- Universal Credit
- New claims guidance, including for the self-employed...

...can be found here at:

www.communities-ni.gov.uk/landing-pages/covid-19-benefits

www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-and-benefits

Claiming Universal Credit

Citizens can apply for Universal Credit online. As of 16th March all face-to-face appointments at Jobs and Benefits Offices have been postponed, hence follow up activity that would normally have taken in place in Jobs and Benefits offices will be managed online or over the phone.

The link for applying for Universal Credit is available at www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/claim-universal-credit-online

If the applicant is unable to make the application to Universal Credit online or needs assistance to make the application, the **Universal Credit Helpline** is available at **0800 012 1331**.

Payments of Universal Credit

Once an online application for Universal Credit has been made it often takes five weeks for the first payment to be made to the recipient. If this time lapse would result in serious financial strife for the person who has made the application, the DfC have in place a number of financial supports:

To apply for **extra financial support**, the DfC's Finance Support service can be contacted on **0800 587 2750** (Freephone) or **0800 587 2750** (textphone for customers with hearing difficulties).

Help with short-term living expenses may be available through *Discretionary Support* or the *Universal Credit Contingency Fund grant* or the *COVID 19 Grant*.

Further information is available at NI Direct www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-and-benefits

DfC's Housing Service

The DfC have a specific webpage providing the latest information about COVID-19 and the Department's Housing Services. The webpage which will be updated regularly during the pandemic is available at www.communities-ni.gov.uk/landing-pages/covid-19-housing

The DfC has an agreement in place with the NIHE and Housing Associations that any tenant facing difficulties paying rent during COVID-19 will not be evicted.

The Department is also working with the private rented sector and has produced a guidance document setting out general advice and information for tenants and landlords in the private rented sector (available at the link above). Legislation has also been put in place by the extending the "notice to quit period". Landlords must give tenants up to 12 weeks.

Citizens who have lost their jobs during the current pandemic and have made a claim to Universal Credit can apply for a *Discretionary Housing Payment* to have their full rent paid for 13 weeks.

Housing Rights NI

Housing rights NI provide advice to citizens requiring help with their housing problems. **Housing and Debt Helpline: 028 9024 5640**, available from 09.30 to 16.30 each weekday.

For citizens who are hard of hearing, they contact the Helpline via **Textphone** at **028 9026 7927**.

Housing Rights NI have a "coronavirus section" on their website providing information and advice on common problems including help for citizens to pay their rent and mortgage, eviction and repairs, available at www.housingadviceni.org

COVID-19 Helpline

As signposted on the DfC's Service Updates Webpage, a Freephone Helpline has been established to assist people in vulnerable groups to access information, advice and support in relation to COVID-19.

Advice NI manage the Helpline which is open 9am to 5pm, 7 days per week at **0800 802 0020**. Alternatively those seeking advice could text **ACTION** to **81025**; email COVID19@advice.net or complete a form on the Advice NI website.

Advice NI

Advice NI, the independent advice network, offer free, independent, high quality advice on issues such as Benefits, Debt, Housing, Employment, Disability and Community Care.

In response to the COVID-19 crisis Advice NI have compiled useful information for citizens on their website, available at www.adviceni.net, updated regularly as we move through this crisis including:

- *Benefits* - and changes which have been made to the benefit system as a result of COVID-19
- *Employment* – including information about vulnerable workers, Statutory Sick Pay, Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and help for the self-employed.
- *Money/Debt* – Advice NI’s Money and Debt Team have compiled helpful “frequently asked questions” around financial issues during the COVID-19 crisis.

Advice NI’s Helplines which citizens can contact for specific advice they require are as follows:

Welfare Changes: Ring **0808 802 0020** or email welfarechanges@adviceni.net

Tax & Benefits: Ring **0800 988 2377** or email tax@adviceni.net

Business Debt: Ring **0800 083 8018** or email bds@adviceni.net

Debt Action: Ring **0800 028 1881** or email debt@adviceni.net

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