The outbreak of coronavirus means that you may need to self-isolate. This means that you might have to stay at home to avoid spreading the virus. This may impact on your ability to work, how much you earn, or stop you from doing things you normally need to do to claim benefits.

The Government and banks have said they will offer help to people if they are diagnosed with coronavirus and need to self-isolate. If you need more information about the symptoms of coronavirus, or advice about avoiding infection, go to the NHS website.

### Help for sole traders and businesses

The Government has released guidance for employers and businesses on how you should deal with the impact of coronavirus. The guide covers several topics, such as how to help prevent the spread of the virus, what to do if someone in your work force has coronavirus, and advice on the certification of absence from work resulting from coronavirus.

The Chancellor also confirmed in a statement on 17 March 2020 that advice given by Government to avoid pubs, clubs and theatres is sufficient for businesses to claim on their insurance if they have appropriate business interruption cover for pandemics in place. Although advice has changed and the Government has said that many of these businesses must now close, the Chancellor’s earlier statement may affect the date from which your insurer pays you.

The Government has also announced help for self-employed people and businesses.

- A temporary Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme will allow banks to offer loans to support small and medium sized businesses. The Government will cover the first 12 months of interest payments.
- If you run a business with fewer than 250 people, costs for up to 14 days of Statutory Sick Pay will be refunded for employees who have been off work because of coronavirus.
- Call the HMRC Coronavirus Helpline on 0800 024 1222 if you cannot pay your tax bill on time because of coronavirus. You may also be able to use HMRC’s Time to Pay service.

On 20 March, the Government announced further support for businesses. Go to www.gov.uk and search for ‘COVID-19: support for businesses’ for more information and to see the dates these schemes cover.

- The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme will be available to all UK businesses. Once the scheme is running, HMRC will repay 80% of selected employees’ wages up to a maximum amount of £2,500 per month. To get this, you will need to apply online.
- Business are also being given longer to make some VAT payments, and the self-employed are being given longer to pay self-assessed income tax that is due on 31 July 2020.

On 26 March 2020, the Chancellor also announced the Self-employment Income Support Scheme.
This scheme pays a grant of 80% of your average trading profits up to a maximum of £2,500 per month for three months. It is available to self-employed individuals and members of a business partnership who have trading profits of less than £50,000 and get more than half of their income from self-employment. You must also:

- have submitted your 2018 - 2019 tax return (or do so by 23 April 2020);
- have traded in the 2019 - 2020 tax year;
- still be trading (or would be if it were not for coronavirus);
- plan to continue trading in the 2020 - 2021 tax year; and
- have lost trading profits because of coronavirus.

The scheme is not open yet. HMRC will start contacting eligible people by the start of June. For more information, go to www.gov.uk and search for ‘Claim a grant through the coronavirus (COVID-19) Self-employment Income Support Scheme’. Please also read the scam warning.

**Business rates**

- Business rates in England and Wales will be scrapped for 12 months from 1 April 2020 for retail, leisure and hospitality businesses. Contact your local authority to find out if you qualify.
- Business rates in Scotland will be scrapped for 12 months from 1 April 2020 for retail, hospitality and tourism businesses. Contact your local authority to find out if you qualify.

**Grants**

In England, the following grants are being given. You do not need to do anything. Your local authority will write to you if you are eligible.

- A grant of £10,000 for the smallest businesses. These businesses will be ones currently eligible for small business rates relief or rural rate relief.
- A grant of £25,000 to retail, hospitality and leisure businesses that operate from smaller premises that have a rateable value of between £15,000 and £51,000.

The Business Support website also contains useful information for businesses in England. Go to www.businesssupport.gov.uk or call 0300 456 3565.

In Wales, the following grants are being given. They will be administered through the business rates system, so you do not need to apply

- A grant of £10,000 for all businesses that are eligible for small business rates relief with a rateable value of up to £12,000.
- A grant of £25,000 to retail, hospitality and leisure businesses that operate from smaller premises that have a rateable value of between £12,001 and £51,000.

Also, details about a ‘New small business grant’ should be available shortly. For information, go to www.gov.wales and search for Coronavirus (COVID-19): support for businesses.
In Scotland, the following grants are being given:

- A grant of £10,000 for small businesses in receipt of the Small Business Bonus Scheme or Rural Relief.
- A grant of £25,000 for retail, hospitality and leisure properties with a rateable value between £18,001 and £51,000.

The Business Gateway website is run by local authorities and also contains useful information for businesses in Scotland. Go to www.bgateway.com or call 0300 013 4753.

## Business rent

The Government has introduced temporary measures to protect business tenants. From 26 March 2020 until 30 June 2020, business landlords in England and Wales can no longer end your lease and take the premises back (forfeit the lease) because of rent arrears.

Your business rent is still due. If you cannot afford to pay your business rent, contact your landlord to discuss your situation.

## If your income is affected

You are not eligible to receive Statutory Sick Pay unless you are employed. Instead, you may be able to claim Universal Credit and/or contributory Employment and Support Allowance.

- The Government has announced that contributory Employment and support allowance can now be claimed from day one of illness.
- If you are claiming Universal Credit, you can do so without having to attend a jobcentre if you have been advised to self-isolate.
- The Government has temporarily changed the way they work out Universal Credit for self-employed people on low incomes. Call the Universal Credit helpline on 0800 328 5644 for more information.

If you are employed, you may be entitled to Statutory Sick Pay more quickly than usual.

Turn2us has more information about benefits and how to claim them.

## Already claiming benefits?

If you are claiming Universal Credit you may need to meet certain requirements to continue to receive the benefit. This could be job searching, periods of time at work, or attending regular meetings or assessments.

If you are too ill to carry out any task, you should phone the office paying the benefit to explain why you can't go. There will be no requirement for people self-isolating to attend a job centre to claim benefits. This can be done over the phone instead.
The Government has confirmed that if you are claiming sickness and disability benefits you will no longer need to attend face-to-face assessments for the next three months. This will apply if you receive Personal Independence Payments (PIP), Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), Industrial Injuries Disability Benefit and possibly Universal Credit. New claimants will also no longer need face-to-face assessments. More information can be found on the GOV.UK website.

**Benefit increases**

From 6 April 2020, the standard allowance in Universal Credit and the basic element in Working Tax Credit will be increased by £20 per week. This will apply to new and existing claimants. The exact amount you will receive will depend on your situation.

If you rent privately the maximum amount of help you can receive through Housing Benefit or Universal Credit has been increased to 30% of the average rents in all areas of the UK. This is called the Local Housing Allowance.

To find out more about how these changes may help you, please visit Turn2us. They have a benefit calculator to help you find out if and how much you may be able to claim.

**Your bank may be able to help**

Many lenders including TSB, Lloyds, Halifax, Bank of Scotland, NatWest and Royal Bank of Scotland have said that it may be possible for their customers to receive a payment holiday if they are struggling to pay their mortgage as a result of coronavirus.

Even if your bank isn’t mentioned above, you should contact them to explain your situation. Each bank will consider what help it may give case by case. Give them a call to see if they can help you.

Some banks are also offering possible payment holidays on loan and credit-card payments or allowing people to access their fixed-savings accounts without a penalty. Speak to your bank, explain your situation and see how they can help.

Avoid taking out more credit unless you know that you can afford to pay it back.

**Help with your mortgage**

The Government has announced that if you are affected by the coronavirus and struggle to pay your mortgage you may be able to receive a three month payment holiday. This means you will not have to make a repayment for three months. However, interest will continue to accrue during this time.
Your lender will look at your individual circumstances and offer support on a case-by-case basis.

You will need to make up the payments that have been deferred; this could be over the remaining term of the mortgage.

You can only get a payment holiday if you are not already in arrears and are up to date with payments.

If a payment holiday is agreed then it should not affect your credit rating.

Lenders also announced that no repossession action will be taken for a **three month period** starting on **19 March 2020**.

If you cannot afford to pay your mortgage, or already have arrears, contact your lender as soon as possible to discuss your situation. If you are at risk of repossession and your lender is unhelpful, contact **Shelter** on **0808 800 4444**.

If the court says that the eviction is going ahead, contact **Shelter** on **0808 800 4444**.

**Help to Buy customers**

The Government has confirmed a possible **three month repayment holiday** if you have been affected by the coronavirus and have Help to Buy loans.

For more details contact the Help to Buy: Equity Loan administrator on **0345 848 0236**.

If the loan was taken out in Wales, you should contact **Help to Buy (Wales) Ltd** on **029 2080 3451**.

**Buy to let landlords**

On **18 March 2020**, the Government **announced** the following measures to protect tenants and landlords affected by coronavirus.

- There will be no new evictions from social or private rented accommodation while the emergency is taking place.
- New possession proceeding applications through the court cannot be started during the crisis.
- To protect landlords, the new three-month mortgage payment holiday will also apply to Buy to Let mortgages. See the earlier section **Help with your mortgage** for more information about how this works.

Tenants and landlords will be expected to work together to agree affordable payment arrangements once this period is over.

**Help if you rent your home**

In **England** and **Wales**, the Government has introduced temporary laws to protect tenants. From **26 March 2020** until **30 September 2020**, landlords must give at least **three months' notice** before they can start court action to evict you.

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**Business Debtline**

Freephone **0800 197 6026**

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If you cannot afford to pay your rent, or already have arrears, contact your landlord as soon as possible to discuss your situation. If your landlord is unhelpful and you need more support, contact Shelter on 0808 800 4444. Information can also be found on the Shelter website.

The court service also announced that from 27 March 2020, it will suspend all ongoing possession action for at least 90 days.

If your landlord has already started court action and you already have a notice of eviction, contact the court that is dealing with your case. Ask the court if the eviction will still take place. If the court says that the eviction is going ahead, contact Shelter on 0808 800 4444.

In Scotland, the Housing and Property Chamber has postponed all scheduled hearings until 28 May 2020. This means that if a decision to evict you has not already been made, you can't be evicted from your property before this date. If you have a case that has been postponed, you will be notified when you should attend the Tribunal.

The Scottish Government has also announced extra protection if you are unable to pay your rent because of a delay or failure in the payment of welfare benefits. Protection from eviction will be increased from three to six months. More information can be found on the GOV.SCOT website.

If your landlord is unhelpful and you need more support, contact Shelter Scotland on 0808 800 4444.

Help from your home energy provider

Energy providers have agreed that the disconnection of credit meters will be completely suspended. Also, if you are self-isolating and unable to top up your pre-payment meter, you can:

- nominate a third party for credit top ups;
- have a discretionary fund added to your credit; or
- have a pre-loaded top up card sent so that your supply is not interrupted.

If you are struggling to manage repayments to your energy provider contact them to see what help they can provide. New guidance means that your debt repayments and bill payments could be reassessed, reduced or paused where necessary.

More information can be found on the GOV.UK website.

If you are a vulnerable person, you could ask your energy provider to place you on the Priority Services Register. The Priority Services Register can help to make sure that you receive all the appropriate support you need. You can find out who may be classed as vulnerable and what help is available by visiting Ofgem.

Help with your council tax

Councils in England have received guidance from the Government on how they should use new funding to help households in their area.
If you currently get help from the Council Tax Reduction scheme (also called Council Tax Support) and are of working-age, you may see your council tax bill for 2020-2021 reduce by a further £150.

- You do not need to have been directly affected by coronavirus to be eligible.
- You do not need to apply to the council for this extra reduction. Councils already have details of households that get help through the Council Tax Reduction scheme and should contact you directly.

Councils may also give further help if you are dealing with exceptional circumstances.

Business Debtline endeavour to keep our fact sheets as up-to-date as possible, however, we cannot be held responsible for changes in legislation or for developments in case law since this edition of the fact sheet was issued.