



# Work and Pensions Committee

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From the Chair

4 March 2020

Rt Hon Thérèse Coffey MP  
Secretary of State  
Department for Work and Pensions

Dear Thérèse,

I am writing to you about the current outbreak of COVID-19 (novel Coronavirus) and the potential implications for your Department.

As you will know, [Public Health England](#) is advising some groups of people to self-isolate, which involves staying away from the workplace or other public areas. This will obviously have an impact on people who are required to attend Jobcentres (or face a sanction) and on people whose terms of employment mean that they lose income if they are unable to work.

I would be grateful if you could answer the following questions:

1. Was your Department involved in the development of the Government's [Coronavirus Action Plan](#)? If so, why does the plan not address the potential impact on Universal Credit claims or people's earnings?
2. What is the Department's approach to sanctions for people who can't meet the obligations in their Claimant Commitment because the Government's guidance is that they should self-isolate?
3. What guidance have you given to Jobcentres about the outbreak, including on the approach that staff should take to sanctions? Please could we see a copy of any guidance?
4. Given the high number of people attending Jobcentres and the risk of transmission, what plans are in place if Jobcentre staff are unable to attend work, or if a service centre needs to close temporarily? How are you ensuring that staff and claimants are will not be disadvantaged as a result?
5. In a response to Written Parliamentary Question [20565](#), your Department suggested that those required to self-isolate could make a claim for new-style Employment and Support Allowance. Could you set out how this would work?

Those in low paid or insecure jobs, for example those on zero-hours, short-term contracts or workers in the gig economy, who are often self-employed, could also face additional hardship from loss of pay if they are required to self-isolate. It would be helpful to have answers to the following questions:

6. What assessment has the DWP made, if any, of the impact of the outbreak on the number of Universal Credit claims in the event of an upsurge in cases of COVID-19?
  - a. Can you confirm that anyone applying for Universal Credit in these circumstances will have to wait five weeks for their first payment, or take out a loan in the form of a repayable Advance?
7. Is the system sufficiently prepared and resourced to ensure that those affected will not face any further financial hardship as a result?
8. Self-employed people who make a Universal Credit claim risk being disadvantaged by the minimum income floor if their income decreases (or stops) as a result of their inability to work. How are you ensuring that self-employed people will not suffer hardship if they are required to self-isolate?

I hope you will agree that the exceptional circumstances of this outbreak necessitate a flexible response from the DWP. To contain the spread of the virus, it is vital that those required to self-isolate are not deterred from doing so due to the threat of sanctions or loss of income.

The Committee would be grateful for a reply by **Friday 13 March**.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Stephen Timms', with a horizontal line above the name.

**Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP**  
**Chair**