

Changes to PIP in Response to Coronavirus (COVID-19) in Northern Ireland

The Law Centre NI team are working hard to bring you the most up to date information on changes to social security provisions in Northern Ireland. This update provides all the key information on Personal Independence Payment (PIP), following the Disability Consultative Forum held in April.

If you need any further help clarification, you can contact our social security team on (028) 9024 4401.

Priorities

- PIP are working on reduced staff numbers but are maintaining the telephony service between 10am-4pm every day.
- The priority is primarily payment of benefit, focusing on new claims first and changes of circumstances after.

Extension of Awards

- PIP awards that are due to end before 30 June 2020 will automatically be extended for a further six months.
- There will be no new award review forms generated. PIP awards that are due to be reviewed will be extended for a further six months.
- Claimants will receive notification that their award was due to end but will be extended due to Coronavirus (Covid-19). The notification will advise the claimant that they do not need to take any further action unless there is a change of circumstances.
- Current claims (AR1) that are awaiting assessment will be treated as if they are about to expire and will be extended six months.

Extension on Submitting PIP2 Forms

- Claimants will have 90 days to return their PIP2 form, based on the presumption that things be returning to business as usual in three months.
- Claims will not currently be disallowed if the PIP2 forms are returned later than one month. Claimants will receive a letter detailing this information.
- The same is applied to AR1 forms that have already been issued but these are likely to be extended now anyway.

- Easements on advice sector signing application forms on behalf of client's for PIP

PIP Reconsiderations and Appeals

- All outstanding reconsiderations and appeals will be treated as priority and assurances have been given that there are sufficient resources to cope.
- This includes evidence already submitted and new evidence provided, with efforts made to review and make a formal offer if there is favourable evidence. The same procedure will still be followed in terms of referring evidence to Capita for review.

Capita Assessments

- There will be telephony Capita assessments for new claims and changes of circumstances.
- If there is sufficient evidence, a paper based review will be conducted. If not, an assessment will be required.
- The Department of Communities (DfC) has made it clear that customers should not be disadvantaged by the change to telephony assessments. There is an understanding that the situation is not ideal and it has been emphasised that changes will be closely monitored by the department.
- Capita staff members have received training in relation to teleconferencing and the importance of information gathering has been emphasised. Assessors have been advised to be cautious around informal observations and urged not to make assumptions. It is acknowledged by DfC that there is a limitation to telephony assessments. They will involve asking more questions than usual and making sure risk issues are identified.
- In relation to conference calling, assessors have also been advised to make sure they call appointees, if applicable, in the first instance.
- Capita are using similar existing guidance with a modified reasoning framework. In phase one they have categorised 54 conditions that they consider will have restrictions that may make telephony assessments more difficult and will endeavour to do these by paper based review as much as possible.
- Capita have indicated that the list is under review but that it would not be appropriate to provide, at risk of making any claimants feel disadvantaged.
- However, not all claimants that fall into the above 54 conditions will receive a paper based review.
- Efforts will be made to obtain medical evidence, where possible, in order to conduct a paper based review. Capita have been instructed by DfC to make reasonable attempts to obtain information from a GP, however given the circumstances there is an acknowledgement that this may be difficult but that

efforts should be made to obtain evidence from other avenues such as social workers and mental health professional etc.

- There will be no time limits on phone assessments. The timing of the calls has been monitored and is currently similar to face to face assessments, with an average length of 50 minutes.

Failure to Attend

- Claimants will be issued letters regarding telephone assessments, giving at least seven days' notice.
- If there is a failure to attend, the process will be followed as normal with DfC reviewing why this happened. The department has given assurances that clients will not be disadvantaged because they are unable to conduct a phone assessment.
- There will be three attempts made by the assessor to contact the client by phone on the day of assessment. However, procedures overall will not change. The claimant must provide good reason why they could not take part in assessment, if they fail to do so. If they are unable to attend the assessment, the onus remains on the claimant to notify Capita and rearrange prior to the assessment date. The claimant does not need to provide a reason as to why they wish to rearrange the date of assessment. If there is no contact, Capita must take reasonable steps to contact the claimant on the day of assessment then return the claim to the DfC to make the relevant investigations.

Audio Recording of Telephone Assessments

- Recording of telephone assessments is not possible due to the number of disability assessors working from home without the ability to record.
- The Department for Communities have also noted that since being introduced in November the uptake of audio recorded assessments has been low.
- Audio recording will return once the arrangements return to normal.
- The Department for Communities encourages claimants to have a representative or family member dialled in for the assessment. A representative or family member can be present for the assessment by means of a conference call.

Auditing

- Internal audits will continue with Capita supplying a sample of reports to DfC weekly. The telephone assessments can be audited by listening in to the telephone assessment and will be reviewed on a weekly basis.
- If a report is found to be flawed, or clarification is required, DfC will ask Capita to amend the report.

Other Issues

- There has been a commitment to investigate whether the PIP claim form can be submitted online.
- There has been a commitment to clarify whether transcripts would be made available to clients if translation needed.
- There has been a commitment to explore how BSL and ISL interpreters can be facilitated.
- Assessments for child DLA – PIP claims have been suspended. The children will remain on DLA until normal business resumes and face to face assessments can be carried out.



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