



Department
for Work &
Pensions

Minister for Disabled People,
Health and Work
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Caxton House
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LONDON
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www.dwp.gov.uk

23 November 2020

Dear Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP,

Thank you for your letter of 11 November regarding the suspension of face to face assessments and processing of new claims for Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit (IIDB).

The COVID-19 outbreak has been unprecedented and we took the difficult decision to temporarily suspend all face-to-face assessments in order to protect the health of claimants and staff. I am deeply saddened that some individuals have died or seen their health deteriorate while waiting for their IIDB assessments. We know that increasing numbers of claimants are awaiting assessments, but we must ensure that when we open up our assessment centres again, they are COVID-secure and claimants feel confident coming to them.

We are not currently able to lift the suspension on face to face assessments for IIDB claims due to the restrictions in place to control the spread of COVID-19, but work is continuing at pace to ensure readiness when these restrictions are lifted. The nature of IIDB assessments, which often involve spending an hour, sometimes longer, in an enclosed private space with a healthcare professional with some assessments involving direct medical examination, makes this particularly difficult. In addition, some of our claimants are less able to comply with safety mitigations such as face coverings or social distancing.

I recognise that there is a balance to be struck between the public health concerns and the need to effectively deliver DWP outcomes. My officials and I have sought advice on re-opening safely from Public Health England, the Health and Safety Executive and the Department of Health and Social Care, including discussions with the Deputy Chief Medical Officer, Jenny Harries. In planning how to deliver our services, we must take account of community transmission rates across the country, considering risks with respect to both claimants and staff. The resumption of face to face services will closely follow the latest UK Government and Devolved Administration guidance around working from home, minimising use of public transport and continuing to reduce overall social interactions, particularly those in indoor enclosed spaces.

I would like to reassure you that we have continued to process IIDB claims for those individuals with terminal illnesses, and those for Fast Track prescribed diseases. These claims have continued to be assessed as usual without the need for a face to face assessment.

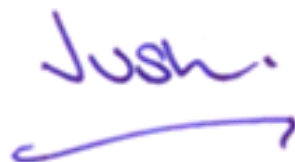
In terms of your questions regarding the processing of IIDB claims, operational management information shows that the current number of outstanding IIDB claims awaiting an assessment has risen by approximately 3000 to 5,300, when compared with March 2020. The average age of the IIDB cases currently outstanding is 116 days.

Following a successful trial, we have now begun paper based assessments for certain prescribed diseases. Assessing some cases on paper means that we can reduce the overall backlog and give some claimants the awards they are entitled to. Over the coming weeks, we will be looking to increase the volume of cases we are able to process in this way based on the feedback we receive from our providers and healthcare professionals who are ensuring that the quality of the assessment outcomes remains high. At present the paper based approach includes claims for asbestosis (D1) and Pleural Thickening (D9), which you specifically refer to in your letter.

I am however aware of the importance of face-to-face assessments for those claimants where there is no alternative approach. We will restart face to face assessments as soon as we are able to and will do so initially on a voluntary basis. I am committed to scaling up face-to-face assessments when it is safe to do so.

I can assure you that no one will lose out on any entitlement to IIDB payments. Award payments will be backdated to the date of application. Reassessment awards have been extended to ensure that payments continue. Any deteriorations which would have resulted in an increase in award will be backdated once face-to-face assessments recommence, to ensure no one is left out of pocket.

Kind Regards,

A handwritten signature in purple ink, appearing to read 'Justin', with a long horizontal flourish underneath.

Justin Tomlinson MP
Minister for Disabled People, Health & Work



Work and Pensions Committee

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From the Chair

Justin Tomlinson MP
Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work
Department for Work and Pensions

11 November 2020

Dear Justin,

I have been contacted by the Chair of the Asbestos Victims' Support Groups Forum, which represents organisations that support asbestos victims. The Forum has expressed its concerns that, during the coronavirus pandemic, there are no procedures in place for processing Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit (IIDB) claims for sufferers of asbestosis (D1) and Pleural Thickening (D9).

While the Forum acknowledges that the Department has put measures in place to process PIP and ESA claims without the need for a face-to-face health assessment, such as the introduction of remote assessments, it says that there are no similar measures for IIDB claims. This has led to substantial delays in processing claims for IIDB since the outbreak, with a small number of claimants having sadly died without receiving their entitlement.

It would be helpful to have answers to the following questions:

- 1. How is the Department continuing to process IIDB claims during the pandemic?**
 - a. How has the suspension of face-to-face medical assessments affected the processing of IIDB claims?**
 - b. In response to a recent Parliamentary Question, you said that the Department is “urgently exploring” the option of alternative assessment channels for IIDB claims.¹ What alternative channels are you exploring, and when might the Department be able to introduce them?**
- 2. How long is it currently taking the Department to process IIDB claims from start to finish, and how long must applicants wait for an assessment?**
 - a. Is there a backlog of claims, and if so, how large is it?**

¹ PQ [109340](#)

b. What steps is the Department taking, if required, to speed up the processing of IIDB claims and clear any backlog?

It would be helpful to have a response by Monday 23 November.

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, Work and Pensions Committee