

1. Introduction

Established in 1966, Spina bifida • Hydrocephalus • Information • Networking • Equality - Shine, (formerly Association for Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus) is an independent charity working across England, Wales and Northern Ireland to support individuals with spina bifida and/or hydrocephalus to overcome challenges and achieve the best for them and their families.

Shine is the largest organisation working in this field in Europe. We are a membership organisation of over 11,500 individuals living with spina bifida and/or hydrocephalus and a community of over 75,000 members, families, friends, and professionals, sharing achievements, challenges and information on living with hydrocephalus, or spina bifida, and related issues.

2. Response

We welcome the temporary suspension of the four and seven waiting day periods with regard to, respectively, Statutory Sick Pay and “New Style” Employment and Support Allowance.

In addition, we welcome the £20 increase in the Universal Credit Standard Allowance. However, we cannot see why this has not, also, been applied to benefits such as Employment and Support Allowance. Many of our members struggle to manage financially at the best of times and we envision that this situation will deteriorate during the course of the present crisis. Therefore we call on the Department of Work and Pensions to apply the £20 increase to these also.

We welcome the suspension of all face to face meetings at Job Centres for, both, new and existing Universal Credit claimants. We also welcome the introduction of regulations which allow UC and ESA claimants “affected” by coronavirus (anyone having Covid-19 or required to self-isolate) to be treated automatically as having limited capability for work, without the requirement for any medical evidence or to undergo a Work Capability Assessment. We are encouraged by assurances made by The Secretary of State for Work & Pensions that no sanctions will be applied who, because of Covid-19, are unable to take steps to look for work.

However, we have significant concerns that the suspension of all face to face functional assessments in favour of paper based or telephone assessments for other claims and reviews, such as Personal Independence Payments, will compound the already, in our view, appalling quality of such assessments. In our opinion this state of affairs will result in our members seeking Mandatory Reconsiderations and Appeals in even greater numbers than those prior to the current situation. Leading them to experience further frustration, stress and anxiety.

Furthermore, we are already seeing delays in the processing of claims, Mandatory Reconsiderations and Appeals that were in the system prior to the current climate, exacerbating our member’s negative experiences.

3. Summary

In summary Shine's opinion of the Department of Work and Pension response to the Covid-19 outbreak is that it has responded reasonably in some areas but in others there are unexplained inconsistencies and some initiatives will increase hardship on our members.

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