

No queue for Universal Credit in Edinburgh

The Scottish Government has told us that an additional 110,000 Universal Credit claims have been made since the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak.

This is borne out by Linda Gibb, who is a Senior Employer at DWP in Edinburgh. Linda tells us that the number of claims has increased fivefold in this time. But she has also confirmed that there is no backlog today.

The reason for this is simple. Every single person who worked for DWP was put into action dealing with every claim that came in. Linda admitted it was some years since she had done this herself, but everyone pulled their weight and they all became quicker through the process. They have also taken on new staff in Edinburgh to help deal with the claims, some of whom were former Flybe employees. They are also going to recruit some new staff, firstly by offering positions to any claimants who have the necessary qualifications.

Linda explained that the Universal Credit system may well come in for criticism, but it has come into its own during this crisis. She said: "It is a much simpler online system, and we would never have been able to deal with all the claims under the previous system which was all paper-based. There is now no backlog, except where there is critical information missing, or we have not been able to contact claimants for some reason."

The DWP has taken the initiative to tell claimants not to call

them. 'Don't call us we'll call you' may be a throwaway jokey phrase, but it has helped them enormously just to concentrate on the claims and then call people to verify information or ask for more.

Advances have been made (those are payments to account of entitlement) and most people will get paid this week.

We asked what people who are new to claiming should do. Linda was firm – just get the claim started and then we will contact you to make sure it is processed. A lot of the information you need is on the website gov.uk but there are also partner organisations such as Citizens Advice Scotland who can help you with your online application. It is of course trite to say that everyone can do their claim online, but there really is help out there.

If you don't have access to the internet then there is also a phone process and the details are with Citizens Advice and other partners such as the NHS.

Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People Shirley-Anne Somerville said: "This huge increase in claims for Universal Credit demonstrates just how many people across the country are struggling financially due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"These are difficult and worrying times for everyone, with many people requiring financial support for the first time and even more pressure on those who were already struggling to make ends meet.

"It is welcome that people are claiming the support that they are entitled to from the DWP, and I would encourage people to look into what additional help is available. Even if you are not entitled to Universal Credit, there could be other assistance that you can access so it is worth checking.

"That's why we've been working with the Citizens Advice

network in Scotland to create this central source of information – with everything from guidance on benefits, right through to what you can do if you are worried about paying your mortgage or rent.”

Citizens Advice Scotland Chief Executive Derek Mitchell said: “The Citizens Advice network in Scotland is known for always being there to help and the support we give will be more important than ever to help people avoid getting into crisis. There may also be lots of people who have never used our services before and it’s crucial that they know our information and advice is there for them too.

“Our national network of Citizens Advice Bureaux is still operating for those who need it – if you have been financially impacted by the coronavirus outbreak your local Citizens Advice Bureau can help make sure you have access to all the income you are entitled to, as well as giving tailored advice about what’s on offer within local communities across Scotland.

“There’s increased demand for our advice on financial services, that’s why we’ve created dedicated COVID-19 content online so people get the information they need 24/7 and from the comfort of their own homes.

“We’ve also got a dedicated helpline for people who might not be able to access our services online. If you have been financially impacted by the coronavirus outbreak and require free, confidential, financial support, please visit cas.org.uk or call 0800 028 1456.

“Local Citizens Advice Bureaux are situated around the country. To find your local service, simply enter your postcode at cas.org.uk/bureaux”