



BRIEFING PAPER

Number CBP 8880, 2 April 2020

FAQs: Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme

By Daniel Ferguson

Contents:

1. Background
2. Eligible employers
3. 'Furloughed workers'
4. Eligible workers
5. Selecting workers for furlough
6. Meaning of wages
7. Other employment issues



Contents

Summary	3
1. Background	4
2. Eligible employers	6
Q1. Which employers are eligible?	6
Q2. What can employers claim?	6
Q3. Do employers need to prove they cannot pay their workers?	6
Q4. When will the Scheme come into effect?	7
Q5. How will employers make a claim?	7
3. 'Furloughed workers'	8
Q6. What is a furloughed worker?	8
Q7. Does the Scheme cover workers on reduced hours?	8
Q8. How do employers designate a worker as furloughed?	8
Q9. Can workers do volunteer work while on furlough?	9
Q10. Can a worker be furloughed by multiple employers?	9
Q11. Can workers work for other employers while on furlough?	9
Q12. Can workers come on and off furlough?	9
4. Eligible workers	10
Q13. What workers are covered by the Scheme?	10
Q14. Does the Scheme cover director-employees?	10
Q15. Does the Scheme cover workers who have already been made redundant?	11
Q16. Does the Scheme cover those who have recently been made a job offer?	11
5. Selecting workers for furlough	13
Q17. Do employers have an automatic right to furlough workers?	13
Q18. Can workers demand to be furloughed?	13
Q19. Can agency workers and zero-hours workers be furloughed?	14
Q20. What about vulnerable employees?	14
Q21. How should employers select which workers to furlough?	15
Q22. Do employers have to consult workers?	15
Q23. Can employers make redundancies before the Scheme comes into effect?	16
6. Meaning of wages	17
Q24. What wages are covered by the Scheme?	17
Q25. How will wages be calculated?	17
Q26. Will employers have to top up the wages?	17
Q27. Will employee NICs and pension contributions have to be deducted?	17
Q28. Do furloughed workers have to be paid the National Minimum Wage?	18
7. Other employment issues	19
Q29. Can workers who are on sick leave be furloughed?	19
Q30. Does being furloughed affect maternity rights?	19
Q31. Does being furloughed affect continuity of employment?	20
Q32. Does annual leave continue to accrue during furlough?	20

Contributing Authors: Lorraine Conway, Insolvency, Section 1

Summary

On 20 March 2020 the Government announced the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. The Scheme is part of a range of Government measures to support businesses during the Covid-19 pandemic which the Chancellor has labelled the “most comprehensive and generous suite of interventions of any major developed country in the world.”

Under the Job Retention Scheme, the Government will provide a grant to employers to cover 80% of workers’ wages, up to £2,500 per month. The Scheme is set to come into effect by the end of April but will be backdated to 1 March 2020. It will last for three months, although it can be extended.

The purpose of the Scheme is to ensure that employers who cannot pay staff wages do not make redundancies.

Employers can only claim for workers who are ‘furloughed’. This is a new concept in UK employment law and describes a situation where a worker remains employed but is not provided with any work. Workers on reduced hours are excluded from the Scheme.

The Scheme is tied to PAYE and employers can only claim for workers who were on their payroll as of 28 February 2020. This would exclude many workers in the gig economy, even if they would be found to be ‘workers’ under employment law.

The Job Retention Scheme is simply a mechanism through which employers can claim money from HMRC. It does not alter existing employment law rights and obligations.

Employers will normally be liable under the employment contract to pay workers their full wages, even if they cannot provide any work. In many cases, the employment contract would need to be varied to allow employers to furlough a worker on reduced pay. This would likely require the worker’s agreement.

The decision to designate a worker as furloughed is one for the employer. This could cause problems for zero-hours workers and agency workers whose employers could simply reduce their work to zero without making a claim under the Scheme.

The Scheme also sits amongst a range of existing statutory employment rights. These include protections from discrimination, protections from unfair dismissal and rights to consultation in cases of collective redundancies. It also includes the rules on statutory sick pay, statutory maternity pay and holiday pay. In many cases, the current Government guidance does not provide indication of how the Scheme will interact with these rights.

This paper covers a number of frequently asked questions on the Job Retention Scheme.

This is a fast-moving area and the paper should be read as correct at the time of publication.

This information is provided to Members of Parliament in support of their parliamentary duties and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. A suitably qualified professional should be consulted if specific advice or information is required.

1. Background

The Covid-19 pandemic continues to have a significant impact on economic activity in the UK, including on jobs and income. An academic survey conducted on 25 March 2020 found that 57% of workers were engaging in less paid work and that 8% of workers had already lost their jobs. It also found that the economic impact of the pandemic was most strongly felt by those in precarious working arrangements.¹

On 26 March 2020, the Government made the [Health Protection \(Coronavirus, Restrictions\) \(England\) Regulations 2020](#). Similar regulations have been made for the other three nations. The regulations require businesses in a range of sectors to close their premises. They also make it an offence for a person to go to work if it is “reasonably possible” for that work to be done from home.

The Government’s [guidance on self-isolation](#) states that a person who shows symptoms of coronavirus illness must self-isolate for 7 days. Those in the same household as a symptomatic person must isolate for 14 days. Meanwhile the Government’s [guidance on shielding](#) strongly advises all those in the ‘extremely vulnerable’ category not to leave their home for 12 weeks.

The Government recognised that these interventions could lead to workers being made redundant.

Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme

On 20 March 2020, the Chancellor announced the [Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme](#) (‘JRS’). Under the Scheme the Government will cover 80% of worker’s wages up to £2,500 per month.

Both the [Trades Union Congress](#) (TUC) and the [Confederation of British Industry](#) (CBI) welcomed the measures.

Section 76 of the [Coronavirus Act 2020](#) provides that HMRC shall, in relation to Covid-19, have such functions as directed by the Treasury. This would appear to be the legislative basis on which the JRS will operate. The Explanatory Notes say:

This clause provides that Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs (HMRC) have such functions as the Treasury may direct in relation to Covid-19. It allows the Treasury to grant additional functions to HMRC where these are necessary to deliver the Government’s response to Covid-19. In particular, it will enable the Treasury to grant the functions necessary for HMRC to pay grants to businesses to deliver the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme.²

The announcement of the Scheme gave rise to a number of questions about its compatibility with existing employment law. This was covered in the Library Insight, [Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme: How will it fit with employment law?](#)

¹ Abi Adams-Prassl, Teodora Boneva, Marta Golin and Christopher Rauh, [Inequality in the Impact of the Coronavirus Shock: New Survey Evidence for the UK](#), 1 April 2020.

² [HL Bill 110 Explanatory Notes](#) (the Explanatory Notes for the Coronavirus Act 2020 are not yet available on the legislation.gov.uk website).

On 26 March, the Government published more detailed [guidance for employers](#) and [guidance for employees](#).

Other steps taken to support businesses and workers

The JRS is one of a number of measures the Government has introduced to provide financial support to businesses and workers. The Chancellor said the JRS, along with the other support measures, is the “most comprehensive and generous suite of interventions of any major developed country in the world.”³

The Library Briefing, [Support for businesses during the Coronavirus \(Covid-19\) outbreak \(CBP-8847\)](#), covers the business measures in detail, including the Business Introduction Loan Scheme, business rates holidays, VAT deferrals and more.

The Government has announced new insolvency measures to help businesses hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. Significantly, the proposed new insolvency measures include a three-month suspension of the wrongful trading rules in order to remove the threat of directors incurring personal liability whilst trading on during the pandemic. The change in law will apply retrospectively from 1 March 2020 for an initial period of three months. All other “checks and balances” that help ensure directors fulfil their legal duties properly are to remain in force. This is covered in the Library Briefing, [Coronavirus: changes to insolvency rules to help businesses \(CBP 8877\)](#).

The Government has also reformed the rules on statutory sick pay to extend it to those who are self-isolating in prescribed circumstances and to make regulations to provide employers a rebate for SSP payments relating to Covid-19. The Library Briefing, [Coronavirus Bill: Statutory Sick Pay and National Insurance Contributions \(CBP-8864\)](#), covers this in detail.

The Government has also announced a [Self-employment Income Support Scheme](#), which provides similar support for the self-employed.

A note on terminology...

A number of terms are used frequently throughout this paper.

- “Guidance for employers” means the Government’s [guidance for employers on the JRS](#).
- “Guidance for employees” means the Government’s [guidance for employees on the JRS](#).
- “Guidance for businesses” means the Government’s [guidance for businesses on the JRS](#).
- “Government guidance” refers collectively to the three documents above.

The Government’s guidance uses the terms ‘employee’ and ‘worker’ interchangeably and in an apparently non-technical manner (see Q13). This paper uses the term ‘worker’ to refer generally to those who will qualify under the JRS. The term ‘employee’ is used when referring to specific employment rights that only apply to those who are employees as defined in employment legislation.

³ [HC Deb 24 March 2020 vol. 674 c190](#).

2. Eligible employers

Q1. Which employers are eligible?

The [guidance for employers](#) says that any UK organisation that has set up an PAYE payroll by 28 February 2020 can make a claim to the JRS.

Eligible organisations can include:

- Businesses
- Charities
- Recruitment agencies (if they have agency workers on PAYE)
- Public authorities

However, the guidance says that public sector employers are expected not to furlough workers (a prerequisite for making a claim) if they continue to receive funding for staff costs.

The guidance says that where a business has gone into administration, the administrators can make claims to the Scheme.

Q2. What can employers claim?

The [guidance for employers](#) says that employers can claim 80% of a furloughed worker's regular wages, up to £2,500 per month.

For the meaning of 'furloughed worker' see Question 6. For the meaning of 'wages' see Section 6.

The guidance says that employers can claim an additional grant to cover associated Employer National Insurance Contributions (NICs) and minimum automatic enrolment employer pension contributions.

The Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales (ICAEW) [provides the following illustration](#) of how a claim could work:

X Ltd employs Mr B at an annual salary of £42,000, so £3,500 per month. Mr B has opted out of auto enrolment.

Each month, Mr B currently receives net pay of £2,675 which is after deducting PAYE of £492 and employees NIC of £333. On this salary, the employer pays employers' NIC of £383.

The available grant for the employer is the lower of

(c) 80% of £3,500 = £2,800, and

(d) £2,500

Plus employers NIC, £245, on this amount

So X Ltd claims a grant of £2,500 plus £245 = £2,745.

Q3. Do employers need to prove they cannot pay their workers?

The [guidance for businesses](#) says that that support will be available to cover wages for workers "that would otherwise have been laid off during this crisis." Here the term 'laid off' is used to mean 'made redundant'.

It is unclear whether employers will need to show that they could not otherwise pay their workers. This could have significant implications, for example, for employers who could continue to operate but who would prefer to close their premises out of concern for the safety of their staff.

The [guidance for employers](#) contains a list of the things an employer will need to provide before making a claim. It does not ask for evidence that a worker would otherwise have been made redundant. However, the guidance does say that “HMRC will retain the right to retrospectively audit all aspects of your claim.”

Q4. When will the Scheme come into effect?

The JRS covers a period of three months, beginning on 1 March 2020. However, the [guidance for employers](#) says that the systems for making claims will not be in place until the end of April.

During Treasury Questions, the Chancellor explained that claims will be paid in the April payroll and can be backdated to 1 March:

We are already working night and day to construct something from scratch, but claims will be allowed to be backdated to 1 March so that businesses have the security of knowing that the cash-flow rebate will be coming. As I have said, the aim is to have the Scheme up and running so that the April payroll can be reimbursed through it.⁴

The [guidance for businesses](#) says that if a business is experiencing cashflow problems, it should access the Business Interruption Loan to cover wages until claims can be made to the JRS.

Q5. How will employers make a claim?

The [guidance for employers](#) says that claims will be made to HMRC through a new online portal. Claims can be made after an employer has run a payroll or in advance of an imminent payroll.

The guidance lists the information employers will have to provide:

To claim, you will need:

- your ePAYE reference number
- the number of employees being furloughed
- the claim period (start and end date)
- amount claimed (per the minimum length of furloughing of 3 weeks)
- your bank account number and sort code
- your contact name
- your phone number

⁴ [HC Deb 24 March 2020 vol. 674 c204.](#)

3. 'Furloughed workers'

Q6. What is a furloughed worker?

The [guidance for businesses](#) states that a furloughed worker is someone who remains employed but who is not provided with any work:

[The JRS] applies to employees who have been asked to stop working, but who are being kept on the pay roll, otherwise described as 'furloughed workers'.

The JRS will only cover the wages of workers who are designated as 'furloughed'. This is not a recognised term in UK employment law (although the term is more commonly used in the USA).

This is closer to the concept of 'lay-off' in UK employment law.⁵ This is somewhat confusing as the guidance uses the term 'laid off' to describe what would actually be called 'redundancy'.

There are a number of tests in employment law for determining what constitutes 'work', most obviously the tests used for calculating National Minimum Wage entitlements.⁶

The [guidance for employers](#) says that work is anything that "provides services to or generates revenue for" an organisation. It does say that workers can undertake training while furloughed, although it notes that this would count as work for NMW purposes.

Q7. Does the Scheme cover workers on reduced hours?

No. The [guidance for employers](#) states:

If an employee is working, but on reduced hours, or for reduced pay, they will not be eligible for this Scheme and you will have to continue paying the employee through your payroll and pay their salary subject to the terms of the employment contract you agreed.

Q8. How do employers designate a worker as furloughed?

The [guidance for employers](#) notes that in most cases the contract of employment will need to be varied to designate a worker as furloughed.

Varying a contract typically requires agreement with the worker. Employers cannot usually change contracts unilaterally. This is covered below under 'Selecting workers for furlough'.

The guidance says that employers can only make a claim if they have provided workers with written confirmation that they are furloughed. The Arbitration, Conciliation and Advisory Service (Acas) has [produced guidance](#) which lists some of the issues a furlough agreement should cover.

⁵ Section 147, *Employment Rights Act 1996*. Acas, [Lay-offs and short-time working](#).

⁶ Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, [National Minimum Wage and National Living Wage: Calculating the minimum wage](#), April 2019.

Q9. Can workers do volunteer work while on furlough?

The [guidance for employers](#) says that workers can do volunteer work or training while they are furloughed. However, this cannot provide a service to or generate revenue for their employer.

It is unclear how furlough leave will interact with the new right to emergency volunteering leave created by the *Coronavirus Act 2020*. Under that Act, volunteering leave is unpaid although the Government is required to compensate volunteers.⁷

Q10. Can a worker be furloughed by multiple employers?

The [guidance for employees](#) says that where a worker has more than one employer, each employer will be treated separately. As such, it is possible for a worker to be furloughed by more than one employer, or to be furloughed by one employer while continuing to work for another employer.

Q11. Can workers work for other employers while on furlough?

The [guidance for employees](#) notes that it is possible for a worker to be furloughed by one employer while continuing to work for another.

It is less clear whether a worker who is furloughed by one employer can take up work with a new employer while on leave. Nothing in the guidance suggests that an employer will become ineligible from claiming the grant if their worker provides services to another employer.

Ultimately the matter will be determined by the terms of the employment contract. Any term prohibiting a worker from providing services to other employers would continue to apply, unless otherwise varied. Absent such a term, an employer will likely remain liable for paying the worker's wages (either in full or at an agreed reduced rate). This is in contrast to certain statutory payments, such as maternity pay, where an employer's liability ceases if an employee undertakes work for a new employer while on leave.⁸

Q12. Can workers come on and off furlough?

Yes. The [guidance for employees](#) states that while a worker must be placed on furlough for a minimum period of three weeks, they can be placed on furlough more than once.

⁷ See [Coronavirus Bill: health and social care measures](#), Commons Library Briefing Paper CBP-8861, 20 March 2020.

⁸ Section 165(6), *Social Security Contributions and Benefits Act 1992*.

4. Eligible workers

Q13. What workers are covered by the Scheme?

The [guidance for employers](#) says that the scheme will cover the wages of any worker who is on a PAYE payroll as of 28 February 2020. It says that the contractual arrangement is not a determinative factor and notes that workers on zero-hours contracts and agency workers can qualify.

In employment law, a distinction is made between employees, 'limb (b) workers' and the genuinely self-employed. Employees enjoy full employment rights; workers enjoy a limited set of rights and the self-employed fall outside the scope of employment law.⁹

The Government guidance uses the terms 'employee' and 'worker' interchangeably. It does not appear to suggest that only employees will be covered by the Scheme. Rather, the test seems to be based solely on whether a worker is on a PAYE payroll (the distinction made in tax law).

Daniel Dyal, a barrister at Cloisters chambers, explains:

The guide, which is not very technical, oscillates between using the term 'employee' and the term 'worker'. It does so in a way that suggests that the legal distinction between those terms is not intended (or perhaps understood). The impression is very much that the Scheme will apply broadly rather than narrowly. In essence, to anyone who falls into the category of people that employment lawyers would identify as a 'worker' (within the meaning of either limb of s.230(3) Employment Rights Act 1996) *and* who is on the payroll.¹⁰

It should be noted that this test would exclude workers who are not on PAYE but who would be found by an Employment Tribunal to be 'limb (b) workers' or even 'employees' (for the purposes of employment law).¹¹ Many workers in the gig economy will fall into this category.

Q14. Does the Scheme cover director-employees?

A significant number of workers now work through personal service companies (PSC) of which they are both the sole director and employee.

The Government guidance does not mention PSCs. While the guidance would suggest that director-employees can claim for the wages they pay themselves through PAYE, the legal picture is complex.

The Institute for Chartered Accountants (ICAEW) says:

Which businesses are eligible?

1. Eligible businesses include charities and not-for-profit organisations and will include single director companies, although the same rules will apply as to other businesses. The grant applies to all UK based businesses.

⁹ [Employment status](#), Commons Library Briefing Paper CBP-8045, 28 March 2018.

¹⁰ Daniel Dyal, [Covid-19: Furlough and job retention: Key issues for Employment Lawyers](#), Cloisters, 30 March 2020 (accessed 31 March 2020).

¹¹ See e.g. [Autoclenz Ltd v Belcher \[2011\] UKSC 41](#).

Owner/managed companies

2. Many owner managed company director/shareholders pay small salaries and the balance of income as dividends. The scheme does not extend to dividends. Only the salary is relevant to the scheme. Such companies must have been paying a salary through a payroll to be eligible for a grant.¹²

Andrew Hubbard, the editor in chief of *Taxation* magazine, noted that there are uncertainties over whether a director-employee will be considered to be 'working' (and therefore not eligible under the Scheme) if they carry out director's responsibilities:

[T]he scheme applies only to employees who have been furloughed. It is not easy to see how an individual operating through a PSC could furlough themselves and do no work for the company at all. Surely making the claim for the CJRS would be work and thus make the claim invalid. Even if this point could be overcome – and I am sure that it will be the subject of debate as to whether such an individual can be furloughed but still carry out directors' duties – there is the fact that most PSCs structure payments around a small salary and top-up dividends. Since only the salary can be taken into account, the amounts claimable under the CJRS are likely to be minimal.¹³

Q15. Does the Scheme cover workers who have already been made redundant?

The [guidance for employers](#) says that workers who have been made redundant since 28 February 2020 can be rehired and put on furlough.

It is not clear precisely what the Government means by 'redundant'. Employment law has two definitions of redundancy, one broader than the other.¹⁴

The guidance would suggest that terminations for reasons other than redundancy would not be covered.

Alan Bogg and Michael Ford QC, Professors of Law at the University of Bristol, have also noted that a qualifying employee who was made redundant but rehired would still be entitled to statutory redundancy pay.¹⁵ This issue is not addressed in the guidance.

Q16. Does the Scheme cover those who have recently been made a job offer?

The [guidance for employers](#) says that the key question is whether a worker was on the PAYE payroll on 28 February 2020. As such, it is unlikely that those who have been made a job offer would be covered.

If a new joiner has accepted the job offer, the employer may be contractually obliged to pay their wages, even though they are unable

¹² ICAEW, [The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme: furlough guidance](#), 30 March 2020 (accessed 2 April 2020).

¹³ Andrew Hubbard, [Coronavirus job retention scheme](#), *Taxation*, 31 March 2020 (accessed 1 April 2020).

¹⁴ Section 139, [Employment Rights Act 1996](#) (narrower); section 195, [Trade Union and Labour Relations \(Consolidation\) Act 1992](#) (broader).

¹⁵ Alan Bogg and Michael Ford QC, [Legislating in Times of Crisis: The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme](#), UK Labour Law Blog, 23 March 2020 (accessed 31 March 2020).

12 FAQs: Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme

to make a claim under the JRS. However, a new joiner would not have two years continuous service and would not be covered by the provisions on unfair dismissal and statutory redundancy pay.¹⁶ As such, new joiners can normally be dismissed in accordance with the terms of the contract. Lewis Silkin LLP, the law firm, explains:

If a potential new joiner has not yet accepted the offer, it can be withdrawn because no contract is in place yet. If the new joiner has accepted an offer, the employer should check the offer letter and/or contract with the new joiner, and in particular what notice period has been agreed. The employer can terminate the contract before the new joiner was due to start by making a payment in lieu of notice. Failing to pay notice in this situation would give the individual a potential breach of contract claim. An employer only needs to pay notice for the period when the employee was due to be working and receiving pay, so it may be possible to give a new joiner notice which expires before they were due to start work and not make an actual payment.¹⁷

¹⁶ Sections 108 and 155, *Employment Rights Act 1996*.

¹⁷ Karen Baxter and Bethan Carney, [Coronavirus – FAQ for employers](#), Lewis Silkin LLP, 30 March 2020, p. 16.

5. Selecting workers for furlough

Q17. Do employers have an automatic right to furlough workers?

No. The JRS is a mechanism through which employers can reclaim worker's wages from HMRC. It does not alter existing employment law rights and obligations. The [guidance for businesses](#) clearly states that workers will need to be furloughed in accordance with existing employment law.

As a general rule, workers have a right to be paid their full wages if they are ready, able and willing to work.¹⁸ The employer has a contractual obligation to pay, even if no work is available. If an employer failed to provide work and unilaterally reduced pay this would likely amount to a breach of contract and an unlawful deduction from wages.

In some cases, employment contracts will contain a clause that gives an employer the right to send workers home without pay (called a lay off clause). However, these clauses are rare in practice.

Absent such a clause, an employer would need to vary the employment contract before it could put a worker on furlough.

The [guidance for employers](#) suggests that the contract should be varied by agreement. In many cases the alternative to furlough will be redundancy, so workers may be inclined to agree. The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas) has [produced guidance](#) that lists a number of points a furlough agreement should cover.

Where workers do not agree to vary a contract, a common practice is 'termination and re-engagement', where workers are dismissed and rehired on less favourable terms. However, it is possible that a worker who is terminated and re-engaged would fall outside of the Scheme if they had to be put on a new payroll.

Alan Bogg and Michael Ford QC have argued that UK employment law is not suited to contractual variations in times of crises.¹⁹

Q18. Can workers demand to be furloughed?

No. Under the JRS, the decision to designate a worker as furloughed and claim the grant from HMRC is one that must be made by the employer. Workers who wish to be furloughed, which could include those with caring responsibilities or those who cannot work from home, do not have an explicit right to place themselves on furlough.

Daniel Dyal notes that aggrieved workers will need to rely on existing employment law rights to challenge any selection decisions.²⁰

This is discussed further in Questions 21 and 22.

¹⁸ [Beveridge v KLM UK Ltd \[2000\] IRLR 765](#).

¹⁹ Alan Bogg and Michael Ford QC, [Legislating in Times of Crisis: The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme](#), UK Labour Law Blog, 23 March 2020 (accessed 31 March 2020).

²⁰ Daniel Dyal, [Covid-19: Furlough and job retention: Key issues for Employment Lawyers](#), Cloisters, 30 March 2020 (accessed 31 March 2020).

Q19. Can agency workers and zero-hours workers be furloughed?

The [guidance for employers](#) notes that agency workers and workers on zero-hours contracts can be furloughed, provided they are on PAYE. Whereas the guidance generally says that workers may not work *for their employer*, for agency workers the guidance says more clearly that they cannot undertake work.

The fact that the decision to furlough workers is for the employer is a particular problem for agency workers and zero-hours workers. For such workers, the right to pay is contingent on work being provided and generally the employer or agency is not under a contractual obligation to provide them with work. As such, the employer or agency could simply decide to reduce the worker's hours to zero and not designate them as furloughed.

Bogg and Ford highlight that zero-hours workers and agency workers are ultimately dependent on their employers:

So, once the assignment has been ended, why should the agency bother to write to the workers and confirm they have been 'furloughed', as the Scheme requires? Unless it happens to be motivated by altruism, it is easier for it to rely on its existing contractual provisions and do nothing at all. That, after all, is often the economic point of these contractual arrangements for firms, giving agencies and end-users the flexibility to adjust quickly the supply of labour in accordance with demands.²¹

Q20. What about vulnerable employees?

The Government's [guidance on shielding](#) 'strongly advises' people who are categorised as extremely vulnerable not to leave their home for a period of 12 weeks. However, such people are not considered to be 'isolating' for the purposes of statutory sick pay (SSP).²²

The [guidance for employers](#) says that workers who are shielding can be designated as furloughed. However there is no specific obligation on employers to furlough such workers.

In the present situation, vulnerable workers who are not put on furlough may have a right to refuse to attend their workplace.²³

Employers would also need to ensure that they are not discriminating on the basis of age, disability or pregnancy.

²¹ Alan Bogg and Michael Ford QC, [Not Legislating in a Crisis? The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, Part 2](#), UK Labour Law Blog, 31 March 2020 (accessed 31 March 2020).

²² Reg. 3, [The Statutory Sick Pay \(Coronavirus\) \(Suspension of Waiting Days and General Amendment\) Regulations 2020 \(SI 2020/374\)](#).

²³ Stuart Brittenden, [The Coronavirus: Rights to Leave the Workplace and Strikes](#), UK Labour Law Blog, 27 March 2020 (accessed 31 March 2020); Schona Jolly QC, [Covid-19: Critical workers refusing work – What if everyone is being reasonable?](#), Cloisters, 26 March 2020 (accessed 31 March 2020).

Q21. How should employers select which workers to furlough?

In many cases employers who are operating at reduced capacity will need to select which workers to furlough. This could create problems if either too few or too many workers want to be furloughed.

The [guidance for employers](#) does not set out how an employer should select the workers that it furloughs.

When selecting which workers to furlough employers will be bound by general employment law.

An obvious area of law that will be applicable is discrimination law.

Daniel Dyal explains:

There are also many equality implications arising out of the Scheme. The guidance makes clear that the employer must apply the Scheme in a way that is consistent with equality law. Some of these implications are obvious and simple: it would be unlawful to dismiss rather than furlough an employee because he is of a particular race. But others are complex and difficult. For instance, if furloughing decisions take into account the number of hours particular employees are able to offer in current circumstances that could easily engage indirect sex discrimination considerations, which would need to be carefully thought through. Likewise furloughing decisions may need to take into account what tasks particular employees can do and from where. They will often then engage challenging disability discrimination issues, particularly in respect of reasonable adjustments, indirect discrimination and discrimination arising from disability.²⁴

If a worker refuses to be furloughed and is dismissed, the fairness of the selection criteria will likely be a consideration in any subsequent unfair dismissal claim.

Bogg and Ford have also suggested that a failure to use a fair selection criteria could possibly amount to a breach of the implied term of mutual trust and confidence.²⁵

Q22. Do employers have to consult workers?

In most cases an employer will need a worker's agreement before they can put them on furlough. As such, individual consultation will clearly be necessary.

Whether an employer is required to consult the workforce more broadly will again be determined by existing employment law.

Where an employer proposes to make 20 or more employees redundant within a period of 90 days, they have an obligation to consult employee's representatives.²⁶ The [guidance for employers](#) notes that as

²⁴ Daniel Dyal, [Covid-19: Furlough and job retention: Key issues for Employment Lawyers](#), Cloisters, 30 March 2020 (accessed 31 March 2020).

²⁵ Alan Bogg and Michael Ford QC, [Not Legislating in a Crisis? The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, Part 2](#), UK Labour Law Blog, 31 March 2020 (accessed 31 March 2020).

²⁶ Section 188, *Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992*. See also Acas, [Handling large-scale redundancies](#), April 2014.

the alternative to furlough will often be redundancy, employers may be under such an obligation.

If there is an information and consultation agreement in place for a workforce, this may require an employer to consult employee representatives on furloughing decisions. A standard agreement will cover situations where there is a threat to employment within the organisation.²⁷ If no agreement is in place, negotiations can be triggered by a request from 10% of the workforce (dropping to 2% of the workforce from 6 April 2020).²⁸

Q23. Can employers make redundancies before the Scheme comes into effect?

Yes. However, any dismissal will need to be in accordance with general employment law.

Employees with two years' continuous service are protected from unfair dismissal.²⁹ While redundancy is a potentially fair reason for dismissal, the availability of the JRS, and the Government's Business Interruption Loans, may be relevant factors in considering whether dismissal was reasonable in the circumstances.³⁰

Employees who are made redundant may also be entitled to statutory redundancy pay.³¹

²⁷ Reg. 20, [Information and Consultation of Employees Regulations 2004 \(SI 2004/3426\)](#).

²⁸ Reg. 7, ICE Regulations 2004; Reg. 16, [Employment Rights \(Miscellaneous Amendments\) Regulations 2019 \(SI 2019/731\)](#).

²⁹ Part 10, *Employment Rights Act 1996*.

³⁰ See generally [Key Employment Rights](#), Commons Library Briefing Paper CBP-7245, 23 November 2018 (Section 27).

³¹ Section 135, *Employment Rights Act 1996*.

6. Meaning of wages

Q24. What wages are covered by the Scheme?

The [guidance for employers](#) says that the Scheme will cover a worker's 'regular wages'. It specifically notes that this excludes any fees, commission or bonuses.

The methods of calculating wages (discussed below) are different from the normal rules on calculating 'a week's pay' in employment law. That method can include commission and bonuses for workers who have no normal working hours.³²

Q25. How will wages be calculated?

The [guidance for employers](#) sets out how wages will be calculated for different types of workers. An employer will be able to claim 80% of these wages, up to £2,500.

For salaried workers, wages will be their regular salary as of 28 February 2020. This suggests that payments under the Scheme will not reflect any increases to salary that occur after that date.

If a worker's pay varies and they have been employed for a full 12 months, their pay will be the higher of:

- their earnings in the same month in the previous tax year; or
- their average monthly earnings for the 2019-20 tax year.

If a worker has not been employed for a full 12 months, their wages will be their average monthly earnings since they started work.

If a worker only began work in February, their earnings so far will be pro-rated to determine their monthly wages.

Q26. Will employers have to top up the wages?

The [guidance for employers](#) says that it is for employers to decide whether to top up wages (the extra 20% or anything above £2,500).

However, as noted in Question 17, the default position under the contract will normally be that workers are entitled to their *full wages* if they are ready, willing and able to work.

If the contract is not varied, an employer would likely be in breach of contract by only paying 80% of wages. This could also be an unlawful deduction from wages.

Q27. Will employee NICs and pension contributions have to be deducted?

The [guidance for employers](#) says the normal deductions will need to be made for income tax, employee NICs and auto-enrolment pension contributions. If pay is reduced to 80% the deductions should reflect this change.

³² Section 224, *Employment Rights Act 1996*.

Q28. Do furloughed workers have to be paid the National Minimum Wage?

The [guidance for employers](#) says that furloughed workers are not undertaking 'work' within the meaning of the [National Minimum Wage Act 1998](#) and so do not have to be paid the National Living Wage / National Minimum Wage (NLW / NMW). As such, it will be permissible to vary the employment contract to reduce a worker's pay to 80%, even if this puts their wages below the NLW / NMW.

However, the guidance notes that if a worker undertakes training then this will constitute work for the purposes of the 1998 Act and the worker must be paid the NLW / NMW. The implication is that the employer must top up the JRS grant. Workers cannot contract out of their right to be paid the NLW / NMW.³³

³³ Section 49, [National Minimum Wage Act 1998](#).

7. Other employment issues

Q29. Can workers who are on sick leave be furloughed?

The [guidance for employers](#) notes that employees who are on sick leave or self-isolating in accordance with the advice issued by Public Health England should claim statutory sick pay (SSP). However, the guidance says that such people can be put on furlough once they return.

Secondary legislation is expected to be made to allow employers to reclaim coronavirus-related SSP payment from the Government.³⁴

It is currently unclear whether an employee who is already on furlough would be required to drop to the lower rate of SSP if they are required to self-isolate while on leave.

It is also unclear whether employers who are paying workers enhanced contractual sick pay are entitled to make a claim for this under the JRS. As noted below, enhanced maternity pay is considered to be 'wages' that can be claimed under the Scheme.

Q30. Does being furloughed affect maternity rights?

The JRS does not alter existing rules on maternity leave and statutory maternity pay (SMP). However, being furloughed could impact a woman's eligibility for SMP or the rate of SMP she receives.

An employee who has worked for her employer for a continuous period of 26 weeks by the 15th week before the expected week of childbirth will be eligible for SMP. Her normal weekly earnings must be above £118 per week (£120 from 6 April 2020). SMP is paid for 39 weeks. The first 6 weeks are paid at 90% of the woman's normal weekly earnings. The remaining 33 weeks are paid at the statutory rate of £148.68 (£151.20 from 6 April 2020). Some women will have a contractual right to enhanced maternity pay.³⁵

'Normal weekly earnings' for the purposes of SMP can include bonuses and commission. They are calculated by reference to the eight weeks preceding the 'qualifying week' (the 15th week before the expected week of childbirth).³⁶

The [guidance for employers](#) notes that as the JRS does not alter maternity rights legislation, a woman will be entitled to SMP at the usual rate. Employers can already reclaim most of the cost of SMP from the Government.³⁷ The guidance notes that employers who pay enhanced maternity pay can claim this as 'wages' under the Scheme.

³⁴ See [Coronavirus Bill: Statutory Sick Pay and National Insurance Contributions](#), Commons Library Briefing Paper CBP-8864, 20 March 2020.

³⁵ See [Key Employment Rights](#), Commons Library Briefing Paper CBP-7245, 23 November 2018, (Section 9).

³⁶ Regs. 20-21, [Statutory Maternity Pay \(General\) Regulations 1986 \(SI 1986/1960\)](#).

³⁷ Section 167, [Social Security Contributions and Benefits Act 1992](#).

However, Maternity Action, a leading maternity rights organisation, has noted that a woman who is furloughed or on SSP in the period preceding her 'qualifying week' would be on lower pay and that this could impact either her eligibility for SMP or the rate at which it is paid:

If I'm off work on Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) or on furlough, does that count towards the 26 weeks continuous service for qualifying for Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP)?

Yes, any weeks on SSP or on furlough count as continuous employment. In order to qualify for SMP you must be employed by the same employer for at least 26 weeks by the 15th week before your baby is due. If you are on SSP or on furlough during part of that period it will still count towards your continuous employment. But bear in mind that SSP is below the earnings threshold for SMP, so it may affect your average earnings, see question above. If you are on furlough and receiving 80% of your normal pay this will also affect how much SMP you will get.³⁸

A woman who becomes ineligible for SMP will still be able to claim [Maternity Allowance](#). However, this is paid entirely at the statutory rate.

Q31. Does being furloughed affect continuity of employment?

The Government guidance does not address continuity of employment.

A number of employment rights are only available to employees who have a period of continuous employment with their employer. Examples include the protection from unfair dismissal, the right to redundancy pay and notice pay. There are detailed rules for determining what constitutes 'continuous employment'.

Generally speaking, continuity is broken by a period of a week where the relationship is not governed by the employment contract. Even then, continuity is preserved in certain cases, such as where there is a 'temporary cessation of work'.³⁹

As the employment contract continues to apply during periods of furlough, being furloughed should not affect continuity in itself.

However, if a worker has been made redundant and is subsequently re-hired to be furloughed under the scheme, the dismissal may have broken their continuity. Alan Bogg and Michael Ford QC have called for a statutory provision to preserve continuity in such circumstances.⁴⁰

Q32. Does annual leave continue to accrue during furlough?

The Government guidance does not mention how the JRS will interact with the law on annual leave.

As workers remain employed during periods of furlough, the annual leave will presumably continue to accrue. This should be the case for

³⁸ Maternity Action, [FAQs: Covid-19 – rights and benefits during pregnancy and maternity leave](#) (accessed 1 April 2020).

³⁹ Section 212, *ibid*.

⁴⁰ Alan Bogg and Michael Ford QC, [Legislating in Times of Crisis: The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme](#), UK Labour Law Blog, 23 March 2020 (accessed 31 March 2020).

both the statutory entitlement (5.6 week) and any contractual holiday, although the latter could be varied by agreement.

It is currently unclear whether a worker can take annual leave while they are on furlough.⁴¹ The guidance does not address this point.

A worker who takes annual leave is entitled to receive holiday pay under the [Working Time Regulations 1998](#) (WTR). Holiday pay is calculated using the normal rules for calculating a week's pay in employment law.⁴² This involves the use of a twelve week reference period.

However, the WTR implements EU law and must be interpreted in accordance with the [Working Time Directive \(Directive 2003/88/EC\)](#). The Directive requires that workers be paid their 'normal remuneration' for four weeks of annual leave. In the past, UK law has been interpreted so as to allow commission, bonuses and overtime to be included in the calculation of pay.⁴³ If a worker is able to take annual leave during periods of furlough, while they are on reduced pay, it is unclear what would constitute their 'normal remuneration'.

It is also unclear if an employer could make a claim under the JRS to cover holiday pay costs.

⁴¹ See David Reade QC and Daniel Northall, [The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme: More holiday cancellations?](#), Littleton, 2 April 2020 (accessed 2 April 2020).

⁴² Reg. 16, *Working Time Regulations 1998 (SI 1998/1833)*.

⁴³ [Lock v British Gas Trading Ltd \[2016\] EWCA Civ. 983](#).

About the Library

The House of Commons Library research service provides MPs and their staff with the impartial briefing and evidence base they need to do their work in scrutinising Government, proposing legislation, and supporting constituents.

As well as providing MPs with a confidential service we publish open briefing papers, which are available on the Parliament website.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in these publicly available research briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

If you have any comments on our briefings please email papers@parliament.uk. Authors are available to discuss the content of this briefing only with Members and their staff.

If you have any general questions about the work of the House of Commons you can email hcenquiries@parliament.uk.

Disclaimer

This information is provided to Members of Parliament in support of their parliamentary duties. It is a general briefing only and should not be relied on as a substitute for specific advice. The House of Commons or the author(s) shall not be liable for any errors or omissions, or for any loss or damage of any kind arising from its use, and may remove, vary or amend any information at any time without prior notice.

The House of Commons accepts no responsibility for any references or links to, or the content of, information maintained by third parties. This information is provided subject to the [conditions of the Open Parliament Licence](#).