

COVID-19 – Job Retention Scheme Portal Update 08.04.20

Senior representatives from HMRC have appeared before the Parliamentary Select Committee today to answer questions around the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme – this scheme making provision for the furloughing of employees. The full recording of the meeting can be accessed online at parliamenttv.com (I warn you, this did last for just over two hours).

1. The portal will be open for employers to use on 20 April 2020. The first payments should be made to employers on 30 April 2020 and the aim is that payments will generally be made within 4 to 6 working days of submission of data;
2. Live testing is underway with a very small number of employers. The capacity has been tested and HMRC is confident in the resilience of the new portal. It will be available 24/7 for users, and users may be queued if too many people are trying to use at the same time;
3. A guidance document on how to compile claims will be released within the next week; the aim is to ensure employers can self-serve and get claims ready for submission by the date the portal opens. If employers need help, there is a helpline available; this is already staffed by 2,000 advisers. A further 3,500 will be redeployed onto the helpline temporarily, further private sector support is available and HMRC is working with agencies such as the Institute of Chartered Accountants to ensure they can give similar, comprehensive advice;
4. For employers who run their payroll weekly, claims can be submitted with the same regularity. Only one claim can be made per pay period (which may be weekly or monthly) and it is expected that a high proportion of the first claims will include some backdating into March. A business can make a claim up to 14 days' ahead (so, if a monthly pay period goes to the 31st of the month, it appears a claim can be submitted 14 days beforehand).
5. A number of challenges were made around the requirement for employees to be on the Company's payroll on 28th February in order to qualify. It was made clear that there is no plan to extend the scheme to incorporate those who started after this date; instead, affected employees are being signposted to other, less lucrative benefits;

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6. Concerns were raised around abuse of the system in relation to furloughed employees being required to carry on undertaking work. HMRC stated that there is a hotline in place for employees to report such behaviour. It was also confirmed:
 - a. If there was evidence of a breach of the rules now, claims would simply not be paid out (this would really rely on a report from employees that the scheme was being abused);
 - b. In the future, there is the ability to check claims and HMRC may well look for evidence of employees continuing to work while furloughed;
 - c. Depending on the severity of an employer's conduct, this could quite feasibly result in criminal proceedings being considered.