

Family Test: Reducing Temporary Absence outside GB period from 13 weeks to 4 weeks in line with UC policy

This is an assessment of the impact of the amendments to the temporary absence from GB regulations on families. The current Housing Benefit regulations for working age and pension age claimants allow a claimant to be absent from their home for up to 13 weeks regardless of whether this is within or outside GB. In certain circumstances the absence can be for up to 52 weeks e.g. where the claimant is receiving medical treatment or accompanying a partner or child who is receiving medical treatment.

The new policy applies only to absences outside GB and reduces the period allowed from 13 to 4 weeks or for the extensions to the usual rules, the period will be reduced to 26 weeks from 52 weeks in most cases but not all. The new policy will apply to new HB claimants as well as current claimants.

1. What kinds of impact might the policy have on family life?

This policy will have a minimal impact on family life because the changes only apply to absences outside GB. Those families who need to go overseas for medical treatment or medically approved convalescence, for any of the members including children, will be allowed to be absent for 26 weeks. This should ensure that families are able to be together without worrying about losing their home and alleviate some of the stress and pressure on them at a difficult time in their lives.

2. What kind of impact will the policy have on families going through key transitions such as becoming parents getting married, fostering or adopting, bereavement, redundancy, new caring responsibilities or the onset of a long-term health condition?

This new policy only applies to absences outside GB and therefore will have only a low impact on families going through key transitions where these happen within GB. Even where key transitions occur outside GB the policy allows, for example, an extension to the usual time allowed where the temporary absence is in connection with the death of the person's partner or a child or a young person.

3. What impacts will the policy have on all family members' ability to play a full role in family life, including with respect to parenting and other caring responsibilities?

The policy allows for the claimant to accompany their partner and or child outside GB if the partner or child needs medical treatment and the period allowed is extended to 26 weeks rather than the new policy of 4 weeks. Therefore, the policy ensures that the HB claimant can play a full role in family life. As before the policy change only applies to absences outside GB and makes no change to the time people can be absent within GB.

4. How does the policy impact families before, during and after couple separation?

The policy reduces the period that a claimant can be absent outside GB but not the period that a claimant can be absent within GB and therefore, it is unlikely to add to the pressures families face before and during the period when a couple separate unless the family regularly spends time with extended family members outside GB. It could cause problems after separation if the member of the couple with care of the children moves outside GB which could include moving to Northern Ireland. If the claimant wants to visit their children outside GB they will be limited to 4 weeks which could be a problem if they have moved some distance from GB so can only visit them occasionally for long periods rather than visiting regularly for short periods.

5. How does the policy impact those families most at risk of deterioration of relationship quality and breakdown?

The families who will be impacted most by this policy will be those where one partner is a victim of domestic violence and flees to a place of safety outside GB. This could mean that women, who are generally more likely to be the victims, stay with an abusive partner rather than seek safety overseas. However, this would only impact them if they are the HB claimant not their spouse/ partner unless they have taken on a tenancy and are now also claiming HB.