

Annual verification

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Introduction

From February 2016, an annual verification of Universal Credit claims was introduced. It affects claimants in both the Intensive Work Search and Light Touch regimes.

Annual verification applies to claimants who have remained in the Intensive Work Search and Light Touch Regimes continuously for 12 assessment periods from the start of the assessment period when they were allocated to their regime. This could be from a new claim or following a change of regime.

They must re-declare the circumstances of their claim to verify that the claim details held for them are still correct.

The aim of this is to significantly reduce the amount of overpayments to claimants through fraud and error.

Eligibility

Annual verification applies to:

- claimants who have remained in the Intensive Work Search and Light Touch regimes continuously for 12 assessment periods from the start of the assessment period when they were allocated to their regime (this could be from a new claim or following a change of regime)
- couples where one or both members has remained continuously in the Intensive Work Search and Light Touch regimes for 12 assessment periods from the start of the assessment period when they were allocated to their regime (for couples, the time served by one or the other member in the Intensive Work Search and Light Touch regimes will count towards the review trigger provided the time served was without a break)

For annual verification to apply, one person in the benefit unit must be in the Intensive Work Search or Light Touch regime continuously for 12 assessment periods, otherwise the clock 'restarts'. If there is a break and no person in the benefit unit is in one of these regimes, the clock will restart only when one person re-enters the Intensive Work Search or Light Touch regime.

Example 1: Simon

Simon is single

- his assessment period ends on the 10th of each month
- he moved into the Light Touch regime on 5 January 2016 from the No Work Related Requirements regime due to a change in his circumstances
- he will be due for annual verification on 10 December 2016 if he stays in the Light Touch regime (or the Intensive Work Search regime) continuously until that time

This is because Simon will have spent 12 assessment periods in the Light Touch regime which includes the assessment period that he moved into it. In this example, this is 12 assessment periods from 10 January. If Simon moves out of the Light Touch regime (unless he moves into the Intensive Work Search regime) during this time, the clock will re-start from the point that he re-joins the Light Touch regime.

Example 2: John

- John is part of a couple with Joy
- their assessment period ends on the 10th of the month
- John is allocated to the Intensive Work Search regime on 5 January 2016
- Joy is currently in the Work Preparation regime as they have a child under 5
- their child reaches age 5 years in April 2016 and Joy joins the Intensive Work Search regime at that point
- John subsequently becomes a carer in June 2016 and leaves the Intensive Work Search regime

As there is a continuation of the time served in the Intensive Work Search regime by one or other member of the couple which is continuous (without a break), the time already served by John counts towards the annual verification trigger.

The review date is based on the date John was allocated to the Intensive Work Search Regime. The claim would be eligible for annual verification at the end of the 12th assessment period spent in the Intensive Work Search regime, which is 10 December 2016.

Any overlapping time is not counted towards the 12 assessment periods, for example - the time served by Joy from April to June overlaps and would not be counted as John has served that time already.

In this scenario, if Joy became a carer in August 2016 and John was able to look for work and re-joined the Intensive Work Search regime in October 2016, the

time served in the Intensive Work Search regime in that benefit unit would be broken due to the break in one of them being in the Intensive Work Search regime (from August to October 2016).

Eligibility for annual verification will restart for John from October 2016, to October 2017.

If John was able to look for work and re-entered the Intensive Work Search regime in July, and Joy left the Intensive Work Search regime because she became a carer in August (but remained in the benefit unit), the review for the benefit unit would continue to be 10 December 2016. This is because one or the other member has always been in the Intensive Work Search regime continuously since John's original entry into that regime in January 2016.

Failure to comply

A claimant will be sent a 'Review your details' to-do when they have been in the Intensive Work Search regime or Light Touch regime for 12 assessment periods. It will ask them to re-declare their circumstances. If any of the claim details are no longer correct, it will ask the claimant to report a change of circumstances.

A claimant will normally have 14 days to complete the action and report any associated change of circumstances. If necessary, this period can be extended to allow the claimant more time to comply. The to-do will inform the claimant that failure to comply within the deadline could result in their claim being suspended. The suspension could be a full suspension or partial suspension and is discretionary. A reminder is sent at the end of the deadline.

If the claim is suspended, this will take effect from the day after the deadline notified to the claimant on the annual verification to-do.

An agent will be able to see if a claim has been suspended due to annual verification by viewing the claimant's journal. If the agent feels the claimant has complex needs, they can consider extending the deadline to allow them to consider contacting the claimant. This is to ensure the claimant understands their responsibility to complete annual verification and to be offered support if needed.

If the annual verification is still incomplete 1 calendar month after the claim is suspended in full, the entitlement to Universal Credit will end and the claimant is notified of their right of appeal. The Service closes the claim from the first assessment period in which the to-do or claim closure tab is completed.

A claimant with complex needs can access support if they have difficulties completing annual verification. In the first instance, this would be over the phone with a Service Centre agent. If the claimant can't be supported in this way, an

appointment can be booked to complete it in the jobcentre. In exceptional circumstances, see Home Visits.

Change of circumstances

When completing their annual verification, if a claimant reports a change of circumstances late (after the assessment period when the change took place), their award will be recalculated to check if there has been an underpayment or overpayment.

If an overpayment has occurred, a decision on a Civil Penalty must be considered before the overpayment can be referred to Debt Management. At this point, agents must consider a fraud referral following the normal process.