

- Low-paid workers are also more likely to receive no sick pay at all, with one-in-five (19 per cent) receiving nothing

What's the self-isolation support payment scheme?

The self-isolation support payment scheme, also known as the Test and Trace Support Payment Scheme, was introduced in late September 2020. Initially planned to last until January, it was a short-term fix to the terrible sick pay system to last only during the pandemic.

The scheme is intending to provide a £500 payment to workers on low incomes who have been required to self-isolate due to Covid-19. To be eligible, workers must be unable to work from home and will lose income due to self-isolating.

The scheme is split in two:

- Main scheme: eligibility criteria set by government, aimed at workers who receive benefits, have been told to self-isolate and cannot work from home
- Discretionary scheme: councils have more control over the eligibility criteria, but the intention was for the scheme to catch those who just miss out on the main payment

Councils were given £50 million to set up, run and advertise the new scheme at short notice. This funding was split between the two schemes: £25 million for the main scheme, £15 million for the discretionary scheme, and £10 million for the set up and administration.

This funding covered the period until the end of January 2021. Councils were told that any overspend on the main scheme would be covered by government, but that funding for the discretionary scheme was fixed and limited.

Councils therefore had the freedom to set their own criteria for the discretionary scheme, but they also knew funding had to last for over three months. If it ran out, there'd be no more. This promoted caution when setting the criteria, with fears that a spike in local cases could close the scheme.

What's the problem with it?

The scheme has two main problems: no one's heard of it and it's not getting money to everyone who needs it.

For a sick pay system to be a success, people need to know about it. Our recent survey found that only one-in-five workers (21 per cent) even know about the scheme. Awareness drops even further among groups who most need the support: low-paid workers (16 per cent), those in insecure work (18 per cent), and those who receive no sick pay (16 per cent).

Secondly, for those who have heard of it, the scheme isn't working. In January 2021, the TUC sent freedom of information (FOI) requests to every English council to find out how it was going. What we found was evidence of a failing system. Only 30 per cent of applications had resulted in a payment, meaning the majority of applicants got nothing. For the discretionary scheme, just 1 in