



**SURVIVING
ECONOMIC
A B U S E**

How banks can help during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak

Building safety

In partnership with

This information is being reviewed and updated regularly during the coronavirus outbreak. Last updated 2 June 2020.



If a current or former partner has interfered with your money or other economic resources in some way to limit your choices, this information is for you.

The measures in place to control the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak may mean that an abusive partner is able to exert more control over your economic situation, particularly in this period of economic uncertainty. You may need to contact the bank more than ever to access the support that may be available, and for their help in securing your accounts if it is safe to do so.

This resource outlines how your bank or building society can support you at this time if you are experiencing economic abuse.

The role of banks and building societies

In recent years, the banking sector has taken steps to better identify and support vulnerable customers. In 2015, a [Vulnerability Taskforce](#) was set up to outline the ways that banks should treat customers facing challenging circumstances, including abuse. In 2018, UK Finance published a [Financial Abuse Code of Practice](#) with commitments on the service that vulnerable customers should receive. Following these measures, many banks and building societies now have their own policies on supporting vulnerable customers and many are increasingly aware of the challenges that abuse victims face.

An abuser may use the current pandemic to further exert economic control, or you may be isolated at home without access to the sources of support usually available. Your bank may be a useful source of support at this time. There are a lot of measures now in place that mean they may be able to offer you financial support, including [a package of support outlined by the Financial Conduct Authority \(FCA\)](#). This support is available to customers experiencing financial difficulty, including as a result of abuse.

Reporting economic abuse to your bank or building society

Approaching your bank about abuse can be daunting, especially in the current circumstances, where support may seem more limited and harder to access than usual. If it is safe to do so, speaking to someone at your bank or building society can be a useful step to help you regain control of your money. They may be able to suggest ways that they can offer you financial support, and ways that they can help keep your banking information secure and de-link your finances from the abuser, if you feel it is safe to do so at this time.

You may be able to speak to the bank while the abuser is out for groceries or exercise. If you wish to report economic abuse or ask for financial support, you may want to:

- use an alternative method to get in touch if you cannot use the phone privately – a web chat for example.
- ask whether you can speak to someone in the vulnerable customer team, if they have one. A member of this team may have more specific knowledge to support you.
- ask for the conversation to be recorded on your file, so that you don't have to repeat

it in the future. This may be especially important at this time if it is harder than usual to make private phonecalls or if your devices are being monitored more than usual by the abuser.

- if you feel safe to do so, ask for the fact you are experiencing abuse to be noted on your file. This means that the bank should not disclose information to the abuser if they contact them, for example if you have a joint account or mortgage.
- make a note, if safe to do so, of the key details you want to explain to the bank so that you don't forget when you speak to them.
- ask to continue the conversation at another time if you need a break, or ask to speak to someone else if you are not happy with the service.

The bank has a duty to support you, and you won't be penalised or blacklisted for reporting abuse and seeking their support.

What response you can expect

There are guidelines on how banks and building societies should respond to vulnerable customers, including customers who have experienced economic abuse.

Your bank or building society should:

Respond with empathy

Staff should be trained on economic abuse, and respond in a way that is sensitive to the issues you are facing. They should be aware of some of the difficulties you may be facing due to the current measures in place, and of the ways that they can support vulnerable customers at this time.

Make sure it is safe for you to talk

If the abuser is monitoring your devices more closely than usual at the moment, it may be more difficult for you to speak to the

bank about what is happening. If you can call at a time when the abuser is out shopping or for exercise, perhaps you can set up some code words with the bank so that you can call more safely if you need to do so when the abuser is at home.

Be flexible

Your bank should be responsive to your needs and can take action that is outside their normal procedure to support vulnerable customers. This may include moving deadlines to give you more time to make any financial decisions.

Not ask you to repeat your experience

Bank staff should be aware that the current measures in place may mean it's difficult for you to call once, let alone repeat your experience. Your experience should be recorded securely on your file so that you do not have to explain your circumstances more than once.

Offer specialist help

Bank staff should offer to refer you to specialist services, including external sources of help, relevant to your situation (eg specialist debt services or independent legal advice). Specialist services can support you with information to help you make financial decisions.

Alert the police

If your bank feels that you may be in immediate danger of fraud or other criminal activity in relation to your bank account, they can alert the police on your behalf. If you feel that alerting the police may put you at risk, clearly explain your concerns to the bank staff member.

Help to regain control of your finances

There are a number of ways that your bank can support you to help regain control of your finances, if it is safe for you to do so.

Securing your account

If you think that someone else may have access to your PIN or online banking passwords, your bank can support you to change these. They can issue a new card and PIN to a new address if it may not be safe at the address they have on file for you. The abuser's increased presence at home may mean that they should send statements and other letters to a different address, too. You could ask to use the address of a family member or friend, for example, who can keep the documents for you until it is safe for them to be collected. Alternatively, you could use the address of a refuge or safe house with a PO Box, if you have left your home due to the risk of immediate danger.

The bank could also help you to remove any access that the abuser may have to your account, if you feel that it is safe to do this and are sure that this would not put you at risk of further harm from the abuser at this time.

Opening a new bank account

An abuser may use the measures in place due to the virus to exert more control than usual and you may need to access a bank account that is unknown to the abuser.

If you do not already have a bank account in your sole name, the bank can support you to open one safely, sending documents to an alternative address. Make sure that the accounts are not 'linked' with any joint accounts you may have with the abuser. You may want to consider opening a new account with a different bank to completely avoid this risk.

There may be additional challenges with opening an account and providing identity documents at this time, but many banks can do this remotely.

If you do not have access to the documents usually required to prove your identity (such as a passport, driving licence or birth certificate), they may consider alternative documents, including letters from a refuge, social worker or local authority. Check if your bank can accept these documents by email.

Managing joint accounts

You may be under more financial pressure than usual due to the effects of the coronavirus, and may need to speak to the bank about financial support they can offer in relation to a bank account, credit card, loan or mortgage. Many banks can offer support including payment deferral (also known as a payment holiday), an increase in your borrowing limit or switching to a reduced interest rate (see below for further information on these options).

An abuser may withhold consent for these kind of changes to a joint account as another way to exert control at this time. Speak to your bank about your situation and ask whether it is possible to make these changes without the consent of both parties. It may help to speak to the vulnerable customer team if this is an issue you are facing. They may also be able to freeze your account to prevent any payments or withdrawals being made if this is something that may help you and you are sure it would not put you at risk of further harm.

Financial support during the coronavirus outbreak

The Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) has set out measures that banks should take during this period to support customers experiencing financial difficulty. The guidance applies for three months and will be reviewed throughout the virus outbreak.

Payment deferrals

Lenders (also known as creditors) can offer payment deferrals if you are in financial difficulty because of the coronavirus. If you were in financial difficulty prior to the outbreak, lenders you have borrowed money from should offer flexibility and support as usual. This may include payment deferrals on loans, credit cards and mortgages.

A payment deferral is an agreement on behalf of the lender to accept either a payment of zero or a token payment of £1 for a specific period – without considering you to be in arrears. Lenders can still charge interest in this period. However, if you were in financial difficulty prior to the virus outbreak, lenders are expected to waive this interest.

A payment deferral is a temporary break in making payments and the total amount remains owed after the deferral has ended.

You should not be asked to pay a fee to access a payment deferral and it will not have a negative impact on your credit file.

If the lender identifies you as a customer in financial difficulty, they should offer you a payment deferral at this time if you request it. They will not investigate the reasons why you need to access a payment deferral.

Loans

Payment deferrals can be requested for personal loans. A lender can offer you a payment deferral of less than three months, or offer a lower minimum payment. A lower minimum payment may be offered if you are facing a partial rather than a loss of income.

Mortgages

Lenders are able to offer 'payment holidays' for mortgage customers. A payment holiday is different from a payment deferral because it applies specifically to a mortgage contract. However, the conditions are very similar. There should be no fee for accessing a payment holiday and it should not have a negative impact on your credit file. Your mortgage provider must clearly explain the impact that the payment holiday will have on the mortgage balance and on your future mortgage payments.

Payment holidays were initially available for a period of three months and this has been extended until 31 October 2020. If you have already accessed a payment holiday for three months due to the virus outbreak, you will be able to apply to extend this. For further information, please see [guidance from the Financial Conduct Authority](#).

Repossession proceedings were also put on hold for an initial period of three months, and this too has been extended until 31 October 2020. Where a repossession has been granted, lenders should not seek to enforce it during this time. Your mortgage provider should contact you to let you know about the next steps. They should also clearly tell you the impact on your equity if you remain in the property at this time. More information [can be found here](#).

Credit cards

You can access a payment deferral for your credit cards for three months. Lenders can review the 'minimum payments' for credit cards during this period to ensure that you can access this support.

If you are accessing a payment deferral, the lender should tell you how this will affect your minimum monthly payments in the future.

In addition, any credit cards you have will not be suspended during this period.

Overdrafts

You can access support in relation to your overdraft during this period, too. Many lenders have already introduced interest free and fee-free periods on arranged overdrafts.

Your bank should not charge you any interest or fees on arranged overdrafts on any amount up to £500. If you have an overdraft facility of up to £500, you can request that no interest is charged for a three-month period.

If you have an arranged overdraft of more than £500, you might want to consider contacting your lender to discuss this as they may still be able to offer flexibility.

You may also be able to access a new overdraft facility or extend your existing overdraft. The bank may consider this if it is likely your financial circumstances will improve in the future.

Accessing finances

Lenders can show increased flexibility to ensure you can access essential finances at this time. This might include waiving fees for missed payments or for taking a cash advance on a credit card, or allowing you to end your fixed-term deposit early. Sometimes banks can look to refund charges on an account to provide you with an immediate source of money. Speak to your bank about what other support is available to allow you to access the money you need.

[More information](#) on the support that banks can currently offer is available from the Financial Conduct Authority.

Our resource 'How banks can help' has more information on steps your bank can usually take to support you if you are experiencing economic abuse.

If you are not happy with the service you receive

While the banking industry has made strides to improve its service for vulnerable customers, there are things you can do if your bank does not properly support you.

1. Make a complaint

If you are unhappy with the service you have received from your bank or building society, or if you feel they are not sensitive to your situation, you may wish to complain.

The first step to resolve an issue with your bank is to contact their complaints department. The bank must respond to complaints within eight weeks, and often they try to do so much quicker. There can't be negative effects on your bank account as a result of making a complaint. It may help the bank to provide a much better service for you and recognise your situation.

You can approach the bank in the way that feels most comfortable for you. However, putting your complaint in writing can be a useful record of the issue and the date the complaint was made. You may wish to highlight what the issue is, the impact it has had on you, and the outcome you would like.

2. Report it to the Financial Ombudsman

If your bank or building society doesn't resolve your complaint or doesn't respond within eight weeks, you can report it to the Financial Ombudsman Service.

The Financial Ombudsman Service is completely free and independent, and its role is to settle disputes between consumers and companies. They have the legal power to put things right if they uphold your complaint. [You can make a complaint online.](#)

Further support

If someone you know is experiencing economic abuse, they are not alone. We have information that can support them to take steps towards safety and begin to regain control of their finances.

Visit [the resources page of our website](#) for information including:

- Economic abuse and the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak
- Organisations that can help
- Grants and financial help

