

Processing immediate detriment cases – November 2021

This note sets out HM Treasury's best assessment at this point on the advisability of processing immediate detriment cases before new legislation to enact the McCloud remedy is in place, and the implications of this assessment for the Home Office guidance on processing immediate detriment cases published in August 2020 and revised in June 2021.

Background

Before the McCloud legislation is in place, any corrections to individuals' pension arrangements depend on an interpretation of how section 61 Equality Act 2010 would operate.

The government made clear in its July 2020 consultation and February 2021 consultation response that it accepts that members who moved to the reformed pension schemes on or after 1 April 2015 and have subsequently retired already have an entitlement to be treated as a member of their legacy scheme for the remedy period if they wish. This is based on the view that section 61 Equality Act 2010 permits pension scheme regulations to be read as though discriminatory provisions do not apply, allowing members in this position to be treated as a member of their legacy scheme.

It was initially thought that section 61 would be sufficient to allow the position of unprotected individuals due to retire before the deferred choice underpin is implemented ('pipeline' immediate detriment cases), who wished to receive legacy scheme benefits, to be corrected before the McCloud Bill, scheme regulations and relevant tax legislation came into force. This was reflected in the position set out in the July 2020 consultation document, which stated that the government would work with schemes to give members of reformed schemes due to retire before 2022 a choice of benefits, where this was administratively possible. It was acknowledged that there were still some policy and administrative issues to work through, and the consultation document noted the complexity involved and that systems changes may be required.

Consistent with that, the Home Office guidance document originally published in August 2020 was the best attempt possible at that time to set out a pathway for processing pipeline cases ahead of legislation. The document was produced in response to specific requests from the Firefighters' Scheme Advisory Board and in recognition of the particular pressures affecting the locally administered schemes. In producing the document, the complexity of these issues became increasingly apparent. The guidance did not therefore cover cases where individuals had already retired ('rectification' cases). Home Office and HMT were also clear that the document contained gaps in respect of pipeline cases, and that cases may need to be revisited, though the belief at the time was that it provided a basis to process at least some pipeline immediate detriment cases.

The February 2021 consultation response also reflected this position and acknowledged the particular complexities associated with rectification cases. The updated version of the Home Office guidance document published this year following further discussions with the sector was an attempt to provide more detail in some areas where this was possible, and to correct areas where thinking had moved on as a result of the further work that had been done. Both of these guidance documents were produced in good faith based on the best information available at the time, and it was made clear that there were still gaps and uncertainties.

Current assessment

The further work done by HMT and HMRC on drafting the remedy in the McCloud Bill (i.e. the Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Bill) has made it clear that these gaps and uncertainties are considerably greater than was previously thought. In some situations, it now appears that section 61

may not give all the powers required to operate the remedy smoothly and predictably, without generating significant uncertainty for schemes, and risking significant second or third adjustments for individuals.

Because of this, HMT's current view is now that immediate detriment cases, including those yet to retire, cannot be processed before legislation is in place without considerable risk, uncertainty and administrative burdens for individuals, schemes and employers.

The fundamental issue is that to support correction of immediate detriment cases before new legislation is in place, section 61's impact on some fairly obscure aspects of the McCloud remedy needs to be understood. Any such interpretation of how section 61 comes into play on these points is novel and contestable, and actions taken on the basis of it are risky.

This risk has become more apparent over time, as HMT and HMRC have worked through the McCloud remedy and its tax consequences in more detail. On some of these points, the effect of section 61 would only be known for certain if it is tested in a court of law. This means schemes face significant uncertainty on how to proceed.

For example, where an individual's situation is corrected before legislation is in place, analysis at this point suggests it is not certain that section 61 will allow contributions paid in the past to reformed schemes to have been paid, as a matter of fact, into legacy schemes. This could call into question certain aspects of the remedy, including those contributions' tax relievable status. That could mean that the individuals in question will owe tax on contributions made in the past to their reformed scheme. This issue could affect all individuals who have made contributions into their reformed scheme – not just those for whom an adjustment in the amounts of contributions is required. Schemes and employers could then face difficult decisions over how to deal with those past contributions, plus significant administrative burdens as they attempted to fully unwind historic situations. Some individual members could lose out – potentially temporarily, but to a significant degree if tax is owed on past contributions but compensation for tax relief on contributions now being made into the legacy scheme is not available until the full remedy is in place. Individuals may also face significant second, and sometimes third, corrections once legislation is in place, as some of these problems are corrected.

Other areas of uncertainty exist and based on the experience so far of preparing the McCloud remedy, it is reasonable to conclude that further issues could emerge as work continues on the detailed McCloud remedy for changes to tax legislation and through scheme regulations.

The legislation the government is putting in place, through the McCloud Bill and tax legislation, and through the scheme regulations changes, aims to address uncertainties to deliver proportionate and reasonable results which are robust to further challenge on the grounds of discrimination, in line with the policy set out in the consultation and response documents. It is HMT's view at this point, based on the analysis as it currently stands, that cases cannot be smoothly and predictably processed until this legislation is in place and that there are risks and uncertainties for schemes and for individuals if cases are processed ahead of that.

Therefore HMT and Home office do not advise that schemes process pipeline immediate detriment cases before the legislation is in place, given the uncertainty of how to proceed on some elements, and the significant risk of generating unintended tax consequences that may, to a greater or lesser extent, then need to be reversed once legislation is in force.

It is of course still up to schemes to choose to process cases or not based on their own assessment of the competing legal risks, but at this stage it is not possible to give any guarantees that the remedy and its tax consequences will work as intended for everyone, before the legislation is in place.

Implications for the Home Office guidance

Whilst section 61 permits individuals affected to be treated as members of their legacy scheme, given the uncertainty around how it operates on some of the detailed elements of the McCloud remedy, HMT no longer views the current version of the Home Office guidance as accurately representing the situation. Unfortunately, that uncertainty also means the guidance cannot be revised to give schemes a clear way forward on how to process these cases that is certain to be correct. Home Office have therefore taken the difficult decision to withdraw this guidance.

It is also important to note that if schemes process cases and run up against tax issues which it is not straightforward to resolve – because the situation is either ambiguous under current rules due to uncertainty about how section 61 acts on some elements, or the current rules generate unwelcome tax outcomes – they will have to operate within the existing tax legislation and HMRC will not be able to help resolve those issues. This may mean that individuals could face unwanted tax bills and/or corrections to their tax affairs, which may then need to be corrected again once the legislation is in place.

For cases that have already been dealt with, or are in the process of being dealt with, the new legislation will give powers intended to allow schemes to put these individuals into the correct position, drawing on the provisions of the McCloud Bill. However, this could entail significant second or third corrections and so HMT would not advise that schemes continue to process cases on the assumption these provisions will mean a smooth and predictable experience for themselves and for members.