

Work and Pensions Select Committee inquiry: The DWP's response to the coronavirus outbreak

Written evidence from the Welfare at a (Social)
Distance research project

December 2020



This written evidence is submitted on behalf of the Welfare at a (Social) Distance project. This is a major national research project investigating the benefits system during the COVID-19 pandemic, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council as part of UK Research and Innovation's rapid response to COVID-19. The project comprises a nationally representative survey of benefit claimants; in-depth interviews with claimants; and local area case studies of support organisations. As such the project is uniquely placed to provide insights into how the social security benefits system is functioning during the pandemic.

The evidence is submitted by researchers Prof Lisa Scullion, Dr Ben Baumberg Geiger, Dr Daniel Edmiston, Dr Jo Ingold, Dr Kate Summers, Dr David Robertshaw, Dr Andrea Gibbons, Dr Eleni Karagiannaki, and Dr Rob De Vries, from the universities comprising the study: University of Salford, University of Kent, University of Leeds, Deakin University, and the London School of Economics.

In addition to our responses to the Committee's specific questions below, we would be very happy to provide any supplementary information that may be of use.

For more information on the project or to contact the team, please visit
<http://hub.salford.ac.uk/welfare-at-a-social-distance/>



1 How well is the Universal Credit system working for the unprecedented numbers of new claimants?

Has there been any improvement in the significant delays that new UC claimants were experiencing in the second half of March?

1.1 The DWP adapted quickly to process the large influx of claims at the start of the pandemic. However, we want to highlight that waiting times are still a challenge, and more importantly, significant proportions of claimants *delayed* making their initial claim for various reasons. *Delays* to submitting a claim is a policy challenge that should be addressed.

1.2 Our nationally representative survey of 7,601 benefit claimants (conducted 21 May-15 June 2020) – including both new and existing claimants – found that delaying making a claim for benefits was common: 38.6% of claimants reported submitting a claim almost straightaway or within a week; but 22.1% waited for between a week and a month; and a further 21.7% reported waiting by more than a month before submitting their claim. In our qualitative interviews (consisting of 74 in-depth interviews with claimants conducted between May and September 2020), we found there were varied reasons for such delays, with some citing misunderstandings about how the benefits system worked, including a lack of understanding of eligibility. Indeed, 41.6% of claimants who had delayed making their claim by more than a month during the pandemic said that they delayed because they were unsure of their entitlement. Others viewed benefits only as a last resort, after other options had been exhausted:

"We didn't do it at first, because we didn't think we'd be eligible, for one...Because, at first, we didn't think that we could apply. Our mindset wasn't, 'Yes, let's sign on.' We've never - either of us - have ever signed on in our lives. It wasn't the obvious thing and it wasn't until... Obviously, on the news and all those press conferences about what you can do to help. Everyone's talking, aren't they? Saying, 'Oh, I've managed to get this.' 'I've managed to get that.' Or, 'You would be eligible, you should get it.' It wasn't until the reality struck, of absolutely no money coming in" (Female, 40s, Universal Credit claimant)

"It wasn't straightaway because my husband said that he was going to see if he could find a different delivery job or something like that, but it ended up being, no one was taking anybody on and no one wanted to employ and stuff like that ... I think it was literally like six to eight weeks later." (Female, 20s, Universal Credit claimant)



1.3 Stigma also led people to delay claiming until they could not avoid it. One third (33.2%) of those that delayed a month or longer before claiming said that this was due to stigma. As one interviewee put it:

"I thought it wasn't really for me. The other reason why I didn't reply, I thought it would affect where I can live [because I thought I would have to disclose it to my landlord].... I feel guilty being on it, to be honest. I think that's another reason. I was like, 'I'll put it off and it can be a last resort and I'll use it as a security thing,' but I should do everything I can before applying for it." (Male, 20s, Universal Credit claimant)

1.4 Looking to the survey, we can also unpick the timing of claims before and during the pandemic. New claimants, that is, those whose claims started during the pandemic, were less likely to delay their claims than those whose claim had begun pre-pandemic. New Universal Credit claimants were the least likely to delay, with 12% of this group delaying by a month or longer. This perhaps reflects a growing awareness of the 5-week wait inbuilt into Universal Credit's design, or a greater sense of urgency to 'get in the queue' at a time when there is a very high volume of applications.

2 *How do the needs of people claiming UC for the first time now differ from the needs of groups who've claimed UC in the past? How well is Universal Credit working for these new groups of people?*

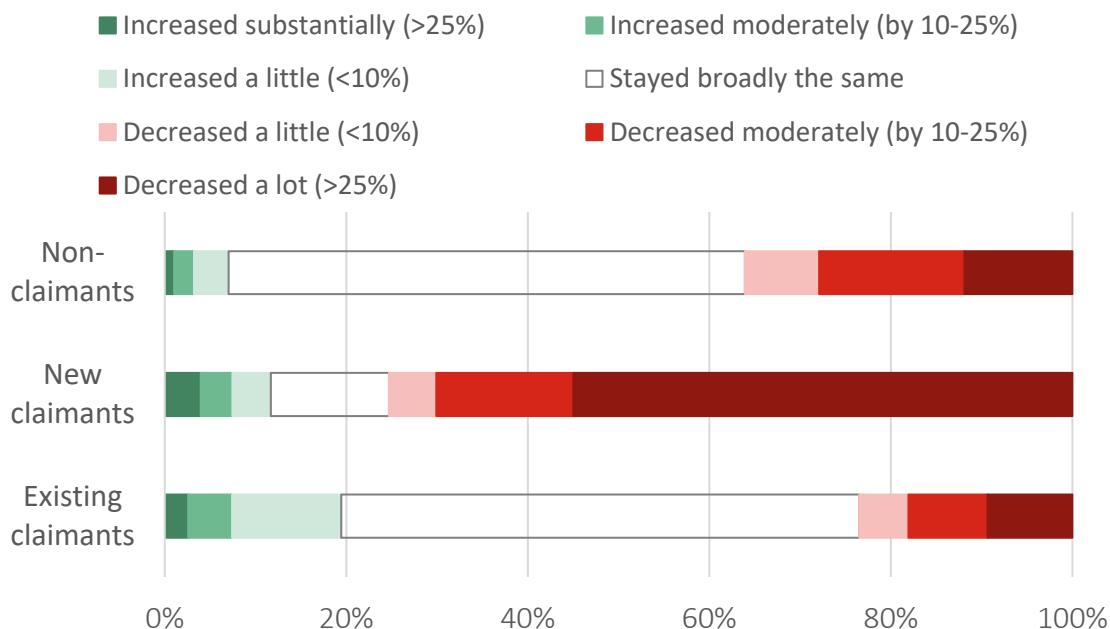
2.1 Our research finds that those claiming during the pandemic are more likely to be younger, more highly educated, and less likely to have a disability (see our report [here](#)). This new claimant cohort therefore has different needs. In particular this is: a) in terms of the level of income shock they are experiencing when moving onto benefits, and b) in terms of their employment histories and potential future trajectories.

2.2 Our survey compared what happened to the incomes of new benefit claimants, existing benefit claimants, and non-benefit claimants (see figure 1). The survey question asked:

'Now comparing your situation before the coronavirus outbreak started (i.e. at the end of February 2020) to now... to what extent has your household's income (the money you and any partner have coming in from earnings, benefits and other sources) increased or decreased, or has it stayed broadly the same?'



Figure 1: Change in income among new and existing benefit claimants compared to non-claimants



Sources: (i) non-claimants = YouGov survey of the working-age population, excluding benefit claimants, n=4,786; (ii) New/existing claimants = YouGov survey of benefit claimants, excluding Tax Credit claimants, n=6,502. This excludes the 9-15% of people who said they didn't know how their income had changed.

2.3 As can be seen, compared to non-benefit claimants almost twice the proportion of the new benefit claimants reported a fall in their household income: 75% of new benefit claimants reported that their household income fell and almost 54% reported a decrease of over 25 percent.

3 Are there any indications of how well the UC system will work for these claimants as they move into work in the short to medium term?

3.1 We will be able to report on this in more detail in the medium and longer term as we gather more data. Preliminarily, we would like to highlight concern about older claimants' ability to retrain or reskill in order to successfully re-enter the labour market in future.

4 How easy is it for people to understand what they're entitled to claim? For example:

- *Is it clear enough how the benefits system interacts with other forms of Government support during this period, such as the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme?*

4.1 Claimants generally can clearly identify how much they receive. However, there are high levels of confusion in terms of why this amount is received, and payments are often experienced as unpredictable. This makes financial planning difficult, causing hardship and stress.

4.2 Most of our interview participants seemed to understand the general principle behind their claim but there were often specific problems around certain aspects of the rules. In particular, participants tended to be frustrated with a perceived lack of clarity or transparency. This was typified by the amount paid not seeming to have a justification or explanation:

"I don't know what the amounts are, I don't know what I'm eligible for, I don't know what the figures calculate to. If there's a tariff or a - there's nothing that says - yes, you look on the computer and you try and work it out, but you've got to be Carol Vorderman" (Male, 40s, Universal Credit claimant)

"I don't really know how they work it out. I thought I would be getting less. I wasn't expecting to get that much anyway, per month, from them. So when I got it through, it was easily £200 more than I thought I would get, but I don't really know how they work it out on me because I didn't have any books or account info to say this is what I earn. I don't know how they worked it out, no." (Female, 20s, Universal Credit claimant)

4.3 Other specific issues around rules and eligibility included: not understanding that communication took place via the online journal; not understanding how joint versus individual claims worked; not understanding whether there was a legal obligation to tell one's landlord about their claim; and not understanding that the UC account was separate from one's self-assessment tax account.

5 *Have people who were already claiming benefits when the outbreak began seen any changes to the support they receive from DWP?*

5.1 Considering our in-depth interview data, in some ways the changes to the social security system made during the pandemic represented a welcome hiatus to 'business as usual'. Often those already claiming benefits were also dealing with challenging circumstances, including job loss, drops in income, difficult family circumstances, and so on, meaning the pause in various requirements provided some 'breathing space'.

6 *Are people who are claiming benefits receiving enough money to cover their basic living costs during this period?*

6.1 Both our survey and in-depth interviews considered the living standards of claimants, finding that income adequacy is a major challenge for the social security system as it currently exists.

6.2 Many claimants were experiencing some level of deprivation. To explore evidence of financial strain more closely, our survey included a series of questions focusing on seven deprivation indicators:

- i) can't make regular savings of £10 or more a month
- ii) can't replace/repair major electrical goods when broken
- iii) fallen behind on housing costs

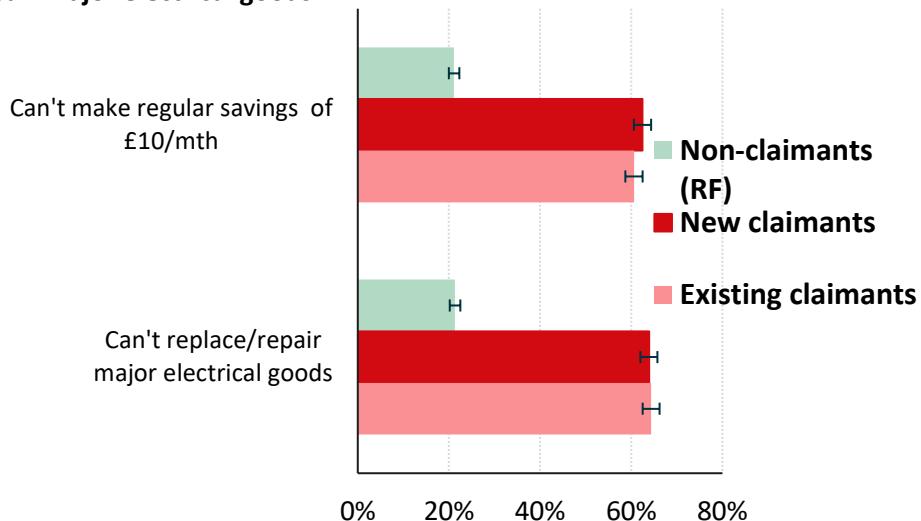


- iv) fallen behind on debts and bills
- v) can't keep up with bills and regular debt payments
- vi) been hungry and not eaten in the past two weeks
- vii) could not afford to eat fresh fruit and vegetables

6.3 We compare the deprivation rates of working age claimants with the non-claimant working age population. Figure 2 provides comparisons in terms of indicators (i)-(ii), Figure 3 for indicators (iii)-(v) and Figure 4 for indicators (vi) and (vii).

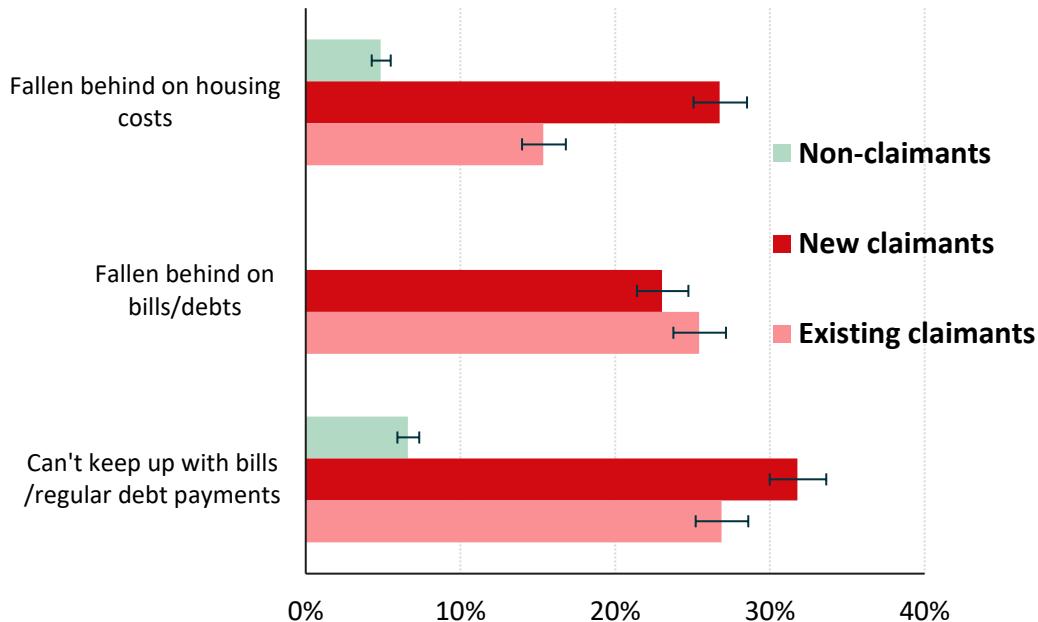
6.4 As shown in Figure 2 almost two thirds of claimants (61-64%) were experiencing some financial strain, stating that they would not be able to replace/repair major electrical goods if they broke, and could not make regular savings of £10 per month, compared to a fifth (21%) of non-claimants.

Figure 2: Proportion of claimants and non-claimants who can't make regular savings and replace/repair major electrical goods



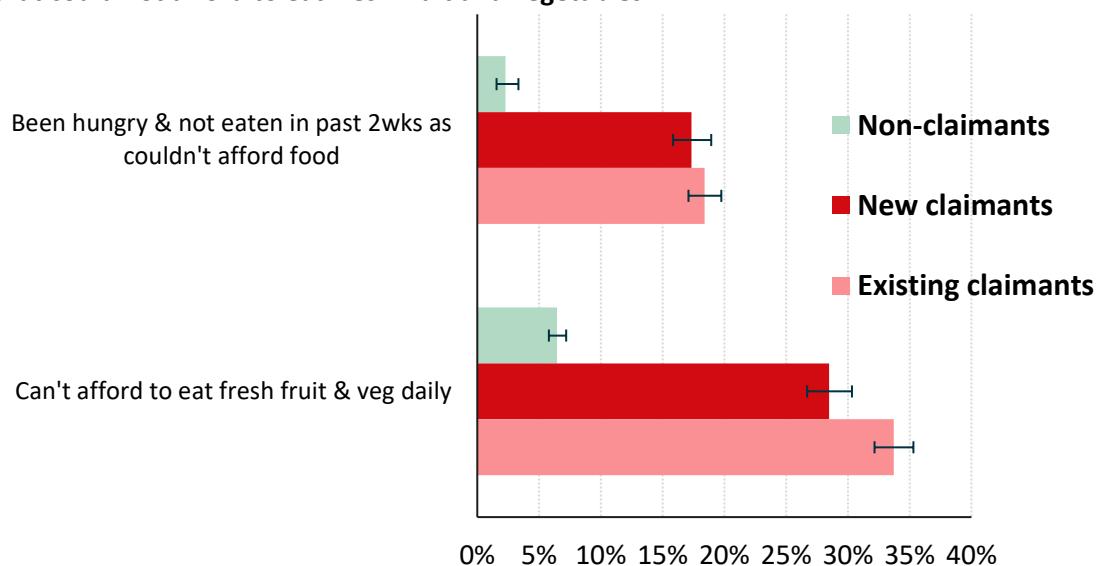
Sources: (i) non-claimants = YouGov survey of the working-age population, excluding benefit claimants, n=4,786; (ii) New/existing claimants = YouGov survey of benefit claimants, excluding Tax Credit claimants, n=3,092/ 3,167.

6.5 A large proportion of claimants reported falling behind on housing costs, and on bills and regular debt payments (Figure 3). All of these were much more common among claimants than the wider non-claimant population. It is particularly noteworthy that new claimants were more likely to be falling behind on housing costs, highlighting a mismatch between significant shocks to income alongside fixed expenditure and financial liabilities for this group.

Figure 3: Falling behind on bills and debt payments

Sources: (i) non-claimants = YouGov survey of the working-age population, excluding benefit claimants, n=4,680-4,786;
(ii) New/existing claimants = YouGov survey of benefit claimants, excluding Tax Credit claimants, n=3,089-3092/3,167.

6.6 Looking to more extreme indicators of deprivation, a large proportion of claimants reported not eating when hungry in the past two weeks because they could not afford food (Figure 4). An even higher proportion reported that they could not eat fresh fruit and vegetables every day. Both of these were much more common among claimants than among the wider non-claiming population and (unlike the previous indicators) among existing benefit claimants (i.e. their claim began pre-pandemic) than new benefit claimants.

Figure 4: Proportion reporting being hungry and not eating in the past two weeks and proportion that could not afford to eat fresh fruit and vegetables

Sources: (i) non-claimants = YouGov survey of the working-age population, excluding benefit claimants, n=1,429; (ii) non-claimants = YouGov survey of the working-age population, excluding benefit claimants, n=4,786 (iii) New/existing claimants = YouGov survey of benefit claimants, excluding Tax Credit claimants, n=3,092/4,207.

6.7 Our in-depth interviews provided further understanding of how people had experienced financial strain during the first wave of the pandemic. The interviewees had a range of living situations, but overall, those living independently of parents, and responsible for their rent or mortgage either by themselves or with a partner indicated that they had struggled to cover rent/mortgages as well as other key outgoings. Younger adults who were able to ‘boomerang’ back to the parental home appeared the most able to protect themselves against hardship.

6.8 In our survey we found no significant differences in the probability of being hungry in the past two weeks between male and female claimants or between claimants of different age groups. BAME claimants are around 8 percentage points more likely than white claimants to report that they were hungry and could not afford to eat in the past two weeks. Disabled claimants also have a higher probability of reporting having been hungry (this reflects that disabled claimants are more likely to be prior claimants as opposed to new claimants).

7 Are there groups of people who need support but aren't able to access it through the benefits system? What should DWP be doing to support those people?

7.1 In response to this question we think it is important to spotlight the experiences of the deaf community with regard to access to benefits during the pandemic. Support to make reasonable adjustments and to improve the functioning of Access to Work should be urgently addressed.

7.2 One of our in-depth interview participants was deaf, and serves as a critical example that raises issues of concern that we believe deserve further attention. She highlighted serious problems with how Access to Work functioned, and with communicating with the DWP.

7.3 She had made contact with the DWP on numerous occasions to clarify that she was deaf and therefore unable to participate in a phone-based work-search review. Despite this, phone interviews were repeatedly arranged, which was the source of considerable stress and anxiety to her.

7.4 The participant also explained that she had been employed until March but a sudden shift to remote-working saw her contract end. This was not related to a decline in available work (the employer actually became busier), but because of the costs the employer would incur in procuring specialist equipment via the *Access to Work* scheme. In follow-up correspondence, the participant related that a new offer of work (made in August by a different employer) had been withdrawn due to “unnecessary delay with Access to Work” (including a lengthy process where she was attempting to establish whether an earlier Access to Work assessment could be used for the new role). These kinds of delays, barriers and inflexibilities were experienced as discriminatory by the claimant.



8 Are support organisations and charities able to access the resources they need from DWP to support vulnerable people? What more could DWP be doing to facilitate that support?

8.1 Organisations involved in supporting claimants have needed to adapt quickly to the new context, while facing new and heightened pressures on service provision from various directions. Support is needed with being able to ‘reach’ particular claimant groups, and serious concerns remain as to how to cope with the crisis ‘cliff edges’ yet to come for large numbers of claimants.

8.2 In recent years, the process of claiming social security has become increasingly complex with a range of actors and organisations mediating the relationship between benefit claimants and the DWP. These intermediaries provide important information, advice and support that is often instrumental to helping households either initiate or sustain a claim for benefits. Our research suggests that the amount of help received by benefit claimants is considerable. In our survey, respondents were asked whether they had received any help making their claim for benefits, excluding any assistance from Jobcentre Plus and the DWP. Overall, more than a third (35%) of benefit claimants received some kind of help. This principally involved support in making a claim, understanding eligibility, getting (medical) evidence to complete applications, and so on. Those making a claim prior to the pandemic and those experiencing a health condition or disability were most reliant on this help.

8.3 During COVID-19, organisations and actors providing support have had to adapt and respond to the challenges that social distancing presents. To explore what bearing this has had on the coverage and quality of support that many benefit claimants rely on, we interviewed 34 individuals, held meetings with 13 national informants and attended multiple practitioner and policy steering groups across four local areas (Leeds, Salford, Newham, Thanet). We spoke to managerial and front-line staff involved in benefits and income maximisation; Help to Claim; crisis and emergency food provision, housing, welfare rights, employment support, debt advice and money management, community support and local government. Key issues arising included the following:

- Alongside a sharp increase in demand, many third sector organisations experienced a sudden reduction in capacity. Many services were overwhelmed and unable to answer calls/emails or hold appointments with those financially struggling and seeking benefit support.
- After the initial disruption of lockdown, many services adapted by moving their systems onto the phones or online. The majority of those interviewed expressed concern about the quality of the interactions, assessments and support they were able to provide over the phone or online. Service providers were particularly concerned about claimants with more complex needs and circumstances.
- Those interviewed observed a change in the profile of benefit claimants accessing their service, with new enquiries from those with less experience and knowledge of the benefits system, but higher expectations. However, others also noted an increasing complexity of cases with compounding issues making access to effective advice, money and emergency support difficult.
- Depending on local eco-systems of support in operation, those working in larger organisations were more likely to experience a reduced demand for aspects of their service (e.g. welfare rights within the local authority). Some cited changes to the benefit system as a reason that made initiating or maintaining a claim ‘easier’ during the first few months of the pandemic. However, others expressed

concern that many of the service users who rely particularly on face-to-face support were currently 'on their own'. Digital literacy, poor confidence and understanding were cited as key barriers that meant some claimants, often most dependent on support, were not being reached or reaching out via remote methods of communication. Based on this, concerns were raised about the coverage and quality of support available to those with limiting health conditions or disabilities, BAME individuals, those whose first language isn't English, and older people.

- Across the four case study areas, referrals between key services became more effective in certain instances with greater collaboration and coordination to pool resources and expertise. However, in other instances there was a collapse in the referrals process which often proves crucial to effective assessment, signposting and interventions for benefit claimants via community hubs, public libraries, etc.
- Some organisations shifted to a more proactive model of service provision, contacting previous or ongoing service users to make sure they were okay. Others shifted to an outreach, floating service to adapt to COVID-19. Voluntary and third sector groups expressed concern that a lack of face-to-face contact with benefit claimants meant they were 'moving off the ground' in terms of their capacity to effectively assess and respond to community needs.
- Overwhelmingly, those providing income, employment and benefit support were concerned about the future. They were concerned about their own operational capacity and the prospect of constrained funding on the horizon. However, they were principally concerned about the 'cliff edges' yet to come for benefit claimants and those financially struggling. This included widespread cases and concerns surrounding debt accumulation, financial uncertainty, extreme poverty and destitution, job loss and un(der)employment, poor labour market prospects, Brexit, the return of conditionality for claimants, etc.

