

Work and Pensions Committee

Oral evidence: Universal Credit: survival sex, HC 2025

Wednesday 22 May 2019

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Heidi Allen (Chair); Rosie Duffield; Frank Field; Ruth George; Nigel Mills; Chris Stephens; Derek Thomas.

Questions 1 - 93

Witnesses

I: T; B; and K and M.

II: Laura Seebohm, Executive Director, Innovation and Policy, Changing Lives; Dr Raven Bowen, Chief Executive Officer, National Ugly Mugs; Sarah McManus, Chief Executive Officer, A Way Out; and Amber Wilson, Business Development and Marketing Manager, Basis Yorkshire.

III: Helen McDonald, Member of the Management Committee, Nordic Model Now!; Blair Buchanan, Activist and Organiser, representing SWARM; and Niki Adams, Spokesperson, English Collective of Prostitutes.

Written evidence from witnesses:

A way Out [UCX0017](#)

English Collective of Prostitutes [UCX0016](#)

Nordic Model Now [UCX0014](#)

Changing Lives [UCX0013](#)

SWARM [UCX0009](#)

National Ugly Mugs [UCX0007](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: K, T, B and M.

Q1 Chair: Good morning, ladies. Thank you very much for coming to join us. For the record and by way of saying hello, do you want to introduce yourselves one by one and tell us a little bit about—first and foremost, thank you very much for coming today—what sort of things you want to get off your chest, what you want to talk to us about and why you think it is important the Department for Work and Pensions understands what life is like for you? Who wants to start, B or T? Go on then, T.

T: I am T. I am an escort and it is led through Universal Credit.

K: I am K. I am a single mum. I am a lap dancer and I have done sex work in the past.

M: Hi, I am M. I work in a brothel and I have experience with the benefit system, but haven't even bothered trying to apply for Universal Credit.

B: Hi, I am B. I am a migrant and I am a sex worker of 10 years. I have worked in brothels and various other forms of the sex industry. The same as M as well, I have claimed other benefits before, but I am not even bothering with the Universal Credit.

Q2 Chair: Forgive me, T, did you say you had experience of Universal Credit?

T: Yes.

Q3 Chair: Do you want to talk to us a little bit about what that is like, what is good about it and what is rubbish about it?

T: I was on Jobseeker's Allowance. I got a job as a carer and then enrolled for Universal Credit, which meant even though I was working, I still had to comply with the Jobcentre, tell them what hours I was working and things. They were making us appointments for Friday, when I was a fulltime carer for 12-hour shifts. I couldn't make the Friday appointment, so I could not tell them the hours I was working, so they refused to pay my rent. That was the first start.

I then went for an interview and they told us that my reasons for not being able to pay my rent weren't good enough, because my wages were not enough to pay my bills and the rent. They basically said I had to go on a budgeting course to learn how to pay my rent and stuff, but when Citizens Advice worked it out, I was going to be left with £8 and that is not enough to pay my rent. I then obviously signed on the Universal Credit and I got put on the sick duty, trying to end my life. When I got put on the sick, I then applied for Universal Credit and things, because I still wanted to have a job and stuff. I went on to Universal Credit and I had six weeks to wait for my money to be sorted out. In the six weeks, I had already had three foodbanks and you are only allowed three in my area, so I couldn't go to any more foodbanks for any more food.



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I had heard about a girl who was dancing and things and she told us about escorting. I used to judge people like that, you know, I would never do nothing like that, but I thought it was the easiest way. Like I had done one job and I could go and I paid my rent, do you know what I mean? That one job made us feel on top of the world. So now my Universal Credit claim is still going, but I am not entitled to any money.

Q4 Chair: Sorry, forgive me, I am probably dipping into some of your questions, Ruth. So you have seen the old benefit system and Universal Credit. What has been the biggest problems for you and how has your work coach relationship been and that kind of stuff?

T: I didn't have an allocated work coach, so every time I was going into the Jobcentre I was seeing a different person. You only see them once a month. I was doing a job search and things, but it was on a bit of paper in the first six weeks of my Universal Credit and then they rolled in the online service. But my area, they were just testing Universal Credit there first, so we were doing the papers, filling in like a five day a week job search and stuff. Then it changed to the online service and I am not very good with computers. I haven't been in school since I was an 11 year-old due to past experiences and stuff, so I tried to explain that to them and they said to go on a computer course.

I did go on a computer course, but they kind of put you on a computer, give you like a slideshow kind of thing. You have to read it, answer a few questions and then that was meant to be me learning how to use a computer. I don't even know how to go on Google emails or anything, do you know what I mean? Like I really do struggle a lot. I can't remember my passwords and stuff and they basically said it was an excuse, do you know what I mean? So I just thought that obviously sex work, like it is the easiest thing, honestly it is. It is horrible to say, but it is the easiest thing to keep us girls alive, it is.

Q5 Chair: Have you kind of just accepted that your relationship with Universal Credit now is what it is, it is just—

T: That's me done, yes.

Q6 Chair: Okay. K, I did not catch it, forgive me. Have you been on Universal Credit?

K: No. I am currently on tax credits. Can I read my story?

Chair: Yes, of course you can.

K: Hi, my name is K. I have three children. My husband was abusive to me. I got rid of him, because he was attacking me. Sorry, I will be all right in a minute.

Chair: You are so brave, you know that, don't you?

Q7 Frank Field: K, before you go on, because we had T's view about what it is like trying to get on to Universal Credit, can you tell us about your



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experience claiming tax credits?

K: Tax credits were easy just to claim, really easy, and I was getting a fair amount of money.

Q8 Frank Field: How many times did you have to apply and were there problems about what your earnings were in one period and whether there was a clawback in another?

K: Sorry, I am currently still on tax credits, but I will be moved over soon. This is about my story.

Q9 Chair: Do you feel strong enough to do that?

K: Can I just read the story? It is probably easier.

Frank Field: No, do. I just want you to settle down.

K: Sorry, I am okay now. I got rid of him and I was living on benefits. Occasionally I would work as a lap dancer when I was short money. I met my two youngest children's father. I found out he was married when I was four months pregnant with my son. He then turned against me and started hitting me. He found out I had done a bit of stripping in the past and called me terrible names and he would abuse me. Sorry.

Chair: It is all right.

K: Basically I had my daughter and she was not able to feed herself and was rocking in the crib at seven to eight months. She was really far behind, not feeding herself. It just went on from there, really.

I worked as a lap dancer when money was short. My boyfriend wasn't paying or contributing and I was literally stuck on my own because I have no family. It has been really tough. I had to deal with the ex's behaviour and trying to earn money to look after a disabled child and other children. It has been literally impossible. It has been so stressful. I am determined to get a home for my children, so at different times I have worked to buy a house. This meant my children could go to a decent school, but it has been very exhausting and tough trying to pay a mortgage.

I am back on benefits now. My daughter gets DLA. I get the Carer's Allowance. The father pays £6 a week towards two children and the Government does absolutely nothing. He says to me that he is not ever going to work again because he does not care I have no money and why should he pay for his children. The benefits don't cover what the children need. I have to go to car boot sales to get their clothes or people give me stuff from Freecycle and Facebook. The only thing I buy new is shoes from Clarks for their feet and new underwear. The rest is second hand.

I am about to be moved on to Universal Credit. I will lose £200 a month, approximately. I have been to Citizens Advice about this. My friends have already been moved over. I don't have any savings. I am scared that I will have to wait weeks before I get any money. I have just been trying to scrape together £1,500 to cover my mortgage and loans. I need to



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save some money so I am planning to escort or massaging or something similar. I am scared that that means I have to advertise and put my face out there and the father could find out and call Social Services and I will be in a lot of trouble.

The thought of going into debt and having no money is really frightening. I have children. I can't do that. I will sell my body. I want to tell this Committee that there are a lot of girls out there just like me. The women that I met at the strip club are all single mums doing their studies. We all need the extra money. With Universal Credit, we are all really struggling.

Chair: Well done.

Q10 **Frank Field:** K, will you leave us your statement so we can make sure it is all in our text, which you will then approve?

K: What, leave it?

Frank Field: Yes.

K: Yes.

Frank Field: That would be brilliant of you, thank you.

Q11 **Chair:** M and B, before we move on to Ruth, do you want to give us just a rough overview of what life has been like on the old benefit system for you and how you are managing—because you are presumably nervous about going on to Universal Credit—and why you think that it is still better to stay on the old system rather than move across?

M: I have currently failed to get any form of benefits because I am too scared to disclose what I do for work, especially because I currently work in an illegal brothel and we have faced police harassment before, so I really can't have it on record anywhere what I do.

I have been trying to apply for a disability benefit. I have myalgic encephalomyelitis, fibromyalgia or chronic pain and I cannot work fulltime or consistent hours at all. The only work I have been able to find that is flexible and allows me to do enough hours to still be able—I am a student at the moment—to go to university and try to do something better has been sex work, so I now work in a brothel.

The issues I have had applying for disability benefit is there is a very, very quick turnaround from opening a claim and having to get evidence in. At the moment I am struggling to feed myself, to do basic things like laundry, let alone fill out a huge form when I struggle with writing things down and articulating words when I am very tired. The case gets automatically closed if you take more than a couple of weeks, so I have never once, in my three attempts of trying to do it, been able to fill out the form and send it off on time.

I have also heard from friends with similar conditions that the appeals process is really horrible because with illnesses like mine, where you have good days and bad days, they really only listen to your good days.



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They say, "Oh well, you can walk 200 metres on some days" even though I wake in the morning and I don't know if I am going to be able to. Every day I wake up and have to figure out if I am in too much pain to even get up and get food, because my illness fluctuates so much. Friends with really similar diagnoses have had to go to court and had to go through all this brutal questioning. I am too terrified to put myself through that, especially when I would end up having to disclose my sex work, which is, for all intents and purposes, illegal.

Because I am currently a student, I am not eligible for Universal Credit. I don't know what I am going to do when I graduate in a couple of months. Probably I am going to have to apply, but I am really terrified because I know I am going to have to disclose what I do.

Q12 Chair: It sounds as if a lot of it is wrapped up in your fear of what you have heard about the various application processes and things like that.

M: Definitely.

B: Kind of just mirroring the same sort of thing as M was saying, I have been on JSA before. I found it inaccessible, particularly to those of us who fall in a neurodiverse spectrum. I have complex PTSD from very early age child sex abuse and over the years my mental health has deteriorated. My ability to do a lot of sort of admin-based work, it becomes more and more difficult, so as you can imagine, Jobseeker's Allowance doesn't necessarily provide for people who kind of fall under that category. Just even sometimes leaving the house is very difficult, which is why sex work has been—I guess for a lot of us—very useful in terms of being able to manage our own time when we can and can't work. That, for me, is also partly another reason why I will not be going on Universal Credit because, again, it doesn't allow supporting people who can't both mentally and physically do that admin-based work, which it takes a lot of time and effort and it is online stuff.

Q13 Chair: Is that the online stuff that you do with UC?

B: Yes. For me as well, like I used to do independent-based work and working in a brothel means that I don't have to do all that extra work that I find really difficult to do. Also I have not been on benefits for a good part of four or five years now and have just solely relied on sex work to survive.

Another important thing to mention is that again, people have said to me, "It would be easier if you just claimed disability benefits". I think that is also very difficult when the NHS, for example, doesn't want to treat you because you are a sex worker. I am out as a sex worker and that has meant I have been denied therapy because I do sex work, I have been denied any form of support because I have been open about the work that I do and have been told that my work is abuse and therefore if I want any support from the NHS, I need to leave the work that I do without being given any other support, again making it more difficult to



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claim any other form of benefits, because I can't back up the fact that I have disabilities or unseen disabilities.

Q14 **Chair:** It is a vicious circle then?

B: Yes.

Q15 **Ruth George:** Thank you very much. They are all really powerful stories that you have given us and really useful to bring to us.

We are particularly looking at the whole benefit system, but at Universal Credit in particular because it is new and it is coming in and we want to try to see if it needs changing to make it more accessible for people. What would need to change in Universal Credit, in the benefit system, for you to be able to access it, T?

T: Honestly, I am not quite sure, because just last week I had an appointment today, but obviously with coming here, I can't tell them that I am coming here, so I have told them that I am the doctor's, okay? I have told them that I am at the doctor's today and I have my appointment for tomorrow. Now, on the phone they told us that my appointment is for tomorrow at 4 o'clock. On my online journal, it says my appointment is for half 11 tomorrow morning. When I try to ring them, I am going to be on the phone for six hours, okay, like I am going to be on the phone for at least half an hour to get through to them and then a good two hours to tell them all my story and stuff, do you know what I mean? Probably for them to say that I have missed my appointment, do you know what I mean, because tomorrow I am not going to make it by 11 o'clock, because I have mental problems. By then I will have just got my tablets, do you know what I mean, and it takes them a good hour to kick in.

It would be afternoon time that my appointment would normally be, so tomorrow they are going to automatically sanction us and I know they are, do you know what I mean? Like for the past five weeks I have been getting ongoing sanctions, sanctions and sanctions. This is because I can't explain to them in those six weeks how I survived. Obviously, like L, I don't want to tell them that I am doing escorting and stuff, so I have been telling them that I am lending money, I am just living obviously here, there and everywhere, but I don't have family to lend money off, so I am not lending money because I can't. She is the only support I have and she has had to drop food off to us and stuff because of obviously that break.

The only thing that I think that Universal Credit could do is go back to Jobseeker's Allowance, honestly. Jobseeker's Allowance was so easy, you just had one appointment, one a fortnight, do you know what I mean, you could tell them your fortnight's job search, you could tell them what jobs you had applied for, what jobs you had been interviewed for and stuff, whereas here it is just all on a computer, like you don't get somebody like you to sit and talk to about what jobs you have applied for, why they haven't taken you for that job, do you know what I mean?



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I got told that I was too educated. I haven't been in school since I was , so I haven't got GCSEs or nothing, but I did have level 3 in social care, like carers, but also doing the child development side of it as well. Basically they were saying to us to go back into caring work, but with my mental health I was vulnerable myself, like I was getting stressed when I was cleaning people up and stuff and I was crying a lot and crying at my manager. Explaining to them that I had to walk out of a job isn't good enough for them, do you know what I mean? Like to them I have walked out of a job and that is it.

Q16 **Frank Field:** T, can I just butt in? You said you have not been to school since you were .

T: Yes, that is true.

Q17 **Frank Field:** Here you are, all of you, before a House of Commons Select Committee, all of you articulate, all of you making big decisions or having to make decisions in your lives. Why no school? What happened and didn't anybody follow you up?

Q18 **Frank Field:** No, I do. It is brilliant of you, what you are telling us.

T: Like some things do lead from drugs and stuff, but my mum has never touched a drug in her life. My mum works fulltime and she doesn't smoke or nothing. Her money, everything goes on my mum's kids and stuff now, do you know what I mean, but back in the day, for my mum to be able to work, I had to go and be abused, do you know what I mean? Now my three brothers and sisters are having an amazing life now, but I haven't, do you know I mean? So it is just hard, really hard.

Frank Field: T, thank you.

Q19 **Ruth George:** Thank you so much, T. That has enlightened us about that. A lot of you spoke about other people that you speak to and you deal with and the fact that you have come here partly to tell their story as well. Are there any particular problems in Universal Credit, in the benefit system in particular that you think are really driving women into survival sex or work?

M: I think definitely it is a big problem with waiting times, like when we apply for benefits we don't have money to spare, like we are not applying ahead of time, we are already in a crisis. Then to have to wait weeks or months without support, like what are we supposed to do when we have no family support? We have to find some way to get money and if you somehow find a job in that time, it can totally get rid of your claim.

Q20 **Ruth George:** Yes, it can. Did you know that you can get an advance of your benefits pretty much straight away when you go in? About 70% of people are doing that now.

K: I have heard this, but I have heard it is a high interest rate and you have to pay it back.



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Q21 **Ruth George:** They don't charge interest on it, but yes, it comes off your benefits, in the next few months they deduct it.

K: It is not what I want to do. I don't want to be in more debt. I would rather just do some sex work, easy money, and then pay my debts like that.

Q22 **Ruth George:** Yes, it is an issue, like you say, if you are losing £200 a month, then to have other deductions on top of that.

K: Yes. I just can't afford that. I just need to start saving, because I don't know when I am going to go on Universal Credit. I just have no idea. Me and my other friends, other single mums, we are so stressed out. We just don't know when. No one is telling us anything.

Frank Field: T, you were going to say something.

T: Yes, they do give you an advance, they do give you that. I am not going to say they don't, they do give you that, but you have to wait six weeks and £250 is not going to last anybody six weeks. Like I am only 21 and I only spend £20 on gas and electric a fortnight, do you know what I mean, and that is cheap. I am trying my best, £30 on shopping, not a penny over, because if I go a penny over I can't get other stuff that I need, tampons and things, do you know what I mean? That Universal Credit advance, by the time I got it I had spent it and then I was waiting another three to four weeks for my benefit. Even then when I got my benefit, they were taking £150 off my benefit and I was left with £50.

Q23 **Frank Field:** T, is that for your advance or is that because it was historic debt, as they call it, money that you borrowed before?

T: No, that is the advance. I have never borrowed money off the system before. I try not to. The only thing I have ever had is a budgeting loan and I paid that off straight away.

Q24 **Frank Field:** How much were they taking off you, T?

T: £148, so I was left with £52.50 or something to live on.

Q25 **Chair:** Sorry, how long have you been on Universal Credit in total?

T: January. Obviously this all happened since. I have lost my house and everything, locks on my door. All my furniture is in that house and the locks have been changed on the door. That was because I was doing the caring work and had fallen behind a little bit on my rent and not being able to put it back until my wages would come in and then they would give us like a top-up, do you know what I mean? So I was having to wait for that to be able to pay my top-up of my rent and the landlord wasn't happy with that, so chucked us out.

Q26 **Chair:** A private landlord, I presume, was it?

Q27 **Ruth George:** Where are you living now, T?



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T: I haven't got a house. I am sofa-surfing and obviously I am a sex worker, so I pay my fees daily to use an apartment, so whatever money I make that day, I pay some rent so I can stay there that night, just get like a pot noodle or something, like that is how I am living now. I am going to have to live like that, I don't know how long for.

Q28 **Frank Field:** You are living where, T?

T: I am just living with my friends and stuff and obviously the escorting work that I am doing, like I pay for an apartment to work from, so if I pay £60 for one day, I can stay there that night, do you know what I mean? But I am having to do five or six duties of sex before I get to pay, do know what I mean, my rent and stuff.

Q29 **Chair:** What would you like to do for a job?

T: I have danced since I was like three years old. I would love to just do my performing arts. I'm not good with like words and stuff and admin and that, I am more of a hands-on person, dance, drama, art, anything that like, that is me. But I am struggling at the minute, like I think I have bipolar, but I am trying to get them to give us an assessment and it is just all dragging out, like I am just going stay being an escort because I am sick. Honestly, I am only 21, do you know what I mean, and I haven't been one of these that left school and not worked. I worked in a café, I done my work experience in a café and then joined that café to work hard. I worked at , I have swept floors, do you know what I mean? I have done everything and then obviously the caring work and now I am an escort.

Q30 **Frank Field:** T, can I just ask, DWP have what they call work coaches. Have these work coaches ever asked you, "What would you like to do"?

T: No, they just send you on obviously warehouse operative jobs and stuff like that. Obviously they won't send me for a labouring job because I am a girl, so they send me for office jobs and stuff like that and I cannot use a computer, I really can't. That is not me lying. If you put a laptop in front of us now, I wouldn't know how to get on to Word.

Q31 **Frank Field:** I couldn't, but you see, I have an office, so my disability is disguised.

K, what is your experience of the work coach?

K: I am still on tax credits at the moment.

Q32 **Frank Field:** So you don't have to go in? You are in sanctuary, you don't have to do it?

K: Yes. I am just really stressed out about the whole thing. I have sleepless nights about Universal Credit, because I just have no idea. I don't know.

Q33 **Ruth George:** I was just going to say what was really worrying about it for you? Is it the wait that you were saying or the drop in income or the



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journal?

K: It is the wait, the journal. How can I go on a computer when I have all this in my head? It is just very hard. I get absolutely no help, so I can't even cook or clean and I am too scared to go to Social Services for help in case they start digging around. My biggest bugbear here is the father. He is on benefits. He pays £6.20 for two kids. I mean, it is just ridiculous. The Government does nothing and even the self-employed—

T: That is not enough for two kids at McDonald's and I don't have kids. It is disgusting.

K: It is just ridiculous. Even when you are self-employed, you still have to pay like £5 a week or something for CSA or whatever it is called now. It is just ridiculous, it is disgusting and it has put pressure on me to work and work at like lap-dancing and probably working as a prostitute again. I mean, I grew up in care, I have no family.

Q34 **Ruth George:** I was just going to say that all of you, you don't seem to have support around you, like family support, and you are struggling either with your own disability or, like you are, K, with your daughter's, which is something really difficult for anybody to deal with.

K: It is very difficult.

Ruth George: I see in my surgery lots of parents who are struggling and not getting the support they need. It is difficult even when you have a whole family around you. Do you think that it is almost impossible to cope with the system without that sort of family support or a community around you to lend you money when you need it or to just help you get by with childcare and things?

T: Yes, because you always get asked the question, like if you ring up for a hardship payment or something because you're without, they will always ask you, "Have you got a family member you can—" and sometimes you don't want to explain where your mum and dad are or if you even know them, do you know what I mean, like K, bless her. I don't know my dad, so if they say to us, "Can your mum not lend you anything?" I would say, "Well, no, because she has got _____ and they would say, "Well, do you not have a father?" Do you know what I mean? That is not very nice to have on the other side of the phone when you literally don't know who your dad is. It is horrible.

Then they say to us, "Can you ask your grandparents?" Like they don't want us to start going on about that as well, because then I will just cry. It is just so hard, like they have so many excuses and I just feel like saying to them, "Can you not lend us some money?"

Q35 **Ruth George:** That is where the Government are supposed to be there as a safety net, for people who don't have any other support, but it does seem that in all of your cases that that safety net is failing. Some of the particular issues seem to be around using computers and the time that it



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takes to navigate the system. I don't think any of us who have not been there appreciate how long, like you were saying, T, it can take on the phone to try to sort even a little thing out, like the time of an appointment.

T: Even changing your address, honestly, it is like ages on the phone and then they ask you why you are changing your address, what was the date you moved in, what are your circumstances now and stuff, do you know what I mean? Like it is just so much and then obviously the next day you have to ring up for hardship or something again and it is just so tiring, like it takes up half of your day to sometimes not even get any help. You feel like you are just take, take, taking off them, like even if you have had a job before in the past, as soon as you are on Universal Credit, you get talked down to. Like I am a young person, so when I go in, I feel like they are talking down to us anyway, do you know what I mean, but if K went in, she would probably still feel like the way I do, because she has kids, she is by herself, she doesn't work at the minute, like they will just talk down to her. Automatically they would say, "How are you, K? We will put you on a course" do you know what I mean, and then she couldn't explain about her kids and stuff.

K: They took my son's car away. He had a mobility car. They took that after three—sorry, my daughter's car away after three years. I had to go to tribunal and I lost. It was ridiculous. I mean, I really struggle on public transport. It is totally ridiculous. It is just so unfair.

Q36 Ruth George: I am sorry to hear that. Yes, the disabilities, it is not just Universal Credit, it is like you were saying, M, about the disability benefits as well. T and K have explained really clearly about how their housing is affected by it. B and M, how do you get by for housing? Because that is another serious problem, and as T said, that is sort of driving you having to do escort work because you can get into a flat.

T: It is awful having to stay. I have just been speaking to the girls about the brothel, because I have never worked from a brothel before, so I don't know what it is like. I don't have somebody sitting downstairs looking after me when I am working and stuff. It is not the case of like having somebody come upstairs if you are screaming, do you know what I mean, it is just someone downstairs to answer the phone and stuff, whereas they are probably having to stay in their brothel to have a roof over their head, just like I am having to stay in my apartment that I work from.

If I have a really rich businessman who has just took me out all day, gives us a little tip or something and says, "There you go, go and get yourself something nice tonight" that is brilliant for me, do you know what I mean? I will go back to my apartment. The next-door neighbour knows that I am an escort. I am going to get done over, my door is going to get kicked through, do you know what I mean? It has happened before and it is going to happen again. Some people come and have sex with you and they might pay in card payments, you don't get paid. So we are



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having to live in these houses and people know where we are working from and we haven't got another roof to go to, so I have to live there.

Q37 Ruth George: You are left in that situation.

T: The girls were saying that they have had their brothel done over by the police.

B: I live in and most of the time I am able to afford my rent, but that involves working 80 hours a week at the brothel, doing 20-hour shifts. I work in , so I kind of go between for work, but that is the only way that I can at present afford to pay my rent, working 80 hours in a week, with like four hours' sleep most of the time and sometimes two hours' sleep, working 20 hours.

T: I don't how you are doing 20 hours. I did two 12-hour shifts last week. Obviously it is horrible for you to listen to, but us having sex for 12 hours for two days in a row is a lot, do you know what I mean? You probably do it for an hour and stuff and think, "Oh my God, I am knackered". We are doing 12-hour days, do you know I mean? Like it is a lot just to think, "Oh, I have done this for 12 hours today. I have my gas, electric and my food and tomorrow I am going to have to do it all over again to pay my rent". It is awful. What happens if one day we don't want to and we don't feel like it or lady things happen? Because that is another thing, like when it is your time of the month and stuff, we do not want to work.

M: You have to use a sponge.

T: Yes, you have to use sponges. You probably don't even know what they are.

M: You probably don't want to know.

B: I think it is important to say that the state kind of fails many of us, many people in various ways and it is all intersecting. Something so basic as financial support that should be easily accessible to those who need it isn't there. That is just like one small reason for why people go into sex work, excluding the fact that the NHS is a mess and doesn't support the people that desperately need support, mothers not getting the right childcare or support for childcare, like these are all factors that all kind of come together.

But to be able to have a living wage or to have any form of income in which you can survive on, because JSA as well is not enough, £50 a week is not enough for you survive on. I spent almost £10 getting here today, so it all kind of adds up, so I think it is important to recognise that the state fails people in many, many different ways and this is just a basic thing that we are asking for.

M: Can I explain my interactions with the system? I grew up in an abusive household.



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I ended up failing all of my A-levels and I was really lucky to be able to go uni based on an interview, but once I had got to university, because I am still in contact with my mum, I did not count as estranged from my parents, so I got the smallest possible amount of student finance. I had no way of getting any more money, so I was just trapped in sex work again, like the student finance I get doesn't even cover my rent, so I have to work like three or four days at a time in the brothel earning nothing. Sometimes if there are no clients you end up paying to work because you have to pay a house fee, even if you don't get to see anyone.

It is like while juggling all of this that I have been trying to apply—three times now—for a disability benefit and just finding it completely inaccessible, which is ironic, considering it should be an accessible process. I never once had real interaction with Social Services. I know the NHS flagged something based on what I said in a therapy assessment, but I know nothing has been done. Because I am a student, I am expected to be able to have all of the student finance that I need and not need Universal Credit, so I am not eligible for it, but I have no other source of income.

I have raised this with my MP, and she has tried to lobby on my behalf with student finance, but in order to prove my estrangement, they need evidence from like support services, but I have had no support, like I have no one to attest to the fact that I have been estranged. The only people who have heard about is I have a personal adviser at university and he had said he wasn't comfortable, because he only knows like the bits and pieces I have told him, and it is not enough to give evidence.

So I am just trapped in this system that wasn't designed to help people in complex situations. If you don't fit—there is really like no idea of what they think a victim looks like, I guess—then you just don't get the support that you need.

Chair: It sounds to me like the systems are just impenetrable. Nigel, you have some questions about—

Nigel Mills: It has all been covered.

Chair: Are you okay? Go on, Chris.

Q38 Chris Stephens: Thanks. I have been struck by a lot of the comments made about the lack of support. I think, T, you said something that I wrote down right away, which is you are all seeing a different person when you go to the Jobcentre, it is not consistent, it is not the same person and you can't build a relationship. Could you maybe tell us quickly, is there anyone else helping you or is there anything else you think you can be supported with by the Jobcentre or CMS or anyone?

T: The Jobcentre, I have tried telling them that I haven't got a very good support network to try to get like a social worker or just somebody that I can tell all of my stuff to, so I don't have loads of different people to work



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with, do you know what I mean? Because it is hard for us to ring people every now and again, like sometimes I don't even pick up the phone to my partner when I am out all day, do you know what I mean? Like I can't find a good enough reason of why I need a support worker or why I need a social worker. I've now got as my support worker for the sex work and stuff that I do, but there is loads and loads of background, do you know what I mean?

M: I think the way to make the system more accessible is if everyone had like one named contact who understood our cases, because it is a system that is really impossible to navigate. I am struggling to even fill out the forms and every time I phone up, I am talking to someone else and having to explain the situation all over again. Because I don't fit in with their idea of what people who are claiming should look like, it just seems like I fit too many exceptions and stuff and there is just no way in this to support me.

Q39 **Chair:** Should it be one person that can help, yes, with benefits, but also, "What is your housing situation, how is your health?" because it is everything all together, isn't it? "How are your kids doing?" It is not just the benefits, is it, it is the whole shebang?

M: Yes, they interact.

Q40 **Frank Field:** It really goes on from your point, Heidi. T, when you say you had to phone up and start explaining why you have changed address—and you have given us an example where your landlord threw you out and changed the lock on the door—when you phone up and tell the officials this, do they say, "We must do something" or do they just listen to you and then put the phone down?

T: I just got my stuff yesterday in my removal van. I am originally from , and I am living in now, so I have had to move a long way, do you know what I mean? I was trying to talk to Universal Credit on the phone and explain that my locks were changed due to us being a carer, falling behind on my rent a little bit and not being able to explain my circumstances to them. Like I thought I was doing a really good job of explaining, like I am now, but they didn't seem to see my point. Yes, I was on the phone and I told them about the rent and the doors getting locked and stuff and not being able to get back in, but they have told us to go to Council to fill in a home finder form and to tell them the circumstances and then hung up the phone, like what you are saying, Frank.

Q41 **Frank Field:** So they are like this and tell you to go off somewhere else?

Chair: It is always somebody else's job.

T: Yes, and then they will say, "Ring the council" so I phoned. I don't know why, but people my age aren't allowed to go on the council list in, so I have to live in supported housing—not supported, sorry, shared accommodation. Apparently in I am only eligible for one room or



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something. I may be young but I have always lived by myself in my own little flat, do you know what I mean, kitchen, bathroom all to my own. Not anymore, like I am having to live in a bedroom with a kettle and stuff.

Q42 Frank Field: Thank you. K, might we afterwards follow up with you? We are doing an inquiry into mobility and we have some questions we are asking on mobility. Do you think afterwards we might make contact with you so you can tell us your experience with mobility, the mobility scheme?

Chair: Losing the car.

K: Yes.

Frank Field: It is part of today's inquiry, obviously, but it is also a separate inquiry we are doing about how this benefit works and to whose benefit.

K: Yes. It is just awful. They took my car after three years. I have lost my no claims bonus now, so I am paying more insurance now. Getting on public transport is just terrible.

Q43 Frank Field: With your child?

K: Yes.

Frank Field: That is hugely great, thank you. We will come back to you.

Q44 Chair: To finish this off, could you give us, all of you, one thing each? What would transform your experience of the support you have or you haven't had from the welfare safety net, from the Government? B, can you think of one thing that would make a difference?

B: I think a caseworker would be good, someone that can sit down and go through the application system with you, go through everything that you need to know and explain it, because some of us sometimes find it difficult to understand the process of applying and also understand the wording, because I also don't feel that the language used often is accessible to many people with learning disabilities or if English is not their first language.

Chair: Okay, thank you. M.

M: I think more of a tailored approach to each individual, because applying criteria to thousands of people's lives and expecting everyone's situations be treatable by the same criteria, it just doesn't work in reality.

If we have time, I would like to address the memorandum.

Chair: Yes, you mentioned that, didn't you? Go on then.

M: I had several issues with it. The first is that at the beginning they say there—



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Q45 **Chair:** This is from the DWP, the memorandum they have put in to us, yes.

M: They say that they are committed to ensuring that no one finds themselves in a position where they are forced into prostitution and yet *The Independent* broke a story a while ago that an FOI request suggested that they had a target of rejecting 80% of mandatory reconsiderations, which does not seem at all like they want to help us.

My second issue with it is the evidence in it just seems to be wilfully misrepresented, like they are saying, "Oh, people are claiming that Universal Credit is the biggest cause of survival sex work, but it is drug and alcohol", like no one has ever claimed that. Just because drug and alcohol are a big reason that people enter survival sex work, that doesn't mean that Universal Credit has not had a really big influx.

Issue 3: as a victim of child abuse, I really don't appreciate the insinuation that we are in sex work primarily because we are traumatised and we don't know how to make another living. The reason that I am in survival sex work is because my material conditions are so bad that I need the money and I have no other support and no other options.

It also suggests that there is not a new problem with Universal Credit because the rest of the benefit system has been pushing people into survival sex work. I am like, "Yes, that is the problem". It is the whole systematic thing. It is particularly bad with Universal Credit because we have seen these huge waits, but the whole welfare system is stacked against us and it is pushing people into survival sex work. It is the long wait, it is the payments in particular that I think are really dangerous because when we apply for things like this we are in crisis already, like we don't have the ability to wait and sex work is the only real job you can go out and earn money that night.

I was really upset with this sensationalist media quote they had about someone earning £450 a night and they are kind of implying, "Oh well, sex workers make loads of money in the industry". My last brothel shift, I was there for three days and I earnt £158, so it just does not reflect the actual reality of survival sex work just because someone is making so much in the sex industry and it just seemed to be kind of ridiculing us.

Then there was this whole section where they were attempting to point at other things that the rise in survival sex work has been attributed to. One was cuts to student grants, which of course, like cuts to student grants, have led to students being in the sex industry to survive because it is making people poorer. Of course there are increased numbers in the sex industry due to things like migration, because as more people enter the sex industry the problem is exacerbated, because we all have to compete with each other and we have to all lower our prices and accept dangerous services, like bareback.



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Then the other examples that they claimed were rising survival sex work were things like influxes of football fans in the Olympics and Craigslist, which is not an increase in people doing survival sex work, it is an increase in the visibility of survival sex and we are just noticing more. We were already in the industry. People don't enter the industry because it is a fun opportunity, like we enter it because we have a material need. That is what drives people into the sex industry. All the examples they give just prove the point that it is poverty that pushes people into survival sex work.

As with any kind of measure that is making people poorer—like I read some statistic that families with children were £200 a month worse off when they transferred to Universal Credit—if you are making people poorer, we have to make up that shortfall in some way and that is how we end up in the sex industry. I really felt that the memorandum was an attempt to kind of cover the DWP's back and be like, "Oh well, you can't prove that it is us or you can't prove that it is Universal Credit that is the issue", like it tried to blame sex workers for being here and it kind of like proved the point that it is poverty and it is this horrible system that is making us be in the sex industry.

Q46 Chair: Thank you. K and T, can you think of one thing that would make it better from a kind of welfare state point of view?

K: It is the five-week waits. The other thing is in domestic violence relationships, apparently I have heard the man will get the money and then can control like that. I think that is one.

Q47 Chair: One payment to the household. On this Committee, we have argued that, as best as you can, you should split it out, so any childcare element, for example, would come to you.

K: I am single, but what I am trying to say is for abusive relationships, it is just wrong that the man will get it and then he can control like that.

Chair: Yes, absolutely.

T: I think if they had people that were working for them that had experience of what we have, do you know what I mean? It is all right them having people that have been to university first and all this carry-on, but if they haven't had somebody that has lived this experience, how the hell do they know what we are on about, do you know what I mean? They don't. I don't know if you have been on the dole or anything like that before, but if any of you have experience of it, then you will probably have a better understanding than some of you that haven't, do you know what I mean?

Q48 Frank Field: The DWP should offer each of you jobs, so you can advise, teach in the DWP.

T: Like I do joke with the Jobcentre, sometimes when I am there I do say to them, "Look, like I am good with my words, but I am not good on a



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computer. I could help loads of young lasses getting into dancing, college and all that stuff if you would let us" but they won't let us, because that is too many jobs getting taken off them, do you know what I mean? Like if I got given the opportunity, that would be mint, but I don't get given the opportunity.

Chair: Yet.

T: Yet, yet.

Chair: Ladies, you have been amazing, amazing.

Frank Field: Stunning. Thank you very much. Great.

Chair: Thank you very, very, very much.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Laura Seebohm, Dr Raven Bowen, Sarah McManus and Amber Wilson.

[Frank Field took the Chair]

Q49 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Amber, might you introduce yourself for the sake of the panel so we get you down correctly and your voice is picked up? Then we will start with Chris on the questioning.

Amber Wilson: My name is Amber Wilson. I work for Basis Yorkshire. We are a charity that is based in Leeds and we support indoor and street-based sex workers in Leeds.

Sarah McManus: Hello, my name is Sarah McManus. I am the CEO of A Way Out. A Way Out is an outreach and prevention charity that works across Teesside. We have been working for the last 17 years with female on-street survival sex workers.

Dr Bowen: My name is Raven Bowen. I am the CEO of National Ugly Mugs. We are the leading charity in the nation that collects reports and shares alerts and documents the climb among on and off-street sex workers around the nation.

Laura Seebohm: I am Laura Seebohm. I am Executive Director at Changing Lives. We are a north-based charity, looking at homelessness and addiction and women's services, but I started the women's services about 13 years ago, supporting women involved in selling sex in Newcastle. We have expanded, so we now have five services in Merseyside, Wolverhampton, Doncaster and across the north-east.

Q50 **Chris Stephens:** Good morning. We heard some very powerful testimony earlier this morning. I want to ask each of you what



particular risks do women in survival sex face relative to other forms of sex work?

Laura Seebohm: When we first started our services we did some peer research, which is where we trained a small group of women who had experience of selling sex to go and interview their peers to try to understand, where they might not be as open with more formal researchers. We have done that across the north-east and we have now done five different pieces of peer research. Each time we do it we come out and the picture looks the same every time. What we see is a massive huge link to homeless and women saying there is a stark choice of living on the street or exchanging sex. I think women are often invisible from homeless statistics because of this.

One woman said, "I hate sleeping on the street. I try to find a punter who will let me sleep for free sex. I hate it, but I hate sleeping on the streets more". That was from one of our things. Within our peer research, it is linked to some childhood experiences and trauma and more recently what we have seen is this link between childhood sex exploitation and vulnerability to survival sex, domestic abuse, sexual violence and high levels of drug and alcohol use. But I think the main point here is that the absolute link is poverty and deprivation. In that peer research it is still the case now, as it was when we first did it in 2007, that women are saying, "We exchange sex sometimes for £2 or for laundry or a bottle of cider or for food" or to meet very basic needs. The link between poverty and survival sex is the significant one, I think.

Q51 **Chair:** Laura, before we go on, has it become a bigger issue or are you just better at making contact with people?

Laura Seebohm: I do not know if it is a bigger issue because we do not know who we are missing. We work at the moment with 670 women who are involved in selling sex across the north. What I would say is that as things like Universal Credit exacerbate financial hardship, what we are seeing is more women coming to our services saying that they are finding themselves in situations where they are selling sex because of the poverty they find themselves in.

Dr Bowen: First of all, I would challenge the definition of survival sex so that it is not entrenched in gender. I have been operating under a definition for the past 17 years that was created with sex workers and they make the distinction between sex work and survival sex. Sex work is parties negotiating the details of the transaction, whether it is price, duration, location, boundaries, all of those things are negotiated, usually led by the sex worker because they are the person in control at that time.

Survival sex we define as the lack of opportunity to refuse work. It is you are compelled to take the next client, you are compelled to take the next date because of chemical dependency, poverty, rent issues, school fees, whatever that is. Indigenous sex workers in Canada and sex workers of colour define survival sex as how they are forced to engage in the sex



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industry because of criminalisation and stigma, very much linking it to structural issues, but not entrenching it in a certain gender or a certain way of working, because you can be a webcam person at 9.00 pm with no money and the rent is due the next day. You make some money and then all of a sudden you can refuse dates, you can prioritise your health and safety. Therefore you have to see survival sex as a state; it is a set of practices within a context. It is across the industry people experience desperation, deprivation and so on. Please do not see it as an identity per se.

We have 5,400 members who identify as sex industry workers. They are either people who are already on benefits, who may transition to Universal Credit. With the unpredictability of that, they are supplementing their income with sex work. We have people who want to transition out of industries, who unfortunately have to go through benefits to do so, and they are supplementing, because it is a monumental change. It is like a ministerial salary one day and working at Costa's the next. Your family would be affected by that kind of change. It is a huge change.

Then we have people who are already blending benefits with sex work or square work, which is the subject of my PhD. They are sanctioned when they are found out. Right now we have punitive responses that then push people into more desperate ways of working. For us as a charity that documents crime, individuals who blend sex work and benefits do not report. They will report anonymously to share in their communities but they will not report to police, they will not go through the criminal legal system. There is no chance. People who blend sex work with precarious labour and other jobs will not report. People who are parents will not report. There are large contingents of people who are trading sex in this country who will not report the predators. Predators are getting away and that is a big concern for us.

Q52 Chair: Are you saying, Raven, we should have another name? Are we misleading the public? We thought we were trying to be more open and this is the language we should use. Are you saying it is wrong to use it?

Dr Bowen: No, I am saying the definition of survival sex needs to be broadened and it needs to be based on broader scholarship. I am talking beyond philosophical positions on whether sex work should exist or not. I am talking about drawing on practitioner experience, lived experience and scholarship to develop a definition that transcends gender and transcends class, because we limit it. If you are making law on policy that is not properly informed, then we are going to come out at the back end with something that is not going to be effectual.

Chair: Thank you. Sarah.

Sarah McManus: From our experience of working with women who are on the street and selling sex, they have suffered adverse childhood



experiences that has subjected them to abuse, trauma and harm from an early age. They have addiction issues and struggle to maintain and secure accommodation. There are a whole number of other multiple disadvantages that all add to their vulnerability and alongside the on-street sex working make them incredibly high risk in terms of being subjected to further harm and violence.

I would add, bringing in what Raven has said around survival sex work, that currently there are around 72,800 sex workers across the UK, roughly about 88% of them women, and most of them will be mothers who are also trying to survive and support themselves and their children. That is why they are out sex working, but they are also subjected in terms of issues around their safety. They are out there because of economic need.

Amber Wilson: I would echo a lot of what is being said. In the past 30 years, as an organisation we have definitely seen women who feel that they do not have any other choice but to do this. When we asked women about Universal Credit, for example, one woman who we had helped had experienced childhood abuse. We had known her for quite a long time. She had worked in survival sex simply to survive. We had helped her leave that because she wanted to leave. Recently when the Universal Credit came up she almost felt forced to go back in. She eventually chose to shoplift instead, but she felt so embarrassed it took her about a month to tell us. She is a carer for her elderly mother, which is something we have not mentioned there, sometimes carers as well for elderly relatives. She eventually did not go back.

We have seen others who we had helped exit and who have gone back. Sometimes it forces them also to disengage from our services because they do not want to tell us that they have gone back because they feel that sense of shame. We know that they can always tell us and they eventually do, but because of the stigma that is attached to sex work, they feel incredibly ashamed to tell us that that is what they eventually resorted to doing.

Chair: Thank you. That is what Tomorrow's Women told me in Birkenhead, people who had that period of working and then not working and now the pressure is on them again and their real fight not to. Steve, you are next.

Q53 **Steve McCabe:** The Department for Work and Pensions say it is not possible to demonstrate a causal link between Universal Credit and women who engage in survival sex. From your experience of the women you support, do you think it is possible to say there is a direct connection between the rollout of Universal Credit and the decisions some of these women are forced to make?

Laura Seebohm: For us at Changing Lives what we find is there are issues, which we could list now or later, that exacerbate financial



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homeless with Universal Credit. It is about the economic hardship that people find themselves in, but Universal Credit has exacerbated that.

Saying there is a direct causal link, I think it is very difficult with a lot of social policy to say there is an absolute direct causal link and it feels a bit misleading. What we are told time and time again by the women we are supporting is that they are getting involved in selling sex directly because of issues around Universal Credit. One woman who we took to a foodbank in Doncaster said, "I don't have to go out and sell sex now" so we have that direct link.

We have seen numbers increasing of women starting to sell sex and they have not done that before. One of our staff said, "We have seen numbers increasing of women who have not done this before. A couple of women just went out to get £5 for their electric". We also see women, as Amber said, who have stopped selling sex. We had a woman who had not sold sex for 17 years going back on to the streets. Yes, we might not be able to give an absolute statistical causal link to this. However, I think the fact that women tell us time and time again, where we now expect it in our services, this link between Universal Credit and financial hardship and increasing likelihood.

Dr Bowen: I do not like basing arguments on anecdote, but in this case we have to because we have not had the opportunity to investigate this issue among our membership. Definitely I would say there is a strong correlation. Any disruption in revenue for people who are in poverty will cause harm. Yes, there is definitely an issue there. Part of the issue also in accessing benefits is the stigmatisation around that and how people are treated through that system. Also there are other things that contribute to poverty that we are seeing or other contributing factors, so I would caution us not to look at survival sex because there is a particular population with a particular issue. This is embedded into larger social inequality. We are looking at wage caps and insecure work and benefit caps and austerity and all of those other threads. It is a pressure cooker out there.

We are supposed to be supporting and lifting the bottom. The Department can look at this issue, but it can look at people who blend benefits with all other kinds of survival employment, survival crime and other work, because the benefits rates are, frankly, low. The idea of the rule of lesser eligibility and the undeserving poor and all this stuff, we need to come away from that because we pay anyway. Either we invest smart money in the front—resources, education, all of that, apprenticeships—or we invest dumb money at the back end with criminalisation, medication, institutionalisation.

Q54 **Chair:** Raven, we are doing reports on all those points, how we have deliberately made people poorer by cutting benefits. This is a separate issue, which we have heard in our private session, where people first of all fear going on to Universal Credit and



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when they go on to Universal Credit they get no money. It is not because when they get the money there is a benefit cut, they are not getting the money. This is an issue, I think, arguing against you, where we should be specifically looking at the effect of the introduction of Universal Credit on the ability of women to manage their money, because they do not have any Universal Credit, to put it simply.

Dr Bowen: There are more populations that experience that kind of deprivation. That is all I am saying.

Chair: We are reporting on those as well. Sarah.

Sarah McManus: From our experience there certainly is a link. We have had, just as Laura said, women who have not sex worked for some time who have come back out because they have not had the Universal Credit coming through as quickly as they would have hoped. Because Universal Credit picks up six different benefit streams and puts it into one and it is paid in arrears, that has caused and added to the financial hardship already experienced by this group of women. We would definitely say that that has added to it. There is link between them starting to go back out and sex work or increasing the frequency at which they are sex working because of the financial hardship that Universal Credit is causing.

Amber Wilson: Definitely we would echo that. I echo the fact that an exact causal link might be hard but the anecdotal evidence builds up, just like when the bedroom tax came in we saw women going out to work.

Chair: Yes, that was also supposed to be no—

Amber Wilson: There are specific features of this Universal Credit that make it an even bigger barrier. We have women who are due to go on it but the anxiety has built up so much, with the requirements that are needed to do it, who are already not coming into us. They know they have to, but with the mental experience, the capacity experience of the Jobcentre before, knowing that there is this big barrier of procedures they need to go through, cannot start that process. The idea that it is a safety net, it does not feel like a safety net when arrears are taken off and when they are eventually getting their payment, their rent is taken off. We had one woman, her second payment was made and it was £118. When she questioned it, when she finally got through, she was told, "You are in arrears with council tax and rent". Because, as Sarah said, it is all pulled in and then everything gets taken out, there is so little left that they have no other choice.

This again is a woman who does not want to sex work. She had left and she is so much in denial that when we see her on the van we will help her and she sees her and the next morning she will come and drop in and she will say that she is not sex working. She will not admit it to anyone, including us, who have seen her the night before.

Q55 **Steve McCabe:** Do you have any idea of what the scale of this



issue is?

Amber Wilson: A lot of the women that we support who have particularly high vulnerabilities who we know will struggle with this are not on the system yet. But of all the women who have been through the process, it has been a very negative and tough process for them. We are almost living in anticipation, fearful anticipation, on their behalf of what is yet to come. We have only seen the tip of the iceberg in our area.

Laura Seebohm: Yes, it is hard.

Sarah McManus: Yes, I would certainly say it is hard to understand the scale but from what we see and what we hear from the women, it is definitely having a negative impact on them. This is a group of women who are marginalised and discriminated against. They do not find it easy to come and connect with mainstream services and even to have a voice to shout up about any injustices. We can only be here and allow the voices of the women we work with to be heard at this panel, but there are other women who have not had their voices heard as well because they are in the shadows, they are hidden, because this is a group that has a lot of mistrust and is marginalised. I think what we are seeing, as Amber has just said, is the tip of the iceberg and there is much more to be uncovered here.

Q56 **Chair:** Before I ask Raven to come in, Sarah, if I go to meetings in Birkenhead and talk about Universal Credit, there is a roar of horror at the meeting if people are not on Universal Credit. It is like a plague being put on to people. Let's call it people who have mums and dads and been mainstream all their lives. Out there I find there is an incredible fear about the transfer from what they have—tax credits and six other benefits—to this. It is not just if you are on the margins. It is a mega problem generally, isn't it?

Sarah McManus: Absolutely, I would agree, because there is an assumption. The benefit system is there as that safety net to help some of our most vulnerable in our community and there is an assumption that people come equipped to be able to digitally engage with this benefit and they have that financial money management to be able to distribute and manage their money effectively, when they have not been used to a system that has equipped them to do that. There is a big fear from other groups as well, absolutely, in terms of the administration and how it is going to impact on them.

Chair: Raven, would you come in here?

Dr Bowen: Yes, you pointed to exactly what I wanted to say around the anxiety, the unpredictability of how much money they are going to get, when are they going to get it, what are they going to do in order to guard against not losing money. There is also that issue with the interface, if you are not tech savvy, if you do not have financial literacy, if you are not computer literate. The fear is even there of how do you find out what you are entitled to, how do you make sure you do not miss an



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appointment, miss a tick box, miss something. As soon as that happens, they are right back into sex work or they are into sex work and working in more dangerous ways than they would normally. They take dates that would not see, they provide services they would not normally see, they work longer hours, all of these things, because there are also a whole bunch of other people who are competing for the same client, so it turns into a complete buyer's market.

In the meantime I think that the opportunities that we can probably use are tech experts and maybe libraries or computer science students to help people be able to use the system itself. We need that education part to roll out alongside it. People can barely see the screen.

Laura Seebohm: I would agree. In our Merseyside Red Umbrella service we work with over 200 women involved in sex work and our manager there estimates that about 30% do not claim for Universal Credit because of all this concern about the complication. Many of the women we support do not have bank accounts or they can then nominate somebody else to have the money put in the bank account. We have numerous examples of women saying that that other person they have nominated, it just gets stolen, because quite often that is an abusive partner's bank account and that financial abuse is very real for a lot of women we support.

Q57 **Chair:** Laura, before you go on, can I ask if people are using a library to make their claim, are libraries still limiting you to half an hour, so that if you have not claimed the whole thing shuts down?

Laura Seebohm: Absolutely, and it is really stressful for people. A lot of the people we support do not have the digital literacy and access.

Heidi Allen: Even if you have, I do not think you could do it in the time.

Laura Seebohm: No. It is hard for anyone. It is incredibly hard, and do people have ID? There are so many barriers to people getting on with the system. The mainstream people who might be able to cope with it are often not the people we are talking about. There are a lot of people who have all these barriers in their lives.

Q58 **Chair:** Laura, can I add my experience, because I am trying to get the Department to take it seriously? I went into my local DWP, Jobcentre Plus, to register and I had two managers to help and I never made it. That was all right, they were all around and it was all hunky-dory. I kept saying, "But your MP can't do it". That is because I have had a very privileged life; I have always had an office looking after me.

Laura Seebohm: It is complicated.

Chair: I could not do it and they would not take it seriously. They still have this rule that after half an hour—they did not do it to me, but everybody else goes "woomph" and then you have to—I have never



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known a system that does not allow you to save something.

Laura Seebohm: The other thing that we found particularly with Universal Credit that makes it different to other benefits from the past is the lack of flexibility, things like you have a deduction and there is no negotiation. Our research with people we support has been that in the past it could have been agreed at £5 or £10 a week deduction. Now it can be £150 and that is that and there is no negotiation.

Q59 **Steve McCabe:** The Department, when it gives evidence here, says it is negotiable. It is very interesting to hear you say that is not what happens.

Laura Seebohm: No, it is not, and I think after people have their advance payment, rent and find all these different things—we know women are disproportionately impacted by things like non-payment of TV licence, because it is whoever answers the door and apparently women answer the door more than men.

Q60 **Chair:** On this, could I ask all of you to help to us? Two people who you work with who are having these big deductions made, could you ask the Department to tell you what is the period of time over which these deductions are made and literally break down the amount? Did they ever collect money before? This will help us in our inquiry because I think they are collecting debts off people, say from five years ago, when Parliament has written off the Department's debts because it has said it is not recoverable. I think we are making lots of people even more vulnerable by collecting debts that Parliament told it not to collect. If you could give us some, going back a few years, we will check up what we have done in letting the Department off all its debts that we do every year. I want to see whether there is an overlap. Could you help the Committee on that? That would be really helpful.

Laura Seebohm: Can I mention one more thing? We have someone we are supporting who has had an indefinite sanction. We contacted the DWP because the reason she was in a really bad way was because she had experienced a rape. It did not matter; she has been indefinitely sanctioned for her benefit because she has not been turning up.

Q61 **Chair:** When you say indefinitely, can you unpack that for us?

Laura Seebohm: No end date for her benefit sanction.

Q62 **Chair:** When the Secretary of State said that she is abolishing sanctions of three years, do we need to go back and say, "That is great news, but there are also people who are sanctioned for longer than three years, indefinitely"?

Laura Seebohm: Somebody mentioned this week there has been an announcement that indefinite sanctions are being looked into, but we would urge that that is done as a priority.



Q63 Derek Thomas: Most of mine have been covered, but we talked about the digital default part of Universal Credit and everything, it appears, with the Department, Government Departments. Do you have specific recommendations about how we sort that out? In 20 years' time we might be in a place where everyone can do it, and the Chairman and I are pretty comfortable on the internet. What are your proposals today that the DWP needs to do to make that a bit more reflective of not just the people you support but society as a whole? What should DWP do to resolve this digital default barrier? Any ideas?

Amber Wilson: For some of these it is at least to acknowledge and recognise it and slowly implement it and not make it a default and then go. Allow for support. Our staff are spending extraordinary amounts of time on the phone in the Jobcentre, more than they ever have done before and getting themselves trained up on this process. Recognising that this is an issue and it takes away from the other support that is needed for the women who we support.

A little thing—and this is specific to UC—for example, to get through to the right person quicker, it helps if you phone from the same phone number. Now, a lot of our women do not have a phone, borrow a phone and so on. We did not even know this was the case until we had spent an hour on the phone and then somebody told us, “If you had done that—” But that phone has gone now. Those kinds of little glitches that possibly had a good intention but make things so much more difficult.

Sarah McManus: Absolutely. I think it is about speaking with specialist agencies and understanding some of the difficulty that they have had when they are representing the women that they work with. I totally agree with what Amber has said, and your experience as well, in that we have very experienced caseworkers who find it extremely difficult to navigate this very complex system. Then it begs the question how are the women we are working with expected to be able to do that, when the whole purpose of that benefit was to act as a safety net for some of our most vulnerable and it is not doing that? I think there need to be some genuine, authentic questions and conversations and some listening time with the women themselves as well to better understand some of the challenges and barriers that are out there in terms of that digital engagement.

We work with women who struggle even to remember some of the passwords that are needed and so on, some of the real practical elements. There have been huge assumptions around the capacity and ability of people who are going to be using this system and almost an assumption of one size fits all. It is there to help some of the most vulnerable and we need to take account of what their difficulties are. Having some open conversations around what those difficulties look like and speaking to the women themselves, we will be able to come up with some of those suggestions.



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Q64 **Chair:** Before we go on, Sarah, if anybody who had been poor had helped design this benefit, it would have been very different, wouldn't it?

Sarah McManus: Absolutely.

Q65 **Chair:** Would a good suggestion to the Secretary of State be to set up a panel of people who are poor and people who help people who are poor to guide her on what the reforms should be?

Sarah McManus: I think that would be an excellent suggestion. When we look at it and strip it all back, who better to ask the people than those who it is designed to engage with? We need to go back and ask them "What would work and what matters to you?" Then we have a system that is going to be designed around the person rather than around systems and processes and we have made it over-complex.

Q66 **Chair:** It has never been done, has it?

Sarah McManus: No, but I love the suggestion and absolutely I think it would radicalise the benefit system and we would get something that is much more responsive to the needs of the people who are using it.

Chair: So far we have had eight people this morning who could serve on the panel.

Dr Bowen: Yes, you are lifting the speaking notes right out of my page. Absolutely, hear from the people who are meant to use it. We need a low-tech alternative.

Q67 **Chair:** What do you mean by that, low-tech alternative?

Dr Bowen: There has to be away to engage with paper and pencil outside, because there will always be a contingent of the population who will not be computer literate, so we have to have a way of supporting those. It could be language issues, it could be sight issues, visual and all kinds of things, so we have to have low-tech alternatives even though we are in the tech world. Also mapping the UX, so mapping the user journey, not only the processes that they go through but the emotion, because our caseworkers also provide a lot of time supporting victims and offering Universal Credit and benefits as an option when they are rethinking about what they want to do with their lives or wanting to take a break from the industry. If you are already in distress and you have to go through all of these boxes in a half hour—for them it is easier to pull their pants up and go back to work, because they feel victimised by that process that is not designed by and for them. I definitely celebrate your suggestion and any help that you need bringing people forward for a panel and for consultation, we will be there.

Laura Seebohm: I mirror what everyone has said. I particularly as well want to draw attention to women in the criminal justice system. I keep trying to encourage people to come and walk the journey of someone who is released from prison. We know that women are more likely to go



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to prison for non-violent offences, 84% of women are in prison on a short-term sentence that is generally—

Chair: For not paying their TV licence, for example.

Laura Seebohm: Exactly, or shop theft. 48% of women in prison say that they have offended to fund somebody else's drug habit. Then they are unable to start a Universal Credit application because of the digital issues while they are in prison. On release from prison they are released with £47, which I believe has not changed in the last 15 years.

Q68 **Heidi Allen:** We were told, Laura, if I could interrupt briefly, 18 months or two years ago perhaps—as a Committee we visited some prisons exactly with this in mind, not just women's prisons, but generally. We were reassured by the DWP that it was putting essentially a mini Jobcentre inside the prison so that before people were released everything was set up so you do not walk out cold. That clearly is not happening then?

Laura Seebohm: That absolutely has not. I think that was the intention. There were huge glitches to this and the cost was enormous because of the security. There was a massive concern about the security around prisoners being able to access the internet.

Heidi Allen: You are literally leaving cold then?

Dr Bowen: You are literally. Then the long wait that you have with £47, that time is so vulnerable. We are seeing women being recalled back to prison in much higher numbers and I think there is a direct link there. Then women with children and it goes on and on, that hardship.

Q69 **Heidi Allen:** We started to cover it a little bit, but the overwhelming message I am hearing—and we have heard it many times before for other vulnerable claimants—is that Universal Credit is a sausage machine. It is impenetrable if you cannot access it in the nice middleclass way that the DWP obviously thinks everybody can. Thank goodness for organisations like you, who presumably broker on behalf of some of these women and help them. What are your relationships like with your Jobcentres? How could that relationship be improved? Do you want to talk us through how that works? I guess it will be different for all of you. Do you want to start maybe, Amber, and work down?

Amber Wilson: It depends. It is inconsistent, I would say. We have good experiences and we have less good experiences. There is a part of the Jobcentre that is a social justice specialist. They tend to be a lot more understanding and better than other areas.

Chair: Amber, tell us more on that. I had never heard of that.

Amber Wilson: Yes, there is a certain area within the Jobcentre that we can be referred to. We only found that out by accident ourselves through word of mouth from other charities working in Leeds. It is funny that we



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had to find that out ourselves rather than it being presented to us, specifically for the kinds of clients we work with. They tend to be more helpful, but that is not always the case. When you have to resort to the helpline for things like login and lost IDs and those kinds of questions, you do get a lack of understanding that you are calling on behalf of a client and those kinds of things. It is problematic and we face the same challenges, as I said before, as vulnerable people face, but we are possibly slightly more confident and have less to lose from standing up for the rights we know the women we work with have.

Q70 Heidi Allen: You have a phone line, no doubt, and you can sit behind a desk and make that call for two hours and all the rest of it.

Amber Wilson: Yes, but still we know that at that point a woman may be sitting downstairs wanting to go home to see her mother who needs care or needs to go to a drugs or health appointment, so it is a wasted opportunity and that time that could be spent on other things.

Sarah McManus: I would reiterate the same. We have mixed experiences. We have had support around training and going to networks and workshops and so on. It is difficult when using the helpline. There is no single point of contact so there is no consistency in terms of who it is that you are speaking to. As I say, very experienced caseworkers find it very difficult and frustrating to navigate that system and to use that helpline.

There is room for improvement in terms of expanding its knowledge and understanding about the area that we work in and the women that we work with, understanding their challenges and barriers so that they can better help feed into the system themselves and make some suggestions and so on, as workers, about how that system needs to be reshaped and look like to better meet the needs of some of the vulnerable groups that no doubt you have heard about.

Q71 Heidi Allen: Does that need to happen locally or nationally? Both, presumably.

Sarah McManus: I think it is both, yes, absolutely.

Dr Bowen: We do not work directly with Jobcentres, but sex workers at National Ugly Mugs want to do some sort of a learning exchange, similar to what you are saying, to talk about the impact of some of the policies directly with staff there. But you are the lawmakers, so I think it is good to start here and see how that translates in practice for people and if there is a way of maybe supporting people and increasing the resources to them when they are most in need. If you are transitioning out of sex work on the back of violence, you are not going to go right into a job. They need time to heal, cope and recover and it is treating these individuals as the victims of crime they are and then support the journey into work and map what that looks like and then work with staff to make



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sure that we design out some of the harm that exists in the current system.

Laura Seebohm: We have a mixed experience. In Wolverhampton our staff went and did some training. It is about people understanding the reality of life for the women we support so they are coming at it with some compassion and empathy and removing stigma and judgment. Our team there tells us that that has made an impact on decision-making around sanctions. What that suggests to me is that there is some discretion about sanctions and I wonder where it comes from, that it has been so inflexible and rigid when clearly there can be more flexibility. Is it a directive from the top, is it specific Jobcentres?

We have a team of experts who are experienced with people with complex needs who have gone and trained staff themselves in Gateshead. That has made a huge difference so I think there are things that can be done. We are having more positive stories recently than there were in the past so I think that individual Jobcentres and DWP probably go to work not wanting to do this. I think they are finding ways to be more flexible. That is not solving the problem because I think the problem is much more systemic than that.

In some ways, where the DWP treats our staff as a trusted person to liaise on behalf, that has been massively helpful. It feels a bit disempowering that this system has to be so complicated that charities are employing people to navigate systems. Let's look at the system itself. It does not feel a great way for women to be dependent on our workers in that way. It feels very disempowering. However, it does make a difference.

Q72 **Chair:** Can I end with you, Laura, partly for pressure of time on us today? Are you saying that this change in attitude of the more generous response and more warm response came because you were going in and saying to people, "What about thinking a bit more"?

Laura Seebohm: Yes, and I think it comes down to individual relationships. It is not systemic, but there have been some situations. We work in a number of offices across the north and there have been a few where there has been that openness to engage with us.

Q73 **Chair:** That was a large question. The last question is how do you think we should spread that experience at Wolverhampton to all our officers?

Laura Seebohm: Good question.

Dr Bowen: Make it mandatory.

Laura Seebohm: There seems to be a perception in DWP staff that there is no flexibility. Clearly there can be. No one, as far as I am aware, is



losing their jobs, so if there is a way that that can be spread I think it is a really important message.

Chair: Brilliant. Huge thanks. We might be in touch with you about that other idea.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Helen McDonald, Blair Buchanan and Niki Adams.

Q74 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Helen, might you begin opening our session—thank you all very much for coming—by saying who you are, for the sake of the record, and then we will begin questioning with Heidi?

Helen McDonald: My name is Helen McDonald and I am representing Nordic Model Now!

Blair Buchanan: I am Blair Buchanan. I am representing SWARM, which is the Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement. We are a grassroots collective founded and led by sex workers based across the UK. Around 90% of our members have personal lived experience of selling or trading sex and the great majority are current sex workers. Just to give you a context, in preparation for this evidence-giving we surveyed our members and wider network and collected testimony from those who were personally impacted by Universal Credit or the wider benefit system.

Niki Adams: I am Niki Adams from the English Collective of Prostitutes, which is a sex worker collective, which started in 1975, in fact. From the beginning we were always campaigning for decriminalisation, but for economic alternatives so that women could get out of prostitution if they wanted. We do a lot of daily advice and support work, providing legal advice, but also working with women on getting resources so that they can get out of prostitution if they want to or are not working in such difficult circumstances.

Chair: Very good, thank you.

Q75 **Heidi Allen:** I am learning an awful lot this morning about things I know nothing about. Talk to us about the different language between survival sex and sex work and the risks that are associated with that. Explain to us a little bit about what survival sex means and how perhaps it is different. Do you want to start, Helen, and move on?

Helen McDonald: Certainly. It is unclear to us what the Committee means by sex work, because it is a wide term that is often used to cover a lot of things, ranging, for example, from street prostitution to webcamming, through to performing in lap-dancing clubs. Assuming that in this context the sex work you are talking about is referring to different forms of prostitution, for us at Nordic Model Now! we would not make a distinction between survival sex and other forms of prostitution, which I



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am well aware is probably quite different to some of the other people who you have heard from and who you are going to hear from.

For us, all forms of prostitution would be for the purposes of survival. Changing the cause of the need to engage in prostitution for us would not be something that we would particularly differentiate, but we are happy to accept for the purpose of this discussion today that what we are talking about are predominantly women who are forced to engage in selling sex as a result of the Universal Credit either not being paid on time or having a long wait.

Blair Buchanan: Basically for us we do not think this is the important question.

Heidi Allen: No, it is not, you are right.

Blair Buchanan: Whether someone thinks of themselves as working or whether they see themselves as sustaining their livelihood through this particular choice, we believe it is about seeing the structural and systemic reasons why someone is put in that position in the first place. We believe that whether you think of it as prostitution, sex work or survival sex, the important thing to recognise is the structural factors, which are Universal Credit, austerity, widespread poverty, many, many cuts to the important services that women and marginalised people and vulnerable people in the society use or have been forced to not be using anymore. Turning towards survival sex has been a livelihood strategy for a lot of people, particularly if you think about the fact that asylum seekers or refugees are even less able to access support. There are a lot of refugees and asylum seekers who are turning towards survival sex in order to sustain a livelihood and to be able to survive.

I was sitting in on the last private session and I think we can all say that it is incredibly frustrating and deeply angering that we are in the position that we are. I am deeply, deeply frustrated and angry and I think that you should be too.

Chair: We are.

Heidi Allen: That is why we are having this today.

Niki Adams: When we first started discussing this inquiry among women in our network, a lot of women did object to a distinction being made between survival sex and their own experience because they felt that what they were doing was for their survival. One woman gave me an example and said, "I am working to pay my mortgage because my husband has been made unemployed". That is survival sex as far as I am concerned.

I think people also did recognise that what you are trying to address, we expect, is particularly the link between the sex work and Universal Credit but also where people do not have a lot of other options. I was very interested in Raven's distinction where you can be working and once you



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have earned a certain amount of money you then have a few more choices for the rest of the evening in terms of who you refuse to go with and whether you can refuse to do particular services. I do think it is a bit of a spectrum, but I do understand and we do greatly appreciate that you are focusing on this crisis that women are in now, particularly mothers, where many people have no other economic options apart from sex work.

Q76 Heidi Allen: That is what we are trying to get to, the fragility of the system for very vulnerable people, that if the welfare safety net is not working for you, there is literally nothing else you can do. You run out of options, basically.

Blair Buchanan: It is also worth mentioning that often criminalisation of sex work will lead people to be working in a situation in which they are experiencing more violence, more precariousness. Prostitution cautions are basically fines for those who are working on the street. If you are working to pay off a fine, you will end up in a situation where you are going back out in order to pay it. It is a cycle that continues. We would obviously very strongly advocate for the decriminalisation for sex work as a whole but particularly those on the street.

It is incredibly important that we think about the fact that services such as the charities that we had here are basically filling the gap that the state should be filling, and support services or sex worker collectives are also becoming well trained in how to manage and negotiate with these systems because we have sex workers and people who are selling sex who would not necessarily identify themselves that way coming to us and asking for help. That tells you something about the level of disenfranchisement and the level to which people feel alienated from the system and how impenetrable it is.

Helen McDonald: I would echo some of what has been said. In our experience, criminalising women who are on the street does not stop them from being there. It moves them away and then they come back and the risk is increased. I would absolutely echo, as I said, that for us all forms of prostitution are for survival, whether it is paying your bills, whether it is putting a roof over your children's head, whether it is getting school uniforms or whatever, it is for the survival of either the women herself or her family.

Niki Adams: Could I add one thing about mothers, because that has come up for us over and over again? In our experience most sex workers are mothers. Women describe the difference between working in sex work when it is just your own survival that is the question and when somebody else's survival depends on you, that is a very different experience. It means it is a different level of desperation and stress and anxiety. It means that you are forced to take much greater risks.

Q77 Chair: Less choice, isn't there?



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Niki Adams: Yes, much less choice. You can go without a meal, but if you know that your children are not going to be eating, it is a completely different level of pressure. I know that you heard from people this morning. The other thing that we have seen across the board is a lot of women who have children with disabilities or who are caring for a disabled partner. That is again another additional pressure. We work very closely with WinVisible, a women with disabilities group based at our women's centre, the Crossroads Women's Centre. We see our particular pocket of the experience of Universal Credit, but there is an enormous amount of overlap with the experience of people with disabilities.

I was listening to the last panel and people spoke about what changes could happen. For us, I feel like the enormity of the problem is so bad that it cannot be reformed and it has to be scrapped and started again. Our experience of Jobcentre staff, for example, we are not a specialist benefit agency by any means but we have noticed about a third increase in the number of calls that we are getting specifically about benefits and a lot of them are Universal Credit. We do have some contact with Jobcentre staff and the rest of it and our experience is absolutely appalling. I feel like people are trained to be brutes. I feel like there has been a real army of brutes that has been trained there to implement this Universal Credit, that people must be working on targets because their focus is so much on a determination to refuse people, regardless of people's circumstances.

Heidi Allen: It is all process.

Niki Adams: The enormity is just too big. There is no picking away at the corners with this, the thing has to be scrapped.

Chair: Thank you, we have had views on that. I think you know our views.

Q78 **Rosie Duffield:** I want to hone that down a bit. It is obvious to all of you and everyone we have heard from that there is a causal link, but the DWP is saying there is no obvious causal link. It clearly does not reflect your experiences or those of your members, but if I were Amber Rudd how could you succinctly put the fact that you know for sure there is a causal link? Do you see what I am getting at? How would you prove to her that your numbers have gone up or whatever?

Niki Adams: I think there are some structural issues within Universal Credit that absolutely are causing more women to go into prostitution. Again I would echo what people said before, which is that we are seeing a lot of women going back into prostitution, having left sometimes for 10 years and are now going back into prostitution because they have been moved on to Universal Credit.

The key ones are the delay, obviously. One woman was saying she had £2 in her pocket left to get her to the end of the week. What was she supposed to do? The fact that that delay was put in there deliberately



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reinforces my view that it is not a question of the DWP misunderstanding. It knows very well what the impact is. Delay is a very big one. The actual cut in benefits to children with disabilities is a big issue because people were just about managing in some cases on disability benefits for their children. If you cut that money, they are not managing at all. Paying the money to the head of the household was a very big issue. There was one other issue, sorry.

Chair: Niki, we can come back.

Niki Adams: Okay, I will come back.

Blair Buchanan: For us, we would echo everything that has already been said by Niki. The sanctions and delays are deliberately built into the design of the Universal Credit. They are not ignorant at the DWP. They know exactly what they are doing and they have designed the system with an attempt to exclude people at the core. Surely that begs the question, "What did you think was going to happen?" If people are deliberately being sanctioned in a much more punitive way than they ever have been before in the previous system and when the delays are long and when people recognise that this is going to be their experience, we have seen from our members, and as you have heard already, people are choosing not to apply altogether because they are scared of being caught up in a system that is ultimately going to alienate and dehumanise them.

We know that staff have been accused of being bullying. We have heard from the DWP that the recent UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty was saying that this is a terrible situation and the DWP's response was that its insight and going to speak to people in foodbanks was, "Barely credible". Calling the UN Rapporteur on this "barely credible" speaks to the level of refusal to engage with these issues. For us, we know that this is the case and we are telling you this is the case, but of course you are not going to respond to it because it is clearly made by design.

Helen McDonald: The tone of the memorandum for the Department for Work and Pensions was concerning, when it kept saying, "This has always been the case". It had a quote from 1977 as some kind of illustrative way of saying, "It has always been a problem, it is a problem now, what are we going to do?" The kind of shrug I felt from that document was concerning.

What the DWP is failing to acknowledge is the massive increase in the number of women who are affected. You asked one of the other panels earlier around is it that more women are coming forward. I think that could possibly be the case, but it is more likely that more women are at the point of absolute desperation that they feel they have to go and seek support from an agency, whether that is one of the agencies represented here, on the last panel, or a local foodbank. We have had reports come in from rape crisis centres, foodbanks and community cafes, and what they are telling us—and I think the DWP are deliberately ignoring—is that



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there are women who are having to give serious thought to prostitution as a response to a sanction or a long wait.

I do not know how they think you would measure that, unless a woman was in a position that she could go and tell someone, and I guess the people that she would be telling about that feeling of desperation are not working at the Jobcentre or are not representing the DWP. We are also talking about not necessarily women going into prostitution in order to get cash. It might be for somewhere to sleep, so they are having to perform sex acts in order to be allowed to stay at someone's home or to get food; they are being expected to perform sex acts in order to have their dinner.

Also if their partner is on Universal Credit, if we say—stereotypically—there is a male partner, if his Universal Credit is delayed or he is sanctioned, the pressure is then possibly transferred on to her in order to make up his shortfall, so then potentially you are getting double pressure. If you add children into that, as Niki said, the pressure is overwhelming in order to make up a shortfall that has been caused by Universal Credit. It is disingenuous of the Department for Work and Pensions in their memorandum to basically shrug this off.

Q79 Chair: Helen, can I just ask you to pause there? What struck me reading that stuff is that the starting point of their analysis is saying nothing has changed. We had had a Tory Government led by Harold Macmillan, who said that benefits should rise in line with prosperity, so that there will be regular reviews and it will match other people's increases in wealth. Since 2010 we have had a Government cutting people's benefits. We have never, ever been in this position before. That alone ought to make the DWP think something has changed. We have changed the world. We have designed a system that pushes people into hunger and destitution. What you have been brilliantly telling us, and all three panels so far have too, is what the consequences are of that. I just could not understand their attitude. The puzzlement that you are telling us about, Helen, we should not have the puzzlement.

I interrupted you just to make that point. We are in a different world. We have never been in a world where people who are on benefit have not shared in rising prosperity. We are now in a world that not only does not do that, it deliberately cuts your benefit in real terms, yet the DWP say, "Gosh, I did not know. Nothing has changed. What are you all going on about?" You are brilliantly explaining what it means in individual terms, the significance of what you might have to do to get your dinner, what you might have to do to get a bed. Will you pick up from there?

Helen McDonald: Yes. There was just one last thing I wanted to say and then I think I better let Niki come in. Another thing about the memorandum was that they tried to take Universal Credit and isolate it and say, "This is Universal Credit. Yes, there is some other stuff going on, but we are only talking about Universal Credit". I think it is absolutely



impossible to do that, because Universal Credit interacts with so many other procedures and policies. Of course it would be impossible to prove a causal link if you specified, "We are only going to look at Universal Credit and we want proof". That is just not how research works. No research can give you that absolute, conclusive proof if you are determined not to allow that to happen, if that makes sense.

Q80 Chair: Helen, can I push you on that and get your view? It is not just that we have two Governments now that have cut people's benefits, we then had Universal Credit introduced on top of it, which means you do not always get your money anyway.

Helen McDonald: Yes. Also look at zero-hour contracts and all kinds of things, and even cuts to services in the community, like mental health services. The second you cut mental health services, that is going to have an impact. We need to look at it holistically. I can understand why the Department for Work and Pensions want to say, "There is no direct cause here". However, as Raven said earlier, there is definitely a correlation and that correlation needs to be looked at in more detail.

Niki Adams: The other issue that I wanted to raise, which women have raised with us, is the two-child limit. If you have a third child, that is having a big impact. Also the fact that the benefits are rolled into one. I do not know if you have heard evidence on that. It used to be that if they cut your actual income, you still had your housing benefit. Now you lose the whole lot and that means homelessness and eviction and the rest of it. They are also in that memorandum ignoring existing evidence that shows an increase, for example, with sanctions. There is some evidence that sanctions have caused an increase in prostitution and that comes from reputable sources. The police and other charities in Sheffield have said that street prostitution has risen by 166% since the introduction of sanctions.

You said that this is the first time that benefits have been reducing in level in that way, but it is also, I feel, the first time that the Government have had a deliberate policy of destitution. I know when people were seeking asylum that was the first deliberate policy of destitution and that is different. I remember that happening.

Q81 Chair: It is designed into the system, isn't it?

Niki Adams: It is. It is designed to leave people with no money or to leave people with a level of income that everybody knows is below the poverty line and not enough to sustain health and welfare and even to feed yourself. That is a sign of the kind of cruelty and brutality that is built into it. I would like this Committee to look into the question of targets. Is it true that they are on targets to refuse people? Our experience is that where we have been able to be effective in getting people what they need in other areas by various means—like, for example, going to the local MP or making direct representations to the DWP—it does not work with Universal Credit.



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I just heard on Monday that a young woman has been refused Universal Credit on her third application. Each time she has been refused. She has gone to appeal and she was waiting months for the appeal to be heard. It was on the grounds that she was not in the right higher education course. They said hers was a higher education course and she was actually in further education. She got evidence from the college and so she felt that it was completely a done deal, it just had to get to the right person to make the decision. Therefore, in the meantime she was borrowing a little bit of money here and there to survive while she was waiting for the case to get to appeal. Then on Monday they just told her, "We are refusing you again". In this case both of her parents are dead, and in this case they said, "It is because you are not really estranged from your family, because you are living with your sister". Her sister was 20 years old when she took on the care of her younger siblings.

I feel at my wit's end, because I would usually know what to do, but I do not know who to go to to get that woman money. I feel that that is across the board now; everything that used to sometimes work does not. It was not acceptable that people had to rely on organisations to find their way through their benefit system, but now even with that support you are not getting anywhere. She is left without any money.

Q82 **Chair:** The biggest change is when you talk to people who worked in the National Assistance office with the supplementary benefit. They would never let anybody leave the office who they thought were hungry and without money.

Niki Adams: Especially if the mothers sat in.

Chair: Now it is quite difficult to just get into the office, let alone whether you leave with any money.

Q83 **Rosie Duffield:** The next part of the question is what should the Department do to get a better understanding of Universal Credit? However, you have answered that question. It is looking at the whole person and the whole picture. The problem is when I was on tax credits I was getting things like housing benefit and then two weeks later I would get the next bit and then two weeks later I would get my salary. I could survive from those bits of the month and I knew what was coming in and when my rent went out. However, you are getting this whole payment, are you not, and if that does not totally give you what you need and you are being sanctioned or the money does not arrive, what do you do? It seems like a no-brainer to me that to get money instantly and quickly in cash. Of course there is a link. Have they ever approached you as organisations to ask you if there is a link or if you have seen increases?

Niki Adams: No, we are on a war footing. I am sorry. I do not think it is a question of them understanding. I think they do understand. I think they understand very well. I do not think there is anything we can say to



appeal to some kind of compassion, because that is not what it is about now.

Blair Buchanan: Also the way in which it is discussed in the memorandum is very clear. In their eyes there is a clear link between Social Security, welfare and prostitution, but it is not Universal Credit, so it is okay. That shows you the level to which they are completely obfuscating responsibility or at least are saying, "We do not have to take responsibility on this specific issue" because they bring in other ridiculous causes of prostitution as though that somehow is more important than the economic need. Prostitution, sex work, survival sex, these are all things about economic viability. They are about people needing money to survive, so talking about it as though any benefit system, any welfare cut, any increase in austerity is not going to have a direct link is completely ridiculous.

I also want to add that we have spoken about or listened to in the different panels the fact that the system, as you have said, is incredibly dehumanising and it is based on targets, not people and their actual circumstances. However, the thing around not having an individual caseworker who is linked with the person from the beginning is so incredibly important when you think about some of the most marginalised and vulnerable claimants. Think about the fact that there will be some people who do not have a permanent address, who do not have a bank account, who do not have access to a computer, who might not always have the same mobile phone or even access to a mobile phone at all. They do not have a relevant individual person who will take them through the process and who will help them regardless of whether they have a phone number or whatever. Having a consistency and someone who can help you through that process is incredibly important. Yet it is the 30-minute limits, all these things that are basically designed to help people get through the system as quickly as possible, and then they just become another number in the system.

Q84 **Chair:** Yes, but you need money to have a mobile phone, don't you?

Niki Adams: Can I just talk about the caseworker very quickly? Of course it would be good to have somebody that knew your story and you were not having to start again with each person. However, my experience is that if the caseworker is hostile and discriminatory and abusive, in that case I prefer to have several people. I do not think it is a solution in itself.

Q85 **Chair:** They should have the right to choose, should they not?

Niki Adams: You have to deal with the fact that it is a hostile environment. It is a deliberately hostile environment. The young woman that I spoke about, when she first went there her caseworker said to her, "Well, why don't you just go out and get a job? Why are you claiming benefits?" That is not her place. In fact, the young woman had been



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working before she was 18 and she was being paid £4.20 an hour, which did not even cover her bus fare to her place of work. She had to work two hours to afford her bus fare. It is not their place to be passing judgment on people like that. It is their hostility that is a major barrier to people getting what they need.

Helen McDonald: Just a couple more things that I think the Department for Work and Pensions could do. I want to challenge their dismissal of women's lived experience anecdotes in the memorandum. That was just absolutely ludicrous. What they are saying is, "We do not count women who are sharing their stories". What do you have to do to be counted? The first panel that you heard this morning, would they dismiss all of those women as just sharing anecdotes? If they believe there are gaps in the data, they need to take responsibility and fill those data gaps by doing their own research, rather than just dismissing it, and to be clear about what they will accept as evidence and what they will not. If it is not someone saying, "This is having this impact on me" I do not know what it is they are looking for.

I also think that the Public Sector Equality Duty could be used much more effectively. Equality impact assessments should be carried out—they should have all been done anyway to find the evidence if they want a causation, if they are looking for that definite link—or do the work that will show you that that link is there by doing the equality impact assessment that will show you that this has a negative impact on women, especially, as we have talked about already, mothers, and especially single mothers.

Q86 **Ruth George:** Thank you very much. It has been very powerful today. One thing that struck me is the link between criminalisation of women and their ability to claim benefit. We are supposed to have a safe place and person within each Jobcentre that women suffering from domestic violence or anyone suffering from domestic violence can access and talk to. Do you think that should also be somewhere for women who have been involved in any type of sex work, so they can disclose and talk about their circumstances without fear of repercussions or criminalisation?

Niki Adams: I do not think special services like that work, because you then get identified just by the fact that you are accessing those services. The system should work for everyone. There should not be prejudice and discrimination. The issue of criminalisation is crucial because it seems that on a policy level the priority has been criminalisation rather than dealing with poverty. In our written submission we gave the example of Redbridge, which is one of the poorest boroughs in London. There, instead of tackling that and tackling the fact that there has been a big increase in prostitution in that area because of poverty, what they have done is they have come in with two measures: over 600 prostitute cautions in a two-year period and these new civil orders, the public space protection orders and the various anti-social behaviour orders, called



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different things now. That criminalisation puts you at much greater risk of violence because of the ways that you are then having to work to avoid criminalisation. It exacerbates the cycle of poverty and criminalisation and means that you just cannot get out of sex work as well.

Q87 Chair: Niki, the Home Secretary asked three of us, Baroness Butler-Sloss, the Chairman of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, and the Chairman of this Committee to review the Modern Slavery Act. He does not wish us to, but we are going to look at the whole issue that you have just raised about how the law operates in all of this. If we do not take it in this Committee, it is not because we do not think it important. We are going to do that despite the fact that the Home Secretary has told us he does not want us to do it, because he has done a bit of research on it.

Niki Adams: The Home Affairs Committee in 2016 and 2017 did look at it and I think their report was good.

Chair: Yes. I promise you that we will look into this.

Niki Adams: No, it is just that there is a recommendation there already that could be followed.

Chair: Yes. We are going to do a review and it will be public. Niki, you will give evidence. Thank you.

Q88 Ruth George: Can I just ask each of you whether you agree that the fact that the system is now more difficult to get through and the fact that there are more women in poverty and looking to come into sex work, as you say, are both driving more risky practices and just the fact that you are able to get less money from sex work as well? That was something our first panel mentioned.

Helen McDonald: Yes. The content that we shared with the previous panel where they were saying it is a complex system, it relies on you being computer literate and literate and having English as a first language and all of that stuff, I would absolutely echo all of that. I do think there is a significant difference with Universal Credit in comparison to previous ways of claiming your benefit. In terms of what you were saying about putting someone in the Jobcentre who women could potentially go to, I absolutely agree with Niki that that would not be a useful method. Also, we need to rethink this. It is no good and it is a complete false economy to put something in after the event. There needs to be something before that woman is in a position where she is engaged in survival sex or prostitution. For example, instead of putting money into having specialist workers, take that money, scrap the system, start again and do not put people in a position where they need to go to a specialist worker.

Blair Buchanan: I know you said the legal framework is not going to be addressed in this inquiry, but it is important to think about how



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criminalisation leads to violence and so on, and that is spearheaded by Universal Credit and other benefit cuts. If you are a person who has just been sanctioned, just found out that you are not going to be able to access your benefit, you may have been ideally thinking about working indoors, which is statistically—and in our anecdotal evidence—often safer. However, people are scared about working together for safety because of the criminalisation of brothel keeping. Someone may then turn towards outdoor sex work, which inevitably can lead to more violence. We need to think about the fact that someone who has just been sanctioned may have less agency in deciding what types of services they are going to do, which place they may be and what price and so on. Negotiating power does make a difference in how you feel safety in yourself.

Q89 **Chair:** Sure. All I am saying is that this Committee will not be making recommendations on changing the law. There is a group of parliamentarians who are going to look at that.

Blair Buchanan: I just think it is relevant for the context, that is all.

Q90 **Chair:** I can see that. I am also worried because I know that you want to leave at 12.00 pm. We have had a brilliant session.

Niki Adams: Can I just say one thing? The question of criminalisation we see very graphically, because women are going back into prostitution, having left for maybe 10 years in some cases. What people are seeing there is that brothel raids have increased. A woman may have worked at a particular point in her past, worked inside, and may have been able to work for a number of years without ever coming into contact with the police. Now people are going back to working in brothels and on the street and are immediately getting criminalised.

The police raids have massively increased for various reasons and people are having to move on all the time, going from one premises to the next, because you cannot settle any more. That means you cannot work out security systems, you cannot implement all the things that, even within a criminalised environment, would have kept you a bit safer. People are going back into prostitution in a much more dangerous environment. Then of course if you are more desperate you do take more risks, definitely.

Q91 **Chair:** Yes. All of us, as MPs, have had evidence of that. We have also had evidence that women who are working the streets are having stones and eggs thrown at them by younger people. It is pretty vicious. Helen, I want to end at 12.00 pm, but Ministers often get notes from the box, it is called, behind them. You have just been given a note.

Helen McDonald: I have. I have been told.

Q92 **Chair:** Please, can we end with what you would like to tell us?



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Helen McDonald: Absolutely. It was just in relation to the CEDAW Committee's concluding observations and that the DWP should pay attention to that. In particular, in paragraph 35 it says, "that women in vulnerable situations have effective access to employment opportunities, housing and social security so that they do not need to resort to prostitution or 'sex for rent'" and to, "Ensure the availability of specialist services, which are adequately funded, inclusive and accessible, to assist women and girls to exit prostitution". There is a lot of information there, and it would be good if the DWP put some effort into having a look at it.

Niki Adams: Can I just add support for mothers as well? I feel like people need to look at why so many mothers are going into prostitution and what is happening with wages and benefits in relation to mums.

Q93 **Chair:** We have cut family benefits and we do not have pensioner benefits. That is a real cause of all this. You have been terrifically helpful and you have been very good listening to other people's evidence before, so thank you very much.

Blair Buchanan: Thank you for having us. We are always happy to give more evidence at a session in the future.

Chair: Our heads have been knocked off by your evidence. I am sorry, Blair, I am one minute late in concluding the evidence.