

Written evidence from the Women's Aid Federation of England SVC0050

Background

Women's Aid Federation of England (Women's Aid) is the national charity working to end domestic abuse against women and children. We are a federation of 170 member organisations which provide just under 300 local lifesaving services to women and children across the country. Over the past 49 years, Women's Aid has been at the forefront of shaping and coordinating responses to domestic abuse through practice, research and policy. We empower survivors by keeping their voices at the heart of our work. Our support services, which include our Live Chat Helpline, the Survivors' Forum, the No Woman Turned Away Project, the Survivor's Handbook, Love Respect (our dedicated website for young people in their first relationships), and the national Domestic Abuse Directory, help thousands of women and children every year.

Women's Aid welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Work and Pensions Committee's inquiry on safeguarding vulnerable claimants. Due to our area of expertise, we focus on the Department of Work and Pensions' (DWP) response to survivors of domestic abuse. The themes in our response are primarily drawn from a series of interviews with survivors, specialist domestic abuse and violence against women and girls (VAWG) services, and welfare organisations, which we conducted between July and September 2023 to better understand the challenges survivors face in accessing benefits. In addition to this, we consulted with Al-Hasaniya Moroccan Women's Centre on the questions in this inquiry and thank them for their support with this response.

The benefits system impacts survivors who are still in abusive relationships and those who have fled. The Committee's 2018 inquiry into Universal Credit and domestic abuse made a series of important recommendations to support survivors in abusive situations. Some of these – most significantly the recommendations on split payment requests, data collection and monitoring of the Scottish split-payment-by-default system – are still outstanding and should be implemented by the DWP as a matter of priority.

Given the Committee's existing research and recommendations, this response focuses on the second group of survivors, who often rely on the benefits system to flee and to 'stay fled'.¹ Given that survivors are likely to have little money and be in significant debt when they leave an abuser,² it is vital for their safety that they receive a quick, sufficient and trauma-informed response from the DWP when accessing benefits to rebuild their lives in safety. As DWP guidance on domestic abuse acknowledges, the benefits system is a vital financial safety net for survivors.³ However, we know that when it does not meet their needs, adult and child survivors may be forced to return to an abuser. In this way, economic safety underpins physical safety for survivors of domestic abuse.

¹ Women's Aid. (2019) Economics of Abuse. Available [online](#).

² 2 in 3 survivors are now in a negative budget or have less than £100 at the end of each month. See: SEA. (2022) "Tsunami of need" for abuse victims: SEA and MAP issue stark warning ahead of winter cost of living crisis. Available [online](#).

³ DWP. (n.d.) Domestic abuse. Available [online](#).

Summary

Survivors currently face a number of barriers to accessing benefits and the support they need from DWP. Many of these barriers are underpinned by issues in DWP's culture, which too often prioritises compliance and employment at the expense of claimants' wellbeing. A lack of understanding of domestic abuse compounds these issues; even where mitigations exist for survivors, our member services tell us that they are rarely proactively offered and that they are inconsistently applied.

Barriers to survivors accessing benefits include the following:

- Practical barriers, such as not having access to ID or a bank account.
- Language barriers, which cause delays to survivors' claims and leave them vulnerable to exploitation.
- A poor understanding of domestic abuse by DWP staff, which can lead to survivors missing out on their full entitlements and relevant exemptions.

Neglect of the support needs of the survivors can be seen in the following situations:

- The five-week wait, which may force some survivors to return to an abuser because they cannot afford basic essentials for themselves and their children.
- Deductions from benefits due to policies like the two child limit and benefit cap.
- The application and length of easements, which often do not correspond to survivors' circumstances.
- The inconsistent and unnuanced interpretation of 'intention to return', where survivors apply to have their housing costs paid for a property from which they have fled.
- The wrongful application of sanctions to survivors who are in need of support, signposting and lenience, rather than a punitive response.

To ensure that the benefits system is the lifeline which survivors need – rather than a source of retraumatisation and further harm – we set out a number of recommendations to improve the Department's response to domestic abuse. These include the following:

- Implement a statutory duty for the DWP to safeguarding the wellbeing of vulnerable claimants, including survivors of domestic abuse.
- Make application forms for benefits available in the UK's top non-English languages and ensure Jobcentres provide interpreters for claimants who need them.
- Adequately fund specialist domestic abuse services which support survivors to overcome barriers to accessing benefits and advocate on their behalf to the DWP.
- Ensure frontline DWP staff receive regular, in-depth, specialist domestic abuse training and establish a named domestic abuse lead in every Jobcentre.
- Introduce a duty for DWP to assess the impact of all new welfare policies on survivors of domestic abuse.
- Exempt survivors of domestic abuse from repaying an advance and abolish the benefit cap and the two child limit, which disproportionately impact survivors.
- Extend the Domestic Violence Easement to a year and ensure it is fully respected by work coaches.
- Explore the extension of the Home Office's pilot Emergency Fund for survivors to help fill some of the current gaps in the benefits system which put survivors' safety at risk in the current economic climate.

DWP's responsibilities and accountability

Question 1: DWP does not have a statutory duty to safeguard the wellbeing of vulnerable claimants. Should this change?

Yes, from a domestic abuse perspective there are a number of reasons to implement a statutory safeguarding duty.

Firstly, a safeguarding duty would support DWP's own aims. Two of the department's three core objectives are to maximise employment and improve people's quality of life.⁴ However, it is well evidenced that claiming Universal Credit (UC) is related to substantial stress, anxiety and psychological harms, which impact claimants' ability to engage with work coaches, access employment and improve their situations.^{5, 6} Whilst the Government has assessed the impact of UC on the labour market, it has not evaluated its impact on mental health and wellbeing or on specific groups – such as women experiencing or escaping from domestic abuse.

For many survivors, these stressors exacerbate the mental health impacts of the abuse they have experienced – as set out in the case study below, where a survivor describes how her interactions with the Jobcentres recalled and mirrored abuse. A safeguarding duty would reinforce the DWP's work to become a trauma-informed department⁷ and could help form the basis of more supportive interactions with claimants, leading to better relationships and outcomes.

Secondly, a safeguarding duty could act as a helpful counter to current cultural issues, as described below in case study below. One former work coach told us that there is a tunnel focus on claimants finding a job quickly, which often means that any wider circumstances, needs or safety concerns are disregarded, even where these could be crucial to an individual's ability to access meaningful employment in the long term. Another former DWP employee told us that the culture disincentivises showing compassion, understanding or curiosity about a claimant's circumstances.

Work coaches have a significant amount of discretion in how they apply sanctions, easements and work requirements, but as a result of their limited understanding of the issues claimants experience and their prioritisation of compliance and employment above all else, they are not consistently using this judgement well. A recent IPPR report found that appropriately tailored conditions are not always put in place, which leads to claimants being subject to unrealistic expectations and thus puts them at a greater risk of sanctions and mental health issues.⁸ A safeguarding duty could help redress this balance and ensure that the DWP does not cause harm to the vulnerable claimants who are relying on its support.

⁴ DWP. (2021) Department for Work and Pensions Outcome Delivery Plan: 2021 to 2022. Available [online](#).

⁵ The first major study to quantify the impact of Universal Credit on mental health found that claimants experienced a 6.6% increase in mental health issues, compared with a comparison group of employed or retired people.

See: Wickham, S. et al. (2020) Effects on mental health of a UK welfare reform, Universal Credit: a longitudinal controlled study. *The Lancet*, 5(3), pp.157-164. Available [online](#).

⁶ This impact has been found to be more severe for single parents due to additional challenges, such as the system not adequately recognising caring responsibilities, and less support.

See: Power, M. et al. (2023) Where's the Credit? Single Parents, Universal Credit and Mental Health. Available [online](#).

⁷ 'Staying fled' refers to the survivor being able to remain living in a separate home to the abuser, in the face of economic challenges which could potentially result in them being forced to return.

⁸ IPPR. (2022) No-one Left Behind: Supporting people with complex needs on Universal Credit. Available [online](#).

“I applied for Universal Credit after I fled my abusive husband when I was two months pregnant. My first appointment at the Job Centre was during my pregnancy. It was hot, and I became dizzy and asked for a glass of water – which was denied. It felt like the people there were robots who couldn’t feel any empathy. There was a sense that because I’d left my husband, I was out of the situation and I was ok. But no one asked me if I was ok. They didn’t understand domestic abuse or the fact it often continues – and gets worse – after you leave.

I wasn’t eligible for a Domestic Violence Easement, as my son had not yet been born. I was told to look for a job – even though this didn’t make any sense with the stage of my pregnancy. They also didn’t take into account my deteriorating mental health or how much work, effort and time it takes to leave an abuser. At the time, I was searching for houses, dealing with both family and criminal court proceedings and also processing the years of abuse. But the only thing the Jobcentre cared about was me attending their sessions, which kept triggering my anxiety.

I found going to the Job Centre retraumatising. All their probing questions felt threatening. It’s like I had to prove myself to them every time, else they would take away the benefits and I would become homeless. They control your money, so they control your life – which brings back how it was with my abusive husband.

Every single time I’ve gone to the Job Centre, I’ve cried. Even seeing the building or getting a message in my journal triggers me. I get such anxiety that I physically shake before appointments. Just one ‘no’ from the work coach and everything would be taken away from me.”

- A survivor of domestic abuse

Thirdly, a safeguarding duty would support cross-governmental efforts to tackle domestic abuse. In the government’s ‘Tackling Domestic Abuse Plan’, it states ‘our approach is all about enabling the whole system to operate with greater coordination and effectiveness.’⁹ Introducing a safeguarding duty would prompt DWP to consider its role in this whole system approach more thoroughly and could contribute to improvements in policymaking and practice. As access to benefits is key to survivors’ safety, this is a much needed change.

Recommendation 1: The DWP should introduce a statutory duty to safeguard the wellbeing of vulnerable claimants, including survivors of domestic abuse.

⁹ Home Office. (2022) Tackling Domestic Abuse Plan. Available [online](#).

Ensuring benefits are accessible

Question 3: What are the main challenges that vulnerable claimants face when trying to make a new benefit claim?

Question 3b: What should DWP do to improve support for vulnerable people to make a claim and to ensure they do not delay making a claim?

In a 2019 Women's Aid survey, two fifths of respondents who had left an abuser said they had difficulty accessing welfare benefits.¹⁰ Survivors experience multiple barriers making a claim. Below are three common issues, but this is by no means exhaustive. We also urge the Committee to consider the impact of digital illiteracy and disability on making a claim.

Practical barriers

Survivors often face practical barriers to making a benefit claim. ID is required to make a benefit claim, but an abuser may have withheld this from them as part of the abuse, or they may have been forced to flee without it. Survivors may also not have their own bank account, due to economic abuse, and must set one up before making a claim. As ID is required to do this, this creates a significant chain of delays to a benefits application.

The online UC form does not allow a claim to be submitted until all the questions have been answered. Yet as the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) highlights, the law does not require answers to these questions at this stage in order to make a valid claim – it is DWP who requires them.¹¹ If the DWP made provisions for bank details to be provided at a later stage in the process, this would help ensure that survivors and other vulnerable claimants do not face long delays to accessing benefits, which for UC comes on top of the five-week wait.

Recommendation 2: The DWP should consider how delays for applicants without a bank account or accepted form of ID can be minimised by adjusting its current requirements timeline.

Language barriers

Survivors who have limited or no English face significant barriers to completing the application forms for benefits. Specialist 'by and for' services, which support survivors from marginalised groups, raise the following issues with us:

- Some women do not realise they have missed certain required fields on the UC application and have had their claim cancelled as a result.
- Some women are left reliant on friends, family, professionals or strangers to translate communications from the DWP and may miss key appointments – such as the initial ID check for UC – if the message is not translated in time.
- Some women are tricked by members of their community who offer to 'help' them with a claim, but who then give bad advice or put their own bank account details on the form.

Interpreters are also not reliably provided in Jobcentres. Our 'by and for' member service Al-Hasaniya, which supports Moroccan and Arabic-speaking women in London, offered the following case study as illustrative of wider trends they are seeing:

'We supported a survivor who does not speak English, has mobility issues and suffers from depression and anxiety. The survivor struggled with the Jobcentres

¹⁰ Women's Aid. (2019) Economics of Abuse. Available [online](#).

¹¹ Mears, R. and Howes, S. (2023) You reap what you code: Universal Credit, digitalisation and the rule of law. Available [online](#).

finding her Arabic interpreters – they told her they don't have a budget for this, despite being required to provide interpretation services. This left an Al-Hasaniya support worker stepping in and helping her understand her appointments.'

Where the DWP do not meet their responsibility under the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) to provide an interpreter, this places more strain on 'by and for' specialist domestic abuse services – which are already chronically underfunded and are unable to meet demand.¹² Where a survivor does not have access to these services and is denied translation, it may delay her claim even further.

Recommendation 3: The DWP should make application forms for benefits available in the UK's top non-English languages.

Recommendation 4: The DWP should ensure that Jobcentres staff use translation services where supporting claimants who do not have English as a first language, as required by DWP guidance and the PSED.

Recommendation 5: The DWP should work with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to ensure that specialist domestic abuse services, which provide support survivors to overcome barriers to accessing benefits, are adequately funded. This would cost £427m a year and must include a ring-fenced pot for 'by and for' services. Funding domestic abuse services in this way would result in a £9 saving to the economy for every £1 invested.¹³

Domestic abuse understanding

Following the Committee's recommendations in 2018, DWP worked with Women's Aid on a programme of training for 650 Jobcentre Plus managers across England, Wales and Scotland. Whilst this represented progress, Women's Aid has consistently stated that specialist domestic abuse training must not be a 'one-off'. To be effective, the training must be available to all work coaches and frontline DWP staff and be supported by ongoing professional development. We are concerned that the training we delivered in 2019 has not been embedded with such an approach. In addition, the high turnover rate of work coaches makes it difficult to ensure an in-depth understanding of domestic abuse across Jobcentres and staff.

From the recent interviews we have conducted with our member services and survivors, it is unfortunately clear that DWP staff's understanding of domestic abuse remains inconsistent and is often poor. For example, a key tactic of economic abuse is to commit benefit fraud in the survivor's name.¹⁴ When the survivor makes a new claim, she is often informed that she must pay off the money owed to DWP. Even where she or an advocacy service provide evidence of the economic abuse and explain that it is the perpetrator who is responsible, member services tell us that it is 'pot luck' whether DWP agrees to write off the debt. In areas where there is a named domestic abuse lead in the Job Centre, members report that the response is often better, as the staff member understands the dynamics of abuse and takes them into account.

Another example of the clear gaps in understanding on domestic abuse, and its risk and impacts, are evident in the reprimand issued by the Information Commissioner's Office to DWP in 2022. This was due to the DWP failing to test a software application that redacted official documents, resulting in the inappropriate disclosure of personal information including

¹² Imkaan. (2021) The Comprehensive Spending Review and Funding for the Ending Violence Against Black and Minoritised Women and Girls Sector. Available [online](#).

EVAV et al. (2023) Listen to Us: Communication Barriers – How statutory bodies are failing Black, minoritised, migrant, deaf and disabled women and girl victim/survivors of VAWG. Available [online](#).

¹³ Women's Aid. (2023) Investing to Save: The economic case for funding specialist domestic abuse support. Available [online](#).

¹⁴ Women's Aid. (2019) Economics of Abuse. Available [online](#).

one person's address that was revealed to their ex-partner who had a history of domestic abuse.

Health assessors, too, lack understanding of domestic abuse – as the case study below illustrates. Recent research and campaigning by Women's Aid has drawn attention to the severe mental health impacts of domestic abuse, such as PTSD, depression, anxiety and suicide ideation.¹⁵ However, many health assessors seemed to believe that once the survivor has left the abusive situation, the trauma is over. The lack of attention paid to the survivor's mental health and wider circumstances can lead to survivors missing out on their entitlement for disability benefits, having to undergo onerous appeals or being subjected to inappropriate work requirements.

We are not aware of any domestic abuse training for health assessors. Whilst we know that work coaches receive domestic abuse training, from the levels of understanding reported by survivors and members, this is clearly not adequate.¹⁶ Given the complexity of domestic abuse and the high rates of turnover of work coaches, a higher level and quality of training is required to ensure that survivors receive the right response and support from DWP. This would also serve the Department's ambitions to become the first trauma informed government department.

Recommendation 6: All frontline DWP professionals, including health assessors and work coaches, should receive regular, in-depth domestic abuse training designed and delivered with specialist organisations to improve their understanding of the signs, dynamics and impacts of domestic abuse and the response which survivors need.

Recommendation 7: The DWP should ensure that there is a named domestic abuse lead in every Jobcentre, as there already is for disability and homelessness. This domestic abuse lead should build relationships with local specialist domestic abuse services, promote best practice in the Jobcentre and work to resolve barriers which survivors face when making a claim.

¹⁵ Women's Aid. (2022) Are You Listening? 7 Pillars for a survivor-led approach to mental health support. Available [online](#).

¹⁶ Following the Committee's 2018 report on UC and domestic abuse, Women's Aid worked with Jobcentres to train staff in line with the report's recommendations. However, since then, we have not been involved and we do not believe that other specialist domestic abuse organisations are currently inputting into the training either.

Preventing harm

Question 5: Does DWP have an adequate understanding of the vulnerable claimants that use the benefit system and the support they require?

The benefits system is not designed with the needs of survivors in mind. While there are a variety of additional measures work coaches can take to support survivors, in our experience these are inconsistently applied.

Five-week wait

Member services consistently tell us that the five-week wait for UC fails to take account of survivors' needs and pushes them further into poverty. Al-Hasaniya told us:

'The wait feels like a lifetime for many women. The transition after fleeing one's home cannot be underestimated.'

After fleeing, survivors often need to replace basic possessions like clothes, pay for transport to key legal, support and health appointments, and pay for accommodation, on top of covering living expenses for themselves and their children.

Survivors may already be in debt after experiencing economic abuse and, as many perpetrators isolate survivors from their friends and family, survivors may not have the option of borrowing money from them. Whilst survivors can take out an advance, the deductions from subsequent payments will limit their ability to afford housing and essentials for them and their children in the long run.

Whilst the five-week wait has an impact on all claimants, for survivors it can compromise their ability to remain in safety after fleeing. Women's Aid recently administered an Emergency Fund for survivors, funded by the Home Office. Support workers could apply on behalf of a survivor for up one-off grants of up to £250 (or £500 for survivors with children), from a pot of £300,000. The funding which wasn't ring-fenced for specific groups of survivors ran out within five days, such was the demand. The evaluation found that being unable to access benefits or waiting for benefits can cause financial hardship for survivors, with 1 in 6 referrals to the whole fund (16.6% of 626) giving this as one of the reasons for the application.¹⁷ The most notable impact of the fund was on the mental health and wellbeing of survivors – referrers reported that it relieved economic stress – and it was also found to enable survivors to 'stay fled'.

Recommendation 8: The DWP should exempt survivors of domestic abuse who are moving to or on from refuge from repaying an advance of Universal Credit.

Recommendation 9: In the meantime, the DWP should work with the Home Office to explore extending the Emergency Fund to make up for some of the shortcomings in the current benefits system, which may otherwise force a survivor to return to an abuser. Any updated Fund must be designed and delivered in partnership with specialist domestic abuse organisations like Women's Aid to ensure that it meets survivors' needs and circumstances.

Deductions and taxes

Over the past decade, a number of welfare policies have been introduced which have had adverse and unintended impacts on survivors of domestic abuse. These include the benefit cap and the two child limit, which are commonly reported issues by our member services. One service told us that over 95% of the women staying in their refuge were subject to the benefit cap. As it is difficult for women in refuge to work – the work of rebuilding their lives takes up a significant amount of time and energy, they may be caring for children, and employment may pose risks of being tracked by a perpetrator – they cannot avoid the cap.

¹⁷ The publication of the full evaluation is forthcoming.

As a result, their benefits are reduced which can compromise their ability to move into rented accommodation – which in turn means that the refuge has fewer available spaces to offer to women in desperate need.

Whilst there is an exemption to the two-child limit for survivors, the requirement to produce evidence of abuse limits its accessibility. Survivors are forced to disclose a trauma at a time and in circumstances not of their choosing in order to avoid or minimise poverty for themselves and their children – which does not respect their dignity and needs.

There are important lessons to be learnt from the case of the bedroom tax, introduced in 2013, which impacted survivors who had sanctuary schemes in place, such as a fortified safe room. In order to exempt survivors using sanctuary schemes from the tax, a case had to be taken to the European Court of Human Rights. This took years and would not have happened if the policy had been assessed for its impact on survivors in the first place.

Recommendation 10: When introducing new welfare policies, the DWP should publish an appraisal of the impact on survivors of domestic abuse as part of their equality impact assessments.

Recommendation 11: The DWP should abolish the two child limit and the benefit cap. Both policies keep children in poverty and disproportionately impact single parents, including survivors of domestic abuse. Furthermore, in the case of the benefit cap, the policy is unlikely to be saving the Government money, as the Committee found in 2019.¹⁸

Easements

Survivors of domestic abuse are entitled to a 13-week easement from job seeking or work preparation requirements (26 weeks for those with children). Members report that easements are rarely proactively offered and that they have to support survivors to request them. Once granted, easements are not always respected; many members tell us that survivors still receive calls from the Jobcentre in this time and are sometimes required to attend appointments, which is a significant source of stress for survivors.

Furthermore, the length of the easement does not consider the range of survivor's circumstances and needs when escaping domestic abuse and rebuilding their lives in independence. Often, survivors who have just fled are contending with moving house and area, protracted family court proceedings for child contact, trauma and mental health issues, which cannot simply be resolved within 13 or 26 weeks. In addition, our members tell us that when easements elapse, women who are heavily pregnant or who will soon be moving out of the area are still required to search for a job, despite this not being logical.

Recommendation 12: The DWP should extend the Domestic Violence Easement to one year and ensure work coaches proactively offer easements and respect the conditions of them. This should be covered in the specialist training recommended above.

Recommendation 13: The DWP should collect and publish data on the number of easements of each kind which are granted each year, broken down by Jobcentre.

Housing costs in absence

When someone is temporarily absent from their home due to fear of abuse, they can have their housing costs paid for up to 12 months in their absence, if there is an intention to return within this period. Whilst this is clear in law, DWP staff's interpretation of 'intention' varies in practice. Unless a survivor clearly and proactively states they intend to return, the decision seems to usually be made that they do not have such an intention, rather than exploring the

¹⁸ Work and Pensions Committee. (2019) The Benefit Cap. Available [online](#).

issue with the claimant to find out more about the circumstances. If survivors explore their options, e.g. by signing up to the local housing register on the advice of a refuge, they may lose the additional housing costs – thus causing them to fall into rent arrears.

Understandably, many survivors are unable to express concrete intentions in the immediate aftermath of leaving, given the trauma and number of other decisions they are making at that time. For others, a decision to return may depend on whether their home will be safe for them, e.g. whether the perpetrator will be sentenced to custody.

Recommendation 14: DWP staff should proactively explain the housing costs in absence policy to survivors and explore 'intention to return' in a nuanced way which takes account of survivors' circumstances. This should be covered in the specialist training mentioned above.

Sanctions

Many members raised with us the issue of survivors being sanctioned for not attending appointments. Often, this is due to a survivor having to change her phone number so she could not be contacted by the perpetrator and then forgetting to update the DWP. In other cases, the survivor did not understand why she had been sanctioned; this was a common theme in conversations with 'by and for' services, who reported that this caused additional anxiety, distress and confusion.

In some cases, members were able to advocate for the survivor to the Jobcentre and have the sanction removed – but we know that not all survivors are in contact with specialist services and many will not have this support. Given that sanctions push claimants further into poverty and damage their relationship with the DWP, it is important that these are not imposed in circumstances where a more appropriate response is support and signposting.

Recommendation 15: The specialist training recommended above must cover the reasons why survivors may not be able to comply with their claimant commitment and the types of support to which work coaches can refer them. Combined with the cultural change requirements outlined in Q1, this will help ensure that work coaches employ their discretion with an understanding of survivors' circumstances and needs, rather than solely with a lens of compliance.

In terms of the DWP's response to survivors, the stakes are high. A support worker from Al-Hasaniya, the specialist service mentioned above, expresses this eloquently:

'Many survivors experience deep rooted fears around financial security, as this tends to be weaponised by perpetrators to instil fear and compel them to remain in the relationship. For example, perpetrators tell women that they will be homeless and will starve if they leave them. When survivors start to experience challenges and difficulties in claiming benefits, they believe the perpetrator and consider returning to the abusive relationship.'

To ensure that the DWP supports survivors to access safety, there needs to be a shift in culture and understanding, as well as concrete action to tackle the many barriers survivors face to accessing benefits.

October 2023