

Written evidence submitted by WinVisible (SVC0095)

We are writing to follow up the Work and Pensions Committee's [session](#) on 8 January when organisations testified about drastic problems with the Move to Universal Credit (UC) programme for claimants on Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and with stopping income-related ESA. Also our email of 15 November 2024 after you reopened the inquiry.

We face a terrifying situation of losing our income and becoming destitute if we don't make a new claim for UC and successfully complete all the steps. But this is dismissed by the DWP minister for Social Security and Disability, Sir Stephen Timms. His [letter](#) to you stated:

This government is committed to getting Britain working. Completing the implementation of Universal Credit will support this mission. Universal Credit provides greater support and incentives to get people into work and increase the hours they work than the benefits it replaces. (12 November 2024).

The **six women's cases we bring to your attention below** are clear testimony of the reality the minister is denying. Some of us are disabled single mothers whose children's welfare is also at risk from underpayments and "waiting time" for UC. And once you start your UC claim, the DWP can close it if you can't verify your identity or haven't agreed a claimant commitment.

Others too are aware of the risks. The Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), the DWP staff union, oppose the move. Already, people are suffering with DWP staff cuts causing huge delays to Personal Independence Payments (PIP).

We supported the 2020 legal [challenge](#) on behalf of Errol Graham, a Black man in Nottingham, by his daughter-in-law Alison Burton. As you rightly corrected the DWP's Chief Medical Adviser, Dr Gail Allsopp, on 8 January, he shockingly starved to death after his ESA was stopped for not attending a benefit assessment. But the judge in the judicial review sided with the DWP. Later, the DWP was exposed for shamefully spending £50k in legal [fees](#) trying to block the release of a safeguarding report about Mr Graham by Nottingham authorities. **Only guaranteed continuity of benefit will prevent tragic deaths from the stop of ESA.**

Can the Committee require the DWP to make public the criteria for complete cancellation of the migration notice, to enable people to stay on ESA? According to UC [regulation 44](#) (2014) this should apply: *In any circumstances where DWP*

considers it necessary to do so **in the interests of the person, or any class of person**. But this is rarely implemented.

We have put together our own self-help info from our group's experiences. This is being widely used and you may want to refer people to it:

<https://winvisible.org/2024/11/26/esa-to-universal-credit-things-to-know-helpful-tips/>

Some experiences of women in our group and network:

The women we are supporting have all responded to letters, but many people are too frightened to open these – we can only imagine what is happening to them.

- **Ms A is disabled, has cancer, and most of the time is too ill to make or answer calls.** In May 2024, she was told she had a year to live. She rang the DWP Managed Migration helpline to say she is on the end-of-life GP register. They replied that she still has to make a new claim. With WinVisible's help and support over two months, staff finally conceded that she does qualify for cancellation of the migration notice and would carry on getting her ESA benefit. Disability News Service [reports](#) systematic and potentially fatal errors by DWP staff and [bullying](#) by work coaches. In 2019, she went through the ordeal of being cut off PIP by Capita/DWP for "failure to attend" a reassessment, after being diagnosed with cancer. She faced loss of her Motability car, which she needed to travel to hospital in another town for her cancer treatment. We helped her to keep her car and to secure over £11,000 in backdated benefit (see [Disability News Service](#), 6 August 2020).
- **Ms B has Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (ME) / Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS) and is a single mum and domestic violence survivor** living with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). She finds dealing with officials and long interviews overwhelming due to anxiety, trauma and chronic fatigue, and is unable to cope with making a fresh UC claim. We supported her to request a cancellation of her migration notice via her MP. The DWP Complaints Team replied to her MP that Ms B 'does not meet the criteria for deferral or exclusion from the Move to UC programme'. They 'acknowledge the toll [Ms B] said this is having upon her health and have arranged for our enhanced Customer Support team to contact her directly regarding any outstanding concerns she may have about moving to UC.' (October 2024) But Ms B already said such calls are too stressful and worsen her health.
- **Ms C is due to have major surgery and will need several months to recover.** Initially she was only offered short extensions of 3-4 weeks, and was made to justify them with more detailed medical reasons. Helpline staff shouted and verbally abused her when she requested her third extension. She only got an eight-week extension because of the Christmas/New Year holiday period. But then the DWP called her three times during her NHS appointments telling her to start a phone claim. She says, "*The phone calls and voice messages were inducing anxiety, panic attacks and heart palpitations – especially after I had already received written confirmation that my deadline had been extended.*"
- **Ms D is a disabled mum of two children under 5.** The DWP issued the wrong monthly amount of £393.45 (single person standard rate), causing panic. She needs money for the children, her disability element (carried over from ESA), and rent. When we complained, the DWP brushed it off with the comment "this sometimes happens" before someone's claim is verified. On the call to verify Ms D's identity, the Jobcentre staff member stated that if the computer system didn't

accept the information she inputted, they would send someone to Ms D's house for a home visit. We had to explain that this phone appointment was a "reasonable adjustment" because Ms D cannot have a face-to-face appointment because of severe anxiety. Questions included past dates when she applied for different benefits – difficult questions for long-term claimants to remember. If you can't answer them, the DWP can disallow your claim.

- **Ms E requested a home visit** to verify her identity, as she is unable to go to the Jobcentre. She was told there is a six-week wait. This would cause huge delay with her UC payments. Eventually after she complained, the DWP accepted to do it by phone instead. She was refused an extension to the deadline which she requested on grounds of family bereavement.
- **Ms F is a single mum with Sickle Cell.** She contacted us stressed out because she received nothing by post until she got a DWP reminder that she has one month left to claim UC. She was refused an extension of the deadline even though problems with post are not her fault.

Four of the six women are women of colour. As disabled women of colour, especially if we are also immigrant, we experience racist disbelief in medical treatment/diagnosis, and additionally in the benefits system, making it even harder to get the disability benefits to which we are entitled.

We call for the "No Recourse to Public Funds" (NRPF) rule to be abolished, because it denies benefits and healthcare to many immigrant people, including disabled asylum seekers, and even NHS staff (see [Royal College of Nursing](#)). Immigrant women, many of whom are women of colour, are a mainstay of the NHS. Many are mothers and particularly impacted by NRPF and having to leave children behind, causing heartache and trauma to the children and the mothers. It is a stain on the healthcare system that while people of colour kept the NHS going through the pandemic, disproportionate numbers of us died.

Coping with disability and ill-health in an inaccessible and prejudiced society is hard work in itself. This should be recognised, instead we face a barrage of benefit cuts and changes. In Disability Living Allowance (DLA) to PIP, pensioners were allowed to stay on DLA. Why not the same for claimants on ESA?

Ms A says:

"Each time there's a change like the DLA to PIP, there's invariably a cut back. This affects not only the physical health of the unwell person because they can no longer get whatever they need to manage their health better but also their mental health, with all the worry of meeting basic needs."

"In fact, I know of a young person who has MS, is able to work only a few hours each day, pays her taxes and NI credits. She feels she cannot deal with the stress of applying for UC or PIP, because that in itself could make her condition worse. There are days when she has gone without meals and it's heartbreaking knowing the effect lack of nutrition has on MS."

The High Court ruling in Ellen Clifford's case (16 January) that the DWP unlawfully hid benefit cuts in their consultation on changes to the Work Capability Assessment, **is an important victory for the disability movement and a warning to the Labour government not to go ahead with similar plans.** We are defending our benefit rights and protections like the "Substantial risk to health" regulation, which many women in WinVisible need.

The government's treatment of sick and disabled people, mothers and other family carers as "economically inactive" or "workless" is insulting, especially of single mothers and disabled single mothers, who are one third of all single mothers. It denies our vital caring work, for ourselves and others, for which we deserve an income. Extra costs of disability are also dismissed. Single mothers and disabled people who are only able to do part-time waged work are [sanctioned](#) under UC.

The money is there to fund the benefits we need and free high-quality care and support by people of our choice, to end zero-hour contracts and exploitation of unwaged family carers. But Keir Starmer prioritises military spending -- pledging a £75b [increase](#) and visiting the RAF in Cyprus doing surveillance for bombing hospitals in Gaza. Life and wellbeing must be prioritised, not war.

January 2025