

Written evidence from Autism Anglia [SWP0035]

- how well is the universal credit system working for the unprecedented numbers of new claimants?

At the beginning of the sudden influx of claims, it was manic and very stressful for people. Working with autistic individuals who already have a high level of anxiety and stress, it was very difficult. There are only two of us in welfare rights covering the whole of East Anglia. We are working from home and had a lot of issues trying to help people who are very visual while working remotely.

- how quickly are people who ask for advance payments of universal credit receiving their payments?

It is dependent on which JC contacts you. Some have been very good at sorting out advanced payments, whereas others are not so good. Work Coaches are not giving info about Advanced Payments. When I raised this with a local JC, I was told "claimants should know about AP's, it is not up to us to tell them."

- what lessons can be learned from the changes that have been made to the processes for verifying the identity of universal credit claimants?

Verifying identity before the pandemic was always frustrating for the people we represent; we have seen individuals being sent up to 200 codes and all of them rejected. We seem to forget those individuals who are unable to access computers and need to wait for F2F appointments. I think biographical verification is a way forward, but I also feel you should be in contact with charities who work closely with minority groups and who require information to be bespoke help to claim UC, including information delivered in other formats.

- how well is the benefits system working for self-employed people who aren't able to access the government's Self-employment Income Support Scheme?

Not very well, we have seen people panicking because they unable to pay rent and bills. They've paid into the system for years and struggling to access any help. There does seem to be discriminatory gaps in the system. SEISS is not payable until June, we have found claimants are not aware that the money they receive from SEISS will have to be paid back if they are claiming UC. The guidance needs to be crystal clear and in a manner everyone understands.

- how effective have the DWP's communications with the public been during this period?

As a Welfare rights adviser, I receive regular and daily updates and can share these on our social media pages. We have seen our dedicated FB page go up by 200 people in one week and not just people with autism. I think the general public are

dependent on charities and advisers getting the information out. There has been only one letter from the govt, nothing which alleviates worry

- is it clear enough how the benefits system interacts with other forms of government support during this period, such as the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme?
No, it is not clear, and guidance keeps changing.

- how is the assessment process for employment and support allowance working? Have there been any difficulties with obtaining medical evidence to support claims?

We are in a position where we can supply clinical evidence for people in our care. We can also act on behalf of the claimant and request medical evidence from GP's. This is because people are worried about taking up GP time in requesting reports etc. It has always been difficult for people to obtain a medical report, because once diagnosed with autism they might not see anyone again. The diagnostic reports are often dismissed by the DWP and alternative providers yet show how a person functions in relation to his/her autism.

- what impact has the outbreak had on people who were waiting for a mandatory reconsideration of a decision, or who were going through the appeals process?
- ***This is probably one of the biggest areas of concern. Example- I put in a UC MR in Nov 2019. I started chasing up in Feb and then every two weeks. The situation became dire at the end of march when the claimant was placed in the Covid-19 vulnerable group and told he would not be resuscitated if he went into hospital. Two weeks ago, I requested that the MR was escalated considering the situation. I was told, 'these are unprecedented times and the DWP is stretched.' I am aware of the situation but relaying that information could have been more considerate. I am still waiting for a MR for this case and 4 others. It seems MR's have been pushed to the back of the queue.***

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

- ***No, it never has met basic living costs. We have had people who could not afford electricity and one person unable to keep insulin in the fridge. People worry because they do not know how much UC they will get (or if indeed they will get anything.) People are still reliant on Foodbanks, which are in more demand and food more difficult to obtain.***

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

Autistic individuals and those with cognitive impairment, really struggle to access the benefit system without support. Citizens advice do a grand job in helping people claim UC, but in our region, they refer autistic individuals to our charity. People with autism see the world differently and that is why we work closely with

Job Centres. We have produced an Autism Passport, specifically for Job Centres and Tribunal Courts, which can be uploaded onto the work journal. We helped write the Autism Insight Report for IAS, which I feel should be rolled out to all Job Centres. The Insight Report is a great tool for work coaches and anyone else who needs to assess an autistic individual. I also firmly believe that every Job Centre should have an Autism Lead.

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

Welfare Rights Advisers at one time had escalation numbers, this is no longer the case. When we are desperate, we contact the regional managers, because we simply do not have the time to wait on the phone for over an hour. It would help if funding was made available to welfare rights services and advisers, we are at the coal face of a claimant's journey. If that person is autistic, the journey is so much harder. Without a doubt we make life much easier for Work Coaches, who may be dealing with a challenging autistic person. We also help them tailor appointments and advise on suitable work and training.

We are aware that there are many more autistic individuals who are unable to access support and help, there should be more signposting for those who go under the radar.

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