

Written evidence from SCOPE [SWP0068]

Introduction

Scope welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Work and Pensions Committee's inquiry into the Department for Work and Pensions response to the coronavirus outbreak.

Coronavirus has created an unprecedented surge in demand for support from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) amongst both disabled and non-disabled people. In response, DWP has quickly introduced a range of positive measures to support individuals both in and out of work.

Whilst we welcome these changes, some do not go far enough, and others create an unfair disparity of support between different groups. We would also like to see many of the measures introduced on a permanent basis, rather than as a temporary solution to the current crisis. The increased level of demand has revealed shortfalls in DWP support that disabled people experienced long before coronavirus, and will continue to do so, unless certain measures are made permanent.

As circumstances continue to evolve, Scope is committed to ensuring that disabled people receive the right support from the DWP, both during the coronavirus outbreak and in the future.

Recommendations

- DWP should extend the suspension of the waiting days rule for Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) to all workers, not just those ill with or self-isolating due to COVID-19
- DWP should increase the rate of SSP in line with the National Minimum/Living Wage
- DWP should utilise its existing relationships to ensure that disabled people are supported during the coronavirus lockdown
- DWP should ensure that tribunals can continue to take place safely during the coronavirus crisis, exploring options for remote hearings.
- DWP should uprate Employment and Support Allowance in line with Universal Credit

Demand for Scope's services

Scope's Helpline has received 300 queries related to coronavirus since 20 March 2020. Of these, 23 per cent were about benefits – the largest proportion of queries after access to food and essentials.

The most frequent queries we received were regarding:

- What benefits our customers could claim if they had either lost their job or been furloughed
- What benefits our customers could claim if they were self-isolating
- Whether Personal Independence Payment (PIP) assessments/tribunals will still go ahead

The number of coronavirus benefits-related queries to our Helpline has decreased over the past three weeks, from 40 during 20-29 March to 17 during 6-12 April.

This suggests that the announcements made by DWP on 19, 20 and 23 March on the changes to the welfare system reached and were understood by disabled people and their families.

Nevertheless, we are still hearing from many disabled people who receive benefits that they feel unsupported by the Government.

Assessments

We welcome the Government announcement made in March to suspend face-to-face assessments during the epidemic. We know that disabled people often face barriers accessing assessment centres, such as lack of suitable public transport, or inaccessible buildings used as assessment centres. As well as physical barriers, the prospect of a face-to-face assessment can be both overwhelming and anxiety-inducing for many disabled people. This may result in difficulties expressing the information required on the day of the assessment. We have also heard from disabled people that the use of informal observations during face-to-face assessments has led to inaccurate conclusions about their abilities.

Making assessments paper or telephone based will enable disabled people to easily access their benefit assessment during this time.

DWP must recognise, however, that this approach risks some disabled people slipping through the net. One member of Scope's online community commented, "If I had to choose now I'd hope it would be a paper assessment or I'd just wait the months before they can restart to avoid a telephone assessment". The Department must work to mitigate this risk by prioritising paper-based assessments, where sufficient evidence is provided. Where

telephone assessments are necessary, it is essential that DWP puts in place measures to identify claimants who may require additional support.

Statutory Sick Pay

We also welcomed the change to Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) which means that anyone who is eligible for SSP and cannot work or needs to self-isolate due to coronavirus can receive payments from day one rather than day four.

On average, disabled people face extra costs of £583 a month related to their impairment or condition, even after receiving welfare payments designed to meet these costs (1). Disabled people are also more likely to be a member of a household to have unsecured debt (2) and have an average of £108,000 fewer savings and assets than non-disabled people (3). Ensuring that disabled workers get the financial support that SSP is supposed to provide is therefore key.

However, we feel that this change, whilst important, does not go far enough. This change only covers workers who need to take time off sick due to COVID-19, leaving many others who need to take time off waiting to receive financial support. Scope's research has found that the three-day waiting limit is problematic for people who have a fluctuating condition which requires them to be off work for short periods. Extending this change for all workers would enable more disabled people to take time off work when they need to, giving them the confidence that they won't suffer financially as a result.

We also believe that the rate of SSP is too low. Scope research has found that the biggest issue disabled people face when on SSP is the lack of financial support it provides. At present, the rate of SSP is just £95.85 per week. Using figures from the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, we estimate that an average earner would face a drop in income of £489.15 per week when they were off sick with only SSP for financial support (4).

As we have mentioned above, disabled people are more likely to have a lower amount of savings and assets than non-disabled people. A loss of just under £500 per week in income would have a negative effect financially for many disabled people who are ill with or need to self-isolate due to coronavirus.

DWP should increase the rate of SSP so it matches the National Minimum or Living Wage.

This will enable disabled people who have to take time off work because of coronavirus to still receive a reasonable level of income

¹ Scope (2019), Disability Price Tag. <https://www.scope.org.uk/campaigns/extra-costs/disability-price-tag/>

Scope (2019), Disabled people and financial well-being - credit and debt.

<https://blog.scope.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/credit-and-debt1.pdf>

³ McKnight, A. (2014), Disabled people's financial histories: uncovering the disability wealth penalty, CASE paper 181.

⁴ Office for National Statistics (2019), Employee earnings in the UK: 2019.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/bulletins/annualsurveyofhoursandearnings/2019>

“I have enhanced PIP but we are struggling. No one is supporting (our) mental health and it’s tough...it feels no one cares.”

This anecdotal evidence backs up recent research. A snap survey by the Research Institute for Disabled Consumers (RiDC) found that only one in five disabled people feel the Government is doing enough to support them during the coronavirus pandemic (5).

Disabled people are just as likely, if not more, to find the lockdown difficult to manage. Data from the Office for National Statistics found that people who were disabled were the group most likely to report feeling lonely “often or always” (6).

DWP have existing relationships with many disabled people through employment support and administering benefits. It is important that DWP officials are empowered and supported to proactively check the wellbeing of disabled customers and how they are coping during the lockdown. If appropriate, this should also include signposting to support which may be available.

Personal Independence Payments

Scope has heard from disabled people who are concerned that the delays to PIP appeals will mean they will struggle financially.

“The tribunal that would decide on my PIP appeal has had to be cancelled and without that money I’m struggling to survive.”

Disabled people face on average extra costs of £583 per month (7). It is therefore essential that the correct amount of PIP is awarded, to reflect the higher costs associated with disability. Despite this, poor DWP decision-making means that many disabled people are incorrectly denied PIP. This is demonstrated by the fact that over three quarters of PIP decisions that go to tribunal are overturned in favour of the claimant (8).

⁵ Research Institute for Disabled Consumers (2020), Covid-19: the impact on disabled and older people in the UK. <https://www.ridc.org.uk/news/covid-19-impact-disabled-and-older-people-uk>

⁶ Office for National Statistics (2020), Coronavirus and social relationships and support for vulnerable groups: 2017 to 2018 and 2018 to 2019. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/coronavirusandsocialrelationshipsandsupportforvulnerablegroups/2020-04-02>

⁷ Scope (2019), Disability Price Tag. <https://www.scope.org.uk/campaigns/extra-costs/disability-price-tag/>

⁸ Ministry of Justice (2020), Tribunal Statistics Quarterly: October to December 2019.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/tribunal-statistics-quarterly-october-to-december-2019>

It is crucial that appeal requests should continue to go ahead, even during lockdown, to ensure disabled people can access the financial support they are entitled to.

It is especially important that disabled people receive appropriate financial support during this period, when many working disabled people are likely to be receiving less income due to being furloughed or made redundant from work.

DWP should ensure that tribunals can continue to take place safely during the coronavirus crisis, exploring options for remote hearings.

Uprating of benefits

Another decision that is having a negative impact on disabled people is the inconsistency with uprating of benefits. In response to the coronavirus outbreak, the 2020/21 Universal Credit (UC) standard allowance has increased by £1,000 per year (9), which equates to an increase worth around £20 a week. While this is a welcome change, it means there is now a disparity in out-of-work support, as the uplift has not been applied to Employment and Support Allowance (ESA).

It is unfair that UC claimants have received an increase in their benefit rate whilst those on legacy benefits such as ESA have not. Legacy benefit claimants have just as much of a need for a benefit uprating as those who claim UC.

There is also the risk that the inconsistency in rates could result in additional pressure on an already stretched system. Claimants who receive income-related ESA may be motivated to migrate to UC if they remain worse off by being on ESA.

However, this risks placing some claimants in a tougher financial situation in the short-term. One disabled person told us that he is afraid to move onto UC as he can't afford to go five weeks without payment without it affecting his ability to pay rent.

The Government should uprate Employment and Support Allowance in line with Universal Credit. This will help to financially protect ESA claimants through the coronavirus crisis and ensure DWP resource can be focused on new claimants with an immediate need to claim UC.

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⁹ McInnes, R. (2020), House of Commons Library Briefing Paper: Benefits Uprating 2020.
<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8806/>