

Universal Credit Survey

Universal Credit Full Service in York: July 2017 to July 2018



The Universal Credit Focus Project survey has come to an end and we are now able to collate our data to highlight the emerging trends and common experiences of Universal Credit (UC) claimants in the York area.

Over the full year we received 69 responses (40 between July 2017 – January 2018 and 29 between February 2018 – July 2018). Not all the respondents answered every question; the percentages given relate to the number of respondents who answered each particular question.

Summary: February 2018 – July 2018

The three main issues that emerged in our July 2017 to January 2018 interim report were difficulties due to the initial wait for the first payment of UC, administrative barriers to making and maintaining UC claims and problems identifying eligibility for Council Tax Support. These concerns continued to be reflected in the responses received between February and July 2018.

Initial delay in waiting for payment

In early 2018, a series of measures were introduced by the government to try and alleviate the hardship that the initial wait for payment was causing. In January 2018, the amount of the advance payment available to claimants increased to 100% of their likely award and the repayment period was extended from 6 to 12 months. In February 2018, the 7-day waiting period was removed. As these dates correspond with the second half of our survey period, the responses from February 2018 - July 2018 may indicate whether the government's action has had any meaningful impact on claimant's experiences.

Between February 2018 – July 2018, 96% of respondents found it fairly difficult (32%) or very difficult (64%) to pay for their essential living costs while they waited for their first payment of UC. This is an increase from our interim report, where 85% of respondents reported finding it fairly or very difficult to manage. Of those that found it fairly or very difficult, paying for food (80%), rent/mortgage (70%) and gas and electricity (64%) were the payments that respondents struggled with the most. 48% of respondents used a foodbank while they waited for their first payment, 64% of respondents borrowed money and 44% had help from family and friends. Comparing these figures to our interim period, the percentage of respondents borrowing money and getting help from family and friends remained similar (1% higher for both during the interim period) but the percentage of respondents accessing a foodbank was lower at 35%.

Advance payments

In our interim report in March, we stated that in the first 6 months of the UC focus project, 41% of respondents had claimed a UC advance, and out of the 11 people who were repaying the advance, 9 of them were finding it very difficult to meet essential living costs. During the period February 2018 - July 2018, 84% of respondents claimed a UC Advance, with nearly 60% of respondents stating that they found it fairly (18%) or very (41%) difficult to manage ongoing expenses while the advance was being repaid. This is despite the extension of the repayment period that was introduced in January 2018.

Administrative problems

A major concern that was apparent in our interim report were the problems that claimants had with finalising their claims and providing appropriate and sufficient evidence. Between February 2018 – July 2018:

- 69% of respondents found it fairly difficult (42%) or very difficult (27%) to provide the information required, compared to 44% in our interim survey
- Rental agreements (67%) and proof of identity (78%) were the most difficult evidence to obtain
- 68% of respondents reported having to provide the same proof more than once, compared to 52% in our interim survey

It would appear from this data that administrative problems are an ongoing problem that is yet to be resolved in any meaningful way.

Council Tax

For the period February 2018 – July 2018, nearly 40% of respondents were already claiming Council Tax Support at the time of their UC claim, or made a claim at the same time. Nearly 22% of respondents were not aware that they might be eligible for Council Tax Support (21% in the interim report). The link between Universal Credit and Council Tax Support needs to be further strengthened to ensure that those who are entitled do not miss out.

Further findings

Alongside the issues that emerged in our interim report, the second half of our survey also highlighted the impact that making a claim had on claimants' mental and physical wellbeing.

One respondent commented that Universal Credit made him feel *"like a product with a barcode"* and another stated that she had lost half a stone on what she now calls the *"Universal Credit Diet"*. Several respondents reported that the claims process had triggered mental health problems or made existing conditions worse. One respondent stated that the process had made him feel suicidal. When asked to provide feedback to the DWP about Universal Credit, 100% of the claimants who responded made negative comments.



More detail, February to July 2018 ...

Who responded

- 29 responses – 85% were already receiving Universal Credit and 15% had claimed and were awaiting payment
- 89% (24) paid rent
- 41% (11) had children, and 11% of them had childcare costs (i.e. in work)
- 37% (10) had a disability or health problem.

The claims process

The respondents all reported that they made claims online. Of these claims:

- 38% of people used their own computer
- 13% of people borrowed a friend or family computer
- 50% reported having to use a public computer (e.g. in the Jobcentre)
- 80% needed help to make the claim (although we do recognise that respondents directed to the survey are more likely to have been supported)
 - Help was received from varying sources – Jobcentre Plus, the council, library services and Citizens Advice. This is a significant increase from the percentage of people (50%) needing help during the period July – January

Respondents were given the opportunity to provide more information about making their claim, with 14 people (48%) responding.

Two people responded that the Jobcentre had been very helpful in assisting them to make their claims.

One respondent commented that the whole process was “*lengthy and frightening*”, and another stated that having to ask family for help while he waited for his first payment made him feel “*very ashamed*”.

Getting paid

- 18 respondents were already receiving Universal Credit
- The average waiting time was 6.2 weeks (although this may also include receipt of advance payments)
- 6 respondents had to wait 7 weeks or more

Claimant Commitment

Of the 23 people who responded to this question, 87% said that they understood their claimant commitment. Respondents were asked to give further feedback about their commitment and of the 12 people who responded to the question, 3 people made very negative comments:

“I really feel like [the claimant commitment] gives civil servants more weapons against me under the name of commitment”

“It's discrimination it does not take into account real life like child care travel etc”

“The rules, or the government like to call it a “commitment”, is a constant reminder of the trap the system sets for you. To be honest I think looking for paid employment for 30+ hours is a big ask. I realise as do most people that it's important to get into employment quickly

and most of us want that. But the system is unforgiving, it has a "one shoe fits all" policy and that's not helpful when all individuals have different needs. It bulldozers over vulnerable and desperately worried people."

Further comments

18 respondents chose to make further comments about Universal Credit in general. The main themes were

- Issues with accessing the internet
- Hardship while waiting for the first payment
- Accruing debts

Feedback to the DWP

19 respondents chose to provide comment, with all 19 making negative comments. The specific feedback given was very similar to the feedback given between July 2017 – January 2018 and included:

- The impact of UC on the mental health of claimants
- Ongoing problems with private landlords
- Recognising the difficulties faced by those with no internet access
- Claimants feeling that they do not have enough money to survive.



July 2017 – July 2018: Full Year Findings

The survey covered the first year of the Universal Credit full service roll-out in York. Over the full year that the Universal Credit Focus survey has been taking place, there have been many amendments to the UC regulations, as well as developing case law, updated guidance and improved understanding. It is difficult to compare the figures across the year due to this as respondents in July 2017 were faced with a different system to those in July 2018. Despite this, the results highlight two main areas of UC implementation which continue to raise concern.

Making and maintaining a claim: one size fits all

Universal Credit full service is digital by default. In practice, what this means is that people claim online, manage their claim online and communicate with the DWP online on a long-term basis. Although the DWP accept that this approach will not work for everyone, they believe that only a minority of people will not be able to use the system in this way. Our survey indicates that it is not the minority but the majority that are not using the system as intended. Problems making and managing a digital claim have also been highlighted in specific cases supported by our Universal Credit Focus project.

Across the year, 56% of respondents made their claim using a family, friends or public computer. If a claimant does not have internet access at home, as well as causing issues with the initial claim, it also indicates that the ongoing management of their claim and communication with the DWP will be problematic. This problem is further highlighted by the fact that 63% of respondents needed help to make their claim. If those 63% also need help with the ongoing administration of their claims there will be unsustainable pressure on advice agencies and statutory services. Claimants frequently receive text messages or emails

telling them to log on to their journal. It is unsustainable for people without internet access at home to be able to visit family/friends or public computers every time this happens. In some cases, the message on the journal may be general and insignificant, in other cases missing an 'action' could mean the risk of a sanction. There is also the consideration of the cost of transport to get to a location where a computer is accessible.

DWP statistics and the recent Citizens Advice report, 'Making a Universal Credit claim'¹ confirm that these figures are not a localised problem but a national trend; the DWP reported that 44% of claimants made multiple attempts to make a UC claim², and Citizens Advice highlighted that 28% of claimants took longer than a week to successfully make a claim.

To address this problem, the government has given funding to local authorities to provide a Universal Support package. The actual support offered is decided and delivered locally, either by the local authority themselves or a partner organisation. As part of their research, Citizen's Advice contacted the national network of bureaux and concluded that 'limited availability or coverage of this support can add additional delays as people wait for help with their claim and that the support provided 'can be patchy and can lack a coherent local strategy'. Moving forward, it is imperative that the Universal Support package in each local area is publicised, clear and meets the needs of claimants, providing not just access to computers, but help making and maintaining claims.

The one size fits all approach is also apparent in the issues that have been highlighted regarding evidence and proof. It appears that non-standard documents lead to delays with processing and can mean that claimants wait even longer for their claims to be finalised.

Proof of housing costs is a particular problem area; across the year 52% of respondents who found it fairly or very difficult to provide all the evidence required of them found it particularly difficult to provide proof of rent. This is confirmed by the Citizen's Advice report¹, where 40% of their respondents found providing evidence of housing costs difficult. The government has responded in part to this issue by introducing a Landlord Portal, where registered social landlords can verify and confirm residents rent figures easily, however the portal has not yet been rolled out fully across the county and will still only provide help to the social rented sector once complete. Alongside problems with non-formalised rental agreements (such as a letter from a landlord not being accepted as proof), we have also seen several cases on our advice line of the DWP refusing to pay full rent figures to claimants who have an 'untidy tenancy' (e.g. where an ex-partner has left but is still named on the agreement). With managed migration in mind (see below), it is vital that the DWP resolve these issues to prevent real financial hardship and considerable distress to those affected.

Transition to Universal Credit

We are currently in a period where claimants in full service areas are migrating to Universal Credit either because they are choosing to claim or because they have a relevant change in circumstances. The nationally managed process by which existing legacy benefit claimants will be moved across to Universal Credit is due to begin in early 2019. Throughout the rollout of Universal Credit, the government have been committed to a test and learn approach; it is

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<https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/Global/CitizensAdvice/welfare%20publications/Making%20a%20Universal%20Credit%20claim%202018%20-%20final.pdf>

2

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/714842/universal-credit-full-service-claimant-survey.pdf

essential that they listen to claimants' voices regarding the transition process and make changes before managed migration begins.

Across the whole year, 89% of respondents reported that it was fairly difficult (22%) or very difficult (67%) to pay essential living costs while waiting for their first UC payment. Of those people, 86% struggled to pay for food, 70% found it hard to keep up with rental or mortgage payments and 64% struggled to pay for gas and electricity. When asked how they covered costs during this period, 63% reported borrowing money, 43% said that they turned to family and friends and 37% accessed a foodbank for support. These figures are mirrored in the Citizens Advice report which found that 31% of respondents who had been paid UC on time had accessed a foodbank, and 44% of those who received their first payment late used a foodbank.

The government's answer to this issue has been centred on Universal Credit Advance payments, but it does not appear that these provisions go far enough. 52% of our respondents received an advance payment, with 63% stating that it was very or fairly difficult to cover essential costs while the advance was being repaid (10% of those who had received an advance had not started repayments). 24% of our respondents were not made aware that they could apply for a UC advance.

In a recent guardian article³, Abby Jitendra, policy and research manager at the Trussell Trust, Britain's largest food bank provider, said "repaying an advance payment, for example, can be an unaffordable expense when taken from a payment that wasn't enough to start with, pushing people further into debt at the time when support is most needed".



³ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/aug/11/third-of-universal-credit-claimants-face-payment-deductions>