

## Assessing DWP's Response to the Consequences of Coronavirus (26 March 2020)

We have [previously outlined what DWP could do](#) in the Coronavirus crisis; we assess here what they have done so far. The flexibility and creativity of the digital teams across most of Government is starkly contrasted by the inflexibility and ineffectiveness of DWP's 'digital' service.

HMG and HM Treasury have said they will do "whatever it takes" to address the coronavirus and its consequences. NHS digital teams and the Government Digital Service have tweaked existing services and deployed new services rapidly at scale – to legitimate acclaim.

DWP seems to be doing "whatever it takes" to avoid changing anything in its "digital and agile" service,<sup>1</sup> that is beginning to buckle under the hundreds of thousands of people using it – and getting stuck in processing queues to avoid what DWP characterises as "unfairness" to "taxpayers". The 100,000 people who claimed UC after the Chancellor's announcement about the self-employment measures *were* taxpayers until last week.

### **Q: When the Chancellor said HM Treasury would fund "whatever it takes" to respond to coronavirus, did that exclude DWP?**

DWP claims that UC is "[continually updating](#)", which in normal circumstances would be every two weeks. How many times has DWP updated UC since this crisis began? How does that compare with the number of updates to services run by the NHS or GDS?

Entirely new NHS services have been created and run at large scale, whereas "agile" DWP claims it cannot:

- Offer claimants in England the same choice about payments that it already offers in Scotland;
- Temporarily set a cap on the reclaiming of debt to 1 pence (or lower) for the period of the crisis;
- Reclaim advances given under UC in the same way as any other debts in the UC system – i.e. at some point in the future.

None of these small tweaks are entirely new to UC – yet DWP claims it is unable to make them. We recognise the huge amount of work that large scale changes to a digital service takes, but note that many digital teams across Government have done so repeatedly, sometimes multiple times per hour, over the last few weeks.

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### **Details**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/164/work-and-pensions-committee/news/145668/work-and-pensions-committee-questions-secretary-of-state-on-dwp-response-to-coronavirus/>

## Payment frequency

Claimants in Scotland can choose to be paid fortnightly. What is so flawed in DWP's implementation that it claims it cannot provide that option to claimants in England?

## Deductions

The flexibility that Government and Treasury have expected of businesses and their payroll systems seems not to be replicated in what DWP can do? Is their 'digital service' really that bad?

The Government announced that the UC capital checks were to be suspended for a period. Has DWP implemented this? And if it can suspend that part of the system, why does DWP claim it *cannot* suspend other parts? If DWP simply does not wish to make that change, that is its decision, but DWP's claim of *impossibility* does not stand up to scrutiny.

How often does DWP calculate what deductions are owed? Can it pause such calculations and recalculate everyone again in future, when political decisions about if and when to reclaim any advances are made? Does DWP not have any mechanism for issuing claims should there be a technical failure in their deductions system ("computer is down")? Can UC's "continually updating" system not set a fixed deduction of zero for a period? Can DWP really not bring forward the change in cap from 30% of benefits to 25% – something DWP has already confirmed to Treasury it can do (as it was in the Budget)?

## Debt collection

DWP checks all new claimants against existing databases of past debts – so-called 'necrodebts'. For money paid out rapidly during the Coronavirus crisis, which is currently expected to be claimed back, DWP could use its reclaim system to recover loans in the future (say not before the 2022/23 financial year). That would allow DWP to help people now, but also to meet its political commitment to penalising people in the name of the taxpayers many of those people were last week.

## DWP's Universal Credit Queues

The [Government Digital Service publishes weekly statistics](#) on how many people have signed up successfully to GOV.UK Verify – in the first week of this crisis, 130,000 people successfully created a new Verify account. (These are the latest figures available; updated figures appear every Monday morning.) We understand that around the same number of

(different) people registered for UC in the 6 hours after the Chancellor released details of his plan for the self-employed.

**Q: Can DWP provide the equivalent weekly figures for UC accounts, and how many people per day were in which queues at their peak?**

Draft PQ: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, how many individuals a) began the process of signing up for Universal Credit, and b) successfully completed that process, per calendar week, since 1st March 2020, broken down by each of the different methods of identity verification available.

**Q: From a user pressing the first “Start” button to initiate a claim for UC, how long (in calendar terms) is it taking for DWP to consider their request complete for consideration?**

- How long (in terms of waiting times and numbers of people) are all of the individual queues within DWP?
- [ask GDS] How long is an individual waiting within Verify, from pressing the first ‘start’ button to ending their Verify journey successfully and being redirected back to the original service?

**Using the DWP Longitudinal Study to inform decision making**

DWP maintains a ‘DWP Longitudinal Study’ for research analysis of the labour market as part of their ‘DWP Digital’ initiative. What external academic analyses have been conducted on that study for the current crisis? Is wider academic access via UKRI’s ADRUK being accelerated to allow (safe) analysis of a rapidly changing labour market to inform Government and policy? (it should be; it isn’t)

**In summary**

The technical possibilities we [previously outlined](#) remain possible, should DWP wish to meet the needs of the current situation with the digital tools they have already built.

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