

Annex 4 – COVID-19 and the Welfare State (July 2020)

Around 2 million additional people are on Universal Credit because of COVID19. NHS national leaders are privately noting the effects on health – both on individuals' health, and on the NHS budget – of unemployment *over years*, which is how long both DWP and the Department of Health and Social Care expect the economic consequences to last.

We note below that the response profile of both government's digital services and the NHS' digital services have followed a pattern far different to that of DWP. And while the changes that most of the NHS and the rest of government have made so far will fall away over time, DWP has taken the inverse approach – and most of its changes are still to come in the future.

This Annex follows a different structure to the other Annexes and is split into sub-documents that were written at different stages of the Work and Pensions Committee inquiry, each of which were published at different times. We anticipate that these and related situations will continue to evolve into the future.

Published documents

Part 4A: [The overview](#) (this is evolving over time, with current versions available at medconfidential.org/2020/Universal-Credit)

Part 4B: June 2020 – [COVID Credit Checks](#)

Part 4C: early March 2020 – [‘sending money next week’](#)

Part 4D: 26 March 2020 – [‘what DWP did instead’](#)

Part 4E: April 2020 – [Written Evidence to Parliament \(responding to Oral Evidence by DWP\)](#)

Part 4F: July 2020 – Supplementary Illustrated and Written Evidence following our Oral Evidence (also based on other parts of our report) [as yet unpublished]

Overview

It is already clear that the consequences of this crisis will go on for years; long after the initial health and public service response, the social pieces will need to be picked up by UC / DWP for as long as it takes. DWP's current culture seems entirely unfit to resolve fundamental issues which will only increase over time.

The situation would appear to require a strategic pivot from the current un(der)responsive, *‘surveillance-industrial’*, hyper-means tested approach to a more economy-*and*-individual-supporting *‘health-industrial’* paradigm. The UK is faced with a sequence of interrelated tough choices in which individual-level surveillance will be demonstrated to really not help; while data will remain fundamental to driving and measuring change, this requires a shift in thinking, systems and culture from the current obsession *‘claimant-as-criminal’* (or scrounger, or unworthy) towards using better-constructed and more meaningful statistics, sampling and focusing on real world outcomes.

During the initial impact of the 2019/2020 coronavirus, the ‘social safety net’ has been Universal Credit – and in one week, one million people were able to sign up to the digital service.¹ That volume of people over such a short period has given civil society an opportunity to measure aspects of UC that were previously impenetrable, due to DWP’s blanket secrecy.

Some other services have responded to COVID-19 with institutional flexibility and a focus on the delivery of their public task for their users – most notably GDS and NHS digital services, i.e. NHS Digital, NHSX, et al., but also HMRC.² Meanwhile, DWP (digital) initially took an alternate approach, *changing almost nothing in the UC digital pathway*, instead only moving staff between call centres. (Only after week two of full lockdown did DWP start changing minor steps in its workflow.³)

A fundamental rethink of parts of the UC workflow is required to align with *current* user needs; not those ‘needs’ that were identified by DWP in 2011.⁴

At the recent Work and Pensions Committee,⁵ DWP officials focussed some of their reasoning for changing nothing on the trope of “fairness to taxpayers” – neglecting to note that nearly all of those people who were now using the social safety net because of COVID-19 had been taxpayers merely days before...

¹ While we cover the problems with the digital service in this document, physical offline mandatory processes are posing a health risk: <https://twitter.com/neilcouling/status/1247848823713665025?s=21>

² <https://www.civilserviceworld.com/professions/article/inside-hmracs-coronavirus-response-jim-harra-on-how-the-furlough-scheme-was-created-in-a-month>

³ <https://www.express.co.uk/finance/personalfinance/1266181/universal-credit-dwp-overpayment-recovery>

⁴ <https://pt2.works/blog/2020/04/02/universal-credit-report/>

⁵ <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/work-and-pensions-committee/news-parliament-2017/sos-dwp-response-to-coronavirus-evidence-19-21/>