

## Annex 4H – A worked example of Inclusive Data Collection to understand the effects of COVID-19 on service users, in a hostile and non-compliant environment

In the midst of COVID-19, we have almost no statistical and research information on the individual household and wider economic consequences of the pandemic.

Universal Credit is a digital service about which DWP is extremely reluctant to collect data for research on the effects of the service and UC itself upon users. Even in a pandemic, when DWP admits its 'clientele' has changed significantly, the Department does not collect and share the data necessary to measure impacts.<sup>1</sup> Never before in its history have such large numbers of people come onto UC at around the same time, with effects measurable by third parties such as Citizens' Advice.<sup>2</sup>

COVID-19 and DWP intransigence have created the opportunity for an independent digital survey of UC claimants via digital methods outside of DWP,<sup>3</sup> run by a third party (possibly academia or statistical), and accessing a statistically relevant subset of claimants.<sup>4</sup>

### Implementation steps

Assuming DWP's intransigence continues and that it will continue to refuse to collect the relevant data, and that it will not assist in data collection via, e.g. the placement of a link in the journal of UC applicants, then the following will be necessary:

- 1) The list of questions should be curated from civil society and academia;
- 2) The responses should be received and held by a trusted entity willing to analyse them, and make data available for particular projects;
- 3) All stakeholders with an interest in questions or answers should be encouraged to add a link to the questions within their user workflows.

These steps transfer control and the narrative away from DWP, and into the hands of those parts of civil society with an interest in producing statistically rigorous evidence of what is happening in the system. It can be done *even when the Department refuses to cooperate*.

Initial results in Spending Review terms should be targeted at the 2021 Spending Review, including results involving other work – such as assessing the cost of the mental health burdens on the NHS caused by DWP's culture and approaches.

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<sup>1</sup> While this paper focuses on DWP, the general approach will apply to other Departments which prefer to shut down criticism by claiming critics have insufficient data, rather than to collect the data necessary to provide proof that there are systemic failings by the Department. This behaviour is not unprecedented:

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.legalfutures.co.uk/latest-news/court-reforms-data-collection-progress-disappointing>  
<sup>2</sup> <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/events/data-bites-10-getting-things-done-data-government>

<sup>3</sup> This assumes that DWP's intransigence will continue, but DWP could also circulate the link. Or - more likely - follow the 'Facebook playbook' around online harms, and replicate the questions internally so as to know what harms it causes before the public find out.

<sup>4</sup> We frame this here as a new digital study, but the questions designed could, e.g. be a module in the ONS Opinions Study as well for baseline analyses.

## **An endnote on History**

The research from such a study would not be unprecedented. The Department used to run the DWP Longitudinal Study for many years, until it effectively ended due to DWP empire-building and a lack of a desire to see answers.

The DWPLS was notable for having a cross-civil service ethics review prior to other studies being done across Government; it was also notable for the decisions that required such reviews.