

## 5B - DWP's UC release schedule

Asked by Parliament and others, the Department of Work and Pensions has said repeatedly that it “releases” changes to Universal Credit’s digital systems every fortnight,<sup>1</sup> using “agile” methodology,<sup>2</sup> as part of a “continual improvement” process.<sup>3</sup>

*“The Universal Credit Agile methodology means we continuously learn during rollout, listening to feedback from our staff, claimants and stakeholders, and building improvements into the system. We release **fortnightly updates** of the Universal Credit IT build...”* - Alok Sharma MP, then Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions; HC Deb, 7 February 2018, cW<sup>4</sup>

*“This is where I think the universal credit system is so brilliant, although we constantly seek to improve as we develop it. We inject **every two weeks, on average**, a new piece of software into that system to improve it, on the basis that everybody’s situation is different.”* - Baroness Buscombe, then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions; HL Deb, 5 March 2019, c550<sup>5</sup>

It appears DWP Digital defines its fortnightly ‘release’ as something that involves changes it has to tell its staff – likely frontline Job Centre Plus staff – about. This is entirely reasonable.

However, DWP Digital also makes numerous changes between those ‘release’ dates – as many times a week as needed – which, by definition, it does not tell even its own staff about.

At least one Freedom of Information Act response shows that DWP Digital considers such changes may include *and have included* changing the sign-up process for UC.<sup>6</sup>

Any change to the sign-up process is something that, by definition, will affect whether some of the most vulnerable people can make successful claims – not least because the videos and other materials DWP funds support services to make will no longer work. DWP makes changes that make the support provided by those services inaccurate; it makes those changes with zero notice, not even telling its own staff; and it does so in under a week,<sup>7</sup> at the whim of DWP’s digital team.<sup>8</sup>

For DWP to say that it only makes releases ‘once a fortnight’ is based on a misleading definition of “release” which DWP officials use to answer Parliamentary questions, rather than as a way to constrain its practice of far more frequently changing UC as it is experienced by DWP staff, by frontline support workers, and by MPs’ constituents – claimants themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/601989/response/1447720/attach/html/2/IR2019%2035392%20Reply.pdf.html>

<sup>2</sup> Fig 2, pp16 & 17: <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Rolling-out-Universal-Credit.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> e.g. <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2018-09-03/169858>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/wrans/?id=2018-01-31.125984.h>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/lords/?id=2019-03-05d.550.1>

<sup>6</sup> <https://medconfidential.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/5Q-AB-as-used.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Slide shown at time code 1:21:37 - <https://youtu.be/OLDfMXP4Te0?t=4897>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/708015/response/1695310/attach/3/FOI2020%2072835.pdf>