

Annex 7 – Baby then bureaucracy: the paperwork of new parenthood

Those who encounter the greatest burden in one place will face it in many.

This may be via the obscurities of systems like Risk-Based Verification (see Annex 2), or more explicitly – as for the parents of newborns who face paper form after arcane paper form, layered with idiosyncratic processes. Burden laid upon burden, strikingly notable for people with newborn children.

While similar happens to all who have to use public services, DWP goes out of its way to obscure the hoops many of the most burdened must jump through in UC. It is one thing to assume everyone applying is a crook, another to treat them as criminals to their face.

For this reason we focus on parents of newborns in this Annex, where things are more transparent and obvious – and where one would think the policy intent is closer to, “We’re keen to help, we just need to check a few things first”.

Question 1 when applying for a Maternity Grant

The Sure Start Maternity Grant is a payment of £500 for the firstborn child of a couple on UC.¹ The form² must be filled out on paper and posted to DWP within 6 months of your baby’s birth.³

This below is the very first question asked of those filling in the form, who by this point will have had to read two dense pages of eligibility text. So what is the first question to which DWP wants an answer?⁴

Part 1: About you and your partner

Please complete this form on line and sign with **BLACK INK** after printing.



Are you or your partner involved in a trade dispute?

We use trade dispute to mean a strike, a walkout, a lockout or another dispute at work.

You	Your partner
No <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Yes <input type="checkbox"/> How long have you or your partner not been working because of a trade dispute? If this is less than 6 weeks, we may not be able to make a payment.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> How long have you or your partner not been working because of a trade dispute? If this is less than 6 weeks, we may not be able to make a payment.
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Surname or family name including title	
<input type="text"/>	

The civil servants who created this form – and them alone – may have some logic by which this is the first question posed, but from the perspective of a new parent filling in the form it is just bizarre.

¹ A few other benefits are also covered.

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sure-start-maternity-grant-claim-form>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/sure-start-maternity-grant/how-to-claim>

⁴ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/840295/sure-start-maternity-grant-sf100.pdf

HMRC's CH2 form (see also [Annex 5E](#))

Child Benefit is not a low profile service,⁵ and parents of newborns are not a group who suffer from policy neglect⁶ – nor are they ‘time rich’. The form for claiming Child Benefit⁷ is the second most downloaded form⁸ on GOV.UK with 1.068 million “unique downloads”⁹ in 2020 despite only 640,000 children being born a year.¹⁰ HMRC collects no data on which versions of the form are submitted to HMRC,¹¹ although the excess is close to the 459,000 downloads of the “on screen” version.

In 2021, the web page¹² for claiming Child Benefit has one option for parents to “print then fill in” and post back, and a second option to “fill in on screen”. In the current digital world,¹³ when you click on the link to the “on screen” form, you are presented with a broken PDF which states:

Please wait...

If this message is not eventually replaced by the proper contents of the document, your PDF viewer may not be able to display this type of document.

You can upgrade to the latest version of Adobe Reader for Windows®, Mac, or Linux® by visiting http://www.adobe.com/go/reader_download.

For more assistance with Adobe Reader visit <http://www.adobe.com/go/acrreader>.

Government reliance on a ‘PDF-only’ approach appears to be an entrenched legacy of consultants,¹⁴ whether the System Integrators or Adobe sales teams, who cared more about their ongoing revenues than about “user needs*”.

The instructions further down the web page show HMRC knows the user experience is flawed:

“If you’re using an older browser, for example, Internet Explorer 8, you’ll need to update it or use a different browser. Find out more about browsers.

You’ll need to complete the form fully before you can print it. You cannot save a partly completed form so we suggest you gather all your information together before you begin to fill it in. The form includes help text to help filling it in.”

That “help text” tells you that even the “fill in on screen” form still requires the completed form to be printed. *So if parents of newborns don’t have a printer, how do they claim Child Benefit?*

⁵ Such as the NCC1 form: see below and [Annex 5L](#).

⁶ Nor are migrants, and yet policy delivery is persistently poor – as we covered in Annex 5D on a form used by the Home Office:

<https://medconfidential.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/5D-Digital-failure-HO.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/child-benefit-claim-form-ch2>

⁸ Consistently over time: https://whatdotheyknow.com/request/the_most_downloaded_pdfs_from_go

⁹ All usage figures are from GDS figures for GOV.UK only – there may be other copies of forms available from other places, or completed by accountants, etc.

¹⁰ Latest figures:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/bulletins/birthsummarytablesenglandandwales/2019>

¹¹ https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/cost_of_transactions_for_ch2_for

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/child-benefit-claim-form-ch2>

¹³ https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/platform_etc_figures_from_google#incoming-1778698

¹⁴ <https://twitter.com/smithsam/status/1373952229552615427>

NCC1 Form – Support for a child conceived without your consent¹⁵

Every government process usually has a form embedded in it in some way. Government has to receive information somehow, in order to process it.

NCC1 is the form created for survivors of rape who, as a consequence of that assault, have had a child so they can request an exemption to the two-child limit for benefit payments. In 2020¹⁶ the form was downloaded over 1,500 times from GOV.UK alone.

Should DWP ever attempt to claim the NCC1 form¹⁷ was created carefully, they've already said it wasn't.¹⁸

Workflow and form handling

A process that requires a woman to put something into an envelope to give to her JobCentrePlus contact, who then puts it into a special form to be sent to a special group by a special courier is an obvious anachronism that can only have been designed without regard to the 'customer'.

'Best' is an odd term in this context, so let us instead describe two 'less bad' workflows – one where the survivor of rape fills in the form first and gives a reference number to her supporting professional; the other where the professional fills in the form first and give a reference number to the applicant to fill in the second half.

Either of these approaches would be more dignity-preserving, and could even be a bit more empowering – in that they allow those women applying for support and the professionals already supporting them to choose the order in which things are done, for themselves.

User testing

If responsible Departments object to properly digitising this process, then user testing should be done on both the old and new workflows with the professionals who support survivors of rape, *observed by the responsible owner for the existing process.*¹⁹

Cruel by design

It would be wrong to highlight this issue without pointing out that it is the policy that created this form which is abhorrent, by design – any service design on top of it is merely polishing a cruel turd. A fact implicitly recognised by DWP when it put zero effort into service design for the current NCC1 form.

Sometimes it appears that to (new) mothers, the cruelty *is* the point.²⁰

¹⁵ See also Annex 5M: <https://medconfidential.org/2020/universal-credit/>

¹⁶ https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/govuk_google_analytics#incoming-1800781

¹⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/support-for-a-child-conceived-without-your-consent>

¹⁸ https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/creation_of_the_ncc1_form

¹⁹ GDS recognises the problem: <https://gds.blog.gov.uk/.../collecting-information-from-users/>

²⁰ <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/the-cruelty-is-the-point/572104/> & forthcoming book.