

## Annex 4J: COVID successes, and otherwise

We agree<sup>1</sup> with DWP's claim that the "automated" and "digital" nature of UC<sup>2</sup> made it easy for DWP to implement the £20 uplift in 2020. The "automated" and "digital" nature made it equally easy to take it away in 2021. It would also be equally easy to make the uplift permanent – or to set it to any other figure, whether £30, £10, or whatever, and to do so at any time.

**Digital allows the whims of politicians *and Treasury* to be met; that is not necessarily the same thing as being in claimants' best interests.**

The Department often refuses requests for information, citing 'fraud' risks – a catch-all, cover-all 'comfort blanket' that is warm and fuzzy.<sup>3</sup> And were you to ask DWP for details of its database schema, it would flat out refuse to tell you.<sup>4</sup> Though, should you happen to attend the tech conference where officials are bragging about their tech, those details are right there on screen, and in the video posted to the internet... (because apparently that's different...)

### COVID response

Digital services, broadly speaking, had a good pandemic; purely digital services scale easily and don't require much human interaction, which helps when an unknown pandemic hits.

That Universal Credit is "digital first" – arguably digital only – meant there were no photos of queues outside Job Centres when 1.5 million people signed up for UC in one evening (after the Job Centres would have closed for the day anyway).

Compared with other countries that have paper-only processes, DWP and its spin doctors can point to the absence of such photos as a success. But the success of a digital service is purely digital – those *without* digital access were left with neither the digital service, nor the job centre, library and other support services which had in the main closed abruptly.

Of course the digital service *looked* good – it didn't need human interaction.

Government has had a lot of experience of scaling services and, in the 2020s, purely digital services that are effectively just entering rows into a database should no longer fall over under load. No-one should expect them to, and it's not that noteworthy when they don't.

### One transparent queue, and a lot of opaque ones.

While the 'signup' process for UC is largely automated, there are some steps which require human review, which include the identity verification step. Having been developed in a culture of 'working in the open' (not by DWP) the queue for the identity verification service was deliberately transparent – which is why we know that while the queue of new claimants peaked at 100,000 people long, it was cleared the next morning (again, not by DWP) as more staff were brought in.

This was, however, the last element of transparency in the process, as DWP queues are opaque.

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<sup>1</sup> 5K: Changes to the Taper Rate <https://medconfidential.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/taper-rate.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Q78 <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/303/html/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://medconfidential.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Annex3-error-and-fraud-20200908.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/mongodb\\_schema](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/mongodb_schema)

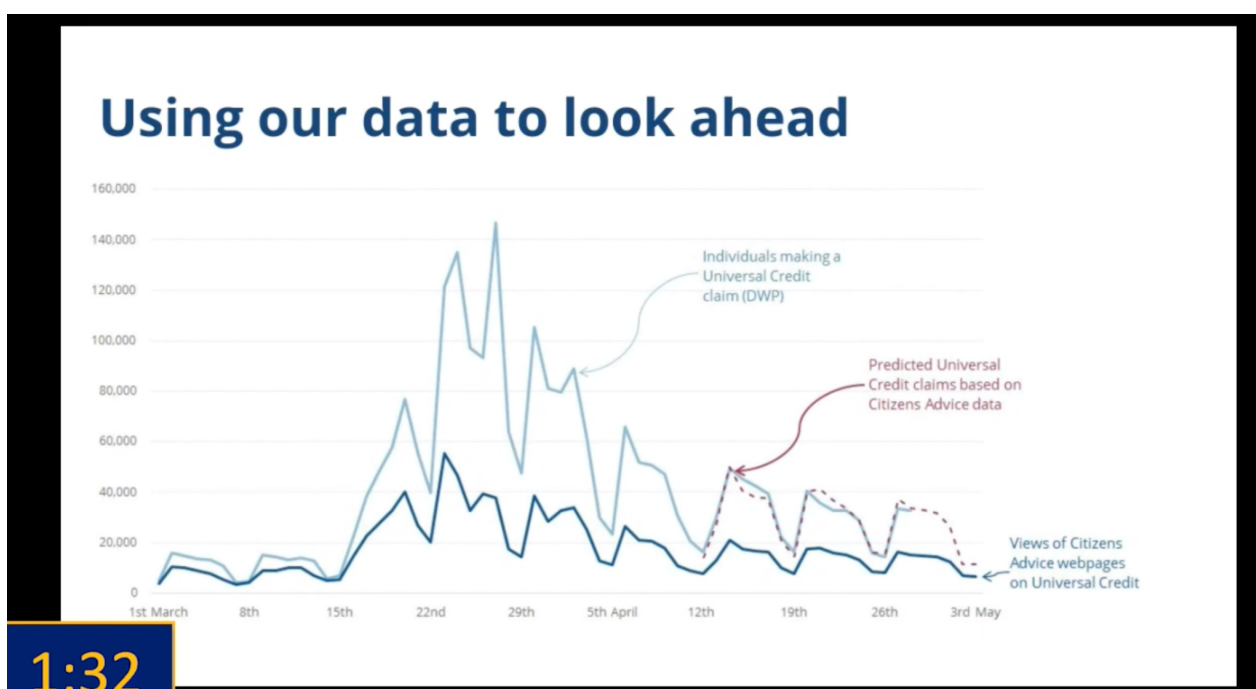
In the interest of making payments to claimants in the crisis, some of those queues were abandoned completely – i.e. parts of the process were ignored – but it is still deeply unclear what the ‘claimant flow’ through UC actually is, and where claimants become stuck or are checked repeatedly.<sup>5</sup>

DWP rarely misses an opportunity to knock others,<sup>6</sup> so it pointed at these identity verification figures. However, scrutiny prompted by the pandemic also uncovered that – because DWP is the largest user of the GOV.UK Verify service, Verify’s success rate had been kneecapped by DWP’s UC sign-up journey. DWP’s implementation choice resulted in most UC journeys – hence most Verify journeys – having a *maximum* possible success rate of 50%, because the UC sign-up process guided users to abandon their first journey, return to UC, and then make a second attempt...

## Traffic figures

DWP is normally deeply reticent to talk about the user journey through UC, and about what happens to claimants at each stage. But when officials believe it is in their interests, they will say more. And because DWP wanted to brag, the Department published some graphs of UC signups by hour – information it usually hides.

With the Department talking in more detail about signups, its new figures could be compared by Citizens Advice with the traffic they saw to their website:<sup>7</sup>



DWP counts only what it chooses to count,<sup>8</sup> and then brags about numbers it cherry-picked. Nowhere is this clearer than in fraud. The official figures on fraud may be largely fictional,<sup>9</sup> and

<sup>5</sup> <https://medconfidential.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Annex-2-RBV-20200908.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Especially when it is in DWP’s political interest to do so.

<sup>7</sup> <https://youtu.be/wRuv58OSVAs?t=920>

<sup>8</sup> cf. 5P <https://medconfidential.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/5P-AB-testing-practices.pdf> and 5Q <https://medconfidential.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/5Q-AB-as-used.pdf> of the ‘Burdens upon burdens’ Annex of our ‘Data flows of Universal Credit’ report.

<sup>9</sup> When DWP makes its next estimate of fraud, claiming it will recover some percentage of that, ask them how much fraud there will be after that recovery. Strangely, it never goes down.

some fraud will inevitably occur – but UC fraud, which is conflated with both claimant and official error, is still dwarfed by commercial fraud and corruption.<sup>10</sup>

## Ideological Decisions and Consequences across Whitehall

When schools closed, there was a critical need to feed kids who would otherwise have been fed by Free School Meals. Wales solved this issue quickly and easily by effectively giving the money to schools and letting them get it to parents; Scotland did something roughly similar.

England meanwhile implemented an expensive and error-prone voucher scheme through a commercial supplier, which required Marcus Rashford to step in to keep it going over the summer, and was later panned in an NAO inquiry<sup>11</sup>. (The food parcels that replaced vouchers in 2021 fared no better.<sup>12</sup>)

This was a utter fiasco by the Department for Education, and yet apparently no-one in Whitehall was able to help them out.

If DWP had the bank details of every claimant, it could have easily sent an additional payment *directly* to any UC recipient who met the criteria – since most recipients of Free School Meals are from households receiving UC. However, because UC only records the bank details of the ‘first applicant’, DWP could not bail DfE out of a very harmful and embarrassing policy hole.

The *true* test of a digital service, and a digital team, is not ‘did the computer work when lots of people tried to use it?’ but ‘did the system adapt to new and adjacent challenges that it could address, if needed?’.

UC fails that test.

All across Whitehall, Departments helped each other where they were stretched – BEIS on vaccines, MoD on logistics, others loaned staff to DHSC. Load sharing is what government is for, and it is not a bad thing.

The ideological choices of DWP, however, left it spinning its wheels in COVID. DWP itself coped, but it was too hamstrung by its own ideology to help others across Whitehall. So, as so often with this DWP, it did the bare minimum.

That DWP sees this as something to brag about is cause for future concern. The next crisis may not be so forgiving of DWP’s blind spots and digital indolence.

While it is fair to say DWP was busy with UC, it is unclear that it helped anyone *else* out with the claimants it serves. And compared to the rapid iteration and flexibility offered by GDS and NHS digital services, or the entirely new programmes spun up by HMRC and HM Treasury, it is notable that UC itself did not meaningfully change.

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<sup>10</sup> As Lord Agnew’s resignation speech makes clear: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kINbEMch70o>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/investigation-into-the-free-school-meals-voucher-scheme/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/health/2021/01/free-school-meal-scandal-why-government-failing-feed-people-during-pandemic>

What DWP says it *did* change – whether on the £20 uplift, or changing the repayment period for advances – has been shown to be tantamount to editing a constant in the system, i.e. something that should be trivial to change.

Across the rest of the UK's COVID response, the appearance of an explicit immediate threat of the highest priority required massive institutions to restructure. NHS London, to name just one, reconfigured itself in a single weekend. 'Digital' DWP could, technologically at least, introduce split payments in a month if it chose. It simply lacks the will to do so.

Problems in Universal Credit that were exposed by the pandemic are not so much with the digital as with the institution of DWP – and the choices offered by, and to, its leadership.