Annex 8B: How digital services and apps get built: task by task, ticket by ticket (aka The Queue, the Backlog, or Jira)

If recipients often feel frustrated when dealing with a service that shows no interest in their experience, the records of the process of how UC is built shows those working on UC have similar frustrations. Individual staff feel as powerless to help clients as Parliamentarians for constituents. We cover how all these frustrations can together be changed.

For example, all the parts of UC that are not automated (see Annexes 5 & 6) are done manually.[1] If your UC claim touches any of them, every month, your work coach has to remember to make a request to another team that they make that alteration. Every month they do, and then they mark that request as closed. Next month, another request. That is one queue in the UC system; relatively self-contained and simple. DWP knows there are many reasons the process fails citizens,[2] and all those reasons and queues are available under FOI (or Parliamentary Questions). If DWP does not choose to make it easy for Parliamentarians and claimants to suggest improvements, users and others can input into those processes via existing means.

Roadmaps can be published

NHS England regularly publishes their roadmap for the NHS app showing what is being worked on now, what's just been done, and what's next, so patients and others can understand how the App is likely to evolve in the short term. Behind the scenes, the GDS Service Standard describes some of the same tasks as "Managing your backlog", and which DWP calls it "The Queue".[3]

While a team may know what it is working on today, developers use tools to manage the list of what they may work on next, and what is waiting for after that (and after that, and…). Like any other document, electronic or paper, items in the queue can be requested under the Freedom of Information Act.

Somewhere in DWP there is a queue of tickets for the system which overpaid carers allowance, to use the data DWP has to only pay people if eligible, but that ticket was not acted upon and implemented; and DWP continued ruining lives instead.

Development of UC creates many documents

If a work coach has an idea for how UC could be improved, they talk to their local "Service Innovation Lead" who can consider the suggestion, then search through all the other suggestions made around the country, and either add their support to it (via a comment), or create a new suggestion if it's not been thought of before. Some of those suggestions get assessed, some of those get closed, some of them get done, some of them languish for years as something DWP knows could/should be better but simply won't allow. There is an item in the queue for implementing digital to phone, and it's been there for years. It's not active, because DWP has decided it should not be, even though the frustration of some staff is palpable; but the priorities are not chosen by those who feel the frustrations, or, as we cover later, are prosecuted as a result.

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[1] Most links and footnotes for this page are covered in the following sections.
[2] If your work coach doesn't make the request, or there's another systemic problem DWP continues regardless but the claimant suffers unresolvable underpayment, or clawbacks from past overpayment. The official answer is your work coach should set an outlook reminder (and not be off work that week).
[3] There isn't just one queue.

As one piece of development work completes, development teams move on to the next one. They (hopefully) receive a clear set of requirements from policy, and break them down into a series of implementation "sprints", each of which is a series of steps. Those tasks are then broken down at different layers until a designer is given a form to design, and a programmer handles the outputs and integrations. Step by step, tasks get marked as done, sometimes new tasks are created. In implementing services, often you only really understand how long it will take after you have trained all your staff on what to do in every case (otherwise you are saying you learnt nothing in the process, which is even worse and epitomises the most ideological decisions in UC[4]).

To pick what's now and next, the various queues of tasks get considered[5] – security bugs have the absolute highest priority, sometimes there are technical reasons something must happen by a hard deadline (the building is going to be demolished so we *really* have to move the servers), work partly finished may need to continue, Ministers may have new priorities or short timescales, the Budget announces changes for financial years, political winds shift, and maybe, if there's any time left at all, the list of suggestions from staff gets looked at.

The entirety of developing and running digital systems is adding things to task lists, and either doing them or not. What gets done is a reflection of DWP's choices of their own priorities, and those imposed from outside. Lord Freud's book covers his experience of this process. When it goes well, you get the flexibility exemplified by UC in the pandemic; when it goes wrong, what you get is Horizon at the Post Office or carers allowance, or…

In the context of a Spending Review, changes that can make staff more efficient or reduce the DWP error rate can be significant looking forward over the spending review period.

Incomplete ToDo items show options, *done* todo items show actual priorities

The prioritisation clarity imposed by the pandemic is scarce – you could ask any child why they weren't at school, or ask any teenager why they weren't going to parties, and get a set of coherent answers. They may not have understood the epidemiology of an outbreak, but they understood enough to do their part and why. Indeed, even if the vast majority of those involved understand the direction and goals, there's always someone (in no10) who doesn't get the memo and does their own thing.

One of the anecdotes about the US initial failure of the healthcare.gov site was different contractors were operating off different queues of tasks which didn't talk to each other, and the teams didn't know that they didn't talk to each other. Competent leadership matters.

No matter the size of the system or team, there are projects to manage, there are tasks to do to improve or maintain it, and a growing list of things that will not be done. They all go in a queue

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[4] E.g. UC is supposed to "mirror the world of work", but when someone's partner joins their claim they are not asked to provide any bank details. In DWP's evidence base on "the world of work", where a partner joins the same payroll as their other half, can DWP cite *any* cases where the second partner would *not be asked where their salary should be paid*? UC alone pays all money to the primary partner. (see Annex 6)
[5] As with the development process for apps, which we cover in Annex 8.

somewhere,[6] usually one of several queues, given tags and priorities, until one day, they're done, or closed as undone. Much of that happens behind the scenes.

We know there is no plan for a "change a digital claim to a phone claim" ticket, because another ticket says so, and the comments from the submitter express frustration at how many times they've submitted a ticket that keeps getting closed as a duplicate of the long paused plan:

> "I have also included these other 4 clts ID's that I have set up for the same issue. That's 5 for me alone- Multiplied across the DWP- its a lot."

There'll also be an open todo item somewhere in DWP with some steps to reduce the 5 week wait. It will have been there for a long time, as a placeholder which can subordinate all suggestions on the topic. The (Conservative until 2024 election) government simply would not let them go forwards. A new Government may change the choices, but choices will still be made.

Details of change requests are available via FOI

One topic which civil society has repeatedly raised with DWP is the fact that you can't easily go from a digital claim to a phone claim. The staff in a JobCentre can't do it because the functionality hasn't been built. Every time someone needs to be moved to a phone claim, a ticket has to be opened for technical staff to do that change.

Of course, UC has an improvement process, and a "Service Innovation Lead" exists in each Job Centre to suggest improvements. And they do this by searching Jira and seeing if it has already been suggested, adding a supportive comment if it has, or then submitting a new ticket if not. These tickets show the same frustrations inside as felt outside.

You can get a list of items that are open, and any particular item from the list (see the context of that request). Some particular examples of what you can get:

> **User facing**
> - The questions users are asked even in "interactive and dynamic" systems
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> **Training materials**
> - All bureaucracies will have new staff join over time, new staff will be trained through courses they pick from a list.
> - When a new feature is rolled out, training materials are created for all staff, about what is known and not known/considered about that feature.
> - The training materials provided for any feature / process of any system (others), including processes in the most complex scenarios.
> - All the processes available to staff have to be documented
>
> **Development**
> - When a service is being developed, it goes through multiple stages of review , and the reports at the end of each stage can be read. What was prioritised? What wasn't mentioned?
> - When suggestions for improvements are recorded, you can ask for lists of the suggestions or any specific suggestions by topic, and also see how many there are,

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[6] "JIRA is the project management software used by governments and organisations in the UK and around the world to help them organise their workloads in order of priority so that tasks can be completed efficiently, effectively and on time. It helps teams manage projects from start-to-finish while keeping track of progress along the way." Jira is used by DWP, HMCTS, and HMRC; other tools are available (GDS use Trello).

- [The list of all open change suggestions, including their title, tags, and categories](#)
- [All new features are tested, and those tests have outcomes](#).
- Where there are high profile or known bugs, you can ask [what training is provided on known bugs](#), and compare what staff are told with other public statements.

Change processes can be influenced

If it's not in the *right* queue, it's not being planned by the implementation teams. And since the queues can be made legible, pressure can be applied by asking specific questions.

Those on Universal Credit can ask their job coach to ask their local Service Innovation Lead to suggest an improvement to UC which would improve the system. DWP does not seem to have a mechanism for engaging with Parliamentarians and the public. It is perverse that the most input a backbencher or WP Select Committee member could have is to write to the Service Innovation Lead at their local job centre to ask them to open an [improvement ticket](#) with particular reasoning and descriptions and to reply with the reference code. The contents of such tickets and the responses to them can be cited in later Parliamentary Questions, assuming DWP doesn't change.

Tickets can have labels and tags, they can be instructive in understanding how the development is *managed* and prioritised. Those decisions are made by public bodies responding to their incentives on how they [schedule things](#).

Of course, even if there are calls for improvements, DWP will simply ignore things it doesn't want to do. DWP has been supposedly "working on" [split payments](#) for years, but has not delivered anything meaningful because the ideology of DWP doesn't allow it. All the details will be in the change management systems and the user research reports. Government is very skilled in getting the answers from user research that satisfy government policy, even when it is obviously not in the interests of user needs*. The Department of Health in England believes that they can do whatever they wish with data in their Palantir platform, but implementation creates paper trails that will be open to question as we have covered for UC.

There are consequences of secrecy, and they rarely fall first on the Department, even if they may do eventually as the Post Office is discovering.

MoJ had a subtle user interface flaw that resulted in the [wrong couple getting divorced](#), hidden because they only make some screens available to trusted contacts (or those willing to commit perjury[7]). There'll have been steps taken to fix it now, which will have gone through the process. Priorities can be changed[8].

It would be an exercise for the new Work and Pensions Select Committee[9] to ask DWP for copies of any tickets in the UC Jira that reference recommendations from WP select committee reports, and to ask for updates on implementation ahead of hearings. In his book, Lord Freud discloses that there was a mechanism for him to participate in those discussion without the input being a Ministerial Decision; that same mechanism should be applied more widely.

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[7] [15:20 onwards](#) in Joshua Rozenberg's Gresham College lecture.
[8] A decree absolute can not.
[9] Or anyone else really.