

Rt Hon Amber Rudd MP - Secretary of State for
Work and Pensions
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

My Ref.

LCS-DLDS-DS-S-003

Date:

13 February 2019

Dear Secretary of State for Work and Pensions

I am writing, on behalf of Gateshead Health and Wellbeing Board, to let you know about research on the impact of the roll out of Universal Credit in North East England, which has been recently published by Gateshead Council <https://www.gateshead.gov.uk/article/10089/People-moved-onto-Universal-Credit-are-fighting-to-survive->.

The qualitative research was undertaken by researchers from Teesside University and Newcastle University. It involved interviews with 33 Universal Credit claimants, many of whom have health conditions and disabilities, and 37 staff supporting them from community and voluntary organisations, housing organisations and the local authority.

The report makes for deeply distressing reading and we would like to highlight the findings for the Department for Work and Pensions to consider.

UC is having a profoundly negative impact on the mental and physical health, social and financial resilience and employment prospects of vulnerable claimants, resulting from the claims process itself, and the consequences of life on UC.

Claiming UC was experienced as complicated, difficult and demeaning for UC claimants in this study. Participants described a labyrinthine, dysfunctional UC system prone to administrative errors, experienced as impersonal, hostile, degrading and difficult to navigate.

The requirement to initiate and manage a UC claim online was problematic for many participants. Digital literacy, verifying identification online, lack of computer access/bank account and /or email address added to the difficulties of application.

The consequences of waiting for payment of between 5-12 weeks (on average 7.5 weeks) pushed many people into debt, rent arrears and serious hardship, which included going without food and utilities. Few people said they knew about, or were offered, alternative payment arrangements (APAs).

The impact of claiming and managing on UC was profound; increased conditionality, harsh deductions, threat of sanctions, and risk of eviction and homelessness, food and fuel insecurity, further exacerbated health conditions. UC impacted so negatively on claimant's mental health that some had considered suicide.

Staff supporting UC claimants described confusing, inconsistent and inaccurate advice from UC helpline staff, and delays in correcting mistakes. The arbitrary nature of UC decision-making lead

to frustration and concern for claimants ahead of managed migration. Fears were expressed about the anticipated effects of the 'two-child limit' on larger families. Significant workload pressures and additional costs were described for voluntary and community sector organisations, local government, and the wider health and social care system, including primary health care, as a result of UC.

The researchers conclude that UC is not working for vulnerable claimants and does not achieve its aims of simplifying the benefit system and improve work incentives. UC adversely affected vulnerable claimant's rights to health, social security and an adequate standard of living, increased poverty, insecurity and social isolation among people with disabilities and health issues.

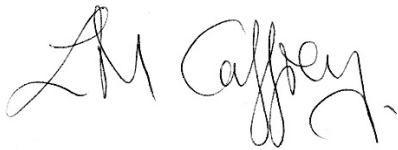
Members of the Health and Wellbeing Board would be interested in working with DWP staff to explore ways in which we can collectively manage the impact of UC on vulnerable claimants, improve the support available to people going through the UC claims process and pilot innovative ways to overcome the issues raised in the report, in partnership with people with disabilities and health conditions locally.

We recognise that opportunities exist to replicate this research in other areas of the UK so that lessons can be learned before the Government proceeds with the roll out of UC. Members of the research team would be willing to work with DWP researchers or other academic teams to plan this.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you would like to discuss this further. If you have any queries about the research, I will gladly put you in touch with the researchers.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lynne Caffrey', with a stylized, cursive script.

Cllr Lynne Caffrey (Chair of Health and Wellbeing Board) on behalf of Gateshead Health and Wellbeing Board Members

Encl.
cc Shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions.

Gateshead Health & Wellbeing Board Membership:

- Chair – Councillor Lynne Caffrey, Gateshead Council
- Vice Chair – Councillor Paul Foy, Gateshead Council
- Councillor Gary Haley - Cabinet Member for Children and Young People
- Councillor Malcolm Graham, Gateshead Council
- Councillor Martin Gannon – Leader, Gateshead Council
- Councillor Mary Foy - Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing
- Councillor Michael McNestry – Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care
- Councillor Ron Beadle, Gateshead Council
- Alice Wiseman - Director of Public Health, Gateshead Council
- Caroline O'Neill - Strategic Director, Care Wellbeing and Learning
- Dr Bill Westwood – Gateshead Federation of GP Practices
- Dr Mark Dornan - NHS Newcastle Gateshead Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG)
- James Duncan - Northumberland Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust
- Susan Watson – Gateshead Health NHS Foundation Trust
- Steph Edusei, HealthWatch Gateshead
- John Pratt - Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service
- Mark Adams - NHS Newcastle Gateshead Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG)
- Sally Young – Community and Voluntary Sector Representative
- Representative of South Tyneside Foundation Trust
- Representative of NHS England

Associate Member:

- Sir Paul Ennals - Local Safeguarding Children's Board