



'NON-DIGITAL' UC AND THE PEOPLE WHO NEED IT

A BRIEFING FROM CPAG'S EARLY WARNING SYSTEM

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The rules

People are encouraged to apply for universal credit (UC) over the internet but are not *required* to. If you'd struggle to manage an online UC account, [you can claim by phone instead](#). The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) acknowledges [in guidance](#) that '*not everyone will be able to make and maintain their claim online for a variety of good reasons.*' Those reasons might include a mental health condition or poor internet access.

If you claim UC by phone, you'll receive updates about your claim by phone and by post, instead of through an online portal. This non-digital option makes UC more accessible for many of the people who need it.¹ Unfortunately, this option is not well-publicised and is poorly understood by DWP staff.

The problem

[The Gov.uk website](#) now acknowledges that '*if you cannot claim online, you can claim by phone through the universal credit helpline*'.

But the UC helpline's list of recorded options does not include the option to make a telephone claim. A caller can only get through to an agent if they choose another option. And we have come across multiple cases where telephony agents miscommunicate the rules about making a telephone claim.

A 19-year-old with a learning disability, living in a residential care home, needed help from her support workers to try to claim UC by phone. They called the helpline on four separate occasions. Each time the call handler told them that a telephone claim was impossible. The support workers have struggled to help her call again, because the UC helpline waiting times mean the support session ends before the phone is answered. She has no income.

¹ Switching to paper- and telephone-based communications for UC, to accommodate a health issue or disability, is an example of a [reasonable adjustment](#).

The good news for somebody struggling with an online account is that they can ask the DWP to switch them to a 'non-digital' account. Their online account still exists, but the DWP no longer uses it to contact them. This option is confirmed in [DWP guidance](#) but that guidance could be much clearer – and that might explain why the Early Warning System sees cases where a DWP agent has refused a switch.

A couple with mild learning disabilities were told by DWP staff members that they must make a digital claim for UC but were then unable to manage their online account and could not access important information on their online journal. Their advice worker was told incorrectly that there was no process to switch to a non-digital account.

A single person who cannot read or write applied for UC online with help from a friend. After a while it became untenable for his friend to help him manage the online account, so he asked to be switched to a non-digital account. However, the call handler he spoke to on the UC helpline told him that this was not possible.

A 20-year-old care leaver with mental health problems, living alone, had a poor internet connection at home. She called the UC helpline several times to tell them that she was struggling to access her online journal and asked to be contacted by phone call or text about appointments with her work coach. This did not happen, and she missed a job centre appointment and was sanctioned as a result.

A single mother-of-one with anxiety disorder and no computer or smartphone was unable to manage her UC claim online after she stopped receiving help from her tenancy support worker. She was not able to access and respond to messages in her online UC journal and, as a result, was sanctioned for ten months, reducing her UC by £335 a month. At times she was unable to pay for food or electricity. When her case was eventually referred to an Advanced Customer Support Senior Leader (ACSSL), she was still not switched to 'non-digital' claim. DWP staff told her that it was not possible to contact her by phone and letter.

Recommendations

It is vital that these issues are improved urgently as the DWP rolls out managed migration and 2.6 million people move from legacy benefits to UC's primarily digital claim system. The managed migration notices that have been posted to claimants to date only refer to online claims. This will lead people to make a claim online, believing this is their only option, when they are not realistically able to manage.

To ensure that UC is accessible to *all* claimants who qualify the DWP should:

- Better publicise to claimants the option of applying for UC by phone, including
 - in managed migration notices and
 - as one of the recorded options on the UC helpline.
- Improve guidance and training for UC work coaches and sub-contracted telephony agents, both about the fact that UC can be claimed by phone, and about the fact that an existing digital claimant can switch to a non-digital account.
- Introduce a more effective 'switching' process for DWP agents. At present, a digital account can only be made into a non-digital one clerically, using notes and reminders.
- Invest in the UC helpline. This should begin with actions to reduce waiting times and ensure that call handlers have adequate training and the option to escalate calls to more specialist colleagues. This would improve the non-digital claims process for claimants and for the DWP.

About CPAG

Child Poverty Action Group works on behalf of the more than one in four children in the UK growing up in poverty. It doesn't have to be like this. We use our understanding of what causes poverty and the impact it has on children's lives to campaign for policies that will prevent and solve poverty – for good. We provide training, advice and information to make sure hard-up families get the financial support they need. We also carry out high profile legal work to establish and protect families' rights.

About the Early Warning System

Our Early Warning System helps us get a better understanding of how changes to the social security system are affecting the lives of children and families. The information we gather from frontline advisers informs much of our policy, research and campaigning work, and also feeds into our advice services.

Thank you to everyone who has contributed to our Early Warning System – to every adviser who has submitted a case and to rightsnet which hosts invaluable benefit forums for advisers.