

- A partnership of public health researchers across the five universities in North East England
- Working with policy makers and practice partners to improve health and wellbeing and tackle inequalities
- A founding member of the NIHR School for Public Health Research (SPHR)

What is the impact of Universal Credit on health and wellbeing?

Universal Credit radically changes the system of welfare benefits and tax credits for people of working age. It aims to simplify the benefits system, 'make work pay' and reduce system fraud and error (Department for Work & Pensions 2018), but has been plagued by delays and implementation problems (National Audit Office, House of Commons 2018).

The full service roll out of Universal Credit (UC) started in Gateshead in October 2017. Qualitative research to understand its impact was commissioned by Gateshead Council Public Health Team and undertaken by a team of Fuse researchers from Teesside University and Newcastle University in 2018 focusing on vulnerable groups.

Interviews were carried out with 33 claimants, including people with long-term health conditions, disability and complex lives; and 37 staff providing support and advice to claimants in Gateshead and Newcastle between April and October 2018.

Universal Credit claimants were recruited with the support of staff from Gateshead Council, Gateshead Housing Company, and eight voluntary and community sector organisations in Gateshead and Newcastle providing welfare rights advice and support. Staff from these organisations were also interviewed about their experiences of supporting claimants. Department for Work and Pensions staff were invited and declined to take part in the study.

Claimants said their experience of claiming Universal Credit was complicated, difficult and demeaning. Participants described a labyrinthine, dysfunctional UC system prone to administrative errors, experienced as impersonal, hostile, degrading and difficult to navigate.

The requirement to start and manage a Universal Credit claim online was problematic for many participants. Digital literacy, verifying identification online, lack of computer access, a bank account or email address added to the difficulties of applying.

Waiting for payment between 5-12 weeks (on average 7.5)

pushed many into debt, rent arrears and serious hardship, which included going without food and utilities. Few were offered alternative arrangements, such as fortnightly payments or payments direct to landlords.

Staff supporting Universal Credit claimants described confusing, inconsistent and inaccurate advice from UC helpline staff, and delays in correcting mistakes. The arbitrary nature of Universal Credit decision-making led to frustration and concern for claimants ahead of the 'managed migration' process. Fears were expressed by staff about the anticipated effects of UC on children living in poverty.

Some good practice was observed among staff: co-location, collaboration and partnership with Department for Work and Pensions staff at a local level worked well to build relationships, help navigate the UC system and support claimants who needed additional support.

Key findings

- The impact of claiming and managing Universal Credit was profound on vulnerable claimants; increased conditionality (more requirements being put on UC claimants), harsh deductions, threat of sanctions, and risk of eviction and homelessness, food and fuel insecurity, further exacerbated health conditions. Universal Credit impacted so negatively on claimants' mental health that some had considered suicide.
- Universal Credit is not working for vulnerable claimants and does not appear to be achieving its aims of simplifying the benefit system and improving work incentives.
- Universal Credit adversely affected vulnerable claimants' rights to health, social security and an adequate standard of living, increased poverty, insecurity and social isolation among people with disabilities and health issues.
- Significant workload pressures and additional costs were described for voluntary and community sector organisations, local government, the NHS and wider health and social care system as a result of UC.

Policy relevance and implications

- This research amplifies calls for a halt and radical overhaul of Universal Credit policy and practice by the UK government, alongside a comprehensive review of its impact on vulnerable groups.
- Universal Credit should be appropriately resourced before managed migration begins.
- The five-week delay in payment needs to be removed as a matter of priority.
- An updated Equality Impact Assessment for Universal Credit is urgently needed.
- A full, independent cost benefit analysis of the impact of Universal Credit should be undertaken.
- Long-term research is needed to examine the effects of Universal Credit on health inequalities, the effectiveness of sanctions, and to understand the wider impact of UC on public sector spending.
- Research on the impact of Universal Credit on workload for general practice needs to be undertaken.

“Actually it cuts the feet from under you at a time when you need it most. Rather than encourage you into work, it makes it harder for you to get work” (Claimant 16)

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

Research to understand the impact of Universal Credit was commissioned by Gateshead Council and undertaken by researchers from Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health, based at Teesside University and Newcastle University in 2018 focusing on vulnerable groups.

A copy of the full research report is available here: www.gateshead.gov.uk/article/10089/People-moved-onto-Universal-Credit-are-fighting-to-survive

The study was referenced by Professor Philip Alston, the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights in the statement made following his visit to the UK.

The research has attracted national media interest.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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