Work and Pensions Committee

The Work and Pensions Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Department for Work and Pensions and its associated public bodies.

Current membership

Frank Field MP (Labour, Birkenhead) (Chair)
Heidi Allen MP (Conservative, South Cambridgeshire)
Jack Brereton MP (Conservative, Stoke-on-Trent South)
Alex Burghart MP (Conservative, Brentwood and Ongar)
Rosie Duffield MP (Labour, Canterbury)
Ruth George MP (Labour, High Peak)
Steve McCabe MP (Labour, Birmingham, Selly Oak)
Nigel Mills MP (Conservative, Amber Valley)
Chris Stephens MP (Scottish National Party, Glasgow South West)
Justin Tomlinson MP (Conservative, North Swindon)

Powers

The Committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 152. These are available on the internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publication

Committee reports are published on the publications page of the Committee’s website and in print by Order of the House.

Evidence relating to this report is published on the inquiry page of the Committee’s website.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Anne-Marie Griffiths (Clerk), Katy Stout (Second Clerk), Libby McEnhill (Senior Committee Specialist), Kemi Duroshola (Committee Specialist), George Steer (Assistant Policy Analyst), Jessica Bridges-Palmer (Senior Media and Policy Officer), Esther Goosey (Senior Committee Assistant), Michelle Garratty (Committee Assistant).

Contacts

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Sixteenth Special Report

The Work and Pensions Committee published its Seventeenth Report of Session 2017–19, Universal Credit and domestic abuse (HC 1166) on 1 August 2018. The Government response was received on 28 September 2018 and is appended to this report.

Appendix 1: Government Response

1. The Government welcomes the Seventeenth Report of Session 2017-19, following the Committee’s inquiry into Universal Credit (UC) and domestic abuse. In that report the Committee noted that:

   “Since 2010, the Government has begun to make great strides in tackling domestic abuse. This includes welcome recognition of the damage wrought by perpetrators of coercive and control, including financial abuse where a survivor is deprived of their financial independence.”

2. Other points in the Committee’s report summary page, which the Government supports, include:

   - “The Government aspires, through Universal Credit, to create a new, modern welfare system.”
   - “It has also demonstrated a clear commitment to being more supportive of survivors of domestic abuse.”
   - “The Department must prioritise gathering and publishing data on disclosures of abuse and split payment requests - including the number of requests, reasons for request and the number of split payments being made.”
   - “DWP should view the introduction of split payments in Scotland as an opportunity to learn about the part that splitting payments more routinely could play in supporting survivors of abuse.”

3. The Committee published its report on 1 August 2018, which included eight recommendations for the Government to consider. The Government’s response to these recommendations is set out below.

Committee Recommendations

Recommendation 1

We recommend the Government set out in response to this report its timescales for producing the draft Domestic Abuse Bill and connected legislation. (Paragraph 11)

4. The Home Office and the Ministry of Justice led on the recent domestic abuse consultation and draft Domestic Abuse Bill. They will publish their response later this session.
Recommendation 2

We recommend DWP – in collaboration with specialist domestic abuse organisations like Women’s Aid – design a specific training module for Work Coaches. This should equip them to:

- Identify the warning signs of all forms of abuse
- Support claimants to disclose safely
- Work effectively with claimants’ representatives and companions
- Know what support they can offer claimants
- Signpost specialist support

We recommend the Department set out its implementation plans for this training in response to this report. (Paragraph 20)

5. The Department agrees with the Committee, that in order for Work Coaches to help claimants who are victims of domestic violence effectively, they require specific training to provide them with additional skills.

6. The Department also recognises the value that expert organisations provide when developing our training products. Over the past months, we have worked with relevant stakeholders to develop products that raise awareness of domestic abuse for Work Coaches and improve our learning and development products.

7. All UC Full Service Work Coaches and Case Managers are required to complete mandatory training on complex needs as part of their learning route into UC Full Service. This is a stand-alone module that includes a classroom discussion around a (fictional) claimant who is a victim of domestic abuse and the conversation is steered to focus on the support available, easements and disclosure.

8. We have also produced a multimedia product using material and advice from Women’s Aid and Mankind, designed to raise awareness for Work Coaches and case managers. The product launched in April 2018 covers types of abuse, signs of abuse, impacts and support. It also refers to wider organisations to signpost for specialist support. This product has been shared with the Committee already.

9. All UC Full Service sites have a Complex Needs Toolkit in place to enable colleagues to signpost claimants with complex needs to guidance, local provision/support and named advocates for specific complex needs groups. The toolkit enhances effective partnership working at a local level.

Recommendation 3

We recommend every Jobcentre Plus be required to appoint a domestic abuse specialist, building on and enhancing the existing disability and self-employment specialist model. The domestic abuse specialist would serve both as a direct point of contact for local domestic abuse services and as a specialist source of advice and support for Work Coaches on handling possible and confirmed domestic abuse cases. They should work behind the
frontline, and have in-depth specialised training on all forms of domestic abuse and coercion, especially financial abuse, and comprehensive understanding of DWP policy for survivors claiming Universal Credit. The department should also consider where possible, co-location between JCP and domestic abuse services to enhance these links. (Paragraph 27)

10. Our Work Coaches are passionate about providing the right support to all vulnerable claimant groups, including survivors of domestic abuse. To support them to do this, the Department ensures that they are equipped to do their role by providing them with the expertise and training to undertake this role effectively.

11. As mentioned above, all Jobcentre sites have access to and make regular use of a complex needs toolkit available at a local level. This toolkit includes information on both local and national supporting agencies. The toolkit also links to the wider District Provision Tools, which have further comprehensive and detailed information on support for a wide variety of complex needs, including domestic abuse.

12. We accept the Committee’s recommendation to have Work Coaches in each Jobcentre trained to deal with claimants who are victims of domestic abuse. We already have Work Coaches in some Jobcentres equipped to do this, and are working towards all Work Coaches having the knowledge and skills to support claimants with complex needs in all Jobcentres. We will also continue to maintain links with local refuges and other specialist organisations, for example local shelters.

13. On the issue of co-location, at a local level, Jobcentres will have links and local agreements with their network of charities and other organisations; and will work in partnership to provide support for domestic abuse victims. Supporting agencies are often invited on site by those Jobcentres to provide learning sessions for Work Coaches, as well as one-to-one support for claimants. For example, DWP have partnered with Women’s Aid and South East Wales to deliver domestic abuse workshops, which involved raising awareness and up skilling front line staff.

14. In relation to the recommendation of in-depth specialised training, the Department is working in collaboration with domestic abuse charities to further develop and enhance our training programme for all operational staff.

15. To further strengthen this working relationship, the Minister for Family Support, Housing and Child Maintenance will be meeting with both Women’s Aid and Mankind to discuss issues relating to domestic abuse.

16. This will ensure the training provided remains up to date and relevant. We recognise the expertise these charities can offer us, so we can learn from them and take into account issues they raise for our training programme.

**Recommendation 4**

*We recommend the Department provide a private room in every Jobcentre without delay. The online journal for couple claims should be redesigned to ensure each partner has access to their own, private communication log with their work coach, not accessible by the other partner. (Paragraph 33).*
17. We always endeavour to deal with vulnerable claimants sensitively, taking into account the particular circumstances and individual needs of the claimant.

18. The vast majority of Jobcentres delivering UC Full Service have private interview facilities as standard, and we understand the benefits of having private facilities for claimants to discuss sensitive matters.

19. In the small number of offices where a separate room is not available, we are able to make alternative arrangements for customers, such as at nearby offices, which do have rooms, or arranging a home visit, where it is appropriate to do so.

20. Additionally, our work coaches can, and do, utilise their discretion to conduct certain appointments by phone.

21. The model of a separate journal for each member of a couple in a UC claim presents issues which may prove detrimental to victims of domestic abuse. In some households, couples within a joint UC claim may already know the login details to each other’s accounts, including in a domestic abuse context. In these situations, the victim of domestic abuse may request a split payment and the perpetrator could potentially see that the payments are separated in the account, which could create risk of further domestic abuse instances occurring.

The Department is keen to ensure every individual has every opportunity to have private communications with their Work Coaches, therefore the claimant can phone, email or have face to face discussions in the Jobcentre. We are therefore not considering implementing separate journals for each member of a couple.

22. It is the Department’s duty of care that claimants are protected at all times and ensure the use of sensitive information is applied correctly. Any sensitive or private information provided by the claimant will be recorded on other areas of our IT system so other staff members can access this. Therefore, in the event that the claimant’s dedicated Work Coach is not available, another member of staff can continue to pick up these sensitive conversations with the claimant.

**Recommendation 5**

We recommend the Department publish all existing data on split payment requests. It should then work to fill in the remaining evidence gap by monitoring the disclosure of abuse and collating quantitative and qualitative data on the number of split payment requests, reasons for the request, and the number of split payment being made. It should publish its findings in a regular statistical bulletin. (Paragraph 40)

23. We agree on the importance of data and evaluation in order to monitor the use of split payments.

24. On 11th September, the Department published figures on the number of split payments as part of the Universal Credit Official Statistics series. The data shows us that in June 18, there were 20 households with split payments.

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1 https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/universal-credit-statistics#contents
25. There are a number of reasons why the number of split payments may be low, such as the number of ‘couples households’ making up just 12% of all households in payment at present on UC – the majority of claims still being from single claimants. Additionally, some claimants may not see split payments as the solution, and domestic abuse victims may choose not to return to the household and will therefore make a claim in their own right.

26. The data published on the 11th September does not, however, provide information on the reasons split payments were requested.

27. Providing data on the reasons for split payments is not something the Department is currently considering as we need to consider sensitivities and protecting our claimants as a priority.

28. We will continue to commit to publish split payment statistics as part of the Universal Credit official statistical release. This will provide information on the number of split payments made in a given month. The next release is due on the 13th November and will subsequently be updated each quarter.

**Recommendation 6**

*We recommend the Department commit in response to our report to providing the regular updates on its progress negotiating automation of split payments with the Scottish Government. This will provide a clearer understanding of the challenges, costs and feasibility of splitting payments by default. (Paragraph 66), and;*

**Recommendation 7**

*We recommend the Department support the Scottish Government to scope out and, if appropriate, support them to pilot different approaches to split payments in Scotland as soon as possible. This might include proportional and entitlement-based models. To ensure lessons are learned from the Scottish experience the two Governments should agree to co-commission and publish a full, independent evaluation of the pilots. In response to this report, the Department should tell us when this work will begin, and set out a clear timetable. It should also provide quarterly updates to Parliament on the progress of these pilots. When the final evaluation report is published, the Department should give careful consideration to whether, on the basis of the evidence, there is a case for splitting payments by default in the rest of the UK. (Paragraph 75)*

29. The Government notes the Committee’s recommendations. The Department agrees that observing the implementation of split payments in Scotland will provide the Government an opportunity to further understand the impacts of such policy.

30. Policy and design teams in the Department and Scottish Government are working collectively to establish the practicalities of delivering split payments in Scotland. We continue to explore and follow closely the outcome of Scottish Government approach to split payments.
31. The Government’s view is that a pilot considering different methods for how payments are split is not the best approach. The volume of work involved in delivering multiple solutions would markedly increase the scale of the challenge so further pre-pilot research would need to be carried out to decide on the best course of action.

32. The policy will be applied to a sufficiently large area for us to obtain strong data, allowing us to explore both the potential advantages of such a policy, as well as any previously unidentified challenges which may appear.

33. We will continue to work closely with Scottish Government officials as they design the split payment policy, as we have done previously with the design of the first Scottish flexibilities in Universal Credit known as Scottish Choices. Once agreed, we will implement the policy on their behalf when it is feasible to do so.

34. Our previous collaborative work with the Scottish Government involved joint user research labs, joint testing in Scottish job centres and co-hosted design work shops in London and Edinburgh.

35. This joint effort has built trust between the Universal Credit programme and the Social Security design teams in Scotland. We have also delivered Fair Start Scotland and the Scottish Carer’s Allowance.

36. It is important to consider that, as a result of Scotland’s devolution powers, the method by which the Scottish Government introduce their policy is a decision for the Scottish Government to make. The Government is certain, however, that the Scottish Government will have read the Committee’s report and recommendations.

37. We will continue to observe the progress of the Scottish Government in implementing their split payment policy, but it would be inappropriate for the Government to comment or report on a devolved matter.

**Recommendation 8**

*We recommend that where claimants have dependent children, the entire UC payment should be made to the main carer by default. Where alternative split payments requests are permitted, the higher proportion of the split payment should remain with the main carer other than in exceptional circumstances. (Paragraph 76)*

38. Universal Credit is paid to a nominated individual in the household, with the option for claimants to request split payments. This is the same position as for many legacy benefits. This money is paid to the household to support the family unit as a whole. In situations where there is a fundamental breakdown or domestic abuse, the right response is to signpost and support claimants. Changing the way payments are made does not solve these problems.

39. For example, we use face to face meetings with claimants to signpost them to more specialist support services. Each district area has a team of partnership managers whose purpose is to make links with local partners, providers and refuges who work with or can help vulnerable persons, including refuges. For those leaving situations of domestic abuse,
we make support available from the moment they report their circumstances to us, enable them to open a new claim on the same day with the offer of an advance, which can total up to a full month of their indicative entitlement.

40. In addition, for people who need extra support, we have a well-established system of hardship payments and budgeting loans within the benefits system. We also provide Personal Budgeting Support tailored to the individual’s needs to help claimants manage their money, which is funded through Universal Support.