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Work and Pensions Committee

Universal Credit and “survival sex”

Second Report of Session 2019–20

*Report, together with formal minutes relating
to the report*

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Work and Pensions Committee

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Summary

“Survival sex” is when people—overwhelmingly, but not exclusively, women—have to turn to sex work to meet their basic survival needs, including money, food and shelter. Our inquiry arose directly from the experience of one of our members, who had visited a project in his constituency called Tomorrow’s Women Wirral and learned that the design of Universal Credit had caused some women to turn to survival sex. Despite this issue being raised directly with the then Secretary of State in Parliament, and with her successor in oral evidence before this Committee, the inadequacy of the Department for Work and Pensions’ (DWP/the Department) response led us to begin this inquiry and call for evidence.

I didn’t go out looking for it, I said no at first. It wasn’t until about three weeks later that I said ‘OK, yeah,’ because I thought I need to, because I need money [...] It was during the eight weeks that I was waiting to get the Universal Credit. I couldn’t wait eight weeks for money. I just couldn’t. - Julie¹

The Department’s response to our inquiry

We wanted to better understand the scale and nature of this problem, and what role, if any, the Department’s policies play in exacerbating or alleviating it. We were particularly interested in hearing directly from people engaged in sex work or survival sex, and from the specialist organisations that support them.

Our interest was not, initially, shared by the Department. The Department’s first written response to our inquiry addressed the narrow question of whether there is a “direct causative link” between Universal Credit and “prostitution”. The Department displayed little interest in either the lived experience of claimants or the expertise of frontline support organisations. Its initial response was defensive, dismissive and trite.

The Department’s decision to respond in this way meant that it missed a wider point. The fact that people with complex needs and precarious financial situations turned to sex work before Universal Credit does not mean that the design of this newer benefit system does not present its own problems for people who are already vulnerable. People with personal, first-hand experience told us—and widely available media sources—that Universal Credit was a factor in their decisions to turn to, or return to, sex work.

I am about to be moved on to Universal Credit. I will lose £200 a month, approximately [...] The thought of going into debt and having no money is really frightening. I have children. I can’t do that. I will sell my body. - K

In May 2019, we held an evidence session in Parliament. We heard in private from B, K, M and T—four women who work or have worked in the sex industry due, in part, to problems with Universal Credit and the wider benefit system. Given our concerns about the Department’s grasp of the problem, we invited the Minister for Family Support, Housing and Child Maintenance (the Minister) to sit in on our private session with B, K, M and T. Witnesses at that session were highly critical of the Department’s response. Afterwards, we asked the Department to submit a new response that properly engaged with our inquiry and the evidence available. Although the resulting resubmission was

¹ BBC News, [“I was forced into prostitution by Universal Credit”](#), 19 November 2018

substantively similar to the original, the Minister also wrote to us with a fuller response. He also acknowledged that DWP had got it wrong on its first attempt. This is a welcome admission from the Minister.

I was really upset with this sensationalist media quote [DWP] had about someone earning £450 a night and they are kind of implying, “Oh well, sex workers make loads of money in the industry”. My last brothel shift, I was there for three days and I earned £158, so it just does not reflect the actual reality of survival sex work [...] it just seemed to be kind of ridiculing us. - M

The Minister’s willingness to engage constructively with our inquiry was very welcome. But this is not the first time that the Department has seemed unwilling to engage with frontline evidence about the impact of its reforms. The quality of DWP’s responses to pressing, urgent evidence from the frontline should not be dependent on topics catching the eye of individual ministers. DWP needs to improve the way that it systematically gathers, uses, and responds to frontline evidence and claimants’ lived experience of Universal Credit. DWP should publish a revised Evaluation Framework for Universal Credit. This should detail how it will systematically seek out and respond to evidence from frontline organisations, and claimants themselves, to help prevent desperate situations driving people into survival sex and other problems.

Universal Credit

Universal Credit has a “baked in” five week wait for a first payment. The Department offers claimants an Advance payment of up to 100% of their Universal Credit award to tide them over during the wait. This must then be paid back from subsequent Universal Credit payments over the following 12 months, reducing their value and piling more pressure on claimants’ already limited income. Some claimants who are transferring to Universal Credit from the system it replaces will also receive non-repayable “run on” payments of some of the benefits they are currently claiming. The Department would not tell us how much these measures cost. It is clear, however, that they are sticking plasters over a fundamental design flaw in Universal Credit: the five week wait.

I am only 21 and I only spend £20 on gas and electric a fortnight, do you know what I mean, and that is cheap. I am trying my best, £30 on shopping, not a penny over, because if I go a penny over I can’t get other stuff that I need, tampons and things, do you know what I mean? That Universal Credit Advance, by the time I got it I had spent it and then I was waiting another three to four weeks for my benefit. Even then when I got my benefit, they were taking £150 off my benefit and I was left with £50. - T

We have repeatedly called on the Government to eliminate the five week wait, and we reiterate that recommendation in this Report. We heard repeatedly in evidence that the long wait for a first payment is often the cause of people turning, or returning, to survival sex. In the meantime, the Department should offer non-repayable Advances to vulnerable claimants who would otherwise suffer hardship. It should work with stakeholders to ensure that it has a consistent way of identifying “vulnerability”. This might include disabled people or people with long-term health conditions; people with rent arrears or debts over a certain threshold; or people receiving support from social services or an external organisation, or with previous social services or other care worker involvement as a child or adult.

Most Universal Credit claimants try to make and manage their claims online, using the Universal Credit digital service. The digital service has great potential. In time, it could reduce DWP's operating and staffing costs, and offer claimants a convenient, modern way of managing their benefits. But some claimants will struggle with aspects of the digital service. Others will be unable to use it at all, either temporarily or ever. People should not be put off or prevented from claiming benefits that they are entitled to because they struggle with computers. The Department says that Universal Credit claims can be managed via telephone, face-to-face in Jobcentre Plus, or home visit for claimants that need it. But the experiences of our witnesses and some of our own constituents suggests there is a gap between what DWP says is available, and what claimants actually receive.

I have complex PTSD, from very early age child sex abuse, and over the years my mental health has deteriorated [...] That, for me, is also partly another reason why I will not be going on Universal Credit because, again, it doesn't allow supporting people who can't both mentally and physically do that admin-based work, which it takes a lot of time and effort and it is online stuff. - B

The Department should do much more to ensure that its staff deliver a consistent service, and that claimants know about and can access the support available. The Department should improve awareness of telephone and face-to-face Universal Credit claim management, and ensure that the policy intent of providing alternatives to people who struggle with the digital service is being met. This should include advertising alternatives on the Gov.uk and *Understanding Universal Credit* websites and in Jobcentres. The Department should also issue guidance to Work Coaches on accepting or rejecting requests for non-digital claims, and collect data on the numbers of requests for non-digital claims that are requested, accepted or rejected.

The support that people engaged in survival sex receive varies from Jobcentre to Jobcentre. There are pockets of good practice. But this is a group of claimants with complex needs, and the appropriate support will vary from person to person and from place to place, as will disclosure by individuals. The Department should commission and publish a review on improving services for this group of claimants. This must make full use of the expertise of specialist support organisations, and of claimants' own experiences.

This inquiry was concerned, primarily, with the experience of a relatively small group of claimants: one whose needs DWP has not, seemingly, been focused on to date. The key to getting support right for this, and other groups of claimants with complex, specialist needs, will be listening to and seeking out evidence from lived experience and the front line. This applies not just in Universal Credit, but across DWP's working age services.

1 Introduction

1. Universal Credit (UC) merges six separate benefits into one single payment, paid monthly in arrears. For people who do not have income from work, this means that their UC can be their entire income for the month: covering rent, bills and childcare, as well as basic living costs. UC works well for many claimants, but not for everyone. Our previous reports have highlighted several reasons why some claimants may struggle to manage on UC:

- a) There is a minimum five week wait for payment at the start of every UC claim. This is a consequence of the Department for Work and Pensions’ (DWP/ the Department) decisions to pay UC monthly, and to pay it in arrears. The Department offers claimants a repayable Advance payment (a loan) to tide them over during the wait, equivalent to four weeks’ worth of UC. An Advance must be repaid over the following 12 months (rising to 16 months from October 2021). The Department also has plans to extend “run ons” of some of the benefits UC replaces.² For some claimants the wait for all, or some, of their payment will be longer than five weeks. The Department’s latest figures show that in March 2019, just 84% of new claims were paid in full and on time.³
- b) Most of the benefits that UC replaces have been frozen in cash terms at 2015/16 rates. In the three years before 2015/16, they were uprated by only 1% each year. Our report on the *Welfare safety net*, published in August 2019, concluded that these reforms are “pushing some people not only into poverty, but into hunger and destitution”.⁴
- c) Claimants may find that their payment is substantially lower under UC than it was under the system that UC replaces (the “legacy system”). This is because claimants who move to Universal Credit via the “natural” migration process will not receive transitional protection that would ensure they do not lose out in cash terms from the introduction of UC. “Natural” migration is when a legacy benefit claimant moves to UC because they have had a change in circumstances. They might, for example, have separated from their partner or formed a new couple, or have had a child. We have concerns about some of the circumstances in which “natural” migration is triggered: for example, if a claimant’s partner dies, or if someone is fleeing domestic abuse.⁵
- d) Claimants need to communicate with their Work Coach—Jobcentre Plus frontline staff—via their UC online journal. Claimants who have poor digital skills, have difficulty accessing computers or smartphones, or other problems using the journal independently may struggle to use it for this purpose.⁶ Even

2 “Run-ons” are non-repayable payments of some of the benefits that UC replaces. They are automatically paid to people who were in receipt of those benefits who move to UC. They are intended to help ease the transition to UC. Former Housing benefit recipients have been able to receive a two-week run-on of that benefit since April 2018. Run-ons of Employment and Support Allowance, Jobseeker’s Allowance and Income Support will be paid to claimants moving to UC from 2020.

3 DWP, [Universal Credit statistics](#), updated October 2019

4 Work and Pensions Committee, [Welfare safety net](#), Twenty Eighth Report of Session 2017–19, HC 1593, July 2019, p.3.

5 Work and Pensions Committee, [Universal Credit: Natural Migration](#), Twenty Seventh Report of Session 2017–19, HC 1884, July 2019, p.4.

6 See, for example, [Beyond the Streets \(UCX0006\)](#), [Changing Lives \(UCX0019\)](#), [National Ugly Mugs \(UCX0007\)](#)

those who can access and use a smartphone may not be able to afford the cost of data needed to update their journal regularly. This can mean they miss important messages from their Work Coach, or fail to fulfil parts of their UC Claimant commitment (for example, entering details of their work search activities or telling their Work Coach that they cannot attend an appointment).⁷ This can lead to claimants receiving a sanction, which means their benefit payments are reduced or stopped for a period of time.

- e) Sanctions can be applied at a higher rate, and for longer, under UC than under the legacy system. In the most severe cases, claimants can lose 100% of their Universal Credit personal allowance for up to three years.⁸
- f) The amount that the Department is allowed to deduct from claimants’ awards to repay debts is higher under UC than under the system it replaces.⁹ Debts can be to repay Advance payments, or to third parties such as landlords or utility companies. Tax credit claimants who transfer to UC carry any pre-existing debts with them.
- g) Under the legacy system, some of the benefits that UC replaces would not have been paid to the claimant. Housing benefit, for example, is often paid direct to landlords. UC claimants are expected to manage their entire budget themselves, paying for rent, food, bills and other living expenses (including expenses for children) from their monthly payment. Some claimants find it difficult to cover all costs. This can be because they have difficulty budgeting effectively, or because—given the freezes and UC policy decisions, such as changes to deductions policy and the two-child limit—their UC payment is not enough to cover all of their and their household’s basic living costs.¹⁰

2. The Department’s own data show that financial difficulties are not uncommon amongst UC claimants. For example, in its *Full service claimant survey* (“the survey”) the Department found that 44% of claimants were experiencing financial difficulties at the outset of their claim. These ranged from “keeping up [with bills and commitments] but it is a constant struggle” (14%), to experiencing “real financial problems” (18%). Older claimants and those reporting a long-term health condition were more likely to report that they were in financial difficulty at the start of a claim.¹¹ By five months into their claim (Wave 2 of the survey), half of claimants who were still on UC had taken on debts in addition to their UC payments. This was more common among those who had fallen behind with bills and credit commitments (63% of whom said they had borrowed money), but 41% of those keeping up had taken on debts in order to do so. Friends and family were, at the point the survey was carried out, the most common source of additional funds: one

7 The “Claimant commitment” sets out what individual claimants are expected to do to in order to receive benefits.

8 Work and Pensions Committee, [Benefit sanctions](#), Nineteenth Report of Session 2017–19, HC 955, November 2018, p. 9

9 Work and Pensions Committee, [Universal Support](#), Eighteenth Report of Session 2017–19, HC 1667, October 2018

10 Work and Pensions Committee, [Welfare safety net](#), Twenty Eighth Report of Session 2017–19, HC 1539, July 2019, pp.26–43

11 DWP, [Universal Credit Full Service Survey](#), Research Report 958, June 2018, pp.67–68

in three claimants (33%) said they had borrowed from friends or family.¹² Around 7% had obtained extra money from high risk sources, such as payday or doorstep lenders—in spite of the Government’s own efforts to reduce reliance on high-cost credit.¹³

3. The survey was carried out before the Department introduced new rules on Advance Payments of Universal Credit. The latest data suggest that take up of these payments, which can be up to 100% of a claimant’s monthly UC entitlement, stands at around 60% of claimants (compared to just over one in ten of those who took on debts in the survey above).¹⁴ The Department has not published further data on the proportion of claimants who now take on additional funds from other sources.

“Survival sex” and Universal Credit

4. Our inquiry arose from the experience of one of our members, who had visited a project in his constituency called Tomorrow’s Women Wirral.¹⁵ Staff at the project explained that some women had turned to survival sex because of the way Universal Credit worked and because of threats over debt collection. In the light of these alarming findings, the same Member asked the then Secretary of State on 15 October 2018, on the floor of the House of Commons, about the possibility of a link between the roll-out of Universal Credit and women being driven to survival sex in his constituency. The former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Rt Hon Esther McVey MP, responded that the Department needs to:

Work with those ladies and see what help we can give them—from Work Coaches right through to various charities and organisations. In the meantime, perhaps [...] the Work Coaches could tell these ladies that there are currently a record 830,000 job vacancies, and that perhaps there are other jobs on offer.¹⁶

The inadequacy of the then Secretary of State’s response led us to launch this inquiry.

5. We were also concerned by the Department’s response to media reports that charities and support organisations across the UK were seeing increasing numbers of people—overwhelmingly women—getting involved in “survival sex” as a direct result of welfare policy changes. The media reports tended to refer to “survival sex”, although we heard some criticism of this term from witnesses (see Box 1: What is “survival sex”?). The policy changes identified in the reports included the roll-out of UC.¹⁷ The five week wait for a first payment was causing particular difficulties. For example, on 19 November 2018, the BBC reported that it had spoken to five charities in England who said they had seen an increase in women on UC turning to “survival sex” to meet immediate survival needs, such as paying for shelter or food. One of the charities—Tomorrow’s Women, based on the Wirral in North West England—told the BBC that women taking on sex work, especially while waiting for their first UC payment, was:¹⁸

12 DWP, [Universal Credit Full Service survey](#), p. 69.

13 DWP, [Universal Credit Full Service survey](#), p.69

14 National Audit Office, [Rolling out Universal Credit](#), HC 1123, Session 2017–2019, June 2018, p.32

15 <https://www.tomorrowswomen.org.uk/>

16 HC Deb, vol. 647, col. 398, 15th October 2018

17 BBC News, [“I was forced into prostitution by Universal Credit”](#), 19 November 2018

18 BBC News, [“I was forced into prostitution by Universal Credit”](#), 19 November 2018

A very familiar story [...] The delay [in payments] is massive, how are you supposed to cope? So people think it’s a quick fix: “I’ll go out, do a bit of sex work, it’s a quick fix”. But then they get trapped.

6. The Department responded to the initial news reports about UC and survival sex by saying that “no one has to face hardship” on UC. It stressed that “100% Advances are available from day one of a claim”.¹⁹ These responses suggested to us that the Department had not yet grasped either the scale or complexity of the problem, or the role its own policies could play in exacerbating or alleviating it.

Box 1: What is “survival sex”?

The call for evidence for our inquiry referred to “survival sex”. We drew on a definition from research carried out in 2015 by Changing Lives, a charity that supports women who are, have been, or are at risk of engaging in sex work. The research was peer-led, meaning that current sex workers were trained to interview and gather data from their peers. It sought to understand the experiences and motivations of sex workers in cities that do not have traditional “red light districts”.

Changing Lives’ research found several broad categories of sex work, although it emphasised that these are fluid: “categorisations which were given for the purpose of this study are likely to change with the circumstances of individuals”. For example:

- “Survival” sex workers regularly exchange sex to meet immediate needs, whether financial or otherwise (for example, accommodation or somewhere to sleep, food, tobacco, drugs or alcohol).
- “Opportunistic” sex workers occasionally exchange sex for money or otherwise. They are particularly unlikely to perceive themselves as sex workers, due to the infrequency of exchanges.
- Escorts tend to engage in “more formalised sexual exchanges”, usually for money. Escorts were more likely to feel that they were in control of their involvement in the sex industry than survival sex workers, but still reported experiencing high levels of social isolation, and the risk of violence from customers.

Some witnesses had concerns about these definitions. The English Collective of Prostitutes, a grassroots organisation, told us that many of their members objected to a distinction between “survival sex” and sex work more widely. They “considered that what they were doing was sex work to ensure their survival and the survival of their families and other loved ones”, irrespective of whether there was an immediate need for money or other resources.

Other witnesses sought to place “survival sex” in the wider context in which it takes place—particularly as it relates to poverty and a lack of resources to meet immediate survival needs. Dr Raven Bowen, Chief Executive of National Ugly Mugs, a support organisation, told us that “survival sex” is linked to “desperation [and] deprivation”. Dr Bowen said that these factors can compel people “to take the next date because of chemical dependency, poverty, rent issues, school fees, whatever that is”. We also heard that deprivation can also push people to engage in more risky forms of sex work (such as working alone), or to feel that they have little control over their work. This can mean that “survival sex” workers are particularly vulnerable to exploitation or violence from customers.

Sources: Q51 (Dr Raven Bowen), English Collective of Prostitutions (UCX0016), Changing Lives, [“The type of girl that would do that”](#): Peer led research into sex work in Darlington and Durham, October 2015

7. In the light of the Department’s inadequate response to the experiences of our constituents—many of whom face destitution when they move onto Universal Credit—and to the reports from charities working directly with people engaged in survival sex, we called for evidence to help us to understand better what was happening across the country. We received nineteen pieces of written evidence, largely from specialist, frontline organisations.²⁰ We also heard directly from women involved in sex work: both via written evidence submissions, and during a private evidence session held in Parliament in May 2019. We are extremely grateful to the women who took part in that session, to the others who took time to give evidence to our inquiry, and to the support organisations that facilitated their involvement. We recognise that for several of the women we heard from, giving evidence involved sharing extremely difficult and distressing experiences. We are grateful for their courage and openness in coming forward and helping us, Parliament, and the Department, to better understand this issue.

20 <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/work-and-pensions-committee/inquiries/parliament-2017/universal-credit-survival-sex-inquiry-17-19/publications/>

2 Evidence from the frontline

8. We launched our inquiry on 19 March 2019. The inquiry’s Terms of Reference set out three key issues that we had identified, via previous UC inquiries and the media reports, that could contribute to women turning to sex work to meet their survival needs. They were:

- a) The wait for a first UC payment.²¹
- b) Sanctions (where benefits are cut or stopped). Sanctions under UC are longer and more severe than under the legacy system.²²
- c) Deductions from UC payments to pay back debts. These could be to DWP, other Government departments and agencies, or to third parties.²³

The Department’s initial evidence submission

9. A select committee inquiry’s Terms of Reference sets out the key topics it is concerned with. It usually provides the central questions that the Committee wants to address. The questions for this inquiry were:²⁴

- a) What features of Universal Credit might drive people into “survival sex”? How does Universal Credit compare to the previous benefits system in this respect?
- b) How widespread is this problem? To what extent are any increases in prevalence directly attributable to Universal Credit?
- c) Are some claimants at particular risk of turning to “survival sex”? If so, who are they and what are the risk factors?
- d) What changes to Universal Credit could help tackle this problem and better protect claimants?
- e) What role should Jobcentre Plus play in supporting claimants who are involved in “survival sex” or sex work more widely?

10. By convention, the Department—and other stakeholders, including individuals and support organisations—provides a written response to the issues raised in an inquiry’s Terms of Reference. In this instance, however, the Department’s initial written submission instead addressed the narrow question of whether there is a “direct causative link” between UC and “prostitution” (which was not a term we had used in our call for evidence). The Department described reports linking UC and survival sex as “anecdote”. It stated this “can never be the basis for a judgment on a direct link between two factors”, and that UC “cannot be robustly attributed as a sole cause” of women engaging in survival sex.²⁵

21 Work and Pensions Committee, [Universal Credit and survival sex inquiry](#), updated June 2019

22 Work and Pensions Committee, [Benefit sanctions](#), p.19

23 Claimants who owe HMRC debts (for example, because HMRC has overpaid their tax credits) carry the debt over with them to DWP.

24 Work and Pensions Committee, [Universal Credit and survival sex inquiry](#), updated June 2019

25 DWP ([UCX0015](#))

11. The Department put forward a number of points in support of its argument. They included:²⁶

- a) People who work in the sex industry often have multiple, complex needs, such as mental health problems, addictions, or other health problems. These can be pre-existing, or a result of their involvement. The Department says “it could be assumed that those people experiencing these issues may be more likely to be in receipt of benefits in the first place”.
- b) That “the suggestion that poverty generally associated with the welfare system can sometimes lead some people into (or back into) prostitution or other kinds of “survival sex” is not new, and certainly not unique to Universal Credit”. To support this assertion, the Department offered a quote from a 1977 BBC interview with an “unidentified prostitute”.
- c) Many sex workers who are now claiming UC would, previously, have been claiming other benefits. The Department cited a 2008 report by Changing Lives, an organisation supporting women in the North East, which showed that 71% of the female sex workers they interviewed were in receipt of Income Support, and a further 22% claimed Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA). The Department’s evidence states that “this clearly demonstrates the issue and linkages with welfare benefits pre-dates Universal Credit and cannot sensibly be the result of any specific benefit”.
- d) The Department says that a “trawl of social media [...] illustrates the existence of these practices well before the introduction of Universal Credit”. It continues: “of note, though, is the scarcity of social media and other internet stories pre-dating the growth in popularity of the internet as a discussion forum—which may mean that Universal Credit stories can be more easily found”.

The Department said that it is “very clear that ‘social security’ or ‘welfare’” has “long been blamed for a rise in prostitution or sex work”. It claimed this link can “literally be tracked back as far as research allows”, and that “links can be often found where they are sought”. It concluded:

On the basis of current evidence, it is wrong to suggest that there is a direct causative link between Universal Credit specifically and an increase in prostitution or survival sex.

12. We asked the organisations and individuals that gave evidence to us for their views on the Department’s submission. Changing Lives told us that the women they support do, often, have multiple, complex needs.²⁷ These can include histories of family, domestic and child sexual abuse, homelessness, and addictions (see Boxes 2 and 3).²⁸ Dr Raven Bowen, Chief Executive at National Ugly Mugs, told us that a lack of money to meet immediate survival needs is, inherently, a driving factor behind “survival sex”, irrespective of how that lack of money has come about. She explained that financial problems, combined with

26 DWP ([UCX0015](#))

27 Changing Lives ([UCX0013](#))

28 Changing Lives ([UCX0013](#)), A Way Out ([UCX0017](#)), Homeless Link ([UCX0012](#))

issues such as those identified by Changing Lives and cited by the Department, mean that for some people, “engaging in the sex industry for survival is the best choice and at times, the only choice available”.²⁹

13. But witnesses also told us that the Department’s written evidence had missed a wider point. None of these broader factors mean that UC does not present some additional problems for some people—predominantly women—who are, have been involved in, or are at risk of becoming involved in sex work.³⁰ Laura Seebohm, Executive Director of Policy and Innovation at Changing Lives, told us that although it might be difficult or impossible to prove a direct link between UC and survival sex “in a sociological sense”, that did not mean that UC was not contributing to women’s decisions. She said:³¹

We have seen numbers increasing of women starting to sell sex and they have not done that before. One of our staff said, “We have seen numbers increasing of women who have not done this before. A couple of women just went out to get £5 for their electric”. [...] We had a woman who had not sold sex for 17 years going back on to the streets.

Ms Seebohm said that the women Changing Lives support tell their support workers “time and time again” that difficulties with UC have contributed to their decisions to sell sex. She explained that such disclosures are so common that “we now expect it in our services”.³²

Box 2: Case study: K

K is a single mum, who has worked as a lap dancer. She currently claims tax credits, but is due to move to Universal Credit. K told us about her personal circumstances and her worries about the new benefit system. She said:

I have three children. My husband was abusive to me. I got rid of him, because he was attacking me [...] I worked as a lap dancer when money was short. My boyfriend wasn’t paying or contributing and I was literally stuck on my own because I have no family. It has been really tough [...] I am determined to get a home for my children, so at different times I have worked to buy a house. This meant my children could go to a decent school, but it has been very exhausting and tough trying to pay a mortgage [...].

I am about to be moved on to Universal Credit. I will lose £200 a month, approximately. [...] I don’t have any savings. I am scared that I will have to wait weeks before I get any money. I have just been trying to scrape together £1,500 to cover my mortgage and loans. I need to save some money so I am planning to escort or massaging or something similar [...] The thought of going into debt and having no money is really frightening. I have children. I can’t do that. I will sell my body. [...] There are a lot of girls out there just like me. The women that I met at the strip club are all single mums doing their studies. We all need the extra money.

Source: [Q6–9](#) (K)

29 National Ugly Mugs ([UCX0007](#)), [Q51](#) (Raven Bowen)

30 See, for example, [Q54](#) (Laura Seebohm), [Q45](#) (M), [Q54](#) (Sarah McManus and Amber Wilson)

31 [Q54](#) (Laura Seebohm)

32 [Q53](#) (Laura Seebohm)

Box 3: Case study: T

T is a former care worker. She has been claiming Universal Credit for a few months. She started sex work because her UC payments were not enough to cover her basic living costs. T told us about her experience growing up, and the difficulties she has had in getting support, and understanding, from DWP.

You always get asked the question, like if you ring [DWP] for a hardship payment or something because you're without, they will always ask you, "Have you got a family member you can—" and sometimes you don't want to explain where your mum and dad are or if you even know them [...] I don't know my dad, so if they say to us, "Can your mum not lend you anything?" I would say, "Well, no [...]" and they would say, "Well, do you not have a father?" Do you know what I mean? That is not very nice to have on the other side of the phone when you literally don't know who your dad is. It is horrible. Then they say to us, "Can you ask your grandparents?" Like they don't want us to start going on about that as well, because then I will just cry.

[...] Back in the day, for my mum to be able to work, I had to go and be abused, do you know what I mean? Now my three brothers and sisters are having an amazing life now, but I haven't, do you know I mean? So it is just hard, really hard.

Source: [Q18–34](#) (T)

14. Other women that we heard from—either directly or via organisational case studies—told us that UC was, or was likely to become, an important factor influencing whether they started, or returned to, sex work:³³

- a) A Way Out, an organisation based in Stockton-on-Tees, told us about SM, a woman who they supported.³⁴ SM had stopped sex work, but while waiting for her first UC payment, she was unable to pay her rent. She “was asked by a punter in town if she was doing business and saw an opportunity to get the money she needed”. Despite receiving a UC Advance, deductions from her subsequent UC payments meant she was continually unable to meet all of her living costs, including rent. A Way Out said that SM is, as a consequence, “sex working every few days”.
- b) One 25, an organisation based in Bristol, told us about a woman they supported who had recently been moved to UC, but had no access to a computer or smart phone.³⁵ She needed additional support just to be able to access the application process for UC. One 25 said she “spoke of needing to make up the shortfall [while waiting for UC] by seeing her ‘sugar daddy’ who she was not seeing before”.
- c) Beyond the Streets, a UK-wide charity, told us about Jackie, who applied for UC having previously claimed Employment and Support Allowance (ESA).³⁶ To make ends meet while waiting for UC, she “returned to selling sex on the streets after nearly 30 years”. She also began taking amphetamines and drinking

33 See, for example, A Way Out ([UCX0017](#)), One25 ([UCX0001](#)), Nordic Model Now! ([UCX0014](#)), Beyond the Streets ([UCX0006](#)), Changing Lives ([UCX0019](#)), Women@thewell ([UCX0010](#))

34 A Way Out ([UCX0017](#))

35 UC is intended to be a largely online service: claimants make their claims online and manage them via their online journal. See One25 ([UCX0011](#)).

36 Beyond the Streets ([UCX0006](#))

heavily to cope with stress. When Jackie attended meetings at the Jobcentre about her UC claim, with support from a specialist organisation in Beyond the Streets’ network, she was “unable to remember her email address, username or password. She had kept [her] login number but had no idea what to do with it”.

- d) A welfare rights adviser for a London-based housing association told us about two residents with children who had disclosed involvement in survival sex.³⁷ One of the women, Ms J, had faced long waits for her UC payments, and they had not been enough to cover basics, including bills and food. She had resorted to shoplifting food and been caught. She said:

The manager said if I gave him [oral sex] he’d let me off. What could I do? It was that or have the police called. I just did it. I just kept thinking “please don’t call the police”. Anyway, he said afterwards that if I did the same next week he’d let me have forty quid’s worth of stock. It seemed like a fortune. [...]

In the end, I held out for two weeks. I got my [UC] money, and again it was short, and again it was gone on bills before I’d even thought of food. So, I left the baby with next door and went down to the shop [...] It’s been like that for months now.

15. M, who was a student working in a brothel when she gave evidence to us, told us that DWP’s initial evidence submission “wilfully misrepresented” the issue of survival sex, and sex work more widely. She continued:³⁸

[T]hey are saying, “Oh, people are claiming that Universal Credit is the biggest cause of survival sex work, but it is drugs and alcohol”, like no one has ever claimed that. Just because drugs and alcohol are a big reason that people enter survival sex work, that doesn’t mean that Universal Credit has not had a really big influx. [...]

I really felt that the [evidence submission] was an attempt to kind of cover the DWP’s back and be like, “Oh well, you can’t prove that it is us or you can’t prove that it is Universal Credit that is the issue” [...] it kind of like proved the point that it is poverty and it is this horrible system that is making us be in the sex industry.

- 16. The Department’s initial written evidence submission to our inquiry sought to disprove the presence of a “direct causative link” between Universal Credit and “survival sex”. In taking this approach, it missed the wider point. The fact that people with complex needs and precarious financial situations turned to sex work before Universal Credit does not mean that the design of Universal Credit does not present additional problems for people who are already vulnerable.**

- 17. The Department’s initial submission displayed little interest in the lived experience of claimants and would-be claimants. People with first hand, personal experience told us and widely available media sources that Universal Credit was a factor in their**

37 Name withheld ([UCX0002](#))

38 [Q45](#) (M)

decisions to turn to, or return to, sex work. The Department also chose not to make use of the expertise and experience of multiple support organisations. Its initial written response was defensive, dismissive, and trite.

The Minister’s intervention and the Department’s second submission

18. Our first public evidence session was held in May 2019. We heard from specialist organisations that support people who are involved in sex work, and from representatives of grassroots and campaigning organisations.³⁹ On the same day, we also held an evidence panel in private with B, K, M and T: four women who are, or have been, involved in survival sex or sex work. Given our concerns about the Department’s engagement with our inquiry, we invited the Minister for Family Support, Housing and Child Maintenance, Will Quince MP (the Minister), to attend our private panel with B, K, M and T. We hoped that hearing directly from people with lived experience of the relationships between sex work, “survival sex” and UC would help the Department to better understand the issues raised in the inquiry.

19. Given what we heard in that session and via written evidence submissions from other organisations, we asked the Department to resubmit its written evidence, engaging properly with the concerns raised.⁴⁰ On 10 June 2019 the Department did so. DWP’s resubmission was not substantively different to the original.⁴¹ It contained some, largely cosmetic, changes. For example:⁴²

- a) the Department replaced references to “prostitution” with “sex work”; and
- b) where the original submission says it is “wrong” to posit a “direct causal link” between UC and survival sex, the revised submission says it is “overly simplistic”.

20. The Minister also wrote to us alongside the Department’s resubmitted evidence, discussing in greater detail some of the points raised by our witnesses.⁴³ He said the Department had made its original evidence submission “before the publication of [the Committee’s] evidence from stakeholders and those with lived experience”. The Minister also said that many of the stakeholders who submitted evidence for this inquiry “have not been amongst our main stakeholders thus far”.⁴⁴ He explained that “we have not had much engagement inwards” from those organisations, “whereas there are other organisations that [...] lobby the Department on a regular basis”.⁴⁵ The Minister also apologised for the initial submission and said he did not think it “very well reflected [his] views” on the issue. He said that the Department knew “very little” about the relationship between UC and survival sex.⁴⁶

We came back with a response that we do not know very much about this and we do not have a very good understanding of it, and I think that is what led to [the evidence submission].

39 Work and Pensions Committee, [Oral evidence on Universal Credit and “survival sex”](#), Q1-Q93

40 [Letter from Chair to the Minister on Universal Credit and ‘survival sex’](#), May 2019

41 DWP (UCX0018). See also [Letter from the Minister to the Chair on Universal Credit and ‘survival sex’](#), June 2019

42 Annex 1 contains a comparison of the original and resubmitted evidence.

43 [Letter from the Minister to the Chair on Universal Credit and ‘survival sex’](#), June 2019

44 [Letter from the Minister to the Chair on Universal Credit and ‘survival sex’](#), June 2019

45 [Q121 \(Will Quince\)](#)

46 [Letter from the Minister to the Chair about Universal Credit and ‘survival sex’](#), June 2019

21. After the Minister attended our session, the Department convened a meeting with the organisations that gave evidence to us to discuss how it could better support women involved in survival sex or sex work, to prevent any more people being left in vulnerable situations and at risk of entering survival sex situations.⁴⁷ In previous reports, we have highlighted the difficulty of understanding how DWP systematically uses its engagement with stakeholder organisations to improve the services that it offers to claimants.⁴⁸ We have also heard that organisations that give feedback to DWP frequently do not receive a response. In its 2017 report *Rolling out Universal Credit*, the NAO reported that local organisations had said that the Department’s engagement with them “sometimes felt like a public relations exercise” and that they “did not routinely receive a response from the Department on the issues that they raised”.⁴⁹ In this case, it is not clear what the outcomes of the meeting between DWP and the support organisations were. Organisations that attended told us informally that they were not sure what steps the Department planned to take next.⁵⁰

22. We are glad that the Minister accepted our invitation to sit in on our private evidence session with B, K, T and M: four women who are involved in sex work due, in part, to problems with Universal Credit and the wider benefits system. The Department’s invitation to the organisations that we heard from to attend a meeting to discuss our inquiry was also welcome, if overdue. It is regrettable that the Department, on realising it had little understanding of the issue on the ground, did not make contact with specialist organisations before it made its submission to our inquiry or in response to earlier warnings from welfare and other organisations. We have found those organisations keen to engage constructively. We hope that the Department has, belatedly, managed to obtain a better understanding of the issue than it exhibited in its first written submission. But the quality of DWP’s responses to pressing, urgent evidence from the frontline should not be dependent on topics catching the eye of individual ministers. DWP needs to improve the way that it systematically gathers, uses, and responds to frontline evidence and claimants’ “lived experience” of UC.

23. We recommend that the Department sets out in response to this report the key lessons that it took from its June 2019 meeting with stakeholders supporting people involved in “survival sex”. Alongside this, we recommend that the Department sets out a set of clear, measurable actions and next steps that it is taking as a result, including through Jobcentre Plus and Work Coaches specifically.

24. The Department says that the support organisations we heard from are not amongst its existing stakeholders, and that it had not been lobbied on the issue of survival sex. Given that this issue had been raised with the then Secretary of State on the floor of the House of Commons in October 2018, this claim is baffling. When it is fully rolled out, Universal Credit will support eight and half million people. Some of them—like some of the women we heard from—will have very specific, complex circumstances and needs that can only be met through specialist support. The organisations providing that support are often small, local, and not orientated towards extensive public affairs

47 [Q96](#) (Will Quince)

48 Work and Pensions Committee, [PIP and ESA assessments](#), Seventh report of Session 2017–19, HC 829

49 National Audit Office, [Rolling out Universal Credit](#), p.49

50 Private correspondence between witnesses and Committee staff

work. The Department’s underwhelming initial response to this inquiry illustrates that it cannot afford to listen only to the organisations with the largest resources targeting Parliament.

How DWP uses “lived experience” and frontline evidence

25. We have previously concluded that DWP’s understanding of the impact of its policies, including UC, on some of the most vulnerable claimants it supports, is limited—to put it mildly. Our August 2019 report on the *Welfare safety net* said that:

People and organisations rarely approach select committees—or their MPs—when everything is going well. Even allowing for that, the contrast between the Department’s characterisation of [the effects of its recent reforms], and the evidence we have heard repeatedly across multiple inquiries, from front-line organisations and claimants, is stark. It is difficult to avoid concluding that the Department lacks the tools and insight fully to understand and evaluate the impact of its reforms on some of the most vulnerable people it supports.⁵¹

In the same report, we called on the Government to “commission and publish a cumulative impact assessment of the effect of welfare reform since 2010 on claimant incomes”, as a first step towards filling this gap in its understanding.⁵²

26. We heard that this is, in part, because the Department seems unwilling to accept the evidence put forward by third-parties that support claimants as real “evidence”, preferring instead to rely on higher level data (which may not always be available or of sufficiently high quality).⁵³ The NAO said in its 2017 *Rolling out Universal Credit* report, for example, that the Department had “responded quickly to some purely operational concerns” about UC. It had “not always been able to examine and respond promptly to wider concerns” reported by stakeholder organisations, however. The NAO said that this lack of understanding was because DWP “does not systematically capture the views of external organisations”.⁵⁴ It also does not systematically track what actions—if any—are taken in response to feedback from stakeholders, or what the outcome of those actions are. In response to the NAO, the Department said that there are “some cases ‘where the anecdote is stronger than the management information’”, and that “the facts as presented [by some stakeholders] were incorrect and misrepresented”.⁵⁵

27. The *Universal Credit evaluation framework* was first published in 2012, and updated in 2016.⁵⁶ Neil Couling, Senior Responsible Owner for Universal Credit, described it as “very comprehensive”.⁵⁷ It contains no reference to either frontline experience or the personal experiences of claimants.

51 Work and Pensions Committee, [Welfare safety net](#), p.23

52 Work and Pensions Committee, [Welfare safety net](#), p.49

53 Work and Pensions Committee, [Welfare safety net](#), p. 11

54 National Audit Office, [Rolling out Universal Credit](#), p.49

55 Ibid.

56 DWP, [Universal Credit Evaluation framework](#), Report no. 34, July 2016

57 [Q264](#) (Neil Couling)

28. The Department has also, so far, resisted suggestions from this Committee, the NAO, and other stakeholders, to set clear tests and metrics for proceeding with “managed migration”—the transfer of legacy benefit claimants to UC.⁵⁸ Managed migration is due to begin in pilot form from 2019, and at scale from 2020. This means that it is not clear how, or whether, feedback and evidence from stakeholders will be systematically used in deciding whether the Department is ready to “managed migrate” more than two million legacy benefit claimants to Universal Credit.

29. The Department seems willing, however, to accept and promote individual accounts as evidence of UC working well. For example:

- In May 2019, the Department invested £225,000 in a publicity campaign for UC, published in the *Metro* newspaper. The campaign aimed to rebut prevalent “myths” about Universal Credit with the Department’s own “facts”.⁵⁹ The campaign also featured positive accounts of individuals’ experiences in claiming UC, being paid on time, and receiving excellent support from their Work Coaches.
- The Department frequently posts videos of individual claimants who have had good experiences with UC on its social media accounts. For example, on 10 September 2019, the Department posted a video of Elina, who had been able to “secure her dream job” thanks to UC.⁶⁰ On 19 August 2019, the Department posted a video of Charlotte, who had been “so, so anxious” about going onto UC, but had been reassured by her Work Coach telling her that UC “is going to make you so much better off financially”.⁶¹ The former Minister for Employment, Alok Sharma MP, told us in May 2019 that Work Coaches do not have access to all of the information they might need to calculate accurately whether a claimant will be better off on UC, and should not be advising claimants as such.⁶²
- The former Secretary of State, Rt Hon Esther McVey MP, told us that she went “around the country” meeting Work Coaches during her tenure and was reassured that UC was working well. She said that Work Coaches told her they felt “very positive” and “very liberated [...] they are able to do what they always wanted to do, help people in to work and signposting them”. She said that she had received letters “from people who have said they have been to the Jobcentre say, 10 years ago [...] they have all said it has been a very different experience this time and a much more positive one”.⁶³

30. The Department’s media communications, and statements from a former Secretary of State, suggest that it is content to present positive individual experiences as true representations of Universal Credit, even in the face of evidence that those positive experiences are not universal. But it is hesitant to accept that individuals’ poor

58 Work and Pensions Committee, [Universal Credit: tests for managed migration: Government Response to the Committee’s Twenty Sixth Report](#), Twenty Fourth Special Report of Session 2017–2019, HC 2499, July 2019

59 *Metro*, “Universal Credit uncovered”, May 2019

60 <https://twitter.com/DWP/status/1171347711523790848>

61 <https://twitter.com/DWP/status/1163450796031086597?s=20>

62 Q201–210

63 Q30 (Esther McVey)

experiences might indicate wider problems in the system. It should not be beyond the Department to understand that claimants can genuinely have both very positive and very negative experiences with its benefits.

31. Frontline evidence and lived experience can provide early warnings on wider problems with DWP’s systems. This is particularly valuable in helping the Department understand and identify specific problems facing small groups of claimants, that may be lost in higher level data. Failing to use evidence from the frontline and lived experience effectively is not just insulting to organisations and individuals who take the time to try to tell the Department what is wrong and to improve Universal Credit. It puts claimants at risk, and deprives the Department of the opportunity to ensure that Universal Credit is achieving its own aim of supporting some of the most vulnerable people in the country.

32. *We recommend that the Department updates and publishes a revised Universal Credit Evaluation Framework. This should detail how the Department will systematically seek out and respond to evidence from frontline organisations (including those who are not amongst its usual stakeholders) and claimants themselves. The new Framework should also set out clearly how the evaluation findings will be treated in making future decisions on Universal Credit: for example, the Department’s decision on whether to accelerate “managed migration” of legacy benefit claimants to Universal Credit from 2020.*

3 Universal Credit and survival sex: contributing issues

33. Organisations including the English Collective of Prostitutes, Changing Lives and Beyond the Streets told us that of the three issues identified in our inquiry’s Terms of Reference which could contribute to people’s decisions to take on or return to sex work (the five week wait; accumulation of and deductions for debt; and sanctions), the five week wait is a particularly significant problem.⁶⁴ But it also became clear from the evidence we received that problems can arise well before claimants get to the point of waiting for a first payment. Support organisations, and claimants themselves, told us that the application process for UC is complex, and can be confusing for vulnerable people.⁶⁵ We heard from women who had decided not to apply at all due to the perceived complexity of the process.⁶⁶ Changing Lives told us that this decision is not uncommon.⁶⁷ Data released under a Freedom of Information request in April 2018 showed that one in five UC claims were closed without payment being made due to “non-compliance with the [UC] process”: for example, the individual failing to book or attend an initial interview with JCP.⁶⁸

The digital service and “Help to Claim”

34. DWP anticipates that UC will enable it to move away from costly, in-person registration and maintenance of benefit claims, towards a single digital claim service and digital communication between claimants and the Department.⁶⁹ This means that claimants are expected to make and manage their claims online. At the outset of a claim, this includes tasks such as verifying their identity, designating a bank account for UC to be paid into, and providing proof of costs such as rent and childcare, if applicable. Once the claim is set up, claimants are expected to use the UC online system (the journal) to maintain their claim. This could involve using the journal to communicate with their Work Coach (for example, if they are unable to attend an appointment), or to notify the Department of any changes of circumstance.

35. The Department’s research suggests that claimants frequently experience difficulties making and managing their claim online.⁷⁰ Three quarters (74%) of claimants in the Department’s survey of claimants made their claim online. Four in ten of those claimants (41%) said they needed help in order to do so. More than four in ten claimants overall (43%) said they needed more support than they received in setting up their claim, and three in ten (31%) said they needed more ongoing support to maintain their claim.⁷¹ The Department provides some assistance for claimants via the Help to Claim service (formerly “Universal Support”),⁷² delivered by Citizens Advice and Citizens Advice Scotland. DWP funds Citizens Advice advisers to support claimants “in the early stages” of their UC

64 English Collective of Prostitutes ([UCX0016](#)), Changing Lives ([UCX0013](#)), Homeless Link ([UCX0012](#))

65 National Ugly Mugs ([UCX0007](#)), Changing Lives ([UCX0013](#)), Beyond the Streets ([UCX0006](#))

66 See, for example, Changing Lives ([UCX0013](#)), Q12 (B), Q54 (Amber Wilson)

67 Changing Lives ([UCX0013](#))

68 Guardian, [Complex rules for Universal Credit see one in five claims fail](#), 12 May 2018

69 See Work and Pensions Committee, [Universal Credit Project Assessment Reviews](#), Fifth Report of Session 2017–19, HC 740

70 DWP, [Universal Credit Full Service survey](#), p.35

71 DWP, [Universal Credit Full Service survey](#), p.13

72 See Work and Pensions Committee, Universal Support and DWP, [Press release: new “Help to Claim” service provides extra Universal Credit support](#), April 2019

claim, “from the application through to [their] first payment”. Advisers can help with issues such as “how to gather evidence for your application, or how to prepare for your first Jobcentre appointment”.⁷³ Advisers cannot offer DWP-funded support after the initial claim is complete: for example, with maintaining the claim and using the journal.⁷⁴

36. Organisations including Beyond the Streets, Homeless Link, Changing Lives and National Ugly Mugs told us that the people they support frequently face problems with the digital service.⁷⁵ These problems are not limited to the initial registration for UC. They can persist throughout a claim, and can mean claimants are unable to manage their claim independently. This might be because:

- a) many people do not have access to a computer and have only simple phones. Access to public IT facilities is also limited. For example, Beyond the Streets told us that public libraries often require people who want to use their facilities to be members.⁷⁶ The women they support are often homeless. They cannot provide an address for membership purposes;
- b) degrees of digital illiteracy are common. Even if a prospective claimant has access to a computer or suitable smartphone, they cannot necessarily use it for claiming UC;⁷⁷ and
- c) people who are experiencing, or have experienced trauma and addiction, or who are struggling to meet survival needs, can find it very difficult to remember details about their account and what they need to do to continue receiving UC. Beyond the Streets told us that people they support routinely forget their passwords and login details, or to access their account at all (for example, to communicate with their Work Coach—which can lead to a sanction).⁷⁸ Box 4 illustrates this point.
- d) Even people who can access and use a smartphone may not be able to afford the cost of using it to maintain their UC claim, especially the costs of mobile data use.

73 Citizens Advice, [Getting help applying for Universal Credit](#), visited September 2019

74 CAB contract; US report

75 Beyond the Streets ([UCX0006](#)), Homeless Link ([UCX0012](#)), Changing Lives ([UCX0013](#)), National Ugly Mugs ([UCX0007](#))

76 Beyond the Streets ([UCX0006](#))

77 Beyond the Streets ([UCX0006](#))

78 Beyond the Streets ([UCX0006](#)), [Q4](#) (T)

Box 4: Case study: T

T told us about the difficulties that she had using the digital service and journal. She said that the support offered by the Department was not sufficient to help her overcome these. T said:

I am not very good with computers. I haven't been in school since I was [redacted] due to past experiences and stuff, so I tried to explain that to them and they said to go on a computer course. I did go on a computer course, but they kind of put you on a computer, give you like a slideshow kind of thing. You have to read it, answer a few questions and then that was meant to be me learning how to use a computer.

I don't even know how to go on Google emails or anything [...] Like I really do struggle a lot. I can't remember my passwords and stuff and they basically said it was an excuse, do you know what I mean? So I just thought that obviously sex work, like it is the easiest thing, honestly it is. It is horrible to say, but it is the easiest thing to keep us girls alive, it is.

Source: Q4 (T)

37. For some people, the process of claiming and maintaining a claim is so daunting that it puts them off claiming altogether. B, a current sex worker, told us that she had not applied for UC because she felt she would not be able to manage making and maintaining her claim online (see Box 5: B).⁷⁹ Amber Wilson, Business Development and Marketing Manager at Basis, a support charity based in Leeds, said that the women they support:⁸⁰

Know they have to [apply for UC], but with the mental experience, [...] knowing that there is this big barrier of procedures they need to go through, [they] cannot start the process.

Changing Lives told us that of the 200 women they support who are involved in sex work, “about 30% do not claim for Universal Credit because of all this concern about the complication”.⁸¹ Changing Lives' Laura Seebohm told us that the process is “really stressful” and “incredibly hard” for many of the women they work with. She explained that “the mainstream people who might be able to cope with it are often not the people we are talking about. There are a lot of people who have all these barriers in their lives”.⁸²

79 [Q12](#) (B)

80 [Q54](#) (Amber Wilson)

81 A Way Out ([UCX0017](#))

82 [Q57](#) (Laura Seebohm). See also Changing Lives ([UCX0013](#))

Box 5: Case study: B

B is a sex worker. She does not claim UC or other benefits, and has relied solely on sex work to survive for the past “four or five” years. She told us about previous experiences applying for benefits, and why these had contributed to put her off claiming UC. For B, the need to complete “admin-based work” online to register and maintain a UC claim is a significant barrier.

B explained that she has complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a result of child sexual abuse. This makes it difficult for her to manage the tasks she would need to complete to sustain a UC claim. She said:

I have been on JSA [Jobseeker’s Allowance] before. I found it inaccessible, particularly to those of us who fall in a neuro-diverse spectrum [...] Over the years my mental health has deteriorated. My ability to do a lot of sort of admin-based work, it becomes more and more difficult, so as you can imagine, Jobseeker’s Allowance doesn’t necessarily provide for people who kind of fall under that category.

Just even sometimes leaving the house is very difficult, which is why sex work has been—I guess for a lot of us—very useful in terms of being able to manage our own time when we can and can’t work. That, for me, is also partly another reason why I will not be going on Universal Credit because, again, it doesn’t allow supporting people who can’t both mentally and physically do that admin-based work, which it takes a lot of time and effort and it is online stuff.

Source: Q12

38. The Universal Credit digital service has great potential. In time, it could reduce DWP’s operating and staffing costs, and offer claimants a convenient, modern way of managing their benefits. But some claimants will struggle with aspects of the digital service. Others will be unable to use it at all, either temporarily or ever. People should not be put off claiming benefits to which they are entitled simply because they struggle with computers, or cannot afford the cost of maintaining their claim online.

Alternative claim management

39. The Department acknowledges that improving take-up of UC, relative to the benefits it replaces, will be crucial if it is to achieve its aims.⁸³ The Department told us that claimants who cannot manage the online process are able to claim by other routes. The Minister said that although UC “is a digital by default” system, “telephony is available, face-to-face in the Jobcentre is available, home visits are also available in exceptional circumstances”.⁸⁴ Neil Couling, Senior Responsible Owner for Universal Credit, told us that the Department has recently prioritised building its capacity to take and maintain claims by telephone.⁸⁵ He disputed the Minister’s characterisation of UC as “digital by default” and said that “there will always be a bunch of people who need our services who will not be able to go online”.⁸⁶ Neither the Gov.uk website, nor the Department’s *Understanding Universal Credit* website, mentions that face-to-face support or home visits are available, and the Department has no way of knowing whether Work Coaches are routinely discussing the options with claimants.

83 Work and Pensions Committee, [Welfare safety net](#), p.55, Q265 (Justin Tomlinson)

84 [Q176](#) (Will Quince)

85 [Q177](#) (Neil Couling)

86 *Ibid.*

40. The Department told us that, as of July 2019, it maintains 17,000 UC claims by telephone: less than 1% of the total number of claims.⁸⁷ It was unable to tell us what proportion of requests for telephone management this represented, nor to offer any analysis or view on why requests might be accepted or rejected. It said it does not collect this information centrally, since requests may be made in several different ways and information held across several different systems.⁸⁸ The Department was also unable to provide any further information at all (either numbers, or reasons for acceptance/rejection) about claims managed face-to-face in Jobcentre Plus, or claims managed by home visit.⁸⁹ The Minister’s letter suggested that there are no set criteria or guidance for staff on whether requests for alternative claim management should be accepted. It said:⁹⁰

As Universal Credit is tailored to the individual, there is not a set of circumstances whereby the claimant may have their claim entirely managed by telephony or face-to-face as the Department acknowledges that individuals may move in and out of situations where they do or do not require support. Where support is identified and required, they [sic] may be put in place once, for as long as it’s needed.

41. We put it to the Department that, although alternatives to the journal are available, claimants are not able in practice to access these easily and consistently.⁹¹ Some of our own constituency work suggested this was the case. The Minister told us he was “very interested” to hear this feedback. He continued:⁹²

I am very keen to ensure that where there is a policy intent at ministerial level that it is being implemented on the ground. If there is that disconnect, we do in part rely on stakeholders and Members [of Parliament] to inform us of that. If there is evidence that you have that that policy intent [...] is not being implemented or enacted on the ground, please let me know about that.

42. The Department says that non-digital management of Universal Credit claims is possible via telephone, face-to-face in Jobcentre Plus, or home visit for claimants that need it. It does not promote the latter two options, and does not offer any guidance to its Decision Makers or claimants on when alternative claim management should be considered. Given this, it is difficult to see how the Department can be confident that it is providing the support that claimants need. The experiences of our witnesses and some of our own constituents suggests there is a significant gap between what DWP says is available, and what claimants actually receive. The Department could do much more to ensure that its staff deliver a consistent service, and that claimants know about and can access the support that it offers.

43. We recommend the Department take steps to improve awareness of telephone and face-to-face Universal Credit claim management, and to ensure that the policy intent of providing alternatives to people who struggle with the digital service is being met. Specifically, the Department should:

87 [Letter from the Minister to the Committee Chair](#), June 2019

88 [Ibid.](#)

89 [Ibid.](#)

90 [Ibid.](#)

91 [Q176](#) (Derek Thomas and Will Quince)

92 [Q179](#) (Will Quince)

- a) *Publicise the availability of face-to-face claim management (either at home or in Jobcentre Plus) on Gov.uk, Understanding Universal Credit, via Help to Claim, letters and other direct communications with claimants and via posters and leaflets in Jobcentre Plus;*
- b) *develop clear guidance for Work Coaches on when alternative claim management should be put in place;*
- c) *centrally collect and publish data on: the number of requests for telephone or face-to-face management; the number of requests accepted and in place; and the reasons why claims are accepted or rejected.*

We would expect these measures to reduce the number of people who are eligible for, but not currently claiming, Universal Credit because they struggle with the digital system. The Department should set out, in response to this report, a measurable target for reducing that number and the timescale within which it will be achieved.

Bank account verification

44. UC claimants usually have their UC award paid into a bank account that they have nominated. Most claimants will have their own account, and will use this to receive their UC. Beyond the Streets told us, however, that some of the most vulnerable women they support do not have their own bank accounts.⁹³ In some instances, they are ineligible to open one (for example, because of criminal convictions). In this situation, some women nominate a third-party account (one not owned by a UC claimant) to have their benefit paid into. This payment can be all that they, and any dependent children, have to live on for the entire month. We heard that the requirement for payments to be made into a bank account can leave vulnerable women at increased risk of financial exploitation. Beyond the Streets said:⁹⁴

Staff report that the majority of our clients do not have their own bank accounts. [...] However Jobcentre Plus is not required to verify third-party bank accounts when nominated by our clients. All services reported instances of women nominating a ‘friend’ or ‘boyfriend’s’ bank account to take receipt of payment. These funds were immediately stolen.

Beyond the Streets concluded that “this financial exploitation of women who are already vulnerable is directly linked to the likelihood of conducting survival sex work and indirect sexual exploitation”.⁹⁵

45. The Department could not tell us how many UC awards are being paid into bank accounts that do not belong to the UC claimant. It said it does “not hold that level of information”.⁹⁶ We asked whether the Department conducts any checks at all on the

93 Beyond the Streets ([UCX0006](#))

94 Beyond the Streets ([UCX0006](#))

95 Beyond the Streets ([UCX0006](#)), [Q56](#) (Laura Seebohm)

96 [Letter from the Minister to the Committee Chair](#), July 2019

identities of non-claimants who are nominated to receive regular UC payments—especially in light of requirements on UC claimants themselves to prove their identities before they can claim the benefit.⁹⁷ Neil Couling asked us in response:⁹⁸

What would you like me to check there—that that person exists?

The Minister subsequently said that if claimants nominate a third-party account for their UC payment, JCP staff would usually ask the owner of the account to attend their appointment with them and would discuss other bank account options with the claimant. He noted, however, that this is not ideal: “the problem in this instance is coercive partners”, who may attend and prevent claimants from disclosing that there is a problem.⁹⁹ Accordingly, the Department does not make attendance by third party account holders mandatory, since that might “require their partner or the perpetrator of any abuse to be involved”.¹⁰⁰ Regular UC payments can, therefore, be made to third-party accounts without any verification of who the account belongs to, and with no attempt to ensure that the claimant will be able to access their money. In contrast, claimants whose accounts are nominated to receive Advance payments, which the Department expects to be repaid, are required to attend JCP to verify their identity, as of September 2019.¹⁰¹ This requirement was introduced following reports, in Summer 2019, of fraud involving Advance payments.¹⁰²

46. Changing Lives told us that there are alternative ways of ensuring that claimants who do not (or cannot) have a bank account receive their money, other than payment into a third-party account.¹⁰³ Payment can be made direct to the claimant, for example, via HMRC’s Payment Exception Service (PES). The PES can be used to collect benefits from any PayPoint outlet, on production of identification.¹⁰⁴ DWP’s guidance to UC decision makers and Work Coaches emphasises that traditional bank accounts are preferred, however. The Gov.uk site states that payment via PES is only available in “very limited circumstances”.¹⁰⁵ Neil Couling explained that the “limited circumstances” are not having, or not having access to, a standard bank account.¹⁰⁶ DWP guidance describes the PES as the “absolute last resort” for payment, placing it after third-party accounts. It says that use of the PES should be accompanied by a “robust conversation with the claimant to establish why they cannot use any of the other payment methods”.¹⁰⁷ Changing Lives reported that awareness of the PES option amongst JCP staff was low.¹⁰⁸ Only a very small number of claims are paid in this way. As of May 2019, 403 UC claims were being paid via the PES.¹⁰⁹

47. Some of the most disadvantaged claimants will not have, or will not be able to open, their own bank account. In these cases, payments can be made direct to the claimant via the Payment Exception Service (PES). Payment via the PES requires claimants to

97 [Q188–190](#) (Will Quince and Neil Couling)

98 [Q189](#) (Neil Couling)

99 [Letter from the Minister to the Committee Chair](#), July 2019

100 *Ibid.*

101 DWP Guidance, [Universal Credit advances](#), updated September 2019

102 Guardian, [Universal Credit scam “leaves claimants up to £1,500 out of pocket”](#), 9 July 2019

103 Changing Lives ([UCX0013](#))

104 Acceptable ID includes passports, driving licences, utility bills, council tax bills or a tenancy agreement.

105 Gov.uk, [Payment Exception Service](#), visited September 2019

106 [Letter from the Minister to the Committee Chair](#), July 2019

107 *Ibid.*

108 Changing Lives ([UCX0013](#))

109 [Letter from the Minister to the Committee Chair](#), July 2019

show identification, usually in a shop, to get their Universal Credit. But DWP guidance for staff emphasises that this is an absolute last resort, and that payment into the bank account of someone who is not part of the claim (either individually or jointly, as a partner) should be considered before the PES. Payment into someone else’s account can mean Universal Credit payments never reach the person or household they were intended for, because they are immediately stolen.

48. The Department now requires claimants whose bank accounts are nominated to receive Universal Credit Advances to verify their identities with Jobcentre Plus. This was a response to reports of fraud involving Advances, over Summer 2019. It carries out no comparable checks on non-claimants whose accounts are nominated to receive regular Universal Credit payments. The Department should take as much care with claimants’ money as it does with its own. Yet, by its own admission, the Department does not know how many Universal Credit awards are being paid to non-claimants, let alone who they are being paid to or whether the claimant is actually able to access their payments. It is a scandal that the Department lacks this basic knowledge about where its money is going.

49. *We recommend that the Department change its guidance to Decision Makers to emphasise that payment of Universal Credit into a non-claimant bank account should be considered the absolute last resort. Decision Makers should, instead, look to use the PES as an alternative for people who do not have a bank account, credit union account or Post Office account. We also recommend the Department identifies claimants who are currently having payments made to a non-claimant account and takes steps to review and, if necessary, amend those arrangements. It should set out a timetable for this work in response to this report.*

The five-week wait and Advance payments

50. Alongside its revised evidence submission, the Minister wrote to us addressing some of the issues raised by our witnesses.¹¹⁰ These included the five week wait for a first Universal Credit payment, and deductions to repay debts from the first, and subsequent payments. Debts may be to third parties (for example, to local authorities) or to the Department itself (including for Advance payments). The Department said that it appreciates that waiting for the first UC payment “can be a challenge”. It continued, however:

On Universal Credit, no one has to wait five weeks to receive their money; advances of up to 100% of their first indicative award are available from day one where needed.

51. The Department also pays two-week “run on” payments of Housing Benefit to claimants in receipt of that benefit who move via “managed migration” onto UC.¹¹¹ Run on payments will be extended to include JSA, ESA and Income Support from 2020. Run ons are not available to new claimants of UC, or to people who migrate to the benefit “naturally”, via a change of circumstance. Claimants of JSA, ESA and Income Support who “managed” migrate before 2020 will be eligible to receive a discretionary hardship payment, comparable to a run on, to ease the transition.

110 [Letter from the Minister to Committee Chair](#), June 2019

111 A “run on” is a non-repayable payment of a claimant’s legacy benefits. It paid alongside UC to help claimants manage during the five week wait.

52. The English Collective of Prostitutes, Changing Lives, Homeless Link and Beyond the Streets told us about the impact of the built-in five week wait for a first payment.¹¹² We heard that the wait is a key factor prompting women to engage in survival sex. Homeless Link told us that repayable Advances are not the solution to this problem.¹¹³ This is because the level at which Universal Credit is paid is simply too low for claimants to be able to meet their basic living costs alongside deductions, which can be up to 40% of the UC standard allowance and which include deductions for Advance payments.¹¹⁴ Homeless Link explained that “the level of monthly benefit is such that repayments push people into debt”.¹¹⁵ Changing Lives said that many of the women they support also have other debts, such as rent arrears. Deductions for these eat further into their UC payments. On receiving UC payments that are “insufficient” due to multiple deductions, women “sell sex as the only option they have to pay for their necessities”.¹¹⁶ Beyond the Streets concluded that although the Advance Payment is:¹¹⁷

Helpful [...] the rate it is paid back needs to be drastically reduced. In addition, Jobcentres need to consider an individual’s other financial commitments before making the repayment schedule.

53. Several organisations supplied us with case studies of women they had supported who had gone into, or gone back into, “survival sex” because the amount of UC they were paid after deductions for Advances and other debts was not enough to live on.¹¹⁸ T told us:

Yes, they do give you an advance, they do give you that. I am not going to say they don’t, they do give you that, but you have to wait six weeks and £250 is not going to last anybody six weeks. Like I am only 21 and I only spend £20 on gas and electric a fortnight, do you know what I mean, and that is cheap. I am trying my best, £30 on shopping, not a penny over, because if I go a penny over I can’t get other stuff that I need, tampons and things, do you know what I mean? That Universal Credit Advance, by the time I got it I had spent it and then I was waiting another three to four weeks for my benefit. Even then when I got my benefit, they were taking £150 off my benefit and I was left with £50.¹¹⁹

54. We heard substantial evidence on the gap between benefit levels and living costs in our inquiry on the Welfare safety net. We concluded that as a result of various freezes and reductions in the generosity of benefits—including UC—since 2010, benefit rates have become divorced from the cost of living. Deductions from already low benefit payments to repay debts and Advances compound this problem, and total deductions are often set at rates that are unaffordable for claimants. Our recommendations in that inquiry focused on restoring the value of benefits, linking their levels to the cost of living, and ensuring

112 English Collective of Prostitutes ([UCX0016](#)), Changing Lives ([UCX0019](#)), Homeless Link ([UCX0012](#)), Beyond the Streets ([UCX0006](#))

113 Homeless Link ([UCX0012](#))

114 Work and Pensions Committee, [Welfare safety net](#), p. 24

115 Homeless Link ([UCX0012](#))

116 Changing Lives ([UCX0013](#))

117 Beyond the Streets ([UCX0006](#))

118 Beyond the Streets ([UCX0006](#)), Changing Lives ([UCX0013](#)), A Way Out ([UCX0017](#)), One 25 ([UCX0001](#))

119 [Q22](#) (T)

any deductions are based on an assessment of affordability for claimants.¹²⁰ We have also recommended that the Department eliminate the five week wait, removing the need for Advance payments, run ons, and discretionary payments.¹²¹

55. We have asked the Department to make an assessment of the cost of “scrapping the five week wait” for all claimants.¹²² It did not provide this. The Department told us that making such an assessment is “difficult” because “there are existing measures already in place to support individuals whilst they wait for their first payment”. These include run ons, discretionary payments, and Advances.¹²³

56. **The five week wait is a fundamental design flaw at the heart of Universal Credit. It plunges too many claimants into debt from day one of their claim—at best, to the Department, and at worst to high cost and unscrupulous lenders. The women we spoke to, and the organisations who support people driven to engage in survival sex, all named the five week wait as a key reason why people were turning or returning to sex work when they moved onto Universal Credit. We have repeatedly recommended that the Department find a way to eliminate the long wait for a first payment. It has so far refused to do so. We reiterate our recommendation that the five week wait must be eliminated.**

57. We have again asked the Department to provide an estimate of the cost of ending the five week wait for a first Universal Credit payment for all claimants. It says this is “difficult”, because it already has measures in place to support claimants financially during the wait. It is not clear to us why the existence of Advance payments, run ons and discretionary support precludes the Department from making an assessment. But however much it is spending now will only increase as more people move to Universal Credit. Advances, run ons and discretionary support are sticking plasters over a fundamental flaw in Universal Credit: the five week wait for a first payment. *We recommend the Department carry out and publish an assessment of the cost of removing the five week wait for all Universal Credit claimants.*

58. Too large a number of Universal Credit claimants are unable to find ways of managing the five week wait and subsequent months. The combination of low rates of benefit and high living costs can mean that living on UC is a constant grind, which is exacerbated by the need to repay the Department. While the five week wait remains, those claimants would benefit substantially from a non-repayable Advance of their first Universal Credit payment. This would smooth the transition to Universal Credit and help to ensure that vulnerable claimants are not pushed into a downward spiral of unmanageable debt.

59. *We recommend that the Department introduce non-repayable Advances of Universal Credit for claimants who would otherwise suffer hardship. This could include, for example:*

- a) *Disabled people or people with long-term health conditions, who often have higher living costs than non-disabled people. This could be extended to include households with disabled children;*

120 Work and Pensions Committee, [Welfare safety net](#), pp.45, 61, 64

121 Work and Pensions Committee, [Welfare safety net](#)

122 [Letter from Amber Rudd MP to Chair](#), Five Week Wait, 30th August 2019

123 [Letter from Amber Rudd MP to Chair](#), Five Week Wait, 30th August 2019

- b) *people or couples who are receiving support from social services or who are able to provide verification by a social worker, or who have had previous social services or other care worker involvement as a child or adult;*
- c) *people with pre-existing rent, third party or Government debts above a certain threshold.*

60. Even after waiting five weeks—or more—for a first payment, many claimants find that the amount they receive is simply not enough to live on. Most benefits for working-age people have been frozen since 2015/16 and have, as a result, become divorced from real household costs. People will continue to be driven to survival sex for as long as benefit rates fail to match the amount of money that they actually need to live on. We reiterate our recommendations that the Government should:

- a) *from 2020/21, increase the rates of frozen benefits by CPI plus 2%. That would mean that benefit rates would, after 4 years, reach the level at which they would have been set if they had not been frozen. From that point, the Department should commit to uprating benefits at least in line with inflation; and*
- b) *produce a medium-term plan for linking the rate at which benefits are set with the real cost of living.*

Prison leavers

61. Organisations that support people who are involved in survival sex or sex work told us about the challenges faced by people who are leaving prison. Homeless Link said that people who are “at risk of destitution” are “at a heightened risk of engaging in survival sex”.¹²⁴ They identified prison leavers as a group that is particularly at risk. Common problems for people wanting to claim UC—such as “poor access to digital technology, delay for [the] first appointment, lack of ID and bank accounts”—can be compounded when people are released from prison with “no access to funding beyond a £46 discharge grant”.¹²⁵ They may also have nowhere to live and a lack of support on release. Our inquiry on *Support for ex-offenders* heard about prisoners “left at the prison gates with only a sleeping bag and tent” or to “fend for themselves”.¹²⁶ Dr Raven Bowen, Chief Executive of National Ugly Mugs, told us that that gap between leaving prison and receiving benefit payments leaves women “so vulnerable” to engaging in “survival sex”.¹²⁷ It is disappointing that our key recommendations on Universal Credit for prison leavers have not been implemented.

62. Our *Support for ex-offenders* inquiry heard that in some instances, the support offered to people leaving prison is good. For example, that inquiry heard about JCP working with prisons to ensure prisoners have a benefits appointment on the day of their release.¹²⁸ The Department has considered allowing prisoners to apply for UC before their release. We heard that concerns around IT security had prevented this from being put in place across the JCP network.¹²⁹ The Minister explained, however, that the Department had conducted

124 Homeless Link ([UCX0012](#))

125 Ibid.

126 Work and Pensions Committee, [Support for ex-offenders](#), Fifth Report of Session 2016–17, HC 58, December 2016, p. 20

127 [Q68](#) (Raven Bowen)

128 Work and Pensions Committee, [Support for ex-offenders](#), 5th Report of Session 2016–17, HC 58, December 2016, pp. 21, 23

129 [Q68](#) (Laura Seebohm)

a further trial of allowing prisoners to complete some of the application stages for UC online, before release, with an appointment at JCP “on the day of release or as soon as possible following release”. To test whether this would work well, the Department placed “Prison Work Coaches” in three resettlement prisons. The Minister said that the results of trial gave the Department “cause for optimism”. In July 2019, it announced it was progressing to the next stage of its trial, testing the new system in two Scottish prisons.¹³⁰

63. Some prison leavers receive good support from DWP. The Department’s intention to improve the support it offers to prison leavers, and its willingness to trial new ways of doing so, is very welcome. But done properly, implementing a new support system will, and should, take time. In the interim, people are all too often leaving prison without appropriate support. This leaves some people with little option but to engage in dangerous or illegal means of making ends meet, including survival sex.

64. We recommend the Department prioritise allowing telephone applications for Universal Credit from prisoners. This would help to ensure that “day 1” of being released from prison coincides with “day 1” of a Universal Credit claim.

Wider support

65. People engaged in survival sex or sex work frequently have complex, overlapping needs. These could include trauma, addictions, histories of or current abuse, and housing problems. Our previous inquiries have emphasised the need for the Department to ensure that it either provides, or effectively signposts claimants towards, specialists who are trained to support people with complex needs.¹³¹ We heard that this group of claimants is no different in that respect. Changing Lives recommended that the Department improve awareness and understanding of trauma and complex needs among staff by training dedicated specialists. They said that this would “would provide a clear pathway for both professionals and clients, and would help support anyone with complex needs, not just women experiencing survival sex”.¹³²

66. In previous inquiries, we have recommended that the Department trains dedicated specialists to offer support to claimants in Jobcentre Plus. For example, in a recommendation subsequently accepted by the Department, we recommended that each Jobcentre should have a domestic abuse specialist to support people who are in, or have been in, abusive relationships.¹³³ We heard that that model would not work for this group of claimants because of the stigma attached to sex work. Niki Adams, spokeswoman for the English Collective of Prostitutes, told us that “special services like that [do not] work, because you then get identified just by the fact that you are accessing those services”.¹³⁴

67. Witnesses identified pockets of good practice in the support the JCP network offers to women who are involved in survival sex, and sex work more widely. For example, Changing Lives said that their support workers had reported “good experiences of working

130 [Letter from the Minister to the Committee Chair](#), July 2019

131 See, for example, [Work and Pensions Committee](#), *The future of Jobcentre Plus*, Second Report of Session 2016–17, HC 57, November 2016, p.8

132 Changing Lives ([UCX0013](#))

133 Work and Pensions Committee, [Universal Credit and domestic abuse](#), 17th Report of Session 2017–2019, HC 1166, August 2018, p. 14

134 [Q86](#) (Niki Adams)

with local Jobcentre Plus teams”.¹³⁵ They reported that often this was based on local staff treating the Changing Lives’ specialist services as a trusted third party with whom the Jobcentre team were allowed to liaise on the client’s behalf. Changing Lives reported that:

This resulted in improvements such as staff being more flexible and lenient about missed appointments, or extending the time of an appointment to accommodate a woman’s needs.¹³⁶

Homeless Link identified “further good work in this area”, citing “Lancashire Women’s Centre having formed partnerships with 26 JCPs in Lancashire and Cumbria, working to support clients coming out of prison with benefits and housing”. Witnesses emphasised, however, that the extent of joint working was inconsistent across the country.¹³⁷

68. We also heard about more formal models of support that could be adapted to women involved in survival sex. For example, Women@thewell, a support organisation based in London, told us about Haringey Council’s “Hidden homelessness worker” (see Box 6).¹³⁸ They suggested that a similar approach might work well for people who are engaged in, or at risk of becoming engaged in, sex work or survival sex.

Box 6: Haringey’s “Hidden Homelessness Worker”

Haringey Council introduced its “Hidden Homelessness Worker” programme in 2018. The Council runs the programme in partnership with St Mungos, a charity that supports people who are homeless or having difficulty with housing, and Jobcentre Plus.

The “Hidden Homelessness Worker”, who is managed by St Mungos, receives direct referrals from Jobcentre Plus for claimants who are having problems with housing. For example, they might be rough sleeping, sofa-surfing, or staying in inappropriate accommodation. They can then be offered focused, specialist support.

This model could work well for people who are vulnerable to becoming involved in survival sex. It could, for example, be extended to include identifying women who are at risk of destitution and are “at an increased risk of involvement in prostitution” as a result.

Source: Women@thewell and <https://www.haringey.gov.uk/news/council-bid-helps-rough-sleepers-autumn>

69. The support that people engaged in survival sex receive varies from Jobcentre to Jobcentre. We heard there are pockets of good practice, especially where Jobcentre Plus works closely with specialist support organisations, and models of support that could serve this cohort well. But it is clear that this is a group of claimants with complex needs, and that the appropriate support will need to be tailored to meet an individual’s needs and will vary depending on where they are in the country. We recommend the Department commission and publish a review on improving services for this group of claimants. In doing so, it must ensure that it engages with and makes full use of the expertise of specialist support organisations, and of claimants’ own lived experiences.

135 Changing Lives ([UCX0019](#)), see also [Q69](#) (Amber Wilson)

136 Changing Lives ([UCX0019](#))

137 Changing Lives ([UCX0019](#)), see also [Q69](#) (Amber Wilson)

138 Women@thewell ([UCX0010](#))

Disclosing sex work to DWP

70. People who have turned to survival sex are likely to find it difficult or impossible to disclose that fact to the Department for Work and Pensions. M told us:

I have currently failed to get any form of benefits because I am too scared to disclose what I do for work, especially because I currently work in an illegal brothel and we have faced police harassment before, so I really can't have it on record anywhere what I do.¹³⁹

We heard evidence that many of those who turned to survival sex were single mothers, who may also fear losing custody of their children.¹⁴⁰

71. The Minister told us that he was aware of this difficulty, saying that:

I am very keen to see how we can link up Jobcentres and some of the charities that do incredible work supporting women in this case, because I am also conscious, and this came out from the evidence from the stakeholders, that people are not always keen to disclose that they have been involved in sex work.¹⁴¹

72. Even if sex workers do feel able to disclose their circumstances to their Work Coach, they may then encounter other problems with UC. It is not clear how income from sex work would be treated for the purposes of assessing entitlement to UC. If people disclosing income from sex work were to be treated as being self-employed, then they would be subject to UC's Minimum Income Floor (MIF): an assumed level of monthly income for calculating benefit payments. Our report on UC and self-employment found that:

Self-employed claimants are treated the same as employees when they are doing well, but differently when they are doing badly.¹⁴²

As a result, those with volatile monthly incomes from self-employment can find themselves worse off than if they were unemployed. That may well create an additional incentive not to disclose income from sex work.

73. In order to provide support to people who are engaged in survival sex, the Department needs to know who they are. It is, however, understandably difficult for people to disclose their circumstances to a Work Coach—especially if they fear that they may be reported to the police or may lose custody of their children. The Minister is alert to these difficulties, and we welcome his efforts to find a solution. We agree with him that there is an important role for charities and support organisations, working with Jobcentres, to play. We recommend that the Department establish an advisory group of agencies who support sex workers, including representation of sex workers, and ask it to make recommendations on:

139 [Q11 \(M\)](#)

140 Name withheld ([UCX0001](#)), Name withheld ([UCX0002](#)), English Collective of Prostitutes ([UCX0016](#)), Nordic Model Now! ([UCX0014](#))

141 [Q100](#) (Will Quince)

142 Work and Pensions Committee, [Universal Credit: Supporting self-employment](#), 11th Report of Session 2017–19, HC 997, May 2018

- *how DWP, through Jobcentres and Work Coaches, can best support people who disclose that they are sex workers, including through referrals to specialist support organisations;*
- *what reassurances the Department could give that any disclosures will not be shared with other government agencies;*
- *how income from sex work could be treated for the purposes of Universal Credit, to avoid creating disincentives to disclosure, such as a reduced entitlement to Universal Credit.*

4 Conclusion

74. This inquiry was concerned, primarily, with the experience of a relatively small cohort of claimants: one whose needs DWP has not, seemingly, been focused on to date. The key to getting support right for this, and other groups of claimants with complex, specialist needs, will be listening to and seeking out evidence from lived experience and the front line. This applies not just in Universal Credit, but across DWP’s working age services.

75. The Department’s initial engagement with our inquiry was defensive, trite and superficial. We are grateful for the Minister’s intervention, which helped to ensure that we, and the organisations and individuals that gave evidence to us, received a more meaningful response. There is still work to do to establish what would work best in providing support to this group across DWP’s services. It is worth DWP trying to find out, however, especially since measures that would help this group would also likely help other vulnerable claimants. Now that the Department has acknowledged that there is a problem, it must take steps to resolve it.

Conclusions and recommendations

Evidence from the frontline

1. The Department’s initial written evidence submission to our inquiry sought to disprove the presence of a “direct causative link” between Universal Credit and “survival sex”. In taking this approach, it missed the wider point. The fact that people with complex needs and precarious financial situations turned to sex work before Universal Credit does not mean that the design of Universal Credit does not present additional problems for people who are already vulnerable. (Paragraph 16)
2. The Department’s initial submission displayed little interest in the lived experience of claimants and would-be claimants. People with first hand, personal experience told us and widely available media sources that Universal Credit was a factor in their decisions to turn to, or return to, sex work. The Department also chose not to make use of the expertise and experience of multiple support organisations. Its initial written response was defensive, dismissive, and trite. (Paragraph 17)
3. We are glad that the Minister accepted our invitation to sit in on our private evidence session with B, K, T and M: four women who are involved in sex work due, in part, to problems with Universal Credit and the wider benefits system. The Department’s invitation to the organisations that we heard from to attend a meeting to discuss our inquiry was also welcome, if overdue. It is regrettable that the Department, on realising it had little understanding of the issue on the ground, did not make contact with specialist organisations before it made its submission to our inquiry or in response to earlier warnings from welfare and other organisations. We have found those organisations keen to engage constructively. We hope that the Department has, belatedly, managed to obtain a better understanding of the issue than it exhibited in its first written submission. But the quality of DWP’s responses to pressing, urgent evidence from the frontline should not be dependent on topics catching the eye of individual ministers. DWP needs to improve the way that it systematically gathers, uses, and responds to frontline evidence and claimants’ “lived experience” of UC. (Paragraph 22)
4. *We recommend that the Department sets out in response to this report the key lessons that it took from its June 2019 meeting with stakeholders supporting people involved in “survival sex”. Alongside this, we recommend that the Department sets out a set of clear, measurable actions and next steps that it is taking as a result, including through Jobcentre Plus and Work Coaches specifically.* (Paragraph 23)
5. The Department says that the support organisations we heard from are not amongst its existing stakeholders, and that it had not been lobbied on the issue of survival sex. Given that this issue had been raised with the then Secretary of State on the floor of the House of Commons in October 2018, this claim is baffling. When it is fully rolled out, Universal Credit will support eight and half million people. Some of them—like some of the women we heard from—will have very specific, complex circumstances and needs that can only be met through specialist support. The organisations providing that support are often small, local, and not

orientated towards extensive public affairs work. The Department’s underwhelming initial response to this inquiry illustrates that it cannot afford to listen only to the organisations with the largest resources targeting Parliament. (Paragraph 24)

6. The Department’s media communications, and statements from a former Secretary of State, suggest that it is content to present positive individual experiences as true representations of Universal Credit, even in the face of evidence that those positive experiences are not universal. But it is hesitant to accept that individuals’ poor experiences might indicate wider problems in the system. It should not be beyond the Department to understand that claimants can genuinely have both very positive and very negative experiences with its benefits. (Paragraph 30)
7. Frontline evidence and lived experience can provide early warnings on wider problems with DWP’s systems. This is particularly valuable in helping the Department understand and identify specific problems facing small groups of claimants, that may be lost in higher level data. Failing to use evidence from the frontline and lived experience effectively is not just insulting to organisations and individuals who take the time to try to tell the Department what is wrong and to improve Universal Credit. It puts claimants at risk, and deprives the Department of the opportunity to ensure that Universal Credit is achieving its own aim of supporting some of the most vulnerable people in the country. (Paragraph 31)
8. *We recommend that the Department updates and publishes a revised Universal Credit Evaluation Framework. This should detail how the Department will systematically seek out and respond to evidence from frontline organisations (including those who are not amongst its usual stakeholders) and claimants themselves. The new Framework should also set out clearly how the evaluation findings will be treated in making future decisions on Universal Credit: for example, the Department’s decision on whether to accelerate “managed migration” of legacy benefit claimants to Universal Credit from 2020.* (Paragraph 32)

Universal Credit and survival sex: contributing issues

9. The Universal Credit digital service has great potential. In time, it could reduce DWP’s operating and staffing costs, and offer claimants a convenient, modern way of managing their benefits. But some claimants will struggle with aspects of the digital service. Others will be unable to use it at all, either temporarily or ever. People should not be put off claiming benefits to which they are entitled simply because they struggle with computers, or cannot afford the cost of maintaining their claim online. (Paragraph 38)
10. The Department says that non-digital management of Universal Credit claims is possible via telephone, face-to-face in Jobcentre Plus, or home visit for claimants that need it. It does not promote the latter two options, and does not offer any guidance to its Decision Makers or claimants on when alternative claim management should be considered. Given this, it is difficult to see how the Department can be confident that it is providing the support that claimants need. The experiences of our witnesses and some of our own constituents suggests there is a significant gap between what

DWP says is available, and what claimants actually receive. The Department could do much more to ensure that its staff deliver a consistent service, and that claimants know about and can access the support that it offers. (Paragraph 42)

11. *We recommend the Department take steps to improve awareness of telephone and face-to-face Universal Credit claim management, and to ensure that the policy intent of providing alternatives to people who struggle with the digital service is being met. Specifically, the Department should:*
 - a) *Publicise the availability of face-to-face claim management (either at home or in Jobcentre Plus) on Gov.uk, Understanding Universal Credit, via Help to Claim, letters and other direct communications with claimants and via posters and leaflets in Jobcentre Plus;*
 - b) *develop clear guidance for Work Coaches on when alternative claim management should be put in place;*
 - c) *centrally collect and publish data on: the number of requests for telephone or face-to-face management; the number of requests accepted and in place; and the reasons why claims are accepted or rejected.*

We would expect these measures to reduce the number of people who are eligible for, but not currently claiming, Universal Credit because they struggle with the digital system. The Department should set out, in response to this report, a measurable target for reducing that number and the timescale within which it will be achieved. (Paragraph 43)

12. Some of the most disadvantaged claimants will not have, or will not be able to open, their own bank account. In these cases, payments can be made direct to the claimant via the Payment Exception Service (PES). Payment via the PES requires claimants to show identification, usually in a shop, to get their Universal Credit. But DWP guidance for staff emphasises that this is an absolute last resort, and that payment into the bank account of someone who is not part of the claim (either individually or jointly, as a partner) should be considered before the PES. Payment into someone else's account can mean Universal Credit payments never reach the person or household they were intended for, because they are immediately stolen. (Paragraph 47)
13. The Department now requires claimants whose bank accounts are nominated to receive Universal Credit Advances to verify their identities with Jobcentre Plus. This was a response to reports of fraud involving Advances, over Summer 2019. It carries out no comparable checks on non-claimants whose accounts are nominated to receive regular Universal Credit payments. The Department should take as much care with claimants' money as it does with its own. Yet, by its own admission, the Department does not know how many Universal Credit awards are being paid to non-claimants, let alone who they are being paid to or whether the claimant is actually able to access their payments. It is a scandal that the Department lacks this basic knowledge about where its money is going. (Paragraph 48)

14. *We recommend that the Department change its guidance to Decision Makers to emphasise that payment of Universal Credit into a non-claimant bank account should be considered the absolute last resort. Decision Makers should, instead, look to use the PES as an alternative for people who do not have a bank account, credit union account or Post Office account. We also recommend the Department identifies claimants who are currently having payments made to a non-claimant account and takes steps to review and, if necessary, amend those arrangements. It should set out a timetable for this work in response to this report. (Paragraph 49)*
15. The five week wait is a fundamental design flaw at the heart of Universal Credit. It plunges too many claimants into debt from day one of their claim—at best, to the Department, and at worst to high cost and unscrupulous lenders. The women we spoke to, and the organisations who support people driven to engage in survival sex, all named the five week wait as a key reason why people were turning or returning to sex work when they moved onto Universal Credit. We have repeatedly recommended that the Department find a way to eliminate the long wait for a first payment. It has so far refused to do so. We reiterate our recommendation that the five week wait must be eliminated. (Paragraph 56)
16. We have again asked the Department to provide an estimate of the cost of ending the five week wait for a first Universal Credit payment for all claimants. It says this is “difficult”, because it already has measures in place to support claimants financially during the wait. It is not clear to us why the existence of Advance payments, run ons and discretionary support precludes the Department from making an assessment. But however much it is spending now will only increase as more people move to Universal Credit. Advances, run ons and discretionary support are sticking plasters over a fundamental flaw in Universal Credit: the five week wait for a first payment. *We recommend the Department carry out and publish an assessment of the cost of removing the five week wait for all Universal Credit claimants. (Paragraph 57)*
17. Too large a number of Universal Credit claimants are unable to find ways of managing the five week wait and subsequent months. The combination of low rates of benefit and high living costs can mean that living on UC is a constant grind, which is exacerbated by the need to repay the Department. While the five week wait remains, those claimants would benefit substantially from a non-repayable Advance of their first Universal Credit payment. This would smooth the transition to Universal Credit and help to ensure that vulnerable claimants are not pushed into a downward spiral of unmanageable debt. (Paragraph 58)
18. *We recommend that the Department introduce non-repayable Advances of Universal Credit for claimants who would otherwise suffer hardship. This could include, for example:*
 - d) *Disabled people or people with long-term health conditions, who often have higher living costs than non-disabled people. This could be extended to include households with disabled children;*
 - e) *people or couples who are receiving support from social services or who are able to provide verification by a social worker, or who have had previous social services or other care worker involvement as a child or adult;*

- f) *people with pre-existing rent, third party or Government debts above a certain threshold.* (Paragraph 59)
19. Even after waiting five weeks—or more—for a first payment, many claimants find that the amount they receive is simply not enough to live on. Most benefits for working-age people have been frozen since 2015/16 and have, as a result, become divorced from real household costs. People will continue to be driven to survival sex for as long as benefit rates fail to match the amount of money that they actually need to live on. We reiterate our recommendations that the Government should:
- g) *from 2020/21, increase the rates of frozen benefits by CPI plus 2%. That would mean that benefit rates would, after 4 years, reach the level at which they would have been set if they had not been frozen. From that point, the Department should commit to uprating benefits at least in line with inflation; and*
- h) *produce a medium-term plan for linking the rate at which benefits are set with the real cost of living.* (Paragraph 60)
20. Some prison leavers receive good support from DWP. The Department’s intention to improve the support it offers to prison leavers, and its willingness to trial new ways of doing so, is very welcome. But done properly, implementing a new support system will, and should, take time. In the interim, people are all too often leaving prison without appropriate support. This leaves some people with little option but to engage in dangerous or illegal means of making ends meet, including survival sex. (Paragraph 63)
21. *We recommend the Department prioritise allowing telephone applications for Universal Credit from prisoners. This would help to ensure that “day 1” of being released from prison coincides with “day 1” of a Universal Credit claim.* (Paragraph 64)
22. The support that people engaged in survival sex receive varies from Jobcentre to Jobcentre. We heard there are pockets of good practice, especially where Jobcentre Plus works closely with specialist support organisations, and models of support that could serve this cohort well. But it is clear that this is a group of claimants with complex needs, and that the appropriate support will need to be tailored to meet an individual’s needs and will vary depending on where they are in the country. *We recommend the Department commission and publish a review on improving services for this group of claimants. In doing so, it must ensure that it engages with and makes full use of the expertise of specialist support organisations, and of claimants’ own lived experiences.* (Paragraph 69)
23. In order to provide support to people who are engaged in survival sex, the Department needs to know who they are. It is, however, understandably difficult for people to disclose their circumstances to a Work Coach—especially if they fear that they may be reported to the police or may lose custody of their children. The Minister is alert to these difficulties, and we welcome his efforts to find a solution. We agree with him that there is an important role for charities and support organisations, working with Jobcentres, to play. *We recommend that the Department establish an advisory group of agencies who support sex workers, including representation of sex workers, and ask it to make recommendations on:*

- i) *how DWP, through Jobcentres and Work Coaches, can best support people who disclose that they are sex workers, including through referrals to specialist support organisations;*
- j) *what reassurances the Department could give that any disclosures will not be shared with other government agencies;*
- k) *how income from sex work could be treated for the purposes of Universal Credit, to avoid creating disincentives to disclosure, such as a reduced entitlement to Universal Credit. (Paragraph 73)*

Conclusion

- 24. This inquiry was concerned, primarily, with the experience of a relatively small cohort of claimants: one whose needs DWP has not, seemingly, been focused on to date. The key to getting support right for this, and other groups of claimants with complex, specialist needs, will be listening to and seeking out evidence from lived experience and the front line. This applies not just in Universal Credit, but across DWP’s working age services. (Paragraph 74)
- 25. The Department’s initial engagement with our inquiry was defensive, trite and superficial. We are grateful for the Minister’s intervention, which helped to ensure that we, and the organisations and individuals that gave evidence to us, received a more meaningful response. There is still work to do to establish what would work best in providing support to this group across DWP’s services. It is worth DWP trying to find out, however, especially since measures that would help this group would also likely help other vulnerable claimants. Now that the Department has acknowledged that there is a problem, it must take steps to resolve it. (Paragraph 75)

Annex: Written evidence submitted by the Department for Work and Pensions

Written evidence submitted by the Department for Work and Pensions

The Government made two submissions of evidence to this inquiry. The differences between the two submissions are marked in the text below.

Further written evidence from The Department for Work and Pensions (UCX0018) Select Committee

2019 Inquiry: Universal Credit and Survival Sex

The Department ~~takes seriously~~~~for Work and Pensions draws~~ the evidence presented~~Committee's attention~~ to the Committee that some claimants~~following as part of their inquiry on the link between~~ Universal Credit may feel the need to become involved in sex work, and "Survival Sex".

The Department is committed to providing a safety net for the most vulnerable in society ~~and~~~~The Department~~ works closely with other Government Departments and with stakeholders to support these individuals and to move them into other work where ~~and~~ when they are able. We are committed to ensuring that no one finds themselves in the position in which they feel they are forced into selling, or exchanging, sex in order to survive, prostitution. We are of course extremely concerned to hear of individuals~~women~~ who feel that they have no other choice but to turn to survival sex. ~~The Department~~~~We~~ would be very grateful for the opportunity to look into any individual cases that the Committee is able to refer to us, to help us to better understand the circumstances which have led to this concerning outcome, especially those cases where Universal Credit is believed to have led to the claimant taking this route.

The Department for Work and Pensions would like to draw the Committee's attention to the following as part of their inquiry on the link between Universal Credit and Survival Sex.

Survival Sex - The Data

1. There is a paucity of reliable objective evidence given that both sex workers~~prostitutes~~ and their users are reluctant to discuss their activity, a fact commonly acknowledged in other studies of prostitution or sex work.¹ The Department welcomes the Committee's call for evidence from those with lived experience and from those groups who support those involved in sex work and we hope to engage positively with these stakeholders. We will, of course, consider the evidence presented to the Committee about any potential

¹ 'Prostitution', Home Affairs Committee report, Third Report of the session 2016-17, June 2016, p. 8 - <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmhaff/26/26.pdf>

~~correlation between Universal Credit and survival sex.² Anecdote can never be the basis for a judgment on a direct link between two factors.~~

2. The University of Bristol has been commissioned by the Home Office to develop a typology of prostitution as it operates currently in England and Wales and to identify robust sources for estimating the prevalence of those involved.³ We believe that this will be helpful in establishing data and evidence outside of anecdote and will support more detailed consideration of the facts more generally, although for the reasons set out below we believe these would have wider societal causal effects. Unfortunately, this typology will not be available in time for this inquiry.

A bigger issue

3. We know that those involved in the sex industry in any capacity often have wider support needs, for example:- health issues, addiction, and mental health problems, whether pre-existing or caused by their involvement. The House of Commons Home Affairs Committee registers this complex mix of cause and effect in its third report into Prostitution (2016/17)

*“Some organisations which already provide services to support women working in prostitution, or those who wish to exit, described the vulnerability of their clients, the barriers they face and their wide support needs. For example, Nia, a charity providing accommodation, advice and exit support, explained that women involved in prostitution faced a range of barriers, including money, housing, a legacy of childhood violence, coercion, mental and physical health issues, problematic substance abuse, having entered prostitution at an early age, lack of qualifications and having multiple criminal records.”*⁴

4. The APPG on Prostitution and the Global Sex Trade report ‘Shifting the Burden’ in 2014 further supported this finding, mentioning that a “prevalent trend reported to the Inquiry was experience of sexual abuse as a child” with the Oral Evidence given by the East London Rape Crisis Service, highlighting that point:

*“our experience is that women begin to have the experiences that lead them into prostitution at a very, very young age and well below the age of 18 in many cases”.*⁵

² ‘Prostitution’, Home Affairs Committee report, Third Report of the session 2016-17, June 2016, p. 8 – <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmhaff/26/26.pdf>

³ <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/news/2018/march/prostitution-project.html>

⁴ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmhaff/26/26.pdf>

⁵ ‘Shifting the Burden’, Inquiry to assess the operation of the current legal settlement on prostitution in England and Wales’, March 2014, All-Party Parliamentary Group on Prostitution and the Global Sex Trade, accessible at: <https://appgprostitution.files.wordpress.com/2015/09/appg-prostitution-shifting-the-burden-inquiry.pdf>, p. 32

The same enquiry heard from the UK Network of Sex Worker Projects who stated that:

"the biggest issue that forces women out onto the street in our street UK based population are drug and alcohol issues".

5. The 'Paying the Price' report identified common characteristics of those involved in sex workprostitution as: having experienced abuse; having experienced difficult childhoods (low school attendance/spent time in care); homelessness and problematic drug use.⁶
6. The evidence above does not state that these factors are attributable to the receipt of benefits, but it could be assumed that those people experiencing these issues may be more likely to be in receipt of benefits in the first place.

Not a new issue

7. This does not diminish the seriousness of the issue, but The suggestion that poverty generally associated with the welfare system can sometimes lead some people into (or back into) sex workprostitution or ~~other kinds of~~ "survival sex" is not new, and ~~certainly~~ not unique to Universal Credit:-

"Well, yes, I am ashamed [of being a prostitute] because if you can't find much work, which I can't, and you're threatened with getting your electricity and gas cut off, and you're not getting enough money from social security to live on, there's nothing else you can do".

Interview with unidentified sex workerprostitute, Sheffield, circa 1977, reshow on BBC4BB4 26 March 2019.

8. A 2008 Report by Changing Lives showed that of the female sex workers they interviewed, 71% of them were in receipt of Income Support, with a further 22% claiming JSA ⁷ - this clearly demonstrates the issue and linkages with welfare benefits pre-dates Universal Credit and cannot sensibly be the result of any specific benefit.
9. There may be a partial link to lower incomes in general. In the aftermath of the 'credit crunch', in May 2013, the Independent reported that due to the stagnation of wages that "increasing numbers of women have turned to prostitution to support themselves".⁸ Some of these women, who were outside

⁶ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/16_07_04_paying.pdf, p.11.

⁷ Changing Lives (Charity) Report, "Hidden for survival: Peer research into the lives of sex workers within Newcastle, Gateshead, Sunderland, South Tyneside and North Tyneside", February 2008. – p. 20.

⁸ Article can be accessed through <http://prostitutescollective.net/2013/05/prostitutes-and-the-recession-how-david-cameron%E2%80%99s-cuts-are-affecting-british-women/>

of the welfare system, were seemingly unable to support themselves on a lower wage.

10. In addition, there is some evidence to show that in some cases, the money that an individual is able to earn to supplement a welfare income is far beyond what would be achievable on any kind of benefit, as this media testimony from a mother who claims that benefits forced her onto the streets shows:

“What the kids want, they get. But it has to be paid for. My boyfriend...thinks I work in a strip bar. I can earn £450 a night.”⁹

11. Media evidence also suggests that the latter term ‘survival sex’ is not a new phenomenon. A recent article in the Evening Telegraph in Dundee recounted the experience of a Lithuanian family who migrated to Scotland ten years ago and who had to [resortreport](#) to the wife and mother selling sex to survive.¹⁰

12. A trawl of social media, again illustrates the existence of these practices well before the introduction of Universal Credit (of note, though, is the scarcity of social media and other internet stories pre-dating the growth in popularity of the internet as a discussion forum – which may mean that Universal Credit stories can be more easily found):

“I am a survivor of prostitution...I have no other means of making money, I rely on benefits but it is not enough...I am on JSA.”¹¹

13. None of this proves or shows that ~~prostitution or~~ survival sex is not a tragic, or real phenomenon. What it does show though, is that it is misleading to point to Universal Credit as the [direct](#) cause, when allegations of a link with [poverty and](#) a lack of welfare support generally have been made for a long time (and even this, as shown above, cannot be [attributed as a sole cause](#)). [The Department recognises that there will be cases of claimants on Universal Credit resorting to sex work to increase their income and is grateful to the Committee for highlighting this issue. However, it is important that this been seen in its wider context as set out above, so that a fuller understanding of the issue can be reached.](#)~~robustly attributed as a sole cause~~.

Links to current topics

14. A rise in prostitution or “survival sex” has been linked variously to the news topics of the day over time. Some specific examples are:

⁹ <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/universal-credit-forces-mum-prostitution-13612610> 19 November 2018: Mum of two, aged 29, who claims a cut in her benefit forced her onto the streets

¹⁰ <https://www.eveningtelegraph.co.uk/fp/ewan-gurr-i-first-heard-about-survival-sex-10-years-ago-it-is-not-going-away/>

¹¹ https://www.mumsnet.com/Talk/womens_rights/1857137-Prostitution-and-poverty 18/9/2013

- The removal of the Educational Maintenance Allowance and the removal of student grants¹²;
- Existing migrant sex workers from elsewhere in the EU relocating to the UK – attributed to better earnings¹³
- The London 2012 Olympics¹⁴
- The arrival of “foreign” football fans, in an article published one week prior to Euro 2016¹⁵
- A US study showing a link between an increase in prostitution and the introduction of Craigslist in a country¹⁶
- Air bnb enabling “Pop Up” brothels¹⁷

This suggests~~It is clear~~ that a correlation can often be found ~~where it is looked for,~~ however an actual causal link ~~can rarely~~cannot be ~~shown~~found.

Conclusion

15. There is little reliable data to illustrate any specific cause and effect in this space. Over time, and in many countries, sex work increases and decreases. It is often linked to wider economic conditions, and much evidence shows that there are multiple barriers facing those entering or returning to ~~prostitution or~~ sex work. However, it is very clear that “social security” or “welfare” more broadly has long been blamed for a rise ~~in prostitution or~~ sex work. This can literally be tracked back as far as research allows, and links can be often found where they are sought.

16. On the basis of current evidence, it ~~appears over simplistic~~is wrong to suggest that there is a ~~direct~~ causative link between Universal Credit specifically and an increase in ~~prostitution or~~ survival sex. We, of course, welcome the work of the Committee in exploring this issue further, and will carefully consider the evidence submitted as part of this enquiry, along with the Committee’s report.

17. The Department has always been committed to supporting vulnerable claimants. The benefits system is designed to provide a safety net to ensure that no one finds themselves in the position in which they feel they are forced into ~~sex work~~prostitution. We take reports that this may have happened extremely seriously, and would welcome the opportunity to look into individual cases.

¹² <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/sex/findom-webcamming-sexting-lectures-rise-student-digital-sex/>

¹³ <https://www.nottinghampost.com/news/local-news/gigantic-rise-migrant-sex-workers-886509>

¹⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-18174387>

¹⁵ https://sports.vice.com/en_uk/article/78nvyy/football-fans-and-prostitution-the-myth-that-wont-go-away

¹⁶ <https://twin-cities.umn.edu/news-events/research-brief-introduction-craigslist-increased-prostitution-across-us>

¹⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcthree/article/1e40a4e9-5206-4c10-9d76-d5423471db5e>

| 17-18. June 2019

Formal minutes

Wednesday 16 October 2019

Members present:

Rt Hon Frank Field, in the Chair

Heidi Allen Steve McCabe

Neil Coyle Nigel Mills

Rosie Duffield Chris Stephens

Ruth George Derek Thomas

Draft Report (*Universal Credit and “survival sex”*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 75 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Annex agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Second Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till Wednesday 23 October at 9.30am

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee’s website.

Wednesday 22 May 2019

B, K, M and T

[Q1–48](#)

Laura Seebohm, Executive Director, Innovation and Policy, Changing Lives, **Dr Raven Bowen**, Chief Executive Officer, National Ugly Mugs, **Sarah McManus**, Chief Executive Officer, A Way Out, and **Amber Wilson**, Business Development and Marketing Manager, Basis Yorkshire;

[Q49–73](#)

Helen McDonald, Member of the Management Committee, Nordic Model Now!, **Blair Buchanan**, Activist and Organiser, representing SWARM, and **Niki Adams**, Spokesperson, English Collective of Prostitutes

[Q74–93](#)

Wednesday 12 June 2019

Will Quince MP, Minister for Family Support, Housing and Child Maintenance, **Neil Couling**, Universal Credit Senior Responsible Owner, and **Donna Ward**, Policy Director, Children, Families and Disadvantage, Department for Work and Pensions

[Q94–233](#)

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee’s website.

UCX numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 APPG on Prostitution and the Global Sex Trade ([UCX0005](#))
- 2 Away Out ([UCX0017](#))
- 3 Beyond the Streets ([UCX0006](#))
- 4 Changing Lives ([UCX0013](#))
- 5 Changing Lives ([UCX0019](#))
- 6 Department for Work and Pensions ([UCX0015](#))
- 7 Department for Work and Pensions ([UCX0018](#))
- 8 English Collective of Prostitutes ([UCX0016](#))
- 9 Homeless Link ([UCX0012](#))
- 10 Name Withheld ([UCX0002](#))
- 11 Name Withheld ([UCX0001](#))
- 12 Name Withheld ([UCX0003](#))
- 13 Name Withheld ([UCX0004](#))
- 14 National Ugly Mugs (NUM) ([UCX0007](#))
- 15 Nordic Model Now ([UCX0014](#))
- 16 One25 ([UCX0011](#))
- 17 SWARM (Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement) ([UCX0009](#))
- 18 women@thewell ([UCX0010](#))

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee’s website.

Session 2019–20

First Report	Bereavement Support Payment	HC 85
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Session 2017–19

First Report	Universal Credit: the six week wait	HC 336
Second Report	A framework for modern employment	HC 352
Third Report	Protecting pensions against scams: priorities for the Financial Guidance and Claims Bill	HC 404
Fourth Report	PIP and ESA assessments: claimant experiences	HC 355
Fifth Report	Universal Credit Project Assessment Reviews	HC 740
Sixth Report	British Steel Pension Scheme	HC 828
Seventh Report	PIP and ESA assessments	HC 829
Eighth Report	European Social Fund	HC 848
Ninth Report	Pensions freedoms	HC 917
Tenth Report	Assistive technology	HC 673
Eleventh Report	Universal Credit: supporting self-employment	HC 997
Twelfth Report	Carillion	HC 769
Fourteenth Report	Appointment of Professor Sir Ian Diamond as Chair of the Social Security Advisory Committee	HC 971
Fifteenth Report	The Motability Scheme	HC 847
Sixteenth Report	Collective defined contribution pensions	HC 580
Seventeenth Report	Universal Credit and Domestic abuse	HC 1166
Eighteenth Report	Universal Support	HC 1667
Nineteenth Report	Benefit Sanctions	HC 955
Twentieth Report	Universal Credit: managed migration	HC 1762
Twenty First Report	Universal Credit: support for disabled people	HC 1770
Twenty-Second Report	Universal Credit: Childcare	HC 1771
Twenty-Third Report	Two-child limit	HC 1540
Twenty-Fourth Report	The benefit cap	HC 1477

Twenty-Fifth Report	Universal Credit: childcare: Government Response to the Committee’s Twenty-Second Report	HC 2078
Twenty-Sixth Report	Universal Credit: tests for managed migration	HC 2091
Twenty-Seventh Report	Universal Credit: natural migration	HC 1884
Twenty-Eighth Report	Welfare safety net	HC 1539
Twenty-Ninth Report	Pension costs and transparency	HC 1476
Thirtieth Report	Overpayments of Carer’s Allowance	HC 1772
Thirty-First Report	Welfare policy in Northern Ireland	HC 2100
First Special Report	Child Maintenance Service: Government’s Response to the Committee’s Fourteenth Report of Session 2016–17	HC 354
Second Special Report	Self-employment and the gig economy: Government Response to the Committee’s Thirteenth Report of Session 2016–17	HC 644
Third Special Report	Disability employment gap: Government Response to the Committee’s Seventh Report of Session 2016–17	HC 652
Fourth Special Report	Victims of modern slavery: Government Response to the Committee’s Twelfth Report of Session 2016–17	HC 672
Fifth Special Report	Employment Opportunities for Young People: Government response to the Committee’s Ninth Report of Session 2016–17	HC 872
Sixth Special Report	Protecting pensions against scams: priorities for the Financial Guidance and Claims Bill: Government Response to the Committee’s Third Report	HC 858
Seventh Special Report	A framework for modern employment: Government response to the Second Report of the Work and Pensions Committee and First Report of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee	HC 966
Eighth Special Report	PIP and ESA assessments: Government Response to the Committee’s Seventh Report	HC 986
Ninth Special Report	British Steel Pension Scheme: The Pensions Regulator Response to the Committee’s Sixth Report	HC 987
Tenth Special Report	Pension freedoms: Government response to the Committee’s Ninth Report	HC 1231
Eleventh Special Report	Carillion: Responses from Interested Parties to the Committee’s Twelfth Report	HC 1392
Twelfth Special Report	Universal Credit: supporting self employment: Government Response to the Committee’s Eleventh Report	HC 1420

Thirteenth Special Report	Employment Support for Carers: Government Response to the Committee’s Thirteenth Report	HC 1463
Fourteenth Special Report	Carillion: Government Response to the Committee’s Twelfth Report	HC 1456
Fifteenth Special Report	Assistive technology: Government Response to the Committee’s Tenth Report	HC 1538
Sixteenth Special Report	Universal credit and domestic abuse: Government response to the Committee’s Seventeenth Report	HC 1611
Seventeenth Special Report	Universal Support: Government Response to the Committee’s Eighteenth Report of Session 2017–19	HC 1862
Eighteenth Special Report	Universal Credit: managed migration: Government Response to the Committee’s Twentieth Report of Session 2017–19	HC 1901
Nineteenth Special Report	Benefit sanctions: Government Response to the Committee’s Nineteenth Report of Session 2017–19	HC 1949
Twentieth Special Report	Universal Credit: support for disabled people: Government Response to the Committee’s Twenty- First Report of Session 2017–19	HC 1998
Twenty-First Special Report	Two-child limit: Government Response to the Committee’s Twenty-Third Report	HC 2174
Twenty-Second Special Report	The benefit cap: Government Response to the Committee’s Twenty-Fourth Report	HC 2209
Twenty-Third Special Report	Universal Credit: childcare: Government Response to the Committee’s Twenty-Fifth Report	HC 2422
Twenty-Fourth Special Report	Universal Credit: tests for managed migration: Government Response to the Committee’s Twenty-Sixth Report	HC 2091