

Moving claimants to Universal Credit from other working age benefits, August 2018

Tenovus Cancer Care is Wales' leading cancer charity. Our aims are simple. We want to help prevent, treat and find a cure for cancer.

We do this by offering support, advice and treatment to cancer patients and their loved ones. We also promote healthy lifestyles and fund cancer research to find new ways to prevent it, diagnose it, and treat it.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to this important consultation which will cover 3 broad topics:

- Capacity issues;
- Competency issues;
- Specific issues with current system.

Capacity issues

Identification

Universal Credit will require new claimants to verify their identity.

Due to the nature of their relationship with us, a significant proportion of Tenovus Cancer Care clients are potentially vulnerable. Therefore attending a Job Centre in order to verify their identity has and will be problematic due to a number of health issues including frailty and suppressed immune systems. Some clients have also experienced significant delays in accessing a home visit in order to complete the verification process, while the Online ID verification has also been known to be of intermittent success and of limited accessibility to some less digitally engaged clients. Throughout this period clients have no income while they wait for their ID to be verified.

It is not currently clear whether this will apply to migrated claimants. If this is the case, Tenovus Cancer Care would be concerned regarding any potential delays in ID verification and subsequent receipt of benefits by our clients (see below).

Competency issues

At present there appears to be a significant knowledge gap among DWP advisors regarding the implementation of Universal Credit. Tenovus Cancer Care believes that this places our vulnerable clients at risk and is thus something we would urge the UK Government to address prior to the proposed migration.

Housing Benefit

In instances where the only relevant benefit currently received by clients is Housing Benefit, there will nevertheless still be a requirement to move over to Universal Credit. There is anecdotal evidence of employed people having work-seeking conditions attached to their Universal Credit claim despite, as a

result of their cancer, being too ill to work. This appears to be in error. Tenovus Cancer Care would be concerned that the prevalence of such instances might be amplified in the course of the proposed migration with more claimants having work-seeking conditions inappropriately applied to their Universal Credit claim, were this not addressed.

Requirement to seek work

The main relevant benefit for the majority of working-age clients of Tenovus Cancer Care is Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). Clients receive this benefit if they are of working age but are unable to work as a result of their cancer diagnosis. The vast majority of our clients have chemotherapy and/or radiotherapy and thus are placed in the 'Support Group' of ESA. Consequently there is no requirement to send in sick notes to the DWP as it has been accepted that they are having cancer treatment.

Despite the incredibly vulnerable physical and emotional position in which many Tenovus Cancer Care clients find themselves there is evidence that claimants are being asked to attend meetings at the Job Centre, if their Work Coach deems it appropriate, and/or are being telephoned weekly and being asked to give two examples that they are taking to 'get well'.

Additionally claimants who are seeking to claim housing costs are being requested to job-search for 35 hours per week, irrespective of their personal circumstances, for example if they are still gainfully employed, but off work long-term sick and claiming ESA.

Specific issues with current system

Requirement to seek work

Tenovus Cancer Care would be concerned were there to be any increased requirement for cancer patients to engage with the DWP as a result of the proposed migration. At a time when they are too unwell to do so, and/or have suppressed immune systems, engaging in home visits, attending the JobCentre or being asked to undertake Work Capability Assessments would place our clients at risk.

Payment Delays due to ID Requirements

Claimants who, as a result of their inability of attend the Jobcentre, require a home visit for ID verification face a longer wait to receive their payments. This is clearly disadvantageous to our clients at a time in their lives when they are incredible vulnerable.

Implicit Consent

Tenovus Cancer Care employs a number of dedicated Cancer Support Advisors (CSAs) who are on hand to help navigate our clients through the often daunting world of the benefits system, at a time when they are incredibly vulnerable. For the 'legacy benefits' eg ESA, our CSAs had previously been able to speak to the DWP on behalf of our clients.

Since the launch of Universal Credit we can no longer automatically do this. For many clients, having a CSA present is logistically unfeasible or occasionally inadvisable on health grounds. The provision of consent via their online journal is often impractical for less digitally-engaged clients, particularly if the consent provided is not adequately specific. Vulnerable clients are being placed at increased disadvantage by being unable to leverage such support from us as a result of these changes.

Financial Hardship

At a time in their lives when they need it most clients of Tenovus Cancer are often reliant upon the safety net of the welfare state for vital support. However, the requirement for claimants to wait five weeks for their first payment often places additional stress upon an already fraught period. With many Housing Associations being paid four-weekly, the cash-flow issues generated as a result of the delay risk placing many of our clients in a situation of building up arrears or, if they are already in arrears with their rent at the point of claiming Universal Credit, being evicted.

Phone number

The same phone number is used for New Style Employment and Support Allowance, and Universal Credit enquiries which is causing significant confusion to our clients. Clients of Tenovus Cancer Care also report confusion when using the IVR system, with too many options, a lack of a clear user-journey and many placed on hold for substantial periods - sometimes as much as one hour.

Seating

Some Job Centres lack adequate seating for unwell and/or disabled clients while they wait for their appointments. Any requirement that would see our clients attend Job Centres more frequently would, in addition to the above points, be unsuitable unless this issue were addressed.

Severe Disability Premium

Existing claimants receiving the SDP who naturally migrate to Universal Credit are likely to experience or already have experienced a significantly less favourable financial outcome than other groups. The SDP claimant group is notable not least since many live alone, have no carer and are less likely to have had any recent connection with the labour market.

Therefore while existing claimants will have their awards protected there are a substantial number of claimants in this situation who were receiving the SDP and who have already migrated naturally. In the short term, transitional payments will be introduced for this group to help mitigate the financial loss, however, eventually these payments will be eroded, then ceased as part of the proposed schedule.

Finally, under the proposals new claimants of Universal Credit will never receive SDP. For clients who suddenly become unwell and fully intend to go back to work when they are well enough (or those who are terminally ill or too unwell to ever return to work), this vital support would be denied. With SDP currently worth £64.30 a week, its removal represents a significant risk to our clients.

Tenovus Cancer Care is extremely concerned at this and urges the Government to reconsider how this might be more sympathetically applied.