Support services play a crucial role in the benefits system but are currently at risk of being overwhelmed

*Debates about the withdrawal of crisis social security measures have focused on the financial implications for benefit claimants. Attention is also needed on what this means for welfare support services, explain **David Robertshaw** and **Daniel Edmiston**.*

Record numbers of people have moved onto Universal Credit since spring 2020. In the run-up to the first lockdown in March, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) actioned its business continuity plan: staff from across the department were quickly redeployed into benefit-processing roles and would later be commended for dealing with an unprecedented number of applications. However, these were not the only workers supporting social security claimants.

Our recent survey highlights the considerable support that benefit claimants access, with a third (33.6%) receiving some kind of help in making their application (excluding assistance from Jobcentre Plus or DWP). Those claiming benefits prior to the pandemic were more likely to be receiving additional assistance in their encounters with the system (Figure 1) but more than a quarter of new claimants have also received support since the start of the coronavirus outbreak.

Figure 1. Whether received any support making a benefit application (by claimant group)
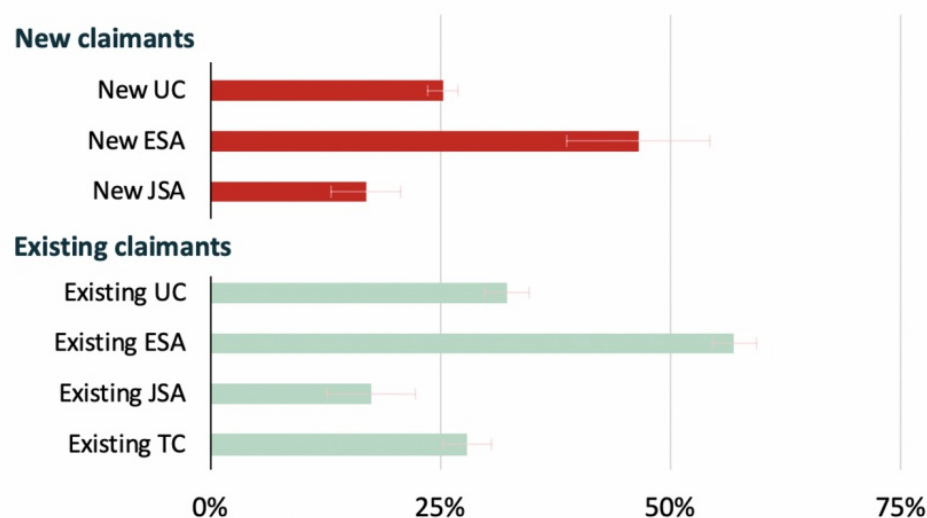
Source: YouGov survey of benefit claimants, new (n=3,167) and existing (n=4,434) claimants. The sample size was 2,643 for new UC claimants; 157 for new ESA claimants; 367 for new JSA claimants; 1,429 for existing UC claimants; 1,660 for existing ESA claimants; 246 for existing JSA claimants and 1,099 for Tax Credit claimants.

In providing this support, a range of different actors play a critical role in helping current or would-be claimants if they encounter difficulties. Assistance provided to claimants most often takes the form of support in making an application, understanding eligibility, raising awareness of entitlements, and reducing associated anxieties/providing reassurance. Friends and family provide this support most frequently but, alongside them, a wider group of intermediaries (such as welfare rights teams, advice workers, charities, the 'Help to Claim' service, housing associations, and food banks) provide critical assistance in helping people to navigate the benefits system.

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Since June, the Welfare at a (Social) Distance project has been researching experiences of social security and employment support in the context of COVID-19. Our fifth report draws upon a nationally representative survey of 7,000+ working-age benefit claimants and qualitative fieldwork into local ecosystems of benefits, crisis, and employment support across four case study areas, to consider the changing claimant support needs and how organisations have responded to these since COVID-19. Social distancing not only impacted upon claims for Universal Credit and the work of the DWP – it has increased demand for auxiliary support and affected the ways in which it is accessed and provided. Our findings highlight a number of risks associated with the planned withdrawal of crisis social security measures.

Remote work had implications for the intensity and quality of support and presents significant practical obstacles.

Experiences of the switch to remote working varied across the organisations that we spoke to. As one advice worker explained, both clients *and* support workers had to become more 'self-reliant' within a context of remote support: claimants needed to do more than before to progress their own enquiries and workers were less able to directly draw upon the knowledge and emotional support of their colleagues. Many support workers also noted that screen- or telephone-based work presented some specific practical difficulties for aspects of their work such as obtaining written consents.

In addition, there were other, more fundamental challenges to the nature of the work. People often shared that trust and rapport-building with clients was more difficult than in face-to-face meetings. Many workers also emphasised that the ability to pick up on non-verbal cues, which was an important aspect of their role (e.g. for working with non-native speakers, or people with limiting health conditions or disabilities), was lost over the telephone. In summary, remote working often increased the demands of this type of support work whilst diminishing its coverage and quality. In acknowledging the links between face-to-face delivery and the quality of support, many services expressed their ambitions to re-establish some physical presence as soon as was practicable.

Demand for support had changed and intensified with many services concerned about 'missing' clients.

The crisis social security measures implemented by the DWP were regarded by the support organisations that we interviewed as providing much needed assistance to clients and also as 'safety valves' reducing pressures upon their own services. However, despite such measures, demand for support had grown rapidly since COVID-19, primarily because of job losses in the context of the pandemic. Increasing demands were sometimes further aggravated by the loss of existing volunteer capacity, and some organisations were unable to meet the demands on their services (even after the initial surge in claims had subsided).

In our interviews, four client groups were highlighted as needing additional support: people with poor knowledge or understanding of the system; people experiencing extreme financial hardship; people struggling with IT-related barriers; and those with No Recourse to Public Funds. Many support workers also observed changes to the qualitative demands of their work in relation to these groups. Increasing levels of complexity were frequently seen, and clients often presented in states of heightened stress and anxiety.

It was also typically noted that the profile of clients had changed; specifically, the fact that traditional 'walk-in' clients had 'dropped off the radar'. Concerns were raised about whether these clients would re-emerge later with significant additional support needs. Overall, there was a strong sense from participants that an unseen, often out of reach, crisis was being experienced by certain groups of claimants and those who were financially struggling. Despite efforts to adapt working practices and provide remote support, many recognised that those exposed to the worst effects of COVID-19 were not necessarily receiving the support they needed either locally or nationally.

Staff anticipated future financial troubles, caseload spikes, and frontline burnout.

COVID-19 presented considerable funding challenges for specific types of support providers. Third sector organisations that had used reserves during the crisis saw few opportunities for restoring these through revenue generation because of the limitations imposed by social distancing. Many interviewees also assumed that 'COVID-19 response expenditure' would need to be clawed back from elsewhere soon, and this led to concerns about the implications for future support provision: it was assumed that much of the financial fall-out would fall upon the third sector either directly or indirectly (via local authorities).

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In addition, many support organisations were conscious of the temporary nature of specific policy measures and how this would impact upon future caseloads. A variety of measures such as the Universal Credit Uplift were credited with having temporarily reduced support caseloads but it was anticipated that caseload spikes would emerge as these were withdrawn. It was frequently suggested that such surges in demand would overwhelm organisations at a time when frontline staff were already stretched. As debates continue about the withdrawal of temporary policy measures, such as the Universal Credit £20 uplift, it is vital that the knock-on effects upon those providing benefit, crisis, and employment support should also be considered. These essential ecosystems of support that many claimants rely upon could easily become overwhelmed unless the adaptation (or withdrawal of) crisis social security measures are communicated well in advance, and sequenced gradually and carefully.

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Note: the above draws on the Welfare at a (Social) Distance project's new report.

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