

Employment and Support Allowance: Assessment Phase Durations

12 September 2012

Introduction

This statistical release presents durations of the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) assessment phase. The analysis includes numbers of assessments completed in up to 13 weeks and those completed in more than 13 weeks. It also shows average durations of the assessment phase broken down by constituent country. The figures are derived from administrative data held by the Department for Work and Pensions and assessment data provided by Atos Healthcare. This analysis presents information on new claims for ESA only. It does not contain incapacity benefits reassessments to determine eligibility for ESA.

Background

When a claimant first applies for ESA, they are put into the assessment phase, which lasts 13 weeks. The assessment phase is the time between a claim commencing and a decision on whether a claimant has either limited capability for work, or is fit for work. During this time, claimants are assessed through the Work Capability Assessment (WCA) process. Individual claimants do not have to engage in work-related activity. They receive benefit paid at the assessment phase rate (equivalent to Jobseeker's Allowance personal allowances).

While in the assessment phase, the claimant has to provide up-to-date medical certification of their disability or illness, and is assessed against the criteria set out in legislation. Most claimants are sent a limited capability for work questionnaire (also known as the ESA50) and following completion of it are invited to a face to face assessment carried out by a trained healthcare professional working for Atos Healthcare. However, depending on the severity of an individual's condition, some claimant journeys will differ; for example those who are terminally ill or otherwise have sufficient medical evidence are fast-tracked into the Support Group on the basis of paper evidence.

Information gathered through the questionnaire and the face to face assessment, together with any other evidence provided by the claimant, is used by a DWP decision maker to determine their eligibility for the ESA main phase.

The main phase starts once the assessment phase is complete. If the WCA shows that the claimant's illness or disability does limit their ability to work, an additional amount (called a component) is paid on top of the basic rate. This is normally paid from the 92nd day of the claim. If the WCA is delayed beyond 91 days (13 weeks) for whatever reason, entitlement to the component will be backdated to the 92nd day of the claim.

There are two groups within the main phase:

Work-Related Activity Group

If the claimant is placed in the Work-Related Activity Group, because they have limited capability for work, they will be expected to take part in Work-Focused Interviews with their Personal Adviser and may also be required to undertake work-related activity. The claimant will get support to help them prepare for a return to work. In return, they will receive a work-related activity component in addition to their basic rate.

Support Group

If the claimant has an illness or a disability that has a severe effect on their ability to work, because they have a limited capability for work related activity, the claimant won't be expected to engage with a Personal Advisor, but can do so on a voluntary basis. The claimant will receive a support component in addition to their basic rate.

There are a number of reasons why the time between the claim start date and the WCA output may take longer than 13 weeks. These include the claimant delaying return of the ESA50 form, not being able to attend a face to face WCA with good cause, or awaiting a face to face WCA or DWP decision. In addition, process changes following Professor Harrington's first independent review (including the introduction of the personalised summary statement) meant that it took some healthcare professionals longer to complete assessments than expected.

Results

Assessment Phase Durations Above or Below 13 Weeks

Table 1, in the associated spreadsheets, shows the number of ESA claims where the waiting time between the claim start and the WCA output was (i) up to 13 weeks and (ii) longer than 13 weeks for each month during 2011, plus January and February 2012, which is the latest available data.

Average Assessment Phase Durations

Table 2, in the associated spreadsheets, presents the average durations in the assessment phase for initial ESA claims, in weeks, broken down by WCA outcome. The table covers all initial WCAs that took place between October 2008 and February 2012, which is the latest available data.

The analysis shown in this release excludes any time spent in the assessment phase after the WCA decision is made – as is the case for appeals. Claimants appealing the WCA decision remain on ESA in the assessment phase until their appeal is resolved. Claims that are closed before the WCA is completed, and those awaiting a WCA decision, are also excluded.

Annex

The analysis was produced in relation to the following Parliamentary Questions (PQ):

- **PQ/12/107229 – Tom Greatrex (Rutherglen and Hamilton West):** To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, with reference to the Answer of 20 February 2012, Official Report, column 666-7W, on work capability assessment, how many people waited longer than 13 weeks to undergo the work capability assessment in 2011, by month.
- **PQ/12/115257 – Tom Greatrex (Rutherglen and Hamilton West):** To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, with reference to the Answer of 20 February 2012, Official Report, column 666W, on work capability assessment, how many people waited longer than 13 weeks for a work capability assessment in (a) 2011 and (b) 2012.
- **PQ/12/115366 – Tom Greatrex (Rutherglen and Hamilton West):** To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, with reference to the Answer of 20 February 2012, Official Report, column 655W, on employment and support allowance: work capability assessment, what the average time of the work capability assessment customer journey was in (a) 2011 and (b) 2012 to date.
- **PQ/12/109782 – Ian Lucas (Wrexham):** To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, what the average waiting time is for examination of claimants of employment support allowance in (a) Wrexham, (b) Wales and (c) the UK.
 - In the Wrexham local authority area, the average time between claim start and WCA outcome is about 18 weeks.
- **PQ/12/114914 – Fiona O'Donnell (East Lothian):** To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, what the average waiting time was for examination of claimants of employment support allowance in (a) East Lothian constituency and (b) Scotland in the latest period for which figures are available.

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