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Move to Universal Credit Late Claimers (formerly tax credit customers) Qualitative Research

A report of research carried out by Ipsos on behalf of the
Department for Work and Pensions

December 2024

DWP ad hoc research report no. 105

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Background and methodology

Research objectives

The aim of this research was to better understand the experiences of tax credit customers who claimed Universal Credit (UC) after their migration deadline. The research explored participants’:

- Knowledge and awareness of UC prior to receiving the Migration Notice
- Reactions to and understanding of the Migration Notice and how this impacted next steps
- Motivations why customers submitted their claim at the time that they did and if there were differences between those who claimed close to the deadline versus later
- Barriers to claiming UC before the deadline and any support that could have helped customers to make a claim sooner
- The impacts of claiming after the deadline and early impacts of moving to UC
- How communications and messaging could be adapted to help support future UC customers to claim before the deadline

Methodology

Interviews were conducted with 35 former tax credit (Working Tax and Child Tax Credit) customers who had claimed UC after the deadline in their Migration Notice or an extended migration deadline.

Sampling and recruitment

Participants were recruited from a sample provided by DWP which included UC customers who submitted their claim for UC in January to February 2024, meaning they had all made a claim to UC around 2-3 months before the interviews were conducted.

The sample contained a mix of UC customers who had claimed up to 1 month after their migration deadline and those who claimed 1-4 months after their migration deadline to understand any differences in the reasons for claiming late and any support needed to make a claim sooner.

There were recruitment quotas for claim type (single/couple), individuals who claimed within 1 month after the deadline and 1-4 months after the deadline, tax credit type, gender, age, employment status, health condition, and presence of children. In order to reach couples who had made a joint claim, the research team targeted recruitment of UC customers who were living at the same address as a proxy measure for living as a couple. The number of achieved interviews for each of the recruitment criteria is included in Appendix 1.

Fieldwork

Fieldwork took place in April and May 2024 and interviews were conducted online or over the telephone lasting 40-45 minutes. Prior to recruitment, individuals were sent an advance email giving them the option to opt into or out of the research.

Participants received a voucher of £30 each per interview as a thank you for taking part. After the interviews, participants were sent a follow-up support leaflet via email. This included details about the research they had participated in, a link to the privacy policy, and contact details for further support in case the topics explored in the interviews prompted participants to need further support.

Awareness, understanding and perceptions of UC

Awareness and perceptions of UC

Participants had heard of UC before receiving the Migration Notice, either from the news, from friends and family, or through their work.

Working participants tended to think that UC was a benefit for unemployed people only and assumed that they would therefore not be able to make a claim for UC. Similarly, participants with savings (of any amount) also thought that they would not be eligible to claim UC.

Participants who thought they would not be eligible for UC tended to intentionally delay making a claim to stay on tax credits for as long as possible.

“Obviously I know it's taken over Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance, but I never thought it would apply to me as a working person”.

Claimant, in work, WTC & CTC.

Attitudes to UC

Participants had some negative attitudes towards UC before receiving the Migration Notice. Participants who had heard negative stories about UC in the press or media were usually worried about sanctions and gaps in payments on UC.

Comparatively, participants who had heard negative stories about UC from word-of-mouth, were more concerned about its complexity and the challenges of making and managing a claim.

Participants who had negative attitudes to UC were likely to cite these as reasons for delaying their claim.

“My sister-in-law had moved onto it [UC] and she said it was the worst thing she had ever done – ‘she said stay on tax credits as long as you can’...I had only heard bad things about UC, for me it sounded stressful. And I was quite happy with tax credits and knew how it worked.”

Claimant, not working, WTC.

Reactions to and understanding of the Migration Notice

Participants tended to understand the contents of the Migration Notice and found it easy to read. They remembered it informing them that tax credits were being replaced by UC, and they would need to make a claim to UC to continue receiving financial assistance. Participants also recalled that the letter included a deadline to make a claim.

Participants with health conditions

Participants who had health conditions or disabilities, particularly learning disabilities such as dyslexia and mental health conditions such as anxiety, tended to report finding it more difficult to understand the Migration Notice and feeling less confident about what actions to take. Participants with health conditions were also more likely to report feeling stressed or worried about the move to UC. These participants tended to ask friends or family members to support them with understanding the Migration Notice and navigating the process for making a claim.

“I didn't know what to do because I can't use a computer or email, anything like that.”

Claimant, not working, WTC.

Where participants recalled that the Migration Notice informed them that they would be moved automatically, they reported not being aware that they needed to make a claim for UC at all.

Details about eligibility (work and savings)

Whilst the capital disregard was noted on the Migration Notice, participants who had savings often didn't recollect being aware of this. They felt that if the details about the one-year capital disregard had been clearer to them, this would have reassured them about their eligibility.

Participants who were in work felt that the letter could have stated more explicitly that UC is for people in work and provided more or clearer details about how working impacts a UC claim.

Details about transitional protection and advance payments

Awareness of the term 'transitional protection' was very low before and after making a claim, and even once explained, few participants knew about it including those who thought they could be eligible.

Participants who were aware of transitional protection tended to believe it had a 12-month limit, showing some confusion between this and the capital disregard. Participants who intentionally delayed their claim because they were concerned about receiving less on UC shared that they may have claimed sooner if they had known more about transitional protection.

“If people realise that they're going to probably get the guarantee for a year, they're not going to worry as much. I left it as late as possible, because I thought I'd be worse off. So, I left it all last minute.”

Claimant, not working, WTC.

Participants tended to become aware of the advance payment once their tax credits had ended and they were communicating with DWP about their claim.

Details about why tax credits were being replaced by UC

Participants felt that the letter should have explained why tax credits were being replaced by UC and 'sold' the benefits of claiming UC to encourage more people to make a claim, for example, if they would receive less correspondence related to benefit claims.

Barriers and reasons for claiming late

There were four key reasons why participants claimed after the deadline in the Migration Notice:

1. Intentionally delayed making a claim
2. Unaware they had claimed after the deadline
3. Prioritised other commitments
4. Had no intention to make a claim

These reasons are explored in more detail below.

Participants who reported they intentionally delayed making a claim

Delayed due to pre-conceptions of UC, including about their eligibility

Participants who intentionally delayed making a claim to UC often reported negative preconceptions of UC and concerns about eligibility, even after receiving the Migration Notice. These participants delayed claiming to stay on tax credits for as long as possible. Participants in work and with savings were the most likely to delay their claim for this reason.

Word-of-mouth stories about the difficulties of applying and delays in benefit payments meant that participants were worried about applying to a new and unknown benefit system operated by DWP instead of HMRC.

“The amount of work I perceived it would be, the information I would have to collate, about income outgoings, and a long list of stuff – it seemed quite daunting...so initially it was quite off putting.”

In work, CTC & WTC.

Advised to delay by friends / family or advice service

Friends or family members with experience of receiving less income on UC advised participants to stay on tax credits for as long as possible. Participants were also advised, sometimes by advice services such as Citizens Advice, to claim as close to the deadline as possible. Participants with savings received advice to delay making their claim to maximise the time of the 12-month capital disregard. Participants who believed that the same 12-month time-limit applied to transitional protection also delayed their claims to maximise the period of payment protection.

“We were told to wait because we had savings.”

Not working, WTC only.

“I had some work abroad last year...I wouldn't have time to get this [the UC claim] done before going. I was told [on the helpline] that I could sort it when I got back and then I realised Child Tax Credits had stopped for two-ish months”

Not working, CTC only.

Participants who prioritised other commitments over making a claim

Delayed due to work and caring responsibilities

Participants reported being too busy to make a claim due to work schedules. This was a particular challenge for couples whose work schedules made it difficult to find time to discuss and apply for UC together. This was exacerbated for those with children, as they were more likely to work at different times to share caring for their children around work.

“Literally it was just finding the time, because I'm not good online, doing things online, and stuff like that...I haven't got a clue when it comes to that stuff. My husband, he does all that. So, it was finding the time when he could sit down with me so he could instruct me what to do and help me, well, with it, because I am hopeless with any technology.”

Not working, CTC & WTC.

Caring responsibilities, particularly for children, were cited as a barrier to claiming within the deadline.

Despite these being challenges, participants were not likely to request an extension to the deadline and were not commonly aware that this was an option.

Delayed due to fluctuating health

Participants who had unexpected changes to their health postponed making their claim to attend to their health needs, which took greater priority at the time.

Participants who were not aware they had claimed after the deadline

Delayed due to confusion around the application process

Participants who reported being confused about the UC claim process were likely to be confused about whether or not the transition to UC was an automatic process.

Other participants were unclear about when exactly they had submitted their application. A possible explanation is that participants thought that starting their claim within the deadline would satisfy the requirement, even if they had not submitted it.

“It was the deadline that made us claim at that point. We had to do it by then, as we would lose our tax credits [unaware they had applied past the deadline]”

In work, CTC only.

Delayed due to confusion around the deadline

Participants who were unsure of exactly when the deadline was felt that the deadline had not been clear on the Migration Notice.

“We did it because we reached the deadline and knew the tax credits were about to stop. I was not aware that we had gone over the deadline. Well actually, now that I think about it, maybe I did – but I was so busy. I called last minute.”

In work, CTC & WTC.

Participants who did not initially intend to make a claim

Wanting to get by without financial assistance

After receiving the Migration Notice, some participants who were working decided not to apply for UC as they wanted to be financially independent. However, some who initially calculated that they could manage financially without UC later experienced a change of circumstances which meant that this was no longer feasible. These changes included redundancy, loss of work hours and changes in health conditions which resulted in decreased ability to work.

Participants who claimed 1-4 months after their migration deadline were more likely to cite these as reasons for claiming late than other reasons for delaying a claim.

“My health plummeted, and I had to apply... I was approved for biological therapy...there are some horrible side effects, but it has quietened down the Crohn’s Disease...because of all this, I had to stop my work – so I had to apply for UC.”

In work, WTC.

“I was unemployed and needed the money.”

In work, CTC only.

Reasons for claiming 1-4 months after the deadline

Participants who claimed 1-4 months after the deadline tended to claim late due to having no original intention to make a claim compared with other reasons. However, they tended to report specific and personal circumstances preventing them from making a claim than participants who claimed within 1 month after the deadline.

Participants in work who didn’t claim initially because they didn’t feel that they needed financial assistance then experienced a loss of paid work which led them to make a claim for UC. Other participants with health conditions struggled to claim within the deadline due to accessing healthcare services. One participant was temporarily working abroad at the time of the deadline. They phoned the helpline to

confirm that they would be able to claim after the deadline when they returned to the UK.

Key lessons on motivating future UC customers to claim before the deadline

1. Preconceptions of UC and concerns about eligibility impacted claim behaviours. Participants felt that clearer information about eligibility, transitional protection and advance payments could have motivated them to claim on time.
2. Some participants were confused about the deadline and claim processes and did not always know that they had claimed after the deadline.
3. Work, childcare and health distracted participants from administrative tasks such as making a claim for UC. Participants felt that if they had known how long the application would take and the documentation/information they would need to provide could have supported them to claim before the deadline.
4. Some participants were not likely not to apply for UC due to wanting to, and being able to, support themselves financially. They therefore claimed late because they had not intended to claim UC at all.

Experiences of the claim process

For the most part, participants found the claim process easy and accessible, however some participants faced challenges.

Participants who were more likely to find the application process straightforward included those who were employed with a regular income, more confident using the internet and were not required to go to the Jobcentre Plus. These participants generally preferred making the claim online (compared with other modes) and/or reported not being able to easily produce the documents requested.

“Once I had the time, it was an easy change over, they made it so easy. They made it so easy to look at all your information online. It was a smooth change over.”

In work, WTC & CTC.

Participants who were more likely to find the application process challenging included those who were self-employed, were asked to attend JCP when they were not expecting to, in a couple and making a joint claim and/or had lower digital confidence.

Self-employed participants

Self-employed participants found the initial financial assessment difficult and time consuming to complete. There was a perceived lack of clarity on how to separate ‘business’ and ‘personal’ income and expenses in the UC claim which led to stress and delays submitting the claim. These participants found the process of logging their

financial details online difficult, they were often worried about inputting incorrect details and being unable to change them once they had been submitted.

The ongoing requirement to submit monthly financial assessments was considered “invasive” and “draconian”. Time spent submitting accounts often took time away from self-employed work, or they needed to pay for more regular accountancy support. The resulting loss in income or increased expenditure could lead participants to report being financially worse off overall.

Self-employed participants also reported that the nature of their work often meant that their income fluctuated from month to month which resulted in UC payments varying and becoming difficult to rely on as a regular income.

However, some self-employed participants noted that whilst the task was daunting at first, it had become easier to manage over time.

“If I was in an employed job, that makes a lot of sense. But for me [self-employed], it's horrendous...I really feel that this is not wanting people to be self-employed and have their own businesses.”

In work, WTC.

“[Self-employed participant] 'if you were employed with a fixed income, it would be more straight forward...it felt like it wasn't much of a consideration”

In work, WTC.

Jobcentre Plus appointments

Practical challenges attending the Jobcentre

Participants who were surprised that they needed to attend the Jobcentre in person did not understand why the meeting could not take place online or over the telephone. They did not like the automatic meeting booking system which sent an appointment time without consulting customers on their availability.

Participants who worked and/or had caring responsibilities reported that finding a convenient time to go to the Jobcentre around these commitments was challenging. Participants with health conditions also reported practical difficulties travelling to the Jobcentre. These participants would have preferred for this meeting to take place online or over the telephone to save time and the requirement to travel.

Negative views and experiences of the Jobcentre

Participants who had negative views of the Jobcentre were particularly unwilling to go. Working participants reported that it was a place for jobseekers to find work and therefore not relevant to their circumstances. Participants who shared this sentiment felt as though they were being treated unfairly and inaccurately as ‘jobseekers’ in being required to attend appointments despite being in work. Those who were not able to work and did not want to attend Jobcentre appointments also reported being unfairly treated as jobseekers.

Participants who reported negative feelings towards Jobcentre staff, tended to report that they found the security staff and overall atmosphere in the Jobcentre to be

unfriendly. Others reported that Jobcentre staff were sometimes unable to answer questions about UC claims including queries about back payments and transitional protection.

Self-employed participants found the regular meetings at the Jobcentre time consuming, took them away from their work and they were not clear on the purpose of these meetings. Some found Jobcentre staff unhelpful and unsympathetic to the specific needs of self-employed UC customers.

Claim form

Couples making a joint claim

For couples making a joint UC claim, often one member of the couple completed both parts of the UC application. There was frustration that the system divided up the application separately despite the claim being joint. Couples also found it inconvenient that they had to attend separate Jobcentre appointments for a joint claim.

“[Claiming as a couple] I found it confusing, getting the code which we eventually found on the app...you could only go so far in the process and then my husband needed to fill his bit out”

In work, CTC & WTC.

“I went to the Jobcentre Plus...we had separate appointments...I had an ear infection and wanted my husband to come [to her appointment]”

In work, WTC only.

Challenges with technology and using the Internet

Those who struggled with the online application were often not aware of the phone helpline and relied on the help of family and friends.

Participants were not aware that there were two helplines, the Move to UC helpline and the general UC helpline. Those who used helplines didn't know which one they had called and often struggled to get through, further delaying their claim.

“I did try to get help with the form, but obviously they weren't going to help me or do it with me, as opposed to tax credits when they would do it for me over the phone... I had to make my own account and do it online...I called several times asking questions and they said they didn't know...there is a lack of knowledge from the staff on the helpline”

In work, WTC & CTC.

Impacts of claiming after the deadline and early outcomes of claiming UC

Impacts of claiming after the deadline

Gap in benefit payments

Not all participants noticed that their tax credits had stopped or that they had experienced a gap in payments.

Participants did not mention the 5-week wait, the waiting period between making a claim and receiving the first UC payments. However, participants who were expecting the gap usually attributed this to being part of the process of migration to UC. Participants who intentionally delayed due to concerns about their eligibility generally expected a gap in their payments.

Participants who had prioritised other things before making a claim were shocked by a sudden gap in payments. They reported that the unexpected gap caused financial stress and worry that then motivated them to make a claim.

Actions taken due to gap in payments

Participants took the following actions to top up their income after tax credits payments had stopped and before receiving UC payments:

- Applied for advance payments to help cover costs while they waited for their first UC payments (more prevalent among participants who claimed 1-4 months after the deadline than those who claimed within one month)
- Monitored finances more closely and reported being more 'careful' with money
- Used savings
- Borrowed from friends / family members

"Yes, I had a gap, of about a month of my tax credits stopping, before I applied. But when I applied, was told I could apply for an advance payment, which I did, and think it came through a week later."

Not working, WTC.

"The day I applied for UC, my tax credits stopped, and it [messed] me up, because I use that money to cover me till I get paid from my work. So, I was demented, didn't know what to do, was having to borrow money from people to get my son to school, it was horrible...So 2 weeks without anything...It totally stressed me, didn't have the money I normally had on a weekly basis."

Working, WTC & CTC.

Early outcomes of moving to UC

How participants viewed the changes from claiming UC compared with tax credits depended on the change they had experienced and their individual circumstances:

- Changes in payments

- felt positive for participants who reported being better off on UC or gained additional financial support via their UC claim
- felt neither positive nor negative for participants who experienced no change in their financial situation since moving to UC
- felt negative for participants who reported fluctuating monthly UC payments, usually due to being self-employed
- Changes in managing claim and budgeting
 - felt positive for participants who were employed and were digitally confident
 - felt neither positive nor negative in regards to monthly payments, with some preference for weekly
 - felt negative for self-employed participants regarding movement to monthly assessments
- Changes in work and home life
 - felt positive for participants who were required to search for a job and who considered themselves suitable for work
 - felt negative for participants who were asked to search for a job who did not consider themselves suitable for work or were self-employed and required to complete monthly assessments

Financial outcomes

Participants who reported being better off on UC were usually only marginally so. They often did not know why they were receiving higher payments. One participant noticed that they were receiving financial support for housing which they hadn't received previously.

“I think I am getting more money on UC, as opposed to Working Tax Credits. The only thing I can attribute it to is because UC is a collection of benefits, maybe there was something else I qualified for that I wasn't previously claiming and wasn't aware of it.”

Claimant, not working, WTC

Participants who had no change in income since moving to UC, or very marginal increases or decreases, felt neutral about the financial impact of moving to UC.

Participants reported challenges receiving fluctuating payment amounts on UC which they did not experience when claiming tax credits. Participants did not know why this was the case and didn't describe this as beneficial to reduce instances of overpayment.

“Last month they paid me £423 and then this month was only £35. Completely different amounts.”

Claimant, in work, WTC & CTC

Self-employed participants tended to attribute fluctuations to being self-employed and experiencing monthly changes in their earnings from work. Fluctuating payments were described as stressful and causing difficulties with budgeting.

Claim management

Participants who were digitally confident commented on the benefits of being able to manage a UC claim more effectively online. These participants also valued being able to make queries and receive responses online, rather than needing to call the tax credits helpline, which they felt had long waiting times.

“It’s probably easier, because you don’t have to call HMRC to talk to someone – would take a lifetime to get through to someone. Now I can just go on the journal, and write, and they’ll write back to me.”

Claimant, in work, WTC & CTC

Negative outcomes

Self-employed participants often felt negative about managing their UC claim. This was due to the increased time, stress and burden submitting monthly financial details (instead of annually), stress and worry about getting it wrong, and issues with fluctuating payments making it more difficult to budget. The process was described as “more invasive” and “more draconian” than when previously on tax credits and impacted participants’ stress levels and certainty about their income.

“I really feel that this is not wanting people to be self-employed and have their own businesses.”

Claimant, in work, WTC

However, some self-employed participants noted that whilst the task was daunting at first, it has become easier to manage over time.

Monthly payments

Although receiving monthly payments (instead of weekly) was cited as one of the most prominent changes on UC, participants tended to be neutral about the impact of this. Participants who preferred weekly payments generally found it to be more of a safety net for them.

Participants who reported preferring, or having no difficulties with, monthly payments tended to also say that they were confident with budgeting their money and had processes in place to support them (e.g. receiving UC payments in one account and setting up weekly standing orders to an everyday account).

Although it is possible to apply for more frequent payments, most participants were not aware of this option.

“You have to get used to managing your money more. With weekly you can just spend it as you go along, but with monthly, I have to think about it.”

Claimant, not working, WTC

“I prefer it weekly. Obviously, Universal Credit is monthly, but weekly is a lot easier because then you’ve always got something coming in, in case anything crops up.”

Claimant, in work, WTC & CTC

Work and home life

Participants who did feel able to look for work commented on the benefits of being required to search for a job and considered it a welcome encouragement.

Participants also commented on the positive impacts of continued financial support and worrying less about money or being able to treat the household occasionally.

“This has opened up other avenues, it’s widened the horizons [on being asked to job search].”

Claimant, not working, CTC

Participants who were being asked to look for work but did not consider themselves suitable for work discussed how it was additional pressure which caused stress and anxiety. For participants doing some self-employed work but were not gainfully self-employed, it took time away from their ability to do self-employed projects.

Working participants reported being more careful not to do overtime at work to avoid impacting their monthly UC payments and one participant described being better off doing less work on UC.

Self-employed participants discussed how the time required for monthly financial assessments and Jobcentre appointments took time out of their working week which had negative impacts on their income overall.

“My husband suffers with anxiety and stress and this is making it worse.”

Claimant, not working, WTC & CTC

“[I] have to set aside at least 2 hours a day just for job search so it has taken some time away from working on projects.”

Claimant, not working, CTC

Case study 1: Self-employed customer who found certain elements of the claim process challenging

Initial reactions to the Migration Notice

Charlie (renamed for anonymity) and his wife had been expecting to be asked to move to UC as they had seen the announcement on the news. They were both self-employed, running their own business, which provided largely seasonal work.

Charlie and his wife found the Migration Notice easy to understand; it told them that they needed to claim UC. Charlie found the prospect of applying for a new benefit daunting. He also commented on the ‘stigma’ associated with attending the Jobcentre and was concerned about the logistics of attending the Jobcentre for an interview.

He remembered transitional protection was mentioned in the letter but would have liked more detail on how this would affect them. He would have also liked the notice to explain why they were being asked to change from Working and Child Tax Credits to UC.

How they made the decision to claim and the process of claiming

Charlie and his wife viewed claiming UC as a natural progression from tax credits ending, they saw it as a 'rolling-over' process for anyone on a lower income. He was not aware that he had claimed after the deadline.

Charlie found the process of claiming quite overwhelming because of the lack of clarity regarding the information that was required to claim as a self-employed couple. He felt that because their income wasn't fixed month-to-month and it was not always clear which income belonged to their business and which was paid to him and his wife, the application process was very complicated.

He found that the Jobcentre staff during his interview were unable to answer questions regarding managing finances as a self-employed applicant, which he felt made the process of claiming more complicated.

Impacts of the decision to claim

Charlie found the requirement to upload monthly accounts time consuming and remained confused about which income was considered personal and which belonged to the business. He reported that this led to varied UC payments.

While it was still quite early to tell, Charlie thought they had been receiving roughly the same amount on UC so far.

Case study 2: Participant with a health condition who wasn't planning to claim UC but their health circumstances changed

Initial reactions to the Migration Notice

Ben (renamed for anonymity) had a health condition, was single and living alone and working for the NHS doing hours that varied because of his health condition.

Ben had heard about UC from the news but wasn't expecting to be asked to move across when he received the Migration Notice. He had a negative view of UC, believing that it made life difficult for those living with disabilities and health conditions.

He ignored the letter when it first arrived as he was not planning to make a claim to UC. He reported disliking the UC system and hoped that his health and finances were stable enough to cope financially without UC. He also considered that UC would not be right for him due to the fluctuating nature of his health symptoms and work income.

How they made the decision to claim and the process of claiming

Ben's health condition worsened a few weeks after he received the Migration Notice and he found he was unable to work the same hours he had previously been working. He found it difficult to come to terms with the fact that he needed to claim UC following a period of good health.

Ben found the online claiming process easy and accessible and found the Jobcentre staff understanding and helpful. However, he felt that some of the information required to claim, such as the requirement for bank statements, was intrusive.

Impacts of the decision to claim

Ben's UC claim did not affect the PIP payments that he received to help with transport and care needs.

As his ability to work was irregular, this was reflected in how often he felt he needed UC payments to top up his income. However, he was unsure how his claim should change to factor in fluctuating work payments and feared being overpaid.

He wanted more information and support about how to manage a UC claim when on a fluctuating work income. He also felt that he might want to stop his claim in the future but was unsure how to do this and wanted more advice and support on how to move off UC.

Customer feedback and requests for support

Feedback for DWP

Participants were asked what they thought was the most important thing to feedback to DWP about their experience of being asked to move to UC. Participants shared that they would like see:

- More consideration of individual circumstances instead of a 'one size fits all' approach, for example, JCP staff being able to better advise on how differing circumstances will affect a UC claim

"It's not a one size fits all approach, look at people's individual circumstances"
In work, CTC & WTC.

- Greater flexibility in the claiming process, for example offering more flexibility in Jobcentre appointment times to schedule around work and caring responsibilities.

Support going forward

Participants were asked the one thing that DWP could do to best support them going forward. Participants requested:

- More support for self-employed customers on how to approach monthly account submissions and provide more clarity on the financial information that is required to manage a claim
- More accessible and clearer communication from DWP when there are issues with UC claims going forward e.g. more accessible support through the helpline and online journal

"Going forward, the communication is very important. To respond when you're supposed to respond"

In work, CTC only.

“They need to have a better helpline, an advice line where you can call up and ask questions and get answers about your claim, and what other support you can get”

In work, CTC & WTC.

- Greater clarity about what will happen after the initial 12 months of the capital disregard has passed, for those with savings over the threshold

Key findings and conclusions

Information and communications

Preconceptions of UC influenced how participants acted when they received the Migration Notice. There were concerns about moving to UC due to negative reports from media, press or word-of-mouth. This led to a preference to stay on tax credits for as long as possible. Working participants tended to believe that UC was an unemployment benefit and that they would not be eligible. This highlights the importance of communications and ‘branding’ UC so it is recognisable to people in different circumstances.

The Migration Notice was generally not a barrier to making a claim for UC within the deadline. However, awareness of transitional protection and advance payments was very low and therefore did not effectively provide reassurance to participants who were concerned about moving from tax credits. Future UC customers may benefit from clearer and more easily understandable details about these on the Migration Notice.

Reasons for claiming late

Participants intentionally delayed making a claim to UC to wait for support with making a claim. Identifying ways to proactively support future UC customers with known health conditions to make a claim on time could be a worthwhile topic for further exploration.

Participants were not always aware they had made a claim after the deadline. These participants had a vague recollection of the deadline or possibly believed that interacting with the online claim process constituted making a claim. These participants tended to consider DWP’s lengthy administration processes as the reason for claiming after the deadline. They also didn’t tend to understand the repercussions of claiming late.

Participants’ work, caring responsibilities or health conditions could make it difficult for them to claim by the deadline. These participants had not intentionally delayed claiming but were too busy to make a claim or were prevented due to individual circumstances. Couples were likely to describe needing time to work together to jointly make the claim and/or complete their individual sections.

Participants did not always intend to apply for UC but decided to make a claim after the deadline due to changes in circumstances. These participants were usually working and had savings and wanted to be financially independent, however due to unforeseen changes such as job loss, reduction in hours, or deteriorating health, they then made a claim for UC to get by.

Impacts

Participants who were aware they had claimed late often considered that the gap in payments was due to claiming after the deadline. Participants described a shock, and a few difficult weeks financially once their payments had stopped. Participants tended to become aware of advance payments when they phoned the DWP after noticing a gap. Whether or not participants claimed within 1 month after the deadline did not seem to be an important factor when describing the length or impact of gaps in payments.

Participants tended to report no change, or being slightly better off, on UC compared with being on tax credits. For participants who were better off, they didn't always understand why. Participants provided feedback that DWP could improve services for UC customers going forward by displaying a full picture of their financial situation in one place, including any benefits received from HMRC and other departments.

Perceptions of monthly payments depended on how confident participants felt with budgeting, with less confident participants preferring the ease and regularity of weekly payments. Awareness of the fortnightly payments option was very low.

Perceptions of job search requirements depended on whether participants felt that they were able to look for work. For participants who felt that they were not able to work, they considered this requirement stressful and unnecessary pressure.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Number of achieved interviews against sample criteria

Sample category	Sample criteria	Number of achieved interviews
Interview type	Single	16
	Couple	19
When claimed	Within 1 month after the deadline	27
	1-4 months after deadline	8
Legacy benefit	Working Tax Credits only	11
	Child Tax Credits only	6
	Both	18
Gender	Female	20
	Male	15
Age	25-34	6
	35-44	12
	45-54	11
	55+	6
Employment status	Working	22
	Not working	13
Health condition	Has health condition/disability	11
	No health condition/disability	24
Presence of children	No children	9
	Pre-school aged (up to and including 4)	5
	Primary school age (up to and including 11)	6
	Secondary school (ages 11-18)	11

	Children 18+	4
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