



# Involving Universal Credit claimants in research

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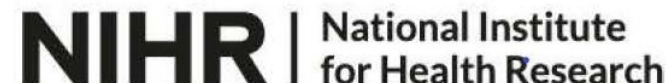
## CSO/NHS Patient and Public Involvement Event

Dundee, 12/3/24

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# Universal Credit

- Biggest reform to UK social security in decades; 6 benefits combined into one
- People retain more of their benefit if they start earning, particularly those with children or health issues – but working people now subject to work requirements
- No payment for first 5 weeks; repayable Advance Payment available (~£800)
- Many problems with implementation; delayed by 7+ years, target now = 2024, ESA delayed till 2028
- Weekly allowances are very low – JRF among others say not sufficient to cover basic needs
- Many people are repaying Advance Payments, utilities bills, rent shortfalls, Tax Credit overpayments, and/or sanctions
- Amount remaining after this often close to zero

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# Evaluation of the mental health impacts of Universal Credit

## WP 1 Natural experiment

Analysis of data from Understanding Society and Annual Population Survey.

## WP 2 Citizens' Advice data analysis

Identify health and socio-demographic characteristics of people who seek advice from CA when claiming UC

## WP 3 Longitudinal qualitative

**2 waves of UC recipient interviews  
T+W and Glasgow  
W1 n= 70 W2 n=35  
W2 data collection complete, analysis ongoing  
Staff interviews; n=30  
In prep for fieldwork**

## WP 4 Dynamic micro- simulation

Estimate impact of changes to UC design on income, employment and health

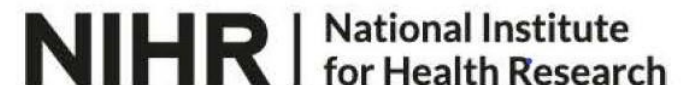
## WP 5 Health economic analysis

Costs and consequences of UC, including distributional aspects; identify policy changes to mitigate effects

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# Public involvement in Evaluating health impacts of UC

Extensive programme of public involvement and engagement (PIE) activity in WP3, including:

- UC Creatives; creative arts project with people with lived experience of UC co-produced an exhibition of arts and poetry illuminating their experiences
- Ongoing involvement of people with lived experience and other stakeholders in developing WP3 materials, staff recruitment interviews etc.
- Including people living on UC in events involving the DWP to highlight their experiences of how UC affects health and how it might be improved
- Contribution to academic conferences and papers, Advisory Group Membership
- Collaboration with Public Health Scotland and DWP to feed findings about how UC implementation is affecting claimants into local policy development.

# Issues around public involvement of UC recipients

Increasing requirements to embed public involvement into our research – but participation for people on benefits is **complex and carries a high risk of harm**

- Larger or more regular payments may be seen as income from work; risk to both benefit amounts and benefit eligibility *per se*
- Rules about income are complex and payments will lead to deductions from UC if total income exceeds the Work Allowance (for carers and UC Health)
- For people who are subject to job search requirements, the time spent on PIE activities may be seen as breaching their Claimant Commitment, and
- For people on health-related benefits, engaging in PIE may threaten their eligibility for benefits if a Work Coach deems that they may be well enough to work if they can manage such activities.

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# Solutions within the current guidance

Current measures designed to address these issues include:

- Participants may choose to waive payments in respect of public involvement, or to be paid a lower amount
- Participants may choose to donate payments to a charity or voluntary organisation of their choice - not clear if Uni Finance departments routinely allow this
- NIHR provide a letter template for Job Centres explaining that participation in public involvement is service user consultation and not employment
- The letter further explains that such participation cannot be used to assess capacity for work
- A dedicated Benefits Advice helpline is provided by Bedford CAB.

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# Ongoing issues with the guidance

Despite these measures, there are remaining issues for benefit recipients

- Circumventing issues with benefit deductions by withholding or diverting funds to which very poor people are entitled is grossly unfair
- Unfortunately, our data show that attempts to explain issues to Work Coaches/JCPs are often unsuccessful
- Much of the risk and burden are left for participants with complex lives, who are very frequently struggling to cope as it is
- The definition of PIE activities is unclear – NIHR says they are not employment, but Uni finance depts often treat them as such, and lack of clarity can cause issues with HMRC and DWP.

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# Issues with University Finance departments

Dealing with Uni finance department adds another layer of complexity

- Many insist that participants are treated as casual employees and put payments through Payroll
- Increases risk that DWP will see PIE activities as employment
- Often ends up getting taxed – can get rebates but introduces more stress and delay for the participant
- Rules about maximum number of payments in a year mean participants can receive large lump sums, increasing risk of large deductions or zero UC award
- Rules vary between institutions, causing further confusion and fragmentation.

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# Potential solutions to these issues

- Make payments to VCS organisations instead of individuals
- Purchase large items for participants
- Investigate voucher-giving status with HMRC
- Negotiate PIE activities counting towards work-related activity
- Lobby DWP to stop treating PIE payments as income
- Training on public involvement for DWP staff
- Pressure Uni finance depts to develop new payment arrangements
- Pressure NIHR, working with Universities, to develop models that work for the most vulnerable participants.

**WE HAVE AN ETHICAL IMPERATIVE TO ENSURE THERE IS NO RISK OF HARM**

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