



Submission by the St Vincent de Paul Society (England and Wales) to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty in response to the Call for Evidence for inquiry into the (in)adequacy of social security

The St Vincent de Paul Society (SVP) is a national voluntary network operating in England and Wales dedicated to tackling poverty in all its forms by providing practical assistance to people in need. Founded in Britain in 1844, the SVP provides practical support and advice to thousands of people each year. We have 9,000 volunteers across England and Wales, and every year we support over 50,000 people.

As part of its frontline support to those in need volunteers from the SVP has consistently provided practical support to families and individuals who have either struggled to make ends meet as a result of inadequate social security provision or have slipped through the gaps and failed to qualify for social security support.

Our Community Support Projects and volunteers provide advice, long-term support and befriending to families and individuals in areas of high deprivation. This submission reflects the experience of our volunteers and provides examples of some of the issues with social security provision.

General comments and observations

Over the past year we have seen a concerning increase in the number of people reaching out to our services who had previously been able to rely on social security to meet their basic needs.

We support a growing number of people who are employed yet are in receipt of benefits, highlighting the rising trend of in-work poverty. Indeed, as of October 2022 39% of people receiving Universal Credit were employed.

Here we present a number of case studies highlighting the aforementioned issues and specifically the inefficiency, inaccuracy and inconsistency of Universal Credit, particularly now amidst the cost of living crisis.

The following anonymised case studies clearly demonstrate that Universal Credit currently does not meet its purpose and objective and requires reviewing.

Case study one

Luis, a guest at our St Vincent's Centre in Southend centre had been self-employed since 2013 as the manager of a cosmetics business. His business initially began to be affected by Brexit which caused him to lose a significant proportion of customers and then the lockdown in March 2020 caused his business to collapse. In summer 2020 he discovered he was not eligible for financial support from the government, and he began to live exclusively off savings.

The reason for his alleged ineligibility for social security derived from the fact that his partner was in receipt of a student loan. This has been incorrectly classified as an income. In addition, he was the applicant for Universal Credit as opposed to his wife.



As a well-known member of the local community who prior to this point had also acted as a school governor in the area this was a demoralising blow. In June he became unable to pay rent and this was what prompted him to ask for help from our support centre, which was able to provide him with food parcels, top up his electricity and support him in rebuilding his life. The centre continues to support him as he seeks employment, but as he himself has stated, without this support himself and his family would be unable to meet his basic needs due to the absence of social security support.

Case Study two

Martin arrived at St Vincent's Centre in Southend requesting food support. After talking to the staff at the centre, he disclosed that he recently went seven days without electricity while waiting for the first instalment of his social security payment to come through. Martin disclosed that his first Universal Credit payment had taken two months to arrive. Martin had been struggling with depression, which was compounded by the recent death of his best friend, and together with the rising cost of energy, he began to feel he could not cope.

The initial wait for payment is a persistent issue experienced by Universal Credit applicants. This initial wait for payment often exacerbates existing debt issues and mental health issues. The system providing an initial advance for a payment is not always an effective solution to the problems faced by people on low incomes.

The centre supported him with food parcels as well as helping him to get an appointment with the local debt advice centre. In addition to giving him immediate practical support they offered a listening ear and a warm place for him to get back on his feet.

Case Study three

Hussain sought financial advice from St Vincent's Leeds after he received a letter saying that his Employment and Support Allowance payment (ESA) was going to be stopped. All because he had an increase of £5 a month on his private pension. This change resulted in his income being considered too high for ESA payments, even though his increase in income was minimal. Hussain had another letter saying that an energy arrears' balance of £130 was being transferred to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) for deductions. Hussain had made several calls to solve this issue but was unsuccessful every time. Worried his payments would be suddenly stopped and that he would fall further into arrears, he sought the support of the centre. The team worked closely with Hussain and successfully challenged the ESA payment being stopped. The team also successfully applied for a Household Support Fund payment, which was used to write off Hussain's energy debt.

Mis-calculating benefits entitlements is an issue affecting many of our service users. Without advocacy and advice from experts, many people would not be receiving the correct amount of entitlement, leaving them at risk of destitution and debt.

Case study four

We received a request from a man supporting his family in receipt of Universal Credit and unable to work due to a heart condition. The man had previously been able to meet the needs of the family,



however due to a rise in the cost of living and energy prices he became unable to pay for food. This led him to become increasingly reliant on the support of his local St Vincent's centre.

Case study five

Jeanette came to us needing support for accommodation, she was in a house share back in 2020 during COVID-19. During this time, she had been receiving daily harassment from the landlord due to her inability to cover her rent. This was in turns a result of a failure from the DWP to accept her application for and Alternative Payment Arrangement (APA).

APAs, and particularly Managed Payments to Landlord are an essential tool which allows people with additional needs to manage their finances. Assessment criteria for APAs must be re-assessed and expanded to reflect the wide range of issues experienced by people in need.

This issue led to her suffering from anxiety and depression. She was the victim of name calling and abuse from the individuals that were also living in the property, due to the issues with the landlord and this culminated in her being arrested. As she had never been arrested, this was a shock for her, and significantly increased her anxiety. Failing to receive support from local servicers, Jeannette became homeless and has now been a rough sleeper for three years.

Summary and conclusions

The case studies are just a few which highlight that the benefit system needs refining to meet its purpose. Our case studies draw attention to shortfalls which can be summarised in the below distinct categories:

Eligibility criteria

- The eligibility requirements which can change due to small increases in salary needs to be amended as highlighted by case study three. This case highlights the need to change benefit entitlement calculations as the current formula risks leaving many people in need without the adequate level of support.
- Recent changes to Universal Credit requiring people to increase their working hours or risk having their entitlement stopped, as announced in the latest Budget will leave many vulnerable groups at risk. Many of our beneficiaries who are in receipt of Universal Credit will be unable to increase their working hours due to caring responsibilities, childcare and disability. Changes to conditionality will risk punishing them further.
- In case study one we highlighted the issue with Universal Credit eligibility assessment criteria and the risk of automating decision-making when assessing complex cases.

Adequacy of support

- The initial wait for a payment of Universal Credit as in the case of case study two, indicates that the potential efficacy of Universal Credit can be undermined by bureaucracy and logistical



problems. The individual in question, despite having qualified for payments was still clearly unable to make ends meet which was exacerbated by the increase in energy prices. This could easily have been avoided if the payment had not taken two months to come through.

- We highlighted the need to re-assess criteria for assessing applications for Alternative Payment Arrangements, particularly a Managed Payment to Landlord. Our experience shows that many people's applications for APAs are refused, and such refusal can have detrimental implications for people's wellbeing.
- Case study four demonstrates that benefit allowance for those unable to work is often not enough to meet basic needs. Particularly in the context of an ongoing cost of living crisis, benefit payments are often not adequate to meet the needs of people. In her case she was also unable to support her children. Data from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) on children living in low-income families shows that the number of children in absolute low income (working) households reached 1,689,198 in 2019/20, up from 1,530,741 in 2015/16. This represents an increase of 10.4% in three years.

Policy and Public Affairs Team

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