

Evidence submission

Age UK evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee's Inquiry into Benefit Delivery

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Introduction

1. Age UK is the country's largest charity dedicated to helping everyone make the most of later life. The Age UK network comprises of around 165 local Age UKs reaching most of England. Each year we provide Information and Advice to around 4.5 million people through web based and written materials, and individual enquires by telephone, letter, email and through face to face sessions. We work closely with Age Cymru, Age NI and Age Scotland.
2. We welcome the opportunity to respond to the inquiry. Most people contacting Age UK about benefit issues have reached Pension Credit age (women's State Pension age) and therefore do not face the same conditionality requirements as younger people in order to receive benefits. If there are delays or problems in receiving benefits they will normally at least have some income from their State Pension. It is therefore relatively uncommon for people to seek help from Age UK on the grounds that they have no money at all.
3. Our information and advice workers do however come across cases where errors or poor administration cause problems for some older clients, and local Age UK's are contacted by some clients under Pension Credit age. In the time available we have not been able to carry out a comprehensive review of the clients who have sought our help around benefit administration, nor are we in a position to judge the extent of these issues. However below we summarise examples of the types of feedback we have received.

Wrong or misleading information

4. Information given to claimants is often over the telephone so they do not have a detailed record of what they were told. However we are concerned at some of the reports we receive of misleading information. One Age UK adviser said that a client who had recently asked for a reconsideration of an Attendance Allowance decision was told over the phone that he would not receive the allowance unless his care or supervision needs warranted him going into a nursing home. Understandably the client was worried about this and did not want to claim something that he was not entitled to.
5. When people call the Pension Credit claim line they are first asked for information about their circumstances to see if they are entitled. If it appears they are, it is explained what information they need to make a claim and, if they do not have this to hand, are asked to ring back to be put through to the claims section. We are concerned that in some situations people may be deterred from claiming because they have incorrectly been told they will not qualify. For example one woman was told that she could not claim based on her date of birth. She contacted Age UK to check this because the information was different to that on our website (which was correct).

Errors

6. Sometimes a problem arises for no obvious reason. For example a woman who was dealing with the affairs of a man in his late 80s with dementia living in a care home recently contacted our national advice service because the man's State Pension had stopped with no explanation - although his Attendance Allowance continued to be paid. Despite contacting the DWP several times the pension had not been re-instated. Cases like this are not common but it highlights a concern we have that when things do go wrong, or an issue is not straightforward, it can take time for this to be sorted out. In the meantime vulnerable clients may be left without essential support

Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)/Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA)

7. When we receive feedback on benefit issues from people under Pension Credit age these tend to be around problems with ESA or JSA. This could involve sanctions, delays in receiving a decision, or the way that people are treated. Inconsistency in service is another issue and often serves to highlight where the system is working well, and where it is not. For example a local Age UK adviser told us of a client with a number of serious health problems who had dealt with a Job Centre where staff were very understanding of her health and disability issues. When the client moved house her case was transferred to a different Job Centre and she was sanctioned for not applying for enough jobs. She ended up at Age UK simply because she had lost her way to an appointment at the Job Centre. She had been forced to seek help from a food bank but due to her health conditions had great difficulty carrying the food home.
8. Sanctions may be counterproductive if they make it harder to look for work, or prepare for work. For example, a local Age UK adviser had a client who had been sanctioned and had been instructed to attend Maths and English classes. However, because of the sanctions she did not have enough money to get to the classes.
9. In another example, an Age UK adviser helped a man who had experienced a work related accident which made it impossible to continue to work and left him in constant pain. His claim for ESA was initially turned down but the decision was changed with assistance from the local Age UK. The client's first language was not English and he had been struggling with the process of claiming and the assessment. The adviser noted how difficult it is for people in situations like this to deal with the complicated systems without support. Other advisers have echoed this view expressing concern for those who do not have support.

Addressing these issues

10. We only receive feedback from people who have a problem and seek our help, so we are not in a position to say how typical the cases are that reach us. However

the ones we have heard about are concerning. We understand the pressure on DWP expenditure but it is important that staff have sufficient time and training to manage claims effectively and provide a good service to people who are often anxious and in difficult situations. Ultimately if people are dealt with efficiently and correctly, this will make the system work better for everyone and reduce the time and resources the DWP has to spend when decisions are challenged and in some cases overturned.

11. Alongside the importance of good benefit delivery is the need to provide appropriate support to help people back to work where this is possible. Research commissioned by Age UK has highlighted the difficulties that some older jobseekers experience with Job Centre Plus or other welfare-to-work providers. This often relates to the lack of knowledge advisers have regarding the specific barriers to work that the 50+ age group faces, for example age discrimination from employers, and an absence of bespoke support to mitigate these.ⁱ With State Pension age rising and more older jobseekers likely to be using Job Centre Plus, it is important that there is appropriate employment support tailored to their needs.

Benefit take-up

12. We would also like to highlight our on-going concern about the low levels of benefit take-up which unnecessarily exacerbates the level of pensioner poverty. After a three year gap estimates were published earlier this year using new methodologyⁱⁱ, and according to these 1.3 million pensioners are entitled to but not claiming Pension Credit. This is over a third (37 per cent) of all those who are entitled. On average people are missing out on £41 a week. The figures also cover Housing Benefit and show that an estimated 260,000 pensioners are missing out on an average of £62 a week. There will also be many people missing out on means-tested Council Tax Reduction. In previous reports estimates of the numbers missing out on Council Tax Benefit were higher than those missing out on Pension Credit but figures are no longer included as this support is now the responsibility of local authorities.
13. Older people are less likely to be living in poverty than some other groups and it is good news that pensioner poverty has fallen over the last 15 years or so. However progress appears to have stalled and there are still 1.6 million pensioners (14 per cent) living in relative poverty - with incomes of less than 60 per cent of typical household income. Of these, 900,000 are in severe poverty (less than half of typical household income)ⁱⁱⁱ.
14. Improving benefit take-up would help reduce poverty and by maximising income many older people would be better able to meet essential costs such as energy and food bills helping to promote health and wellbeing and maintaining independence. We are disappointed that the Government is not pursuing an active strategy to ensure that people claim their entitlements. Indeed when Ministers make comments such as 'trapped in welfare dependency' or people see media reports about benefit cheats this is likely to discourage claims. For example we were told of a 79 year old

man who has long been disabled who worries on days when he feels a bit better that his Disability Living Allowance and other benefits will stop. In another example, a man in his 50s who developed problems that prevented him working was so worried about being assessed and passed as fit to work that he did not apply for benefits at all, leading to him becoming very depressed.

15. Age UK believes that benefit take-up should be increased through on-going publicity and access to information, advice and support to help people maximise their income. We need a cross-government strategy (led by a ministerial champion) to co-ordinate the delivery of high quality information services across all departments, and to ensure that independent information and advice services are also available.

ⁱ Foster et al (2014), Employment support for unemployed older people, Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion.

ⁱⁱ Income-Related Benefits: Estimates of Take-up – Financial Year 2013/14 (Experimental) DWP 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ Households Below Average Income 1994/95 to 2013/14. DWP 2015.