Work and Pensions Select Committee Call for Evidence – Safeguarding vulnerable claimants

National Federation of ALMOs response
October 2023

Introduction

The National Federation of ALMOs (NFA) is the membership body for local authority arms-length housing management companies. We represent 21 ALMOs which manage around 255,800 council homes on behalf of their parent local authorities. The NFA published a report in July this year in partnership with ARCH (the Association of Retained Council Housing), *On the Edge: Cost of Living Findings from the Council Housing Sector.* It looked at the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on households living in local authority housing[1]. We also looked at the forthcoming plans to migrate legacy benefit claimants post-April 2024, and the concerns members have in relation to vulnerable claimants.

We have not answered all the call for evidence questions but focused on question 1 and 3 as these are most relevant for our evidence.

For more information, please contact Lisa Birchall, NFA Lead Policy Officer, lisa.birchall@almos.org.uk

1. DWP does not have a statutory duty to safeguard the wellbeing of vulnerable claimants. Should this change?

a) If so, what should this duty look like?

Feedback from our members is that DWP should have a statutory duty to safeguard the wellbeing of vulnerable claimants, which would bring it into line with other statutory bodies. In fact, one member reported that it was a shock to them to learn that this *was not* a statutory requirement of DWP frontline staff, considering the work that they do and the likelihood of vulnerable customers presenting with safeguarding concerns. Added to this, appointments with Job Centre staff may be the only interaction that many individuals have with an organisation able to flag up safeguarding concerns, so introducing this could be transformative to the lives of vulnerable claimants.

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[1] https://www.almos.org.uk/publications/on-the-edge-cost-of-living-findings-from-the-council-housing-sector/

A four page summary is available here: https://www.almos.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Policy-briefing-At-the-Edge-Report-Sept-2023.pdf

3. What are the main challenges that vulnerable claimants face when trying to make a new benefit claim?

a) How effective is the Universal Credit "Help to Claim" service at supporting vulnerable claimants to register a claim?

b) What should DWP do to improve support for vulnerable people to make a claim and to ensure they do not delay making a claim?

There are a number of changes that could be made to the Universal Credit system to make it work more effectively for everyone, including those with vulnerabilities. Removing the wait for the first Universal Credit payment is the main ask that our members have. This would remove the need for an 'advanced payment' loan that puts people behind from the beginning. Improving the new claim process would also be helpful, as it can be a long and stressful process.

In our research with members, it was particularly clear that there are serious concerns about the upcoming managed migration of claimants on legacy benefits from April 2024. Members stated that there is likely to be a high number of people with vulnerabilities in these cohorts who may struggle to make a new claim. However, it is a bit of an unknown for landlords and DWP which is concerning.

Members are keen to support tenants when they receive their Managed Migration notice, but since they are not informed when tenants have received a notice, they are relying on the tenant contacting them. Otherwise, the first sign that there is a problem is likely to be when arrears start to escalate. The time limit on claimants making a claim is also of concern, since vulnerable households could find themselves in extreme hardship due to their benefits being switched off.

We have made a number of asks to DWP which should help with vulnerable households:

- Put in place a data sharing agreement with local authorities and ALMOs to provide them with details about which households will be affected and when, to allow targeted support. As part of that, provide sufficient notice to landlords before rollout in each area; and improve the two-way communication between landlords and DWP so that landlords can more easily rectify issues with managed migration cases.
- Review social landlords' ability to act on behalf of tenants (in such cases where they require assistance)
- Fully develop the support and protection for vulnerable households before scaling up migration.
- Extend the three-month period a claimant has to apply for Universal Credit once they receive notice to do so; and not end the claim at the end of that period until DWP has got to the bottom of why the claim has not been made.

- For households that receive a notice to migrate in the first quarter of the year, make it very clear on the migration letter that they should seek advice on the best time to migrate, so they do not lose transitional protection (TP) unnecessarily (i.e. as a result of the annual uplift eroding their TP).
- Very clearly communicate to households that the Housing Element will be paid to them and they will be responsible for paying the rent, unlike under Housing Benefit.
- Allow the setting up of APAs as soon as tenants migrate if the tenancy is at risk.
- Consider whether on managed migration notices households could be directed to their social landlord for help completing the claim.
- Clearly communicate that households should make a new claim for Council Tax support as this is not always clear to claimants when they move across.
- Delay or cancel direct deductions for historic debts.

While our members have not fed back specifically on "Help to Claim", it is worth noting that the majority of our members provide financial wellbeing/ income management and tenancy sustainment services which provide extensive support to those tenants that need it over a much longer period of time than "Help to Claim". These services are not part of "Help to Claim" and are not funded by DWP but are necessary for certain claimants. There is clearly a need for a much wider 'universal support' model funded through DWP.

Members have also suggested the following to improve support for vulnerable people:

- In some places, the Job Centre works very well with stakeholders, including housing providers; but this is patchy. Better partnership working to support vulnerable claimants would be welcome.
- There is a home visiting service available where a claimant is unable to attend an office, but this can be delayed due to lack of available visiting teams. A review of this approach could see increasing capacity for home visiting or changing the requirement to see an individual in person.
- Security questions can be difficult for vulnerable claimants. DWP could think about more simple questions or a chance for individuals to make up their own questions. Emails/phone numbers as an essential part of security can be a barrier due to how much people change these.
- The DWP alerts customers to actions required via text, but if they have lost their phone or changed their number, this can risk claim closure. Claimants should always be able to engage face-to-face at a job centre when needed.
- For vulnerable customers who are not computer literate, they have to claim UC over the phone. This process is not easy for vulnerable customers to navigate. DWP should improve the phone claim process or provide more support to people to make an online claim.

We provide two short case studies below to highlight the challenges that vulnerable claimants face:

Example One

The individual has learning difficulties, is working age, and had to make a claim for Universal Credit. He has no family nearby to support him. When trying to make a claim:

- The landlord staff assisted him in making an initial claim, but he did not attend the first appointment. The Job Centre closed the claim and forced him to make a new claim, even though the landlord informed them he had learning difficulties.
- If the tenant did not attend the job centre, then he was advised the claim would fail again. He was unable to do this without support, but the Job Centre does not provide any support for claimants to attend centres.
- The landlord assisted him with a second claim, but the individual did not have money to get to the appointment. Due to the landlord's awareness of the tenant's health issues and learning disability, it was agreed the landlord would fund and arrange a taxi to attend the appointment.
- The landlord's financial support officer went with him to the appointment to make sure he was providing DWP with the correct information. They also supported him with getting a sick note from the doctor and to complete Limited Capability for Work forms to make sure he received all the support he was eligible for.
- No assistance was offered by the job centre to support this vulnerable tenant, and without the landlord's support, it is very unlikely that he would have been able to make a claim and attend the follow up appointment.

Example Two

- This ALMO supported a resident who was migrated from Universal Credit to Housing Benefit.
- Staff became aware of an issue only because the resident's Housing Benefit stopped. However, staff had been unaware of her background: due to domestic abuse, she had developed severe mental health issues and was very insecure and detached from services.
- The Job Centre could not get in contact with the resident. The housing support staff slowly worked with the resident to build up trust. It took a number of weeks to set up a home visit. During this period, arrears were escalating as the resident had not engaged with the Job Centre and UC was not paying her housing costs, putting the resident at risk of arrears action.
- After six attempts, the housing staff managed to meet the resident and understand her housing situation and needs. They contacted the Job Centre to request a home visit from their team and also requested an appeal to have the housing costs backdated, along with an ongoing APA and MPA to cover the rent and small amount of arrears that was left on the rent account.
- The transfer process and build-up of arrears caused the tenant significant anxiety and worsened her mental health problems.