

Voices from the Frontline:

Online barriers to maintaining Universal Credit claims



www.cas.org.uk

May 2019

Citizens Advice Scotland (CAS), our 59 member Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB) and the Extra Help Unit form Scotland's largest independent advice network. Advice provided by our service is free, independent, confidential, impartial and available to everyone. Our self-help website, Advice for Scotland, also provides information on rights and helps people to solve their problems.

In 2017/2018, the Citizens Advice network in Scotland helped over 295,000 clients in Scotland alone and dealt with over 874,100 advice issues. With support from the network, clients had financial gains of over £142.2 million and our Scottish self-help website Advice for Scotland received approximately 3.2 million unique page views.

Citizens Alerts

The logo for Citizens Alerts, featuring a large orange exclamation mark to the left of the text "Citizens Alerts" in a bold, orange sans-serif font.

The Citizens Advice network operates a real-time case reporting system called Citizens Alerts. The system allows CAB to submit client case notes to CAS, demonstrating the impact of policies and services which they feel are failing to meet client needs. This briefing is based on an analysis of **Citizens Alerts** concerning the barriers to maintaining a Universal Credit (UC) claim online.

Introduction and context of briefing

Claims for UC must normally be made and maintained online. Alternative, offline options are only available in exceptional circumstances. Claim maintenance includes all activities required to fulfil the UC Claimant Commitment (and thus to avoid sanction), such as updating the online journal and job searching. Work Coaches also communicate essential information online, for example to request that claimants complete additional tasks or to notify claimants of changes to Jobcentre Plus (JCP) appointments.

Evidence from Citizens Advice Bureaux

Since UC was introduced, CAB evidence has suggested that a significant minority of people do not have the internet access or digital skills required to make and maintain their claims online. Within this group, those with disabilities, mental or physical health conditions, learning difficulties, poor literacy skills and other complex needs appear to face particular disadvantages and barriers to online claim maintenance. In fact, some simply may never be able to do so without substantial support. Those living in rural areas can also face unique difficulties. Such claimants can therefore be at serious risk of sanction (and in some cases claim closure), which can result in significant hardship. This evidence supports previous CAS research which found that only one quarter of respondents seeking benefits advice

could apply online for benefit without any problems.¹

Citizens Alert: An east of Scotland CAB reports of a vulnerable client suffering from chronic anxiety and depression who has been repeatedly sanctioned for not updating his online journal correctly. He has no computer skills or access to the Internet at home. He has no money at all and he is reliant on Crisis Grants and food parcels. The distress is exacerbating his poor mental health and his overall quality of life is deteriorating, hindering his ability to find work.

Citizens Alert: A west of Scotland CAB reports of a distressed client who has worked manual jobs his entire life and so does not know how to turn on a computer, let alone how to log on to and update his journal. The client does not have broadband and mobile data coverage is poor in his rural area. He will therefore need to regularly travel to and from the library, which is an expensive bus ride away, and he is terrified that he will not find the substantial support that he needs. He says the process makes him feel inadequate and he fears sanction.

Citizens Alert: An east of Scotland CAB reports of an illiterate client who sought CAB support as he had no idea what the online journal is or how to access it. He was then locked out of his journal because he could not remember his email address, password or security code. He will always require substantial support to maintain his Claimant Commitment as he cannot read his Work Coach's instructions on the journal, apply for jobs online or fill out his work search history.

Citizens Alert: An east of Scotland CAB reports of a homeless client whose UC claim has been closed because he missed a JCP appointment. He suffers from memory problems and chronic anxiety and his situation is made even more difficult as he has no

mobile phone or Internet access in his temporary hostel accommodation to check or update his journal. He is now relying on friends to provide food.

Citizens Alert: An east of Scotland CAB reports of a client who has been signed off for a minimum of 13 weeks following knee surgery. He is housebound as he cannot walk more than a few metres. He does not have a computer and is struggling to afford regular mobile data top-ups. He has no one to turn to and feels the distress is adversely impacting his recovery.

Citizens Alert: A north of Scotland CAB reports of a client who was sanctioned because he did not attend a JCP appointment. He was unaware of the appointment as he is not computer literate and so depends on his daughter, who isn't always available, to check and update everything. He has otherwise been fulfilling his Claimant Commitment and has taken computer classes to improve his skills but is still struggling. Meanwhile, he has no money for food, gas or electric during the coldest months.

Citizens Advice Scotland recommends that:

- Alternative, suitably supported offline options to make *and* maintain claims (such as telephony, face-to-face support and home visits) should be available and actively promoted to all claimants. Those with health conditions, disabilities or other complex needs should be specifically targeted for support. The Department for Work and Pensions has funded the Citizens Advice network in Scotland to offer comprehensive, practical support to make their claims online but we remain concerned that people may not be able to maintain their claims online thereafter.
- There should be a fundamental review of the purpose and efficacy of the sanctions regime and the impact it has on people and services. To prevent people being left with no income, sanctions should cut benefit to a proportion (e.g. to hardship payment levels of 60%), rather than the entire amount of benefit.

¹ 'Disconnected: Understanding Digital Inclusion and Improving Access':

<https://www.cas.org.uk/publications?title=disconnected&spotlight=All&type=All&=Search>