

Case studies

1) Elaine

“It is hit and miss what you get on Universal Credit.”

Elaine has a seven year old daughter and lives in Croydon. Elaine has two part-time jobs and for one of these roles she is paid on commission. The long wait for money on the transfer to Universal Credit contributed to Elaine’s £4000 rent arrears. She was evicted from her flat and is living in temporary accommodation; a room with shared facilities with single people some of whom have substance abuse issues or are heavy drinkers.

She finds her Universal Credit difficult to manage especially with a fluctuating income. She is unclear how much she will get each month and it is usually less than she expected. Under Universal Credit rules she continues to have to take her childcare receipts to the jobcentre. Her debt problems and housing issues have led to Elaine having to be signed off work for a month. She is keen to move into better paid work but feels she is not helped to do this by the jobcentre. For instance they would not pay for her to do an IT course to update her skills so she could move into better paid and more secure work.

2) Frances

“Without my brother I would not have survived financially.”

Frances has a five-year-old son and lives on the South Coast. Frances transferred over to Universal Credit when her son turned five in the summer. Frances has been waiting for the results of a Work Capability Assessment (WCA). Her WCA was delayed from July to September and she still does not have the result at the start of 2018. Her GP has signed her off from needing to work but because of the severe delays in her assessment Frances must continue to attend and engage with a work coach at the jobcentre. Her work coach is supportive but she thinks that there is inconsistency on the expectations put on claimants depending on the individual work coach.

When Frances transferred to Universal Credit she was left with nothing to live on. Frances took out an Advanced Payment Loan but found it too hard to pay back over six months. She was allowed to extend the payment over a longer period although she is worried this is currently under review and she will be under increased pressure to repay an amount she cannot afford. She thinks that it is good that the Advanced Loan pay back period has been extended to a year but still thinks this is unrealistic for people on such low incomes. Frances thinks there is a confusing array of people dealing with her including a work coach, a person who oversees things in the head office who can query the work coach instructions, someone managing her advanced loan and another person dealing with her WCA. These people do not seem to have a consistent message about what she should be doing under Universal Credit or take responsibility for her claim.

3. Felicity

“Universal Credit does not take some peoples circumstances into consideration.”

Felicity has a three-year-old son and lives in South London. She left University when she was pregnant and this was when she transferred onto Universal Credit. Felicity has not been on a legacy benefit and managed to live on her remaining student loan before she received her first UC payment. She lives in a housing association property and receives some financial support from her son’s father, she also receives a steady amount under UC. Felicity has been accepted on a new place at University to study midwifery later this year and so does not expect to be on UC much longer. To date she has been largely positive about her experience on UC.

Under UC rules she is required to look for work when her son turned three. She thinks that this is too soon for single parents to move into work especially because people’s circumstances can be so different, for instance where they do not have wider family support. Felicity thinks that her work coach is supportive. She is expected to apply for two jobs each week. Felicity was disappointed to find out that she could have undertaken training for up to a year or work experience related to midwifery under UC rules in view of her son’s age. Felicity was not told about this opportunity to undertake training by her work coach.

4. Gina

“The transfer to Universal Credit was a nightmare”

Gina lives on the Norfolk coast with her two sons aged fifteen and five. Gina is being treated for depression and anxiety. When Gina moved onto Universal Credit she faced a ten-week delay and found the transition very difficult as it sent her into a spiral of debt. She relied on a food bank to feed her family. She received an overpayment of tax credits of £600 during the transition despite informing HMRC of her change in circumstances. She has subsequently struggled to pay back the overpayment and other household debts. However, her UC payments are now steady and she has managed her debts and repayments with the support of the charity Step Change.

Gina’s Claimant Commitment included that she should look for work 21 hours per week. Gina thinks that the stress of the work search and the transfer to UC, including the resultant debt, has made her mental health worse. She thinks that this has impacted on her children as she has become short tempered and has relied on her older son for support. She was subject to a Work Capability Assessment (WCA) in November 2017 but is still awaiting the result to see whether she can have her work search reduced or suspended. Her GP does not think that she is fit for work and signs a fit note for the jobcentre. However, Gina is still required to attend the jobcentre each month, which she finds difficult and has to take her mother for support. Gina does not know how long she will need to wait for the results of her WCA.

5. Laura

“Universal Credit is pushing claimants into debt.”

Laura lives in the North East of England with her two sons aged eleven and thirteen. Her youngest son has a disability and she receives Disability Living Allowance to care for him; she is not required to seek work. However, Laura is a qualified teacher and was keen to have a job and moved into temporary work in a school. It was the end of this temporary job that led her having to move onto Universal Credit. Laura had to wait seven weeks until she received her first payment, during which time she build up rent arrears and had to visit a food bank with her children. Laura's entitlement to the housing element for a three-bedroom property (owing to her son's disability) was not transferred to her UC claim. She had to go through the whole application process again and in the interim faced a shortfall in her rent of £40 each week, needlessly putting her into further debt. Laura finds using the UC account online problematic and she often waits weeks for a response.

Laura's UC payments are now regular but money is tight and she finds the monthly payments hard and she usually ends up with very little or no money leading up to the payment of UC. Laura would like to work but she finds it unhelpful that UC staff are not able to give her accurate back to work financial calculations. She found a job before Christmas but did not take it because UC staff were unclear what her take home would be and how it would impact her overall UC payment. She was too scared to take the financial risk to move into work. She would like the jobcentre to offer more support for people like her who have a child with a disability but want to work.

6. Caroline

Caroline lives in temporary accommodation in Croydon with her daughter who is aged four. Caroline's Universal Credit payments are now steady but she is still struggling to pay back an Advance Payment from earlier in her claim which at £100 a month is very difficult to pay. This has resulted in her having other debts including owing money on her nursery fees for her daughter; the nursery will not let her daughter attend until the debt is paid.

Caroline has a named work coach who is mostly supportive and referred her to the National Careers Service who provided helpful comments on her CV. Her work coach also referred her to do courses in business administration and employability. These were helpful but she was not told about being able to claim for childcare costs and so this had to come out of her UC payments. Her work coach expects her to apply for jobs of at least twenty-five hours a week despite her daughters being pre-school aged. Caroline is concerned that there are very few jobs that would fit in with the hours that are available at her daughters nursery.

7. Lynne

“There is a lot of pressure for single parents with young children to be in work... this pressure is intense and they should leave single parents alone.”

Lynne lives in a north of England town with her daughter who is 4 years old. Lynne built up some debt when she transferred to UC, including rent arrears, and had to take out an Advance Payment Loan. She sometimes had to borrow money from her family to buy food. She recently

paid off her loan but is currently in financial disarray. This is because Lynne took a job in a shop in the lead up to Christmas that she could not sustain. She is waiting for a decision as to whether she will be sanctioned for leaving her job under UC rules. She left the job because the shifts were so unpredictable and would go on until the evening. Her mother provided informal care but the unpredictable nature of the hours became too difficult for her mother to step in and care. Lynne has applied for an Advanced Payment Loan but has been turned down because it is considered that she left a job voluntarily.

Lynne's work coach is perfectly nice and was accepting when she moved into a job of twelve hours a week even though the hour's expectations in her Claimant Commitment were higher. Liz finds it difficult to find work that would combine with her ability to care for her daughter. She also thinks that when you do move into work you are no better off. Even when she was working she was not able to save or afford any extras for her daughter and she experienced a cut to her council tax benefit. Lynne struggles with a low mood and is currently on anti-depressants.

8. Beccy

Beccy was offered a job but her work coach was unable to provide her with a financial calculation as to what she would earn "He just said 'why not just wait and see what you get once you have started your job'".

Becky lives in the East Midlands with her two children aged six and eight. She was working twenty-three hours a week but has recently been offered a full-time job. She moved to Universal Credit when her ex-partner stopped paying child maintenance and she needed to claim towards her housing costs. She does not have a work coach or access to support from the Jobcentre. However, she needs to visit the jobcentre regularly with her childcare receipts to claim back childcare costs under UC, she finds this difficult when you are working and running around with the children.

At the start of 2018 Beccy is starting a new job, a full-time role in a school. She found the job independently of the jobcentre. It is a job in a local school that she can combine with looking after her daughters. However, she is frustrated that UC officials cannot tell her what her new job will mean financially including how much she will take home each week, how much of her childcare costs will be paid and what help she will get towards her rent. She is taking the job but does not know whether she will be financially better off taking on the role.

9. Sally

"UC rules should be made more reasonable for single parents, they are too hard on single parents who need to be there for their children."

Sally lives in the Home Counties and has two children aged seven and seventeen. Sally built up rent arrears when she transferred over to Universal Credit because she used her rent money to pay other bills. She was threatened with eviction but her MP stepped in and she

repays her landlord each month together with an outstanding Budgeting Loan. Her UC payments have now settled although she would prefer it if her rent was paid directly to her landlord. Financially she has found the monthly payments hard under UC and thinks it would be better if these were paid every two weeks or ideally paid each week.

Sally thinks that her work coach is supportive and she can open up to her. Her work coach has allowed her to undertake some limited hours of work, as a stepping-stone into more substantial work. Her work coach has also been supportive of the idea of Sally moving into self-employment as a delivery driver. Although her UC payments have settled she finds it difficult to establish with her work coach how much she can earn before she loses UC; so the financial value of working is not clear.

10. Jessica

Jessica lives in a northern city and has two children aged four and fifteen. She is at college studying part-time for a level 4 qualification. She also volunteers part-time. On transfer to UC she had a very difficult time with childcare costs and getting these reimbursed. Her UC amounts were also inconsistent and so what she got varied. Her transfer to UC led her to get into both utility and credit card debt.

The advice from Gingerbread enabled Jessica to negotiate with her work coach for her work search requirements to be suspended so that she can carry on with studying for her qualification up until the time her youngest child starts schools.