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Date: 19 October 2020

cc:

UC Product Delivery since Covid update

Issue: The purpose of this paper is to update UC Programme Board with the outcomes the product delivery team has delivered since the start of the Covid pandemic in March 2020.

UC Programme Board are asked to:

- Note the work delivered since March

Timing: For meeting 27 October 2020

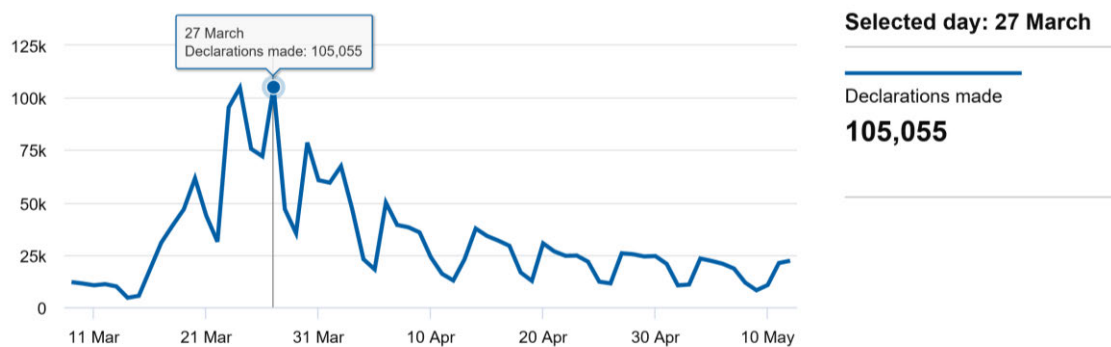
Introduction

1. In March, the UC Programme paused the delivery of the previously agreed Phase 8 objectives, and stopped planning for Phase 9, which had been due to commence 30 April 2020.
2. From the 17th March, the UC Product priorities were agreed and governed by DWP's Bronze Command, and subsequently the Work and Health Executive Team. For ongoing priorities since the start of October, the governance sits back with UC's Programme Delivery Executive.
3. This paper covers work delivered under the following broad priority areas:
 - Support service performance and stability
 - Easing the operational burden and maintaining payment timeliness
 - Reducing fraud and error
 - Labour market response
 - Supporting vulnerable claimants
 - Policy and legislative changes

Support service performance and stability

- In March, our focus turned to ensuring the performance and the stability of the platform as claim numbers grew, and DWP and other Government department staff were redeployed to Operational roles to support claim processing. We supported the creation of users from other Government Departments as UC case managers, requiring various network changes and overcoming training compatibility issues. We also coped with extraordinary demand, for example, new claim declarations rose to several times their average for weeks at a time, peaking at 10x normal demand in March (see Graph 1). We also saw claimant web requests quadruple in some cases compared to an ‘average’ day 49 days earlier (see Graph 2) and we had to scale our hardware to cope with the additional demand.

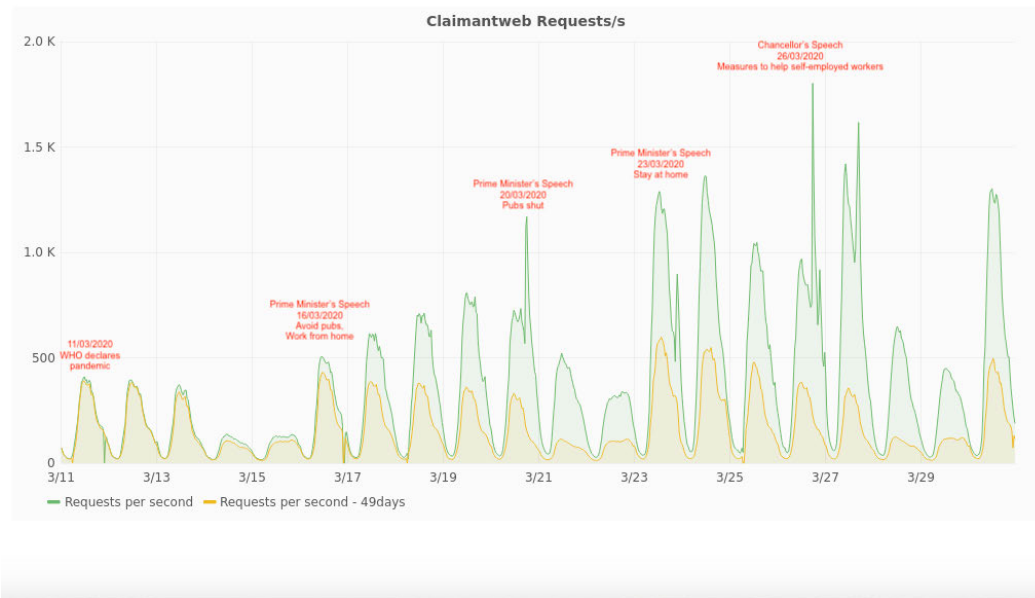
Declarations



(Graph 1)

- As well as infrastructure changes we also made code changes to support the increased demand on the platform, for example we made improvements to background calculation processes to speed them up, to prevent the higher volume of assessment periods to be calculated daily from finishing after 8am, so that any work needing a manual intervention by an agent was ready for the working day. Some of this work was done by our teams in Leeds, in their first experience of working in the main UC code base, making it a strategic investment of effort in more ways than one as we broaden out the capability of teams to make changes in all parts of the UC service.

First Three Weeks



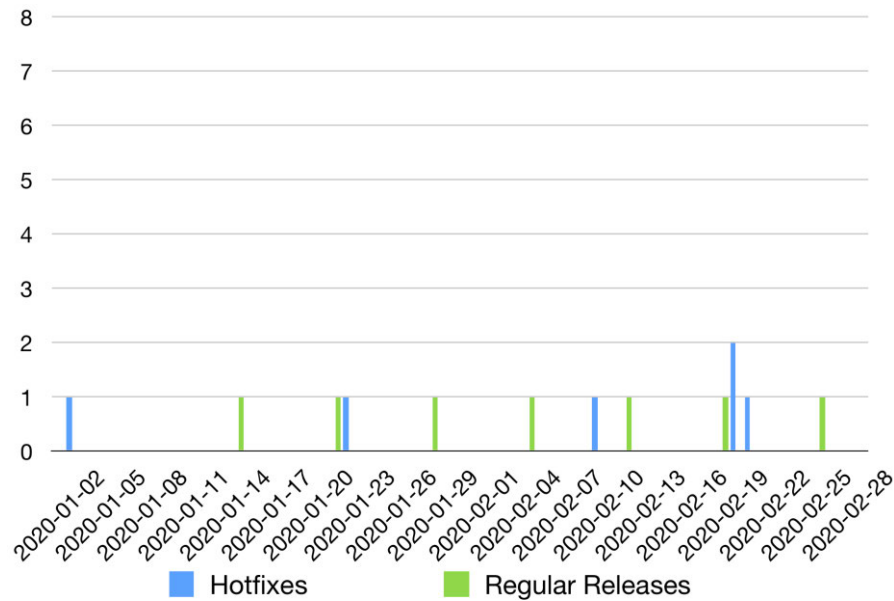
(Graph 2)

6. In addition to the above, an easement was introduced by the Department in March to stop collecting debt from UC claimants, that allowed us headroom to work with Debt Management System to improve our integration and make those end of Assessment Period processes more efficient for when we started collecting debt again in July. As we reintroduced that debt collection, we also improved the content about debt and deductions on GOV.UK and improved signposting to claimants, to try and prevent debt management being overwhelmed by calls from UC claimants.
7. We also increased our capacity to make faster payments threefold, which are required when there are not enough banking days to make a payment to a claimant on time, because of a delay in gathering or approval a piece of information required for an award.
8. More recently, we have been working on moving our internal message architecture from an old technology which is not highly available, to a newer technology which will offer us more resilience. We have not yet migrated over, but it has been a key focus for us over the summer, and we have completed a great deal of the work.
9. In addition to the changes listed here, we also moved to release change much more rapidly, to better support the Department cope with the rapidly changing situation, by working flat out to make numerous changes a day in some cases. Graphs 3 and 4 below visualise the huge increases to the

number of ‘emergency’ releases, described as hotfixes, we made to deliver value as quickly as possible (as opposed to being in response to an emergency), and give the Department more flexibility in its response. Compared to January and February, where we completed 6 emergency releases, amidst the surge of claims through March and April, we completed 76 emergency releases.

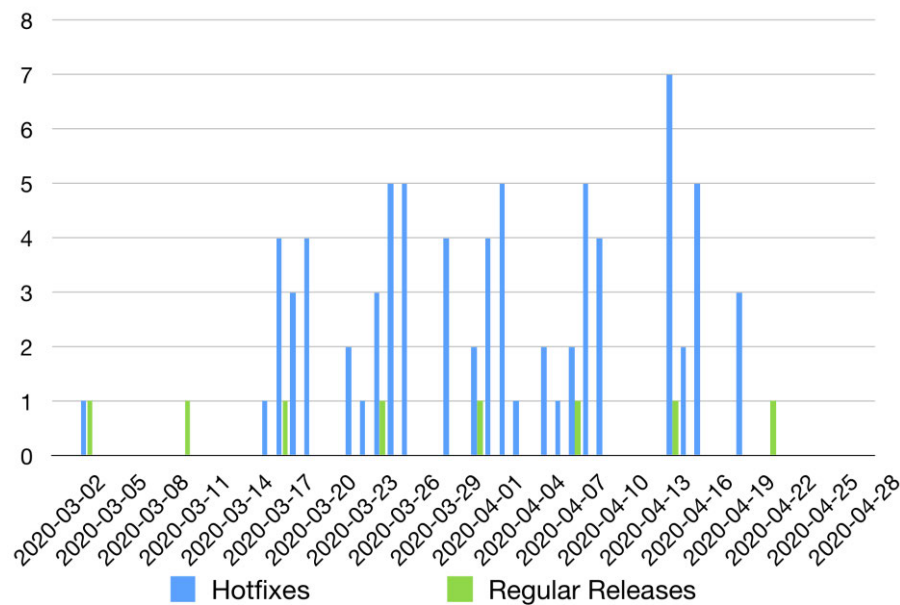
10.

Releases January/February 2020



(Graph 3)

Releases March/April 2020



(Graph 4)

Easing the operational burden and maintaining payment timeliness

11. As claim volumes grew through March, our absolute focus became supporting service delivery colleagues in ensuring the resilience of the social welfare safety net by paying claimants in full and on time. We made a number of changes to introduce easements reducing the evidence burden that claimants needed in order to establish their claim to UC. This included for health, housing costs, child element, and identity. We also increased automation in the calculation and payment processes, allowing more awards to be paid without human intervention – although some of this was tactical and not strategic advancement, and needs to be reviewed as we move out of the easements.
12. As well as ensuring claimants were paid, we also supported service delivery in a number of ways to deal with the huge volume of calls they were receiving from claimants. For example, we added a banner onto the Claimant homepage about Coronavirus, reassuring claimants that their payments would not be affected, and advising them that they did not need to come into the jobcentre. Later, that moved into a service design change as we took the onus off claimants to call us, and instead we instigated outbound calls to verify their identities, and check their claims.
13. We updated the Universal Credit guide, available from claimants' accounts, with information about self-employed income support scheme, furlough scheme (as it pertained to Universal Credit), and rolling changes for how to engage with Jobcentres, keeping it all in step with GOV.UK content. We also updated the new claim journey starting on GOV.UK to make clearer that a claim to UC would end any legacy benefit or tax credit claims, following stakeholder and user feedback.
14. After the initial peak of claims, from mid-April we made a number of sustained improvements. Following the suspension of third party debt collection for a month from mid-April to mid-May (to maximise our ability to ensure claimants were paid on time by minimising work for case managers), we added further automation of calculations involving third party debt, including rent arrears, council tax deductions, and some flat rate child maintenance deductions. That has taken the level of calculation automation in third party deductions to around 80%.
15. We have also moved monthly self-reporting of earnings (for those claimants where we cannot establish an earnings feed from RTE) from the phone to online. When the change was introduced in June, 90%+ claimants started reporting online, saving a 9-minute phone call for each instance, both operational time and claimant inconvenience waiting on the phone lines. In addition, over 60% of these to-dos are completed on the day they are issued, indicating a high level of compliance.
16. We completed the national rollout of the 'Apply for a Direct Rent Payment' tool onto GOV.UK which allows private landlords to apply more easily for rent

to be paid directly to them, with great feedback from landlords about how it improves the process. The online form is 3 times quicker for landlords to complete, only requiring UC case manager involvement 60% of time (down from 100%), and speeds up the end to end process.

17. Additionally, we've added functionality to speed up the allocation of claimants to case managers in bulk, to support the higher volumes being allocated, and made it easier for claimants to tell us about their child's education status in August, for those who had turned 16 in that academic year, as child element is only paid for those children continuing in education.
18. This work has supported DWP in keeping UC payment timeliness well above 90% for most of the last 7 months, as the caseload has doubled.

Reducing Fraud and Error

19. In March, as we lost the ability to see our claimants face to face, we had to replace our methods of evidence and identity verification for those claimants and parts of the claim for which we were still reliant on jobcentre visits.
20. We also accelerated the rollout of the Confirm Your Identity (CYI) platform, which we had been trialling for those claimants who already had a Government Gateway account that we had confidence in. We rolled it out at scale through April and May, and further expanded to allow claimants to sign up to a Government Gateway account as part of making a claim to Universal Credit in June, 3 months earlier than planned. We had to roll this out without the additional risk mitigation of an address check, which was subsequently added in September.
21. We also accelerated the roll out of two factor SMS authentication, to support those verifying their identity through CYI, and to protect claimants from account hijack. Since April, all new claimants to Universal Credit have been able to sign up with this additional authentication, removing the need for the 16-digit Personal Security Number, and over the coming phase we will be migrating existing claimants over to that feature.
22. At present, over 85% of new claimants are opting in to sign up to UC with two-factor authentication, and 39% of new claimants are proving their identity either via CYI or Verify.
23. The loss of the face to face channel in March also removed the ability to verify the bank account of a claimant, if they had been unsuccessful at passing our Bank Wizard checks. However, in June we made a change to allow claimants to report an old address, as well as their current address, to drive up Bank Wizard success where the failure was due to the address not matching. That has increased the number of claimants passing Bank Wizard successfully by 5 percentage points.
24. We were forced to reverse one of the fraud controls for advances we had introduced in 2019 for new claimants, where we had required to see them

face to face before an advance was released. Clearly that control was no longer tenable, so we have instead over the summer introduced a number of different risk rules to manage our advances fraud risk and identify potentially fraudulent advance requests, for example around the use of bank accounts, and behaviour with a proven link to fraudulent activity.

25. The risk we hold around roles based access control has also increased in response to the relaxation of some of the rules we had introduced prior to March, in order to ensure effective and swift access to cases by service delivery colleagues, creating a new advanced access role profile. We are now in the process of moving agents back to their old access controls, to reduce the risk back to the pre-Covid level.
26. We have also delivered some improvements to mitigate the loss of face to face verification for elements beyond identity, supporting a trial around the use of uploaded evidence for verification of private housing costs, and we have expanded the matching criteria in the landlord portal, increasing the number of social rented sector claimants whose rent can be verified by landlords via the portal from 78% to over 85%.

Labour market response

27. As we entered lockdown across the UK in March, Ministers agreed to suspend conditionality, and the need for claimants to look for work. We made a number of changes to support this outcome through March, April and May, including removing the eligibility requirement of having an agreed claimant commitment before a claimant can be paid. For self-employed claimants, this also involved suspension of the Gainful self-employment test, and the application of the Minimum Income Floor.
28. Since June, we have been supporting service delivery colleagues with the reintroduction of conditionality and the creation of tailored claimant commitments, both for new claims from June, and in a staggered way for those who claimed between March and June. We have been re-engaging claimants via text message and their journal, and we have trialled a new process of a claimant-led commitment where they provide more information about their work history and goals digitally, to allow a work coach to tailor a commitment and apply discretion over the need for an appointment to agree it with the claimant.
29. We've also been working on a trial to build an evidence base to understand how we can segment claimants in the intensive regime, eventually enabling us to make more tailored choices about which claimants require additional attention and support. There is a new claimant facing to-do called 'Tell us about your work situation' which gathers a greater level of information about a claimant's work history, skills, and digital confidence. We've been trialling that with several hundred claimants in 4 sites since the summer, with review points around the evidence we've built in November.

30. We also supported the announcements around the Plan for Jobs in July, and are taking forward a number of those initiatives. In September, we delivered the start of the Kickstart programme, and a vacancy service by which work coaches can view approved Kickstart vacancies and refer claimants to those placements. That vacancy service, unlike Find and Refer where contracted provision has sat previously, is integrated into UC and has huge potential to build on to improve the work coach referral experience. We have also delivered the JETS programme onto Find and Refer for England and Wales at the start of October. We will be continuing work on Kickstart and the rest of the Plan for Jobs over the coming months.
31. And finally, essential to our strategy in supporting work coaches help claimants get back into work is the work to meet the work coach need to help them prioritise their caseload and their time. Prior to Covid we were more heavily focused on meeting case manager needs around case progression, further iterating the case management dashboard and improving their navigation experience. However, the Department's priority is to minimise the pandemic's impact on employment and keep the labour market operating smoothly, and so our priority has shifted to making it easier for work coaches to manage their caseload.
32. To that end, we have delivered a number of filters to help work coaches reintroduce conditionality, searching by claim date and commitment status, and we have more work planned over the coming months to deliver the start of a work coach dashboard, supporting them in the same way we have delivered for case managers in recent years.

Supporting vulnerable claimants

33. During the Covid pandemic we have not lost sight of the need to protect and support our most vulnerable claimants. As the number of claimants increased, work coaches and case managers' ability to respond to urgent journal messages was impacted, so we make two significant changes to make them more efficient, and help them spot claimants in need more easily.
34. In May, we added a feature to the case management dashboard, allowing agents to preview the first line of journal messages, to enable agents to scan and pick out urgent or worrying journal messages more easily. We subsequently added the ability to dismiss low priority messages, such as 'thank you' from the claimant, saving UC agent time – with the opportunity to further automate this in the future.
35. In addition, we introduced a tactical change with our data science team, using key words to create a list of journal messages that require a high priority safeguarding response, indicating the claimant is at risk of suicide or domestic violence. That tactical list (hundreds per day) is passed to safeguarding teams regularly so they can weed out false positives, and act on high risk entries that haven't been picked up by the owning case manager

or work coaches. This is manual and time intensive, so we need to eventually evolve this into a strategic solution within the dashboard.

Policy and legislative changes

36. In addition to the outcomes referenced around the suspension of labour market conditionality, we have worked closely with our policy colleagues since May to support changes to UC legislation, advising the quickest and simplest way to deliver Ministerial outcomes.
37. In March that included uprating the UC standard allowance by around £20/week and increasing the rates for private rented housing to cover 30% of market rate in an area. For self-employed claimants, we also suspended the Minimum Income Floor.
38. In July, we implemented the two-week run on of benefit for claimants moving from income-related Employment and Support Allowance, Income Support, and income-based Jobseeker's Allowance onto Universal Credit, providing extra support for those claimants in the first assessment period.
39. In August, we made changes to support new legislation to allow claimants to derive rights to Universal Credit from a Northern Irish family member. There will be a number of changes introduced over the next several months to support the end of the transition period following EU exit.

Decision / Recommendation

40. UC Programme Board are asked to:

- Note the outcomes we have delivered since March