

Department for Work and Pensions

Research Report No 523

# **Reporting changes in circumstances: tackling error in the Housing Benefit system**

## Standard Housing Benefit cases

Jacqueline Davidson and Roy Sainsbury

A report of research carried out by the Social Policy Research Unit at the University of York on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions

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# Summary

## Introduction

Whilst levels of fraud have consistently decreased in the benefit system, levels of claimant and official error have not, and the reduction of overpayments is now an important policy objective (Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) 2007). The estimated total of Housing Benefit fraud and error from October 2005 to September 2006 was £760 million (Audit Commission 2008), which represents just over five per cent of the £14 billion total 2005/06 expenditure on Housing Benefit. Of this, £170 million is estimated to have been lost through fraud, £430 million was overpaid because of claimant error and £160 million overpaid because of official error (DWP, 2007).

This report presents findings from a qualitative research project to explore Standard Housing Benefit claimants' knowledge and understanding concerning changes in their circumstances and their obligations to report them and, as such, complements earlier research which considered a range of means-tested benefits including Jobseeker's Allowance and Income Support (Irvine *et al.*, 2008). The research was commissioned by the DWP and was carried out by the Social Policy Research Unit at the University of York in 2007-08.

## Findings

### **Claimants' knowledge and understanding of reporting changes in circumstances (Chapter 2)**

Claimants on the whole did have an understanding that they were required to report 'changes in their circumstances'. However there was a wide variation in the range of knowledge in two important respects. Firstly, people differed according to the scope of changes they considered important to report (for example, work, income, household circumstances), and secondly in the detail of those changes (for example, amount of hours permitted; earnings; length of stays).

Some people felt that official sources of knowledge on reporting changes in circumstances were not frequent enough, not detailed enough and that they were not presented in plain English. Increasing both the scope and the detail of official knowledge in relevant changes that should be reported for Housing Benefit purposes might therefore be helpful.

It could also be confusing for people when they move from one local authority to another and are not aware that there might be different procedures and administration processes. That there are such differences makes the task of fully informing claimants difficult on a national level.

### **Reporting changes in circumstances: influences on behaviour (Chapter 3)**

A range of factors which might affect reporting behaviour was identified. Perceptions of the financial consequences of reporting a change could lead to not reporting changes which might have increased or decreased benefit. Some people recognised that their receipt of Housing Benefit was tied to their personal circumstances and thus reasoned that changes in their circumstances would therefore need to be reported. Previous negative experiences of benefit administration (delays in processing and waiting times), the apparently contradictory procedures and administration processes, and timelines of different benefit authorities (such as local authorities and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs which resulted in financial difficulties and unanticipated outcomes of reporting changes) could also be seen to influence behaviour and attitudes towards benefit authorities.

Such factors are not mutually exclusive and in practice they are, and will be, interrelated in their influence on reporting changes in circumstances. Moreover, some of the factors will be more or less relevant to different people at different times, and effects might be magnified where people claim several benefits and tax credits.

### **Experiences and consequences of reporting changes in circumstances (Chapter 4)**

A range of methods were used by claimants for reporting changes. Some used those methods they favoured most; some used methods they perceived had the best chances of getting information across to the local authority. Some people had barriers to using some methods (such as the costs of transport or telephone calls). It was noticeable that people valued a good rapport with local authority staff, especially where they were perceived to 'know' the claimant's circumstances. People did not value interactions with staff who they perceived as poorly informed.

People also experienced financial hardship, stress and uncertainty brought about by staff error, delays in processing and lack of interaction (from the claimant's perspective) of benefits and tax credits. Such issues have implications for staff training but also to wider issues in the benefits system, such as complexity and fragmentation.

## **Conclusions and policy implications (Chapter 5)**

The Getting Welfare Right strategy suggests that claimant error might be corrected by prevention (preventing wrong payments at the initial claim stage), claimant compliance (maintaining an accurate claim) and correction (identification and correction of wrong payments). The findings are most relevant to the second strand of this strategy, claimants' compliance to maintain an accurate claim.

Before claimants can maintain an accurate claim, they must first be aware of their full obligations. From the diversity in understanding highlighted in this report and other research, this is not currently the case and the possibility exists for increasing both the scope and the detail of people's knowledge of changes they should report for benefit purposes.

Factors which might influence whether claimants reported changes in their circumstances were also looked at and it was found that previous negative experiences and a lack of trust in benefit administration in addition to procedures and (perceived) consequences of reporting a change (for example financial hardship and stress) might also influence reporting decisions. There is, therefore, scope for enhancing claimants' experience of the benefits system on a number of levels because, for claimants, reporting changes in circumstances is not divorced from experiences of the wider benefit system. As formerly noted, some of these issues could be addressed by structural simplification of the benefits rules and procedures.



# 1 Introduction

This report presents findings from a qualitative research project to explore Standard Housing Benefit claimants' knowledge and understanding concerning changes in their circumstances and their obligations to report them and, as such, complements earlier research which considered a range of means-tested benefits including Jobseeker's Allowance and Income Support (Irvine *et al.*, 2008). The research was commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and was carried out by the Social Policy Research Unit at the University of York in 2007-08.

Whilst levels of fraud have consistently decreased in the benefit system, levels of claimant and official error have not, and the reduction of overpayments is now an important policy objective (DWP 2007). The estimated total of Housing Benefit fraud and error from October 2005 to September 2006 was £760 million (Audit Commission 2008), which represents just over five per cent of the £14 billion total 2005/06 expenditure on Housing Benefit. Of this, £170 million is estimated to have been lost through fraud, £430 million was overpaid because of claimant error and £160 million overpaid because of official error (DWP 2007).

Twenty research participants were interviewed twice in the course of four months. During these qualitative interviews, data were collected on experiences of changes in circumstances that occurred prior to the initial interview and during the period of the research.

This chapter sets out the policy context to the research (Section 1.1), the aims and objectives of the study (Section 1.2), the design and methods adopted (Section 1.3) and a description of the sampling approach and achieved sample (Section 1.4). The final section outlines the structure of the rest of the report and explains how we have used verbatim quotations from participants within the chapters analysing the empirical data (Section 1.5).

## 1.1 Policy context

Housing Benefit is an income-related benefit administered by local authorities on behalf of the DWP. People are eligible to claim Housing Benefit if they are liable to pay rent for accommodation that they occupy as their home. Claimants who are already in receipt of one of the other income-related social security benefits (including Income Support, Pension Credit or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance) have an automatic entitlement to Housing Benefit and are referred to as 'Passported' claimants. They therefore do not have to provide the local authority with evidence of income or capital. However, Housing Benefit can also be claimed by people in employment but on a low income, and will receive the benefit if they satisfy the income and other eligibility criteria. They are known as 'Standard' Housing Benefit claimants in contrast with 'Passported' claimants.

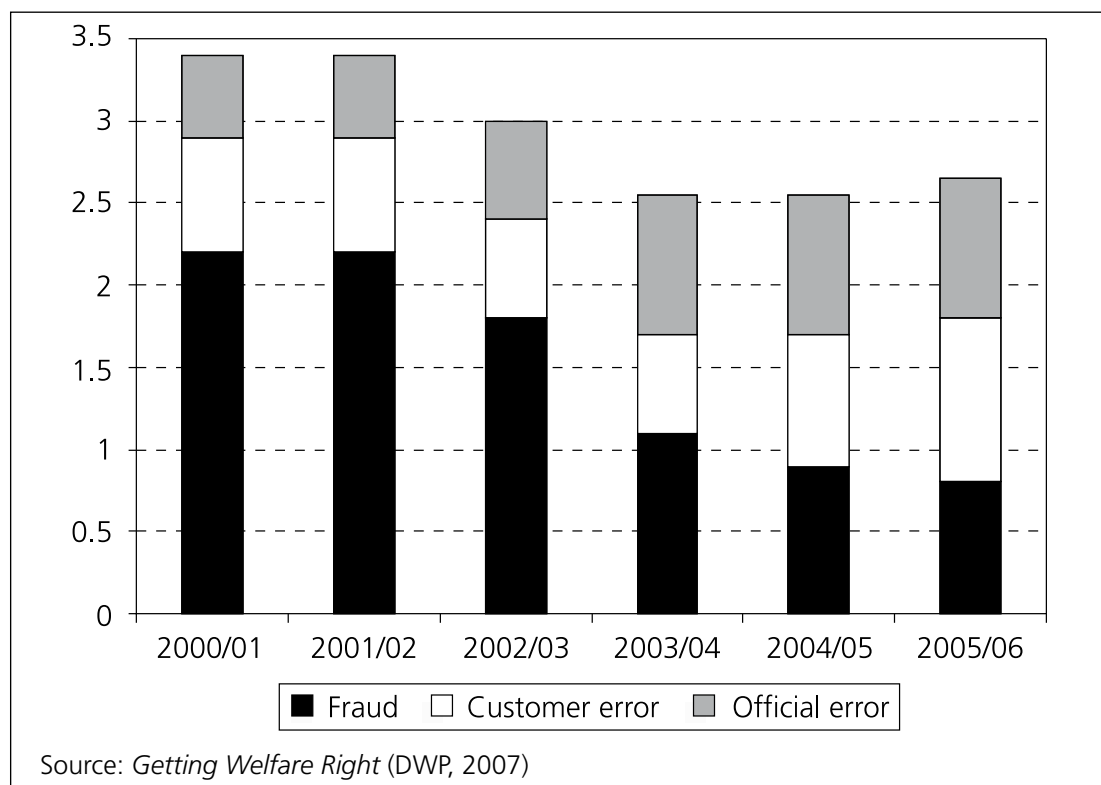
As mentioned above, DWP commissioned an earlier piece of work looking at claimant error across a range of benefits (Irvine *et al.*, 2008). As that project progressed, the experiences of the sub-sample of people receiving Standard Housing Benefit were identified as being distinctive and therefore warranted more detailed investigation. In contrast to recipients of Passported Housing Benefit they were in low-paid employment, or carers, or occasionally recipients of contribution-based Jobseeker's Allowance. They also typically had no or very few dealings with Jobcentre Plus, but conducted most or all of the benefit business with their local authority.

In May 2007 there were 1.1 million recipients of Standard Housing Benefit in Great Britain (compared with 2.9 million recipients of Passported Housing Benefit).

### 1.1.1 Fraud and error across the social security system: the big picture

The systematic measurement of fraud and error in the social security system began in 1997 covering Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance. The first analyses showed that more money was lost through fraud than through error. However, in recent years that picture has been reversed. In 2005/06 losses through fraud were estimated at £0.8 billion (or 0.7 per cent of benefit expenditure). In contrast, losses due to error were £1.9 billion (1.7 per cent of expenditure). The DWP strategy document *Getting Welfare Right* (DWP, 2007) illustrates the changes between 2000/01 and 2005/06 in the figure below.

**Figure 1.1 Total overpaid benefit expenditure between 2000/01 and 2005/06**



### 1.1.2 Fraud and error in Housing Benefit

Systematic measurement of fraud and error in Housing Benefit has been carried out since 2002. Between April 2002 and September 2007 (the last date for which figures are available at the time of writing) official figures show that losses due to fraud and error had dropped slightly from five per cent of total expenditure to 4.8 per cent (i.e. £740 million in 2007). However, within that overall figure losses due to fraud had fallen by over half while losses due to claimant and official error had both risen. Table 1.1 presents data on losses over the period 2002 to 2007. (There is no separate analysis for Passported and Standard claimants however.)

**Table 1.1 Housing Benefit losses due to fraud and error 2002 – 2007 (as % of benefit expenditure)**

	Fraud %	Official error %	Claimant error %
April 2002 – March 2003	1.9	1.1	1.9
April 2003 – March 2004	1.4	1.2	2.3
April 2004 – March 2005	1.3	1.0	2.7
April 2005 – March 2006	1.0	1.4	3.1
April 2006 – March 2007	0.7	1.4	2.9
October 2006 – September 2007	0.9	1.3	2.7

Source: [http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd2/fraud\\_error.asp](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd2/fraud_error.asp)

Official figures are usually presented for the period April to March. However, Table 1.1 includes figures for the latest 12-month period from October 2006 to September 2007. These are interesting as they suggest that the steady downward trend in fraud losses might be coming to an end and that claimant error might be on a downward path from a peak of 3.1 per cent in 2005.

Official statistics also show that of the £320 million lost through claimant error in October 2006 to September 2007, nearly two-thirds (66 per cent) were due to only three causes: non-residency (£60 million) earnings (£100 million) and tax credits (£50 million).

### **1.1.3 Policy responses to date**

In response to rising levels of error, the DWP has developed a strategy for reducing error which was published in January 2007 (DWP 2007). The strategy's suggested approach for reducing claimant error is a combination of prevention, compliance and correction. For example, a 'new awareness campaign' was announced that is designed to increase knowledge of reporting requirements and to persuade claimants that their own interests are served by keeping their claims accurate and up to date (p.28). The strategy also notes that DWP needs to 'look creatively at how to make it easier... to report changes in circumstances'. The strategy's main recommendation on correcting incorrect benefit payments is to pilot a proactive approach to capturing information about changes in circumstances.

As this brief review has shown, the persistence of the problem of error in benefit payments has generated the need for further understanding about the behaviour and experiences of Standard Housing Benefit claimants who have changes in their lives. Standard Housing Benefit claimants, while they may be on a low income, are by definition, not Passported onto Housing Benefit through other means-tested benefits such as Income Support and this can reduce opportunities for system-generated automated reporting of changes in circumstances.

## **1.2 The aims and objectives of the study**

The overall aim of the project was to increase our understanding of Standard Housing Benefit claimants' reporting of changes in their lives and thereby inform policy development targeted at timely, accurate and relevant reporting of changes in circumstances.

The objectives of the overall study were focused on the key areas of:

- how claimants experience changes in circumstances;
- their knowledge and perceptions about reporting changes in circumstances;
- their sources of knowledge;
- their experiences of reporting changes; and
- experiences and responses to overpayment recovery due to error.

To meet these objectives and address the emerging concerns of DWP, the following more detailed research questions were addressed:

- What issues are important in people's lives when circumstances change?
- What are people's knowledge and perceptions about reporting changes in circumstances?
- How salient is reporting changes at these times?
- What do people know about their responsibilities to report changes in relation to housing benefit?
- What are people's attitudes towards reporting changes?
- What motivates people to report changes?
- What time and effort are required to report changes?
- Are there particular issues for claimants in reporting changes of address?
- What difficulties, if any, are experienced in reporting changes to local authorities?
- What do people know about the effects of reporting, or not reporting, different changes?
- Are there barriers to reporting?
- What are people's understanding and experiences of overpayments?
- How do people gain their knowledge and understanding about reporting?
- What are their sources of knowledge?
- Do people have different experiences of reporting changes to the local authority compared with other benefit authorities?
- How do people experience having Housing Benefit suspended?
- Are there differences in the experiences of private tenants and social housing tenants?
- What would help or encourage people to report changes in circumstances?

The next section describes the design and methods chosen to address the research questions for these groups.

### 1.3 Research design and methods

Qualitative research methods were used to generate data. Because individual experiences of the Housing Benefit system were expected to vary considerably, and because of the potential for sensitive data, we chose to use individual interviews (rather than, for example, focus group interviews). Participants took part in a face-to-face in depth interview, and were followed up by telephone approximately four

months later. Interviews were semi-structured (see the Appendix) and so allowed an in-depth exploration of participants' understandings and experiences.

**Table 1.2 Design of study**

	<b>Timing</b>	<b>Method of data collection</b>
Interview 1	December 2007	Face-to-face interview
Interview 2	March – April 2008	Telephone interview

The aim was to interview a sample of 20 Standard Housing Benefit claimants in three locations with different labour markets. In consultation with DWP, the following local authority areas were selected:

- Durham – an urban local authority;
- High Peak, Derbyshire – a rural local authority; and
- Wandsworth – an inner city London Borough.

The first interview was used to collect data on the following:

- current circumstances;
- knowledge about the benefit system and responsibility for reporting changes in circumstances;
- sources of knowledge;
- recent experiences of being a benefit recipient and changes in circumstances;
- views and attitudes towards the local authority and other benefit authorities (including Jobcentre Plus, Pensions Service);
- experiences of and views about overpayments; and
- expectations of changes in circumstances.

Based on previous experience we defined 'recent' changes in circumstances as within the previous six months although in practice some people interviewed described experiences from further back than this. In the subsequent telephone interview we explored the following:

- changes in circumstances since the face-to-face interview;
- new experiences of dealing with the local authority and other benefit authorities;
- changes in knowledge and sources of information;
- changes in attitudes; and
- recent experiences of overpayments.

Topic guides were developed for each of the two interviews in consultation with DWP. Interviews were recorded with permission and transcribed professionally for analysis. Transcripts were analysed using the Framework technique of thematic analysis (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994).

## 1.4 Sampling and recruitment

DWP drew a sub-sample of Standard Housing Benefit claimants for each of the three selected fieldwork locations. We then adopted a purposive sampling approach which used the following sampling criteria as agreed with DWP:

- location;
- gender;
- work status (people in paid work or self employment or not);
- age; and
- social/private landlord.

Table 1.3 compares the achieved sample with the target sample.

**Table 1.3 Achieved sample**

		Target range	Achieved
Authority	High Peaks	6-7	6
	Durham	6-7	7
	Wandsworth	6-7	7
Gender	Male	8-12	8
	Female	8-12	12
Age	Under 29	4-6	6
	30-49	4-6	6
	50-state pension age	4-6	5
	Over state pension age	4-6	3
Landlord	Private	8-12	11
	Social	8-12	9
Employment status	Working	8-12	7
	Not working	8-12	13

Although people were sampled from Housing Benefit databases, their actual experience of benefits and tax credits was much wider. During the course of the study some people had been in receipt of up to three or four different benefits and tax credits, which allowed us to explore experiences of reporting changes in circumstances to different benefit authorities, in particular Jobcentre Plus and Her Majesty's Revenues and Customs, which administers tax credits. However, primarily we use examples to illustrate points from the data as they relate to Housing Benefit. We particularly focus on those issues which incur the largest amount of claimant error mentioned earlier: non residency, non reporting of earnings and non reporting of tax credits, in order to draw out policy lessons.

## 1.5 Structure of the report

The structure of the report is as follows. Chapter 2 considers claimants' knowledge of the requirements to report changes in circumstances, and looks at the breadth and depth of their knowledge. The chapter also outlines the sources from which claimants acquire knowledge over time and their perceived usefulness.

Chapter 3 discusses the factors which might influence whether or not claimants report changes in their circumstances to Housing Benefit authorities. These include knowledge about the types of changes which should be reported, previous experiences of the benefit system and contextual factors surrounding the change.

The processes and procedures in the benefit system which can be seen to facilitate or hinder the timely and accurate reporting of changes in circumstances are the subject of Chapter 4. The range of methods used by claimants to report changes in their circumstances, the variety of people's experiences and the subsequent impacts of reporting changes are considered.

Chapter 5 concludes the report by summarising the main findings and setting out some implications for policy to reduce claimant error.

### **A note on the use of verbatim quotations**

Chapters 2-4 contain examples of people's words, as spoken in the interviews and transcribed by the professional transcription agency employed on the study. Using people's own words is intended to provide illustrations or examples of some of the issues raised and so, hopefully, enhance the understanding of readers. The verbatim quotations are attributed by sex and age. We also occasionally use italicised single words or short phrases within the text taken from transcripts. We do this when a person's own phrase is more direct or explanatory than would be our own construction of what they said. These single words or short phrases are not attributed to particular people. We have adopted the convention of replacing superfluous words in quotations with three dots (...).

## 2 Claimants' knowledge and understanding of reporting changes in circumstances

This chapter considers claimants' awareness of their obligation to report changes in circumstances and looks at the breadth and depth of their associated knowledge. Data are drawn from people's actual experiences within the course of the research study and examples they offered from the past. The chapter also outlines the sources from which claimants acquire knowledge over time and its perceived usefulness.

Section 2.1 looks at claimants' broad understandings of their obligations to report changes for benefit purposes and also considers their perceptions of the time frame within which changes should be reported. Section 2.2 looks in more detail at the actual types of changes people thought might be reportable and their depth of knowledge. Section 2.3 presents the sources of claimants' knowledge and views about the adequacy of those sources. The chapter concludes with a discussion in Section 2.4.

### 2.1 Awareness of the requirement to report changes in circumstances

Most people in the study sample were aware that they were required to report changes in circumstances to their local Housing Benefit department. There were only a few claimants who had very little understanding of their obligations, but it is useful to understand their circumstances. One such person was living in supported accommodation for people with mental ill health. They said that their support worker would inform them when their circumstances had changed for benefit purposes. One other person found it difficult to engage with the question of what changes in circumstances might mean.

*'I suppose it could be like the health of me or...my wife, something like that but apart from that I can't see anything really.'*

(Male, 70s)

The above claimant and his wife were pensioners whose circumstances had been relatively stable for a number of years. Because of their housing situation (sheltered accommodation) they engaged relatively little with the local authority and could not remember receiving any information on what they should do if their circumstances were to change. As the couple perceived it, their rent was adjusted 'automatically' and the housing association and the local authority seemed to work together regarding adjustments and payments with little input from them.

People had different understandings about when they should report change. One person perceived that they had a time period of 30 days to report changes in their working circumstances to the local authority.

*'I've seen it on the letter... 'If you have not let us know of a change within the first 30 days of it happening, why have you not done this?' So obviously it's from that, it's from the forms.'*

(Female, 20s)

Another person perceived that they had a two-week period within which to report changes. Other people had sometimes reported a change before it happened (for example moving house; a family member coming to live with them) or reported it one or two days after the change had happened (turning 60 years of age).

## 2.2 What kinds of change are reportable?

Although people were generally familiar with the obligation to report changes in their circumstances for Housing Benefit purposes, there were instances of lack of understanding of the types of changes which might be important to report, and some people thought that some more concrete examples might be given in literature.

Respondent: *'It doesn't really say, like, what changes, the changes are, really, but... So you have to... Yeah.'*

Researcher: *'...sort of, work those out yourself?'*

Respondent: *'Yeah.'*

(Female, 20s)

Some people seemed to operate with a general understanding that the obligation to report changes in their circumstances effectively meant that they should report any 'extra money' they might have in order that their benefit could be reduced or withdrawn.

*'It means basically anything, any increase in money is, I have to notify them, it's probably going to result in a decrease in something that they give me.'*

(Male, 50s)

Other people exhibited understanding of particular changes in circumstance which could either increase, decrease, or stop their benefit. Some people mentioned a broad range of changes which might affect anyone's benefit, whilst others mentioned changes in relation to themselves.

*'If I had a child, which I know that would never happen. If I had a job that, do you know what I mean, that would affect it big, big time...If I got married... If I had a partner living here, which I know I couldn't because of my contract [laughs], but things, yeah, things like that.'*

(Female, 40s)

Some people mentioned more types of changes than others. The broad range of changes referred to by people is outlined in the following section. In all, there were differences in the scope of change that people could identify (for example, changes in work, family composition, health) as being important for Housing Benefit purposes and differences in the detail of change (for example, earnings disregards, number of hours worked, length of time that someone could stay with them without being considered resident).

### 2.2.1 Paid work

Most people had a broad understanding that paid work was important for Housing Benefit purposes. Starting work, increasing income from paid work or finishing paid work (being made redundant, or becoming ill for example) were all changes that people mentioned.

Some people in the sample who were working or self employed mentioned that they would report extra hours or extra money that they received from work. Some people experienced fluctuating wages, earnings and hours, and regularly informed the local authority when their paid-work circumstances changed. There was a range of understandings of the rules and practices here. Two couples who were self employed understood that their Housing Benefit depended on their income and that this meant they should present their earnings to the Housing Benefit authorities once a year rather than having to report them more regularly.

One other couple with fluctuating earnings had a broad understanding that their Housing Benefit would change if one partner's hours fluctuated from 30 per week. To be 'on the safe side' they handed in all wage slips to the Housing Benefit authority once (or more) a month.

*'If I worked, like, a lot of hours more, 'cause I only work, like, 30 at the minute, and it says on every form that you get, you know, "You must tell us if you work over, or you less your hours, because you're probably claiming money that you're not expected to have".'*

(Couple, 30s)

One person who moved between periods of paid work and full-time education filled in Housing Benefit forms every time a move was made from one status to another, but did not understand how their Housing Benefit fluctuated.

*'...some weeks I seem to, like, not get anything, and then, like, then I get something and it just seems to go up and down all the time. ... Usually I get a letter from it. I just, sort of scan it. It just, sort of says, oh, you get this much now, or it's gone up or it's gone down and I just, sort of, just put it aside and not really look at it.'*

(Female, 20s)

One person thought that relatively small amounts in wages, for example, 20 pence per hour, were too insignificant to make any difference to their Housing Benefit rate. Another was not sure about whether she should report working a couple of extra hours:

*'Well, I'm not sure. Well, I'm not actually sure, because if – to be honest, if I went to them one week and said, oh, you know, "I've done a few extra hours", I might – they might take those hours and say, "Okay, that's what you do every week".'*

(Female, 20s)

One person mentioned the Incapacity Benefit permitted work rules and that they would be allowed to earn some money. Another said that he was allowed to work up to 16 hours and claim Housing Benefit. As we also found in the earlier study, while there was a broad understanding that paid work was important for Housing Benefit purposes, there was less recognition of the detail of what changes in paid work might count.

## **2.2.2 Other changes to household income or capital**

Some people mentioned that they would inform the local authority if their financial circumstances were affected by income other than from work. For example, if they won money from the lottery, if they inherited money or someone gave them a large amount of money. Other people understood that they were obliged to present details of their annuities, savings and private pensions to Housing Benefit authorities and inform of any changes in them.

There were differences in how confident people felt in relation to specific rules. One retired person understood that:

*'...if something changes by a few pounds, you've got to notify them within 14 days.'*

(Male, 70s)

Another person also claiming Incapacity Benefit was not sure of the capital limits but thought that they might have been around £5,000, over which 80 pence per pound would be deducted from benefit.

One person did not include monetary gifts in his understanding of what he would have to report as income to the Housing Benefit authorities, especially where such gifts were for children and were not going to be spent by parents.

### 2.2.3 Home and household changes

As with paid work, there was a widespread understanding that changes in household circumstances would matter for Housing Benefit purposes. Having a child, getting married, having a partner come to live with you, having a spouse or partner move out, rent increases and moving home were all given as circumstances which would need to be reported to Housing Benefit authorities. Some people mentioned that renting out a room to a lodger or family member would need to be reported, and sometimes differentiated between paying lodgers and guests. Where they made this distinction they often did not see the need to inform Housing Benefit authorities if a friend or relative came to stay for a period of time and they were not contributing financially to the household.

*'If somebody comes to stay with you...like a relative, for a couple of weeks, that obviously is not going to be giving you any money, I don't think that you do have to notify them with that...If it was just a family member coming to stay for a short while, I wouldn't notify them, because, at the end of the day, they wouldn't be paying me any rent, and they would just be staying here for a temporary amount of time. But, obviously, if there was somebody staying here that was renting a room, or in the property then, obviously, I would know that you would have to notify them of that, obviously, because you are taking some income in from that.'*

(Female, 20s)

One person mentioned that they would inform Housing Benefit authorities if the time spent living in her rented property changes or if she started to stay away from home for long periods of time.

Others had informed Housing Benefit authorities when their rent on their private rented property had increased. Some had the excess met by Housing Benefit and some did not. One person mentioned that there was a time lag between the time at which her private landlord increased the rent and at which the local authority reviewed her Housing Benefit. She had to pay the shortfall in the interim. Some people in local authority rented accommodation perceived that their Housing Benefit and housing department worked together and sorted out rent increases and adjusted Housing Benefit without the claimant's involvement. The claimant was then informed of the decision and of the recalculated contribution they were required to make to their rent (if any).

Some of the sample had recently moved home. There were differences here in when people informed and applied for Housing Benefit, but it should be noted here that for most of the people concerned this was a move into their first property (they had previously been staying with friends or family). Two people took on a private tenancy agreement and then informed Housing Benefit authorities that they had done so. One other person who was working part time and who was staying with a relative was subsequently offered accommodation by a private landlord who informed him that he would be eligible for Housing Benefit.

One couple had moved (from one private rented property to another) across local authorities in the period between the first and second research interview. They had informed their new local authority that they would be moving to their borough and had been told that they could not apply for Housing Benefit until they had moved. One other family was a week or so away from moving within their local authority borough and said that they would be informing Housing Benefit authorities once they had a definite moving date and a tenancy agreement for their new place.

#### 2.2.4 Other changes

Some people did not think that they would need to inform Housing Benefit authorities about taking holidays, one of them arguing that their rent still had to be paid whether they were on holiday or not.

Becoming ill was mentioned by some people as a reportable change (perhaps to benefit authorities more generally, rather than Housing Benefit in particular). One person, however, understood that if they were to be awarded Disability Living Allowance they would be eligible for full Housing Benefit because they were classified as disabled. They also understood that Disability Living Allowance would not be taken into account for purposes of means-tested benefit calculations:

*'...that won't actually affect my claim for Housing Benefit, even though I'll be getting more money because I'm disabled, a lot more other criteria comes into it. It means that I'm automatically able to get Housing Benefit regardless of what other income comes into the house, because I'm disabled.'*

(Male, 30s)

The major point to draw out from the section above is the range of knowledge claimants hold. It is perhaps useful to make a distinction between the scope of change for benefit purposes that people are aware of (for example, in terms of 'work'; 'income') and in the detail of the changes (how much can I earn, how many hours can I work; how long can someone stay with me for?).

### 2.3 Claimants' sources of knowledge and views on their adequacy

Claimants will be more likely to hold valid and appropriate knowledge about Housing Benefit and what to do when their circumstances change if the sources which impart that knowledge to them also have valid knowledge. This section reports findings on claimants' sources of knowledge. Section 2.3.1 considers official sources (correspondence and contact with a local authority and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)). Section 2.3.2 looks at claimants' knowledge from other agencies (welfare rights; lettings and estate agencies; social work agencies). Informal knowledge (family, friends, hearsay) is considered in Section 2.3.3.

### 2.3.1 Official sources of information

Most people had been given information in some form from official sources such as their local authority and/or the DWP. Some people commented that they had received information in a written format when they had first claimed Housing Benefit telling them that if their circumstances changed they were obliged to report it. Others mentioned that the obligation to report changes was on 'every letter' that was sent out to them about their benefit claim(s).

*'I know, that, anyway, from when – on the back of your – when they send you out your calculation thing from...April, yeah, when they send you out the calculation, it says on the back of the letter itself that if you have any – if there's any changes in circumstances, a partner may come to live with you, or earnings go up, or anybody staying with you that's earning, then you are to notify them ASAP.'*

(Female, 20s)

Some people, like the person above said that their letters provided instances of the kinds of circumstances which might constitute a change, like a partner coming to live with them, or an increase in their earnings. Others however, said that they had only received written information telling them that they were obliged to report changes, but not the type of changes that were relevant. In the absence of official knowledge of this type, this could lead to people making common sense deductions about what mattered. One person said when asked about how they knew what changes to report for example said 'Well that's just me, my...my assumption.' This has obvious implications for reporting changes correctly when the assumptions do not match statutory requirements.

There was a deal of diversity in whether people reported that their local authority conducted any kind of periodic review. Some people could not remember having been asked anything about whether their circumstances had changed since their claim first started. Others said that they received a form now and again asking whether their circumstances had changed. Yet others said that they periodically had someone out to visit them from the local authority.

A number of people also said that they received knowledge and information from visiting or telephoning the local authority office.

### 2.3.2 Claimants' views on official sources of information

Whilst some people thought that listing the types of situations on written correspondence which might constitute a change, such as 'a partner coming to live with you' were informative enough, others thought that there could be more examples listed of the types of changes which should be reported for benefit purposes. One person recognised that there was a fine balance between not giving people enough information and giving them too much.

*'...they only put on a limited thing of what – if your circumstances change. ...It could be definitely more detailed, obviously not getting into it too much because you just end up with a pamphlet and then you just get completely... you get completely lost.'*

(Male, 30s)

Some people also said that some of the language used in official correspondence was not easy to understand and it would be helpful for correspondence to be written in 'plain English'. They also commented that the forms were sometimes long with complex calculations on them.

*'...just simple plain English instead of everything being so complicated and long-winded.'*

(Female, 50s)

*'...a lot of people don't really bother looking at letters really, 'cause it's all down and it's all about three pages long, and you're just thinking, "What's all these numbers?" And then sometimes it's repeated, and you're thinking, oh, I can't be bothered to look at that.'*

(Female, 20s)

People held mixed views about periodic checks. Some people perceived that they were being checked up on to be sure they were not committing fraud. Other people said that they found home visits helpful because they could ask questions face to face about benefits, and they felt less likely to make mistakes with paperwork when the local authority officer was there to assist with filling it in.

Some people did say they would like to be 'called in' to the office for a periodic review with a local authority officer to check whether their circumstances had changed.

*'I would like to see, I know this human touch costs more, blah-blah-blah, 'cos it takes up more time. I would like to maybe be called in, not just me, everybody who's on this or that or other, called in for like a chat in a room, instead of these tons of letters which cost the council money in postage, why not just send one saying, can you come in and bring any relevant documents, just to see if anything's changed.'*

(Male, 50s)

Some people talked about how important it was for them to have a member of staff explain benefit regulations to them in person, either face to face or over the telephone. People in one rural area said that they liked going into the office in person and that, when they did, they felt well informed by staff. Other people in rural areas said that they found it difficult and expensive to access their local offices in person. Some people in urban areas thought that their offices were always very busy, that they did not get to see the same member of staff twice and that some staff could have been better informed regarding benefit legislation.

### 2.3.3 Other agencies

There were instances in the data of people having gained knowledge of Housing (and other kinds of) Benefit from a number of different agencies. For example, one person who fostered children had direct access to a welfare rights adviser. The adviser was used to explore the claimant's circumstances in detail (regarding what benefits the family would be entitled to) and could be called on to discuss implications of any changes in the family's circumstances. The person considered this as being extremely useful.

*'...the support I get through the fostering, I have a Welfare Rights Officer; I can ask for information, so I have a quick link, if you like, and a direct link, as opposed to having to make an appointment with somebody and go through that. So I know a bit more, but only about my circumstances.'*

(Female, 40s)

Other people had got information about Housing Benefit from managers in their housing association, from care managers and social workers. Some people in private rented housing spoke of their landlord, or a letting or estate agent, having informed them of the existence of Housing Benefit. These were all considered useful sources of knowledge (and sometimes help in claiming) for people.

### 2.3.4 Informal and other sources of knowledge

People had also accrued knowledge from direct experience of using the benefit system as well as from their friends, family and acquaintances. Several people said that they had learned from being in the social security system, either because they were engaging with the benefits system for themselves or from assisting other family members and friends.

*'...picking it up along the way and somebody will say something and you go, "Oh, I didn't know that", and then somebody else will mention something the next time you phone up.'*

(Male, 30s)

People accrued knowledge from many sources simultaneously. Knowledge gained from one source sometimes prompted someone to seek, or challenge, knowledge from other sources. There were examples of people challenging official decisions because they had gained knowledge from family or friends or from welfare rights organisations, for example.

## 2.4 Discussion

This chapter has considered claimants' understandings of their requirements to report changes in their circumstances and the sources of that knowledge.

In the earlier report (Irvine *et al.*, 2008) we identified different 'levels of understanding' from people's accounts of their knowledge of reporting changes in circumstances.

1. At the broadest level, there is the understanding that there is a requirement to report changes in your circumstances.
2. At the next level, there is a general awareness of the areas of life, in other words the circumstances, in which a change may need to be reported, for example, changes in employment, household composition or health.
3. Next, there is an awareness of the specific changes that must be reported, for example, if you stay in hospital for a certain length of time, or if you increase your weekly hours of work from 15 to 20.

We found the same patterns of understanding in this study of Standard Housing Benefit claimants. Claimants on the whole did have an understanding that they were required to report changes in their circumstances. However there was quite a wide variation in the range of knowledge in two important respects. Firstly, people differed according to the scope of changes they considered important to report (work, income, household circumstances etc), and secondly in the detail of those changes (amount of hours permitted; earnings; length of stays etc).

These findings were in part echoed in views on official sources of knowledge imparted to claimants. Some people felt that they were not frequent enough, not detailed enough and that they were not presented in plain English. Increasing both the scope and the detail of official knowledge in relevant changes that should be reported for Housing Benefit purposes might therefore be helpful.

It could be confusing for people when they moved from one local authority to another and were not aware that there might be different procedures and administrative processes. That there are such differences makes the task of fully informing claimants difficult on a national level.

# 3 Reporting changes in circumstances: influences on behaviour

This chapter discusses the factors which might influence whether or not claimants report changes in their circumstances to Housing Benefit authorities. The data presented in the chapter draws on claimants' experiences prior to, and over the course of, the research. Section 3.1 presents findings on claimants' knowledge and understanding about reporting changes in their circumstances. Section 3.2 looks at their understandings and experiences of the benefit system, and Section 3.3 discusses some contextual factors which might influence whether or not a change in circumstances is reported.

## 3.1 Knowledge and understanding of the requirement to report changes

As outlined in Chapter 2, people held differing amounts of knowledge regarding the scope and detail of what changes in their circumstances might be important for Housing Benefit purposes. The following sections consider specific influences on their knowledge to report changes, such as how people conceptualise 'change' and how they recognised whether or not a particular change in a particular area of their lives might be relevant to report.

### 3.1.1 Conceptualisation of 'change' in circumstances

Before people can report a change in their circumstances, they have to recognise that change for Housing Benefit purposes has taken place. There was evidence to suggest that people might more easily recognise a relevant change in their circumstances when it moves them between statuses (for example from 'not working' to 'working'). Claimants might find it more difficult to recognise changes within a status (working 18 hours a week instead of 16 for example) – which they might consider as a small or temporary alteration rather than a change.

Thus when asked what might constitute change, people usually offered examples of what might be considered as being major life events: moving house, a partner moving in to, or out of, the house or starting work.

*'...from not working to working I know that's going to be a change that they need to know about.'*

(Female, 20s)

*'...somebody might have given me loads of money. I might have got remarried. I might have had somebody move in as a lodger, and I'm getting money from them. You know, that is a change of circumstances.'*

(Female, 50s)

*'...if I begin work again or...I move, or whatever.'*

(Female, 50s)

One person for example, had reported their changed circumstances – having left their partner to go and live independently – in the hope that they would be able to claim Housing Benefit in their own right.

As said, some people considered small changes in their circumstances to be so insignificant as to be unimportant for benefit purposes. For example, the following person had received a pay rise but did not report it because she reasoned that it would not be important for benefit purposes.

*'No, 'cause really, I can't see how 20p extra an hour is really going to affect me, because I only do three and a half hours a day, 17 and a half hours a week.'*

(Female, 20s)

Some people had recognised that change had occurred in their living circumstances but had, interestingly, not reported this to Housing Benefit authorities because their financial circumstances had not changed. For example, one person's relatives had come to live in their accommodation indefinitely but she had not reported this because their names were not on the tenancy agreement and they were not contributing to the rent. Similarly, another person who had been doing voluntary work for some time had not informed Housing Benefit because it was only for a few hours per week, she did not receive any remuneration for it, and her Jobcentre Plus adviser was aware of what she was doing.

Respondent: *'No, because I'm not doing any work. They want to know if you're doing work.'*

Researcher: *'Paid work?'*

Respondent: *'Yeah, exactly, because that's when you can get yourself into trouble.'*

The main implication to bring out regarding whether or not people report change here then is the potential mismatch between the requirements to report change set out in Housing (and other) Benefit legislation and the way that people in their everyday lives conceptualise and recognise change.

### 3.1.2 Concern to comply with obligations

Reporting behaviour was also influenced by claimants' concern to comply with benefit regulations and to do the 'right thing'. This concern can also be related to a desire to avoid the financial consequences of overpayments for late reporting (explored further in the next chapter).

*'Any changes, you know, whether it be small or whatever, you let them know, which I'm quite happy to do 'cause I don't want to be – I don't want to have to repay money or get told off, I hate it [laughs] you know, it's really – it's just a stress I don't need. ... So it's just easier to say, "Right, look, this is the situation, what happens now?".'*

(Female, 20s)

Another person who had a family member move in to their accommodation with them had informed Housing Benefit authorities of the change prior to it taking place.

*'I'm one of those people that, sort of, I can't have anybody – I'd hate anybody to tap on my shoulder and say, "Excuse me, you're doing us out of money", or anything, so, no, we went straight down to (the) council.'*

(Female, 50s)

There is some evidence to suggest that the concern to keep 'themselves right' can lead people to report the same change several times, or to report all changes and let Housing Benefit authorities decide whether or not they matter for benefit purposes. For example, one couple whose earnings fluctuated from month to month would take the same wage slips down to the local authority office on more than one occasion.

*'I'll try and be ahead of them, and I'll bring the wage slip in, and I'll do this and I'll do this, and I'll be – to the point where I'm being, not annoying, but being persistent, and so they know, and then I know.'*

(Male, 30s)

A concern to comply with benefit obligations can, provided people recognise change for benefit purposes, influence whether and when people report such changes in their circumstances.

### 3.1.3 Perceived financial consequences of reporting a change in circumstances

A further influence on whether people reported a change in their circumstances was the perceived rather than actual financial effects of reporting. For example, where people had moved to a more expensive rented property (or indeed, taken

on a rented property in their own right) they had needed increased financial assistance, but had not always received it from Housing Benefit.

One person was effectively staying full time with a friend rather than staying at their own rented property because they and their friend both had health problems and could be of assistance to each other. This person would have preferred to have moved out of their rented property and to have moved in with their friend but did not do so because they perceived that their contributory-based Incapacity Benefit claim would then be terminated and that their friend would be expected to support them financially.

*'I think they would stop my money...you know, they would stop my money.'*

(Female, 50s)

One person, who was not sure whether their current circumstances were being taken into account by benefits and tax credits authorities, did not enquire about whether they were receiving their full entitlement because of the fear that their Housing Benefit would be stopped. The claimant earned £90 per week from part-time work and from that contributed £25 per week towards his rent. He thought that he might have been eligible for Working Tax Credit and had been told from other benefit authorities that he would be eligible for more help than he was getting. However he did not apply for anything for fear that he would then have his Housing Benefit taken from him and that he would be unable to continue in his employment.

*'...they'll stop paying us, won't they? They'll stop paying me rent and everything, so it's...I'd rather keep me job, like, and just go on the way.'*

(Male, 60s)

Perceived financial consequences then can influence whether or not someone reports a change in their circumstances. Perceptions need not necessarily be the same as actual consequences. It is perhaps timely to mention here that those people in the sample who had trusted and reliable sources of advice they could turn to outside of benefit authorities (for example, a welfare rights officer, or a member of the family who worked with the Citizens' Advice Bureau) did so in order to check out the potential consequences of reporting a change in their circumstances, which they found helpful and reassuring.

### 3.2 Understanding and experiences of the benefit system

Some peoples' understandings of the operation of the benefits system could play a part in reporting changes in their circumstances. Similarly, past experiences, especially where they were negative, could also be seen to influence reporting behaviour in some instances.

### 3.2.1 Understanding the benefit eligibility criteria

Some people had said they found the rules and regulations of Housing (and other) Benefit(s) quite confusing, others said that they had learned about their benefit by being in the system:

*'Yeah, they were trying to tell me how they pay out, and how it's paid to the landlord, and how it's worked out over the year, and whether it's paid a month in hand, and I just could not get my head around that. That's what I really did struggle with, and so I had a couple of visits and, like, they were looking at me as if to say, "Well, we are explaining it really as simply as we can".'*

(Female, 40s)

Some people did link the receipt of benefit to varying degrees to their personal circumstances when reasoning what kinds of changes they would inform Housing Benefit authorities about.

*'The reason I'm claiming Housing Benefit's because I'm on a low income, so if my income was to increase by any means.'*

(Female, 40s)

*'Well I presume it's because of my circumstances which basically, as I say I live on my own so it'll be something to do with that, sort of that they've come to a figure, that people who probably don't live on it, have come to a figure and that's all you need.'*

(Male, 50s)

One other person spoke about a contractual obligation that they perceived had been made when they had signed to receive Housing Benefit. That, they argued, included a 'promise' to inform the local authority of any changes in their circumstances.

Some people did not report a change when they perceived that the local authority would 'already know' about it, or where they experienced the updating in circumstances as 'automatic', for example one person told of how they were sent notification when their rent had gone up and their Housing Benefit had already been adjusted by the local authority. The person presumed that the local authority and the housing association had made adjustments for the increase in rent without their involvement.

### 3.2.2 Previous experiences of benefit administration

Negative experiences of benefit administration (whether related to informing about changes of circumstances or not) could influence both future reporting behaviour and people's overall feelings towards the benefits system. For example, one person who would perhaps have been considered to be 'non-resident' at their accommodation did not inform Housing Benefit that they actually preferred

living with their friend because of their previous experience of reporting such a change. Previously, the claimant had informed authorities that they were moving in with their friend on a platonic basis and said that they had nonetheless lost their Incapacity Benefit. They recounted being visited by a benefits officer and asked whether or not they washed their clothes together, and whether the other people living in the street might say, if asked, that the claimant and their friend were a couple.

Some people also recounted the difficulties of finding out about Housing (and other) Benefit(s) or their problems experienced with their initial claim for Housing Benefit. Whilst, as mentioned in the previous chapter, some people felt that they had good rapport with members of Housing Benefit staff (this seemed especially so in rural areas), others commented that they did not have confidence in the level of staff knowledge. Some said that their claim had taken several weeks or months to process and that they had experienced financial difficulties in the time period, and sometimes overpayments which were difficult to pay back. One person who had incurred overpayments because of delays in processing her Housing Benefit application, and who moved in between low-paid work and benefit receipt said that they did not feel that they were being helped to help themselves:

*'It's just the time that they actually take to assess your claim, really, to be honest. Even when they do have the notification as well, and it's you phone up, and sometimes nobody knows what they're doing...you're having to constantly go over and over and over, which is really, really frustrating. sometimes, you're having to – [sighs] I don't know, you're having to go out of your way to find out different things that they don't advise you, to know what your rights are, and what you're entitled to, to what you're not entitled to.'*

(Female, 20s)

People recounted offices losing claim forms up to three times in a row. One claimant described how they were caught in a 'catch 22' situation. Having applied for Housing Benefit they were informed that they would not get Housing Benefit until they had a written tenancy agreement. However, the letting agent and landlord would not give them a written tenancy agreement until they produced their first month's rent.

### **3.2.3 Interaction of benefits and tax systems**

There was also evidence of a lack of interaction between Housing Benefit and tax credits in responding to claimants' changes in circumstances which could cause stress and financial difficulties for people. There were two examples in the data where claimants had stopped working and had reported their change to Housing Benefit and to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) for Working Tax Credits. One person had their Housing Benefit stopped and were told that they must still be working because they were still in receipt of Working Tax Credits. Another person who had moved between jobs recently was refused Income Support and therefore could not claim Housing Benefit because according to these authorities, she was still receiving Working Tax Credits.

*'I think it took about a month from me not working to actually receive any Income Support...the reason was they said that I was still in receipt of Working Tax Credits, but I wasn't because I called them. ...So then I had to go through the claim, you know, I had to go through the whole process of going through Income Support again and making a new claim. So obviously you've got to have your interview and, you know, they're so booked up and it took a couple of weeks for the next interview, so before I knew it was about a month.'*

(Female, 20s)

Taken together, such factors might be seen to militate against claimants' confidence and trust in the benefits system.

### 3.3 Context of the change in circumstances

There was evidence of time being a potential influence on whether changes might be reported by people. For example, one person who could not work for a month because they had a respiratory illness did not inform Housing Benefit authorities of this change because of the relatively short length of time they were unwell compared with the length of time it would have taken Housing Benefit to adjust their claim.

*Respondent: 'I was off for a month, so I found it really difficult to pay for things as well. ...I just couldn't work. I just – I couldn't really do anything. I just was relying on me mum to pay for things, to come over and do it.'*

*Researcher: 'But you didn't claim – you didn't have another claim for benefit then?'*

*Respondent: 'No. ...'Cause I thought, by the time I signed on anything, I would be, like, better.'*

(Female, 20s)

Difficult personal circumstances could also affect whether changes in circumstances were reported. This was the case with the claimant who lived in supported accommodation for people with mental ill health for example, and whose support worker effectively monitored their claim and decided on, and informed about, changes in their circumstances.

### 3.4 Discussion

This chapter has outlined some of the factors which influence whether people report changes in their circumstances. The first part of the chapter highlighted that people may not conceptualise change the way that benefits authorities do. Claimants may more easily recognise a change from one status to another (from not working to working) than they would changes within a status (working 18 hours instead of 16). A concern to comply with benefit regulations was also seen to influence people's behaviour.

Perceptions of the financial consequences of reporting a change could lead to not reporting changes which might have increased or decreased benefit. Some people recognised that their receipt of Housing Benefits was tied to their personal circumstances and thus reasoned that changes in their circumstances would therefore need to be reported. Previous negative experiences of benefit administration (delays in processing and waiting times, the apparently contradictory procedures and administrative processes and timelines of different benefit authorities/HMRC which resulted in financial difficulties and the unanticipated outcomes of reporting changes) could also be seen to influence behaviour and attitudes towards benefit authorities.

It should of course be noted that the above factors are not mutually exclusive and that, in practice, they are, and will be, interrelated in their influence on reporting changes in circumstances. Moreover, some of the factors will be more or less relevant to different people at different times and effects might be magnified where people claim several benefits and tax credits.

## 4 Experiences and consequences of reporting changes in circumstances

This chapter considers the range of methods used by claimants to report changes in their circumstances. It also explores the variety of people's experiences, and the subsequent impacts, of reporting changes. Taken together, these illustrate processes and procedures in the benefit system which can be seen to facilitate or hinder the timely and accurate reporting of changes in circumstances.

Some people (most especially those whose circumstances for benefit purposes were relatively straightforward) said that their experience of reporting, and the consequences of, change had been unproblematic. Others described having more negative experiences of reporting changes and the consequences of reporting, such as complex reporting procedures (especially where people were on more than one benefit and had to report the same change to multiple agencies), and administrative errors resulting in financial hardship, stress and uncertainty. This chapter draws lessons from the positive and negative experiences that people described.

Section 4.1 outlines the methods that people used to report changes in their circumstances to the local authority and other benefit authorities, and their experiences of using different channels. Section 4.2 explores the consequences for claimants once they had reported a change. Perceptions and experiences of overpayments are considered in Section 4.3, and Section 4.4 concludes the chapter with a discussion of the findings.

## 4.1 Methods of reporting changes in circumstances

Claimants used a variety of methods for reporting changes in their circumstances. Some people used a method which was most convenient to them, for example preferring to make a telephone call or to pay a visit to their local authority office. One person had said how easy it was (for them) to have made a repeat application for Housing Benefit online. The costs associated with both of these methods for people were mentioned. For example, some people said that they thought the cost of telephone calls prohibitive and that they might be more inclined to use a free phone number; others said that their 'local' office was too far away and the costs of getting there on public transport were expensive; one other person said he did not like going into the local office because it was always busy and he did not like discussing personal matters in such an environment. Sometimes people used a particular method, even if it was not the most convenient for them, because they perceived that it was the method most likely to be successful (for example, visiting the office in person to hand in forms instead of posting them) in making sure the information was actually received. This was sometimes influenced by having had problems in the past when forms sent by post had not been received by, or had been mislaid by, local authority offices.

People reported a deal of diversity in the routine procedures used by local authorities to review their circumstances. Some claimants reported that their local authority sent them a form periodically to ask if their circumstances had changed. Others reported that they had a periodic home visit from a local authority officer. Yet other people said that they knew of no such periodic review procedures used by their local authority.

Some people's methods (and timings) of reporting changes in their circumstances were constrained by their employment status. For example, people who were employees in paid work and whose earnings fluctuated reported that they might take their pay slips into the local authority office every month, or week. However, those in self-employment said that they did not report any changes in their earnings until the end of the financial year when a local authority officer would come to visit them.

Changes were sometimes reported for people by an intermediary. For example one person who lived in supported accommodation and who had a mental health condition which fluctuated said that their support worker dealt with all aspects of their income maintenance and housing benefits.

Some claimants who had periodic reviews conducted by a local authority official in their own home said that they valued them because they provided an opportunity to ask the official questions and that, where the official filled in the paperwork, there was less chance of making mistakes. Some other claimants would prefer to have such reviews in the local authority office. One person said that she had recently had a review conducted over the telephone by an agency acting on behalf of benefit authorities. She had not been entirely comfortable with this because, as she perceived it, she was passing her details onto a third party.

## 4.2 Experiences of reporting changes in circumstances

For many people, reporting changes in their circumstances was unproblematic and straightforward. Whilst the study sample cannot be considered as representative, it is noticeable that people living in more rural locations seemed more inclined to speak favourably about the staff in their local authority office. One person described the staff as having an in-depth knowledge of his family's circumstances which seemed akin to having a 'named worker' with whom he was on good terms when he went to report frequent changes in his wife's income from work. This contrasts with comments from people who said that they never seemed to speak with or see the same member of staff more than once.

Some people perceived that some staff, for whatever reason (lack of knowledge or lack of time, for example) were less than competent. For example, one person perceived that staff in his local office were unable to cope with his Housing Benefit claim and the problems he was experiencing with his income maintenance benefits and tax credits because of their lack of understanding of the rules. He also perceived that he was relatively powerless to complain:

*'...all I seem to do is go down into town and just go and sit in the offices and try to speak to people, but a lot people won't deal with you now because you've got so many problems they're just like, "No, we can't deal with it. We don't understand it. We don't understand what's going on". ... You can't say anything because as soon as you get a little bit uppity they'll either put the phone down or walk away from you, because they're not prepared to stand there and discuss it. Which is their ineptitude to actually do the job.'*

(Male, 31)

Sometimes people spoke about repeatedly having to inform their local authority about the same change:

*'I went and told them straightaway that I had a change in circumstances. I didn't wait, and I know they have a 30 day, you know, you've got to tell them within 30 days, and I told them on the first day, and that...was a couple of months ago, so it's still, yeah, it's still ongoing and it's not been sorted and, you know. ...I just find it can be quite difficult and perhaps to getting the information across and for them to, sort of, reflect that on my Housing Benefit...it gets quite difficult and it gets quite stressful, to be honest, because, yeah, it takes quite a while as well.'*

(Female, 20s)

Such instances can mean that an experience of reporting a change in circumstances becomes more than a one-off event – and can involve claimants in several methods of communicating the same change (telephone, e-mail, in person).

### 4.3 Consequences of informing about change

In many of the unproblematic scenarios, people were informed about and entirely expected the financial consequences of reporting a change in their circumstances. Moreover, such consequences (benefit decrease or increase, for example) would happen as and when claimants expected. This was not always the case for claimants in the study group, however, and could lead to instances of uncertainty, insecurity, stress and financial difficulties.

#### 4.3.1 Uncertainty

Some people who had reported changes said they had subsequently been given conflicting, and hence confusing, information by the local authority on what the consequence of that change was going to be for their benefit level. This could take some time and effort on the claimant's part to sort out. For example, one person had contacted her local authority to inform them that her daughter would be moving in with her. She was subsequently sent three different letters with three different figures for her adjusted rate of Housing Benefit.

#### 4.3.2 Financial insecurity

Claimants reported facing unexpected financial difficulties after informing about a change of circumstance in a number of ways. For example, one person, while expecting to lose their Housing Benefit because they were going to live with a friend, had not expected to lose their Incapacity Benefit as well, but had done. Others had experienced delays in the processing of information and had subsequently incurred overpayments which they struggled to repay.

Sometimes people felt that they had not been informed enough about the way in which Housing Benefit worked. This lack of knowledge had left more than one claimant in financial difficulty. One claimant had moved to a more expensive private rented property but had then been told that the maximum Housing Benefit for that size of property would not cover their rent and so they had to make up the shortfall. Similarly, one family had moved across local authority boundaries and, as they understood it, their new local authority had a different threshold for receipt of Housing Benefit and they had been told that they were not eligible for it (this was complicated by the fact that they were receiving Working Tax Credit despite repeatedly informing HMRC that they were not working).

#### 4.3.3 Stress, confusion and annoyance

Some people had longstanding situations which remained unresolved and which could be stressful and confusing. For example, one person told of how they had lost their job due to ill health and had subsequently informed HMRC (because they were receiving Working Tax Credit) that their job had stopped and that they had claimed Housing Benefit. However their Working Tax Credit had continued to be paid and Housing Benefit had subsequently stopped their benefit because they were still receiving Working Tax Credit. This situation had continued for a period of almost two years without being resolved and was still ongoing at the time of

the research. One person spoke of how they had been sent a letter from Housing Benefit authorities telling them to produce their pay slips, which had not yet been issued, and that if they did not do so their benefit would be stopped. When the claimant had rung up to explain and ask them if their benefit would be stopped they had been told that the council 'just put that' on correspondence.

Some other people talked about being bemused by complicated forms they were required to fill in and by not knowing whether their adjusted claim was correct, especially where they had repeatedly to inform about changed circumstances.

*'When you fill out all the forms and that and it's quite confusing filling them out, and then, like, some weeks I seem to, like, not get anything, and then...I get something and it just seems to go up and down all the time.'*

(Female, 20s)

*'I've been swapped and changed about and stopped and started so many times and for the reason I can't understand why...especially with the Housing Benefit decisions, in my personal experience, I've had anything up to 20 pages of letters and on each letter it's conflicting opinions on every letter, you know, the dates and the start times and you're just totally confused. You haven't got a clue where you're at so you phone them up and they just – they haven't got a clue either.'*

(Female, 20s)

Some people did not like engaging with a means-tested system at all; they found the application process for Housing Benefit intrusive (in particular when they were visited at home) and were annoyed at having to report small changes in income, as they perceived it.

*'...fiddling about with pounds. I could understand if it was hundreds of pounds, but a few pounds, it's bloody ridiculous, you know. It really annoys me.'*

(Male, 70s)

Again, the above issues were not mutually exclusive and people experienced varying degrees of all or any of them. It was also apparent that uncertainty, insecurity and financial difficulties could be magnified where people had to cope with repeated and frequent changes in their lives (for example, where their hours and income from work fluctuated on a regular basis), requiring them to report changes to more than one administrative body.

#### 4.4 Experience of benefit overpayment and overpayment recovery

Some people in the study group had been informed that they were liable to repay overpayments both prior to and during the course of the research. We explored with them how such overpayments had come about, the impact on the person and

their household, and how they felt about the process of overpayment recovery. One person was rather perplexed to be told that she would, in the coming year, be overpaid £511 on her Council Tax Benefit and that, once overpaid, she would be asked to pay this back. Another person was repaying £1,000 of Housing Benefit overpayments due to a miscalculation of her housing benefit by the local authority.

*'...because they'd given me the wrong calculation in the first place, to pay that, that is really annoying, and I'm still paying that off to this day, and it's really quite frustrating that they've got me – I'd never been in rent arrears before.'*

(Female, 20s)

Similarly, another claimant described it as 'irritating' that they had to repay from an already tight budget overpayments which had been generated by late processing of information by the local authority rather than any fault of theirs.

One claimant recounted that they had been overpaid a tax credit because they had inadvertently not disclosed a benefit that someone in the household was receiving. The trauma of having to pay a large sum of money back, and the strain that it put their family under, made them wish that they had never claimed the credit in the first place.

## 4.5 Discussion

This chapter has explored the experiences and consequences of reporting changes in circumstances for the people in the study group. A range of methods were seen to be used by claimants for reporting changes. Some used those methods they favoured most; some used those methods they perceived had the best chances of getting information across to the local authority. Some people had barriers to using some methods (such as the costs of transport or telephone calls).

There is scope therefore for increasing the access of particular methods for particular people, especially where these are prohibited by costs. It would also be beneficial if all reporting methods were, and perceived by claimants to be, as successful in imparting information to authorities.

It was noticeable that those people who enjoyed a good rapport with local authority staff, especially where they were perceived to 'know' the claimants circumstances, spoke highly of it. People did not value interactions with staff who they perceived did not know what they were talking about. These are findings which have implications for staff training.

People also experienced financial hardship, stress and uncertainty brought about by staff error, delays in processing and lack of interaction (from the claimant's perspective) of benefits and tax credits. Such issues have implications for staff training but also to wider issues in the benefits system such as complexity and fragmentation. These issues will be explored in more depth in the next chapter.

# 5 Conclusions, discussion and policy implications

## 5.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter draws out the main barriers and facilitators to reporting changes to local authorities for Standard Housing Benefit claimants and offers some implications for policy. While some of the conclusions echo those in Irvine *et al.* (2008), we also identify new insights and findings generated from the analysis. Recent policy documents such as the Department for Work and Pensions' (DWP's) Getting Welfare Right error strategy, as well as Boath and Wilkinson's (2007) research on achieving good reporting of changes in circumstances in Housing Benefit are drawn on.

As the introduction stated, the primary policy interest of DWP lies in claimant errors associated with non residence, non reporting of earnings and non reporting of tax credits. Given the qualitative nature of the research and, in particular, the small sample numbers involved, we only had a few examples of each of these areas of interest. Where possible, however, we draw on them here in the concluding chapter.

## 5.2 Barriers to reporting changes in circumstances

In an ideal scenario Housing (and other) Benefit claimants would operate with full knowledge of the Housing Benefit rules around reporting changes in circumstances (what to report, to whom, how to report it and when to report it). Further they would expect and be able to manage the timely consequences of reporting changes in their circumstances. The findings presented in the report, drawn on below, suggest that there are a number of barriers to this ideal scenario. In the earlier report (Irvine *et al.*, 2008), these barriers were discussed as three dominant reasons why people do not report changes that are relevant to their claims: knowledge deficits, avoidance behaviour and deliberate withholding of information. Knowledge deficits referred to incomplete or inaccurate knowledge

and was by far the most common reason identified in the non-reporting of changes. Avoidance behaviour referred to situations when claimants had recognised a change in their circumstances but did not report it in order to avoid a perceived negative consequence. Deliberate withholding referred to actions which had a fraudulent intent, and so could therefore be distinguished from avoidance behaviour.

In that report (based on interviews with 51 benefit claimants) there was evidence of widespread knowledge deficits, some avoidance behaviour but very little of what might be construed as fraudulent behaviour. In the smaller sample used for this study (20 Standard Housing Benefit claimants), we identified mostly knowledge deficits and occasionally avoidance behaviour as reasons for non-reporting.

### **5.2.1 Knowledge deficits**

While the majority of claimants were familiar with the obligation to report changes in their circumstances, there was much less understanding about what this might actually mean in practice. Operating with full knowledge of the Housing Benefit rules and regulations around reporting changes in circumstances was impeded by several gaps in claimants' knowledge. For example, there were differences in the scope of people's knowledge of what changes were important for benefit purposes (for example 'work'; 'household living arrangements') and some people had much narrower understandings than others about the potential areas of life in which changes should be reported. When people were asked to think about what changes might matter for Housing Benefit purposes, they more easily suggested events that would see them changing status in some way, like starting work or moving from part-time to full-time employment. People might have more difficulty then in recognising change for benefit purposes when they conceptualise it as a small alteration to their circumstances (for example, a 20 pence per hour pay rise). This relates to a second point – where people do identify certain areas of life in which changes should be reported, there can be knowledge deficits in the detail of what changes matter.

Knowledge gaps in both scope and detail left room for 'common sense' understandings and assumptions. Thus some people reasoned that any income changes should be reported to Housing Benefit authorities because they were receiving the benefit because they were on a low income. Others thought that there would be no need to inform authorities about stays away from home because 'the rent still had to be paid' whether they were there or not. Similarly, one person had not informed the local authority that relatives had moved into their accommodation because they were not paying any rent.

People were also found to have accrued knowledge about a range of benefits and their regulations from a variety of unofficial sources. Friends and family, private landlords and other agencies, such as social work. Those people who did feel confident in their knowledge of benefit rules and regulations had sometimes gained this confidence because they felt that they had a reliable member of staff to ask questions in the local authority or they had access to independent welfare rights advice.

### 5.2.2 Reporting channels

No one in the sample felt unaware of who changes should be reported to, which may be because our questioning was primarily geared towards Housing Benefit rather than, as in the last study, towards a range of benefits. Of more policy relevance is perhaps how people reported change. Here we have to account for diverse preferences (and claimant resources) in reporting methods. One person, for example, found the relative speed and ease of an internet (repeat) application for Housing Benefit easier than making their way to a local office. Some people said that they did not like going into busy local offices where staff were perceived to be ill-informed and unhelpful. Others liked to report frequent changes in circumstances (fluctuating earnings, for example) in person at the local office to staff they felt were familiar with their circumstances and with whom they had established a rapport and who could 'keep them right'. These examples were more often cited by people who lived in rural areas and it might be supposed that staff might have more time and resources, and less pressure on their services, to give people when compared with more disadvantaged inner city areas. However, some people also mentioned that the cost of (public) transport could be prohibitive in accessing offices in person in rural areas.

Knowledge of when to report a change is also important for timely reporting. We have little to comment on from this study – people either reported a change before it had happened to them (a relative coming to live with them), at the time it happened (turning 60 years of age), or within what they believed to be a set time period allowed.

### 5.2.3 Consequences of reporting a change in circumstances

The data provided examples of negative, and unanticipated, experiences arising from reporting a change in circumstances which could inform people's feelings towards dealing with the benefits system (for example, having experienced delays and financial insecurities, a lack of trust in staff and benefits procedures could lead people to want as little engagement as possible). In some cases such experiences informed subsequent reporting of changes in their circumstances. For example, the person who moved in with a friend had expected to lose their Housing Benefit, but not their Incapacity Benefit. Subsequently, they had reverted to their previous status and had not informed the local authority that they actually stayed with their friend (an example of what the previous report would have considered as 'avoidance behaviour').

Unexpected consequences could cause financial hardship and stress where claimants were unaware either of Housing Benefit rules and regulations *within* or *between* local authorities. Some people had said that they would not have moved house or moved between local authorities had they been fully aware of the financial consequences.

There were also examples of changes which were reported on time (according to the research participants) which nevertheless resulted in error and overpayments

for the claimant and which seemed to arise from official error and delay. Examples of this were given for people who had reported changes in their earnings, for example, miscalculations of Housing Benefit, delays in processing claims and in making adjustments to Housing Benefit after changes have been reported.

Negative consequences were also experienced because of what was perceived by claimants as the lack of interaction between the practices of private landlords and Housing Benefit authorities (for example, the person who said how Housing Benefit was not payable until the production of a tenancy agreement but a tenancy agreement would not be available until the receipt of the first payment of Housing Benefit). Similarly, interactions between Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and Housing Benefit departments were also problematic for some people. These authorities work to different time lines for calculations and so time lags after informing of a change of circumstances and overpayments were not out of the ordinary for people who were obliged to deal with multiple calculation methods and sets of rules (for example, one person was self employed, claimed Working and Child Tax Credits and Housing Benefit).

Such uncertainty, stress, confusion and financial difficulties can be magnified for people who are repeatedly expected to report changes to several authorities (for example, someone with fluctuating earnings).

### 5.3 Policy implications

This section considers the policy implications of the findings. We would suggest that, similar to the previous report, current options for policy could be grouped into two broad categories:

- Structural – changes to the present system.
- Administrative – changes within the present system.

#### 5.3.1 Structural options

It has long been recognised that the complexity of the current benefits system makes it hard for both claimants and staff to manage in (National Audit Office, 2005; Public Accounts Committee, 2006; Select Committee on Work and Pensions, 2007). Different rules for different benefits, and hence different requirements for reporting changes, and the lack of interaction between different authorities and between the tax and benefits system, if simplified might go some way to reducing both staff and claimant errors and overpayments.

Simplification of the benefit regulations, simplification of the communication of those regulations and a greater interaction or 'joining up' between benefit authorities and tax and benefits systems would be beneficial from the claimant's perspective.

### 5.3.2 Administrative options

Clearly, claimant (and staff) knowledge deficits concerning the scope and detail of relevant changes have implications for non reporting. Increasing claimants' knowledge is one of the tenets of reducing error currently being used by benefit authorities (DWP, 2007). This research suggests that it is important to increase claimants' knowledge of both the scope and detail of changes that need to be reported. Of course, there is a fine balance to be struck in policy terms between giving people enough information and overloading them with too much. What is clear from this research, however, is that lack of certainty about what changes to report can lead to either under or over reporting by claimants – which would suggest that claimants do not have enough relevant information.

Some claimants would also like to be better informed about benefits in general (i.e. what might be available to them), and a greater understanding of benefits and their eligibility criteria might enhance understandings concerning obligations to report relevant changes. In this respect, claimants valued information which was explained to them in relation to their personal circumstances, in simple language and which was imparted from a trusted source (for example, a well-informed member of staff, or welfare rights officer). If claimants had greater knowledge and confidence in the benefits system they might be more inclined to engage with it. Well trained and informed staff that treat claimants with respect might go some way to achieving this.

We can say less about actual reporting mechanisms from this research, but our findings are consistent with Boath and Wilkinson (2007) who suggest that it needs to be easy to report a change in Housing Benefit to the local authority (for example, ways of reporting should be accessible not only in a physical sense but also in relation to literacy and language). Frequency and accuracy of reporting could also be increased if there were more, and more diverse, reporting channels that were accessible to claimants, and that these generated low, or preferably zero, costs for claimants.

One way of decreasing claimant error would be to decrease the obligation on claimants to report changes in their circumstances and to increase the proactive means by which local authorities anticipate changes in people's circumstances. As highlighted earlier in the report, different local authorities currently use diverse means of anticipating, or checking for, changes in peoples circumstances.

Some claimants reported that their local authority periodically sent them a form, for example every six months or every year; others reported that they received a home visit from a local authority officer. As with reporting mechanisms, claimants identified both advantages and disadvantages of these methods. An officer visiting the home, for example, gave the claimant an opportunity to ask any questions related to their benefit that they might have had. However, other people considered home visits to be intrusive and for that reason preferred to be sent a form.

Boath and Wilkinson (2007) suggest that local authorities might target their proactive methods to claimants circumstances more by anticipating when changes might have occurred (changes in earnings, rent, benefits and tax credits) and reviewing their Housing Benefit claim accordingly in an attempt to reduce and prevent claimant error. They also suggest that more targeted benefit checks would also have the advantage of identifying wrong payments and reducing overpayments. There is also no reason to suggest why they might not be used for identifying underpayments. However, the local authorities participating in Boath and Wilkinson's research feared that claimants might then think that they had no obligation to report changes themselves.

There are procedures in place currently however which remove the onus from the claimants to report changes. This is the case with local authority rented housing and Housing Benefit. Many claimants reported that changes in their rent were automatically adjusted for Housing Benefit and they needed to take no action. Those claimants with private landlord, however, benefited from no such linkages and we saw that claimants reported a mismatch between the practices of private landlords and Housing Benefit authorities which could cause confusion and hardship for claimants. Boath and Wilkinson (2007) argue for better linkages in this respect between private landlords and local authorities.

## 5.4 Concluding remarks

The Getting Welfare Right strategy suggests that claimant error might be corrected by prevention (preventing wrong payments at initial claim stage), claimant compliance (maintaining an accurate claim) and correction (identification and correction of wrong payments). The findings are most relevant to the second strand of this strategy, claimants' compliance to maintain an accurate claim.

Before claimants can maintain an accurate claim, they must first be aware of their full obligations. From the diversity in understanding highlighted in this report and other research, this is not currently the case and the possibility exists for increasing both the scope and the detail of people's knowledge of changes they should report for benefit purposes.

Factors were also looked at which might influence whether claimants reported changes in their circumstances and it was found that previous negative experiences, a lack of trust in benefit administration procedures and (perceived) consequences of reporting a change (for example, financial hardship and stress) might also influence reporting decisions. There is, therefore, scope for enhancing claimants' experience of the benefits system on a number of levels because, for claimants, reporting changes in circumstances is not divorced from experiences of the wider benefit system. As formerly noted, some of these issues could be addressed by structural simplification of the benefits rules and procedures.

# Appendix

## Topic guides

### Standard Housing Benefit Claimants' Experiences of Changes in Circumstances

#### **Topic Guide for Initial Qualitative Interview**

- Introduce self.
- Explain the research is funded by the Department for Work and Pensions which is interested in finding out about how using the benefit system fits in with people's everyday life and experiences, and especially what happens when things change in people's lives.
- Explain the independence of SPRU.
- Explain that they have been asked to take part in the research because they have (recently) made a claim for Housing Benefit, and it would be helpful to get their experiences and views now and at one further time point in a few months, in March/April next year, (whether still on benefit or not) to see if their views and experiences change.
- Explain that they can withdraw at any point from the research without giving a reason.
- So in this first interview we would like to talk about things like:
  - Your current situation and circumstances
  - Your experiences of claiming benefit
  - What's been happening in your life since you made your claim.
- Stress that there is no 'right' answers, not a test. We're looking for their views and experiences.

- The interview will take around one hour and will be in the form of a discussion.
- Ask permission to record the interview. Explain that recordings will be typed up by a professional typist.
- Explain confidentiality (i.e. that no one other than the research team will know who they are) and how the material collected will be used – a report for the DWP in which their views are included but not in a way that will identify them – kept anonymous.
- Offer to send a report summary at the end of the research.
- Assure them that taking part in the research will have no effect on any benefits or tax credits that they receive, or on any of their dealings with the local authority, Jobcentre Plus or any other organisation now or in the future.
- Ask if they have any questions
- Check informed consent, get form signed/give money

## 1. CURRENT SITUATION AND BACKGROUND

### 1.1 Can we begin by talking a bit about your situation and personal circumstances at the moment?

- Age
- Household circumstances
- Employment status (self and other household members)
  - Check whether employment of self and relevant household members is stable or fluctuating/seasonal/etc.
- Caring responsibilities
  - Check whether fluctuates (e.g. part-time custody of children; varying adult care duties)
- Tenure
- Health

## 2. VIEWS AND EXPERIENCE OF THE BENEFITS SYSTEM

- 2.1 Thinking about the benefit system in general, I wonder if you could have a look at this list of statements for me (give respondent the flashcard, but researcher also read out each statement from their own flashcard).

DIFFERENT WAYS PEOPLE HAVE DESCRIBED WHAT THEY KNOW ABOUT SOCIAL SECURITY

“I know very little about my benefits”

“I know quite a bit about the benefit I’m on but not much beyond that”

“I am confident I know what I need to know about my benefits”

“I have a good understanding of how my benefit is worked out”

“I don’t really understand why I am getting the amount I do”

“I think the benefit rules are very confusing”

“I haven’t got a clue”

- Do any of these statements ring a bell with you?
  - Probe further to explore their feelings about their understanding of the benefits system, e.g. why they do/do not feel confident.
- 2.2 [As necessary] Thinking about the benefits system in general, how would you describe your overall experience of dealing with the benefit system/benefits office/local authority?

## 3. EXPERIENCE OF THE BENEFITS SYSTEM AND MAKING CLAIMS

- 3.1 Have you had much experience of claiming benefits in the past?
- keep it brief, but get a picture of the extent/range of their benefit history
- 3.2 Is this the first time that you’ve claimed Housing Benefit?
- 3.3 Are you receiving any other benefits or allowances *at the moment*?
- probe re: a range of benefits/Tax Credits
  - ask when claim(s) started
- 3.4 Can we talk a bit about your recent experience of making benefit claims? Let’s start with when you claimed Housing Benefit
- focus on more recent claims (as identified in 3.3), but cover a range of benefits where possible

*For each claim:*

- Reason for making the claim
- Who did you have to talk to about it?
- What was the process?
- Anything go particularly well/smoothly?
- Any problems?
- probe different experiences with Jobcentre Plus compared to Local Authority as relevant.

#### 4. ESTABLISHING DIFFERENCES and EVENTS DURING MOST RECENT CLAIM

##### 4.1 Thinking back to about six months ago, what were your situation and circumstances like then? [Go back further as necessary]

Prompt:

- household circumstances
- employment status (self and other household members)
- caring responsibilities
- tenure
- health
- anything else that was different then compared to now?

##### 4.2 Would you say your circumstances have changed at all during this time?

##### 4.3 Has anything else changed between then and now, even if it was just for a short time?

Prompt:

- household circumstances – comings and goings
- employment status (self and other household members)
- caring responsibilities
- tenure – moves, changes in rent
- health
- stays away from home (e.g. holidays, visiting friends/relatives, trips abroad)

4.4 Has anything else happened in other areas of your life over this time?

## 5. EXPLORING EXPERIENCE OF CHANGES SINCE CLAIM

5.1 So, can I just recap then, x, y and z have happened while you've been claiming Housing Benefit

### *For each 'event'...*

5.2 Does this affect your benefit(s)? [If claimed more than one simultaneously, explore all]

- explore both immediate and potential future effect (e.g. tax credits or Pension Credit)

(a) *If benefit was/will be affected...*

- In what way was it/do you think it will be affected?
- Is that what you expect(ed) to happen?
  - Check expected changes to amount and to overall eligibility
- Did your benefit get changed without you telling anyone?
  - If so: what happened? (e.g. benefit review, 3rd party information, automatic process)
- [As appropriate] ... Or did you tell someone about the change?
  - Why did you decide to tell someone?
  - Who did you tell? [check whether reported to one or multiple bodies, e.g. local authority, JC+, council tax office, pension service office]
  - How did you go about telling them?
- When did you tell them? (before/soon after/long after the change?)
  - Why then?
- Was it an easy process or were there any problems?
  - probe as appropriate
  -

**(b) *If benefit was not affected...***

- Is that what you expected to happen?
  - Check expected changes to amount and to overall eligibility
- Did you tell anyone about the change?

*If they did tell someone...*

- Why did you decide to tell someone?
- Who did you tell? [check whether reported to one or multiple bodies, e.g. JC+, council tax office, pension service office]
- How did you go about telling them?
- When did you tell them? (before/soon after/long after the change?)
  - Why then?
- Was it an easy process or were there any problems?
  - probe as appropriate

*If they didn't tell anyone...*

- Does anyone know about that change anyway?
  - If so: what happened? (e.g. automatic process, benefit review, 3rd party information)
- Is there any reason why you didn't tell anyone about the change?
  - probe as appropriate

**5.3 [As appropriate] Now that we've talked about all of those things, has anything else come to mind that's happened during this time? [If so, explore as above]**

**5.4 Have you been in contact with the benefits office/local authority for any other reasons since you made this claim?**

- Who contacted who?
- For what reason?

## 6. EXPECTED OR HYPOTHETICAL CHANGES

6.1 We've talked about the changes that have happened to you. Thinking more generally about people who are receiving benefits, what (other) types of changes in people's lives or circumstances do you think might matter to the amount of benefit that they get?

- How do you think these types of things might affect the amount of benefit people get? (DO NOT PROMPT unless necessary - benefit might go up; down; stop completely; stay the same)?
- Why do you think it would [go up/down/stop completely/stay the same]?
- Where did you find out about this?
- 

6.2 Are you expecting anything else to change over the next few months?

*If expecting changes...*

- What types of things might change?
- Do you think this could affect your benefit? How?
- Where did you find out about this?
- Do you think you'll tell anyone about this if/when it happens?
- Who? How? When? Why (not)?

## 7. INFORMATION SOURCES

7.1 We're interested to know how people find out about what they should do if things change in their lives when they're getting benefits.

7.2

*If participant has described changes...*

7.2 Did you know that you needed to tell the benefit office/local authority about [x, y and z]? HOW?

7.3 Thinking more generally, have you had any other information about what to do if things change in your life, since you made this claim?

- What was this? Where/who did it come from? etc....

- If necessary, prompt with – ‘some people have mentioned seeing a statement on letters from the Department for Work and Pensions or at the Doctor’s surgery, saying something like: ‘if your circumstances change it may affect the amount of benefit you receive’.

*If participant has not described any changes...*

**7.4 Thinking about the whole time from when you made your claim for Housing Benefit in [month] right up until now, have you had any information about what you should do if things change in your life?**

- What was this? Where/who did it come from? etc....
- If necessary, prompt with – ‘some people have mentioned seeing a statement on letters from the Department for Work and Pensions or at the Doctor’s surgery, saying something like: ‘if your circumstances change it may affect the amount of benefit your receive’.

**7.5 [Ask to all] Was this a useful way to get information?**

- Content: did it tell you what you needed to know?
- Format: was this a useful way for the information to be presented?
- What content would be helpful for you in your situation?
- What format would you prefer?

**8. EXPERIENCE OF OVERPAYMENTS**

**8.1 Sometimes, for one reason or another, people get an overpayment of their benefit, and then they have to pay some back. Has this ever happened to you?**

- probe re: a range of benefits if necessary

*If has personal experience...*

- What happened?
- WAS IT A RESULT OF A CHANGE IN CIRCUMSTANCES?
- If so: probe as appropriate re chain of events in (non-)reporting
- How did it affect you (and your family)?
- How do you feel about it now?

*If no personal experience...*

- Ask for any anecdotes e.g. from relatives, friends, etc.

## 9. CONCLUSION

- Thank respondent
- Reassurance of value of comments and anonymity
- Ask if willing to be contacted for a telephone interview in a few months' time – **if so** check we have/ask for telephone number. Check if they expect to change number/address during this time.
- Check that they are happy for us to use the information they've given us.

## Standard Housing Benefit Claimants' Experiences of Changes in Circumstances

### Topic Guide for Second Qualitative Interview (Telephone Follow-up)

#### INTRODUCTION

- Thank participant for continued involvement
- Remind that the research is: funded by the Department for Work and Pensions; carried out independently by SPRU; and that participation will have no effect on their benefits or dealings with government departments now or in the future
- Remind of anonymity and confidentiality
- Ask permission to record the interview
- Check consent (get agreement on tape)
- Remind them that they can decline to answer any question and end the interview at any point.
- Explain that £10 money gift will be send immediately after interview.

#### Explain:

- In this final interview we will start by covering much the same as our last conversation. I'd like to catch up on:
  - What's been happening in your life since we last spoke
  - Any changes in your life?
- After that, I'd like to ask you some more general questions about how you feel the benefit system fits in with people's lives.
- At the end, we can talk about anything else that you feel is important about your experience of dealing with the benefits system.
- Do you have any questions before I go on?

## 1. RECENT CHANGES

Can we start by checking what's been happening in your life since we last spoke?

- Changes to household composition
  - Living arrangements with partner/spouse
  - Number of adults
  - Number of children
- Ages of household
  - Participant or spouse reached retirement age since last spoke?
  - Children reached 16 or 18?
- Changes to caring responsibilities
  - Children left home
  - New custody
  - Caring for an adult
- Changes to employment status and income (respondent and other household members)
  - Moved into/out of work
  - Started looking for work
  - Changes in hours
  - Changes in earnings
  - Changes in benefit receipt/amount
  - Changes in income from other sources, increase/decrease in savings
  - Changes of address and/or tenure
  - Changes to rent amount
- Changes in health condition
  - New condition since last spoke
  - Improvements/decline in existing condition(s)
- Stays away from home
- Anything else
- Prompt to check whether there have been any short-term changes in any of the above

**PROBE RE ANY EXPECTED CHANGES FROM ROUND ONE, AND ANY FURTHER DEVELOPMENT RELATED TO CHANGES REPORTED PREVIOUSLY FOR ALL CHANGES...**

**Does this affect your Housing (and other) benefit(s)?**

- explore both immediate and potential future effect (on HB and others e.g. incapacity benefits; JSA or any tax credits)

**(a) *If benefit was/will be affected***

- In what way was it/do you think it will be affected?
- Is that what you expect(ed) to happen?
  - Check expected changes to amount and to overall eligibility
- Did your benefit get changed without you telling anyone?
  - If so: what happened? (e.g. benefit review, 3rd party information)
- [As appropriate] ... Or did you tell someone about the change?
  - Why did you decide to tell someone?
    - probe re sources of info: have they become (more) aware of what to do? Our influence? Other influences?
  - Who did you tell? [check whether reported to one or multiple bodies, e.g. JC+, council tax office, tax credits, pension service office]
  - How did you go about telling them?
- When did you tell them? (before/soon after/long after the change?)
  - Why then?
- Was it an easy process or were there any problems?
  - probe as appropriate

**(b) *If benefit was not affected***

- Is that what you expected to happen?
  - Check expected changes to amount and to overall eligibility
- Did you tell anyone about the change?

*If they did tell someone...*

- Why did you decide to tell someone?
  - probe re sources of info: have they become (more) aware of what to do? Our influence? Other influences?
- Who did you tell? [check whether reported to one or multiple bodies, e.g. JC+, council tax office, tax credits, pension service office]
- How did you go about telling them?
- When did you tell them? (before/soon after/long after the change?)
  - Why then?
- Was it an easy process or were there any problems?
  - probe as appropriate

*If they didn't tell anyone...*

- Does anyone know about that change anyway?
  - If so: what happened? (e.g. benefit review, 3rd party information)
- Is there any reason why you didn't tell anyone about the change?
  - probe as appropriate
  -

**(C) Can you remind me, does your local authority Housing Benefit department review your claim on a regular basis – do they have a meeting with you every 6 months or so, for instance?**

**If yes:**

- Are these useful?
- In what ways are they useful/not useful to you?
- Changes reported/discussed during reviews?

**If no:**

- Would this be helpful to you?
- In what ways would they be helpful/unhelpful to you?
- So, how do you usually report changes which you think might affect your HB? (In person, by telephone, as soon as they happen etc)?

## 2. RECENT EXPERIENCE OF OVERPAYMENTS

We spoke last time about how sometimes, for one reason or another, people get an overpayment of their benefit, and then they have to pay some back. [As applicable] You've explained to me about how ... [précis their previous experience]

Has this been an issue for you at all in the last few months?

- What happened? Probe for specifics of:
  - which benefit (so which department)
  - how overpayment came about
  - if overpayments were recovered
  - how overpayments were recovered - off benefit weekly or in a lump sum
- WAS IT A RESULT OF A CHANGE IN CIRCUMSTANCES?
  - If so: probe as appropriate re chain of events in (non-)reporting
  - How did it affect you (and your family)?
  - How do you feel about it now?

## 3. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

As you know, our project has been looking at people's experiences of what happens with Housing Benefit (and other benefits) when things change in their lives.

Thinking about the whole time from when we first met for an interview back in December, right up until now, have you had any information about what you should do if things change in your life?

- What was this?
- Where/who did it come from?

Was this a useful way to get information?

- Did it tell you what you needed to know?
- What content would be (more) helpful for you in your situation?
- Was this a useful way for the information to be presented?
- What format would you prefer?

#### 4. REFLECTION ON EXPERIENCES

So, in all you've told me about [a number of] changes in your life, including [*précis experiences that have been discussed*] and you've explained to me what happened when you were in touch with [council/HB/JC+/Pensions] about this.

How could dealing with those changes have been made easier for you?

- Probe re any difficulties that have emerged
- Probe especially where issues of information sources/provision and simplicity of reporting are highlighted

Can you think of a better way to have dealt with reporting these changes?

Do you think you would deal with reporting any changes differently in future?

- Why (not)
- What would you do differently?

As far as you know, are you expecting anything else to change over the next few months?

*If expecting changes...*

- What types of things might change?
- Do you think this could affect your benefit? How?
- Where did you find out about this?
- Do you think you'll tell anyone about this if/when it happens?
  - o Who? How? When? Why (not)?

When we first met, we talked about what the phrase 'changes in circumstances' might mean. I'd be interested to know if your understanding of this has changed over the last few months.

What do you think they [HB/JC+ etc] mean by 'changes in circumstance'?

- probe thoroughly for perceptions/understanding:
  - which 'circumstances'
  - what is 'change'
  - What is clear about the phrase?
  - What is unclear/confusing about the phrase?

Has participating in this research project affected the way you think about or deal with Housing Benefit /the benefit system in any way?

- Have you learned something you didn't know before?
- Have you tried to get more information?
- Have you talked to anyone (friends/CAB/JC+) as a result?

Prompts: Some people have said they...

... need to understand more

... need to be more careful

... feel more/less confident now

## 5. ANYTHING PARTICIPANT WOULD LIKE TO RAISE

That's just about covered everything I wanted to ask about, thank you. This is the last time we'll talk, so is there anything else that you feel is important about the experience of claiming benefits, that you'd like to tell me about?

## 6. CLOSING

- Thank participant again for their continued involvement throughout the project
- Any questions; anything to add not covered?
- £10 gift will be posted immediately, ask them to **return receipt**
- Explain that we will now be writing our final report for DWP and that when it is published, if they would like, we will send them a summary of our findings. **Check if they expect to change their address** during this time.
- Check participant still happy for taped material to be used.

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