



Department  
for Work &  
Pensions

## POST GRANT APPOINTMENT SERVICE

Helping refugees granted leave to remain transition to mainstream benefits during the 'Move On period'.

Joint Home Office/DWP Evaluation Report

June 2019

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## **Background Information**

Asylum seekers who would be otherwise be destitute are supported by the Home Office under the arrangements set out in section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. The support provided usually consists of accommodation and a cash allowance to cover their other essential living costs, although a sizeable minority receive the cash allowance only because they are accommodated by friends or family.

If a person's asylum claim or appeal is accepted, they are granted refugee status<sup>1</sup> and their section 95 support stops after a "grace period" of 28 days<sup>2</sup>. The grant of refugee status means that they become free to take up employment and are eligible to apply for mainstream benefits provided by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP). They are also eligible to receive housing assistance from their local authority and are treated as a priority need if they have children or are considered vulnerable.

The Home Office and DWP have recognised that some refugees who have an immediate need for assistance have not been able to transition to mainstream benefits within the 28 days grace period and have, over the past few years, been working together to address some of the reasons behind this. Some of the changes that have been implemented are:

- Ensuring that the refugee is provided with their Biometric Residence Permit (the document they need to establish their eligibility to DWP benefits) at the same time that they are given notice that the 28-day grace period has started.
- Ensuring that the refugee is provided with a national insurance number and placing the number on the Biometric Residence Permit.
- Enhanced written material to refugees that provides more information about how they access DWP services and benefits.
- Updated guidance and instructions for DWP staff handling claims from refugees.

These improvements have been useful and welcomed by voluntary sector groups.

However, it became clear that these improvements were of limited assistance if, as appeared to be the case, some refugees did not appreciate the importance of making a prompt application for benefits at the start of the 28 days grace period or were unsure about how to make such an application. A more personal level of service was needed, which did not rely solely on written material, to reduce the risk of some of this group falling into destitution after the expiry of the 28 days period.

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<sup>1</sup> Humanitarian protection or discretionary leave is also granted in some circumstances. People granted these forms of leave are also eligible to DWP benefits and follow the same process described in this paper. For convenience all cases are referred to as "refugees".

<sup>2</sup> The 28 day period is provided for in Regulation 2 of the Asylum Support Regulations 2000.

## **Post Grant Appointment Service (PGAS)**

For the reasons already highlighted, the Post Grant Appointment Service (PGAS) has been in place since early 2017.

A high-level description of the service after a person is granted refugee status and the Biometric Residence is issued is as follows:

- A letter is sent to the refugee to notify them that their Home Office support will stop in 28 days, along with advice about how they can access DWP benefits. The paperwork also advises the refugee that assistance is available if they wish to apply for benefits and provides telephone contact details of the PGAS.
- If a telephone number for the refugee is held, the PGAS calls them to offer the assistance. (The same process is followed if the refugee calls the service by using the telephone number provided on the letter sent to them).
- If, following the telephone call, the refugee makes clear that they do not want assistance or do not intend to claim benefits, no further action is taken.
- If the refugee confirms they would like assistance, the PGAS contacts the jobcentre nearest to where they are being accommodated and makes a new claim appointment for them, which starts the benefits application process.
- The details of the appointment are relayed to the refugee, with a reminder that they need to take their Biometric Residence Permit to the appointment.
- If the refugee cannot be contacted by telephone because no number is held, or because they do not call back following a message in their own language, they are sent a further notice advising them of the PGAS.

### **The numbers accessing the service**

The table below shows the numbers of refugees being assisted by the PGAS. The last column records the number contacted who did not want the assistance. The group generally indicated that they intended to apply for benefits or had already done so.

Quarter	Eligible Refugees	Refugees contacted	% of those eligible contacted	% of those contacted who did not want assistance
2017 Q1	530	277	52%	8%
2017 Q2	452	252	56%	12%
2017 Q3	1074	607	57%	7%
2017 Q4	1152	731	63%	4%
2018 Q1	1197	693	58%	5%
2018 Q2	1407	797	57%	7%

There is some regional variation in the proportion of those eligible who take up the offer of assistance. Over the period between 2017 Q3 to 2018 Q4 the take up rates were:

- London and South-East 68% of those eligible to the service.
- Scotland and NI 67% of those eligible.
- Midlands at 63% of those eligible.
- Wales at 56% of those eligible.
- North East, Yorkshire and Humberside 55% of those eligible.
- North West at 53% of those eligible.

The reasons for the regional differences are varied. Many of the refugees will have been dispersed to the areas after applying for Home Office support. Some of the group may have preferred to seek assistance from friends or relatives in other parts of the country, in particular London, rather than seek benefits in the area where they have been accommodated under the asylum support system. This may account for the higher take up in London and the Scotland and Northern Ireland region, where higher proportions of the refugees have settled of their own volition, rather than as a result of the dispersal system.

## **The DWP Process**

The assessment of benefit eligibility for refugees assisted by the service largely follows normal DWP procedures, which includes tailored support for those claimants with complex needs, who may require additional support to access DWP products and services. This means that the refugees receive assistance in completing the application and other advice and assistance at the appointment arranged for them.

Claims for “Legacy Benefits” (for example Job Seeker’s Allowance and Income Support) are normally processed within 10-13 days. Universal Credit claims are generally awarded one month plus 7 days after the date of application. However, all UC claimants are offered an earlier advance payment, which is repayable, if the claimant wishes to receive one. This advance can be paid on the day of request if necessary.

## **Impact of the PGAS**

To assess the PGAS process data has been collected relating to 100 refugees who accepted the offer of assistance and who were booked a DWP appointment during February 2018. The sample group was otherwise chosen at random.

Of these 100 cases, 14 cases have been excluded from the analysis below because the refugees either did not attend the appointment arranged for them and at the time the data was collected had not made a benefit claim, or because they attended an initial interview and then changed their mind and did not pursue their benefit application.

Of the 86 remaining cases, 20 were processed through the Universal Credit claims process and the other 66 cases through the Legacy Benefit claims process.

The data, which for convenience is set out in the table below, shows:

- 35 of the refugees attended the appointment on the date arranged for them.
- 45 did not attend the appointment on the date arranged but attended later.
- 6 attended earlier than the date arranged for them.
- All 20 of the Universal Credit claimants received their first regular payment on time and 7 of this number accepted and received an earlier advance payment before the expiry of their Home Office support (i.e. within the 28 days grace period).
- Of the 66 Legacy Benefit claimants, 34 received a first payment on time and within the 28 days grace period.
- The date of the first payment for Legacy Benefit claimants who were not paid within the 28-day grace period ranged from 29 days to 80 days.

	Universal Credit		Legacy Benefits	
	Total claimants	Paid within 28 days	Total claimants	Paid within 28 days
Attended later than HO arranged a new claim appointment	10	3	35	16
Attended at the HO arranged a new claim appointment at the arranged time	7	3	28	16
Attended earlier than HO arranged a new claim appointment	3	1	3	2
<b>totals</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>34</b>

### **More detailed analysis**

#### *Universal Credit*

The data shows that all Universal Credit cases were processed correctly according to the proper procedures.

13 out of 20 refugees sampled did not request an advance payment. No firm information is available to explain the reasons for this choice. Universal Credit claims are generally awarded one month plus 7 days after the date of application. Those that did not receive an advance payment received their first full payment shortly after the expiry of the 28 days' grace period.

#### *Legacy Benefits*

Just over half of those in the sample claiming Legacy Benefits (34 out of 66) were paid before their Home Office support ended (i.e. within the 28 days grace period).

The main identified reasons why the remaining 32 cases did not receive a payment within the 28 days' period were:

- In 4 cases the persons did not attend the appointment on the date arranged and only attended after the grace period expired or shortly before it was about to expire.
- In 2 cases, the persons did not bring the correct documentation to their appointment.
- In 12 cases payment was delayed because of the lack of bank account details. (It has not been possible to identify what, if any, other arrangements were

considered to process payments through an alternative method - or if the individuals wanted this option to be considered).

- In 11 cases payment appears to have been delayed where existing DWP processes were not correctly followed. In 8 of these cases this was based on an erroneous assumption that the first payment could not take place until the expiry of the 28 days' grace period. In the 3 other cases the Habitual Residence Test was incorrectly applied.

In the remaining 3 cases, no identifiable reason for the delay in payment could be identified.

## **Overall conclusions**

Generally speaking, the PGAS appears to be effective in contacting about 50-60% of newly recognised refugees, in explaining to the refugees that they are eligible to receive mainstream benefits and in fixing an appointment that enables them to lodge a benefits claim promptly that is capable of being decided and resulting in a payment within the 28 days' grace period. Of the 100 cases sampled, 86 made a benefits application, even if they did not always attend the appointment on the date arranged.

The Home Office is generally unable to contact about 40-50% of the group by telephone, either because they do not answer the call made to them and do not respond to messages to return the call, or because no contact number is available and the refugee does not ring the PGAS following receipt of a contact letter.

It is reasonable to assume that a proportion of the group that are not contacted in this way do not want the assistance, whether this is because they already know how to make a benefits claim or because they do not wish to make a claim at that point in time. However, it is likely that a sizeable portion of the group do wish to make a claim and would benefit from the assistance available to make it.

The Home Office therefore needs to consider other ways of making effective contact. One possibility is that some of the group are suspicious of talking directly with Home Office officials. If that is so, moving responsibility for managing the service to a third sector provider may have some advantages. The Home Office has recently awarded the contract for the advice service for those in the asylum system (the "AIRE" contract) and it will be possible for the provider of that service to assume responsibility for managing the PGAS.

The fact that the PGAS process generally involves contact by phone (with interpreters where necessary), generally means that it is less important than it otherwise would be that the refugees accessing the service fully understand the written material sent to them. However, it remains important that the group that cannot be contacted understand it and both the Home Office and DWP therefore need to keep relevant material under review and make improvements to it where possible. A number of recommendations by the Cabinet Office Behavioural Insights Team about better communication are currently under consideration.

In terms of the speed of processing of benefit applications, the case sampling has shown that there were better outcomes for those being considered for Universal Credit.

All of those considered for Universal Credit received their first regular payment by the due date and those who were eligible for, and wanted, an earlier advance payment received it. These findings are positive as refugees are able to benefit from a variety of customer service process improvements and digital enhancements through the roll-out of Universal Credit to all parts of the UK.

Just over half of those applying for a Legacy Benefit received their first payment by the due date. The analysis showed that payments after the 28 days' grace period

were generally caused when processes were not being followed correctly. New claims for legacy benefits have now ceased from February 2019 and the analysis shows that the streamlined PGAS process within UC has reduced the risk of process failure and improved payment times.

The UC service delivery model has several built-in enhancements for refugee claims. Work Coaches follow a unified process model which is designed into the UC build which enables them to identify refugee cases at an early stage and build all the necessary evidence required to process the claim. UC Work Coaches are based in jobcentres and can easily confirm refugee status through a physical BRP check. UC claimants also have an on-line journal which they can use to notify DWP of changes in their circumstances as soon as they arise; e.g. providing bank account details. Claimants can also give permission to share with their UC account journal with support workers. The opportunity to combine face to face contact with on-line support has helped alleviate some of the communication barriers within legacy benefits which were traditionally more reliant on telephone and written forms of communications. Work Coaches can also use the on-line account to remind claimants of any information needed in order to ensure that their claim is processed smoothly. DWP continues to monitor and enhance its processes.

## **Summary of actions going forward**

- The Home Office to consider how to bring more of the affected group (newly recognised refugees leaving asylum support) into the PGAS scheme - including through moving responsibility for managing the service to a partner organisation. The Home Office has recently awarded the contract for the advice service for those in the asylum system (the “AIRE” contract) and the benefits of the provider of that service to assume responsibility for managing the PGAS are currently being explored.
- The Home Office and DWP to review the paperwork that it provides to its customers with a view to making improvements to the content and clarity of the information it contains. This includes the information provided to those granted status regarding what they should do next. Work is already underway to design a simplified version of the leaflet distributed to newly recognised refugees on DWP services. This should be available by summer 2019.
- DWP to consider ways to ensure that benefit processors are aware that newly recognised refugees leaving asylum support are to be treated as if they are habitually resident in the UK for the purposes of benefit entitlement and that they may receive the first payment of any benefit they are entitled to before the expiry of the 28 days’ grace period. The UC service delivery model has several built-in enhancements for refugee claims. Work Coaches follow a unified process model which has shown to greatly reduce user error. This is evidenced in that nobody in the UC sample received a delayed payment due to DWP processes being incorrectly followed.
- The Home Office and DWP to work together to help newly recognised refugees open bank accounts if they do not already have one and ensure that other methods to make benefit payments are used consistently if the refugees do not yet have a bank account. We are currently working with Lloyds who have communicated a process to their staff using the UC account to open a bank account. DWP Service Design have since engaged with Barclays and are continuing to work with the Banks to progress this work.