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September 2025



ADMINISTRATIVE FAIRNESS LAB

Administrative Fairness in the Digital Welfare State

Report #3: Trade-offs in Bureaucratic Justice in Universal Credit



Executive summary

In our earlier research, we examined the factors that shape people's evaluations of bureaucratic justice in the Universal Credit (UC) service. The five factors in the model are: usability; individualised treatment; dignity; efficiency; and neutrality. However, the way these process qualities apply when considering how to configure a process gives rise to some tensions; the inevitability of trade-offs when striving to design just administrative processes is a well-established idea within the literature.

In the third phase of our study of the processes in the UC service, we took two trade-off tensions that officials in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) often face and, through a survey of 2,093 former or current Universal Credit claimants, sought to understand how UC claimants would resolve these trade-offs. Our intention was to capture quantitative data on questions that would usually be left to official judgment or tested through small-scale user research, thereby bringing a new perspective to this issue. The trade-offs we examined were between (a) consistency and discretion, and (b) speed and accuracy of decision. These results demonstrated that amongst UC claimants, there is a clear-cut preference for discretion over consistency and a slightly less clear-cut preference for accuracy over speed.

These findings, we suggest, have two main implications. First, they demonstrate the value of capturing the claimant's perspective on trade-offs within UC service design. Second, when claimants' perspectives are captured on this issue, they can pose questions about how the UC service is designed; while the DWP takes a 'user-focused' approach to design, its overall approach to trade-offs might be out of step with prevailing claimant sentiment on key issues.



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Introduction

In our earlier research, we examined which factors shaped people's evaluations of bureaucratic justice in the Universal Credit (UC) service (Tomlinson et al 2024). These evaluations of bureaucratic justice comprised a number of judgements, such as trust in, and acceptance of, the UC service. The five factors we tested as determinants of people's feelings of bureaucratic justice in the model are:

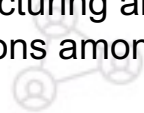
- **Usability.** It is clear to people how to make a claim and update information about their claim.
- **Individualised treatment.** Officials and processes listen to people (including their concerns), have their best interests at heart, and try to accommodate their situation.
- **Dignity.** Officials and processes treat people with respect and kindness.
- **Efficiency.** People can easily contact officials to ask for assistance, and officials respond promptly to engage with their questions and/or concerns.
- **Neutrality.** Rules are applied consistently between people, and everyone is treated the same regardless of background.

However, the way these process qualities could apply when considering how to configure a process gives rise to some tensions. For example, individualised treatment might entail that benefit rules and decisions are applied in a way that is specific to a particular claimant's circumstances. Indeed, some of the survey indicators we used to measure individualised treatment captured this personalised aspect of decision-making ("If my situation didn't fit the rules exactly, I am confident the system has the flexibility to cope"; "If required, I feel the system would give me the benefit of the doubt"). Yet a second process quality, neutrality, might entail that rules are applied in a uniform way across claimants. Again, this feature was partially captured by survey indicators tapping this judgement ("Rules are applied consistently between individuals"). The more that benefit considerations and decisions are personalised to individual claimants' particular needs and circumstances, the higher the likelihood that decisions will vary, and not be consistent, between individuals. Hence the qualities of individualised treatment and neutral decisions might be in tension with one another. The inevitability of such trade-offs when striving to design just administrative processes is a well-established idea within the literature (Mashaw 1983; Teubner 1987; Sunstein, 2006). As Jerry Mashaw (2005) has observed:



Viewed from this perspective, the task of administrative law in structuring and controlling administrative institutions is the task of managing tensions among these competing demands... trade-offs are ubiquitous (14).

In the third phase of our study of the processes in the UC service—the findings of which are set out in this report—we took two key trade-off questions that officials in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) often face and, through the use of a vignette, sought to understand how UC claimants would resolve these trade-offs. Our intention was to capture quantitative data on questions that would usually be left to official judgment or tested through small-scale user research, thus bringing a new perspective to this perennial issue.



Method

To test how claimants evaluated different decision-making processes where values were in tension with one another, we conducted a study explicitly designed to probe trade-offs in benefit decision processes. We commissioned YouGov to conduct an online survey of either former or current UC claimants. The survey was conducted in March 2025 and yielded 2,093 respondents.¹

As part of the survey, we presented participants with two scenarios involving a hypothetical benefits claimant, whom we named Sarah. Sarah's case was described as involving a potential sanction due to a missed work coach appointment. Each participant was then presented with two ways of deciding on Sarah's case. The first involved the imposition of a sanction which was justified on the basis of the consistent application of benefit rules. The second involved the removal of the sanction which was justified on the basis of a discretionary application of benefit rules. The full text provided to survey participants is laid out in Box 1. After each scenario was presented, participants were asked to select which they deemed most acceptable.

Box 1: *Trade-off of 'consistency' v 'discretionary' claims outcome*

Sarah is a Universal Credit claimant who has missed an appointment with her Universal Credit work coach. The standard rule requires that Sarah is sanctioned for missing her appointment, unless she has good reason for missing it. Sarah has contacted her Work Coach to explain her situation. The Work Coach listens to Sarah's explanation of her situation. They then make a decision in one of two ways.

The first way involves the Work Coach imposing the sanction, informing Sarah that there is no discretion over applying the rule. They also explain that, to achieve consistency, the same approach is taken to all claimants who have missed Work Coach appointments.

The second way involves the Work Coach using their discretion and not applying the rule. No sanction is issued to Sarah. This approach is taken even though it means some inconsistency, as other claimants in similar circumstances to Sarah have been sanctioned.

¹ The sample was designed to be representative of the UK adult population, with quotas set on age, gender, social class and education. In addition, the data were then weighted to match the national profile of the UK adult population, using age, gender, social class, region and level of education. The data reported here all incorporate these population weights.

Which one of the two ways of making a decision on Sarah's case do you think is most acceptable?

Alongside the discretionary – consistency trade-off, our survey also explored a second trade-off. This also involved two scenarios presented to survey participants, this time relating to the speed and accuracy of a UC decision. In the first scenario, participants were asked to consider a situation in which information they had submitted relevant to their claim was decided on within 24 hours with a 'moderate' chance of an error being made with their payment. The second scenario involved a decision within a month but with a 'very low' chance of an error with their payment. Again, participants were asked to select which process they deemed most acceptable. The full text provided to survey participants is laid out in Box 2.

Box 2: Trade-off of speed v accuracy of decision

This time, we would like you to imagine that you, yourself, have submitted information in the Universal Credit system about a change to your circumstances that could affect your Universal Credit payment. Now consider two ways in which this new information is dealt with.

In the first way, your change is considered quickly and you are informed about the outcome within 24 hours. Due to the speed of the process, there is a moderate chance of an error being made on your Universal Credit payment.

In the second way, your change is considered slowly and you are informed about the outcome only one month later. Due to the length of the process, there is a very low chance of an error being made on your Universal Credit payment.

Which one of the two ways of dealing with your case do you think is most acceptable?

Findings

We analysed claimants' responses to these two trade-offs by identifying the proportions favouring each option: in the first scenario, either the 'rule consistent' decision or the 'discretionary' decision; in the second scenario, either the 'quick/moderate error risk' process or the 'slower/low error risk' process.

The results are presented in Table 1. We begin with the choice between the consistent application of rules versus the discretionary application of rules. Across our sample, one-third (32%) favoured the imposition of a sanction on Sarah to maintain consistency; over two-thirds (68%) favoured a discretionary approach and no sanction on Sarah. A clear majority thus favours benefit decisions that take into account individual claimant circumstances, even if this means some inconsistency in treatment between claimants.

Broken down by demographic characteristics of our sample, we observed higher rates of support for discretionary over consistent decisions among: older people relative to younger people; people from White ethnic groups relative to people from Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups;² and people whose health problem or disability limits their day-to-day activities a little or a lot relative to people whose health or disability does not limit these activities. There was slightly higher support for discretionary over consistent decisions among people with low educational qualifications (those educated just to GCSE level) than among people with high educational qualifications (those educated to university degree level). There was no difference in support for the two options by gender. There is thus a pattern for claimants manifesting certain features – older people, those with lower educational qualifications and those with impairing health problems or disabilities – to be particularly supportive of a discretionary approach to decision-making. By contrast, individuals from ethnic minority groups are more supportive than white respondents of a consistent approach to benefit decisions (although individuals in this group still predominantly favour discretionary over consistent decision-making).

² Ethnicity was measured using a survey question asking respondents about their ethnic group. The response options included British, Irish, traveller and any other White background (which we label as 'White') and mixed and non-White backgrounds (which we label as BAME).

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Table 1: Benefit process preferences on trade-offs

		Trade-off 1		Trade-off 2	
		A Consistent decision	B Discretionary decision	A Quick/ moderate error	B Slow/ low error
		%	%	%	%
All		32	68	44	56
Gender	Male	32*	68*	47	53
	Female	32*	68*	41	59
Age	16-29	44	56	46*	54*
	30s	37	63	45*	55*
	40s	28	72	43*	57*
	50s	21	79	38*	62*
	60s/70s/80s	20	80	49*	51*
Ethnicity	White	30	70	42	58
	BAME	38	62	51	49
Education	GCSE	28	72	42	58
	A-level	33	67	40	60
	University	35	65	47	53
Disability	Limited a lot	23	77	38	62
	Limited a little	29	71	41	59
	Not limited	38	62	48	52
Sample size		2,093		2,093	

* Indicates that proportions between groups (gender and age) are not statistically significant at the 5% level. All other differences in proportions between groups are statistically significant at the 5% level.

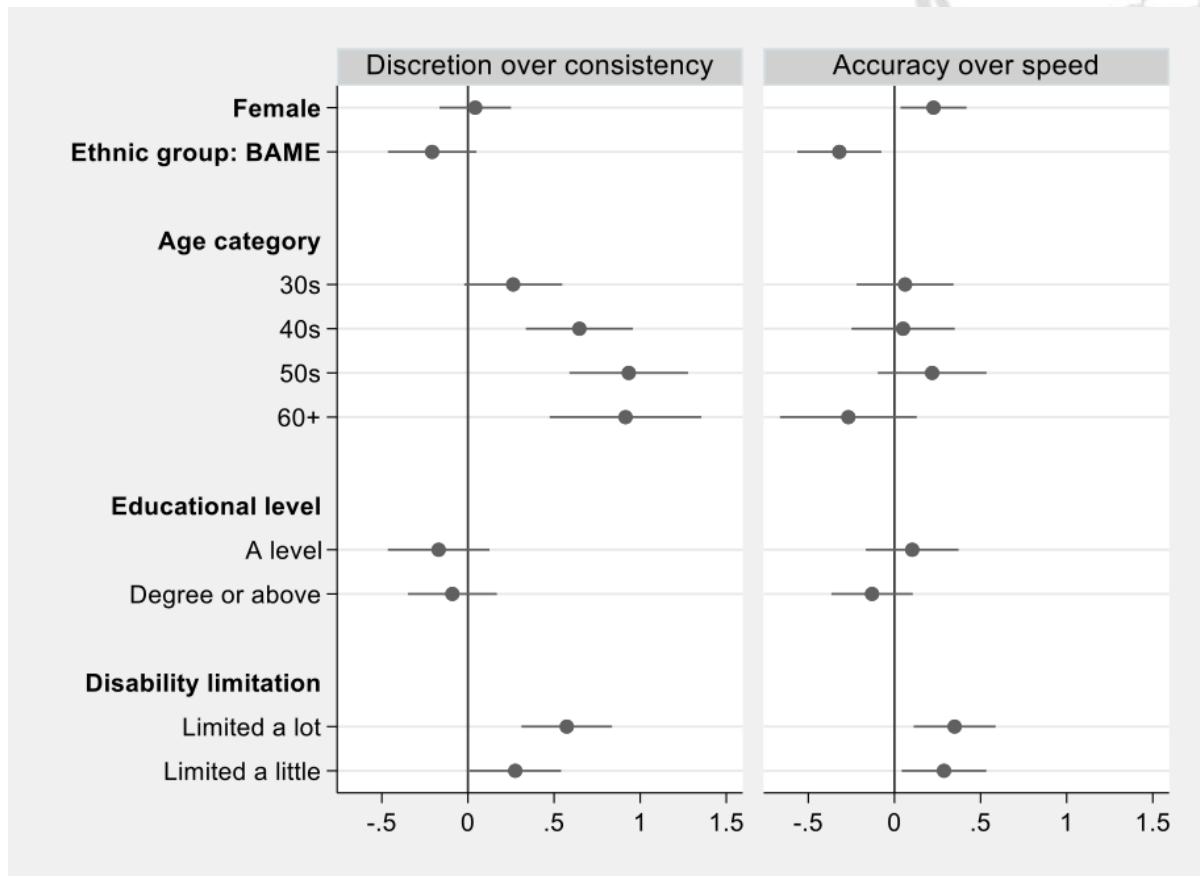
To check that the demographic features of individuals associated with lower or higher support for consistency or discretion remain once account is taken of the other features, we ran a multivariate regression model. This model predicts which demographic features are associated with support for the discretionary outcome over the consistency outcome. Full details of the regression model can be found in the Appendix. A summary of the results is presented in Figure 1.

The left-hand panel of Figure 1 shows the regression coefficients (the dots) and the 95% confidence intervals (the horizontal whiskers around each dot). The coefficients show the strength of the association between each demographic feature a preference for a discretionary decision over a consistent decision, net of the associations of all the other demographic features. The confidence intervals show the range within which we can be 95% confident the true figure sits. Dots to the right of the vertical 0 line mean the demographic feature is associated with greater support for the discretionary decision over the consistent decision; dots to the left of the 0 line indicate the feature is associated with greater support for the consistent decision over the discretionary decision. Where the confidence intervals overlap with the 0 line, the effect is not statistically distinguishable from zero; where the confidence intervals do not overlap with the 0 line, we can be pretty sure that the association of the demographic feature with the outcome is not zero.

The left-hand panel of Figure 1 shows that there are no statistically significant effects on decision preferences for gender (male or female respondents), ethnicity (White v BAME respondents) and education (having different levels of educational qualifications). That is to say, net of all the other demographic factors being considered, none of the variations by gender, ethnicity or education significantly shape people's preferences for a discretionary decision over a consistent decision. There are statistically significant effects for age, with older age groups—particularly respondents in their 40s, 50s and above—being more favourable to the discretionary treatment over the consistent treatment than the younger age group (those aged 16-29 years, who are the reference category and so not shown). Similarly, relative to respondents who report that a disability or health problem does not limit their day-to-day activities (who are the reference category and are therefore not shown), those who report that the problem limits their activities a little or a lot are more supportive of the discretionary decision over the consistent decision.



Figure 1: Demographic correlations with support for different trade-off options



We now turn to the second trade-off. This involved a choice between the rapid processing of a UC decision involving a moderate chance of a mistake and a slower processing of a decision involving a low chance of a mistake. Here, slightly more than one-half (56%) favoured a decision process taking one month but with a low chance of an error in the UC payment being made. Slightly under one-half (44%) favoured a process taking just 24 hours but with a moderate chance of an error being made (see Table 1). There was thus more support for a lengthier decision process involving lower risk of payment error than for a speedier process, although the difference in support for the two options is not substantial. Plenty of survey respondent claimants appear to prefer a speedy resolution of their benefits claim, even if this risks an error in their benefit payments.

If we again break down these levels of support by the demographic characteristics of our sample, we observe higher rates of support for a lengthier decision process among: females than males; people from a White ethnic group than people from a BAME ethnic group; people educated to GCSE and A level relative to people with a university degree level qualification; and people whose health problem or disability limits their day-to-day activities a little or a lot relative to people whose health or disability does not limit these activities (Table 1). There was no major difference in support for the two options by age, although people in their

50s appear more supportive of the lengthier decision process than people in other age groups.

To identify which demographic features remain statistically significantly associated with support for the different trade-off options when account is taken of the other demographic features, we again ran a multivariate regression model. This model showed that people reporting substantial effects of a disability or health problem on their daily lives are more favourable to slower benefit decision processes with lower risks of error than to quicker processes with higher risks of error (see right-hand panel of Figure 1 and Appendix A). We also see significant associations with gender, with female respondents more favourable to slower over faster processes. Similarly, respondents from White ethnic groups are, relative to those from BAME ethnic groups, more supportive of slower, than of faster, benefit processes. There were no variations in preferences for the speed/accuracy trade-off across different age and educational groups.

Conclusion

Overall, we have established that some of the factors associated with people's evaluations of the justice of UC service processes might operate in tension with one another. Thus, the more the system individualises the treatment of particular claimants, the greater the chance of inconsistent application of benefit rules; individualised treatment may thus clash with neutrality or consistency of treatment across claimants. In addition, benefits processes may be speedy, but this speed may come at the expense of the risk of decision errors being made. Our study has shown that benefits claimants tend to prefer benefits processes that allow for individualised treatment, even when this entails inconsistencies between claimants. Individualised treatment was preferred over the strict application of rules by a ratio of 2:1. Preferences for individualised treatment over consistency were particularly pronounced among older people and people suffering a disability or health condition that affects their day-to-day lives. Claimants are more equivocal when it comes to the speed and accuracy of benefits decisions. In the main, people favoured slower and more accurate decisions over swifter but more error-prone decisions. Yet only a little over 50% favoured the former over the latter. This preference for slower but less error-risky processes was particularly favoured by females, people from White ethnic groups, and people suffering from a disability or health problem that significantly affects their day-to-day life. Ultimately, claimants prefer benefits processes that accommodate their individual needs and situations. However, they are less clear about the balance between speed and accuracy of benefits processes. While the overall population of claimants, and in particular certain groups within that population, cleaves slightly to the side of slower and less error-prone processes, there remains a substantial demand for speedy decisions, even if this carries with it the risk of decision errors.

There are, we suggest, two important implications of these findings. First, they demonstrate the importance of capturing the claimant's perspective on trade-offs within UC service design. This has rarely been done, within either academic research or service design practice within the DWP. These calls on trade-offs are usually reserved to official judgment, sometimes supplemented by small-scale user research. We have demonstrated the value, in both academic and policy terms, of trying to develop evidence-based insights on the question of trade-offs. This, of course, does not stop the trade-offs arising, but gives new insights into claimants' sensibilities which can support thinking about how they ought to be resolved. Second, when claimants' perspectives are captured on this issue, they can pose important questions about how the UC service is designed; while the DWP takes a "user-focused" approach to design, its overall approach to trade-offs might be out of step with claimant sentiment on key issues. For instance, there is a credible analysis that the UC service has, on the whole, been emphasising consistency over

discretion in process design, whereas claimant preference clearly goes the other way.

