Amid growing calls from across the political spectrum for a pause in the Universal Credit rollout as evidence of problems continues to mount, the Work and Pensions Committee will take evidence from Secretary of State David Gauke on Wednesday morning.

The DWP has failed to respond to the Committee’s call for written evidence, or any of the four letters requesting statistics and clarifications of policy sent to the Secretary of State over the past six weeks. The Department was asked to respond to the questions by last Thursday, so that the Committee could go into the session with a full understanding of the current picture of the rollout and the protections in place for vulnerable claimants. Despite all this, the DWP has failed to provide any new information to the inquiry.

There are very few statistics in the public domain on Universal Credit. DWP itself has never published data on the length of waits over the statutory, in-built 6 weeks: news of delays of 10, 12 week or longer in receiving payments was heard in evidence to the Committee. In seeking to get an up-to-date impression of the rollout and its effects at local level, the Committee has written to the 54 MPs whose constituents will be subject to Universal Credit full service for the first time in October, asking them to report back information.

103 organisations and individuals managed to send written evidence to the Committee by last Friday’s deadline. A further 52 individuals have contributed to the online forum. That is in addition to the 180 organisations and individuals who contributed written evidence to the inquiry before the election was called.

Rt Hon Frank Field MP, Chair of the Committee, said: “For claimants not to receive money from Universal Credit is usually a disaster. For the Secretary of State not to answer letters shows either a huge discourtesy to Parliament or a sign that the Government knows the game is nearly up in trying to present this mega-reform as a success.

“I don’t know if the DWP is deliberately concealing information about Universal Credit or is simply incompetent. Either way, it is not good enough. This has obvious echoes in the far greater failure of not paying hungry claimants on time.

“One letter simply asked if the conference announcement on advance payments was, despite appearances, simply a restatement of existing policy. You’d think they could at least answer that one. We expect another announcement on Wednesday about helping councils left short by Universal Credit’s failure to account for the cost of emergency temporary accommodation, by “rolling-in” some claimants back onto Housing Benefit. This is overdue, but does nothing to address the fundamental problem of people being left for weeks without anything to live on.

“Given everything we have heard, I was surprised that David Gauke opted to proceed with the accelerated rollout. I strongly suspect his decision, together with the failure to tell us anything, reflects a culture at the DWP of those most invested in Universal Credit not telling anyone, including their Ministers, bad news. The overwhelming picture we are getting is that
Universal Credit as currently configured is very bad news. We have heard nothing, to the contrary or otherwise, from those running it.”

The Committee will be putting some of the many individual cases and scenarios it has heard to the Minister on Wednesday morning. Later in the day in the House of Commons there will be an Opposition Day debate on Universal Credit. /ENDS