



Work and Pensions Committee

House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA
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From the Chair

Peter Schofield
Permanent Secretary
Department for Work and Pensions

21 December 2020

Dear Peter,

The Committee has recently heard reports of people who have received letters from the Department asking them to contact it about debts they owe. Among them were people who had never claimed benefits and therefore feared that they had been victims of fraud. Following this, many of the people affected have struggled to get through to the Department's Debt Management team because of the high volume of calls to the service. This has, quite understandably, caused them a significant amount of worry and, in some cases, distress.

In a written PQ answer of 10 December, the Minister for Welfare Delivery said that Debt Management agents had answered 78% of calls in November 2020, compared to the Department's target of answering 90%.

These figures do not, however, include all calls to the system. The answer also explained that some calls do not "make it into the system": at the height of the recent problems, an average of over 51,000 calls were blocked per day.

I recognise that the Department has taken steps to avoid a recurrence of this problem, which arose because many more notifications than usual were sent by an automated system in November. Nevertheless, the number of blocked calls—in the latest period for which figures are available—is still "less than 6,000". While this represents a welcome decrease from the previous high of 51,000, I am concerned that a significant number of people calling the Debt Management team are still unable to get through.

It would be helpful to have answers to the following questions:

- 1. By when do you expect the Debt Management service to meet its performance targets?**
 - a. Have you considered setting performance targets which include the numbers of calls which are "blocked"?**

feasible to adopt a similar model across other services in the Department?

It would be helpful to have a response by Thursday 14 January.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Stephen Timms". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line above the name.

Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP
Chair, Work and Pensions Committee