

From the Permanent Secretary

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Department
for Work &
Pensions

Rt. Hon Stephen Timms MP
Chair, Work and Pensions Committee
House of Commons
London
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15 January 2021

Dear Stephen

Thank you for your letter of 21 December 2020. Set out below are the Department's responses to the questions you have raised.

1. By when do you expect the Debt Management service to meet its performance targets?

Debt Management aims to meet 90% of calls answered. I can confirm that this performance level is now being met in Debt Management.

a. Have you considered setting performance targets which include the numbers of calls which are "blocked"?

We aim to have no blocked calls. We don't currently measure our performance inclusive of blocked calls, as blocked calls are often repeat calls (with the same customer phoning many times) which would inflate and distort the measure. However, we monitor telephony throughout the day. This allows us to move trained staff to address capacity issues as they emerge.

b. For each month from August 2020 to November 2020, please could you let us know:

- a) how many call attempts were made in total,**
- b) how many call attempts were blocked,**
- c) how many calls were not blocked but were not answered?**

It would also be helpful to have as much information for December 2020 as is available when you answer.

This is not data we normally publish, but I can assure the committee the number of calls blocked this month has dramatically reduced thanks to the actions we have taken.

The temporary spike in the number of calls received was due to the recommencing of debt recovery following a pause due to the outbreak of coronavirus. We have since reviewed our plan to recommence business as usual activity and in the coming months expect to deploy approximately 450 new staff to the network.

c. I welcome the fact that the Department is increasing the number of telephony agents in Debt Management.

Following the recruitment, how many staff in total will the Department have working on answering calls to Debt Management?

As noted, the deployment of staff in Debt Management is dynamic, with trained staff able to move between different aspects of the business. This means that staff can be redeployed from clearing work to answering calls during peak times.

As at the beginning of December 2020, we had 1,037 people able to take calls. An additional 108 people joined Debt Management at the end of November and they are currently in training. A further 312 staff are due to join over the next 3 months and we are making arrangements to bring in additional staff to reach the 450.

2. Some people who have received letters from DWP notifying them of debt said that their letter did not specify what the debt was for. Does the Department routinely inform people of how their debt has arisen when notifying them of it, and if not, why not?

a. The answer to my parliamentary question makes clear that the notifications of debt are sent by an automated system. What steps are taken to check, before the Department acts to recover the debt, that people really do owe the sums they are being required to repay?

The Department advises each customer what the debt is for when the debt is incurred. Debt management letters issued later do not contain this detail. A telephone number is included if the customer does not understand the reason for the debt or cannot afford to pay it.

I am sorry that some customers did not get a satisfactory service when telephoning over suspected fraudulent cases. We now have robust procedures, with every front line member of staff, regardless of their role in DWP, being advised of how to stop further recovery and place the case for investigation if a customer reports a possible fraudulent case.

3. What steps is the Department taking to ensure that written complaints to Debt Management are answered in a timely manner?

The team has been experiencing an increase in complaints and therefore a number of staff from our Bradford Debt Management team have been temporarily deployed to answer complaints.

4. Other than Debt Management, does the Department have other call answering services which are not meeting their performance targets?

For our main service lines there are four lines (Attendance Allowance, Child Maintenance Service, Personal Independence Payment and State Pension) which are currently providing a service level below the expected standards, with steps being taken to improve the service for these lines.

Throughout the response to the Pandemic, DWP has prioritised ensuring people get their benefit payments and that we can continue to support the most vulnerable. To achieve this, we have repeatedly reviewed and in some cases, reallocated, resources across all of our services. In addition, we have opened up a range of alternative digital channels to enable our customers to reach us.

5. What plans do you have, if any, to increase the Department's capacity to answer calls across all of its telephony services?

The Department regularly reviews future demand based on latest insight and forecasts. Resource profiles are then developed to meet customer demand across all channels of contact including telephony, and new on-line services that have evolved through the pandemic. DWP plans in advance to recruit against those resource profiles which is agreed through a regular governance forum in order to protect the customer experience.

6. In a recent PQ response, the Minister for Employment said that the Department has considered the merits of a call-back system, but decided not to adopt one because “it would not support the current operating models of the department”. Could you tell us more about why such a system would not work with the Department’s operating model?

Across DWP services, where possible we try to answer customer enquiries ‘Once and Done’ by providing the right level of training for colleagues so that the vast majority of calls to be handled without the need for a call back and therefore delivering a level of efficiency not realised when a call back model is deployed. In some instances, after speaking to a customer, a call back can be provided for complex cases or for those customers where further information is needed.

The main challenge the Department would face if introducing a call back service without initially speaking to the customer would be in determining who requires the service, for what purpose and who best placed within the Department to conduct the call back to deliver optimum service. This triage of calls and subsequent allocation of work would require a level of resource that would be then removed from telephony enquiry or processing work.

A large proportion of straightforward telephony work – such as initial claim data gathers, sending new claim packs and appointment requests are outsourced to suppliers working for DWP, and introduction of a call back function in these services would not support the most efficient delivery of these services, and would require contractual changes. It also should be noted that not all of these are delivered from a single telephony platform, further adding to the complexity of introducing a call back function

a. The Department introduced a system of “Don’t call us – we’ll call you” in response to the coronavirus pandemic earlier this year. Would it be feasible to adopt a similar model across other services in the Department?

The “Don’t call us – we’ll call you” approach adopted for customers making a new claim to Universal Credit was effective because UC customers would already have registered their claim online, so we were able to track new claims and identify those that needed follow up action to start their new claims. The previous model, to call for an Appointment at the completion of the on-line new claim, was no longer appropriate as Jobcentres were restricting access due to the pandemic and face-to-face services were significantly reduced.

Adopting a similar model in other DWP services would require the same level of functionality – i.e. an on-line service where new claims can be identified. As the vast majority of calls in DWP are not about new claims but enquiries, we would need a new way of anticipating who would need to contact the Department and when.

*Yours sincerely
Peter Schofield*

Peter Schofield
DWP Permanent Secretary



Work and Pensions Committee

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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"?**

- b. For each month from August 2020 to November 2020, please could you let us know: a) how many call attempts were made in total, b) how many call attempts were blocked, and c) how many calls were not blocked but were not answered? It would also be helpful to have as much information for December 2020 as is available when you answer.**
- c. I welcome the fact that the Department is increasing the number of telephony agents in Debt Management. Following the recruitment, how many staff in total will the Department have working on answering calls to Debt Management?**

2. Some people who have received letters from DWP notifying them of debt said that their letter did not specify what the debt was for. Does the Department routinely inform people of how their debt has arisen when notifying them of it, and if not, why not?

a. The answer to my parliamentary question makes clear that the notifications of debt are sent by an automated system. What steps are taken to check, before the Department acts to recover the debt, that people really do owe the sums they are being required to repay?

In a separate answer, the Minister said that, in November 2020, only 49% of complaints to Debt Management were responded to within 15 working days, compared to 88% in October. This is substantially lower than the Department's target of 90%.

3. What steps is the Department taking to ensure that written complaints to Debt Management are answered in a timely manner?

Separately, the Committee has heard that people are struggling to contact the Department about their winter fuel payments, suggesting that capacity issues are not limited to Debt Management.

4. Other than Debt Management, does the Department have other call answering services which are not meeting their performance targets?

5. What plans do you have, if any, to increase the Department's capacity to answer calls across all of its telephony services?

6. In a recent PQ response, the Minister for Employment said that the Department has considered the merits of a call-back system, but decided not to adopt one because "it would not support the current operating models of the department". Could you tell us more about why such a system would not work with the Department's operating model?

a. The Department introduced a system of "Don't call us – we'll call you" in response to the coronavirus pandemic earlier this year. Would it be

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