



Department
for Work &
Pensions

From the Permanent Secretary

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Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP
Chair, Work and Pensions Select Committee

3 April 2020

Dear Stephen

Thank you for your letter of 25 March 2020.

We have seen an exceptional demand for our services as a consequence of the challenging circumstances presented by the coronavirus outbreak. The Department is working round the clock to help people across the country in these extraordinary times to make sure people get the support they need.

Since 16 March 2020, the Department has received over one million claims for Universal Credit, which has been accompanied by a significant increase in call volumes. For comparison, in a normal week we will receive approximately 55,000.

Despite this exceptional and unprecedented demand on the system, Universal Credit continues to respond well, and is more resilient than the legacy systems it replaces. We are continuing with our redeployment of 10,000 staff from other parts of the Department and will be recruiting additional staff to assist with the processing of claims.

To assist with this immediate priority, alongside the other matters the Secretary of State has written to you on previously, we are pausing all the administrative exercises the Department was undertaking, such as the exercise we were carrying out because of the MH and RJ Upper Tribunal decisions in PIP. We will also be postponing work on a number of exercises where these are yet to start.

This will be for an initial period of three months, up until the end of June, but we will keep this under review, depending on developments with coronavirus and the demands on our services. We will restart work as quickly as possible, when the timing is appropriate and I will keep you updated on this.

In your letter you asked for some specific updates and I will address those in turn.

Proportion of people who have applied for Universal Credit and asked for an Advance payment since Monday 16 March have now received a payment; and how claimants are made aware of them given suspension of face-to-face meetings.

As you are aware, New Claim Advances are available to support those in immediate financial need until their first Universal Credit payment is made. As the overall Universal Credit caseload grows, we expect the volume and value of advance payments to increase in correlation. Anyone requiring a New Claim Advance will be made aware of the option during contact with the Department.

We are unable to currently supply a proportion of claims that have received an advance payment as more recently submitted claims are currently being processed. I can confirm that during the following week commencing periods the volumes of New Claim Advance Payments were:

- 16 March 2020 – 41,000
- 23 March 2020 – 72,000

These figures are provisional and are subject to retrospective change as later data becomes available. Typically, around 60 per cent of new claims take an advance payment, and subject to some fluctuation, this rate of take-up has been broadly consistent over the last 12 months.

Average time taken for a person making a new claim for Universal Credit to receive an Advance payment, and the longest waiting times

The Department is committed to delivering advances as soon as possible to people who have requested them. It should be noted that claimants may decide to claim a New Claim Advance later in their first Assessment Period, so this would not reflect the Department's performance or responsiveness to applications.

Current performance figures for answering calls, including average and longest waiting times, and what proportion of calls are cut off without a caller being able to speak to anyone

Call volumes are currently extremely high, particularly during peak hours of 11am and 2pm. In order to protect services across the national telephony network, including critical services such as NHS 111, telephony network providers introduce measures to control the number of calls onto the Universal Credit line. This is dynamically set throughout the day, balancing the enablement of citizens to connect to the line, and protecting the stability of telephony networks and critical services. We are holding twice daily calls with our providers to assess and manage capacity, as well as managing demand by informing claimants that they only need to phone us to book their first appointment and we will contact them if they can't get through.

Between 23 - 27 March inclusive approximately 1.8 million calls were made to the Universal Credit Helpline. On the 30 and 31 March we received 2.2 million and 1.8 million calls respectively.

We have introduced new processes to ease pressure on waiting times for identity verification over the phone. This includes efforts to pro-actively contact new claimants via an outbound call, to conduct initial verification of identity following their online claim to UC, where customers can't get through on the phone.

We are also recruiting and moving more DWP resource to our phone services to alleviate the pressure but this will take some time. Whilst we do this we are working to reassure customers that claims are being processed and that we will contact them if necessary.

Average and longest waiting times for people seeking to register an account online.

There is currently no additional time taken to register Universal Credit accounts online and there has been little variation in this since the start of the pandemic.

We are working to identify and overcome bottlenecks too, however, and we have been pleased to provide extra support for the Cabinet Office's digital 'Verify' identity service to help improve its running. Claimants were experiencing delays in accessing this system but providers have now quadrupled capacity and the current average wait time for registration for GOV.UK Verify (which is a service delivered by Government Digital Service) is now less than five minutes.

Whether you anticipate any delays in new claimants receiving their first Universal Credit payment, which would usually be expected 5 weeks after the start of their claim

Our priority as a Department is ensuring people get their benefit payments and that we can continue to support those who need us the most. We have mobilised our robust business continuity plans to ensure we can do just that. We are already redeploying 10,000 staff from other parts of DWP and are also recruiting additional staff to assist with the processing of claims, including support from other government departments.

Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, we had been consistently achieving around 85% payment timeliness in the first assessment period – a high standard. Recent new claim volumes have been more than 10 times higher than normal - the whole Department is focusing on ensuring that the highest possible standards are achieved.

Whether, in the current circumstances, you have made any separate arrangements for support organisations working with vulnerable claimants to have any form of fast track access to speak to your staff.

To support vulnerable claimants, we have provided a second year of grant funding, worth up to £39mn in 2020/21 to Citizen's Advice and Citizen's Advice Scotland to deliver Help to Claim. This is helpful support at a time when so many people are interacting with the Department's services for the first time and require assistance with navigating and accessing Universal Credit.

Supply of additional MI and commitment to supply new data moving forward

We will be providing a set of supplementary data relating to supply and demand for the most recent weeks, alongside our regular statistical publication on 21 April. We expect that this will include the number of declarations, the number of awards, the number of advances, and information relating to the busiest times of the day for calls and other relevant performance information. We will accompany this with a narrative which considers the cause and effects of each, and will look at providing this on a monthly basis.

Colleagues are currently exploring what additional, more regular data the Department will be in a position to provide, seeking to balance due Parliamentary scrutiny with the need to prioritise the majority of our activity on getting benefits paid. There also needs to be consideration of the UK Statistics Authority's Code of Practice for Statistics. The Department has begun discussions with the Clerks to the Committee, regarding what information might be most useful to provide, perhaps more regularly, and how we can supply accurate, open and transparent information in this current climate.

Once again, I would like to recognise the extraordinary efforts of colleagues throughout the Department in their determination to deliver the very best service for claimants across the country during this challenging time.

Yours sincerely
Peter Schofield

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