



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

9 April 2020

Dear Peter,

Thank you for your letter of 3 April, which provided some information about the Department's handling of Universal Credit claims. I recognise the pressures on the Department, and note that you plan to publish a statistical release on 21 April with further information.

There are, however, some areas of interest which do not appear to be covered by the planned statistical publication and which are of central importance. I would therefore be grateful if you could reflect on whether any additional information could be provided to the Committee on these points.

Advance payments

At such a difficult time, many new claimants will need to receive a payment quickly. In Universal Credit, they can only do that by asking for an Advance. I would be very grateful for any meaningful information you can provide that might help us to understand, even imperfectly, how quickly Advance payments are reaching the people who need them.

Your letter provided the volumes of Advance payments made for new claims in the weeks of 16 and 25 March. It did not, however, tell us how many claims had been made in each of those weeks. On the face of it, the numbers look rather low, especially given that your letter explains elsewhere that about 60% of claimants usually ask for an Advance.

It would therefore be helpful to know:

- What proportion of claimants in each of the weeks since 16 March has asked for an Advance payment? If the Department doesn't hold that information by week, please share any information that you do have.
- What information does the Department hold about how long claimants are waiting, and have been waiting in recent weeks, for an Advance payment? Can this information be shared with the Committee?
- Do you plan to publish any information about the timeliness of Advance payments in your forthcoming statistical release?

Telephone waiting times

I read with interest the announcement today that people making new claims for Universal Credit will no longer need to call the Department as part of the process.

Might you please let us know:

- When is a person's Universal Credit claim deemed to start – when they make the online application, or when they receive a phone call?
- How long is the average wait for a call back? What information do you plan to make public about this on an ongoing basis?

You will appreciate that members of the Committee will want to raise these issues with Ministers when we take evidence from them on 23 April. I would therefore be grateful for a prompt response to this letter.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Stephen Timms". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP

Chair, Work and Pensions Committee