



Department
for Work &
Pensions

From the Permanent Secretary

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

21 April 2020

Dear Stephen

I am writing in response to your letter of 9 April, received by the Department on 14 April, following the oral evidence I gave on our response to Covid 19 outbreak on 25 March 2020.

Since 16 March we have received around 1.8 million new benefit claims, including an unprecedented 1.5 million claims for Universal Credit.

The UC system has risen to the challenge despite a significant increase in claims. The claims received during w/c 16 March – the week the Government announced its restrictions – will be paid this week, and the Department is forecast to pay at least 93% of those on time. For the small proportion of claims from this period that have not yet been paid, DWP staff have reviewed and many of the steps required to progress will be awaiting action from the claimant before they can be paid. Typical examples of required action will include provision of correct bank account details.

The Department is today publishing additional data on declarations and advances alongside the regular official statistics. This data is available at:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/universal-credit-statistics>

Your letter raised a series of specific questions and I will address those in turn.

Advance payments

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.

Do you plan to publish any information about the timeliness of Advance payments in your forthcoming statistical release?

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?

In the four-week period to the 12 April 2020, we have paid 513,000 advances to Universal Credit claimants.

You note in your letter that the number of New Claim Advance Payments appears to be low. It is important to note the difficulties in making a comparison between these volumes and a typical 60% take up. It is very likely that the composition of the new caseload will look different to our established claimant caseload. For example, there may be a higher proportion of new claimants who have only recently left work and who do not need a new claims advance. And Changes of Circumstances from existing claimants of DWP benefits will form a lower proportion of the new claims intake and we know these naturally migrating cases usually take out an advance.

Until we have a better understanding of who is claiming and why, it is simply too early to say what the different needs and behavioural patterns of our new, larger claimant group might be.

Telephone waiting times and increasing our capacity

As you acknowledge, on 9 April we streamlined the process for people making new claims to Universal Credit, so claimants no longer need to call the Department as part of the process. The 'Don't Call Us, We'll call you' campaign is designed to take away some of the worry and frustration new claimants may have felt a time when we are receiving an unprecedented number of claims.

We are starting to see a large fall in inbound call volumes as a consequence of the action we have taken. This is ensuring that we can support those claimants who do need to talk to us whilst continuing to provide an efficient service for those who don't.

When is a person's Universal Credit claim deemed to start – when they make the online application, or when they receive a phone call?

The effective date of claim/date of entitlement will be the date a completed claim arrives with the Department. For Universal Credit, this will most commonly be when a completed online application and declaration has been submitted via the GOV.UK website. This date is not reliant on a claimant's identity being verified online or linked to the date of any further contact.

How long is the average wait for a call back? What information do you plan to make public about this on an ongoing basis?

The Department does not have an average wait time for a call back. But we are clearing call-backs for claims within 24 hours thanks to the work that we have done to increase capacity and prioritise the processing of claims.

It is important to note that not all claimants will need a call back in order to progress their Universal Credit claim. The Department will only call the claimant if we need to check or gather further information. If we do not need to discuss the claim with a claimant, we will make them aware of this via their online journal.

As you will be aware, we have been encouraging people to register their benefit claim online where possible. We have addressed system bottlenecks ensuring the registration process is as simple as possible. This includes providing 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 Verify is now less than five minutes.

I hope you and the Committee find the above useful ahead of the oral evidence session on 23 April 2020.

*Your sincerely
Peter Schofield*

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