The Rt Hon Frank Field MP  
Chair, Work and Pensions Committee  
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3 February 2018

Dear Frank,

I am writing to thank you for the opportunity to give evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee on Wednesday, 24 January on the Universal Credit (UC) Scottish choices, sometimes referred to as “The Scottish Flexibilities”; and our proposed assessment model for Personal Independence Payments (PIP) once the benefit is devolved to Scotland. I hope the Committee found my input a useful contribution to its UC roll out and PIP/ESA Assessment inquiries.

For my part, I was particularly pleased to note that the Committee’s interest in how we will measure and evaluate the use and impact of the UC Scottish choices. As I mentioned during my evidence session, we have agreed, as part of our Working Level Agreement (WLA) with the Department for Work and Pensions, that it will provide us with key statistics on a monthly basis. This includes information on the total number of people who are offered the UC Scottish choices and the total numbers who took it up; as well as a breakdown on the number of households who choose only one or both of the choices.

As you know the take-up rate of the UC Scottish choices has been high with over 2,500 people choosing one or both of the choices between 11 November and 31 December 2017. The Committee may be interested in the more detailed statistics that we have now published on the Scottish Government website at:


It is our intention to publish official statistics on the Scottish Government website after receiving six months of data, and thereafter on a quarterly basis.

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www.scotland.gov.uk
We are also currently discussing with the DWP what further information they can supply to us and, in that regard, I welcome the offer made by the Committee to write to the DWP to support our request. I thought it might be helpful to the Committee to set out the additional data we would require in order to fully evaluate the success of the UC Scottish choices. This would include:

- a longitudinal dataset tracking households use, and the impact, of the UC Scottish choices over a period of time, including household characteristics. The dataset would allow tracking of incidence of rent arrears, household income levels and employment status for households who do and do not take up UC Scottish choices;
- the number of households who chose not to implement a choice, with a breakdown by choice;
- the number of households who take up a choice broken down by private sector and social sector landlord;
- the time taken between the claimant requesting a choice (or choices) and the implementation of the choice(s);
- the number of claimants who subsequently request a choice (or choices) following a change of circumstances which resulted in the removal of a previous choice; and
- a breakdown of all management information by local authority area.

During the evidence session, I also mentioned our Social Security Experience Panels where over 2,400 people with direct experience of benefits have signed up to help us design our new social security system. My officials are currently exploring how we utilise the Experience Panels and other user research to seek the views of people on UC Scottish choices. Once this research is designed, I am more than happy to extend the invitation to you and a couple of members of the Committee to discuss this work, if you would find that helpful. We are also considering how we can make use of the data and intelligence gathered from the third sector, such as Citizens Advice Bureaux, on how the UC Scottish choices are being used.

In the meantime, I am enclosing the first piece of research that we carried out with our panels called “Your Benefits and You”. Overall, it found that 3 out of 5 rated their experience of the current benefits system, operated by the UK Government, as ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’. Of the respondents with experience of UC, 68% rated their experience as ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’.

Finally, we have updated our leaflets for people applying for, or in receipt of UC, to help them make an informed choice. The leaflet provides detailed ‘Question and Answers’ on what the UC Scottish choices are; how a person can get the UC Scottish choices; and how the UC Scottish choices will work in practice, including matters that a person may wish to consider when deciding whether to take up one or both choices.

We have also produced a leaflet for local authorities, the third sector and landlords, as well as others, including MPs/MSPs, who may be advising people in receipt of benefits, which can be used directly with clients, or as a training tool for staff.
I am enclosing copies of both leaflets for the Committee's information.

Kind regards

[Signature]

JEANE FREEMAN