Dear Frank,

Thank you for your letter dated 30 January 2018. You have raised some important questions about Universal Credit and contribution based Employment Support Allowance (ESAc). As you know, Universal Credit is replacing income based ESA and we are developing processes to allow UC and ESAc to operate alongside each other. Because of the fundamentally different qualifying conditions between contributory benefits and Universal Credit there isn’t an easy fit between them so they are administered by different teams - that much has not changed since 1948. As a result we are looking at ways to support claimants through these different processes. I will answer each of your specific questions in turn below.

How is information about claiming ESAc under UC signposted to claimants?
As we develop UC and ESA(c) and understand better how the two benefits interact with each other, we update the information available on gov.uk. On 5 February 2018 we published the most recent update to the gov.uk ESA guide. Our jobcentre staff signpost claimants to this guidance and there’s also a link from the UC homepage. We know this is a complex area and we’re developing an interactive tool to further help claimants identify whether ESAc, JSAc and/or UC is the most appropriate benefit for them.
Does the UC phoneline automated service offer a specific option for ESAc related queries? If not, why not?
The primary way to access Universal Credit is online. This is best way for us to help claimants with their queries. If a claimant decides not to use this option and calls the UC helpline, they have a number of options. Based on their choice, the call goes through to a UC case manager who can best help them. We are testing better ways that claimants can use the helpline if they've got queries about new style benefits such as ESAc although we continue to promote the online system.

How are the staff operating the UC phoneline trained to understand and explain contribution based ESA to claimants?
UC helpline staff receive training as part of their UC implementation learning. This is a half-day trainer-led session, which is face to face. We are developing additional products to support staff when giving advice on ESA(c). For example, we are currently working on an ESA(c) 'Bitesize Learning' product, covering the main issues staff raise. We are also improving the 'Agent Led Process', which sets out the guidance on ESA(c) and the process to facilitate a claim. We remind staff on a regular basis, to ensure they are aware of the correct process.

Is there an option for claimants applying for ESAc to receive their forms by post?
Email is our preferred option. If someone doesn’t have an email address, we can use alternative methods, including by post.

Is there a provision for the claimant to return the form without an appointment?
Once the claimant has completed the ESA(c) claim form, they should call the UC helpline and book an appointment. If there are exceptional circumstances, they are unable to attend an appointment, for example, they are in hospital, we can consider whether an appointee is appropriate, or arrange a visit.

I hope you find this information useful. If you feel I can be of any further assistance, please do not hesitate in contacting me.

Sarah Newton MP
Minister for Disabled People, Health & Work