



Work and Pensions Committee

House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA
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From the Chair

8 November 2018

Sarah Newton MP
Minister for Disabled People
Department for Work and Pensions
Caxton House
London
SW1H 9DA

Dear Sarah,

Employment support for carers

Thank you for your letter dated 31 October, which sought to clarify some outstanding questions following the Government's response to the Committee's report on employment support for carers. A few issues continue to trouble me and I would be grateful for your thoughts.

1. You explained that a significant barrier to introducing a taper for Carer's Allowance is the "fundamental change" required to current IT systems and operational processes, "which are all geared around a cut-off". It strikes me that this will inevitably be a challenge when introducing any change and, if such issues were never tackled, nothing would ever change. Could you therefore please confirm whether:
 - a. the Department has costed the changes required; and
 - b. if it weren't for the practical challenges, you would consider introducing a taper for Carer's Allowance?
2. The Gov.uk website still does not include all the deductions carers can make from their earnings before the threshold applies. You explained that such changes are made on the basis of "extensive user research from anonymous user feedback" and "no issues have been identified with this section as it stands". But is this not because people do not know what should be listed in the first place, so do not, indeed cannot, take issue with omissions? I would also be grateful to know what research has been conducted regarding awareness of the expenses carers can deduct from their earnings before the threshold applies.
3. Someone claiming just Carer's Allowance is not entitled to an appointment with a work coach to consider their options for staying in or entering employment. Our report recommended that these people should be eligible for an appointment if they want one. The Government's response explained:

It is already good practice in Jobcentres for carers that wish to seek advice around the support available to remain in or re-enter the labour market are able to have a conversation with a member of staff who will be able to direct them to sources of support and be quickly signposted to any available guidance.

In my letter of 26 July, I asked whether "good practice" meant carers were proactively informed of their ability to ask for advice about employment. You explained that this was not possible because "a JCP member of staff would not necessarily be aware whether the claimant was a carer". This is surprising, as surely their status of a carer

is known through their Carer's Allowance claim. Would it not therefore be possible simply to inform any claimant of Carer's Allowance that they can access employment advice from JCP staff should they want it?

4. Several of our inquiries have highlighted work coaches' ever-growing responsibilities, particularly in terms of the need to identify and respond to the many complex circumstances that claimants might be faced with. The Department frequently points to the training modules on offer to reassure the Committee that work coaches are equipped to deal successfully with such situations. It is therefore worrying that the Department does "not routinely collect the data on specific training undertaken by our staff". In light of this, could you please confirm:
 - a. how the Department can be confident work coaches have the skills and capabilities to work with claimants if it does not know how many work coaches have completed necessary training, particularly those relating to vulnerable claimants; and
 - b. whether the Department would start to collect data on work coach training to identify where uptake is low, and therefore gaps in work coach capacity might exist?

Best wishes and I look forward to hearing from you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Frank Field', written in a cursive style.

Rt Hon Frank Field MP
Chair, Work and Pensions Committee