From the Chair

Peter Schofield
Permanent Secretary, Department for Work and Pensions
Caxton House
Tothill Street
London
SW1H 9NA

Dear Peter

Overpayments of Carer’s Allowance

On behalf of the Committee, thank you for coming to give evidence on 15 May on overpayments of Carer’s Allowance. I would also be grateful if you could pass on our thanks to Emma Haddad and Laura Squire for their evidence.

You offered during the session to send us further information. We also have some additional questions arising from your evidence. For completeness, this letter brings together all of our requests for information.

Debt recovery

In response to questions from Steve McCabe, you and your team undertook to provide data about the proportion of debt handled by debt recovery agencies and by other methods.¹

1. What proportion of debt is dealt with by debt recovery agencies, what proportion is dealt with by attachments to earnings, and what proportion is dealt with by other methods?

Understanding the impact on carers

The NAO reported that “the Department does not know how these repayments affect carers or the disabled person they care for”. You told us in evidence that “We last

¹ Q 112
seemed to do some work on this in 2014, but in the light of this report I have asked our analyst to prepare a research plan to enable us to get into this”.

2. Might you please let us have details of this work when they are available, including what the scope will be and when the final results will be available?

**Improved communications with carers**

You mentioned the work that the Department is doing to improve the quality of its communications with carers. Emma Haddad referred to a trial of using text messages to communicate with carers.

3. Please could you send us full details of your work in this area, including planned timescales for implementing improvements?

**Level of service offered to carers**

The NAO’s report revealed for the first time the substantial backlogs in Carer’s Allowance, which peaked at 52,000 unprocessed new claims in September 2017 and 104,000 unprocessed changes in circumstances in November 2018. This is, of course, in addition to the delays in identifying overpayments.

Emma Haddad told us that performance on answering telephone calls had been “very acceptable” in “recent weeks and months”. She undertook to send us more detailed information. We also asked about staffing levels, and she said that she would send us further information.

4. Please could you send us all of the management information you have about telephony performance on Carer’s Allowance since October 2018, by week and by month?

5. What has been the average processing time for new claims in each month since October 2018, and what has been the longest time taken to process a new claim in each of those months?
   a. What is the current number of outstanding new claims?
   b. Please could you provide us with 6-monthly updates on average processing times for new claims by month, and on the numbers of outstanding claims?

6. What has been the average processing time for changes of circumstance in each month since October 2018, and what has been the longest time taken to process a change of circumstance in each of those months?
   a. What is the current number of outstanding changes?
   b. Please could you provide us with 6-monthly updates on average processing times for changes of circumstance by month, and on the numbers of outstanding changes of circumstance?
7. What would you consider an a) acceptable and b) good level of service for answering calls, processing new claims and processing changes of circumstance? Do you set any targets for performance?

8. How many staff have been working in the Carer’s Allowance Unit in each of the months since October 2018, and what do you expect the numbers to be over the next six months? It would be helpful in each case to know how many staff are permanent and how many are on fixed term contracts.

**Late payments**

Where payments to carers have been suspended while a change of circumstance is investigated, the NAO found that it was in some cases taking a long time for carers to be paid arrears. It found that the Department does not measure how many people it has to pay such arrears to, and they are not included in your measures of underpayments. You undertook to give us data about how many people the department pays late, and by how much.

9. Might you please let us have this information?

With best wishes and I look forward to hearing from you,

Rt Hon Frank Field MP
Chair