I am writing to you as the owner of Benefit Advice Centre, which operates in my own constituency of Birkenhead.

You might be aware that the Work and Pensions Committee has, over the last four years, highlighted major concerns about application and assessment processes for several benefits. Claimants—especially those who are not used to interacting with Government—often find these processes very confusing and distressing, at a time when they may already be vulnerable due to the impact of an illness or disability.

I became aware of your organisation when I learned that you were distributing leaflets on local buses, targeting Attendance Allowance (AA) applicants. As you know, AA is only available to disabled people over the State Pension age. Local welfare rights groups have told me that these are some of the most vulnerable people that DWP supports. They often have low levels of understanding of and confidence in interacting with the system. I am very concerned that your business presents a risk of exploitation to this and other vulnerable groups.

In this context, I would be very grateful if you would please supply some further information about your business and your business model.

1. Might you please supply copies of any standard contracts that claimants are required to sign on accepting your services?
   a. Might you also please supply a list of prices, including for Tribunal work carried out under a no win, no fee agreement?
2. Might you please outline how you ensure that your clients’ personal data is kept safe?
   a. Do you ever sell client data to third parties?
   b. If so, what proportion of your turnover is from data sales, and what proportion is from benefit advice and support?
3. What qualifications or training are your staff expected to have in advising people on benefit applications?
   a. What proportion of current staff hold those qualifications?
   b. How do you ensure that your staff keep their knowledge up to date?
4. Might you please set out how you go about ensuring the safety and wellbeing of people who come to you for advice? For example:
   a. Do your staff check whether the claimant has previously tried to access—or is aware of—free services, such as local Citizens Advice Bureaux or other welfare services?
   b. Is any attempt made to check that claimants can afford your advice? If so, please would you outline the process?
I also have some specific concerns about the downloadable pdfs on specific conditions and benefits. These advise that claimants simply select the file relating to their main health condition and benefit applied for, and "use this to enable you to complete the form correctly". The forms contain model answers, but no further help or guidance on how to fill in the form. The detailed, pre-populated answers outline the specific impact of each condition on an individual.

5. How do you intend for claimants to use these forms?
6. How do you ensure that claimants are using them as intended? For example, how do you check that claimants are not simply sending the forms off containing your model answers?

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

Rt Hon Frank Field MP
Chair, Work and Pensions Committee