Will Quince MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Family Support, Housing and Child Maintenance
Department for Work and Pensions

27 June 2019

Dear Will,

Thank you for coming to give evidence to us on Universal Credit and Survival sex on
Wednesday 12 June, and for the Department’s resubmitted evidence memorandum in
advance of that session. You also wrote to us with some follow up information on 27 June.

During the session there were a number of other issues discussed that we agreed to follow
up via correspondence. I would be very grateful if you would provide the following information.

Prison leavers

We discussed the support that the Department makes available to prison leavers.¹ You
explained that:

_We have a pilot just concluded around computers in prisons. We already have 135 in-
prison work coaches that are working with men and women to better equip them with
leaving prison and going into the world of work and contact with the Jobcentre._

1. Might you please provide some more detail on this pilot: where did it take place, who were
the participants, and what were the key findings?
   a. How does the Department plan to take these findings forward?

2. You told us that prison leavers cannot apply for Universal Credit until they have left prison.
Might you please explain why this is not possible?²
   a. Are there any plans to allow prisoners who are approaching release to apply for
      benefits from within prison?
   b. What additional support does the Department offer to prisoners prior to release to
      help them claim benefits on release? For example, is the “Help to Claim” service
      offered to them?
   c. Does the Department plan to offer prison leavers any support—other than
      repayable Advances—during the five week wait for their first Universal Credit
      payment?

“Digital by default”

You told us that Universal Credit “is a digital-by-default system, so it is an online system”.
However, you said that “telephony is available, face to face in the Jobcentre is available, home
visits are also available in exceptional circumstances.”³

3. For each of telephony, face-to-face in Jobcentres and home visits, for UC applications,
might you please tell us:

¹ Q102-104
² Q171
³ Q176
4. We heard that, after the initial claim is set up, many claimants experience ongoing difficulties using the Universal Credit online journal. Might you please clarify in what circumstances it is possible for claimants to have the entirety of their claim managed by telephone or face-to-face (including home visits)?

   a) If so, what criteria is used to decide whether claimants can access this provision?
   b) In each of the years in Q3a, how many requests were made for non-digital claim management, and how many were accepted?

Identity and bank accounts

We were concerned to hear reports in evidence of women nominating a “friend” or “boyfriend’s” account for Universal Credit to be paid into, only for that person to then steal their entire Universal Credit payment. There have also been media reports of people claiming Universal Credit on behalf of others, and then stealing their payments.

5. How many Universal Credit awards are currently being paid into bank accounts that do not belong to Universal Credit claimants?

6. We asked whether the Department does any checks at all on the identities of non-claimants who are nominated to receive Universal Credit payments. Neil Couling asked in response: “what would you like me to check there—that that person exists?”

   a) What training do Work Coaches receive on identifying whether someone in this situation is a victim of either coercive control or fraud in this particular circumstance?
   b) Are claimants required to provide any identification at all for the person they would like their Universal Credit to go to? If so, what does the Department do with this information?

7. Claimants who do not have their own bank account can ask that payment be made to them via the Payment Exception Service (PES). Might you please tell us:

   a) How many requests the Department received in 2016/17, 2017/18, 2018/19 and 2019/20 to date for Universal Credit to be paid via PES;
   b) How many of those were accepted;
   c) A summary of the reasons why requests were rejected.

8. Might you please outline the process that Work Coaches are advised to follow when a claimant tells them that they do not have their own bank account? For example, are they advised to recommend the PES or a Post Office Account at this stage, or to ask claimants whether there is another account that UC can be paid into?

---

4 See, for example, written evidence from Changing Lives
5 https://www.fl.com/content/6e8fbc6a-7f9e-11e9-b592-5fe435b57a3b
6 Q188-195
Work Coaches

The Department has told us previously that the relationship between Work Coaches and claimants is central to the success of Universal Credit. Claimants should have the same Work Coach throughout their claim, as far as possible, to allow them to build rapport and for the Work Coach to gain a good understanding of the claimant’s circumstances. We heard, however, that this was not always happening.

Neil Couling told us that:

We have gone through and we will itemise for you the reasons why people are not seeing the same work coach. We have had a good look at that because you asked us to. I am just sorry we have not come back to you with those findings.7

You sent us the findings on 27 June.

9. Your letter of 27 June set out the findings but did not provide any sense of how frequently this is happening, or how common the reasons cited were. Might you please provide this information?

10. What assessment has the Department made of the effect of not consistently seeing the same Work Coach on Universal Credit’s effectiveness at helping people into work?

I would be very grateful if you would please respond by Wednesday 24 July, so that we can progress with our inquiry over the summer.

Best wishes and I look forward to hearing from you.

Rt Hon Frank Field MP
Chair, Work and Pensions Committee