Universal Credit

As you will be aware, the Committee took evidence on the rollout of Universal Credit (UC) on 13 September.

We wanted to understand whether the planned pace of the UC full service rollout from October is appropriate. We were struck by the strength of evidence we heard, which mirrored what we have received in writing and since published on our website. Our witnesses—housing associations, councils, charities that support claimants, and representatives of private landlords—supported in principle the objectives of UC. But, without exception, they told us the rollout should be slowed or halted until such time as its problems are resolved.

We look forward to taking evidence from you on UC on 18 October, and to receiving written answers to the questions in my letter of 12 September. Given the unanimity of concerns that we heard in evidence, the Committee agreed I should write to you requesting clarification on a number of further issues raised in the session:

Project board “traffic lights”
Jeremy Hewer of the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations told us that there is a UC “project board...That has a series of criteria. I think they are all given traffic lights of green, amber or red. Presumably, if one or two are red that is a sign that it should not go ahead.”

1 Q51
1. Can you confirm whether this is the case? If so, I would be grateful if you could please supply:
   a. the project board criteria for the full service rollout;
   b. confirmation of what colour the “traffic light” currently is for each criterion;
   c. a note on how decisions on whether the rollout should proceed relate to the “traffic light” criteria.

Waits for payment
We heard that claimants continue to experience long waits for payment. We also heard that claimants can be left waiting for their housing costs, even after the initial living cost payment has been made; including one case in Newcastle where the claimant has been waiting for the housing element since April 2017.

2. For each month since May 2016, in what (a) proportion and (b) number of full service claims was the housing element paid after the living cost element?
3. We would be grateful for any statistics you have which demonstrate the distribution of lengths of such additional waits for the housing element.

Advance payments
Kayley Hignell of Citizens Advice told us “The advance payment is available to anybody who comes from legacy benefits and also to those who are facing hardship. We are seeing people not knowing about it in the first instance.”

4. How does the Department define “hardship” in determining eligibility for an advance payment?
5. We would be grateful for copies of any guidance, training material or other documentation issued to Work Coaches, relating to a) publicising and b) determining claimant eligibility for advance payments at the initial claim appointment.

Landlord Portal
Although we were encouraged to hear that the Landlord Portal had been helpful in some respects, we heard it is currently a “minimum viable product”. Councillor Fiona Colley, of Southwark Council, told us the portal is “quite new and in development, but what is on it is quite limited” and would need “much more functionality” if it was to resolve some of the key difficulties around communication.

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2 Q46 (Donna Gallagher). See also: Q46 (Nicky Kingston), Q44 (Fiona Colley),
3 Q55. See also Q58 (Natalie Williamson and Jeremy Hewer)
4 Q16 and Q21 (Cllr Fiona Colley and Donna Gallagher)
5 Q50 (Jeremy Hewer)
6 Q18 (Fiona Colley)
6. How is the Department working with landlords to evaluate the Landlord Portal, and to identify any additional features necessary?

7. What additional features are planned, and what is the timescale for rolling these out?

**Private sector landlords**

We were concerned to hear about a lack of support from DWP for private sector landlords who have UC claimants as tenants—a substantial change from the locally administered Housing Benefit system. We understand that private sector landlords will not receive access to the Landlord Portal.

8. What a) number and b) proportion of UC full service claimants receiving the housing element are in i) council accommodation, ii) housing association accommodation and iii) the private rented sector?

9. What resources are available to support private sector landlords with UC full service claimants as tenants? Are there any plans to invest in either expanding this support, or making new means of support available?

I would be very grateful if you could please respond by Thursday 12 October.

Best wishes,

Rt Hon Frank Field MP
Chair

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7 Q62 (Natalie Williamson)