Several of our recent reports on Universal Credit have highlighted weaknesses in the support that the Department provides to help claimants apply for its benefits.¹ For example, although we welcomed the Department’s decision, in Summer 2019, to award the Universal Credit Help to Claim service contract to Citizens Advice and Citizens Advice Scotland, we remain concerned that this service is not offering the extent of support that people need.² Reputable support organisations have told us that they are overstretched and unable to help all of the claimants who could benefit from their help. This is particularly worrying because, as our recent report on Natural migration, claimants who move to Universal Credit prematurely can lose their transitional protection, and face a drop in income. Good advice is important in stopping this from happening.

“For profit” advice services and regulation

In this context, I was concerned to learn that there are organisations operating in my own constituency that are charging for advice: either through pre-populated benefit application forms (described as “self help guides”) or for representation and support at Appeal. There is little information available publicly about Benefit Advice Centre, the organisation concerned.³ The information on their website suggests they can support applications for Universal Credit/ESA, Attendance Allowance and PIP, and they appear to have been targeting claimants of disability benefits by leaving leaflets on local buses.⁴ Those claimants include some of the most vulnerable people in DWP’s caseload, and I am worried about the risk of financial exploitation—or simply paying for poor quality advice.

 Might I please ask:

1. What regulations apply to the provision of third-party (ie. non-Department) advice and support on working-age benefits?
   a. In your view, is there a role for for-profit organisations in providing benefits advice and support?

2. Is the Department aware of this, or similar organisations, that charge claimants for advice and support on their benefit applications?

¹ See, for example, Work and Pensions Committee: Universal Support; Natural migration: “Survival sex”.
² Work and Pensions Committee, Universal Support
³ See attachments.
⁴ See attachments.
a. Do you have any idea of the number of organisations across the UK that operate in this way?

3. What assessment has been made of the adequacy of the Help to Claim contract to date?

4. Might you please set what the Department is doing to ensure that claimants are able to access free, reputable advice on benefit applications and appeals?
   a. Does the Department fund any support to help claimants with PIP, ESA and Attendance Allowance specifically? Do you plan to?
   b. Has the Department made any assessment of the extent of unmet need for this kind of support?

5. The downloadable forms offered by this company offer “sample” pre-populated answers relating to different conditions. Were a claimant to submit one of these forms as is (ie. without modifying the “suggested” answers), would this be viewed as fraud?
   a. If so, is this currently part of your risk register and what penalties would apply to claimants?

**Universal Credit in the media**

I have similar concerns about some recent media reports on Universal Credit. I am aware that the Department is keen to convey to claimants what it views as the “facts” about Universal Credit, to counter negative portrayals (which it calls “myths”). In recent weeks, several national and local newspapers have published articles extolling the upsides of Universal Credit, including possible higher payments for claimants.

Might you please tell us:

6. Are these articles, and other similar ones, part of DWP’s communications strategy for Universal Credit?
7. How does the Department monitor media coverage of Universal Credit?
8. What does the Department do to try to ensure that information on Universal Credit provided in articles such as these is full and accurate?

I would be very grateful to receive your response as soon as possible.

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

Rt Hon Frank Field MP
Chair, Work and Pensions Committee

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5 See attachments.