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Rt Hon Frank Field MP

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Universal Credit (UC) for victims of domestic abuse

Your letter to the Minister for Employment, Alok Sharma, dated 15th March 2018 has been passed to me to provide a response in my capacity as the Minister for Family Support, Housing and Child Maintenance. Before I respond to the questions you have raised regarding split payments, I feel it necessary to first cover a couple of general points for clarity.

You raise within your letter the issue of a single payment to the household and how this can be withheld by the 'paid partner' to exert control and prevent an abused partner from leaving the relationship. Although this will sadly be the case for many that find themselves victims of domestic abuse, it is misleading to suggest that single payments are creating this position and are specific to Universal Credit. Existing benefits also pay to one person other than by exception – in the same way that UC is designed to do. This is not a new scenario so the implication that UC will exacerbate the issue of domestic abuse is completely without foundation.

Nor can split payments in Universal Credit be the solution to what is a criminal act. The solution to this should be delivered through the judicial system and not through any benefit system. Split payments are primarily to help households manage their money and individuals. Victims of domestic abuse can request this payment arrangement.

Turning to your **first question**, you requested the data on split payment applications, the number in payment and the reasons why some split payments have been declined. The Department does not have this information currently available. DWP statisticians are currently working to develop official statistics on Alternative Payment Arrangements (APAs) for Universal Credit which will include information on split payments and this information will be released once the necessary quality assurance work has taken place. Official Statistics on UC, the Department's release strategy and further updates can be found at the following link:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/universal-credit-statistics>

We do know, however, that in December 2017, there were 500,000 households in receipt of Universal Credit, and of these, 46,000 were couple households. We do not know how many couple claims came from men and women as there is no lead claimant in a household. However, we do know that in February 2018, there were 770,000 claimants on Universal Credit and of these, 47% were women.

With regards your **second question**, a split payment can be requested at any point within the UC claim journey. Importantly, both members of a couple do not need to consent to a split payment. The decision maker and work coach will make a decision whether to split the payment between a couple, based on information provided by the requestor, in terms of what is deemed to be in the best interests of the household, the requestor and children. They will also decide to put in place a 'Managed Payment to Landlord' to safeguard the home where housing costs are in payment. The purpose of both types of alternative payments (the split payment and the managed payment to the landlord) is to prevent hardship to the family. Split payments will be considered where financial abuse occurs or where the UC claimant mismanages the UC payment. This is supported by the regulations¹ in place that permit the *"universal credit payable in respect of joint claimants be paid wholly to only one member of the couple or be split between the couple in such proportion as the Secretary of State considers appropriate"*.

I have attached the guidance on both Split Payments and Domestic Violence for your information. You will see that in situations where domestic violence has been reported, the work coach or case worker can also remove work related requirements on the victim and refer them to external, expert support.

Each member of a couple has their own work coach interview so the requestor will be able to have a frank discussion about their circumstances without the UC Claimant being present. A single payment will be paid to a household unless one member of a couple requests a split payment due to the reasons outlined above. There are no examples provided of reasons to turn down the request for a split payment. The on-line journal will be noted if a 'managed payment to the landlord' is put in place. No information relating to the split payment, including why a split payment has been granted, will be notified. We are continuing to keep this process under review.

It is, of course, possible for the partner receiving UC payments already to request that the decision to split the payment is reversed. The work coach and decision maker will consider all the information available but will work in the interests of the household and in doing so, will continue to split the payments where this is considered the best solution.

In supporting victims of domestic abuse, the District Provision Tool provides Jobcentre Staff with a list of help available within their area, including information on services and support and referral arrangements, such as women's refuges. It is delivered by Jobcentre Plus, Skills Funding Agency, Skills Development Scotland, Careers Wales, other providers, Local Authorities, independent and volunteer

¹ Regulation 47 in The Universal Credit, Personal Independence Payment, Jobseeker's Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance (Claims and Payments) Regulations 2013

organisations. No subsequent steps would be taken by Universal Credit beyond ensuring that the payments are split in accordance to the decision made by the Decision maker. As mentioned previously, this process is similar to what happens currently in legacy benefits.

In terms of your **third question**, I can confirm that all staff, not just work coaches, will complete a topic on safeguarding adults and children as part of their foundation learning. This looks at various types of abuse, physical, psychological, sexual, financial and emotional. It also talks about controlling and coercive behaviour and covers what DWP staff should and should not do in terms of behaviours and responsibilities.

In terms of setting a review period, the decision maker will use their discretion based on the information provided. Review periods for alternative payment arrangements are set to take account of any changes since the APA was put in place. It is not possible to say what a suitable review period would be as this is not a 'one size fits all' approach and is very much dependent on the individual circumstances presented.

We do constantly monitor our products and services to ensure we are meeting the needs of our customers; listening to feedback from our staff, claimants and stakeholders, and building improvements into the system. The Department is continuously reviewing and improving the service for those claimants with complex needs, including how they are identified and supported both internally and via referral to local services delivered in partnership activity with other relevant agencies and organisations. The guidance on split payments has been reviewed recently and we are satisfied no improvements or amendments are needed. However, we will continue to raise and maintain awareness of split payments amongst staff.

Finally, there are currently no plans to routinely split payments between two partners in a relationship. It may help if I explain why. An employee receives a single payment from their employer so UC mirrors that approach, preparing the family for when the claimant enters work, thereby smoothing the transition into monthly paid work. Couples make a joint claim to Universal Credit, both are responsible for servicing the claim, and both benefit from the claim. A single payment of Universal Credit enables a household to clearly see the effect of their decisions about work on total household income. The Government believes that people within a household are best placed to make the money management choices that are most appropriate for them and a single payment enables them to do just that.

It is worth noting that the Women's Aid Report – *Unequalled, Trapped and Controlled*² stated that “*The opportunity for payments to be split between partners in cases of financial abuse was however, not regarded as a solution;.....85% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that if they requested this, the abuse would worsen when their partner found out.*” So the Government would not want the Committee to make the mistake of thinking that the greater use of split payments can help tackle the scourge of domestic abuse.

² https://1q7dqy2unor827bqjls0c4rn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Women_s_Aid_TUC_Financial_Abuse_Report_March_2015.pdf

I hope you find this particularly helpful in light of your recent call for evidence requesting information from individuals who have been a victim of domestic abuse whilst on Universal Credit. I do take seriously this issue and anybody who is a victim of domestic abuse deserves and will receive our support, as soon as we are made aware.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kit Malthouse', written in a cursive style.

Kit Malthouse MP

Minister for Family Support, Housing and Child Maintenance