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for Work &
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Frank Field MP
Work and Pensions Committee
House of Commons
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Dear Frank,

Thank you for your letter of 11 January about the ESA65B letter that is sent to GPs once an Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) claimant has been found fit for work following a Work Capability Assessment. The letter is designed to inform the GP about the outcome of the WCA and advise the claimant's GP that fit notes are no longer required for ESA purposes. I am sorry for the delay in replying.

A revised version of the ESA65B letter was introduced in August 2017. The wording was amended to make the letter simpler and clearer, to emphasise the benefits of work for disabled people and those with health conditions, and to ask GPs to encourage their patients in their efforts to find, or return to, some form of work. It was not carried out to dissuade GPs from issuing fit notes for ESA appeal purposes and it was not a cost saving measure; no assessment of the impact on costs has been carried out.

We know that being in the right work is good for health and that being out of work can have a detrimental effect on health. We are working with healthcare professionals to make sure that systems are working well together and that individuals can get the support they need, at the right time, to return to work. For health and care professionals, supporting an individual to be in the right work is central to delivering effective, personalised care and addressing a key social determinant of health.

We understand the importance of providing clear guidance for the health professionals who support the work of the Department, that is why the revised version of the ESA65B includes the following link to guidance for GPs on when to issue fit notes:

www.gov.uk/government/publications/fit-note-guidance-for-gps.

This guidance includes a link to a broader publication on the benefits system aimed specifically at GPs, which is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-short-guide-to-the-benefit-system-for-general-practitioners>. This guide includes information on what to do when a claimant is appealing, where their condition worsens or if they develop a new condition. We would not expect GPs or other healthcare professionals to know the rules pertaining to the benefits system in any detail. We therefore ensure that we provide appropriate guidance that is regularly reviewed and updated. This guidance was issued to GPs by the British Medical Association and has been published on their website.

As part of the review of the ESA65B DWP officials engaged with the British Medical Association and the Royal College of General Practitioners to ensure that the revised wording was fit for purpose. Agreement on the final wording of the revised ESA65B was obtained via the regular meetings DWP holds with both organisations. I can reassure you that DWP is committed to ensuring that its communications products are clear, understandable and fit for purpose. We have a rolling programme of continuous improvement in place. As part of this, we are currently considering amendments to the current ESA65B letter and I will ask officials to take account of your comments.

Yours sincerely,


Sarah Newton MP
Minister for Disabled People, Health & Work