

✉ by email ✉

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Rt Hon Frank Field MP
Chair Work and Pensions Committee



Mark Serwotka
General Secretary

14 May 2018

Dear Mr Field,

Universal Credit and domestic abuse

Thank you for your letter of 24 April in which you request a response from PCS on several specific questions relating to the Committee enquiry into Universal Credit (UC) and domestic abuse.

The Committee is seeking the experience of staff working for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) on their ability to issue “split payments” where domestic abuse or financial mismanagement is disclosed, and more broadly, how staff handle cases where claimants have experienced abuse.

PCS has consulted widely with members working in the field in order to inform the Committee and assist in this enquiry.

General response

Our members, particularly those in Jobcentres, responded to say that that the key problem, other than the aggregation of entitlements, is in relation to the “easements” process. Members believe that the easements process is too bureaucratic and the time limitation of just 3 months in any 12 month period cannot offer the level of support that survivors of domestic violence need.

Work coaches may be supportive and encouraging and be able to signpost the claimant to help, but while the claimant is still living in the abusive household, the coach cannot implement the official ‘easement’. The claimant must move out of the household and is required to provide written evidence to their work coach that they are receiving help for domestic abuse before the easement can be granted.

For claimants still in the household experiencing financial controlling abuse, a split payment of UC is not necessarily helpful or indeed realistic or safe to implement. The claimant would need to be able to ‘explain’ the reason for a split payment to the abusive partner, and would need to set up their own bank account – difficult in itself – in order to receive the money. A split payment of the UC personal allowance element also causes any UC rent element to be paid directly to the landlord which potentially ties the claimant to the household further.

Responses to the specific questions

- 1) What training do your members undertake on detecting and preventing domestic abuse – including handling disclosure? Do they feel this is adequate?**

PCS members reported that there was very little training offered by DWP and that training lacks detail. Some members have sought out training for themselves offered by other organisations such as Local Authorities, Women's Aid and the TUC. Many members reported that they had no training whatsoever.

PCS received a very detailed response from a DWP UC trainer who outlined what was actually included in the training programme. The member explained that UC training products cover domestic violence in three major areas of the work coach learning. 'Complex Needs' covers sign posting to outside help. 'Personal Budgeting Support' covers how to request alternative split payments or advances. Domestic violence is specifically addressed under 'Easements' where Work Coaches learn it is mandatory to remove work-related requirements for claimant's for 3 months.

Many of the other respondents, however, indicated that although there is mention of Domestic Violence issues in training it is not stand alone and is mentioned in passing.

Staff also indicate that the training and mentoring window for work coaches is very short. For this reason they find it very difficult to take on and apply all the new information they are expected to absorb in the four week training period before being placed fully into the job role.

2) Would your members feel confident identifying and addressing potential warning signs of abuse? Does the training cover this?

From the responses PCS received to the above question it would appear that the training does not give them the tools to identify or address warning signs of domestic abuse. Members do not feel confident that they have the skills to deal with Domestic Abuse cases due to the lack of meaningful training. Levels of awareness of the facility to split the payment were also very low.

One respondent stated:

"Response from members was they may not always be able to spot the signs of abuse and are not confident in doing this. Only if customers share or have obvious signs. Complex case training is sporadic and patchy at best – reliant on coms sessions or email reminders for delivery

Managers are reported to have had a telekit a couple of weeks ago about raising awareness with staff. And a video was shown on some sites at the late opening yesterday, regards identifying and supporting customers regards domestic abuse.

This was not supported by other materials, or the champion for sites being available, and only showed one case where the customer had fled DV. There was no satisfactory addressing of clients still at home with the abuser. Attendance of the viewing was promoted as 'opt out' not 'opt in' – no consideration was given to staff who may have experienced DV. Reps said easements available were not well known by work coaches – and many were not confident and would have to refer to guidance and the SILs for further advice. Also reported new staff are not coming in with 'sufficient' recent complex case / easement training / awareness. This recent delivery was felt to be a box ticking exercise only."

3) Do Jobcentre Plus offices provide appropriate facilities – e.g. private meeting rooms to enable claimants to discuss these issues?

There has been significant pressure on the Jobcentre estate for many years but more so since the People and Locations Programme, where a significant number of Jobcentres were closed and merged with nearby offices. This has inevitably led to fewer private rooms available to staff to conduct private interviews.

Members report that although there are private rooms in most offices there are not enough to cope with demand. This means it can be very difficult to access a room at short notice where a claimant presents with signs of domestic abuse.

4) How much discretion do Work Coaches feel they have when deciding on a split payment? Are there instances where members would refuse a split payment request?

Work coaches do believe that they have discretion in deciding on a split payment but it is rarely used. We have no evidence of split payment requests being refused. But it was widely reported that staff were unaware of the facility to split payments.

5) A survey by Women's Aid found that 85% of respondents would be concerned that requesting split payments would worsen the situation at home. Does this finding chime with your members' experience?

Our members agree with the Women's Aid finding that claimants would be reluctant to request split payments. This question has been covered in the general response.

Conclusion

Training for staff who may have to deal with claimants experiencing domestic abuse is not adequate and in some cases does not exist.

Facilities in Jobcentres are not suitable for conducting sensitive interviews. This is likely to make it very difficult for claimants to disclose sensitive personal information.

There is a lack of specialists in this area although a number of members reported local initiatives where "Domestic Abuse Single Point of Contacts" have been created. These individuals have varying degrees of skills and generally signpost staff to external training.

PCS would welcome a concerted effort by DWP to raise awareness of domestic abuse training initiatives using local specialists. However we believe that the fundamental problem is in the design of Universal Credit in that allows an abusive partner such extensive control of so much of a household's income.

I hope that the content of this letter, including the responses to the specific questions raised, is helpful to the Committee in their deliberations on the issue of Universal Credit and cases of domestic abuse.

Yours sincerely,


MARK SERWOTKA
General Secretary