



Department
for Work &
Pensions

www.dwp.gov.uk

Neil Couling,
Director General, Universal Credit
Programme
6th Floor, Caxton House
Tothill Street
London
SW1A 9NA

neil.couling@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

The Social Security Consortium

09 November 2017

Thank you for your letter of 23 October 2017. I appreciate the time and effort you have put into bringing together your feedback and sharing your experience of how Universal Credit operates.

I note that you disagree with the safeguards we have in place to protect sensitive customer information. Almost every day, there are stories in the news about breaches of customer data. The recent Equifax hack affected almost 700,000 UK Citizens. That's why protecting claimant information is so important to us. We need to balance the valuable support third party organisations such as yourselves offer our claimants against our duties, legally and morally, to protect the sensitive information we hold on hundreds of thousands of UK citizens. This includes the time bound nature of explicit agreements to share data.

Your letter mentions cases where this policy isn't correctly implemented. I take these reports very seriously and I will feed your comments back to operational colleagues. I want to make sure staff in our jobcentres and service centres get this right.

Explicit consent works well if the correct procedures are followed. I do not accept this arrangement contributes to a breach of Data Protection principles. Quite the opposite in fact: I do not believe a third party as yourselves can ever constitute a subject with a right to access information. It isn't what Parliament intended when the FOI Act was passed.

I also do not accept that a system of Explicit Consent can be a failure to make a reasonable adjustment under the Equality Act 2010, given the range of methods claimants can use to contact the Department.

You also mention claimants with impairments, health conditions or who are otherwise at risk. I am proud of the work the Department does, every day, supporting the hardest-to-help in our society. We continue to apply these good practices as we deliver Universal Credit. We avoid labelling claimants, just because they are experiencing challenges. That's why there is a wide range of support for people who have problems managing an online account. This ranges from informal

help from friends, families and support groups to a formal appointee system for people who can't manage their own affairs.

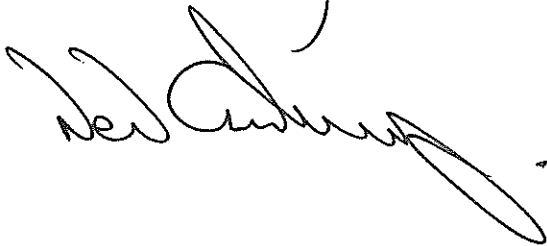
It's also worth remembering that, while UC is designed as an online service, people can make and maintain their claim by phone. As you will be aware, calls to UC will be an 0800 number from this month. We are also making up to £200m available, at the local level, through Universal Support, to help people build their IT and budgeting confidence.

You also mention cases where claimants have serious or even terminal illnesses. My department does everything it can to minimise requirements for these claimants, so they don't face additional burdens in such difficult times. We are looking at the specific query raised on the DSA1500 process and will respond separately on that.

Every fortnight we release new software with additional features and improvements. In the coming months this will include the facility to upload more documents into the online journal.

I'm grateful you've raised examples where our consent policy isn't implemented properly. This is a good opportunity to remind colleagues of the importance of getting this right and the impact it has on claimants' lives when we don't. On the other hand, I maintain my position that we have struck the right balance between protecting personal information and making sure organisations such as yours continue to help claimants.

Yours Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Neil Couling', with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

Neil Couling
Director General, Universal Credit Programme