Department for Work & Pensions

Secretary of State
Caxton House
Tothill Street
LONDON
SW1H 9DA

[redacted]

www.gov.uk

[redacted]

Rt Hon Sir Oliver Letwin MP
House of Commons

Our ref: [redacted]

27th February 2018

Dear Oliver

Thank you for your letter of 22 December 2017 to my predecessor and further email of 21 February on behalf of Mr Andy Pennington of Bridport Citizens Advice regarding Universal Credit. I apologise for the delay in replying.

I can confirm that no Universal Credit Full Service claims are maintained offline or clerically. All of my Department's staff are required to undertake training on the Data Protection Act when joining the Department. Security E-Learning is also undertaken every three years and can be more frequent with a change of job role.

The Department takes data protection very seriously and the increased security measures on Universal Credit Full Service (Personal Security Numbers, security questions, memorable information) ensure that a claimant's personal information is protected. In addition, the Department also has issued detailed guidance to its staff so they are aware how a claimant's personal information should be treated and the strict protocols that are in place as to whom that information should be disclosed.

The main route to access Universal Credit is through digital channels. We actively encourage people to use the service in a digital manner in every instance but we understand there are circumstances in which this may not be possible. All jobcentres across the country have free Wi-Fi and there are more than 8,000 computers available to support customers who need help with making their claim digitally and applying for jobs online. This provides access to digital channels in every Jobcentre for claimants to use when they do not have access at home. A freephone telephone helpline and face to face support are also available for claimants to make and manage a Universal Credit claim. Universal Support is advice, assistance or support from Jobcentre Plus or local partners to help Universal Credit claimants with managing their claim or award of Universal Credit which includes accessing and using online services. Face to face support is also available in the Jobcentre for claimants to make and manage a Universal Credit claim. The work coach will inform the claimant of their next appointment and contact details, in case of enquiry. Where needed, the work coach will provide the claimant with a written note to remind them of the date of their next appointment, especially if the claimant has difficulty using or accessing online services.

However, the Universal Credit Full Service approach to vulnerability reflects the wider Department's definition in that it seeks to identify individuals who have complex user needs and who require additional support to enable them to access our benefits and services. Universal Credit does not label claimant groups in terms of specific vulnerabilities, but instead seeks to identify user needs and respond appropriately and consistently, to support that need for as long as it exists. Underlying this approach is the principle that not all individuals with life events, personal circumstances, health issues or disabilities will necessarily require support.

Where support needs are identified, they may be put in place for a short, medium or long period of time. Universal Credit acknowledges that individuals may move in and out of situations where they do or do not require support. Our staff learning and development procedures reflect this approach and are continually reviewed and updated to take into good and effective practice. This approach results in an individual tailored journey for each Universal Credit claimant based on the totality of their circumstances and not just those historically deemed vulnerable. We are working with a variety of internal and external stakeholders to help inform design. These include local authorities, utilities and Other Government Departments, in addition to welfare organisations such as Citizens Advice. This ensures claimants can access other forms of support including housing, debt advice, low energy tariffs and a variety of passported benefits. Our staff members are empowered to deliver a customised and personalised journey based on an individual claimant's needs. We take an exclusive approach which supports and reflects the Department's vulnerability strategic definition.

We recognise our most vulnerable claimants, including those fleeing violent households, may need additional support measures, including advance payments. Where claimants need access to money sooner there is provision for an advance payment of 100 per cent of their estimated award, which is repayable over 12 months. The claim start date can also be backdated up to one calendar month to protect vulnerable claimants who may be delayed in claiming Universal Credit through no fault of their own. This could include customers who have had to leave home because of domestic violence or abuse. In addition, vulnerable groups including victims of domestic violence are exempt from waiting days and this ensures that they can access Universal Credit sooner.

Alternative Payment Arrangements are also available to support vulnerable people. These might include managed payments of Universal Credit housing costs to landlords, making payments more frequently than monthly and splitting the payment between partners within the household in cases of domestic violence.

As part of our responsibility to safeguard information, we have put a system of explicit consent in place for people who represent claimants. This ensures the claimant has given authority for someone to deal with their claim. This provides an additional layer of security and protects claimants from unscrupulous people who might seek to impersonate genuine advisers.

Kind regards

Esther

**Rt Hon Esther McVey MP**

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WORK AND PENSIONS