

nawra

national association of
welfare rights advisers

Neil Couling
Director General,
Universal Credit Programme,
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London SW1A 9NA

16 February 2018

Dear Neil

Thank you for your letter of 14 February. NAWRA is extremely disappointed in your response for the following reasons.

1. The three issues raised in our letter are not about 'campaigning' for change in universal credit. While NAWRA may well look to do this on other issues, in this case we were raising problems where universal credit was not working within the legislation currently in place. This was made painstakingly clear in our first letter to the then Secretary of State (which you answered on his behalf) which was headed 'Major problems within the operation of universal credit – failure by DWP to act within the legislation'.
2. You ask us to 'reflect on how the debate on universal credit it conducted'. This was not a letter to the media but a letter to the Secretary of State, and then subsequently to you as Director General, to highlight major concerns where we were seeing the same problems arising over and over again and that needed urgent resolution. In the case of people who were migrating over from ESA it was to ensure they were being assessed and paid correctly, and avoiding a situation where errors are made and have to be corrected years later as we are seeing now from the incapacity benefit to ESA migration. Your refusal to accept our evidence that problems are still arising is unhelpful in the extreme.
3. You state, in respect of claimants with a terminal illness, that you are 'at a loss to know what the concern is here'. The concern, to spell it out, is that people in the last few months of their lives are being put through

unnecessary distress and anxiety. I appreciate you have offered to look into cases if we provide names and national insurance numbers - it is through the tenacity of the welfare rights advisers that the problems we are raising are being resolved on an individual basis. What NAWRA was looking for from yourself was action to resolve the issues on a wide scale preventing such distressing situations in the future. I am pleased to say that when I did raise an individual case via our contacts in the stakeholder forum, their response, in sharp contrast to yours, was that they were horrified at the treatment of the claimant, they apologised, resolved it, and ensured that guidance was issued to clarify the correct procedure for all staff.

4. You state that you hope 'this reply might bring this exchange of letters to an end'. Your reply simply does not accept that anyone with a terminal illness is being treated inappropriately, that anyone has been incorrectly paid on migration from ESA, or that anyone has had waiting days applied incorrectly. Refusing to acknowledge that there is a problem does not result in a resolution.
5. You state that you are 'increasingly concerned for the welfare of the public' and that 'we have a shared responsibility to the public we serve'. This sequence of letters started because NAWRA was raising concerns because claimants were being caused unnecessary distress or not being paid the correct amount of benefit. NAWRA asks that you begin to take responsibility by acknowledging that processes are not always working correctly and seeking to resolve them – that is what 'test and learn' is surely about.

I would be happy to discuss this with you in person if it would be more constructive.

We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely

Daphne Hall
Southwest Committee Member
On behalf of the National Association of Welfare Rights Advisers