

Liz Kendall MP
Secretary of State
Department for Work and Pensions
Caxton House
Tothill Street
London
SW1H 9NA

21 September 2024

Dear Secretary of State,

Re: Concerns about level of delay in processing new pension credit claims in the light of the winter fuel payment announcement and the Department's planned take-up campaign

First of all, we welcome you to your new post and we very much look forward to working with you and your ministerial team in the coming months.

We are writing to highlight the ongoing issue in respect of delays in processing pension credit claims. Members of NAWRA (National Association of Welfare Rights Advisers) - which represents advisers across the UK - have been reporting for some time a significant problem with pension credit claims sometimes taking many months, or at times more than a year, to be processed causing considerable distress and hardship.

Back in December 2022, NAWRA teamed up with the Greater Manchester Law Centre to carry out research to try and find out the extent of the issue.¹ The findings from the research were shared with the Pensions Service and the DWP's Operational Stakeholders Engagement Forum, along with a series of recommendations including to put in place a timescale for reducing delays to bring the average claim time down to the target time of six weeks, and to review staffing levels and staff training to ensure staff are capable of delivering on the Service's expected timescales and level of service.

However, NAWRA has not seen evidence of any improvement or of the recommendations being put in place. While we appreciate that this situation arose under the previous Conservative government, we thought you would want to be made aware of it. This is particularly so in light of the government's recent announcement to restrict winter fuel payments to those in receipt of pension credit² (or other specified means-tested benefits) and the Department's planned take-up campaign.³

¹ <https://www.gmlaw.org.uk/2023/01/04/investigating-pension-credit-delays-survey-results/>

² <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2024-07-29/debates/45E1221B-F210-4132-8A8E-711B96F4D503/PublicSpendingInheritance>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pension-credit-awareness-drive-as-thousands-of-eligible-pensioners-yet-to-claim--2>

While NAWRA wholeheartedly welcomes any proposed plans to encourage take up of pension credit by the estimated 880,000 people who may be eligible but not currently claiming, we have strong reservations about the capacity of the Department to manage the huge influx of claims that are likely to follow. If take up is to be successful, it is essential that people's claims are processed both promptly and accurately. If they are not, we will see more of the damage to individuals' financial and psychological well-being reported in the above research.

NAWRA therefore recommends in the strongest terms that -

- Sufficient staffing resources are put in a place as a matter of urgency both on the pension credit helpline and within the Pension Service's processing centre - these should realistically reflect the estimated increase in claims;
- Care should be taken to ensure all new staff are properly trained so that prospective claimants are not given incorrect information or advice;
- Any claims taking longer than the target six weeks should be automatically escalated to a specialist team and prioritised; and
- There should be full transparency about the Department's performance with regular (ideally monthly) updates in relation to -
 - response times on the helpline and number of unanswered calls;
 - the number of claims received; and
 - processing times.

Without adequate resources in place, the government risks hundreds of thousands of individuals going without, not only their pension credit, but also the winter fuel payment to which they should be eligible. This essential allowance could make the difference that enables them to provide adequate heating for themselves this winter in order to stay well, or even alive.

Given the current level of delays and the uncertainty about resources going forward, NAWRA calls on the government to put on hold any proposed changes to the winter fuel payment eligibility criteria until firstly there has been an opportunity to consult on them and, secondly, that the take-up rate for pension credit is above 95 per cent.

We hope very much that you will take these considerations into account as you move forward, and we would be happy to meet with officials to discuss this further if helpful.

Yours sincerely

Alan Markey
Chair, National Association of Welfare Rights Advisers