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Dr Jim McCormick
Disability and Carers Benefits Expert Advisory Group

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Thank you for your letter of 8 June 2018 about split payments of Universal Credit.

I am grateful to the Disability and Carers Benefits Expert Advisory Group for responding to an official's request to consider this matter and pleased that you agree that splitting payments of the Universal Credit (UC) award between the adults in a household would be beneficial. I believe that the UK Government's single household payment of UC may act as an enabler for domestic abuse or financial coercion by one partner towards another. Introducing automatic split payments will, go some way to counter this.

I share your concerns about the capability of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to deliver. I understand its current process for split payments, through Alternative Payment Arrangements (APAs), is agent led with no IT automation and, therefore, very resource intensive. Given that UC is a reserved benefit you will know that the Scottish Government is entirely dependent on the DWP's ability to make significant changes to the existing UC system to introduce and deliver any changes we have limited powers to introduce. While discussions at official level about the technical, operational and cost implications are encouraging, it is critical that the DWP matches our pace for delivery if we are to deliver split payments in Scotland in the future.

I note your interest in the potential effect on levels of domestic abuse or financial coercion. As you know domestic abuse is a complex issue with multiple causes, and split payments per se will not solve the problem, although early signposting to specialist support services may help people in vulnerable circumstances. Once our split payments policy is in operation, we plan to collect robust management information on the use of split payments and evaluate the impact.



In your letter you suggest a "test and learn" approach. For implementation, our aim is to ensure that the policy and design of the service are of benefit to as many people in receipt of UC as possible. You will remember that the UC Scottish choices were introduced on a phased basis, first implemented for new claims only, and then extended to existing claims and live to full service transfers. We will explore how best to introduce split payments with the DWP, taking account of our legal powers as set out in the Scotland Act 2016.

More generally, you may be interested to know that we have been engaging with a wide range of stakeholders including Engender, other womens' organisations, CoSLA, the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations, local authorities and the third sector. This is to help us shape a split payments policy for Scotland, which aligns with our approach to social security, and is based on dignity, fairness and respect. We are also putting in place arrangements to seek the direct views of people in receipt of UC through our social security Experience Panels and via focus groups facilitated by third party organisations. This will help inform options for how the UC award is split between members of a household and, once this work is complete, I will make an announcement.

I look forward to a productive discussion with you and the group on 30 August focussing on the important areas in your remit.

Kind regards



JEANE FREEMAN