

DWP Central Freedom of Information Team

e-mail: freedom-of-information-request@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Our Ref: VTR FOI 1986

DATE 29 May 2014

Nigel Alter

request-208384-b24bbea5@whatdotheyknow.com

Dear Mr Alter

Thank you for your Freedom of Information (Fol) request received on 24 April 2014. You asked:

"As there have been several instances of DWP staff claiming that certain information was not included in my record, that telephone calls made by me had not been logged and that my record could either not be found or was inaccessible, please supply answers to the following points:

- 1. Is it possible or has it been possible for there to be more than one computer record for a claimant who is claiming only one benefit? Please bear in mind that I am not asking whether more than one record should exist but, rather, whether more than one record could exist.*
- 2. When staff at Jobcentres, Benefit Centres and call centres are unable to find or access a claimant's records using the information provided by the claimant (including the appropriate National Insurance number), is there a facility for creating a duplicate, temporary, 'dummy' or pro forma record in order to note down any relevant information? If so, what is the procedure for merging this information with the main record when it is located or accessible?*
- 3. If a claimant were to move home during the lifetime of a claim and that move took the claimant across a Jobcentre Plus district/regional boundary, what procedure should be followed by Jobcentre Plus staff to ensure that the claimant has access to the correct Benefit Centre holding his or her information and that the relevant Benefit Centre holds that information?*
- 4. In cases where a claimant changes address and the new address is in a different Jobcentre Plus district/region to the original address, would the Benefit Centre dealing with the claimant also be likely to change?*
- 5. If a claimant asks for their records to be transferred to a more convenient Jobcentre and the appropriate District Manager's office agrees to this transfer but the convenient Jobcentre is located in a different district/region to that which covers the claimant's home address and is*

also dealt with by a different District Manager, which Benefit Centre should deal with the claimant's enquiries in cases where these would not be the same? In these circumstances, should the Benefit Centre holding the claimant's records be that which covers the postcode area in which the claimant's home is situated or that which the appropriate Jobcentre normally deals with?

6. In cases where a claimant's records are transferred as described in 5 above, could the convenient Jobcentre refuse a claimant's request for an interview with a specialist adviser on the basis that a claimant's home is outside their normal catchment area? Is there any guidance which addresses this point?

7. In cases where a claimant attends an interview at a convenient Jobcentre located across a Jobcentre Plus district/regional boundary as described above, should the Jobcentre adviser have full access to the claimant's record regardless of the benefit being claimed? What procedure should be adopted in cases where a Jobcentre adviser cannot gain full or any access to a claimant's record while conducting a personal interview with the claimant in these circumstances?

8a. I have been advised that JSA cases can be seen across regional boundaries but that ESA cases cannot. Is this true?

8b. If this is true, how should a Jobcentre Plus adviser proceed when dealing with an ESA claimant who lives across a district/regional boundary and whose record is not fully accessible because it is held by a Benefit Centre which the appropriate Jobcentre does not normally deal with? Is there any action that such an adviser could take, such as entering a code/password or telephoning the relevant Benefit Centre, in order to arrange full access to the record?

9a. When Benefit Centre and call centre staff speak with a member of the public by telephone, what course of action should be followed if the answers to any security questions do not correspond with the information held on the claimant's computer record?

9b. If one of the security questions asked was the claimant's home postcode and the answer given was different to that held on the computer record, should the call be terminated or should the relevant staff member ask a separate security question in order to confirm the claimant's identity?

9c. In cases where there is a discrepancy in the postcode stated by a claimant, should this discrepancy be investigated to establish whether the claimant had moved or if the postcode had been entered into the system incorrectly? Should the same conditions apply to any other discrepancies of security information that may arise?

10. Prior to the introduction of the Post Handling Site in Wolverhampton, if an ESA claimant who has moved across a district/regional boundary were to receive communications from the Benefit Centre which had been dealing with his or her case up to that point and also from another Benefit Centre with whom the claimant had previously had no contact:

a) If both Benefit Centres were asking for identical information or the submission of the same original documents such as medical certificates, should such information and documents be forwarded to the Benefit Centre which has previously dealt with the claimant's affairs and which is linked with the Jobcentre he or she usually attends?

b) Could such information and documents be taken to the claimant's usual Jobcentre for forwarding to the appropriate Benefit Centre? If so, would Jobcentre staff be obliged to provide

a receipt for such information and documentation if the claimant asked for one to prove subsequently that he or she had responded to the Benefit Centre's request?"

To put the format of this response into context, I should explain a little about the Freedom of Information Act. The Act provides people with a right of access to recorded information held by public authorities such as DWP. The Act does not extend to requests for views, comments or questions about a particular matter. Your request can be in the form of a question, but DWP does not have to answer if this would mean creating information that is not already held in a recorded form.

However, in the interests of customer service, if we don't hold recorded information that directly answers a question, we do our utmost to provide the recorded information we believe to be most closely related to the subject under question.

We apologise for the delay in our response, we have had to consult across the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to address your concerns. Below is the information you requested.

Response to question 1: Within DWP, a computer record exists on the Customer Information System (CIS) for all claimants who have a National Insurance Number (NINo). If a benefit such as Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) or Employment Support Allowance (ESA) is claimed, a computer record will be held on the system which administers this benefit. For JSA and ESA this is the Jobseeker's Allowance Payment System (JSAPS)).

Claimant accounts on benefit paying systems, such as JSAPS are created using the claimant's NINo. It is not possible to hold duplicate records which have the same NINo on any DWP payment system.

Response to question 2: DWP IT systems do not allow duplicate, temporary or dummy accounts to be created or held.

Response to questions 3, 4 and 5: Attached is the Gathering Evidence chapter of the JSA procedural guidance which explains the process when a claimant changes address or requests to attend an alternative Jobcentre. It also explains about which Benefit Centre is responsible for maintaining the claim. Paragraphs 65 to 70 refer.

Response to question 6: Attached is the guidance on Transfer Claims as per your request.

Response to question 7: The Preparing for the Initial Work Search/New Jobseeker Interview guidance below explains the procedures performed at a personal interview with the claimant.

Response to questions 8a and 8b: The existence of a JSA or ESA claim on DWP systems can be seen across regional boundaries by using the "national search" functionality but levels of access to systems varies. Benefit Centre staff dealing with ESA have a greater level of access than Jobcentre advisers because they are responsible for processing changes using the systems. Jobcentre advisers can identify which Benefit Centre owns the claim from the DWP Customer Information System. Advisers can also advise the claimant to report changes using the national contact number 0345 608 8545 which can also provide a contact route to

the Benefit Centre, for example, where specialised advice is needed. The telephone adviser can identify the relevant Benefit Centre from the Customer Information System.

Response to question 9a: Callers are required to answer 3 security questions correctly. If the answer given to any particular question does not correspond with the information held on their computer record then a further security question should be asked of the caller up to the maximum of 5 questions.

To help to protect the integrity of the process care is taken not to disclose which question(s) have been answered incorrectly. In cases where 3 correct answers are not given the caller is informed that they have not passed the security test and they are given a choice of further actions they can take in order to proceed:

- Ring again and re-take the security test
- Write in
- Call into an office

Response to question 9b: If the answer given to any particular question does not correspond with the information held on their computer record then a further security question should be asked of the caller up to the maximum of 5 questions.

Response to question 9c: As stated in response to question 9a, to help protect the integrity of the process care is taken not to disclose which question(s) have been answered incorrectly. Where a claimant is unable to answer security questions correctly they are advised to contact DWP either in writing or in person. Discrepancies in the data held and that presented are resolved through that engagement.

Response to questions 10a and 10b: ESA guidance advises that documents received in a Benefit Centre are recorded in the contact history of the Customer Account Manager system before being passed to the relevant processing team for action. The Customer Information System is checked to establish which Benefit Centre is the “owning office” for a particular claim so that the location of the processing team can be identified. Once a new Benefit Centre becomes the “owning office” documentation is forwarded to that site.

ESA guidance for Jobcentres generally advises that evidence is to be sent to the relevant Benefit Centre where the processing of claims and changes of circumstances takes place. Evidence that is received in a Jobcentre is recorded in the Labour Market System or the Jobseeker's Allowance Payment System (JSAPS - which is used for both JSA and ESA claims). Where necessary it is sent securely to the appropriate Benefit Centre identified using the Customer Information System. Jobcentre Staff are not obliged to issue a receipt for documentation and will normally return documentation to the claimant in person making a copy where necessary. Medical certificates submitted for benefit purposes are not normally returned to the claimant and there have been recent changes to the process in Jobcentres. Jobcentre staff will enter the details directly onto JSAPS so that the updated information is available to staff in the Benefit Centre without having to wait for the certificate to arrive. Before that change claimants calling into the Jobcentre would normally have been advised to post the medical certificate to the Benefit Centre directly.

I hope the information provided is helpful, but should you need to submit a further request under the Act please try to be as clear as possible about the recorded information you are interested in seeing. I should note that the Department employs over 100,000 people in

numerous sites, and deals with millions of people every year. This does mean that if you ask for 'all' recorded information on a broad subject area which could be held anywhere in the Department, we would be unlikely to be able to answer the request within the costs limits. In cases such as that we would advise that you consider setting the area of the Department to be checked with, for example, your local Jobcentre or information held/issued centrally only.

If you have any queries about this letter please contact me quoting the reference number above.

Yours sincerely,

DWP Central FoI Team

Your right to complain under the Freedom of Information Act

If you are not happy with this response you may request an internal review by e-mailing freedom-of-information-request@dwpgsi.gov.uk or by writing to DWP, Central FoI Team, Caxton House, Tothill Street, SW1H 9NA. Any review request should be submitted within two months of the date of this letter.

If you are not content with the outcome of the internal review you may apply directly to the Information Commissioner's Office for a decision. Generally the Commissioner cannot make a decision unless you have exhausted our own complaints procedure. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at: The Information Commissioner's Office, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow Cheshire SK9 5AF www.ico.org.uk/Global/contact_us or telephone 0303 123 1113 or 01625 545745