

Jobcentre Plus

Room 607, Caxton House, Tothill Street, London SW1H 9NA
Telephone 020 7273 6006 GTN Code 273 6006 Fax 020 7273 6143

Lesley Strathie

Chief Executive
lesley.strathie@jobcentreplus.gsi.gov.uk
www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk

Kevin Barron MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

Our ref: CE010820

December 2006

Dear Mr Barron

The Secretary of State has asked Lesley Strathie to reply direct to your letter of 7 November, enclosing one from Councillor Ann Russell concerning care leavers between the ages of 16 and 21. This is something that falls within her responsibilities as Chief Executive of Jobcentre Plus. I am replying on behalf of Ms Strathie as a member of the Jobcentre Plus Board.

I was concerned to hear about the difficulties encountered by some young people when accessing our services and asked Denise Horsfall, South Yorkshire Jobcentre Plus District Manager to look into the matter.

It may help if I clarify the process for this group of customers, as there are differences for those under 18. Customers under 18 are referred to Jobcentre Plus via the Connexions service and provided with a face-to-face interview within 24 hours. Their claim is then referred to the appropriate benefit delivery centre. For Rotherham customers this is John Rideal House in Barnsley. These claims are given priority as they only qualify for hardship payments and not statutory benefits.

Customers under 18 claiming Income Support or Incapacity Benefit do so by a clerical process, which does not involve the contact centre. The details are referred to the relevant benefit processing team, as these customers do not require an interview unless they are estranged from their parents or legal guardian.

For customers over 18 the process is different and they would normally be expected to make a claim for benefit through our contact centre. This is our preferred method as it ensures we have all the necessary information to complete the claim, minimising any potential delays. However, we are aware that some of our customers do have difficulty using the telephone and have put provision in place for this. These arrangements are either:

- customers can arrange for a third party or nominated advocate to ring the contact centre on their behalf or the customer can have a face-to-face interview at the Jobcentre. Home visits can also be arranged if appropriate; or



- customers can choose to make a claim by the clerical process rather than through the contact centre. These customers will have access to a face-to-face interview in the Jobcentre but I am informed that take up of this provision in Rotherham is low.

You also mentioned delays in customers being awarded benefit. Following the introduction of the new Jobcentre Plus service in Rotherham we experienced some problems introducing the new process whilst managing to deal with the volume of claims. We aim to offer an appointment at the Jobcentre within four days of a new or repeat claim being made and there were times earlier this year when this was not being met. We immediately put plans in place to improve the situation and customers in Rotherham are now being seen within four days and have been consistently for the last five months

Delays have also occurred at the benefit delivery centre but this situation is improving with the average clearance time for a Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) claim currently at seventeen days. We aim to process claims within 12 days so we do have further work to do to meet this target.

Jobcentre Plus staff in Rotherham met with social workers and advocacy team members in June to explain the customer process and more recently staff met with NCH Bridges Project staff. At these meetings Peter Clayton, JSA Manager, provided comprehensive information relating to the range of services offered to care leavers in South Yorkshire. I also understand that the case studies included in Councillor Russell's letter were discussed.

Peter provided the project with contact numbers for the JSA New Claims team leader and also the Change of Circumstances team leader. Mary Taylor, the New Claims team leader is providing the project with regular updates on the progress of claims.

I am committed to providing a high standard of customer service and I apologise for any difficulties this vulnerable group of customers have experienced as a result of delays in offering appointments or processing claims.

I hope this is helpful. If you have any queries please contact Lesley Wills, Business Manager at Chantry House, Rotherham on 01709 343054.

Yours sincerely

Mel Groves

MEL GROVES
CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER
ON BEHALF OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE