



Department  
for Work &  
Pensions



Infrastructure  
and Projects  
Authority

To: Neil Couling CB CBE, Senior Responsible Owner for the Universal Credit Programme

From: Peter Schofield, Permanent Secretary of Department for Work and Pensions (DWP); and  
Nick Smallwood, Chief Executive Officer of the Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA)

19<sup>th</sup> June 2023

Dear Neil,

## **REVISED APPOINTMENT LETTER AS SENIOR RESPONSIBLE OWNER FOR UNIVERSAL CREDIT**

We are writing to confirm your continued appointment as the Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) of Universal Credit Programme (UC), which took effect from 1 October 2014. This letter sets out your responsibilities and the support you can expect from your department and the Infrastructure and Projects Authority.

As SRO, you are directly accountable to Parliament as provided for in the Ministerial Code, Peter Schofield, as the DWP accounting officer, and the Secretary of State for the implementation of Universal Credit.

The Universal Credit Programme forms part of the DWP Departmental Change Portfolio and is included in the Government Major Projects Portfolio (GMPP).

You have personal responsibility for the delivery of the Universal Credit Programme and will be held accountable for the delivery of its objectives, with policy intent and outcomes expected. This encompasses securing and protecting its vision, ensuring that it is governed responsibly, reported on honestly, escalated appropriately and for influencing the context, culture, and operating environment of the Universal Credit Programme. You are also responsible for ensuring the ongoing viability of the Universal Credit Programme and recommending its pause or termination if appropriate. It is your responsibility to ensure decisions regarding the Universal Credit Programme are taken in consideration of the impact they have on, and in the best interests of, the wider Departmental portfolio. Where issues arise which you are unable to resolve, you are responsible for escalating these to Change Portfolio Board and/or Capacity Board and the DWP Investment Committee as appropriate.

In addition to your internal accountabilities, SROs for GMPP projects and programmes are personally accountable to Parliamentary Select Committees. This means that, from the date of this letter, you will be held personally accountable to and could be called by Select Committees to account for and explain the decisions and actions you have taken to deliver the Universal Credit Programme.

It is important to be clear that your accountability relates only to implementation, within the agreed terms in this letter; it will remain for the Minister to account for the relevant policy decisions and development.

More information on this is set out in [Giving Evidence to Select Committees - Guidance for Civil Servants](#), sometimes known as the Osmotherly Rules. Information on the roles and responsibilities of the SRO are detailed in the Infrastructure and Project Authority's guidance on [the role of the senior responsible owner](#). You should also make yourself familiar with the [Government Functional Standard for Project Delivery](#), the requirements of the Government Project Delivery Framework, and the guidance and requirements for project delivery as set by DWP Departmental Change Portfolio Office.

### **Time commitment and tenure**

**This role will require at least 50% of your time to enable effective delivery of the role and execute your responsibilities in full.**

You are required to undertake this role until the implementation of this reform is complete (April 2029). Progress towards this will be reflected in your personal objectives. Any changes to the agreed time commitment or tenure of the role, as set out above, will require both departmental and Infrastructure and Projects Authority consent.

### **Objectives and performance criteria**

The Departmental objectives that are supported by this Universal Credit Programme are strategic objective 3 (Delivering excellent services for citizens and taxpayers) and in doing so supporting the delivery of strategic objective 2 (Improving people's quality of life).

Any proposed changes to scope which impacts on this intent or the realisation of benefits must be authorised by Change Portfolio Board and may be subject to further levels of approval.

### **Vision of the Universal Credit Programme**

By the end of 2018, UC was rolled out to all Jobcentres for new claimants and as at May 2022, there were 4.2m households in payment on UC. However, since your last SRO appointment letter in November 2018, the timelines for the completion of the programme have been delayed by the Covid 19 pandemic and recovery from that.

As at January 2023, there remains 2.5m households claiming legacy benefits and tax credits who have yet to move over to UC. The Government remains committed to completing the Move to UC. Moving the remaining claimants to UC in a safe and secure manner is the last phase of the programme and will ensure that the policy goals of UC are fully realised and also enable relevant legacy systems to be scaled down or closed entirely.

Before the pandemic, the Department was running a small-scale Move to UC pilot in Harrogate. The purpose of the pilot was to test and evaluate the products and processes required to move claimants to UC. The pilot was suspended in 2020 as the Department prioritised the handling of a significant increase in new claims for UC in response to the Covid pandemic. Learning from how UC operated during the pandemic and insight from the pilot, you have revised your strategy for moving the remaining households from legacy benefits to UC.

By the end of 2024/25 you will have completed the moves of all legacy cases with tax credits (including those on both ESA and tax credits), all cases on Income Support (IS) and Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and all Housing Benefit (HB) only cases. The Autumn Statement 2022 announced that the moving of some 800,000 ESA and ESA/HB cases will be delayed until 2028/29.

You will continue to develop ongoing plans for delivery in line with the Autumn Statement 2022 announcement. Future revisions to plans will be subject to Ministerial agreement and you are accountable for ensuring formal approval for delivery of UC throughout this Parliament and longer-term.

You are expected to run your project in accordance with the [Government Functional Standard for Project Delivery](#), the other [Functional Standards](#) as applicable to this **Universal Credit Programme** and the requirements of the Government Project Delivery Framework.

## **Extent and limit of accountability**

### Finance and Controls

HM Treasury spending controls will apply on the basis set out within the department's delegated authority letter. Where the Universal Credit Programme exceeds the delegated authority set by HM Treasury, the Treasury Approval Point process will apply, and the details of each approval process must be agreed with your HM Treasury spending team. You should consult departmental finance colleagues on how to go about this.

You should note that where expenditure is considered novel, contentious, repercussive, or likely to result in costs to other parts of the public sector, HM Treasury approval will be required, regardless of whether the programme expenditure exceeds the delegated authority set by HM Treasury. If in doubt about whether approval is required you should, in the first instance, consult departmental finance colleagues before raising with the relevant HM Treasury spending team.

The overall estimated budget, resourcing requirements and tolerances for your project/programme will be agreed as part of the approval process. You will be expected to deliver within these tolerances and report quarterly on these as part of GMPP reporting.

You should operate at all times within the rules set out in [Managing Public Money](#). In addition, you must be mindful of, and act in accordance with, the specific HM Treasury delegated limits and Cabinet Office controls relevant to Universal Credit Programme. Information on these controls can be found here: [Cabinet Office controls](#).

### Delegated authority

You are authorised to:

- approve expenditure of £10m;
- agree project rescheduling of agreed milestones, but rescheduling beyond that must be agreed with Universal Credit Programme Board and maybe subject to further levels of approval at Change Portfolio Board, if delays to critical milestones are material to delivering the outcomes within the business case; and
- recommend the need to either pause or terminate the programme where necessary and in a timely manner.

These authority limits are subject to change and other conditions, or tolerances may be set as part of the business case approval and ongoing monitoring processes which you should then operate within.

Where issues arise which take you outside of these authority limits which you are unable to resolve, you are responsible for escalating these issues to the accounting officer, Peter Schofield.

## Governance and assurance

You should pay attention to ensuring effective governance for your Universal Credit Programme, including through the Programme Board with appropriate membership and clear terms of reference.

As primary owner, you must ensure that the Universal Credit Programme secures approval from DWP Investment Committee and HMT for any changes to the business case. You should also ensure that the Universal Credit Programme remains aligned to the strategic outcomes, costs, timescales, and benefits in line with the approved business case as well as monitoring the context within which the Universal Credit Programme is being delivered to ensure it remains valid.

Where a change impacts the scope, costs, benefits, or planned delivery milestones agreed as part of an agreed business case, you are responsible for following the agreed change request approval process and setting a new, approved, business case baseline.

You are responsible for bringing to the attention of the accounting officer any material changes in the Universal Credit Programme which could require a new accounting officer assessment to be completed and published. [Guidance on completing accounting officer assessments](#) for major projects is available from HM Treasury.

Although you are directly accountable for this Universal Credit Programme, you are also expected to support delivery of the department's overall strategic objectives. This means that you are expected to work collaboratively with other SROs and project directors in adjacent projects and programmes and with the Departmental Change Portfolio Office and Chief Portfolio Officer to manage dependencies, resources, schedules, and funding to support delivery of the overall change the department needs to achieve its strategic objectives.

You should ensure that appropriate and proportionate assurance is in place and agree on the level and frequency of assurance reviews through the maintenance of an integrated assurance and approvals plan. You should develop this plan and its maintenance in collaboration with the Departmental Assurance Coordinator and the Infrastructure and Projects Authority.

## Universal Credit Programme status, reporting and transparency requirements

The Universal Credit Programme status is reflected in the most recent quarterly return on the Universal Credit Programme to the Infrastructure and Projects Authority and is the agreed position as you assume formal ownership of the programme.

You are responsible for ensuring the honest and timely reporting on the position of the Universal Credit Programme to the Infrastructure and Projects Authority while it remains on the GMPP and for providing reports and information to the Departmental Change Portfolio Office as required. Information on the Universal Credit Programme will be published annually by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority.

As part of the government's commitment to transparency on major infrastructure projects, you are responsible for publishing on GOV.UK:

- A summary of the HM Treasury approved Full Business Case; and
- A close out report after Universal Credit Programme has completed.

## Development and support

As a graduate of the Major Projects Leadership Academy (cohort 10) and a Master Practitioner in Project Delivery, you are expected to maintain your continuing professional development as a project leader,

including your status as an accredited assurance reviewer. To maintain your accreditation, you will be required to participate in a review at least once every 12 months.

The Department will assist you in securing the necessary resources to support the Universal Credit Programme, and will set clear guidance, requirements and standards, which align to the [Government Functional Standard on Project Delivery](#), to enable good governance and effective delivery. You will be part of the department's cohort of major project leaders who will be expected to support each other, share good practice and lessons learned and to collectively develop solutions.

The Infrastructure and Projects Authority will be available to you for support, advice, and assurance throughout the Universal Credit Programme's time on the GMPP.

The Change Portfolio Board will provide ongoing oversight and support and will take steps to help resolve and escalate risks, issues or constraints that are acting as a blocker to successful delivery.


We would like to take this opportunity to wish you every continued success in your role as SRO.

Yours sincerely,



**PETER SCHOFIELD**

Permanent Secretary, Department for Work and Pensions



**NICK SMALLWOOD**

Chief Executive Officer, Infrastructure and Projects Authority

---

## CONFIRMATION OF ACCEPTANCE OF APPOINTMENT

I confirm that I accept the continued appointment of Senior Responsible Owner for the Universal Credit Programme including my personal accountability for implementation, as set out in the letter above.



**Neil Couling CB CBE**

Date: 19 June 2023

