

## **DRAFT LETTER FOR THE SIGNATURE OF MR JOHNSON TO**

Jeff Rooker MP  
Minister of State for Social Security  
Department of Social Security  
Richmond House,  
79 Whitehall  
LONDON  
SW1A 2NS

On behalf of all the members of the Horizon Working Group I should like to express our gratitude to you for returning to the Group so promptly with your team , and for setting out very fully for us where you have got to in your plans to move to ACT from 2003, what remains to be done, and how you intend to set about that.

At the meeting you also returned to the questions which had been raised earlier on the recent BA mailshot about the child benefit allowance. The Group was grateful for your clarification that the policy on periodicity of payment of this allowance has remained unchanged since 1982, and that the policy on methods of payment, whereby recipients can freely choose between payment by ACT or payment by order book at post offices, also remains unchanged. The Group was also grateful for your assurance, which we entirely accept, that the wording on ACT used in the mailshot is that which has appeared consistently over the past few years on a wide range of BA's social security forms and leaflets.

There remains however one serious concern. So far as we have been able to establish, on every occasion in the past - whether addressing new claimants or, as in this case, claimants already being paid by order book - the wording on ACT has been accompanied by additional wording making clear that payment by order book at post

offices is or remains an option for claimants. It is the omission of any statement of this kind that has clearly confused many recipients of the mailshot and has understandably upset the sub-postmasters and others.

I therefore very much hope that on further reflection you will agree that in the circumstances the best course would be for BA to carry out a second mailshot to all recipients of the first, making clear to them that the option of payment by order book at post offices remains open to them whether they are weekly or monthly paid. A less satisfactory alternative might be for BA and POCL to agree on the wording of a poster or leaflet that could be prominently displayed in all post offices reminding child benefit recipients that the choice of continuing to be paid by order book at post offices, whether or not the periodicity of their payments is changing, remains open to them.

Finally, one lesson that we can perhaps all draw from this episode is that if there had been a prior dialogue between BA and POCL about the impending issue of this mailshot, much of the damage and potential embarrassment could readily have been avoided. At the same time, the relationship between the two sides would thereby have been strengthened, which we all agree will be essential to ensure a smooth transition to ACT from 2003.

I am copying this letter to members of the Horizon Working Group, and to Stephen Byers here.