



Rt Hon Damian Green MP
Secretary of State for Work and Pensions
Caxton House
Tothill Street
London, SW1H 9NA

Sunday 23 April 2017

Dear Secretary of State,

Our system of social security was established to ensure that no citizen, whatever their circumstances or disadvantages, would fall into such poverty that they were unable to afford the basic essentials of life – food, clothing, fuel and shelter.

We are writing to you because we are deeply concerned that the system now increasingly fails to provide that basic security for some of our most disadvantaged citizens, while some policies have the effect of keeping people in a constant state of deprivation, anxiety and stress.

The two-child limit on Universal Credit and tax credits inflicts poverty on children who have no power to change their circumstances. By 2020/21, at least two million children will be affected, many of whom are already in, or at risk of, poverty. Many families will be unable to meet their children's essential needs, and the majority of those affected will be working families. We would echo [the remarks](#) of Rachel Lampard, Vice-President of the Methodist Conference who said, "The two-child rule takes a knife to the social security safety net and hundreds of thousands of the UK's most vulnerable children will fall through the gap created." Also the Rev Dr Richard Frazer, Convener of the Church & Society Council of the Church of Scotland, who asked, "How can a decent society look at an impoverished child – and then ignore their needs?" We also find it difficult to imagine how anyone in government sat down and seriously wrote a policy with a 'rape clause' without [questioning](#) whether what they were doing was acceptable or decent.

Another example of a policy which punishes people for circumstances beyond their control is the cut to Employment and Support Allowance. All people who receive Employment and Support Allowance have been found unfit to work. Those in the Work Related Activity Group may be able to return to work in the future, but your own department acknowledges that this may be years hence. So the cuts for new claimants in this group are [harsh in the extreme](#) – a huge cut of £50 per week for claimants under 25 years, and £29 for those over 25 years.

It is clear that many Conservative MPs who voted for the ESA cut [did not understand](#) what they were voting for, stating publicly that people affected would be ‘fit to work’. We also believe some MPs were influenced by an assurance that Penny Mordaunt MP was working on measures to reduce the living costs of people affected by the cut, and that these measures [would be in place](#) before the cut was implemented. As far as we are aware, no such measures have been announced, and we believe that there is no justification whatsoever for this extremely harsh cut.

Despite record employment levels, many such policies have as their stated aim the desire to ‘incentivise’ people into work, primarily by reducing their incomes. But we believe these policies too often create severe hardship for people who are unable to work, or are not expected to work due to their personal circumstances – they may be ill, caring for a new baby, or caring for a sick relative. The vast majority of people affected by the benefit cap, for instance, are not in a position to work. Only [13% are claiming](#) Jobseekers Allowance, so it would appear to be punishing people for circumstances beyond their control. These and other measures are increasing poverty and deprivation for many people in dire straits who are simply unable to change their circumstances. The very people for whom social security was designed appear now to be punished for being in need.

You have stated that you believe the circumstances into which a child is born should not dictate their future path in life. We agree wholeheartedly. However we believe that such policies, by pushing more families into poverty, will actively damage the life chances of millions of children. The Institute for Fiscal Studies [predicts](#) that *absolute* child poverty after housing costs will rise to 30.3% in 2021–22 and says, “This increase is entirely explained by the impact of tax and benefit reforms over this parliament.”

You firmly state that work is the route out of poverty, but the erosion of support for low income working families means that this is too often [not the case](#), and nearly two-thirds of children in poverty now live in working families. Unemployment is [officially the lowest](#) it has been since 1975, but still the number of people living in poverty has risen to fourteen million. Campbell Robb of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has [commented](#), “While employment is at record levels, the rising cost of living and freeze on benefits and tax credits mean ordinary working families are facing a tough outlook.”

We are concerned that your department’s approach to poverty increasingly focuses on social problems and perceived lifestyle choices which are often in fact the symptoms of poverty, whilst ignoring the fundamental reality that many people, in work or out of work, simply do not have enough money to obtain the necessities of life. It seems perverse, for

instance, for the DWP to offer relationship advice to parents while simultaneously cutting their incomes, when money worries are the [commonest cause](#) of conflict in relationships.

We strongly believe that poverty-producing benefit freezes and cuts should be reversed, as they have taken, and continue to take, most from the [very people](#) who can least afford it. We would also suggest the following measures which would not involve additional spending, indeed could potentially save money, but could improve the lives of some of poorest and most disadvantaged people in society.

Benefit sanctions:

In April 2016 the Trussell Trust [said that](#) “89% of foodbanks reported benefit sanctions as an issue driving foodbank use and for 60% it is a major issue.” We would question if it is an appropriate or moral response to somebody being late for a Jobcentre appointment to apply a sanction that causes them, and their children, to go hungry? Quite simply, there is ample evidence to show that benefit sanctions are causing hunger and destitution, and there is no acceptable reason for a government to deliberately do this to its own citizens. It would not be acceptable to withhold food from a convicted criminal in prison as a punishment, so why is it acceptable to cause Jobseekers, people reliant on disability benefits, and their children, to go hungry? Latest academic [research](#) shows that one in five people affected by a benefit sanction is a child. Why are children being punished for the perceived failings of their parents?

Prior to the 2012 Welfare reform Act conditionality existed in the benefits system, but sanctions were nowhere near as prolific, harsh or punitive. Why not return to that position?

The Work Capability Assessment (WCA):

Given your acknowledgement that these assessments cause stress and anxiety, we would ask why you do not scrap the WCA completely – surely a system which is supposed to support people who are ill or disabled should not be a source of additional stress and anxiety?

We are also alarmed and extremely concerned that in the revised [WCA handbook](#), published in July 2016, assessors are told,

“The DWP has reviewed these guidelines and developed new guidance...The main change is that the focus on suicide has been reduced and the question of substantial risk placed in the context of work-related activity (WRA). The Department’s approach is that tailored WRA may be appropriate for most people with mental health conditions, including for people with suicidal thoughts.”

The WCA has been linked by coroners to a number of suicides, and we would ask you to consider the [shocking case](#) of 60-year-old Michael O’Sullivan. It is surely unacceptable that a medically unqualified DWP Decision Maker can override the opinion of a man’s doctors, ending in him taking his own life?

The WCA system has been sharply [criticised](#) by the National Audit Office as being poor value for taxpayers, costing more than it saves. It has also been [condemned](#) by the Public Accounts Committee as failing to meet acceptable standards.

The truth is that the WCA is based on a false, and rather insulting, assumption that many people who claim ESA simply need to be pushed on to the labour market. It is a crude and damaging system that the British Medical Association [has said](#) should be abolished.

Of course we share your wish that every ill or disabled person should have the opportunity of suitable employment where appropriate. But until that suitable employment is available in appropriate forms, pressurising disabled people and suggesting that they choose to live on benefits is insulting and damaging. If you were ill or disabled, would you be content to live in poverty on benefits, with all the limitations of your life that entails? If not, why do you think that ill or disabled people choose to do so?

Personal Independence Payments (PIP)

As with the WCA, the system of assessing people for this benefit is a chaotic and cruel shambles. People previously awarded Disability Living Allowance because they incur considerable extra expense are now being subjected to reassessments which seem to have only one aim – to save money. Despite the name of the benefit, hundreds of people a week are losing their independence as they lose an adapted car, or the funds to cover the costs of living with their illness or disability. Muscular Dystrophy UK has [reported](#), ‘following an extensive survey of individuals and families living with muscle-wasting conditions, this report has uncovered a benefits system that is failing to provide people with the support to which they are entitled. It is also inflicting huge stress and anxiety upon them in the process.’ Other charities, patient groups and disabled people’s organisations have reported to the same effect.

The problems with PIP assessments are so numerous and wide-ranging we would suggest that the most reasonable course of action would be to suspend the reassessment of people receiving Disability Living Allowance. Until a decent and appropriate system can be established, you should guarantee that all new claimants will be assessed by a medical professional who has specific knowledge of their condition, or accept the evidence of their own doctors.

The Independent Living Fund (ILF)

The ILF was helping nearly 17,000 disabled people with the highest support needs to live independently. When it was abolished and responsibility passed to local councils the funding was not ring-fenced, and campaigners predicted that cuts would ensue. This has proved to be the case. For instance, a Freedom of Information request to Waltham Forest Council [revealed](#) that 90 % of people had their support packages reduced, with a quarter losing more than 50 % of their support. This has resulted in a loss of dignity, with young disabled people forced to use incontinence pads because there is nobody to help them get to the toilet. Others have become more isolated, unable to leave their home. The ILF needs to be restored.

We note that three starkly contrasting documents have been published since your appointment. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) published its [report](#) of a four year inquiry into the impact of government policies, and found “reliable evidence that the threshold of grave or systematic violations of the rights of persons with disabilities has been met”.

We appreciate that that the policies so strongly condemned by the United Nations were implemented prior to your appointment, but we found your [response](#) deeply disappointing. The UN investigation was triggered by a formal request from a number of disabled people’s organisations, and gathered [evidence](#) from a wide range of sources. Far from being ‘patronising and offensive’ as you said, we believe the UN report accurately reflects the current situation for disabled people in the UK. We would ask you to treat it seriously, with respect, and to implement the recommendations contained in the report.

The second publication is a [report](#) from the Equality and Human Rights Commission which [states](#) that since 2010, rights for disabled people have regressed in many areas, with welfare reform having a “particularly disproportionate, cumulative impact” on disabled people’s right to independent living and an adequate standard of living.

The third document is the [Green Paper](#), ‘Improving lives: work, health and disability’, which is full of ambition to halve the disability employment gap. We strongly agree that every person who is able to work should have the opportunity of suitable employment. But we also believe that while so many people live in poverty, lacking the support they need to lead independent lives, those fundamental problems need to be addressed as a priority before real progress can be made in other areas.

The opportunity you and your government have to make a positive difference to the lives of millions of people is extraordinary. We hope and pray that you will take the opportunity for a substantial rethink, which we are more than willing to contribute to. We look forward to your considered response to the foregoing concerns, facts and questions.

Yours sincerely,

Simon Barrow

Director

Ekklesia

www.ekklesia.co.uk

3/3 Kirk Street, Edinburgh, EH6 5EX

(Ekklesia is an independent think tank promoting transformative ideas in politics, society and religion)

Simon Duffy

Director

Centre for Welfare Reform

www.centreforwelfarereform.org

(CWR is a citizen think tank working to create a world where everyone matters)