Dear Will

Might I thank you for making time to attend the Committee’s private evidence session on Universal Credit and “survival sex” on Wednesday 22 May? The personal testimonies we heard during that session were amongst the most powerful and harrowing evidence we have heard as a Committee. I am sure you will agree that our witnesses showed enormous courage in coming to talk to us about their experiences.

You will recall that witnesses discussed DWP’s written evidence submission to this inquiry. This was also raised in subsequent, public panels. The view from our witnesses with lived experience, and the organisations supporting them, was that the Department’s response was not up to the standard they would have expected.

Witnesses felt that the Department’s submission took an excessively defensive position. The submission argued that there is not a “direct causative link” between Universal Credit and “survival sex”, and that “it is clear that a correlation can often be found where it is looked for, however an actual causal link cannot be found”. As DWP’s own difficulties in demonstrating Universal Credit’s employment impact illustrate, cause and effect in social policy is often difficult, or impossible, to establish.¹

Nonetheless, multiple witnesses with lived experience and experience of providing front-line support told us that they have seen people engaging in survival sex as a result of problems with Universal Credit. Key issues included sanctions, levels of payment, delays in payment, deductions, and problems with using the digital service. For example, Laura Seebohm of Changing Lives explained:

*What we are told time and time again by the women we are supporting is that they are getting involved in selling sex directly because of issues around Universal Credit […] We have seen numbers increasing of women starting to sell sex and they have not done that before. […] We also see women, as Amber said, who have stopped selling sex. We had a woman who had not sold sex for 17 years going back on to the streets. Yes, we might not be able to give an absolute statistical causal link to this. However, I think the fact that women tell us time and time again, where we now expect it in our services, [there is] this link between Universal Credit and financial hardship and increasing likelihood.*

As it stands, the Department’s response gives the impression that it is dismissing valuable lived experience and evidence from the front line as mere “anecdote”, rather than taking the opportunity to engage with the complex issues at hand. This is doubly unfortunately since, as the Department acknowledges, there is a paucity of “hard data” on this subject. Evidence from front-line services therefore offers a particularly important means of understanding the issue, but the Department’s response gives the impression it is unwilling to listen. I am sure this cannot be what you intended.

You will be giving evidence to the Committee on this topic on 12 June. Before that, I would like to extend to you an offer to submit a revised written evidence memorandum, engaging properly with the concerns raised in the Committee’s private and public evidence session. The Committee would particularly welcome hearing about what the Department is doing to better understand this issue and the features of Universal Credit that might feed into it, and how you are working with organisations in this area to ensure that all claimants are receiving the support that they need.

I would be grateful if you could send your revised submission by Wednesday 5 June, to allow time for it to be incorporated in briefing and circulated to the Committee.

With very best wishes and I look forward to hearing from you,

Rt Hon Frank Field MP
Chair, Work and Pensions Committee