



Work and Pensions Committee

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25 July 2019

Rt Hon Amber Rudd MP
Secretary of State for Work and Pensions
Department for Work and Pensions

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education

Dear Amber x Gavin

Might I begin by welcoming the Secretary of State for Education to his new role?

School holiday poverty

The Work and Pensions committee joined with the Education Committee on 3 July to hear evidence about school holiday poverty, from a panel of four mums and from five organisations which support parents.

The testimony we heard was profoundly distressing. We heard about parents going without meals and surviving on cereal just to make sure their children were fed. We heard about families being plunged further into debt, just to get by.

The two Committees plan to hear further evidence on this issue in the autumn, and in due course to produce a report with recommendations for action. In the meantime, we would be grateful if you would consider the evidence we have heard, and reflect on what immediate action the Government might take.

In particular, we would like to draw your attention to the following key issues that were raised with us in evidence.

Childcare costs

All of the mothers we spoke to listed childcare costs, and specifically the need to pay costs upfront, as one of the biggest challenges they face in the holidays.

The Work and Pensions Committee has already reported on the challenges faced by parents claiming childcare support under Universal Credit. We very much welcome



the constructive approach that the DWP is now taking to engaging with those recommendations, but there is a need for really urgent action.

Our panel of four mums agreed unanimously and enthusiastically that they would prefer to return to the support offered under Working Tax Credits—which is less generous—than continue to bear the upfront costs required under Universal Credit. That is surely a sign that there is something seriously wrong with the system.

Might you please look again at this issue in the light of the new evidence we have heard?

The Government has rejected the Work and Pensions Committee's recommendation that it develop Universal Credit's systems to enable childcare costs to be paid directly to childcare providers. However, the Minister for Housing Support, Families and Child Maintenance told the Work and Pensions Committee on 17 July that the Department will introduce direct payments of Funeral Expenses Payment to funeral providers, because this works better for claimants.

Might the Department for Work and Pensions look again at direct payments to childcare providers for Universal Credit claimants?

School uniform

The need to buy school uniform further exacerbates the financial difficulties that many parents face during the summer holidays. Parents told us that the cost of uniform "could be in the hundreds of pounds". We heard about the problem of schools requiring that generic items of clothing are bought from a specific supplier, preventing parents from buying better value equivalents from supermarkets.

The Welsh Government has recently published statutory guidance to try to tackle this problem.

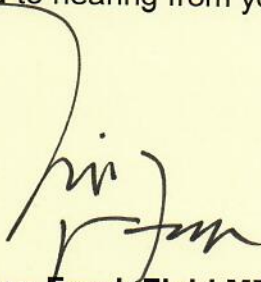
Might you please consider what the Government might do to support parents in England who are struggling with the costs of school uniforms?

Government support for holiday schemes

In 2018, the Department for Education announced the Holiday Activities and Food Research Fund, and said that it would undertake initial research in 2018 followed by a targeted pilot programme in the 2019 summer holidays. The Government's website says that the "2019 programme will help the Department for Education continue to research how it can best support children eligible for free school meals during the holidays, testing a new model in which local co-ordinators oversee and fund clubs in their areas".

Might you please let us know when the Government expects to move on from the pilot phase and to extend support to children across the country?

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

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Frank Field', written in a cursive style. A long, thin line extends from the top of the signature, curving upwards and then back down to the left, ending near the text 'I look forward to hearing from you,'.

Rt Hon Frank Field MP
Chair, Work and Pensions Committee