



Department
for Work &
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Rt. Hon. Frank Field MP

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Dear Frank,

Thank you for allowing me to attend the private evidence session on Universal Credit and 'survival sex' on Wednesday 22 May. As you say, the personal testimonies we heard were powerful and very moving and I join you in commending the bravery shown by the witnesses in talking about their experiences.

If helpful, the Department would be more than willing to look into these specific cases, and at any others which the Committee might be able to provide, to further explore why these individuals found themselves in a position where they felt they had to resort to 'survival sex'.

I was disappointed to learn that the Committee and some stakeholders believed that our original memorandum suggested that the Department is unwilling to listen to the experience and expertise of those who have contributed evidence to the inquiry. Nothing could be further from the truth. Rather our original memorandum was an effort to provide some wider context to the inquiry, to present evidence that illustrates the complex nature of the issue at hand and to ensure that this complexity was recognised during the inquiry. Our evidence was submitted before the publication of the other evidence which the Committee received from stakeholders and those with lived experience. I recognise that similar points were also made by several of those who provided evidence to the Committee, outlining the difficulty of looking at the issue of 'survival sex' solely in relation to Universal Credit.

As the evidence presented to the Committee suggests, there are some Universal Credit claimants who feel they must resort to 'survival sex' and we are committed to supporting these claimants. Both the Secretary of State and I hope to meet with a range of stakeholders to discuss some of the evidence which they presented to the Committee in the coming weeks. A number of the stakeholders who submitted evidence to the Committee for this inquiry have not been amongst our main stakeholders thus far; we hope to engage with

some of them directly and to listen to their feedback going forward to help us address the issues they are concerned about.

I would also like to thank you for offering the Department a chance to revise the written evidence memorandum. The revised memorandum emphasises our willingness to listen and to engage more fully with the concerns raised by the witnesses and those submitted in writing to the Committee on this important issue.

We have decided not to respond directly to the evidence submitted both in writing and orally to the Committee in our revised memorandum. This is not a case of the Department being unwilling to consider the issues raised. On the contrary, I am looking forward to discussing many of these important issues at our evidence session on 12 June. However, I would like to discuss a couple of the major issues raised which were raised at the evidence session.

- 1) A number of stakeholders raised concerns with the fact that claimants have to wait to receive their first Universal Credit payment, and expressed concerns at delays in payment. We appreciate these concerns and we understand that for some claimants waiting for their first Universal Credit payment can be a challenge. However, on Universal Credit no-one has to wait five weeks to receive their money: advances of up to 100 per cent of their first indicative award are available from day one where needed. As the Committee is aware, we have implemented a range of measures to support claimants during their first assessment period, such as removing waiting days and introducing the two-week transitional housing payment for those claimants moving onto Universal Credit from Housing Benefit. We will also be introducing a two-week run on for eligible claimants of Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance from July 2020.
- 2) We also acknowledge the concerns raised about the Department's use of sanctions and the impact of financial hardship on claimants. We recognise the need to ensure that the most vulnerable are protected in the welfare system. That is why where a claimant makes us aware of a good reason for failing to meet a requirement (such as hospitalisation or emergency childcare), they will not receive a sanction. If information amounting to good reason comes to light after a sanction has been applied, the sanction can be overturned and money repaid via a mandatory reconsideration. We are aware of the financial impact of sanctions and the need to put appropriate safeguards in place. That is why during a sanction Recoverable Hardship Payments are available to cover basic needs such as food and fuel, while other elements (for housing and children) remain in payment.

We have listened to stakeholders about the need for sanctions to be more proportionate, and that long sanctions can be counterproductive. That is why we recently announced that we would be abolishing three-year sanctions, to ensure that long sanctions are not undermining our goal of supporting people into work. However, we know this area remains a concern for our stakeholders and we have committed to publishing an evaluation on the effectiveness of Universal Credit sanctions at supporting claimants to search for work with a view to making improvements where appropriate.

As some of the evidence provided to the Committee illustrates, there is clearly an issue surrounding the reputation of Universal Credit which in some cases is preventing people from applying for and receiving the benefits to which they are entitled. I recognise that more needs to be done by the Department to address some of the issues which contribute to this negative perception, and to make the best use of media and other communications channels to publicise the facts about Universal Credit and highlight where people can find more information. The Department will also continue to make changes to Universal Credit, where needed, to ensure the system works for all claimants.

However, it seems equally clear that more needs to be done to counter the myths that have arisen around Universal Credit, which may colour people's impressions of the system before they have even experienced it first-hand. In this, I would greatly appreciate the help of the Committee to ensure that any misunderstandings or misconceptions of how Universal Credit works or what it seeks to achieve are challenged and corrected. In the recent evidence session, I noted that there were a number of these misconceptions which went uncorrected. I have included a small sample of these as an annex to illustrate this point, but would be happy to write with further examples if it would be of use to the Committee.

I am sure we agree that it is essential that people feel at ease and equipped to claim the benefits they are entitled to.

I hope you find the above information useful, and thank you once again for your kind invitation. I look forward to discussing these issues further with the Committee on 12 June.

Yours ever



Will Quince MP

Minister for Family Support, Housing and Child Maintenance

Annex A

- It was suggested that claimants only have 30 minutes in which to make their Universal Credit claim. This is not the case. Once claimants have created their account, their progress will be saved automatically as they navigate from page to page. The system will log claimants out of their account if they do not enter anything or click anything for more than 15 minutes; but if this occurs, claimants just need to log back in to their account and they are able to continue on from where they left off.
- It was suggested that a panel of claimants should be set up to redesign or advise DWP on Universal Credit and the Committee commented that this sort of engagement had 'never been done'. The Department does engage with claimants on a very regular basis to ensure that their feedback and experiences are taken into consideration. The Department directly engages with claimants regularly and our product development team spend time every week in Jobcentres talking to claimants and incorporating their feedback. We also work closely with a range of charities and stakeholders to engage with claimants, and receive valuable feedback from our frontline staff all of which contribute to the feature design of Universal Credit.
- It was suggested that the Universal Credit award is made directly to the head of the household. This is not the case. Both members of a couple in a joint claim nominate the bank account that the Universal Credit award is paid into. As the Committee is aware, the Department has committed to looking at what more can be done to ensure that the Universal Credit payment is paid directly to the main carer as around 60 per cent of Universal Credit payments to a household are made into a woman's bank account. Furthermore, split payments are available where needed and the award can be split to ensure that the person with primary caring responsibilities receives a greater proportion of the award.
- It was suggested that staff working for the Department were chasing targets for refusing people access to benefits. This is not the case and the Department is committed to helping claimants to access the benefits to which they are entitled. One of the main justifications for implementing Universal Credit was a desire to simplify the system to make it easier for claimants to access all the benefits they are entitled to.