

MAYOR OF LONDON

Rt Hon Thérèse Coffey MP

Secretary of State for Work and Pensions
Department for Work and Pensions
Caxton House
Tothill Street
London SW1H 9NA

Date: 14 April 2020

Dear Thérèse,

In my recent letter to the Prime Minister, I expressed my support for the Government's action to put in place measures to support jobs, protect incomes, and bolster the welfare system. I would like to extend the same thanks for the positive steps you and your department have taken to date amidst the most unprecedented pressure.

However, I have also raised concerns on behalf of Londoners that more needs to be done to support some of the most vulnerable members of society. These concerns are shared by many in civil society and the community groups we work with – for example, Child Poverty Action Group, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Shelter among others. I have suggested a number of additional changes to the welfare system that would make a real difference.

Improving access to immediate financial support

It is vital that everyone who needs financial support as a consequence of the COVID-19 outbreak, both in London and nationally, can access it straight away. At present, those with no recourse to public funds, many of whom have been hit particularly hard by job losses in London, are excluded from most benefits and are at serious risk of slipping into destitution. Those who are able to access Universal Credit are also faced with the difficult choice between five weeks with no income at all or claiming an advance payment and reducing their income for the next six to twelve months.

To ensure that those who need support the most can access it straight away without going into debt, I urge the Government to:

- suspend no recourse to public funds conditions.
- offer non-repayable advances to all new Universal Credit claimants.

Increasing capacity to process the sharp rise in new benefit claims

It is equally important that sufficient resources are in place to deal with the increased volume of claims for Universal Credit. I welcome your announcement that 10,000 existing staff are being redeployed to this end and more are being recruited, but I am deeply concerned by the latest figures showing that almost 1 million people have made a claim in recent weeks. This unprecedented surge risks pushing the system past breaking point.

MAYOR OF LONDON

To ensure that the extra capacity you are creating can focus on processing new claims, it is surely sensible to stop those already receiving support through legacy benefits from moving on to Universal Credit. To do this, and further ease the pressure on the system, I urge you to:

- temporarily close the gateway from legacy benefits to Universal Credit to stop people naturally migrating in the event of a change of circumstances.
- halt the Universal Credit managed migration process and redeploy staff to support with processing claims.
- work with the Government Digital Service to ensure that a suitable identity verification process is in place for claimants who do not possess, or cannot afford, official documents.
- suspend requirements to provide medical evidence in support of a claim.

Ensuring that payments cover the basic cost of living and housing costs

The announcements by the Chancellor that Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit payments will be increasing by £20 a week and that Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates will also be rising are welcome and will provide much needed additional support to many households.

However, claimants with children, despite benefiting from these general increases, will not receive any additional support to cope with the significant extra costs they currently face in light of school closures. As I made clear in my recent letter to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the increases to LHA rates, despite being significant, fall well short of what is required to cover the full costs of rent for many Londoners, particularly those who could not have anticipated their current loss of earnings.

To ensure that benefits are sufficient to cover increased costs during the crisis, I urge the Government to:

- uprate Child Benefit payments by £10 a week per child as suggested by Child Poverty Action Group.
- increase the amounts available to private tenants through Housing Benefit and the housing support element of Universal Credit, realigning rates with median market rents for all claimants (as proposed by Shelter) and covering in full the rents of those unable to pay them due to COVID-19.
- allocate additional funding to local authorities for Discretionary Housing Payments, along with the resources to administer payments.

Removing unnecessary deductions to protect those in vulnerable situations

It is vital that we protect the incomes of those in the most vulnerable situations throughout this crisis. I welcome your decision to suspend work capability and health assessments, and work search requirements for the next three months. I was also pleased to see the suspension of recovery of benefit overpayment announced too. However, I am still concerned that a number of policies remain in place that have the potential to, or already are, reducing benefit payments for many claimants. For example, households currently subject to the benefit cap will not benefit at all from the increases to Universal Credit and Tax Credits.

MAYOR OF LONDON

To ensure that benefit incomes are not reduced unnecessarily, I urge you to:

- suspend the benefit cap at least for the duration of the crisis.
- suspend all sanctions and deductions for the duration of the crisis and clearly communicate to claimants that this has been done.
- suspend the Bedroom Tax to ensure that those affected have maximum support with housing costs.
- protect larger families with increased costs by suspending the two-child limit.
- reinstate the previous level of benefits for disabled claimants who are part way through a mandatory reconsideration appeal.

I am also particularly concerned by the increased risk to victims of domestic and financial abuse whilst lockdown measures are in place and how this interacts with single household payments under Universal Credit. I have written to the Home Secretary about domestic abuse, and my officers would be keen to talk to your team about how we can support you to tackle this, and the other issues outlined above.

I appreciate the extraordinary pressure that both you and your department are under at present, and I would like to thank you again for the steps you have taken already.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Personal Data

Sadiq Khan
Mayor of London

Cc: Paul Scully MP, Minister for London
Sir Edward Lister, 10 Downing Street