

Rt. Therese Coffey MP  
Secretary of State  
Department for Work and Pensions  
Caxton House  
Tothill Street  
SW1A 9NA

24<sup>th</sup> March 2020

Dear Secretary of State,

I am writing further to my letter to the Chancellor last week, attached, about support for families with children during the Covid-19 crisis.

Last week, I urged the Chancellor to be bold and ambitious in his support to families. Overall, I think he rose to this challenge and I am particularly pleased to see the introduction of income protection, an increase in the local housing allowance and an increase in the basic Universal Credit allowance. I am also pleased that the Department for Education has committed to delivering a voucher system for families eligible for free school meals. Yet, such is the scale of the current crisis these measures were both unprecedented in their scale, and lacking in some of the particular support that families need. I am writing to you today to ask that you use the benefits system to put in place further measures targeted at those families with children most affected.

As I outlined in my letter last week, I am concerned by the unprecedented pressure being placed on the Universal Credit (UC) system as millions attempt to access the system for the first time, and legacy claimants find their circumstances changing. I understand that the uplift in UC isn't reflected in the equivalent legacy benefits. Can you confirm if this is the case? If it is not, the system will need to cope with up to 2million additional transfers as people transition. I would be grateful if you could explain what procedures are in place to mitigate for the rise in applications, and what is the safety-net if the system simply cannot process the number of applications in time. I hope you will be able to prioritise families with children, and those from vulnerable groups (such as care leavers), in processing claims. I would be grateful for an urgent briefing from your officials on this issue.

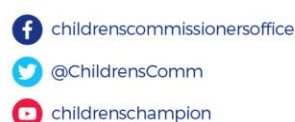
In addition, there are three measures I would like to see the Government adopt:

- An increase in child benefit. None of the measures announced by the Chancellor last week acknowledged the particular costs associated with raising a family. Children need to be fed, clothed, housed and now educated. This is not cost-neutral compared to being a childless household. While an increase in the basic rate of UC is welcome, it does not seem fair that the same rise is given to those with and without children. Many moving on to UC for the first time will now be eligible for FSM, but, as you know, there are delays with take-up for this. I, would, therefore urge the Government to consider an increase in child benefit. A short-term increase in child benefit would:
  - Lead to an immediate increase in family income at a time when many other sources of income are uncertain. In doing this, it would alleviate some of the short-term issues associated with accessing other forms of Government support, whether they be the support offered to small businesses, the income guarantee scheme or applications to UC.
  - It would acknowledge the particular additional costs associated with raising children. This is not something other forms of emergency Government support have yet recognised.

Children's Commissioner for England: Anne Longfield OBE

Post: Sanctuary Buildings, 20 Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT  
Tel: 020 7783 8330 Email: [info.request@childrenscommissioner.gov.uk](mailto:info.request@childrenscommissioner.gov.uk)  
Visit: [www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk](http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk)

Help at hand is a service for children and young people in care,  
leaving care, living away from home or working with children's services  
Tel: 0800 528 0731 Email: [help.team@childrenscommissioner.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:help.team@childrenscommissioner.gsi.gov.uk)



- Families will be coming on to UC in circumstances they could never have envisaged, and therefore the five week delay before payments commence is likely to be particularly difficult. While an increase in child benefit would provide some additional support to families in this period, I would also like to see upfront payments to be made automatic for new claimants and legacy claimants moving on to UC.
- Finally, I would like to see a further increase in the money available for local authorities to distribute through the Hardship Fund. While the money announced in the budget was welcome, my understanding is that it will be mainly used for Council Tax relief. I would like to see further money released to help:
  - Families who have fallen through the gaps between the other forms of support or have hit crisis while trying to access UC.
  - Care leavers, many of whom will be in the industries most exposed to this crisis and who don't have the same support networks to fall back on.
  - Families with no recourse to public funds. Some of whom will be in the particularly invidious position of having lost work, being unable to access benefits and being unable to return home.

I hope the Government will now look specifically at the needs of families and their children. I look forward to your response.

Best wishes,



Anne Longfield OBE  
Children's Commissioner for England