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Fiona Bruce MP
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Dear Fiona

I was very pleased to be able to respond to many of the important issues raised during the Westminster Hall debate on 14 September 2016 on a cross-departmental strategy on social justice. As I mentioned during the debate the Prime Minister has established a new Social Reform Cabinet Committee to oversee our approach to tackling social injustice. I welcomed the opportunity to be part of a wide-ranging debate as we begin to shape this agenda. I agreed to follow up in writing to respond to some of the points I was not able to cover in my speech.

As well as ensuring join-up at Cabinet level, my officials work very closely with colleagues in other government departments including on issues relating to families, children and relationships. This helps us develop a shared understanding of what works, for example, on early interventions.

A number of colleagues spoke about children and young people's mental health, which is a priority for this Government. We have committed an additional £1.4bn of funding which will be used to help radically improve mental health services for children, young people and new mothers over the course of this parliament. The importance of providing parents with support on children's mental health was mentioned during the debate. The Government has provided funding to *MindEd* to provide a set of information and resources on mental health aimed specifically at families and we also continue to provide funding to the Young Minds Parents Helpline which provides support to parents of children with mental health issues.

It was noted that the pupil premium enables schools to provide extra support so that all pupils have the opportunity to realise their potential. The pupil premium is focused on a range of pupil groups known collectively as "disadvantaged". For these groups – those who have claimed free school meals within the past six years ("EVER6 FSM"), looked-after children and children who have left care through adoption, special guardianship and child arrangement orders – there is clear statistical evidence of their under-achievement at school relative to their non-disadvantaged peers. While I

understand the wish to extend the support available through the pupil premium to pupils facing a wider range of challenges, I am pleased to confirm that the flexibility in the policy already allows for a degree of this coverage. Firstly, we know that a proportion of the EVER6 pupil cohort also experiences other disadvantages – including undertaking caring roles and experiencing family breakdown – so schools find the measure is a helpful proxy that enables them to provide extra support to pupils with multiple needs. Secondly, the grant is not a personal budget and school leaders have freedom to spend it as they wish. We know that, in addition to those pupils who attract the funding to the school, head teachers often include other vulnerable children in the support being made available through the grant.

A number of colleagues spoke about benefit sanctions. The decision to apply a sanction is always thoroughly considered and is not something we do lightly. It is a consequence of a claimant not meeting their work-related requirements in return for receiving the full award of benefit. There are a number of steps in the decision making process to ensure that our decisions are correct and the claimant will always be encouraged to give their reasons for not meeting agreed requirements. If a claimant has a good reason a sanction will not be applied. We have a well-established system of hardship payment provision for claimants who are sanctioned. Claimants are told about the availability of hardship payments when sanctions or benefit suspensions apply, and we've made improvements to the payment process to ensure that hardship applications are processed within 3 days.

In terms of budgeting support under Universal Credit, the Personal Budgeting Support (PBS) process provides a conversation with all claimants at their initial work search interview to gauge their potential support needs – this could include money advice with a mix of online, telephone and face to face support. The PBS approach establishes a clear connection between financial responsibility and work readiness and all claimants are given a Money Advice Service leaflet and encouraged to access the support offered, either online or by phone. The Work Coach can also determine if there is an Alternative Payment Arrangements (APA) need e.g. a managed payment of UC housing costs to their landlord, more frequent payments; and split payments in exceptional cases.

Work coaches also assess claimants' situations on a case by case basis, including if there is a need for an APA where they may be experiencing financial abuse. The work coach maintains an on-going conversation with the claimant at subsequent interviews and we can split payments to members of the household where necessary. The work coach can also signpost vulnerable claimants to further help and support.

As I said during the debate, this government is committed to building a country that works for everyone and delivering social reform will be a priority.

I am copying this letter to Members of Parliament who spoke in the debate and placing a copy in the Library of the House.

*Yours ever
Caroline*

Caroline Nokes MP

Minister of State for Welfare Delivery