

JEREMY QUIN MP
Member of Parliament for Horsham



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

19th December 2016

Dear Constituent,

RE: BENEFIT SANCTIONS

Thank you for contacting me about benefit sanctions.

I was deeply saddened to read about the deaths reported in the media, and I extend my sincerest condolences to their friends and families.

While I feel it would be inappropriate for me to comment on individual cases, I am happy to clarify the Government's policies on benefit sanctions and welfare reform more broadly.

It is important to have a system based on fairness which will provide value for money and place greater emphasis on personal responsibility. The Government spends £94bn every year on working-age benefits, so unemployed people and people on low income can meet basic needs. Consequently, I believe that claimants have a responsibility to do everything they can to get back into work. There are now more than 700,000 vacancies in the labour market at any one time, and Jobcentre Plus provides a range of services for claimants. It is extraordinarily difficult to run a fair system without having some form of sanction available – a concept acknowledged by many right across the political spectrum.

Benefit sanctions are not new: they have existed for decades to encourage people to engage with the support being offered. Over 70 per cent of claimants say they are more likely to follow the rules if they know they risk having their benefits stopped. I am glad the overwhelming majority of claimants stick to their commitments and are not sanctioned.

However, I can assure you that sanctions are used as a last resort. I am reassured that the Government has put in place a comprehensive monitoring regime to ensure that sanctions are always and only applied where appropriate. Importantly, the decision to impose a sanction is taken by an independent decision maker, and everyone is made aware of their right to appeal. In my experience of talking to the relevant professionals as a member of the DWP Select Committee I was reassured that they genuinely viewed these sanctions as a last resort. I would like to emphasise that claimants have every opportunity to present additional evidence. Those in genuine need are able to apply for hardship payments; just under 90 per cent of JSA claimants applying for hardship payments are given an award.

I can further reassure you that the Department of Work and Pensions does not sanction vulnerable claimants – such as those with learning difficulties or mental health conditions without making every effort to contact them, their carer, or their healthcare professional first.

On investigation, I can report that the Department of Work and Pensions does not recognise the figure that 100,000 children were affected by sanctions. Every day, Jobcentre Plus staff work incredibly hard to support claimants into work, and their results are shown by the record number of people in work.

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Please allow me to reiterate that sanctions are only used as a last resort for the tiny minority who refuse to engage with support, and that sanctions for Jobseekers' Allowance claimants have fallen over the past year.

I would also like to reassure you that there are no targets for sanctions, and, in fact, the number of sanctions has gone down over the past year. Around 94 per cent of Jobseekers Allowance claimants stick to their commitments and are not sanctioned, and less than 1 per cent of Employment and Support Allowance claimants - the main in-work sickness benefit - are sanctioned. The number of claimants being sanctioned has also fallen dramatically in recent years.

Thank you again for taking the time to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jeremy Quin'.