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Rt Hon Sir George Howarth MP  
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9 June 2020

Dear Sir George

As you may know, your email of 18 May to the Cabinet Secretary has been passed to this Department. You wrote on behalf of your constituents regarding a recent report by Scope; 'The Disability Report'. I am replying as the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work.

The Disability Unit is working across Government to ensure that the needs of disabled people are centred in the Government's response to COVID19. This includes:

- working to improve accessibility and messaging on COVID19 for disabled people, for example:
  - making key Government guidance accessible and working with others on these issues, e.g. BBC News Channel is now broadcasting all daily press conferences with BSL, and BBC iPlayer uploads shortly afterwards; and
  - working with the Cabinet Office and Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) on their guidance on social distancing, to better reflect the needs of disabled people; and
- getting the guidance and policy right by working with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to ensure that non-shielded vulnerable people are able to get the food and essentials they need.

Where local authorities are using the easements to the Care Act introduced by the Coronavirus Act, we are clear they should do everything they can to continue meeting their existing duties. Where unable to do so, it is essential that local authorities prioritise care so that the most urgent and acute needs are met.

We recognise that COVID19 is imposing significant new pressures on the social care sector. We have now made £3.2 billion available to local authorities so they can address pressures on local services caused by the pandemic, including across adult social care. On 15 May, we published details of an additional £600 million Infection Control Fund for adult social care. This funding is to support adult social care providers in England to reduce the rate of transmission in and between care homes and to support workforce resilience.

The DHSC is tracking social care demand and workforce pressures in care homes during this incident. It is also collecting data from domiciliary care providers on COVID19 related pressures. Information from these will be shared across organisations who can help mobilise support, including DHSC, Regional Command Centres, Local Resilience Forums, local authorities, clinical commissioning groups, and the Care Quality Commission's inspection teams.

The Action Plan for adult social care includes an ambition to attract 20,000 people into social care over the next three months. A new national recruitment campaign will be launched shortly.

Progress is also being made to support those who are finding it difficult to get the food and essentials they need. The Government has put in place measures to support the most vulnerable. As of 21 May, 2 million food parcels have been delivered to the shielded group. Supermarkets have now made over 780,000 deliveries in England to those in the clinically vulnerable cohort although, due to the way supermarkets are reporting figures, it is more likely to be closer to 1 million.

Supermarkets have also increased available delivery slots, from 2.1 million before the epidemic to 2.6 million and this is on the way to 2.9 million in the next few weeks, significantly increasing capacity. Though it will not be enough to meet all of the demand, many shops are prioritising the most vulnerable or using a referral system in conjunction with Government and local authorities.

Almost 600,000 people are now registered as NHS volunteer responders. Verified volunteer responders can receive tasks to help those in their

communities, including through shopping for vulnerable people for food and essential supplies. Health and care professionals, and approved charities, can refer vulnerable individuals into the system to receive support from volunteers. Furthermore, it is now possible for individuals to self-refer for assistance, if they consider themselves to be vulnerable and in need of support. They, or one of their family members, can call 0808 196 3646 and ask for help to get food, prescriptions, and essential items. Over 120,000 community support tasks have already been carried out by the NHS volunteer responders.

The Government has also announced a suite of measures that can be quickly and effectively operationalised to benefit those facing the most financial disruption during the pandemic. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is experiencing significantly increased demand and has to prioritise the safety and stability of the benefits system overall. The Universal Credit IT system is more flexible than our legacy systems. It also uses different technology from other DWP systems and these older systems have complex interactions and interdependencies.

We estimate that 2.5 million households receiving Universal Credit will benefit straight away from the increase in the standard allowances which were announced on 20 March, and which is additional to the planned annual uprating. New claimants who have either become unemployed, or whose earnings or work hours have decreased because of the outbreak, will benefit too, subject to their eligibility.

We have also made a number of changes to legacy and other working age benefits in response to the COVID19 outbreak, including increasing certain entitlements, such as Local Housing Allowance. Up-to-date information about the employment and benefits support available, including Universal Credit, Statutory Sick Pay (SSP), New style Jobseeker's Allowance, and Employment and Support Allowance, can be found at: [www.understandinguniversalcredit.gov.uk/employment-and-benefits-support/](http://www.understandinguniversalcredit.gov.uk/employment-and-benefits-support/).

The COVID19 outbreak continues to be a rapidly evolving situation and we are keeping it under review.

Nobody has to wait five weeks for a payment under Universal Credit. New Claims Advances of up to 100 per cent of potential entitlement are available within a few days if a claimant needs support during their first assessment period. Face-to-face checks for advances have been removed due to COVID19 so people get the support they need despite COVID19 restrictions.

Face-to-face Jobcentre Plus appointments, work preparation, work search, and work availability requirements are suspended, initially until 30 June for all claimants. This means that claimants will not receive any new sanctions if they are unable to meet these commitments during this period. This will be reviewed at the end of June.

SSP is designed to balance support for an individual when they are unable to work because of sickness with the costs to employers of providing such support.

The Government recently published a consultation in which we sought views on a range of proposals to reform SSP and this forms part of a wider package of proposals which seek to reduce ill-health related job loss and support disabled people and people with health conditions to stay in and thrive in work. We received a good response from a range of stakeholders and we are currently reviewing the detailed responses to inform decisions on next steps. A response to the consultation will be published later this year.

SSP provides a minimum level of income for employees when they are off work sick. It is paid by employers at £95.85 per week for up to 28 weeks in any one period of entitlement. The costs of SSP are met in full by employers. The estimated cost to employers of SSP is £1.5 billion a year. Any increase to the rate of SSP would place an immediate, direct financial burden on employers at a time when we know many employers are struggling. This could put more jobs at risk.

Some employers may also decide to pay more, and for longer, through Occupational Sick Pay. 60 per cent of employees receive more than the statutory minimum from their employer.

In response to the coronavirus outbreak, SSP is now payable from the first day for employees who are sick, self-isolating or shielding due to coronavirus and are unable to work as a result.

It is important that people follow Government advice in order to prevent the national spread of COVID19. Temporarily suspending waiting days supports the Government's efforts to do so. This is an important, temporary measure in ensuring employees do not attend work during a severe outbreak.

The Coronavirus Act and measures are subject to regular Parliamentary scrutiny through the pandemic emergency, and regulations will be

reviewed as the Government continues to consider and develop its response.

However, SSP should not be looked at in isolation. Government support through the welfare system, including Universal Credit, is also available for those on low incomes, who need extra financial help. For those on Universal Credit, their award will rise if their income falls when they are on SSP. We have increased the standard allowance in Universal Credit by £20 a week for one year, which will mean claimants will be up to £1040 a year better off.

During the coronavirus outbreak, we are making sure that benefits are easily accessible and more supportive for those who need to make a claim.

I hope your constituents will find this reply helpful.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in purple ink that reads "Justin". Below the signature is a horizontal purple line that ends in an arrowhead pointing to the right.

**Justin Tomlinson MP**  
Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work