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Rt Hon Sir George Howarth MP
House of Commons

Our ref: MC2023/86027

1 February 2024

Dear Sir George,

Thank you for your email of 8 November 2023 to the Secretary of State on behalf of one of your constituents about child poverty. I am replying as the Minister for Employment and I apologise for the delay.

Since 6 April 2017, families are able to claim support for up to two children, and there may be further entitlement for other children if they were born before 6 April 2017 or if an exception applies.

Families on benefits should face the same financial choices when deciding to grow their family as those supporting themselves solely through work.

We recognise that some claimants are not able to make the same choices about the number of children in their family, that is why exceptions have been put in place to protect certain groups.

Exceptions to the Two Child Policy applies to any child in a household who is adopted, when they would otherwise be in local authority care, or living long term with friends or family, who would otherwise be at risk of entering the care system. Or where a child is born to a young person for whom the benefit recipient is also responsible (in the case of Universal Credit, that young person will make a separate claim upon turning 16).

Exceptions also apply to third and subsequent children who are additional children in a multiple birth or are likely to have been born as a result of non-consensual conception (which for this purpose includes rape or where the benefit recipient was in a controlling or coercive relationship with the child's other biological parent at the time of conception).

Child Benefit continues to be paid for all children in eligible families. An additional amount for any qualifying disabled child or disabled qualifying young person is payable regardless of the number of children in the household.

The benefit cap helps provide a strong work incentive and fairness for hard-working taxpaying households, whilst providing a reasonable safety net of support for the most vulnerable. Where possible it is in the best interests of children to be in working households and the benefit cap provides a clear incentive to move into work.

Exemptions apply to Universal Credit households with earnings of only £722 (£793 from April 2024) in an assessment period and to Housing Benefit claimants entitled to Working Tax Credits.

Households may also be exempt for a period of nine months if they have a sustained work history. To ensure the most vulnerable are supported, households receiving disability benefits and/or entitled to carer benefits are also exempt.

The Government recognises that high childcare costs can affect parents' decisions to take up paid work or increase their working hours which is why the changes to the Universal Credit childcare element announced in the Spring Budget 2023 now provide generous additional financial support to parents moving into work and/or increasing their working hours.

Eligible childcare costs that are repaid through the Universal Credit payment are exempt from the benefit cap.

The Government is committed to a sustainable, long-term approach to tackling child poverty and supporting people on lower incomes. In 2023/24 we will spend £276 billion through the welfare system in Great Britain including £124 billion on people of working age and children.

From April 2023, we have uprated benefit rates and State Pensions by 10.1 per cent and, subject to Parliamentary approval, working-age benefits will rise by 6.7 per cent from April 2024, in line with inflation.

With over 900,000 vacancies across the UK, the DWP focus is firmly on supporting people into and to progress in work. Its approach is based on clear evidence about the importance of parental employment, particularly where it is full-time, in substantially reducing the risks of child poverty and in improving long-term outcomes for families and children.

We have extended Free School Meal eligibility several times and to more groups of children than any other Government over the past half a century. This includes the introduction of universal infant free school meals and further

education free meals. We have permanently extended eligibility to children from all groups with no recourse to public funds.

Over one third of school children are now provided with Free School Meals, and we have protections in place, ensuring that eligible pupils keep their Free School Meal entitlement even if their household circumstances improve.

I hope this helps to explain the position to your constituent.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Jo Churchill". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

**JO CHURCHILL MP
MINISTER FOR EMPLOYMENT**