



TOBY PERKINS
Member of Parliament for Chesterfield



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Mr Damian Green MP
Secretary of State
Department for Work and Pensions
Caxton House
Tothill Street
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Dear Damian

The Police & Crime Commissioner for Derbyshire, Hardyal Dhindsa, recently arranged an emergency summit to discuss the increasing problem with rough sleeping and homelessness in Chesterfield. The summit was attended by police, local businesses, housing providers, charities, church groups, local authority managers, journalists, councillors and stakeholders all trying to come together and formulate solutions for the problems we are seeing.

Our market town is recording rough sleeping levels similar to what we would previously only expect in city centres and has resulted in an increase in street drinking, substance misuse and antisocial behaviour. It is clear from the contribution of attendees of the summit that welfare reform, particularly sanctions, the Bedroom Tax and the changes to Local Housing Allowance, has contributed to the rise in rent arrears and homelessness. Universal Credit is due to be rolled out in Chesterfield in November and the meeting heard concerns that this will exacerbate the problem and cause huge financial pressures for social housing providers.

A recent report by the Association of Retained Council Housing and the National Federation of ALMOs has highlighted that for claimants on Universal Credit, 73% were in arrears in March 2017, compared to 31% of non-UC claimants, with average arrears almost double amongst UC claimants.

A recent survey by the Citizens Advice Bureau, of 800 claimants who sought their help with universal credit in pilot areas, found that 39% were waiting more than six weeks to receive their first payment and 57% were having to borrow money to get by during that time. The CAB survey also found that severe problems with the online application system and long waits to get help over the phone. Further problems due to maladministration and poor communication between DWP partners, has caused additional delays, increased arrears and severe hardship for claimants.

Toby Perkins, Member of Parliament for Chesterfield

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It is clear from the UC pilot areas that delays in payments and the paying the Housing Element direct to claimants are having a detrimental impact on the welfare of claimants and placing them at further risk of homelessness.

It was agreed at the meeting that I would write to the Government in an attempt to reduce the impact of welfare policy on homelessness. Can I suggest that the Government:

- Delays the roll-out of Universal Credit until the problems with the processing and administration of claims are resolved.
- Does a full assessment regarding the effect of UC on the increase in rent arrears and evictions.
- Creates a transitional funding pot for landlords to help them support vulnerable tenants through the roll-out of UC.
- Reconsiders the decision to pay the housing element of UC direct to tenants, particularly for those in social housing.
- Ends the 7 day waiting period for new claims and reduce the 42 day wait for the processing of initial payments.
- Excludes all families and individuals who are currently homeless from being transferred to UC until they are permanently housed.

When Universal Credit was first introduced the Department for Work & Pensions promised a 'Test and Learn' approach that would ensure UC responds to problems and is constantly reviewed and improved. The Government should stick to this promise and make the necessary changes to ensure UC does not lead to hardship and increased homelessness.

Yours sincerely

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