



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

David Rutley MP  
Minister for Welfare Delivery  
Department for Work and Pensions  
Caxton House  
Tothill Street  
London  
SW1H 9NA

Our Ref: SO30306

20 September 2022

Dear David,

**Re: Universal Credit easement and subsequent reverification**

We are writing to you to highlight the concerning experiences of Universal Credit (UC) claimants subject to reverification checks by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

As you will be aware, a number of UC claims made during the start of the pandemic have recently failed the delayed verifications, resulting in their claims being closed and generating massive debts for the claimants. This is causing undue stress on a number of our constituents, and we are hearing first-hand accounts of debt repayments being an underlying factor for use of foodbanks and in pushing people into destitution and homelessness. In one such case, one of our constituents is now facing a £27,000 debt repayment to DWP.

We fear the debt is extremely damaging to constituents and strongly believe that if UC was claimed in good faith, claimants should not be liable to repay the debt if they fail the delayed verification checks.

Furthermore, there is a lack of information provided to claimants on the reason why DWP have decided that their UC award was an overpayment, and also on how they are able to challenge this, which only adds to their distress. Caseworkers in MPs offices are subsequently left supporting constituents through complex appeals, and with limited guidance from DWP.

The Children's Poverty Action Group (CPAG) have also found evidence that indicates that DWP's approach to retrospectively decide a claimant was not entitled to UC and to then recover that UC income is unlawful. Further, DWP has mis-used its powers to terminate UC for failure to provide information or evidence. In cases where the management of termination has not complied with legislation, the overpayment and closure is rendered invalid. CPAG recommend that DWP take decisions affecting claimants' entitlement in accordance with the law by following correct suspension and termination procedures, and by ensuring decision-makers are aware that a single missed deadline by a claimant is not a sufficient reason to change original entitlement decisions, without considering other evidence held by the DWP.

CPAG also make the following recommendations to DWP that we wish to highlight:

- Pause the recovery of UC overpayments while a decision is subject to a challenge (as

is the case with other benefits).

- Provide claimants with comprehensive information about the reason for a decision and overpayment issues.
- Communicate requests for evidence and information which could affect a claimant's entitlement by physical letter, in addition to existing methods. This is particularly important when contacting claimants who are no longer receiving UC.
- Urgently improve the mandatory reconsideration process, through which claimants can challenge a decision made by the DWP, making it possible to request a mandatory reconsideration via a closed digital UC account, and reducing the time claimants wait for the outcome.

We urge the Department to reconsider your policy of chasing overpayments made following easement at the beginning of the pandemic. And if you will not cancel these debts, we urge you to at least pause deductions/repayments until April 2023 to provide some breathing space to people who are already facing financial hardship this winter due to the cost of living crisis.

In reply to this letter, we ask that you set out your response to the CPAG recommendations above, and also that you detail what steps the Department are taking to ensure that those who are being chased for repayments of benefits following reverification will not face destitution.

Yours sincerely,



Sarah Olney  
Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament for Richmond Park

Sir Ed Davey MP  
Daisy Cooper MP  
Wendy Chamberlain MP  
Helen Morgan MP  
Sarah Green MP  
Wera Hobhouse MP  
Christine Jardine MP  
Layla Moran MP  
Tim Farron MP  
Munira Wilson MP  
Jamie Stone MP  
Alistair Carmichael MP  
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