Michael McMahon MSP  
Convener of Welfare Reform Committee

By email

Thank you for your letter dated 1 December 2014.

As you will be aware the Work and Pensions Select Committee have commenced an enquiry into benefit sanctions policy. My current focus is on helping the Committee with their enquiry and we are in the process of producing written evidence to the Committee which must be our priority at this time. Therefore, I must decline your invitation. However, I will be happy to share evidence with the Welfare Reform Committee once it is complete.

We welcome all contributions to the important debate about the use of food banks. To move this issue forward it is important to acknowledge that the reasons why people use food banks are complex and their use cannot be attributed to a single cause. I understand that the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Scotland will appear before your Committee on the 3 February 2015 to discuss these issues following his series of meetings with those who have provided evidence to you. I look forward to seeing the report of the outcome of those meetings and your discussion with the Scotland Office Parliamentary Under Secretary.

It is widely accepted that sanctions play an important role in the benefit system. We know sanctions are effective in encouraging compliance and we continue to manage the process so that sanctions are only imposed as a last resort - where claimants wilfully fail to meet reasonable requirements which are set to help them move closer or into work.

Our aim is to support claimants into work or closer to work and we know communication is key. To this end, we have introduced the claimant commitment, which is agreed between the claimant and the work coach, allowing both parties to discuss the best approach for that claimant, to help us
better understand the claimants’ circumstances and to ensure conditionality requirements are as tailored as possible. We have also implemented a number of improvements following Matthew Oakley’s Review of sanctions, which include:

- A review of all sanctions communications so that we have a better understanding of what works in driving customer behaviour and that customers are clearer about expectations on them and consequences for failing to meet requirements designed to help them move into work.
- We improved the hardship payment process in July 2014 so that vulnerable claimants are not left without any funds when sanctioned and have support in making applications.
- We published an accessible guide to sanctions in July 2014 in collaboration with stakeholders, advisers and claimants which explains what is expected from the claimant and consequences and can be found at the following link: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/379070/jobseekers-allowance-sanctions-dwpf15.pdf
- Improving claimants understanding of their responsibilities whilst on the Work Programme.

We are not complacent and are monitoring the policy - however, it is important that we allow these changes to be embedded so that we can fully understand the impact and continue to make improvements where they are needed.

Rt Hon Esther McVey MP
Minister for Employment