I am writing to you to highlight how recent changes in social security have severely affected vulnerable people.

I have been a civil servant for the past 3 years with high commendations regarding my work ethic. I am currently working towards promotion and I love my job. I am also doing an accelerated law degree via distance learning in the evenings and have a deep interest in how/why the legal system works. I believe in the principles that Scots law stands for.

The welfare reforms see me as: 22, single, working and therefore not needing any support. The key element that is missing is: I am disabled.

Since the age of 13, I have struggled with various mental health illnesses from self-harm, to eating disorders and depression. In 2012 I was finally diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder and underwent an 18 month programme, which was very challenging but really seemed like a positive step in my recovery. I suffer every day and was placed on numerous waiting lists for continued support, which was only fulfilled recently. Currently I have severe periods of depression, which make me numb and unable to concentrate. I also have problems with understanding peoples’ emotions, which can make building lasting relationships difficult. I need support from my family/friends and medical professionals.

In March 2013 I was diagnosed as Systemic Lupus (SLE), the most aggressive form of Lupus. Since then it has been unable to be controlled, meaning it affects all major joints, my skin and organs. The condition also makes me photosensitive and constantly fatigued. I have tried numerous medications and now take steroids (which have weakened my spine) and immunosuppressants (which have severe infection risks). In total I have to take almost 200 tablets per week, just to function. The constant medical input makes “normal” life for a 22 year old almost impossible.

In August 2014, after it being suggested by my specialist nurse due to financial strains, I requested the PIP application and a close friend assisted with completion. The sheer length of the form and vague questions made it very difficult to explain accurately how I was affected. The tick boxes are almost impossible. It was a highly distressing process and I couldn’t write due to the pain in my hands.

A few weeks after submission, I was informed I required an assessment. The assessment was cancelled twice at the last minute. I complained to Atos regarding these last minute cancellations and was given a £20 payment, but there was a three month delay.
In December 2014, my medical assessment was finally carried out. Neither of my supporters were able to attend due to the previous cancellations. I took letters and medications with me, expecting a detailed conversation and examination. It soon became obvious that this was not to be the case. The questions were vague and very difficult to answer. I was not asked about hospital admissions and she was aggressive and an inattentive listener, leading her to miss vital information.

When I spoke of self-harm, she asked to see and I refused. Upon my refusal, she belligerently insisted, “How am I meant to assess if you don’t show me?” I felt bullied and pressurized, and so humiliated, I showed my scars. She looked very disbelieving and said, “I can’t even see it.” I felt increasingly upset and so showed her fresh cuts on my chest. She replied “is that it?” Dismissive comments like these show a complete lack of understanding, a high degree of unprofessionalism and total insensitivity to mental ill people. I continued the assessment with tremors and controlled breathing to prevent panic attacks. The physical examination involved lying down and bending my knees. From this she stated I could walk, bend and stand for long periods. I left in hysterical tears. I again complained to Atos with no reply.

On Christmas Eve I received the news that I had been awarded zero points, meaning that I was not disabled. In January 2015, having sunken into a severe depressive spell, I was admitted to a psychiatric ward for suicidal ideation. It was a horrible time for me and my loved ones, as I could not see any positive way out. Financially I was starting to struggle under the strain of medical appointments and occupational therapy suggestions. Physically, the hours I was having to work were taking their toll on my lupus, which continued to flare badly, with more and more complications. I was asked if I was afraid of dying, but the truth was that I wasn’t. I was scared of living in isolation, battling my body on a daily basis for absolutely no quality of life.

Upon discharge, I applied for a mandatory reconsideration supplying over 80 pages of additional evidence from medical professionals (which came back no different) before appealing the decision. I had a two month phased return but it soon became apparent I was struggling. Occupational health (Atos) then decided I was not fit to work full time anymore.

In May 2015 the lower tribunal appeal was heard. A welfare rights officer represented me, though was not allowed to speak during the hearing. My Dad came as a supporter and my friend as a witness. The hearing lasted over an hour and a half, being questioned ruthlessly by the panel. The disability member and judge were both professional and polite, but also sympathetic to how difficult it was to express some of my problems. The third member, the doctor, had not practiced in years and had very poor social skills. She asked a question on time/distance which I did not know the answer to, yet repeated it for half an hour. This was very distressing and yet nobody was able to intervene as my supporters aren’t allowed to speak, even to
object. This was key when she asked a leading question: “the walk from A to B would take me 30 minutes but I am a very fast walker, how long would it take you?” Everyone was shocked as this walk was one street away and takes normally 5-10 minutes. She did not ask any of the required questions about medications or my medical history. After she had completed her questions (she was first), she looked at the clock and made no further notes. The entire process was distressing and resulted in a piece of paper handed back stating I had been awarded 7 points for daily living, and 4 for mobility. I had failed to be awarded the vital assistance that I need by 1 point.

Following this, my employer suggested a reduction to part time hours. I had to accept this adjustment even though the reduction in salary meant that I could barely cover the bills. I do not drink or smoke but live alone. It is very difficult to get a flat mate when I need to sleep and recover regularly. I was therefore forced to take on some additional work from home, to supplement my income. I also had to start walking to work considerably more, no matter what pain or fatigue level, to save transport costs.

There are additional benefits available for people who are disabled, but I fail to meet key criteria for each. Most are not available to under-25s unless disabled or have children. PIP has become the standard test for whether or not you are disabled. If you aren't receiving a benefit, aren't blind or injured in action, you're apparently not disabled. Even IF PIP and other benefits for disability were assessed fairly and legally, there is still a major flaw. The system only assesses “daily living” and "mobility" but not things such as food shopping, cleaning, washing clothes, etc. It only covers survival (eating, washing, medications): not in fact, daily living. How can you live healthily without food, clean clothes or basic living standards?

Having sat for two gruelling months, I received news that the lower tribunal had refused permission to appeal to the upper. I cannot accurately describe the sense of complete hopeless frustration and pure pain that comes with a letter like that. To know that you are going back to work and going to lose your full time contract, not have enough money to live and still have to put your health at risk in order to get by. It's terrifying. I am now requesting permission from the upper tribunal to appeal, which takes time and it's over a year now since my claim began.

I don't want to be a dot or number in a statistic when making decisions that affect my life. I hope that you can take the time to read this letter and consider those whose lives are destroyed by a benefits system that punishes society's most vulnerable people.

If nothing else, please help to end the suffering of future young disabled people.