



JO CHURCHILL MP
Member of Parliament for Bury St Edmunds



Mr David Gauke MP
Secretary of State for Work and Pensions
Department for Work and Pensions
Caxton House
Tothill Street
London
SW1H 9NA

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Further to the roll out of Universal Credit this month, across parts of my Bury St Edmunds constituency, I am writing to draw your attention to emerging challenges for services in my constituency.

To summarise, Universal Credit is now rolling out across Bury St Edmunds (Bury) and the surrounding area, continuing with its roll out due in Mid Suffolk from February 2018. Whilst it is too soon in the process, to make any assessment, concerns have, and continually are being raised in my discussions with Mid Suffolk Citizen's Advice and Stowmarket and Bury foodbanks.

For instance, recent figures suggest a significant rise of 35% in the number of food parcels handed out in Stowmarket between 2015 and 2016, with the number of food parcels allocated this year, already up by 25%. This rise has, unlike previous years, been identified as a result of new, emerging challenges, including the pressures of vulnerable individuals with issues of mental health or substance abuse; arguably those who find it hardest to engage with the benefits system. A similar rise has been noted in Bury.

As a result, this places pressure on the process of assessments and referrals; slowing down the rate of assessments and seeing a rise in the number of referrals. Furthermore, I have been informed that the challenge of working with such vulnerable individuals, are putting strain on frontline staff. In particular, staff are finding it harder to engage individuals with the system, especially the deadlines and time sensitivity of applications; succumbing, instead, to simply referring them to their local foodbank for additional support.



As you know I have been engaged for some time with the local DWP lead and local authorities around the roll-out and have instigated a Vulnerable Persons meeting between housing providers, charities, faith groups, police and so on to make sure we can identify individuals who need help quickly and effectively.

From these discussions, I was pleased to note the CAB will have someone stationed in the job centre in Bury to assist those with limited digital and literacy skills. This is in addition to an individual having the right to an advocate to help them through the process. I will be evaluating the feedback going forward, to ensure we are providing a 'test and learn' approach as advocated by the DWP select committee.

Furthermore, whilst I will, of course, be working with the local authority and services to address worrying cases, I fear if the concerns I have raised go unaddressed, these challenges will squander the opportunities that universal credit can deliver.

I therefore write to raise these serious concerns with you, and to request a meeting to discuss the need for a greater flexibility and understanding from within the system of universal credit to account for these challenges and to ensure all learning, as roll-out progresses leads to system improvement.

I look forward to hearing from you shortly.

Yours sincerely,

Jo Churchill MP