

19<sup>th</sup> February 2016

Dear Constituents,

Thank you for contacting me about people with degenerative diseases and the Work Related Activity Group (WRAG) of Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), and its Universal Credit (UC) equivalent. These are terrible conditions for anyone to have to deal with and I agree it is absolutely crucial that sufferers and their families receive all the support they need.

In the Summer Budget 2015, the Chancellor announced that, from April 2017, the rate of benefit paid to new claims for ESA and UC with limited capability for work will be aligned with the standard rate of Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA). This change only affects new claims made after that date. Importantly, this reform will not affect people in the Support Group in ESA or claimants with limited capability for work and work-related activity in UC.

Those in the WRAG currently receive additional cash payments but little employment support appropriate for their needs. The Government is proposing to recycle some of the money currently spent on cash payments, which are not actually achieving the desired effect of helping people move closer to the labour market, into practical support that will make a genuine difference to individuals' life chances. This new funding will be worth £100 million by 2020/21.

Those with the most severe work-limiting health conditions and disabilities are placed in the Support Group in ESA and have been assessed as having limited capability for work and work-related activity in UC. In both cases, these claimants will continue to receive an additional payment in their ESA or UC. These additional payments are also exempt from the freeze on working-age benefits and the Benefit Cap.

The vast majority of people with Multiple Sclerosis are placed in the Support Group. In fact, the most recent figures showed that of 20,800 MS sufferers who had been assessed for ESA, 19,600 were in the Support Group as of February 2015, which means around 95 per cent of claimants who had been assessed are getting the maximum financial support for claimants out of work due to a health condition or disability.

Similarly, the vast majority of people with Parkinson's are placed in the Support Group. In fact, the most recent figures showed that of 2,600 claimants with Parkinson's who had been assessed for ESA, 2,400 were in the Support Group as of February 2015.

In the case of Multiple Sclerosis and Parkinson's, for those ESA claimants who are placed into the WRAG and UC claimants determined to have limited capability for work, a trained professional has advised that they are capable of some work-related activity and it is important we do not write these people off. On its website, Parkinson's UK recognises that "*Many people with Parkinson's continue to work for many years after their diagnosis*" but may need changes to the way they work to do so. However, when an individual's condition deteriorates, they may request to have their

## Alok Sharma, MP for Reading West

eligibility reassessed. On this basis they may then be moved into the Support Group in ESA, or the UC equivalent.

In the case of cancer patients, the Government listens regularly to representations from cancer charities to ensure sufferers are treated fairly. Professor Harrington in his second review of the Work Capability Assessment (WCA) asked Macmillan Cancer Support to look at how the WCA assesses people with cancer and provide him with recommendations for further improvements. As a result, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) carried out a consultation seeking a wider range of views on the proposed changes.

The DWP published its response to the consultation, setting out proposals for changing how the WCA assesses the effects of cancer treatment. These proposals expanded the categories of cancer treatments under which a claimant may be treated as having limited capability to undertake work-related activity to include individuals who are: awaiting, receiving or recovering from treatment by way of chemotherapy irrespective of route; or awaiting, receiving or recovering from radiotherapy.

As a result, over 80 per cent of people on ESA who have had an assessment are in the Support Group. This includes anyone who is preparing for, receiving, or recovering from chemotherapy or radiotherapy that will significantly limit their ability to work. Those ESA claimants who do find themselves in the WRAG, or UC equivalent, have been advised that they are capable of some work-related activity by a trained healthcare professional. However, as with Multiple Sclerosis and Parkinson's, if an individual's condition deteriorates they may request to have their eligibility reassessed. On this basis they may then be moved into the Support Group in ESA, or the UC equivalent.

However, employment can play a vital part in supporting an individual's recovery and Macmillan recognises this, stating in a report that: *"Many people who are working when they are diagnosed with cancer would prefer to remain in work, or return to their job, during or after treatment."*

I believe that the Government's proposed reforms to ESA, WRAG and the UC equivalent are the right thing to do for claimants because it is a duty of government to support those who want to work to do so. I would also reiterate that those already claiming ESA or UC will not be affected by the change.

I hope this has also gone some way to explaining the ways the Government is ensuring the system protects those with the most serious conditions, including exempting the Support Group component in ESA and its UC equivalent from the benefits freeze and the Benefit Cap.

Thank you again for taking the time to contact me.

Yours sincerely,



**Alok Sharma MP**