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Department for
Commonities

From: The Minister

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Our ref: CORR 1236-2024
Date: 28 May 2024

Mr Stephen Brien
Social Security Advisory Committee
Caxton House,
Tothill Street,
London,
SW1H 9NA

Via email: DENISE.WHITEHEAD@SSAC.GOV.UK

Dear Mr Brien,

**THE UNIVERSAL CREDIT (ADMINISTRATIVE EARNINGS THRESHOLD)
(AMENDMENT) REGULATIONS (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2024**

I welcome your letter dated 19 April 2024 and the recommendations of the Social Security Advisory Committee on matters relating to Northern Ireland and I am grateful for the opportunity to respond.

The Committee has recommended that my Department should exempt lead carers from the increase in the Administrative Earnings Threshold (AET). You will be aware that all Departments within the Northern Ireland Executive are experiencing significant budget pressures, and whilst I acknowledge the Committee's recommendation, I am mindful that any failure to maintain parity with Great Britain would likely have additional costs for the block grant.

I am cognisant of the pressures facing parents due to the lack of affordable childcare in Northern Ireland and the barrier that this can create when it comes to increasing work-related activity. I can assure you that I am working closely with my Executive colleagues on this matter, and we are committed to the delivery and implementation of a childcare strategy for Northern Ireland.

As you will be aware, Universal Credit Work Coaches have significant discretion and the ability to be flexible when agreeing a claimant commitment. The proposed change to the AET will not alter the approach of Work Coaches in my Department who will continue to take account of an individual claimant's particular circumstances when agreeing a claimant commitment. In situations where a claimant cannot increase their working hours due to their personal circumstances (for example a lack of available childcare), their expected number of working hours can be reduced, in agreement with the Work Coach, to accommodate any restrictions. Appropriate guidance will ensure that the needs of individual claimants will continue to be taken fully into account when agreeing any new claimant commitments.

In view of the flexibility available to Universal Credit Work Coaches to tailor individual work-related requirements as part of a claimant commitment it has been determined that there is currently no need to exempt lead carers from the increased AET threshold. Your letter also recommends that the Department consider what further steps it needs to upskill employers on providing support, such as offering work suitable for those with a health condition and offering family-friendly hours.

The Department's Employer Services Branch provides a wide range of supports to businesses, large and small, across Northern Ireland. This is provided through a network of Client Executives (CEs) and Employer Advisers (EAs). Our CEs liaise with larger employers across Northern Ireland and our EAs, who are based in every Jobs & Benefits office in Northern Ireland, engage with smaller local businesses and employers. These staff are a key lynchpin in communications between employers and work coaches who support Universal Credit claimants to find work, including more hours or alternative careers.

In addition to providing a job vacancy taking service, the CEs and EAs highlight the range of departmental supports and employment schemes potentially available to companies and their staff, including Jobstart, the Work Experience Programme, Access to Work, Workable NI and the Condition Management Programme. Many of these schemes are specifically designed to support employees with health conditions and / or claimants who are further away from the labour market. CEs and EAs also provide employers with key information on the operation of Universal Credit including the removal of the 16-hour working rule and the availability of financial support towards registered childcare for working parents.

There is a wide range of Universal Credit related information available for employers on the ***nibusinessinfo*** website www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/universal-credit and on the Department's website www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/universal-credit-employer-information-pack.

These links include information on how Universal Credit enables both employees and employers to avail of more flexible working practices. In addition to this information, the Department is currently finalising two short videos which will be shared on the Department's website in the coming weeks. These videos will also be aimed at employers and, in addition to providing general information, will include content to highlight the benefits of employers making their vacancies more flexible. These messages will also continue to be reinforced through the engagements between our CEs / EAs and employers on an ongoing basis.

I trust you will find this information helpful.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gordon Lyons', written in a cursive style.

Gordon Lyons MLA
Minister for Communities