



Craig Whittaker MP

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Response to Changes to Bereavement Benefits – February 2017

Thank you for contacting me about forthcoming changes to bereavement benefits.

Families who lose a loved one must be supported through what will often be one of the hardest periods in their lives. Bereavement can often lead to immediate costs for the family left behind, and it is important to ensure those costs are not unmanageable.

From April 2017, the current sources of support, such as Bereavement Payments, Bereavement Allowance and Widowed Parent's Allowance, will be replaced by a new Bereavement Support Payment (BSP). This will consist of an initial higher payment followed by a series of smaller monthly payments. I think it is right that the new system concentrates on helping with the additional and more immediate costs of bereavement, and shifts the focus away from replacing the deceased spouse's earnings. Importantly, the initial lump sums will be higher under the new benefit. This focuses support on the early stage of bereavement and ensures the immediate costs, which may often have been completely unexpected, are manageable.

The BSP will be much simpler and fairer than the current system, meaning claimants will better understand their entitlements and be able to plan their finances with more certainty. Unlike some of the old sources of support, the BSP will be non-taxable and non-means tested and will not be counted as income when calculating entitlement to other benefits.

After listening to representations from the Social Security Advisory Committee and third party organisations supporting bereaved families, the Government has also decided to change its original proposals so that the BSP will be paid for 18 months instead of 12. However, I do not believe bereavement benefits should be a longer-term source of support. After that initial 18 month period, there are other more appropriate welfare benefits available for those that qualify.

I understand your view that the BSP should be payable to cohabiting unmarried couples, but it has always been a principle of the National Insurance system that derived rights to benefits are based on legal marriage or civil partnership. Allowing entitlement to be derived through cohabitation as well as marriage would add a number of complexities, and proving cohabitation could be a lengthy and distressing process.

Thank you again for taking the time to contact me.

Kind regards,

Craig Whittaker MP