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Thank you for your letter of 10 June to the Secretary of State enclosing the Welfare Reform Committee's report on food banks and welfare reform. I am replying as the Minister responsible for this area of the Department's work.

I am grateful to you for providing me with a copy of the Welfare Reform Committee's report. My view is, however, that this report is not based on solid evidence, but on the opinions of those interviewed. The facts are that employment is going up, benefits are being paid to claimants more quickly and independent experts tell us that there are fewer people struggling with their food bills compared with a few years ago. The Trussell Trust and other foodbanks agree that increased awareness has helped to explain their recent growth.

We spend £94 billion a year on working age benefits and the welfare system provides a safety net that supports millions of people who are on low incomes or unemployed. Our reforms will improve the lives of some of the poorest families in our communities by promoting work and helping people to lift themselves out of poverty.

There has, however, always been a tradition in this country of voluntary and charity organisations providing support to people in addition to the safety net provided by Government, including packages of food and other assistance. It was this Government that started signposting people to these services - for the first time through Jobcentre Plus - at the request of the Trussell Trust.

The Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) regime is very effective at moving people off benefit and into work - around two-thirds of JSA claimants end their claim because they find paid employment .

Sanctions are an essential part of JSA and have been since the introduction of the benefit in 1996. The vast majority of JSA claimants, however, do not receive a sanction (in 2013, on average, five per cent of JSA claims resulted in a sanction in any month).

There are a range of safeguards in place to help ensure that sanctions are only applied where appropriate. Claimants have a right to request a sanction decision be reconsidered and to appeal to an independent tribunal.

The Government is of course committed to continually improving this system. The independent Oakley review of sanctions processes and communications is due to report shortly.

I hope this reply is helpful.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'EmcVey', with a large, sweeping flourish at the bottom.

Rt Hon Esther McVey MP
Minister for Employment