Dear Neil,

Thank you for your letter of 14 December 2018. We appreciate the concern raised, regarding awareness of Advance Payments to help Universal Credit claimants waiting for a first payment.

As you will know from our research and work with the DWP to date, The Trussell Trust is concerned about the impact on households of the five-week wait for a first Universal Credit payment. A benefit delay is one of the most common referral reasons in our foodbank network; latest figures show that this is increasingly driven by referrals due to waiting for a first Universal Credit payment.

We share your view that people should have the right support, as soon possible. Our staff are already briefed to signpost people referred to appropriate support. Where foodbanks are co-located with advice services, people are swiftly referred to our partners. Some foodbanks have established good working relationships with their local jobcentre, to discuss and flag issues seen by our staff. However, I must emphasise that Trussell Trust foodbank managers and volunteers are not welfare advisers. We cannot provide welfare advice, nor should we be asked to do so.

Furthermore, Christmas is sadly a particularly busy period for foodbanks. With more notice, we would have been happy to discuss your request in more detail and consider how we might communicate with our network in time for Christmas. With this in mind, it has also been unhelpful for local DWP offices to forward your letter directly to our staff, creating confusion for foodbanks already under significant operational pressure.

Finally, I should note that the Trussell Trust continues to have reservations regarding the support provided by Advance Payments. We welcome the fact that the DWP recognises that the five-week wait can create significant financial hardship for households. However, we do not believe that Advance Payments are an effective solution – they simply stretch a first payment over an even longer period of time, leaving people without the necessary income to meet living costs. As long as people are expected to live either without income or with reduced income (through advance repayments), we are likely to see people still forced to use foodbanks to make ends meet.
We at the Trussell Trust want a future where foodbanks are no longer needed in the UK. While we are still needed, as we have discussed with Ministers at the Department, we are keen to build on our work to ensure our relationship with the DWP and local Jobcentre Plus is as constructive as possible.

To this end, I would appreciate a chance to meet in the New Year to discuss this work – including how and when it might be appropriate to work with the DWP on information that foodbanks can disseminate (for example, using existing groups such as the Operational Stakeholder Engagement Forum).

We look forward to arranging a meeting with you. To suggest convenient dates or if you have any questions, please contact our Head of Policy and Research, Sumi Rabindrakumar – sumi.rabindrakumar@trusselltrust.org, 07918 559 712.

Yours sincerely,

Emma Revie
Chief Executive, Trussell Trust