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### **UC and Foodbanks:**

I know this is a very difficult time for many people and I want to pay tribute to the charities and volunteers who operate foodbanks to help those struggling to get by. However, I believe the upsurge in the amount of these organisations and the increase in the number of people using them are symptoms of economic failure.

In my view, the current Government has helped fuel inflation, has increased taxes on working people, and, last year, pursued a mini budget which damaged our economy and forced both mortgages and rent bills up. This has meant that household finances are under greater strain than would otherwise have been the case, with people paying the price for these failures and for the failures of the past 13 years.

I hope that Ministers will therefore set out what steps they intend to take to provide more support to the people up and down our country who now have to rely on food banks and other forms of charitable assistance. I note that Ministers announced that benefits would increase in line with inflation for the financial year 2024/25. However, at the same time, they have also indicated that both the Household Support Fund and the extra Cost of Living Payments, which have provided additional support for vulnerable households, would end in March 2024.

More widely, I note that, benefit deductions have risen to record highs. According to one study, 57% of households on UC who use food banks have faced deductions, while 50% of this group have skipped meals to make ends meet on multiple occasions in a month. This compares with 26% of people on UC without deductions. I think that the Government should recognise that while some deductions are necessary, the present scale is causing hardship for many families.

I therefore believe we must reform the way UC operates to ensure that the system treats people with dignity and does not burden them with impossible debts. I also worry that the economy has been forced into a vicious circle of higher taxes, lower investment, squeezed wages and the running down of public services, all of which damage growth. In contrast to this Government's policies, I want to see policies which create jobs and help people into work to widen opportunities across our country.

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