My experience of Austerity and Welfare Reform in the UK.

I have been severely affected by austerity and changes to the benefits system. This includes a five year freeze on working age benefits, moving onto Universal Credit from Employment Support Allowance, also by moving from Disability Living Allowance onto Personal Independence Payments and the changing of Support for Mortgage Interest from being a benefit into a loan. This combined with my health problems, a shrinking NHS which is not providing an adequate service, lack of social care together with the present very hostile environment existing for sick and disabled people, has turned my life into a living hell.

I was forced to move from ESA to Universal Credit in December 2016 because I unavoidably could not attend a medical assessment, the reason being accepted by the DWP. However, I was still moved onto this benefit unnecessarily and not only lost the Severe Disability Premium of £61.00 a week but was told that I would receive no money for living or housing for 6 weeks.

I was forced to get help from the Council who reluctantly gave me food vouchers but criticised me for paying my bills such as mortgage, energy, etc. I felt very embarrassed and degraded by all of this as I have always paid my bills on time.

Since the changes have been made to the welfare system the whole benefits environment has become very aggressive and I felt like a scrounger and did not feel comfortable with other people even friends and family. The DWP totally and deliberately ignored my illnesses and disabilities failing to acknowledge or make any adjustments and provision or even acknowledge them. All words relating to illness or health were avoided. I was treated as a fit and healthy person. There was also no toilet provision either in the job centre building or nearby which I found difficult to cope with. Even the sick note for when you are too ill to work is now called a fit note. I had to take these in person with considerable difficulty in a taxi with a carer because I was not allowed to post them or let anyone else take them for me. There were suddenly demands to adhere to and a timetable of activities that was not possible to achieve and the DWP would not even talk about this but just threatened to take away the benefits. This affected my mental health and all of my other physical problems all made far worse to the extent of ending up in crisis or at A&E or even being temporarily held at a police station. The claimant is classed as fit for work until they spend weeks proving that they are not and having to jump through lots of hurdles and involving an army of different Health Care Professionals, voluntary organisations, support workers, family and friends and support workers helping to make this happen. The stress is unbearable when added to coping with everyday health issues which on their own are enough to endure. I had to sign up to commitments that I cannot fulfil and it seems obvious that this system is deliberately designed to make disabled claimants, especially those with mental health issues, fail or just give up pursuing their claim.

The online system used by Universal Credit was difficult to navigate, and set up in a way that you could only input what the DWP wanted to hear, but most of the time it just did not work. It was also impersonal and robotic and much of what you wrote in the journal was ignored. Complaints were also ignored. Disability was ignored and everything made difficult and if you telephoned you were just passed from person to person or from one department or organisation to another with nothing to show for all the effort. I kept on escalating issues which never seemed to end as the matter would end up with decision makers who rarely made a satisfactory decision if they make any decision at all. With DLA I never had to phone as everything worked, and if there was a problem, everything could usually be sorted out with one call. Universal Credit staff taking the calls have no authority or access to do anything but just to pass on messages and escalate and escalate with the intention of getting rid of the caller.

It took a year to sort out payments with endless mistakes involving endless calls which were physically and mentally too painful to make. I had to constantly stay away from home with my family as the stress was getting too much and my physical health deteriorating and I was not able to cope. Delays with the Support for Mortgage Interest payments caused problems with my mortgage lender and meant that I could not move onto a competitive fixed rate and had to stay on the standard variable rate as well as incurring charges. Now, I do not use the online Universal Credit journal and I try not to phone them at all as phoning is very difficult for me and dealing with them makes me very ill.

Regarding the Work Capability assessment, after obtaining the letter from my GP saying that I needed a home visit, I eventually received an appointment and arranged for my Occupational Therapist and Support Worker to be present at my home. The day before the appointment I received a call cancelling the appointment because the Doctor was unavailable. Then they transferred my file to another department, then saying that I had to get another letter from my doctor. Further, the DWP then sent me an aggressive letter warning me about missing the appointment and told me to fill in the enclosed form saying why I had missed it. I went onto Universal Credit December 2016 and now in September 2018, I still have not had this assessment so the dread of this is constantly hanging over me.

I was also moved from DLA to PIP and attended an assessment in April 2017 where I was awarded zero points, and ended up in hospital afterwards, so all support was taken away while I appealed. There then followed months of hell, involving Citizens Advice, Support workers and even a National Organisation set up to help people with benefits problems, called Fightback 4 Justice, who have their own specialist lawyers for which I pay for monthly as the Government have cut legal aid. I had to wait weeks for the so called mandatory reconsideration which I knew would be a waste of time as I was told that the DWP were deliberately rejecting 80% of appeals.

I do not want to recall the tribunal stage as it is too painful. However, the Tribunal awarded me PIP at higher rate for both care and mobility indefinitely saying that I should never have been put in this situation.
I have found it really difficult if not impossible, having ten different conditions to keep obtaining the evidence required in the form asked for by the DWP. I was seeing a different HCP every time I went to an appointment so they did not know me or know what I was doing at home. This included my GP surgery so it was very difficult to obtain the paperwork needed especially when the information required was not looking at the actual illness or disability. All the paperwork would also take up time and cost money which are both in short supply. I know that this can be obtained privately if you pay for it and can sort it out.

The Assessment process was farcical and clearly designed to fail you and lies were told or key points missed out in the report and my assessor was a physiotherapist so was not qualified to assess all of the different conditions that I have. It was just a tick box exercise with a lot of staring at the computer screen.

You would think that all of this would be enough to endure, but in April I received a letter from the DWP, with no prior notice, saying that in 8 weeks the support for mortgage interest was being turned into a loan with interest added. I would barely have enough equity to downsize and move coming up to retirement. Therefore, I cannot take the loan and now I have to move as quickly as I can while using money from my Personal Independence Payments to pay the interest on the mortgage. Moving is also very difficult because I cannot get any help to facilitate this. There is no help from the Council as they have had cuts so I am stuck.

My health problems are far worse that they were in 2016 when these changes began and now I have stopped attending health appointments because this has become too difficult. I have watched the standard of service from the NHS go down since 2010 and I have seen many good HCPs that were looking after me leave their posts, moved on, retire or emigrate. My mental health now receives no treatment or attention whatsoever and continues to decline.

I have a social worker who seems to be invisible. She sends out support workers but they seem to be there only in name and disappear when anything needs to be done. The social care assessment now only deals with parts 1-4 instead of the whole 12 and attention is only paid to toilet needs, washing and dressing and eating a microwave meal if you are lucky. I have lived in my pyjamas for months and that was deemed acceptable. I cannot look after my feet and legs and put on and take off the compression garments or properly apply the Dermol lotion for instance and this has been neglected causing lack of mobility and infections. This is just one of many needs neglected. Then there is the diabetes, heart disease needing triple bypass, neuropathy, retinopathy, hearing difficulty, prostate problem, breathing problem, gall bladder removal, sleep apnoea and serious mental health issues all neglected.

The constant demands and worry of dealing with benefits means that there is no energy left to keep up with the demands of my personal healthcare. It also puts a strain and a burden on my friends and family who have to step in and help sort out the mess caused by failing healthcare, social care and welfare reform especially as this has now been going on for so long. Because of Brexit, all the problems that sick and disabled people have and all of the disgusting measures being handed out by our own Government, are being ignored as our living standards deteriorate.

What absolutely shocks me is that the public do not seem to know anything about what is going on. There is nothing in the media whatsoever about these abuses and the misery being inflicted on sick and disabled people and this makes me feel very alarmed and worried and fills me with despair. There is a deliberate targeting of vulnerable people as an easy way to save money. The DWP is also watching social media accounts and cctv in public buildings and supermarkets. I dare not even go out or move at all.

I have no life at all and if this carries on I hope it all ends soon.
I live in total insecurity and on a knife edge with worsening health where anything can happen and there are constant threats, harassment and abuse by the DWP and the present Government. I hope this statement is not too long. It has taken a long time and I have had a lot of help with it but I think it is worth the effort to see if something can be done about this terrible situation.

If you wish to publish this account I give my permission to do this.

Steve