

Caroline is a working parent. A public sector worker in Education. 1 of those parents that fortunately doesn't need childcare as her child is 13 but that doesn't mean that working long days, extra hours, travelling long journeys are accessible for her. Living close to the border in Fermanagh, public transport is not accessible for working people, child care is on a skeleton and being a single parent it's not easy leaving a young 13 yr old alone for hours on end in the evenings, even more so if they have anxieties.

She still relies on Universal Credit to top up her household income as her wage isn't enough to sustain a household. Caroline says it is not a benefit so she can be "lazy" it's a benefit for the employers who choose to cap her working hours and withhold her pay rises until December, giving her lump sums. These lump sum awards mean she loses UC the following month, like many others that lump sum is something she can't save as she has to push it into the next month to cover the loss of UC.

The rhetoric and underlying language used by politicians such as "hard working families" implies that if you are struggling financially you must not be working hard enough. She works 30 hours a week, travels just under 1 hour each day, collects her child from school, does homework, housework and then falls into her bed with fibromyalgia exhaustion every night.

Experiencing the pitfalls of that "emergency budget" she never has. Such as her car breaking down, unable to pay for repairs but having to find the money from somewhere as her car is an essential in her life far from a luxury. Caroline had to ask and challenge UC in terms of support to help her stay at work. Being told there was no help she challenged that and did get some financial support from them eventually. Again this knowledge has only come from being part of groups and getting advice from people around her in this room today. The system does not give this information freely.

Caroline says it's not her shame needing social security because of her working circumstances. That belongs to our politicians, because they can't make the difficult decisions that will make a difference to so many lives. The lack of investment in her county means she is trapped, getting a job elsewhere or moving are out of the question she can't afford to move as she trundles through month to month existing.

Caroline has self educated herself whilst working and has a desire to do so much more but again the benefit system isn't there to support her through this. She wouldn't be permitted to cut her hours to try and attend college to get some further education, she couldn't afford to either.

Caroline has been an active participant with a few groups on poverty and how lived experience can be embedded into policies to effect change in the right way. Speaking to media and also experiencing the backlash from the public judgement/ outrage on her being on "benefits", she has tried to challenge some of these social attitudes however she still believes the media and politicians have a huge responsibility to bare in how they report on benefits, all it takes is 1 or 2 wrong words and it twists the system and gets more peoples

I just want my child to have opportunities and feel the hope that I never experienced as a child growing up In the very same town she is now growing up in. I have seen my local town and its economy shrivel away as centralisation socks money out and away from rural communities yet there is nothing put in to help us access these centralised spaces. Children's services are few and far between, often cancelled as staff are off or moved to bigger facilities to cover. Her teenager has nowhere to go, to hang out. She walks to the shop. She doesn't see her friends when school closes as the buses only travel through at 7am or 4pm,, too early and too late. Isolated from her peers Caroline can see the isolation and lack of confidence in her child. Anxiety is always there looming in the background.

I believe we need a better social security system that helps families in need. Thresholds in accessing support haven't changed and as hourly rates go up, more families are sent over the edge of that threshold by pennies yet being left hundreds of pounds even worse off. All children at school right up to 16 should get free lunches. If it's good enough for well paid politicians it's good enough for our children (potential politicians). What costs us short term is reaped in rewards in the long term with better outcomes and reducing poverty rates.

Thresholds throwing people of free dental care and travel support means their dental care drops and access to health services drop. This all decreases health and increases services required. Much of this preventable simply by ensuring households have enough disposable income.