



Work and Pensions Committee

Oral evidence: The work of the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, HC 549

Wednesday 29 June 2022

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Members present: Sir Stephen Timms (Chair); Debbie Abrahams; Shaun Bailey; Neil Coyle; Steve McCabe; Nigel Mills; Selaine Saxby; Dr Ben Spencer; Chris Stephens; Sir Desmond Swayne.

Questions 1 - 143

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon. Dr Thérèse Coffey MP, Secretary of State, Department for Work and Pensions; Peter Schofield, Permanent Secretary, Department for Work and Pensions.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Thérèse Coffey and Peter Schofield.

Q1 **Chair:** Good morning, Secretary of State, and a warm welcome to you. Secretary of State and Permanent Secretary, we are very grateful to both of you for joining us this morning. As you know, we have a slightly shorter period this morning. We are all conscious that we have a lot of ground to cover in a fairly tight period of time.

Can I put the first question to you, if I may, Secretary of State? The impacts of the rapidly rising cost of living are uppermost in all of our minds at the moment. Are you going to be reviewing the level of the benefit cap between now and April next year?

Dr Coffey: We do have this statutory duty. I have had some advice, now that we no longer have the Fixed-term Parliaments Act on exact timing. A year ago, there was a slight concern on whether we have a real reflection of life, but I am getting some advice on that.

Q2 **Chair:** You might review it between now and next April.

Dr Coffey: Yes, we may. I just want to make sure that it is as normal a landscape as possible.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q3 **Chair:** Did you say that you had reviewed it a year ago?

Dr Coffey: No, I did not. I mentioned “a year ago”. I had not planned to do it last year, because we were in such an odd environment with Covid and the like. The economy was in no way stable at that time.

Q4 **Chair:** When was it last reviewed?

Dr Coffey: I do not remember.

Q5 **Chair:** We know that the last change that took place was in 2016, when the level of the benefit cap was reduced. Has it been reviewed since then?

Dr Coffey: I do not think that it has, no.

Q6 **Chair:** Given that there is a statutory obligation, as you said, to review it every five years, we are into six years now.

Dr Coffey: It is linked to Parliaments rather than specifically five years. We had an unusually short Parliament. I am getting some advice. Now that we have got rid of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act, I am just getting a bit of advice on that.

Q7 **Chair:** The advice to us is that, in March, the requirement changed, so it is now every five years, but we will be very interested to know, once you have had your advice.

Dr Coffey: The advice is about when that five years kick in—either from the time of the Act or from when it first happened. That is the advice that I am awaiting.

Q8 **Chair:** On the question of the level of the benefit cap, the Child Poverty Action Group told us that 120,000 households, 86% of them families with children, were subject to the benefit cap in February. Almost all of them, according to CPAG, are in deep poverty—that is, below 50% of median income. As things stand, with inflation around 10%, their benefit income will not increase at all next April. Would that be acceptable?

Dr Coffey: There are plenty of exemptions from the benefit cap—people who are on UC but have limited capability for work and work-related activity, or people caring for somebody with a disability. There are a number of ways that exemptions already apply. In order to not be capped, the incentive is to earn £658 a month in the household after tax and national insurance, which is where, partly, the incentive comes in. Once you go over that limit, the approach is that the benefit cap does not apply. It is a good incentive to encourage people to work.

Meanwhile, there is an exemption for people who we have agreed, as it were, through our assessments, cannot work. I am entirely comfortable with the concept of it. We also have a grace period of about nine months for when people become unemployed, so it is a good balance. Like a lot of these things, when I come to do a review, I will be looking at what the right level should be.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q9 **Chair:** As you pointed out to me in the Chamber the other day, those families on the benefit cap will benefit from the announcements that the Chancellor made in May, but if their benefit does not go up at all from next April, their income will be significantly less next year than it would have been this year, but we will wait for your decision about review.

The Minister for family support told our predecessor Committee just over three years ago, in March 2019, that the evaluation report on the benefit cap reduction in 2016 was going to be published later on that year. Three years have now passed. Does the commitment to publish that evaluation still stand?

Dr Coffey: You have sent me a letter on a number of these issues, and I was intending to respond via the letter. I have not looked into that particular issue yet. As a general principle, I am not necessarily going to be bound by previous Governments and what has been done, but I will respond fully to your letter.

Q10 **Chair:** On the general point, would you recognise that the Department committing to publish reports of this kind and then choosing not to do so does damage trust in the Department?

Dr Coffey: I accept that is what you say, but I am going to respond fully to your letter, for which you have given me a deadline of 15 July.

Q11 **Chair:** Indeed, it is a little while yet. If you do carry out a review of the benefit cap between now and April, would you propose to publish that?

Dr Coffey: I will get advice on what does and does not have to be published.

Q12 **Nigel Mills:** We are about three weeks away from the payment of the cost of living payment on 14 July. Secretary of State, this exchange happened in the Chamber last week, but you used to be a fan of using the benefits system to give people money, rather than one-off payments. What changed to come up with a decision to give people on benefits a one-off payment this year rather than just adjusting the benefits system?

Dr Coffey: We recognised that this is intended to be a one-off payment for this year. It is not intended to be a permanent benefit. The Government recognise the challenges that people are facing. We had to give ourselves powers to do payments that create this additional benefit, but we did not want to necessarily change ratings beyond what we had already done with my annual uprating review. Some of that would mean locking in, but we also come back to some of the challenges, frankly, of our IT systems. UC is far more agile, but our legacy benefits are not. It is absolutely critical that people on legacy benefits and UC were to get this payment, so we have given ourselves the powers. I am very pleased with the SRO, Craig Eblett, and I am confident that we will get those payments out the door.

Peter Schofield: I would also say that I am very proud of the way that the Department has come together to deliver this. This is a whole new



HOUSE OF COMMONS

delivery system and a whole new benefit that we have created. The Chancellor announced it on 26 May and we are planning to make the first payments in the middle of next week, which is an incredible performance by my teams.

- Q13 **Nigel Mills:** Two years ago, when you would have been here, Secretary of State, and we said, “Why can you not make a payment to claimants of legacy benefits?” when you were doing the temporary uplift to UC, you said, “Because we can’t”, and now, two years on, you can. What has changed?

Dr Coffey: We have always consistently said that the impact of people newly unemployed would be considerably higher. We did an uprating that reflected more in line with statutory sick pay. That was not the case for people on existing legacy benefits in that regard. That is the rationale that we took. It just so happens that UC is agile, and legacy benefits absolutely are not.

- Q14 **Nigel Mills:** That is the problem, is it not? It almost feels like, twice in two years, we have hit a situation where you would quite like to do things that the system does not let you do. What is the solution that the Department has planned, so that, next time there is a crisis, you can deliver what you need to rather than what the computer lets you?

Dr Coffey: As I said, the uplift on UC was for the reasons that I have given. It was that people newly unemployed would have the greatest economic impact, which we wanted to address. The Committee is aware that we have resumed managed migration on a very small scale, and the intention is that, by the end of 2024, everybody will be on universal credit, apart from a few exceptions, where we will need to do things with housing benefits for pensioners and stuff like that, which will take a little bit longer. The overall approach is to continue our encouragement to get people into work, which we are doing very well on, and we will have a more agile system. I am also mindful that UC was built in 2013, and technology has also moved on considerably since then, so it is not quite all-singing, all-dancing and the latest thing—

Nigel Mills: You are building two UC systems.

Dr Coffey: It is much more versatile and agile than anything we have had before.

Peter Schofield: Just to build on what the Secretary of State has said, there is a programme of moving all of our legacy systems on to more modern platforms, for example on the pensions side as well.

Dr Coffey: That will make a massive difference.

Peter Schofield: It will make a massive difference, yes. Going forward, the idea is not that you wait for the big upgrade to come, but that you build modular systems that you can then replace and improve, one by



HOUSE OF COMMONS

one, as you go forward, and you keep on top of the maintenance and upgrades on a more regular basis.

Q15 **Nigel Mills:** Would it be possible, Mr Schofield, to write to us and set out, by the time you have finished the UC rollout, what legacy systems will still be in use, how old they are and how easy they are to uprate? I am just getting a bit lost now as to what systems you will still be using and how hard they are.

Dr Coffey: We will still need the system for contributory JSA and ESA, so we will need a system there, but there should not be anybody left on JSA, income support or income-based JSA—the six legacy benefits that we are moving. We need to do the final sorting out about how we handle housing benefit for people in supported accommodation and for pensioners, so that is the final bit.

Q16 **Nigel Mills:** Minister, if you could just write with those details, then we all know what we are talking about rather than having theoretical discussions about 1980s systems or something.

Dr Coffey: I am answering your question now, so I do not really want to have to write.

Q17 **Nigel Mills:** Okay, but I do not think you can tell me exactly how old each computer system you are using is and how long it would take to run an uprating exercise each one of those that would be in existence in 2024—unless you can.

Peter Schofield: The main one that we have not talked about is the pension system that runs the state pension scheme. That is the pension strategy computer system that was introduced in 1989. It currently has about 11.5 million people on it. We have to be very careful about this given the scale of the number of people we are taking about, but our plan over the spending review period is to gradually move those records over to our new pension system, which is called Get your State Pension, which we first introduced in 2016 after the introduction of the new state pension. The idea is that we move people over.

They will retain their eligibility to the old state pension and all of the complexities that I have talked about to this Committee and the Public Accounts Committee before, and all of that needs to be taken into account. That will be with us until people sadly pass away and that is the situation we have. It is a phased approach in that way. A lot of the complexity on the pension side will be with us for quite some time.

Dr Coffey: Just building on that, in my role as Secretary of State I do that review in November. I do it at the last possible moment, so we can get the latest inflation values, but we have to kick it off normally by 26 or 27 November to guarantee that payments can be made at the new rate from the beginning of April. It actually takes that long through the entire system, because there are elements that we do within DWP that then have to be passed on to HMRC, so there are all sorts of knock-on effects.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Basically, it takes four months to do an uprating exercise on our ancient systems, which is why we are moving people. Particularly, as you say, the main principal barrier is still the pensions.

Q18 Nigel Mills: Do you recognise that one of the problems we have hit this year is the uprating was based on such an out-of-date number that it just looked ridiculous? Are you saying that at some point we will get to the stage where you will have a system where you can do an uprating on at least the December inflation rather than the September one?

Peter Schofield: Just building on what the Secretary of State said in her last answer, the crucial thing with these old systems is that we can only do the work around uploading the new benefit rates on weekends when they are not being used for other work. Although four months might seem like quite a long time, it is actually not that many weekends and for the reasons the Secretary of State has described, you then have to upload them sequentially, because some benefits have a knock-on impact on others. Crucially, as the Secretary of State says, we do the DWP ones and we need to then have finished in time for local authorities to do their rates on it, housing benefit and such like and HMRC likewise. It is tightly scheduled.

It may be that with an upgraded system you could work during the week a bit more rather than during weekends, and that might take time off the system, but we are not there yet. Crucially, we will need to have moved all of the pension records across to the new state pension system, which will take quite some time.

Dr Coffey: This has been happening for over a decade that I am aware of. If I go back to September 2009, inflation was 1.8%. By the time we got to April inflation was 5.8%. There are things where it has gone the other way. The previous September was much higher than inflation the following April. We have this undulation, but at least there is a consistency in the approach that we take. As and when there may be opportunities in the future to consider some of this, I still only do by legislation the annual review. As you suggest, there may be the opportunity in the future to move that a little bit later. There are plenty of examples, if the Committee wants to look into it, where you can see where inflation has shifted.

Q19 Nigel Mills: The advantage of consistency when you are consistently wrong is less appealing, is not? In an ideal world, you would like to have a more—

Dr Coffey: We do one annual review. We do not review it every month.

Q20 Nigel Mills: Is it fair to say in an ideal world you would like to have an uprating that was based on more recent data than six months out of date, Minister?

Dr Coffey: At the moment we take it as close to the wire as we possibly can.



Q21 **Nigel Mills:** In an ideal world, you would like the wire to be closer.

Dr Coffey: It could be, but we also have to do things with the OBR. There are all sorts of links into fiscal statements as well, but, dare I say it, as and when we have the opportunity potentially to do it, I am sure, if I am still lucky enough to be the Secretary of State, I will look at it carefully.

Q22 **Neil Coyle:** I am coming on to some of the cost of living payments, which are very welcome. Thank you both for joining us this morning. Lots of organisations have welcomed those cost of living measures, but they have pointed out that they are short-term fixes and not a long-term solution to the overall adequacy of the social security system and payments. Do you accept that the social security system was not designed for modern cost of living?

Dr Coffey: Universal credit has been designed very well to recognise that people's incomes may come up and down. It is a dynamic benefit. We saw its strengths not just in taking new claims in Covid, frankly, but immediately, as soon as people's incomes fell, the support went up. The dynamism kicked in straightaway, so it is very modern, recognising some of the fluctuations that we have.

Q23 **Neil Coyle:** The point is not about the pace at which universal credit is better able to take into account someone's costs and circumstances. It is the level of the payment that is set that is the concern of organisations, which is more critically exposed in the current cost of living crisis.

Dr Coffey: You are suggesting the value.

Neil Coyle: They are.

Dr Coffey: Sorry, you are passing that on. The challenge of one single benefits system is that you have to set a rate. People's circumstances are so different around the country on what is possible for them to earn or not or their costs. I am content with the approach that we have taken. We did freeze benefits in legislation. I know that was a Conservative Government that did that as part of the 2016 welfare Act. Was it the welfare Act? We voted for it, anyway, in primary legislation, to freeze it for four years. Since then we have resumed. I know in the manifesto we stood on we said that we would not be taking that approach again. I cannot remember the precise words.

The incentives to work, for people who can work, are very high. We have just reduced the taper rate. The Chancellor agreed to do that. The OBR would not score it in terms of potentially savings in the future to have this dynamic benefit, but as a consequence, it is seen as a cost of over £2 billion. The Chancellor rightly thought it was the good thing to do, so that people kept more of their earnings.

Q24 **Neil Coyle:** In the main, you think the system is working pretty well. How many people applied for universal credit and did not receive anything



HOUSE OF COMMONS

during the Covid crisis?

Dr Coffey: I do not have that information to hand.

Q25 **Neil Coyle:** Does the Department hold that information?

Dr Coffey: I do not know what we have.

Q26 **Neil Coyle:** Peter, do you have that information?

Peter Schofield: I do not have it to hand, no.

Q27 **Neil Coyle:** Is it in the region of hundreds of thousands of people?

Dr Coffey: I do not know the answer to that.

Peter Schofield: I am trying to work out the question, sorry.

Q28 **Neil Coyle:** How many people applied for help during the crisis and were not able to access it?

Peter Schofield: Do you mean they could not access it because of income?

Dr Coffey: I do not know.

Neil Coyle: That is the primary reason they would not have a claim.

Dr Coffey: It may be capital.

Peter Schofield: They could not claim because they had capital.

Q29 **Neil Coyle:** You do not know the figure, but you think the primary reason for people being declined is a partner's income or their own savings.

Peter Schofield: Sorry, I am just trying to understand the question. The question is about how many people applied for universal credit and, because of their means, because they had more than £16,000 in the bank or because they were earning more than the top rate of the taper, did not receive anything.

Q30 **Neil Coyle:** You are giving the reason they may not have had it. If you could provide the overall figure, it would be really useful. If you would like to provide that broken down by the reason for the decline, it would be really helpful, because there is a concern that for many people who applied, it was their partner's income that prevented them from accessing any support.

Dr Coffey: Correct, because it is based on the household income.

Q31 **Neil Coyle:** Do you think that that level is set at the right rate to reflect the modern cost of living?

Dr Coffey: The household income is important. That principle has been in place a long time. It came with tax credits. It was household income, not just individual income, and the household access to funds over £16,000. Certainly during Covid, we did not know quite how long some of this was



HOUSE OF COMMONS

going to go on, but people could apply, as and when their savings fell. It is reasonable that if people have a lot of money—and £16,000 is a lot of money—they look into their own resources first

What we have just announced recently, which we need to bring into action, is this new policy that we will bring in place where, if you are saving for a house in an approved product—a Help to Buy ISA or LISA—that will not be regarded in terms of capital, because we thought that was a wrong incentive.

Q32 Neil Coyle: Is there any concern in your mind about, for example, a disabled person with higher cost of living or someone with much higher rents in a different part of the country who suddenly finds themselves in difficult times, as Covid exposed more people to? Scope has done its average cost of living studies. Is there any part of you that thinks there could be more variation and flexibility in payment levels for a fixed period perhaps?

Dr Coffey: I do not know about that. The capital limit does not apply for contributory-style JSA. For people who have been paying national insurance and are eligible for that, they may not be able to access the universal credit, but it is possible they could have got JSA or indeed ESA. That is almost the payback for paying national insurance. There is support available, but not for UC.

Q33 Neil Coyle: You are saying there is support available. The Government are throwing hundreds of millions of pounds of additional support, partly to reflect the fact that the basic level of social security is insufficient to address the current cost of living crisis. You are providing hundreds of millions of pounds in taxpayers' money as a short-term fix, but you are not addressing the long-term problem.

Dr Coffey: As I explained to Mr Mills earlier, the rationale was people newly unemployed were suddenly coming into a situation where there was often quite a big drop in income, so the level was put similar to the statutory minimum sick pay. That is why it ended up with it being roughly in the mid-90s.

Peter Schofield: Per week, yes.

Dr Coffey: Yes, per week. I cannot remember the exact figures. One was £95; I think one was £94. That is where that came from.

Q34 Chris Stephens: One of the groups of people who are missing out in cost of living payments, Secretary of State, are pensioners who are eligible for pension credit, but are not claiming it. Can I ask, first, how effective was the pension credit awareness day on 15 June in generating new claims?

Dr Coffey: Did we not have more claims in a day than we would normally have in a week?



Peter Schofield: We normally would get about 3,000 claims a week and we got about 10,000 claims that week, so we saw a tripling.

Chris Stephens: That is encouraging.

Dr Coffey: There is more to come. There was very good value. I am very keen to support people getting access to benefits.

Q35 **Chris Stephens:** Independent Age tells us that its criticism of the national awareness campaigns is that there is poor targeting, poor co-working with local authorities and a lack of a medium-term strategy to improve pension credit take-up. Can I ask, Secretary of State, whether there has been any engagement with the Independent Age charity on this, and how would you respond to their criticisms?

Dr Coffey: I do not know if there has been engagement with Independent Age. I seem to recall Guy has done stuff with Age UK.

Peter Schofield: Yes, we have with Age UK.

Dr Coffey: The wider point on pension credits, so the Committee is aware, is the estimate of take-up is based on the survey that gets done. We estimate how many people would not have necessarily breached the capital limits or elements like that, and we only have a certain amount of information about pensioners, which is why we cannot automate this. The real challenge is we estimate now about three in four people on low income are claiming pension credit, and it is the savings credit where we have only about 50%—it might even be in the 40s—who we estimate are taking up pension credit.

That is why part of the tone of this campaign this year, in addition to stuff that we have done in the past with the BBC—we tried to do a big action day—is actually trying to appeal to the children and grandchildren of pensioners to encourage them to check. What we had been told the other day is that there were quite a lot of people who did apply who are not actually eligible, but that is okay. It is better for people to check and we want people to try to get access to the benefits if they are.

Peter Schofield: Yes, that is true. The proportion who turned out not to be eligible has gone up, but it is still a good chunk of people who are applying who are eligible.

Dr Coffey: It is very early days in response to the campaign.

Peter Schofield: Yes, it is. The Department has been trying many things over many years to try to increase the take-up of pension credit. At the same time as this campaign, we are seeing this big uptake in pension credit claims. We will see how that plays out, but at the moment we are seeing quite a lot of demand for pension credit.

Q36 **Chris Stephens:** What percentage terms, Mr Schofield, of new claims are successful? Is it 80%? Is it 90%? Is it lower than that? Is the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Department tracking that?

Peter Schofield: We are. It is something between 60% and 70% who turn out to be eligible.

Dr Coffey: Every year when we send out a state pension uprating letter we do remind people about pension credit, so they get something directly as well. I have asked the team to do some of our stuff in pharmacies, perhaps, rather than doctors, recognising older people often go to pharmacies, so there are opportunities there.

Q37 **Chris Stephens:** What is the long-term strategy, Secretary of State, in increasing pension credit take-up?

Dr Coffey: In terms of the conditions of the grant for the household support fund, I have ringfenced that a third of it must go on pensioners. We have shared data with councils to identify people on pension credit already. I believe that we will see different opportunities for councils to work perhaps more closely with some of their local charities or agencies to do that sort of benefit reminder.

Q38 **Chris Stephens:** I am just curious about this. Has there been any discussions with colleagues at HMRC in identifying individuals who might be eligible for pension credit but who have not applied for it? Is that something that the Department would consider perhaps doing a study on?

Dr Coffey: I am not aware that we would get sufficiently comprehensive information to do that, because, again, HMRC only has a certain amount of information about people. It will depend on whether people submit tax returns or not. They will not know the capital that people have. There is a variety of reasons why I am not sure it would be particularly productive. I understand your reason and why we want to encourage people to take up benefits.

Q39 **Chris Stephens:** This is my final question on pension credit. Is there some underlying general principle that stops benefits from being universally granted to eligible people rather than them having to apply for it? I am thinking particularly in relation to vulnerable people needing to actively apply for a benefit that they would certainly benefit from.

Dr Coffey: It is because we set eligibility criteria. In terms of the route for people who got their pensions post 2016, they can no longer get in the second form of pension credit and, in fact, the rate of the new pension is intended to avoid the need for anybody to need to get top-up benefits in that regard. We have to change the system as a whole to make that happen, but we will keep trying in different ways to remind people of the opportunities that are there.

The thing we have particularly strengthened is the getting a few pennies from Government. People may not think that is worthwhile but it opens up a gateway. That is what we have been trying to talk about passports



HOUSE OF COMMONS

to—in effect, other opportunities, such as TV licences and other elements like that, to make it more of a reason, as opposed to perhaps getting an extra even penny from the state. Many people, I expect, probably would not think that would be worthwhile, but it is worthwhile.

Peter Schofield: The Secretary of State makes a very good point there. As more and more people who reach state pension age are claiming the new state pension, so the need for pension credit will fall away and we will see claims for pension credit over the longer term falling away because more people are on the higher amount in the new state pension.

Q40 **Chair:** On that point, you have been very clear that state pension uprating will have the triple lock applied again next year. Will pension credit also be uprated at least in line with inflation next year?

Dr Coffey: We have had a consistency. As you know, I cannot say what the uprating is going to be, but we have committed as a Government, as I did in the Chamber when we did the legislation and since, which has been reinforced by Treasury Ministers, that the policy of triple lock will be reinstated. Consistently, we have taken a similar approach for pension credit.

Q41 **Selaine Saxby:** Good morning. Looking at deductions, we have heard on average that £78 is deducted from an individual's monthly universal credit payment, which can be as much as 20% of their total payment. Even though we have rising costs of living, there has been no permanent change in the Department's policy on deductions. I just wondered if you might be able to clarify why that was.

Dr Coffey: In terms of deductions, there is a variety of issues and different priorities. If people are struggling, they can contact our management system in order to discuss what potential changes could be made. That is still open to them as opposed to being automatically deducted. We have put in place things like advances, which is a phasing of how people receive their benefits. We have extended that opportunity to potentially over two years, to have 25 payments instead of 24, but gradually we have been reducing the deduction cap. I think it was 40% at one point, and then it was 30%. Are we down to 25%?

Peter Schofield: Yes.

Dr Coffey: We have been reducing that gradually, and then we took a decision, particularly thinking of fuel charges, to set aside that for a year. We passed regulations to do that.

Q42 **Selaine Saxby:** Is there an opportunity, given that there is this lag between the inflation figures reaching benefit claimants' pockets, to have a pause or freeze on these deductions over that period, given that we also know that the highest proportion of foodbank users are also those who are having deductions off their UC payment?



Dr Coffey: There is a tailored approach that is going to be taken by individuals to speak with the DWP about their own individual situation rather than having a blanket approach. It is important that the debt will still be there. You are just extending potentially the lifetime of it being recovered. I do not know if we should be making that decision for people on how they manage that debt relationship.

Peter Schofield: The other thing, just to add to what the Secretary of State said, is that the first set of deductions are normally for really critical payments, such as utility bills, and there is a balance here, because we want to avoid anyone being cut off or anything. There is a safety that comes from these deductions then going to pay off some of these arrears that some people might have.

Dr Coffey: There is a legal case at the moment, is there not, on one of the benefits? We have taken an approach and we have adjusted it temporarily while we have these challenges, particularly with energy costs.

Q43 **Selaine Saxby:** On a particular type of the debt, with tax credits, we have had a lot of people suggest that those should be written off for individuals. I just wondered if that was something you were considering and if you had any indication of how much tax credit debt is still outstanding.

Dr Coffey: As it has been explained to me, because of the process of tax credits, where you do an annual repair process, the majority of the debt overpayment and underpayment accounts roughly for about 70% of the overall debt there. It is for HMRC to proactively manage that with tax credit recipients. I know often it can be a surprise for people when they come, especially if there are some historic underpayments and overpayments. I believe HMRC is proactively recognising we are also coming to the end of tax credits. They have started to do more repairing. That is what I was told the other day.

Peter Schofield: Yes, we are putting more money into that, exactly. As the Secretary of State says, quite a lot of the tax credit debt is because of changes of circumstance that have happened to an individual during the year, whereas in DWP, with universal credit, we take account of changes of circumstances and adjust the amount every month.

As the Secretary of State says, for tax credits it is only at this annual point, so you will be carrying through the year an underpayment or an overpayment and if it is an overpayment, that generates a debt, which then would normally be recovered by lowering the tax credit amount the following year, but if in that time they have moved across to universal credit, they will take that debt with them and then we need to recover it through the universal credit system. That accounts for a big chunk of the debt. The total stock of tax credit debt with DWP at the moment is £2.7 billion. £3.3 billion has come over. £2.7 billion is what remains as part of the stock.



Q44 **Selaine Saxby:** The latest fraud and error statistics showed that 4% of benefit expenditure was overpaid last year. This contributes to the amount of deductions that claimants face from their award. Do you feel claimants should be responsible for these deductions at the time? What is the Department doing to try to improve accuracy?

Peter Schofield: There is a whole host of things in there. On your particular point relating to overpayments that may have happened because of a change of circumstance, which I answered in the context of universal credit, by far the majority of overpayments relate to fraud in the system. What we have seen this year is the level of overpayments at 4%; it was 3.9% last year, but it has significantly increased through the pandemic.

We always knew this year would remain quite high. That is in part mechanistically because of the way we produce these statistics. In order to have them developed in time for our annual report and accounts, the sampling that is done is carried out some time before, so the sampling that accounted for these numbers was done between October 2020 and November 2021.

One of the biggest elements within universal credit of those overpayments was the self-employed. Up until August 2021 we had suspended the minimum income floor and we were not carrying out gainful self-employment checks, which is a key part of our mechanism there. That is one example of why fraud and error numbers have remained high in the year we have just had, because we are still seeing the impact of Covid in these numbers because of the sampling.

In terms of what we are doing about it, the Government published our fighting fraud in the welfare system plan a month ago. That set out how we are going to be moving forward. We are funded with additional money—around £600 million over the spending review—to enable us to do some really important additional work. For example, we are putting more people into our compliance work. We are recruiting an additional 2,000 people to do what we call a targeted case review. That will enable us to go through 2 million cases over the next five years. It will enable us to root out fraud and error that is in the benefits system. Then we also have an ambition around new powers and new legislation, particularly to help us access data that would enable us to identify people who have more capital in their bank accounts than they would be eligible for.

We have talked about working with HMRC. There is a lot of potential work to do around the self-employed to match things up. For example, we have talked in this Committee before around the opportunity for maybe a quarterly reporting of self-employed earnings and that would enable us, working with HMRC, to catch up with any changes in self-employed earnings.

Dr Coffey: That is voluntary at the moment, but it will become mandatory in 2025.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Peter Schofield: For self-employed earnings.

Dr Coffey: For self-employed, yes.

Peter Schofield: That alone was £1.5 billion of the £5.9 billion overpayments in universal credit, so it is a really important element to get over.

Q45 **Chris Stephens:** Secretary of State, you will be aware I table Parliamentary questions on deductions periodically. I am concerned that the amount that the Department is clawing back in deductions seems to be increasing. It is now at £11 million a month. Is the Department considering any temporary or permanent changes to its policy on deductions?

Dr Coffey: The reduction to a maximum of 25% on standard allowance came into effect from April last year. I am not intending to make any further proposals right now. As I say, there is a personal approach that people can take by contacting DWP to help with some of that personal repayment programme.

Q46 **Selaine Saxby:** I was going to move on to local housing allowance. We have heard from Shelter that there are 1.8 million households in England that receive housing benefits via universal credit or legacy housing benefit. That number is now 32% higher than pre-pandemic. Local housing allowance remains frozen and there is a concern that this no longer covers the 30th percentile of rents for two or three-bedroom homes in 91% of England. I just wondered how the cost of living package support will help people with these increasing rent costs. Are there other steps being taken to realigning local housing allowance to the 30th percentile?

Dr Coffey: There was that significant change that we did at the beginning of the pandemic, which was, in effect, an extra £1 billion. I am mindful that we spend £29 billion to £30 billion a year on housing support, and there are wider things that we are trying to do, as was announced in aspects of what the Secretary of State for DLUHC and the Prime Minister have talked about, in terms of housing and our approach there.

I do an annual review, but it is not likely to be my policy to change that and to keep it at the same cash levels. We do have the discretionary housing payments. Rent seemed to move around quite a bit in Covid. In some parts of the country it fell. This is part of the aspects of the ongoing challenges. Also, the household support fund can be used to help with housing costs if people are not eligible for aspects, whether it is LHA, or cannot get discretionary housing payment and so on. Local authorities have that, again, opportunity with the support fund to do this.

Q47 **Sir Desmond Swayne:** What was the reasoning in the Government's mind behind putting £1.5 billion into the Household Support Fund rather than uprating benefits or the £650 grant? Can we expect, as part of a strategic move, more use of local authorities to target benefits aside to



the main benefits system in the way that this has done?

Dr Coffey: If we go back to the start of the pandemic, at the beginning of that summer there was some support through Defra, and then my Department took on more of an umbrella approach with the winter grant scheme, and we continued that because the lockdowns continued a lot longer. Having the household support fund still recognises the challenges that people face and also particularly, as now it has been extended, the concerns about energy prices.

There is a particular thing here right now with the global inflation challenge. There are elements that simply are not within the control of most the population on aspects, whether it is the impact of our approach, which is the right approach, to tackling Putin and his invasion of Ukraine. That has had a knock-on effect. We still have some of the aftershocks of Covid. Global supply chains still are not quite in the same place. As a consequence, it was the right thing the Government announcing what we have done with the cost of living payments.

In terms of local welfare, it used to be the case that DWP handed over money, for which I guess there would have been Barnett formula, to local authorities to have the local welfare. It was established, but we delegated that responsibility entirely in April 2013 and we rolled about £138 million into the grants. It was only in 2021-22 that the local welfare assistance element of the revenue support grant was no longer a visible budget line. My experience is a lot of councils have a local welfare fund. I am not saying they are putting a lot of money into it, but this is an opportunity for them to supplement some of their welfare activities that they were doing locally.

Q48 Sir Desmond Swayne: How are you going to ensure correctness and consistency across local authorities with the HSF, and to what extent is that fund accessible to people with no recourse to public funds?

Dr Coffey: On the consistency, we have done grant conditions. This is talking about councils in England now. The money has gone directly to the Welsh and Scottish Governments. We could have actually done it to Welsh councils as well, if we had wanted to. We do not have the power to do it direct through the legislation we have used to make these grants. There is an argument that we could use other legislation.

The grant conditions are monitored. The councils are returning information. We are trying not to make it overly onerous in terms of reporting back, but they have to fulfil it and if they do not fulfil it, they do not get the money. One of the reasons for doing this is that local councils will know their communities somewhat better than us trying to entirely dictate, but we have set overall conditions. We have been discussing this for potentially the next round of funding for October. I am still going through that now, in terms of whether we lift some of those grant conditions or if we do something slightly different.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

In terms of no recourse to public funds, off the top of my head I cannot remember whether an NRPf can have access to local welfare assistance. The answer is I do not know, because there is some financial support people with no recourse to public funds can do. I just cannot remember that list of benefits off the top of my head.

Q49 **Sir Desmond Swayne:** Can you let us know?

Dr Coffey: Yes, of course. I will get that sent over today. I think they can.

Peter Schofield: I think they can, if it is consistent with the grant condition.

Q50 **Chair:** On the household support fund, you made the point earlier that one of the conditions is a third needs to be paid to pensioners. Are you getting returns from the local authorities telling you how much has been spent on pensions, for example, and how the other conditions are met?

Dr Coffey: The pensioner condition only came in for April. We asked them for two reports a year, so three months in, but that takes a bit of time. As I say, we have shared some access to pension credit information and pension credit recipients, and the other element is quite often it will be the authority that is responsible for adult social services and is already well aware of potentially pensioners who are there.

Q51 **Chair:** There are two returns a year, did you say, from local authorities about what they are doing with the household support fund?

Dr Coffey: I think that is right. I cannot remember if it is two returns a year or ends up being two returns per award, but again I will clarify that later today.

Q52 **Steve McCabe:** Good morning. I want to ask a couple of questions about people with disabilities. Most people were pleased to see the £150 payment for people with disabilities, but then were a little bit worried to see that changes to the warm home discount meant it was going to be taken back off them. Are you a bit worried this looks like the Government giving with one hand and taking with the other?

Dr Coffey: BEIS did a consultation changing it so the warm home discount, which, by the way, is paid for by other billpayers, is—

Q53 **Steve McCabe:** Are you saying that is nothing to do with the Government?

Dr Coffey: I am not sure what the line of that question is. I am just pointing out it is not taxation.

Q54 **Steve McCabe:** You are taking the credit, rightly so, for giving the cost of living £150, but the effect of the changes in the warm home discount means that 300,000 people end up getting a payment in one hand and getting it taken away in the other. I am asking if you feel okay about that.



Dr Coffey: I am just starting to say that BEIS did the consultation, and it was the right approach to make the warm home discount scheme to be on the basis of means testing. PIP is not means-tested, so to remove people on PIP from the regular warm home discount approach, which, as I say, is paid for the billpayers rather than coming out of taxation, ends up reaching considerably more households. A good decision was made. We recognise for people with disabilities that they may well be incurring some additional costs, which we wanted to account for, and that is why we have taken the approach that we have. The warm home discount consultation and policy is going on until the next time it gets reviewed. I am comfortable with what we have done.

Q55 **Steve McCabe:** It is generally acceptable that quite a lot of people with disabilities have extra heating costs because of the conditions they suffer from. I was asking if you were comfortable, because it does sound to me like giving with one hand and taking with the other, but you have said you are comfortable.

Dr Coffey: Remember that there are a lot of people on PIP who get means-tested benefits.

Q56 **Steve McCabe:** A figure of 300,000 is quite a large number of folk to end up losing out over it. That is not just me saying that. That figure comes from Leonard Cheshire, does it not?

Dr Coffey: Many more people will gain from it. I am conscious of what you said about PIP.

Q57 **Steve McCabe:** I am concentrating on the folk who are not gaining. It is a bit like saying, "There is a happy bunch over here, so let us ignore this lot over there". Anyway, I asked you if you were comfortable; you said you were. We have that clear.

Let me ask you a slightly different question. Are you at all concerned about the backlog in the PIP assessments these days? I gather it has trebled. It is 300,000 as well. It seems to be recurring figure for this Department.

Dr Coffey: Yes, I am. Our assessors are helping our decision-makers make more decisions than ever before. However, we are getting record claims of people applying for PIP. It has never been so high.

Q58 **Steve McCabe:** It has been rising for five years, has it not?

Dr Coffey: There has been a significant upturn this year.

Q59 **Steve McCabe:** The figure has been rising for five years, has it not, Secretary of State?

Peter Schofield: Not demand. Demand for PIP fell quite significantly.

Q60 **Steve McCabe:** I am saying the backlog figure has been rising steadily for five years. That is true, is it not?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dr Coffey: We had an action plan and we were starting to get on top of it. We were starting to get to the point where we were processing more than the claims coming in. That has now gone again. It is a challenge. I am not denying it.

Q61 **Steve McCabe:** When do you think it will start falling now?

Dr Coffey: Peter, you have been doing a deep dive on this. I know that our Minister, Chloe, is working with teams on this.

Peter Schofield: It is a good challenge. The uncertainty is really one about what is happening to demand. It could be that demand is peaking and falling back, in which case we will be able to get on top of the backlogs more quickly, but if demand remains high, we will need to find ways of managing through. Part of that is absolutely the health assessors doing more and they have agreed a recovery plan, which they are doing better than.

Part of it is around findings ways of particularly supporting people who are coming up to the end of their awards. By doing that, the amount of time it takes to go through for a new claim has remained broadly steady at around 20 weeks. That is how it has been for quite some time. That number has come down.

More broadly, we have a longer-term plan called the Health Transformation Programme. That is our approach to really looking at how we deliver these benefits. The contract with the current assessors comes to an end next year, and we are looking at how we can bring together into a single assessment service a way of looking at both work capability assessments and universal credit and how we deliver health assessments in PIP, so we can deliver a better service for our customers going through that process, but also so we can make the best use of the resources that we have.

The particular challenge is one around demand, but take-up for benefits is high on a number of fronts. We have already talked about pension credit. Really, what we are doing here is around reforming how we deliver this to deliver a better service and to use our resources more effectively.

Q62 **Steve McCabe:** Is it accurate to say at the moment the backlog of about 310,000 could continue to climb because you are not sure about demand, and that is your main explanation for the backlog? Is that reasonable?

Peter Schofield: There are other tunes you can play. For example, there is a programme to move people across from disability living allowance to PIP, and we cannot do that. That frees up health assessors to be focusing in on new claims, for example. There are things you can do around people whose current awards come to an end, allowing those to run on rather than using health assessors to do that work. There are things you can do to protect the new claims journey.

Q63 **Steve McCabe:** The reason why I am pursuing this with you is that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Citizens Advice told this Committee that there are people with disabilities who are getting into debt at the moment. People are unable to heat their homes at the moment because they are waiting for these assessments. That is the concern.

Peter Schofield: The amount of time it takes for a new claim has actually been broadly steady and, indeed, has come down in recent weeks because of the action that we have taken that I have described. It is currently around about 20 weeks.

Q64 **Steve McCabe:** Let me ask you one last question on the same theme about backlogs. There is also a backlog for claimants waiting for a work capability assessment for universal credit. That is something you have been threatening to publish some figures on for an incredibly long period of time. 2017 was when you first suggested that. When do you think you will be able to publish the statistics on WCA decisions in universal credit?

Dr Coffey: Why do we not add that to the list of questions? I cannot remember if it was on your list of questions by 15 July.

Q65 **Steve McCabe:** Is that part of a list of answers? Sorry, I did not understand that.

Dr Coffey: I cannot remember if it is on the list of questions that the Chair had asked me.

Q66 **Steve McCabe:** What I have said is straightforward. Why do you not do it?

Dr Coffey: I have suggested I add it to the response to the letter by 15 July.

Steve McCabe: You need to investigate why you do not do it.

Chair: I do not think this specific point was covered.

Dr Coffey: It may not be. I am suggesting if it is not, I add it.

Q67 **Steve McCabe:** Secretary of State, I am just trying to understand why you do not do it. Are you saying there is a technical problem that you need to go and investigate and add to the list of questions or are you saying you do not know why you do not do that?

Dr Coffey: I have said I will respond to the Chair in addition, if it was not on the letter.

Q68 **Steve McCabe:** You come here to answer questions. It is not unreasonable for me to ask it. If you do not answer it, it is not unreasonable for me to say, "Why are you not answering it?"

Dr Coffey: Mr McCabe, the Chair, Sir Stephen, sent me a letter with a variety of questions with a target date to respond by 15 July, and I have committed to doing that. The target was not to come on 29 June. I am responding to what the Committee has asked for and will do.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chair: We will look forward to the reply. Thank you very much.

Q69 **Neil Coyle:** In your previous answer about the local housing allowance, you suggested that rents were falling in some areas of the country. Where is it that someone living in Bermondsey and working at London Bridge, who finds their rent put up, should live?

Dr Coffey: I am not going to advise people on where they should live.

Q70 **Neil Coyle:** That was your answer to a question about local housing allowance.

Dr Coffey: No, it was not.

Q71 **Neil Coyle:** Rather than fix the local housing allowance, you are saying that rents have fallen in some areas so it was not really a problem.

Dr Coffey: I did not say it was not really a problem. I just said there is variety around the country.

Neil Coyle: That specific in my constituency—

Dr Coffey: You are the MP for the area. You might want to give them advice on where to live.

Q72 **Neil Coyle:** I am trying to get the answer out of you. I think the local housing allowance should be repaired to reflect—

Dr Coffey: That is a different story than about where to live.

Q73 **Neil Coyle:** It is not, is it, because in reality the local housing allowance is not fixed based on where you live? It is fixed by you and this Government. If you actually fixed it to reflect the cost that people experience in Edinburgh, London and many parts of the country, as this is not just a London issue, it might better reflect and then work better for employers, who desperately need people to stay in places like London and Bermondsey, for example. What is your solution?

Dr Coffey: You have just asked me about where people should live. I am saying it is not my role to advise people where they should live.

Q74 **Neil Coyle:** In answer to the question, you said that rents were falling in some parts of the country. As your solution, you are saying people should move out of areas with higher rent.

Dr Coffey: That is not what I said.

Q75 **Neil Coyle:** That is what your answer certainly did more than imply.

Dr Coffey: That may be what you inferred. I am conscious that what I said is about the movements on rents during the last couple of years. Some places have gone up and some places have gone down.

Q76 **Neil Coyle:** What are the Government doing to reflect areas with high rent, high vacancy rates and relatively low unemployment?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dr Coffey: We know that in London we still want to encourage people to get into work. There are a number of different activities that have been happening in that regard, but I am not going to give advice to people on where they should precisely live.

Q77 **Neil Coyle:** It is to move out of cities. I wanted to ask about carers, Secretary of State. Carers UK is a fantastic organisation that is also based in my constituency. Something like 2.8 million carers are not qualified for any help from the Government under the cost of living package. Why is this?

Dr Coffey: Carer's allowance is not a means-tested benefit. Covering 8 million households is a substantial way to support people on means-tested benefits.

Q78 **Neil Coyle:** Have you seen Carers UK and other organisations' research into carers cutting things like the amount of meals or the heating and things like that?

Dr Coffey: I have not, but it is done on a means-tested approach. If people have carer's allowance and are on means-tested benefits, they will get the support.

Q79 **Neil Coyle:** There is no plan to do, as is happening in Wales, for example, a one-off payment to carers specifically. It is £500 in Wales. There is no intention from DWP to do something similar.

Dr Coffey: I am not aware, no. We set out our approach and we legislated for it. Thanks to both Houses, it became an Act of Parliament last night, so we are getting on with it.

Q80 **Neil Coyle:** Is there any intention to link carer's allowance to inflation?

Dr Coffey: I do an annual review of uprating of benefits and I will consider that in the usual way.

Neil Coyle: All heart this morning.

Dr Coffey: These extra payments that we will be doing as a Government, whether it is through energy costs for every household of £400 per household or the extra benefits we have legislated for, is an extra £15 billion being spent by this Government from taxpayers' resources, principally focused on the 8 million poorest households in the country. That is a very impassioned response to what was being faced.

Q81 **Neil Coyle:** They are one-off payments that do not address the fundamentals of the system and ignore the long-term problems and concerns raised by organisations like Carers UK. Carers are providing help that saves the NHS and councils money, but it does result in decreased work opportunities, for example, for carers. The Department is undertaking research into barriers to work for carers. Is that research finished?

Dr Coffey: I do not know about that research.



Peter Schofield: I do not know where we are on that, no.

Q82 **Neil Coyle:** You do not know where that is at. It was underway last March. Do you think it is still ongoing?

Dr Coffey: I do not know about that research.

Neil Coyle: Would you find out?

Chair: Let me just add that that is also in that letter that we have been talking about.

Dr Coffey: There we are.

Q83 **Dr Spencer:** I am looking forward to the response to this letter. Just following on from the questions about carers, I have heard from carers, and I am sure we all have. I remember particularly some carers I met during Carers Week who talked about the impact of fuel prices, so petrol or diesel, and the pressures that is causing to them. What assessment have you made on the impact of specifically fuel cost pressures on carers and, for that matter, people on benefits more generally?

Dr Coffey: I am not aware we have done any impact analysis specifically for carers. It is possible the Department of Health has done, but I am not aware that we have.

Q84 **Dr Spencer:** Would you consider a repayment scheme going forward to help those business costs, for want of better words, endured by carers, such as on fuel specifically or on things like missed earnings, where because they have taken a caring role, that has become a barrier to employment?

Dr Coffey: I fully understand why people make the choice to take on caring. They are thinking of their relatives and that is the best support they think they can give to people. It is a very welcome choice that carers make, but the carer's allowance and elements of UC that relate to caring responsibilities have never been intended to be a substitute for earnings.

Q85 **Dr Spencer:** More generally, where there are cost of living pressures that in part are driven by commodity prices, such as fuel, which is heavily taxed, in terms of approaches, which ones would you tend to prefer? Would you tend to prefer ones where we tax and give back in terms of giving support or approaches that cut taxation in the first place and knock down those cost of living pressures?

Dr Coffey: You will remember that we reduced fuel duty by 5p a litre. The expected cost of that was £5 billion, which is again not something to be dismissed lightly. I am also conscious that, dare I say it, matters of taxation are a matter for the Chancellor. When going through his various assessments in thinking of the whole income from a variety of taxes and then how we redistribute that, very deliberately, the Chancellor wanted to make sure this big package of support was highly focused on



HOUSE OF COMMONS

redistributing to people on the lowest incomes. It is really a matter for the Chancellor to talk about different ways of taxation, et cetera.

Q86 Dr Spencer: I completely appreciate and respect that, but in terms of your appraisal in terms of the cost of living pressures that you are deploying resource to help people with, have you done analysis in terms of the overall taxation burden, in terms of upfront taxes like income tax, et cetera?

Dr Coffey: The answer is no, I have not. It is possible the Chancellor has done that.

Q87 Shaun Bailey: Secretary of State, just sticking briefly with this theme around carers, I have quite an active young carers' association in my borough of Sandwell. I am just curious what your Department is doing, maybe in conjunction with DfE, around pathways into work for young carers, particularly young carers who, as a result perhaps of bereavement, now find themselves in a situation where they may be reliant on the benefits system but want to get that pathway into work. Are you undertaking any workstreams at the moment around that?

Dr Coffey: Off the top of my head, the Minister for Employment, Mims Davies, and the Minister for Care, Gillian Keegan, are having some discussions about that. One of the key differences between the carer's allowance and then the caring responsibility elements within UC is UC does not put a limit, in a way, on hours that could be worked, whereas I think I am right in saying that the traditional carer's allowance does. There are opportunities there in terms of the earnings threshold.

I know that Mims has started thinking about this, but I do not know the detail of where she has got to. I mentioned previously opportunities potentially for more remote working could be an avenue, but also I know Mims, as I say, is talking about some of the gaps or vacancies in carers more generally and seeing that as a combination of a career of personal support as well as potentially earning some money.

Q88 Shaun Bailey: It is definitely a concern, particularly for the young carers I have spoken to, about, when they have come to that point and they want to get back into those work responsibilities, getting those opportunities.

If I could just turn now a bit more to the lifting of the cap around migration onto UC, Mr Schofield, this is really more of an operational question for you. You had an exchange earlier in the session with Mr Mills. I am just curious how you are ensuring that your operational systems are there ready. Probably to pick up more on the question that Mr Mills asked you, what is your timeline of getting ready? Given that you are looking to move that cap of £10,000, how are you getting operationally ready for that and any potential influx of migration that you have coming through on the managed migration to UC?



Peter Schofield: The work is underway and we published a strategy. The work is underway in terms of what we call discovery and developing the process, but in terms of our infrastructure and ability to manage big influxes into universal credit, we demonstrated that to a huge extent during 2020 when we had one day where we had over 100,000 people claiming universal credit and we were able to pay and deliver. I am really confident that we are able to manage that claims process.

Q89 **Shaun Bailey:** Just on that point, you will have scaled back slightly since then, because clearly there was a cross-Government effort to ensure, particularly with yourselves, that you were ready to go, given that your Department was very much on the front line in terms of providing that support. Given that you will have had to drop slightly back to a more BAU phase and given the capacity levels we are talking about, how are you getting back to that operational footing that you have just mentioned there? Clearly, it is going to require some sort of upscaling of what you are doing at the moment.

Dr Coffey: It is programmed that more civil servants will be working on the move to UC. People can move now, so you can choose to move and if you have a change of circumstances, there is that approach called natural migration. People are required to move by doing that. People are moving from legacy benefits all the time. The principal difference between the managed migration and the other two tracks of voluntary and natural is the transitional protection. That is probably the key IT challenge in that regard, but also the contacting of people.

We are underway on a small-scale approach, just validating approaches to see which is going to be the most effective, so it can be done at scale. Some of the regulations do not allow us to move certain people, so there are certain elements there where we wanted to be able to unlock that and to allow more testing.

Q90 **Shaun Bailey:** I want to touch on traditional protection, but, before I do, just very briefly, I have a question with regard to the different methods of migration, thinking predominantly of voluntary migration where people opt to move on to UC. Mr Schofield, it is perhaps again a question for you. If you were to have significant upticks in the number of people opting to migrate on to UC, does that in any way relieve that operational pressure on you or do those pressures still remain? How do you factor that in, in terms of your delivery timetables on things?

Peter Schofield: Our planning ahead makes assumptions around the number of people on universal credit and the number of new claims. If you take the number that we are talking about here and look at it alongside other new claims, because people's circumstances have changed and they have made a new claim for benefits to begin with, this is absolutely manageable in that context.

As the Secretary of State says, our plans assume that as we move towards 2024 and the completion of the migration to UC, we will be



HOUSE OF COMMONS

building capacity in our service centres to enable us to manage that. It reaches around an extra 3,500 at the point where we are really working at full pace to move. A lot of that will be around the managed migration element, because, as the Secretary of State says, operationally that is a bigger part of the challenge because you are reaching out to people who have not made a claim. You are encouraging them to make a claim and you are sending them a migration notice.

Dr Coffey: The migration notice requires them to make a claim.

Peter Schofield: They have to then make a claim within three months. Then, as the Secretary of State says, you are calculating the transitional protection for them, but for people who make a voluntary claim, it is like making a new claim. More broadly, the systems are already there and the volumes you are talking about are manageable and planned into our demand modelling.

Q91 **Shaun Bailey:** Finally, just on transitional protection, there have been some concerns raised, particularly about potential inequality for people who will have transition protection this year and then, after the uprating review, Secretary of State, that you will have to do towards the end of the year. How are you mitigating that in light of rising inflation? Clearly, there is going to have to be some sort of discussion within the Department around transitional protection in light of this and the fact that you may effectively almost unintentionally create two classes of claimants as regard to their transition protection.

Dr Coffey: It is not two classes of claimants. The policy is set. The transitional protection applies to the amount that you were receiving on this kind of benefits process; it is just you get at least the same on this new different system. At minimum, it is the same income.

Q92 **Shaun Bailey:** You would not necessarily accept the concern or criticism there may be some sort of inequality within that.

Dr Coffey: The timescale of quite a lot of this means that I am not anticipating we will have lots of managed migration by April. This will speed up over time, but we are keeping the policy approach that we have.

Q93 **Shaun Bailey:** Very finally from me, you touched on it before, Mr Schofield, around those who perhaps do not migrate by the deadline and loss of income on that. What steps are the Department taking just to monitor and track that? Clearly, there will be people who perhaps do not claim by their deadline, because we know there are things like that the digital divide and issues like that.

Dr Coffey: I have added a policy that I would rather talk to you privately about, because I do not want to deter people from responding to our requests to migrate.

Q94 **Shaun Bailey:** There are conversations taking place around that.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dr Coffey: Yes.

Peter Schofield: A lot of management information is starting to be developed to help us.

Shaun Bailey: To identify those particular groups.

Dr Coffey: We are meeting now weekly, because the migration phase is underway.

Shaun Bailey: That is useful to know.

Q95 **Chair:** On managed migration, the original plan was to migrate 10,000, then stop, publish an evaluation of how it had gone and then continue. The 10,000 pause will not now happen. Are you planning to publish information periodically on how the migration is going?

Dr Coffey: We are still considering aspects of that. I did a written ministerial statement. We learned a bit in Harrogate, but not a lot. The main thing we learned in Harrogate is not to do it the way it was done in Harrogate.

Chair: It would certainly be of interest and helpful if you were able, from time to time, to publish information on how it was going.

Q96 **Steve McCabe:** Mr Schofield, the last time you were here I asked you about the state pension underpayments. The Department's estimates are we may be talking about £1 billion. By February of this year you had paid around 10% of that figure. What is the current position?

Peter Schofield: Those are the last statistics that we have published. The Chair wrote to me a few weeks ago and I wrote back on 16 May with a little bit more around the plan. We are on track.

Q97 **Steve McCabe:** Is the exercise finishing in December? Is that right?

Peter Schofield: The 405,000 that we talked about is on track to finish by the end of 2023. The challenge that you asked in your letter was, "Given you have paid out £94 million in the first year, are you on track to do the whole lot by the end of December?" The key point I want to get across is that we started with around 100 folk working on this, working out how to do this. As we have talked about before, these are complex calculations and they were working through how to do that. As we have developed that and got the quality to where we needed it be, we have recruited additional staff to do that, so we are now up to around 500. Broadly speaking, I am looking to almost triple it by the beginning of next year, to enable us to process through and get through all of that.

The other thing I mentioned in my letter is that, as we have continued to do more and more scans, so we have identified additional cases. That, with additional cases, will take us longer as well. I am not going to say much more about that because I need to make a provision for this in the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

annual report and accounts, which are due to be published next month, but there will be an addition to the provision as a result.

Q98 **Steve McCabe:** These extra staff presumably mean you are going to ramp up the operation, but if it was scheduled to finish at the end of this year and in February you had only managed 10% of the figure—

Peter Schofield: No, it is the end of 2023.

Q99 **Steve McCabe:** You would need to have a fairly massive ramp up, would you not?

Peter Schofield: December 2023 is the date. We had 100 for most of 2021. We now have 500, so that is five times more. I am looking to get up to 1,200 or 1,300. I might get up to 1,500, depending on the recruitment. It is not just a little bit of a scaling up. The first year was always going to be slower as we worked through how we were going to do this and developed a plan. The run rate, if I can put it that way, is going to be much higher over the rest of the exercise.

As I say, there will be more to do, because as this Committee and indeed the Public Accounts Committee have regularly challenged me, underpayments in the state pension are remaining steady and relatively low in percentage terms, but the challenge that the Committee has always raised is, "From the sampling you know the number, but how do you identify the people who need to be paid back?" Our scanning work is identifying more people, so we can pay more people back.

Q100 **Steve McCabe:** In April last year you told us you were prioritising older individuals and widows. Have you now reviewed all those cases you were aware of at the time you were prioritising them?

Peter Schofield: No, we have not yet. Our priority was to focus on the over-80s; those remain the first that we will have got through. We are aiming to have done that by spring next year. We are looking to have also done those who are most vulnerable, but also those who are category BL cases first as well. The conversion ones will take potentially a bit longer, but that is the plan. I will say a bit more about that in the annual report and accounts.

Q101 **Steve McCabe:** When is this annual report scheduled for?

Peter Schofield: It is this side of the summer recess, so July.

Dr Coffey: It should be published before the House rises.

Steve McCabe: It is a couple of weeks. Gosh, between that and the letter, I have my summer reading sorted out.

Peter Schofield: I am in front of my Departmental Audit and Risk Committee tomorrow, so we are in the final stages.

Q102 **Steve McCabe:** Can I just ask you one last thing about this? Have you got any plans to expand the LEAP exercise to cover divorced women?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Peter Schofield: No. The difference between divorced people is in all of those circumstances they need to alert us to a change of circumstance. The cases that we are looking at through the LEAP exercise are where we should have known and we should have got those right.

I did a sample exercise looking at divorce cases to see if I could see a widespread issue following some reports in the media. I just thought I would have a look at that, but I could not see anything that would suggest that there was anything that needed a LEAP exercise. If anyone in any circumstance not covered by the LEAP exercise thinks that there is potentially an issue, they should get in touch with us.

Q103 **Neil Coyle:** The Way to Work scheme was launched in January with a target of getting 500,000 people into work by the end of this month. How is it going?

Dr Coffey: We published a response to a parliamentary question that we had hit 485,000 last week. I am confident we will get to 500,000.

Q104 **Neil Coyle:** By the end of the month.

Dr Coffey: Yes.

Q105 **Neil Coyle:** Will these people keep work?

Dr Coffey: We hope so, of course.

Q106 **Neil Coyle:** What is behind the failure rate in restarts, with something like only 7% of people supported retaining work?

Dr Coffey: It would be helpful to remind me where you have got that 7% figure from.

Q107 **Neil Coyle:** Some 227,000 people began work and they were supposed to be supported to keep work, but only 16,000 have kept work. Why is that?

Peter Schofield: On restart, we have had, as of 9 June, 327,500 referrals, leading to 258,500 starts. We have had 16,500 job outcomes, which is 143% of the profile that we were intending.

Q108 **Neil Coyle:** What is your confidence rate in all of those? You said it is just over 250,000 now who have gone into work; that is starts. What is your confidence rate in those people—

Dr Coffey: That is people who have started the restart coaching.

Peter Schofield: Yes, sorry, started into restart.

Dr Coffey: They are not job starts. People have started work, but it is basically a year-long course. Probably the difference to other programmes that have happened in the past is that once people have a job and they are still required to be applying for work, they get that support continuing to try to improve the success rate of keeping people in work. We are still in quite early days.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q109 **Neil Coyle:** The point is that, of the people leaving the scheme, only 7% are leaving the scheme because they have a job. They are moving into full-time paid employment. The rest of the people leaving the scheme are not being supported with the outcome that is the Department's target.

Dr Coffey: It is not a figure I recognise.

Peter Schofield: I gave you the number.

Neil Coyle: Perhaps we will add it to the letter.

Peter Schofield: I will give you the number. There have been 16,500 job outcomes at this stage, which is ahead of the profile that we had intended. As the Secretary of State said, this is early days, because these are people who have been through the scheme, come out of the scheme, got a job and the outcome is after they have been in employment for a certain number of months, and it links to the payment by results contract that we have with the suppliers. That is where we are.

Dr Coffey: There may be a phasing element.

Q110 **Neil Coyle:** Add it to the letter. As part of that process in Way to Work, there is a requirement to have face-to-face appointments. Why are they being required to be face to face and not done remotely, on Zoom, over the phone or whatever? What is the purpose behind calling people in to jobcentres.

Dr Coffey: Historic evidence shows that face-to-face contact is a good trigger to getting people into work. Particularly on Way to Work, bringing employers more into the jobcentre and having interviews there is something that started to happen more with Kickstart towards the end, and we saw that worked. That certainly feels like it has had an impact, but I am really pleased with the outcomes. We want to try to help people still get into work who have not got jobs, but also to try to develop more the rollout of helping people to progress in work.

Q111 **Neil Coyle:** Kickstart missed its 250,000 target by 90,000. I am more interested that you have just said that there is evidence on face-to-face appointments resulting in getting people into work. Where is that evidence?

Dr Coffey: It is what was devised back in 2014 or 2015.

Q112 **Neil Coyle:** Has that been published by the Department? Is this the Department's own research?

Peter Schofield: It lies behind the regime that we use for our labour market work that lay behind the 2015 spending review.

Q113 **Neil Coyle:** Are you telling me the Department did some research and actually published the findings?

Peter Schofield: I do not know. I cannot remember the timing on all of that.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dr Coffey: I do not know that we commissioned any external research, but I was not Secretary of State then.

Neil Coyle: It would be helpful to have those findings. Is the rising number of benefits sanctions linked to the—

Dr Coffey: Can I understand what is behind the question in terms of why we think it makes a difference? We think people coming into the jobcentre and having that personal relationship makes a difference.

Q114 **Neil Coyle:** I am interested in the evidence. You have said there is evidence. I am hopeful that you will provide the evidence to the Committee. I am genuinely keen to see it.

Dr Coffey: I am just trying to understand where you are going with the question.

Q115 **Neil Coyle:** Anything that supports people into sustained employment is welcome. I would welcome seeing the evidence that supports your assertions, so I hope you will provide that.

Dr Coffey: We got a record number of people into work March and April as well. We have had a significant increase of people coming into the jobcentre.

Q116 **Neil Coyle:** That is because they are required to. They are mandated to, and if they fail to come in for any reason, that can result in a sanction.

Dr Coffey: It is not for any reason. It is only if it is unreasonable.

Q117 **Neil Coyle:** Exactly, which is why only 4% of people who missed an appointment were sanctioned. Why is there this reticence to publish the review into sanctions?

Peter Schofield: Just to give you some datapoints, in March 2021 the intensive work search group in universal credit reached its peak of about 2.3 million. In April 2021 we were able to reopen jobcentres and to start face-to-face engagement. The intensive work search group is now down to 1.46 million, so it has dropped by about 900,000. Some of that is captured in the Way to Work data as well.

Lots of other things have been going on in the economy and we have record job vacancies as well, but I see this day in and day out when I visit jobcentres. The difference that it makes, in terms of having jobcentres with claimants coming in and with employers there, the buzz that you get and the sense that our work coaches have in particular that they are seeing outcomes and lives being changed as a result, is palpable. It is so different from how it was when we were unable to bring people in, even though, day in, day out, people were engaging with claimants over the phone and, where they could, on video as well, but it is not really the same.

Q118 **Neil Coyle:** You are saying the physical presence definitely contributes.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Peter Schofield: We really do see that.

Q119 **Neil Coyle:** It is useful to hear that. Does the Department have evidence that the sanctions are also supporting people into work?

Peter Schofield: If you look at the sanction numbers, by far the vast majority of them are linked to a failure to attend. We have a conditionality regime. A conditionality regime ultimately needs to have a sanction at the end of it to be effective, so it is part of the same thing. We are encouraging claimants to come into the jobcentre because we think it is the best way to help them into work. Ultimately, there needs to be something at the end of a process where you are engaging with people and encouraging them. It is by no means the first resort at all, but ultimately you have a sanction.

Q120 **Neil Coyle:** I understand that. You are not saying that there is evidence that the sanction supports people into work. You are saying that the sanction is a penalty for not fulfilling the requirements of the—

Dr Coffey: Claimant commitment.

Q121 **Neil Coyle:** That is simply the basis for it. Given the low 4% figure, and 2% overall, why not publish the Department's research on this? Why the reticence? It would be easier to get nuclear launch codes.

Dr Coffey: The Permanent Secretary has written to the Chair before. I do not know if it is on that list of questions, but I know he has written.

Chair: It is in the letter that we have repeatedly mentioned, yes.

Dr Coffey: Okay. There we are.

Q122 **Neil Coyle:** Your Department told the Lords Economic Affairs Committee two years ago that it would provide this data. You can understand why this Committee might be worried that your letter, which is going to be quite a hefty tome anyway, might not be particularly detailed on this specific.

Dr Coffey: I hope it will not be hefty; I hope it will be succinct and to the point.

Chair: We will look forward to it.

Q123 **Debbie Abrahams:** Good morning, both of you. I just wanted to ask you a question in relation to the EHRC's section 23 agreement, which you were compelled to comply with under the 2010 Equality Act because of its concerns about disadvantage and discrimination of disabled people in the social security system. What progress have we made and when can we expect to see that?

Dr Coffey: The section 23 agreement has not yet been agreed with EHRC. In terms of the approach, we are in discussion with EHRC about this, because we are awaiting further elements from EHRC on, to some extent, why it has made the claims that it has. I know that there is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

ongoing discussion between the Department and EHRC, but I do not have the very latest. We hope to make progress sometime in the summer. That is the timeline I have been given.

Peter Schofield: Yes, we are talking to them. The things we are talking to them about are a lot of the things we have talked about in this Committee. They are things we are trying to do to ensure that we learn from those cases where things go wrong and that we make the experience of engaging with DWP one that is what we would all want to see, learning lessons. There is the work of the serious case panel, for example, and the learning that we have from some of those cases where things have gone wrong and the changes that we have made since.

We have talked about some of that already, and we are updating the EHRC on all of that and the work that we are doing, and understanding from it any further concerns. This engagement is about learning from anything that we need to know and do differently, and it is part of a wider theme that we have discussed in this Committee before.

Q124 **Debbie Abrahams:** We have indeed. That was in April, so could you possibly tack it on to the list of things that we have asked—

Dr Coffey: To do a section 23 agreement, the Department has to agree. It is seen as a particular way to try to have a constructive approach. Of course, the EHRC has all sorts of levers it can pull. That is why we are still talking to them.

Q125 **Debbie Abrahams:** We look forward to hearing about that. I read their letter. I thought it was quite comprehensive in terms of their grounds for demanding that you do that, but perhaps we could look at some of the things that I am going to talk about now as also adding to that evidence.

We know that, since July 2019—these are the latest figures to March; I have submitted another question so hopefully will have the most up-to-date figures before recess—there have been 123 IPRs into deaths of claimants; that is 26 more over the last nine months. There have been 34 IPRs into serious harms; again, that is another seven in just over nine months. When you were asked, through an FOI request, to review these, you rejected it. The lack of transparency that is around the process of how claimants have come to die, so seriously that you are investigating them, is one of the reasons I would put to you that the EHRC is so concerned about the policies of this Government and the culture within the Department, which assumes that people are shirkers.

Dr Coffey: Nobody assumes that in my Department, or they should not. If you can refer me to the people who do, we will look into it.

Q126 **Debbie Abrahams:** Why were those FOIs rejected?

Peter Schofield: In terms of publishing IPRs, they have a huge amount of personal data in them.

Q127 **Debbie Abrahams:** What about in terms of redacting them?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dr Coffey: They are supposed to be internal process reviews. I cannot remember if we are in a legal situation, but there is an ongoing back and forth with the ICO; that is my understanding. I am not sure what I can say right now.

We have continued to do the serious case panels. I have commented this week that I think there is a bit more information that we should be including. With the latest one, I have been verbally told, for example, that we currently do a sample of so many phone calls and how much of that gets automatically linked to triggers for potentially vulnerable people. The decision has been made to expand that to all of our telephony connections. We consider the approaches that could help us with that.

I have referred to this before: ultimately, coroners are the people who come to conclusions about the reasons for somebody's death. I am conscious that we have received seven PFD reports in the last eight years, two of which were related to suicide. For the most recent one we received, we were not even asked to go and give evidence or a representation at the inquest, so we are still working through that. I still believe that the coroners are the people who have that ultimate decision point.

Q128 **Debbie Abrahams:** My point is in terms of trust in the system and why the EHRC may have felt compelled to issue that. Will you be able to share those IPRs? We have asked for this in the past. I appreciate they are redacted.

Dr Coffey: No, I am not sharing the IPRs. I have said that.

Peter Schofield: We do publish the minutes of the serious case panels.

Q129 **Debbie Abrahams:** I have looked at them, and you do not get that much information.

Dr Coffey: That is fair. I have mentioned that we need to put a little more into the minutes.

Peter Schofield: In the annual report and accounts, which I am directing this Committee towards—

Dr Coffey: That is where you are planning to do considerably more.

Peter Schofield: I am going to say more in that as well, so look out for that.

Q130 **Debbie Abrahams:** Can I move on? You started to say that, in the different processes you are undertaking, for example, you are considering the issues around vulnerable claimants. We understand that the universal credit programme board received a report from the Prime Minister's Implementation Unit last year entitled *How effective is the support for vulnerable claimants of UC?* Again, that was all completely redacted.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

What specifically did you find that you were not able to include in the report?

Peter Schofield: You want me to tell you what was redacted from the report.

Debbie Abrahams: It is about the trust element. This was received by the board.

Dr Coffey: Normally, quite a lot of things get redacted or removed because of policy formation. That is one of the usual exemptions in the FOI.

Q131 **Chair:** It has been pointed out to me that the reason given for rejecting the FOI requests is section 35, which is development of Government policy rather than personal information. It is quite surprising that the Department is so reluctant to let people see what is in this.

Dr Coffey: You have covered this in your letter, to which I am responding by 15 July.

Chair: Indeed; it is one of the many things covered in the letter. There is a wider issue about things not being made public that really ought to be, hence the letter.

Q132 **Debbie Abrahams:** This is the Government not being as open about their policy as we would like. On the managed migration process, we have been taking evidence from different groups, including charities. There is real concern about how the Department is going to consider the needs of vulnerable claimants. Can you reassure the Committee that, for example, you have a process around identifying who vulnerable claimants are and that you have a process for ensuring that none of those vulnerable claimants will have their money stopped because they have not been contacted and have not been responded to?

Peter Schofield: I have talked to the Committee before about the vulnerable claimant marker that we have on claims, which absolutely triggers all of the safeguarding concerns that we might need to put in place, all of the care that we might need to put in place, around them. At the first meeting of the serious case panel, we considered the processes that we have to make sure that, where there is a vulnerable person that we know of, we do not stop payments without doing all of the full understanding about what is going on and escalating with other organisations.

We put in place advanced customer support leads all across the country—we have over 30 of them now—who are a point of escalation, to make sure that, where there is a situation where there is someone at risk who is vulnerable, we escalate it to them so they are able to engage with all necessary agencies to make sure that there is wraparound support.

Dr Coffey: There are regular meetings between the key people in the programme and a variety of organisations. I want to assure you that both



HOUSE OF COMMONS

David Rutley and I are taking a very particular interest in and oversight of what is happening. We are using, principally, ESA as a proxy for aspects of vulnerability. I am not saying it is entire, but that is there. I can only give you my assurance that we are looking at this very carefully. It is a really important part of the discovery phase on that.

As I was trying to allude to earlier, there are certain approaches that I have said I want to happen, but I do not want to undermine the initial success or understanding of this discovery phase. We are keeping a very close eye on this approach.

Q133 Debbie Abrahams: I would advise you to have a look at what Mind said in its evidence, because it was an excellent process that it was suggesting.

Dr Coffey: Can I just point out that initially in discovery, in this first phase, a decision has been made not to go to people who have appointees? We can start to manage that process more. That is in this first wave that is already underway, but it will start to come in. We are thinking through very carefully how we do this.

Q134 Debbie Abrahams: My penultimate question is in terms of safeguarding. We have had questions on this before. We took some evidence from two academics last week who were quite clear that there was a duty of care that the Government have to vulnerable claimants. They also, very interestingly, suggested that you might consider setting up a confidential inquiry that would work in a similar way to the more general confidential inquiry into suicide, but obviously it would be expanded for all deaths relating to social security claimants.

Dr Coffey: I will ask my parliamentary clerk to dig out their submission to you and look at it.

Q135 Debbie Abrahams: As I am asking you now, what are your views?

Dr Coffey: I have said before that we do not have a statutory duty on safeguarding; that is very specific. I am very conscious of the wider care approach that we do and want to take in that regard, but I am not looking to do an inquiry as you have requested before. This sounds like something different; I do not know what it is they are referring to, so that is why it is important that I look at the ideas that they gave to the Committee before I give you any response.

Q136 Debbie Abrahams: That is progress. I would like to refer you to article 2 on the right to life, which says that the Government have a duty around safeguarding.

My final question is around the disability employment gap. It is slightly widening again. What are your ambitions around a new target?

Dr Coffey: Chloe has been doing quite a lot of work on this. We are planning to set ourselves a new challenge. We are very pleased that 1.27 million people with disability have got into work; that is great news. I am



HOUSE OF COMMONS

also conscious that a lot of that is self-declared, so there are elements there. I thought the gap had reduced. I did not know it had started going out again.

Q137 **Debbie Abrahams:** It has not reduced as a rate. The rate is slightly widening.

Dr Coffey: I know Chloe is coming up with proposals on our next target to aim for in terms of what we can do to reduce the gap.

Q138 **Chair:** When would we expect that to be set?

Dr Coffey: I had hoped to get this out before recess but I am not sure now.

Chair: That is encouraging.

Q139 **Chris Stephens:** I have a couple of quick questions, Secretary of State. It is probably no surprise that the first one is coming from me, because it is a constituency case. I know Mr Mills has one as well. When does the Department intend to place a second remedial order on bereavement benefits for cohabiting couples?

Dr Coffey: I know that this is a particular matter of interest. We have been through the processes for the first laying period. I will be open with you: I am not happy with the progress, so I have asked the officials to come to my office tomorrow so that we can get through it.

Chris Stephens: I look forward to that, as does the Committee.

Dr Coffey: I hope to then give you a better answer on where we are.

Q140 **Chris Stephens:** That would be helpful, because a number of constituents are concerned about the lack of progress. I would appreciate that, Secretary of State.

The next question goes back to the issue of deductions. The Committee has a concern, as do other stakeholders, that the Department is clawing back money via deductions on errors that the Department for Work and Pensions has made as a result of maladministration. Is that something you could look at? It seems strange to us that the Department is recovering money that the Department really is responsible for.

Dr Coffey: Can I ask the accounting officer to explain the approach that we take?

Peter Schofield: We have a responsibility to recover money. In universal credit we have a responsibility to recover overpayments from whatever cause.

Q141 **Chris Stephens:** If it is the fault of the Department, it seems a bit daft that it is recovering money that is a result of an error that it has caused. There are a number of organisations that have written to the Committee, and the Committee would share the view that we want the Department to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

look at that.

Peter Schofield: We would look at any particular case that anyone raises. There is a general principle under legislation that, in terms of universal credit overpayments for whatever reason, we need to claim the money back. As the Secretary of State said, absolutely if that is causing hardship or an issue, we very much encourage any claimant to get in touch with us and we would look at what we can do around that.

Q142 **Chris Stephens:** Could you come back to us, Mr Schofield, specifically around the issue of errors caused by the Department, please? A number of stakeholders are concerned at the number of deductions that are being made as a result of errors by the Department.

Peter Schofield: The situation is as I describe. We are required to do so.

Q143 **Chris Stephens:** My final question is about the missing paper on the drivers of foodbank use, which the Department committed to place in the House of Commons Library two years ago. Has that been done or is there any progress on that?

Dr Coffey: I thought you had written to the Committee about that before, Peter.

Peter Schofield: Yes, I did. I wrote to the Committee.

Dr Coffey: He has already written to you in the past.

Peter Schofield: Yes, well remembered.

Chair: It was not in the long letter of things—

Dr Coffey: Yes, because I think we have already answered that question.

Chris Stephens: If not, I am sure we will pursue it as a Committee.

Dr Coffey: Just before you close, I want to apologise to the Committee. I am conscious that you have written letters that have not been responded to. I have made it clear that you should get every single letter that is due or overdue by today. I just want to apologise, and also congratulate you on your knighthood.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. I understand a number of letters have come in this morning, which we are very grateful for. Thank you both very much for your time today and for complying with our request to start a bit later. You have given us a lot of food for thought. We are certainly looking forward to the reply to the letter, which we have not got to the deadline for yet. There may well be one or two other things arising from the session that we will write to you about. We are very grateful. Thank you very much indeed.