

Women and Equalities Committee

Oral evidence: Impact of the rising cost of living on women, HC 128

Wednesday 6 March 2024

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 6 March 2024.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Caroline Nokes (Chair); Dame Jackie Doyle-Price; Kim Johnson; Lia Nici; Kirsten Oswald; Bell Ribeiro-Addy.

Questions 151 - 208

Witnesses

I: Maria Caulfield MP, Minister for Women, Equality Hub, Cabinet Office; Jo Churchill MP, Minister for Employment, Department for Work and Pensions; Gillian Unsworth, Deputy Director, Gender Equality Division, Equality Hub, Cabinet Office; and James Wolfe, Director, Poverty, Housing and Disadvantage, Department for Work and Pensions.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Maria Caulfield, Jo Churchill, Gillian Unsworth and James Wolfe.

Q151 Chair: Good morning and welcome to this morning's session of the Women and Equalities Committee in our inquiry into the impact of the cost of living rises on women. Can I thank the Ministers for attending this morning? As usual, Committee members will ask you questions in turn. I am going to ask a big favour, though: please will you make your answers as brief as possible? I am conscious that it is Budget day and that everybody will be enthusiastic to get their seat in the Chamber in good time for that.

Minister Churchill, what are the Government doing to make sure that impacts are not felt disproportionately by women with intersectional qualities?

Jo Churchill: Good morning. Thank you for inviting me. The first thing to say is that there is no doubt that the last few years have been difficult for anyone and everyone, with a combination of global factors. Poverty rates for men and women, even when there is intersectionality applied, are the same. Essentially, we have made sure that we have reached out with immediate support, like the cost of living payments, so that they can be got swiftly. That was the largest package in Europe, at £104 billion. We have also made sure to have a consistent drumbeat of uprating benefits in line with inflation—by 10.1% last year, and by 6.7% this year, which is above inflation—in order to give broader protection. We also have the jobcentre offer, which works directly with individuals to understand them. In those jobcentres, we have 50PLUS champions, we have individuals with specialisation in mid-life, and we have employment coaches for the young. We are making sure that, no matter what the challenge from the intersectionality, they are supported. I suppose that is the broader point.

Q152 Chair: You say that poverty rates are the same for men and women. What data are you collecting to establish that?

Jo Churchill: Essentially, we work off the households below average income statistics, but also the data that we collect within DWP. We know that a disproportionate number of women are in caring and lower-income jobs. That means that more of our payments go to women. That is a statement of fact. Some 2.5 million of our lone-parent families are headed by a female, 73% of those who receive carer's allowance are women and 63% of pensioners are women, because we have a longer life expectancy. Making sure that policies right across Government, into health and so on, look at addressing things like health disparities means that you can build and support a safety net—we are looking at that the whole time—but also make sure that work is the best way out of poverty. If you do not mind, I will ask James whether there is anything he would add.

James Wolfe: Thank you, Minister. The latest published poverty statistics in the household below average income survey show an equal rate for



HOUSE OF COMMONS

both men and women of 17%, so the outcome is similar, but obviously that reflects policies that are different for different groups. On the question of intersectionality, I would say that the cost of living payments that we made went to people on means-tested benefits, people with disabilities and people over pension age, and women are represented more than men in all three of those groups. For example, around 58% of the pensioner cost of living payments will have gone to women, because of their representation in that part of the population. When we give advice to Ministers, all policies that we put in place are equality impact assessed, and they pick up those issues of intersectionality in the population.

Q153 Chair: Do you collect data on ethnicity as well?

James Wolfe: We do. When we evaluate our policies post implementation, we often publish evaluation that includes information on ethnicity. We will not necessarily have that up front, but it is something we look at when we evaluate our policies.

Q154 Chair: I can see that you can collect the data in retrospect, but when you are considering the public sector equality duty of your policies before you implement them, do you consider the intersectional issues?

James Wolfe: Yes, we would always provide Ministers with full advice on the impact on protected groups, subject to the data that is available. That is then scrutinised by the Social Security Advisory Committee before legislation is brought in.

Jo Churchill: I would argue that you see some of that coming out, for example, in the cost of living payments: an additional cost of living payment of £150 was made to those with a disability, over and above the three payments—up to £900—that were paid to those who were eligible.

Q155 Chair: What work was done to establish whether that additional £150 was adequate to cover the additional costs of being disabled?

Jo Churchill: It was an additional uplift, but it was not the sole thing across Government; obviously there was the energy price cap as well. On the impact assessment for that, I am sorry but disability is not held by me; it is held by another Minister, the Member for Mid Sussex, and I am not going to give you a line that I do not feel completely solid in. I will ask James, but if necessary I will write to you.

Q156 Chair: Thank you; I think it would be interesting to know. We have had a lot of correspondence and evidence from disabled charities about the additional cost of being disabled, particularly when it comes to energy costs—maybe the need to keep a house warmer and, for example, the additional costs of charging electric wheelchairs, hoists and so on. It would be interesting to know how that £150 was reached and whether there was an analysis of what the additional cost of being disabled actually was. Perhaps Mr Wolfe can answer.

James Wolfe: The main thing to say is that there is always going to be a bit of a trade-off between the speed with which we can get support into place and how detailed that support can be. Clearly, £150 for people on



HOUSE OF COMMONS

qualifying benefits is not going to take account of everybody's individual circumstances, because we are using benefit receipt as a proxy for that specific need. As the Minister said, that is why there is a range of support. Many of those families will also have received the means-tested cost of living payment.

Chair: I am just trying to establish whether it was a finger in the wind or whether there was some evidence base for reaching that £150.

James Wolfe: I think the answer to that is that if you look at the total package, there is investment in different—

Chair: No, that was not the question.

James Wolfe: Okay. Well, in that case—

Q157 **Chair:** It would be really useful for us when we are looking at this to understand how the £150 was reached—not the total package, but the DWP's understanding of the additional cost of being disabled. If you want to write to us with that, that would be very helpful.

Minister Caulfield, as Minister for Women you get to champion women's voices across Government and ensure there is no disproportionate impact of the cost of living crisis on women compared with men. It would be interesting to hear how you have engaged with women's groups on the cost of living crisis and what evidence they have provided to you.

Maria Caulfield: We are talking to various groups, charities and organisations. There are differences across the country, so it is important to get as wide a range of voices as possible.

There are predominantly two groups of women who have been more impacted than others. First, those in the lower socioeconomic groups struggle at the best of times, so when there is a cost of living impact, they feel it even more.

Secondly, there are the women who have struggled in the last two years but may not have struggled as much in the past. They are mainly women who are unable to get additional income, such as older pensioners. Jo touched on the fact that women make up a greater proportion of pensioners. Very often they are on their own in single-income households. Obviously, they are pensioners so they cannot go out and do more work to increase their income. They are very often asset-rich but income-poor, so they do not qualify for things like pension credits, but they feel the heating costs, food costs and inflationary costs.

Then there are women with disabilities who can't go out and earn more money; with a disability, that is not always possible. Then there is the group of women who are carers. Childcare costs have also increased, and the Government are rolling out the 30 hours of free childcare to try to address some of those pressures. You have women who are caring for elderly parents. Kinship carers, in particular, do not get payments in the same way that foster carers do.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Women who are not able to do extra hours at work and those who have increased costs because they are caring for other people have been particularly hit. In ordinary times, cost of living pressures perhaps exist for those in lower socioeconomic groups; those other groups have felt the pressure this time round. That is why the Government did some targeted schemes, and some more universal schemes. Everyone was impacted, and those women were struggling the most.

Q158 Chair: We have heard representations from domestic abuse charities supporting women who have found themselves in a more vulnerable position because of the cost of living crisis. Can you outline what you and ministerial colleagues are doing to help women's centres, in particular? I am thinking of refuges, whose costs have increased significantly over the past couple of years.

Maria Caulfield: We have been doing a lot of work around domestic abuse. We had the flexible fund trial, in collaboration and partnership with the Women's Aid Federation of England, which made direct cash payments to victims and survivors. We have extended that, and a further £2 million is going into the flexible fund until March 2025.

There was specific targeted funding to the women, rather than necessarily to the refuges or charities. The cost of living and, in particular, covid made it very difficult for women fleeing domestic abuse, and there was a recognition of that. The crisis in Ukraine and the consequent inflationary pressures—the cost of energy pressures—came pretty hot on the heels of covid, so women fleeing domestic abuse, when they had the chance to leave, struggled financially. That is why the flexible fund was set up and has been extended to 2025.

Q159 Chair: Has the Government taken the decision, then, that it is more important to support individual women than to support the sector?

Maria Caulfield: It is a combination, really. Charities absolutely play a vital role, and there has been support for them in the past. There is also an argument for directly enabling women to make some decisions for themselves, and I think that women are often best placed to make those decisions. Financial abuse is one of the elements of domestic abuse, and it is about having that ability to have some funding or money to try to make some decisions. When I have met with women who have been affected, they often say that if they had had that funding, they would have been able to make different decisions at different times. There was a definite decision to allocate money to women directly.

Jo Churchill: Chair, may I just say what we do at DWP? We are trialling the Ask for ANI scheme, which has also been rolled out through most of our pharmacy network, so that women can flag that they are at the hands of someone abusing them. We also do training within DWP, up to 13 weeks, and there is a specialist adviser. In every DWP office, you can be taken into a private room to discuss your needs. We can work with them to set up a separate claim and, as Minister Caulfield said, to help walk them away from the perpetrator. Of course, coercive control is very often



HOUSE OF COMMONS

economic, and it is really important to ensure that we have those skilled individuals in jobcentres. Very often, we are one of the few people they may be seeing on a regular basis because job centre attendance is required for them to get work or to satisfy the eligibility for benefits.

Q160 Chair: Minister Caulfield made a point about pension credit and pension credit guarantee. We know that there is an issue with not every pensioner who is entitled to it claiming it. Has the DWP done any targeted work to focus on older women who may be entitled to pension credit but are not applying for it?

Jo Churchill: There has been an incredible amount of engagement with older women because it was languishing somewhere around 50%, if my memory serves me right, and we have really made an effort. The ability to apply stops at the end of March—I think I am right in saying.

James Wolfe: For pension credit?

Jo Churchill: Not for pension credit per se, but for some of the work that we are doing around pensioners. We are targeting work all the time to ensure that those who are eligible come forward and claim what they are entitled to, because it is vital. As Minister Caulfield said, some of these sections of women end up being disproportionately impacted, so it is imperative that we are doing all we can to reach out and ensure that not only those women but everybody can claim the things that they are entitled to in and around pension credit.

Chair: Thank you. Maria, did you want to come back in?

Maria Caulfield: On domestic abuse support, one of the other things that we have done by recognising economic abuse as a form of abuse is that we now have the toolkit that is available. A lot of work has been done with creditors so that, when managing the credit of a women who may be fleeing domestic abuse, they take their situation into account and are a bit more flexible for someone who may be in debt with bills, credit cards or whatever if they know that economic abuse has happened—taking that into account in the way that they manage the case for that particular woman.

Q161 Kirsten Oswald: I wonder if I can put some questions to Minister Churchill. As yet, there is no indication that the UK Government's cost of living payments are going to continue beyond this financial year. Can you tell us if the Government are planning to continue those payments?

Jo Churchill: The cost of living payments were always time-limited to end on 31 March this year. Obviously, we have also had the household support fund running to the end of the year. We have a fiscal event this afternoon, and obviously it is well above my pay grade to speculate on what may or may not come through in that event.

Q162 Kirsten Oswald: We will certainly be watching that closely. Looking at the payments, what are the main conclusions that you would draw from the delivery and the impact of the cost of living payments and the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

household support fund? Are these things that you evaluate in terms of the gendered impact, for instance? If you do produce evaluations, will they be published?

Jo Churchill: The impact assessments were done on the cost of living payments for both '22 and '23. It is important we understand where they go. From the impact assessments, we estimate that around 54% of the disability cost of living payments were to females, and 58% of claimants in families eligible for the means-tested cost of living payments were female. It slightly segues back to the point I made at the top that females are disproportionately represented in our customers, arguably.

The cost of living payments were swift. It was £104 billion, and it was done to ensure that they could reach those most in need swiftly. The household support fund was slightly different in its targeting. That was done to ensure that people in localities had a degree of control, because it is often argued—hence Scotland having it through the Barnett consequential—that you know where your need is best. Local authorities have therefore distributed on our behalf. Now, 63% of that funding went to households with children, 11% to households with pensioners, and 10% to houses with a disabled person. We obviously evaluate; it is important that we understand. It was a great deal of money, and this financial year it was £842 million within England, with the Barnett consequential taking us to £1 billion.

Q163 **Kirsten Oswald:** Will you publish the detail of that? You may have said that, but I did not pick it up.

James Wolfe: We have published estimated impact for policies that we have legislated for—for example, the estimated impact of the cost of living payments.

Kirsten Oswald: That's not really where I am going.

James Wolfe: We then publish management information as we go along. On the household support fund, we have published management information on where those payments are going and what they are being spent on. We will then do an evaluation of the policy to assess the impact, which then requires survey work and so on. It will then be a decision for Ministers if and when that evaluation is published. The information out there at the moment is around where the money is going and what it is being spent on.

Jo Churchill: I would very gently say that we have reached out to the devolved Governments to ask them to return how those monies have been spent, and thus far we are still waiting for that detailed data. Anything you can do to help us receive that data, so we can evaluate it effectively, would be brilliant. It is a bit chicken and egg. Until we have that clarity on the household support fund of where it has been spent, it is actually very difficult to publish how it has been spent and how it has impacted.

Q164 **Kirsten Oswald:** And on the cost of living payments?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

James Wolfe: As I say, the information is published on where those payments are—the characteristics of the claimants who are receiving those payments. That is already in the public domain.

Q165 **Kirsten Oswald:** I am still not 100% clear on your intention. There are some things that are entirely within your control. Is it your intention to publish evaluations of the impact of these payments, or at least some of these payments?

James Wolfe: That will be a decision for Ministers to take at the appropriate time.

Q166 **Kirsten Oswald:** Minister, is it your intention to publish?

Jo Churchill: As I say, as and when we have received the full evaluation, we will decide across the piece about what information is released. However, as James has explained, there is already an awful lot of information in the public domain. As and when we have that full data, I will evaluate and then happily let you know if we are to publish.

Q167 **Kirsten Oswald:** Okay. I would be interested in any reasons why you would not publish.

Jo Churchill: My inclination would be to publish, because obviously it tells us how those low-income households and those with more acute vulnerabilities have been impacted. But as I say, at the moment we are still on the data collection end of it.

Q168 **Kirsten Oswald:** Thank you for that. We have heard that reversing policies such as the benefit cap and the two-child limit could help to lift thousands of children out of poverty. Is that something the UK Government recognise? If it is, why are you not acting?

Jo Churchill: On the two-child policy, which came in in 2017 and has been accepted by both major parties in government, 78% of families on universal credit have fewer than three children. This is about fairness. On those families who are not customers, and some who have been or may be in the future, we all have to make decisions about what is right for our individual circumstances. The two-child policy was brought in to help support those families to go forward, and to be fair to everyone. There are exceptions, including for those who adopt a child from local authority care. I can tell you from personal experience that you do not plan a twin pregnancy, so if you get a bumper crop and that happens to be your second child, that is covered as well. Children conceived through non-consensual conception are also covered. I believe the two-child policy is fair.

On the benefit cap, the proportion of households that are capped remains incredibly low, at 1.3% of all working-age households in receipt of universal credit. Again, this has to be fair for those who go out to work. It is why we have lifted benefits but also the national living wage to make sure that it always pays to be in work. It is why we have the universal credit taper to encourage the uptake of work, and the more hours you



HOUSE OF COMMONS

work, the fact is that you are better off in that work. Have I missed anything?

James Wolfe: No, I think that is spot on.

Q169 **Kirsten Oswald:** I am going to come back to you a bit on that, Minister. You said this was about fairness, but do you think it is fair to those who are adversely affected by these policies that they are being treated differently from those who are advantaged by them?

Jo Churchill: That is not the way I would look at it. The way I look at it is that the cap continues to provide a balanced work incentive and fairness for those who are working and paying tax, because ultimately the benefits system has to be paid for, while providing a safety net to support the most vulnerable. Getting people into work—lifting them into a secure job where they can stay and progress—is the dynamic direction of what we are aiming to do. I just gently point back to the fact that we know very clearly that children who live in workless households are five times more likely to end up in poverty.

So it is a pivotal strand of how we approach this. I am not saying it is easy, but that is why our jobcentres and the whole of our policies are focused on encouraging people into work and into having that support, whether it is from a youth employment coach or by going on a sector-based work scheme—a really short scheme where you can learn about a different sector where you think you might like to work. We support people through the additional job support. We support people through Restart. We have invested in WorkWell so that those with health conditions and so on can be supported on the journey into work. We discussed disability earlier, but there is there is something of the order of 2.5 million more women in work than there were in 2010, and there are more disabled women in work than disabled men. That has been on a constant rise, because it is the best way out of poverty.

Q170 **Kirsten Oswald:** I am going to move on, Minister, but these children are not people you are seeking to send to work, and I was asking about children who are being adversely impacted. I would also maybe point back to the proportion of people who are in work and in receipt of benefits. We should probably be thoughtful about some of these statements that are being made in a very binary way.

Jo Churchill: I apologise; I am hoping not to make them in a binary way. I am hoping to emphasise the wrap-around support that we give people in order to lift them. I would also point to the fact that it is this Government that have brought in free school meals to make sure that children are supported. Nobody across the House wants to see children growing up in poverty, and that is why I would argue that we would all support the whole tenet of helping to lift families.

Q171 **Kirsten Oswald:** If you want to ease that financial pressure on families, I wonder whether the UK Government will consider reducing the amount that they deduct from universal credit for debt repayment, given that the DWP will recover most of that debt in the long run.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Jo Churchill: Deductions are something that I am acutely interested in and am working on at the moment. Again, I would argue that we are sitting on the edge of a fiscal statement, and we wait to see whether there might be any movement forward this afternoon.

Q172 **Lia Nici:** Minister Caulfield, to what extent do you think the significant increase in the cost of living becomes a health issue for women and children?

Maria Caulfield: Absolutely. We know from our data on physical illnesses, such as heart disease, strokes and cancer, that for all the major conditions there is a correlation between being in a lower socioeconomic group and having both poorer outcomes and higher mortality rates. Lung cancer is a classic example. That is why we are doing some targeted lung health check van roll-outs in specific areas among lower socioeconomic groups and people who have a history of smoking, who traditionally have poorer outcomes from lung cancer. That targeted work for people who have those risk factors, either because they cannot afford to get the time off to see a GP or for other reasons, resulted in something like 70% of the lung cancers being picked up at stages 1 and 2, where traditionally it is stages 3 or 4, when it is harder to treat.

We know that cost of living pressures have an impact on physical health. We also know that that is the case for mental health, too. We have just launched our suicide prevention strategy, and we are looking at high-risk groups. Women do feature in that, but it tends to be the younger age groups: young women in particular are struggling, and postnatal new mums are another group of women. I do not want to make generalisations, but the issues do not tend to be so much around financial pressures; there are other issues going on there. In the suicide groups, financial pressures are a bigger driver of suicide rates for men. It is not as black and white as that, by any means. Financial pressures have an influence on mental health and particularly on suicide rates, but we tend to find that those are more of a driver of suicide in men than in women. There are particular issues for women that drive those rates too.

Q173 **Lia Nici:** With regard to the cost of living, do you think that poor diet at different stages in a woman's life also has an effect on their health?

Maria Caulfield: Diet absolutely does have an effect, and we are seeing a generation coming through now with dental health problems caused by poor diet. We know, for example, that providing fluoride in some of the water reduces dental cavities in children and then into adulthood very significantly. Diet is a huge factor for that, and for things such as cardiac disease, stroke and some cancers. We know that having a good balanced diet with your five fruit and veg a day and reducing obesity makes a huge difference.

In the data around maternal and neonatal health, one of the most significant factors emerging in why our pregnancy outcomes are so poor is obesity. There is a significant rise in the number of women who are overweight during pregnancy. That is why our focus in our family hubs and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

our pre-conception work is about getting not just women but everyone educated about the importance of good pre-conception health. Obesity is a major driver of that, and it is because of not having access either to advice about what a good diet looks like or the ability to cook a healthy meal.

Q174 Lia Nici: On that basis, what practical things are the Government doing? You talk about family hubs and advice, but there is a difference between someone being advised that they should have their five a day and being able to afford it, or being able to cook it and knowing how to cook it and get the health benefits. What kind of practical changes are the Government looking at that could help? Listening to an expert in a family hub might tick a box, but does it actually change how people are able to purchase good-quality food and make good-quality, healthy meals?

Maria Caulfield: We are doing two things. We are targeting families right now, and children, to ensure that they start off on a better footing. I think there is £200 devoted to our million healthy food schemes, and there are a number of elements. One is delivering the free school meals in schools so that children get a hot meal during the day.

I think we have about 2 million pupils who are eligible for free school meals—more than a third of all pupils are getting free school meals in our schools. That is making sure that children get a healthy meal at some point during the day, and it has been extended into holiday activities and breakfast clubs. There are a range of options so that when school is not running, the children still get access to those. We also have £30 million in our national school breakfast programme, which is funded until this summer. We are looking at how we get children into the habit of eating a good, healthy diet on a regular basis.

There is also work happening in jobcentres; I don't want to step on Minister Churchill's toes here, but jobcentre is not a great name for what they do. They do a huge amount. If someone goes in there and one of their cost pressures and reasons why they are struggling in work is around food provision, there is funding available to help them with all sorts of things, including food support. It is a universal package. Funding for the cost of food is being done as well, but making sure that children as a whole get in the habit of eating healthily on a regular basis will prepare them for the rest of life.

Jo Churchill: As we are a tag team, can I just mention the healthy start voucher? Perhaps you would like to go into that, because we try to ensure people are aware of that.

Lia Nici: What is that, then?

Maria Caulfield: The healthy start voucher enables new mums to get funding for food support. Family hubs, particularly in those disadvantaged areas, are mainly health focused, but they also point new mums in particular to the schemes that are available, and the healthy start voucher is one of those.

Chair: How do you get one?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Jo Churchill: When you are expecting, you will be informed about them.

Chair: By whom—GP, midwife? At what point?

Maria Caulfield: A range—anyone can advise them.

Jo Churchill: I have informed constituents about it. I once met a young woman, Daisy, who had received the vouchers. To answer your point, they had changed her approach, because they are restricted to fresh fruit and vegetables, milk, pulses and so on. I will hand back to you, Minister Caulfield.

Maria Caulfield: Some of the schemes that we are doing in schools are about funding to ensure that a child gets a piece of fruit a day in school, as well—

Q175 **Chair:** Can I just take you back to the healthy start vouchers? Minister Churchill can tell people about them in her surgeries—great, but how else do people find out? Who recommends them to a pregnant woman?

Jo Churchill: Your health visitor, midwife and other professionals will know. As I say, it has been extended to include things such as pulses and various other things to ensure that—

Chair: How many are given out annually?

Jo Churchill: Pass.

Chair: It would be useful to understand what the take-up was.

Maria Caulfield: It can be done as part of social prescribing. There is no restriction on who can direct people to the vouchers.

Lia Nici: But this is just for new mums, not for mums who have pre-school children.

Maria Caulfield: No, it can be—

Lia Nici: It would be helpful if we could find that out.

Maria Caulfield: We can send you information on that. We can send the figures. Gillian's from the equality team, but I can ask the health team to send you the figures on the uptake and who is taking advantage of it.

Jo Churchill: I am fairly sure that it is £4.25 for a child of one or more, but you get double payments under one. It also covers vitamins, supplements and things like that.

Chair: £4.25 a week, a month, a year?

Maria Caulfield: A week.

Chair: For how long?

Maria Caulfield: I don't think there is a set time period. If you meet the criteria, you are able to use them indefinitely.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chair: Until they are 18?

Maria Caulfield: No. I will check the age cut-off, but it is mainly for younger children.

Gillian Unsworth: Can I just add that it is children under four who are entitled? Children under one receive £8.50 a week.

Chair: Thank you.

Q176 **Lia Nici:** Minister Caulfield, I will turn to something quite different: period poverty. ActionAid has said that there has been an increase in period poverty from 12% in 2022 to 21% in 2023. What assistance with period products do we have for women who are experiencing period poverty?

Maria Caulfield: This Government have a really good track record on this, to be honest; we have introduced significant measures. For example, the Department for Education has been providing free products in schools and colleges in England since 2020. Some 97% of secondary schools and even 68% of primary schools have put in orders to DfE for those products to be available in their schools.

I have met some young women and girls in education who often say that they are not freely accessible in schools, but funding for and access to those products is available from DfE for schools. There may be a bit of work to do on ensuring that schools take that option and use that scheme, but we have introduced that. We want to make it freely accessible so that you are not having to ask for a tampon or pad and they are freely available in bathrooms for young girls at school.

The NHS is also offering free period products to every hospital patient. That is why it is really important that when women are in hospital, they are in accommodation geared towards female health, so that those products are freely available. We have also changed the VAT rating on period products and, more recently, included period underwear in period products, so reducing the cost quite significantly. Before we could zero-rate period products, the VAT collected was used and given to women's charities. We have done significant work in that space in terms of making those products available in schools and NHS facilities and trying to reduce the cost overall for all women.

Q177 **Lia Nici:** Do you think that the Government should reinstate the period poverty taskforce? As you said, many women probably do not know where to go to be able to access period products if they need them.

Maria Caulfield: The taskforce came to a natural pause during covid, when group meetings could not be held. Because there is a cross-Government focus on the issue and because these initiatives have been put in place, it has not been felt that there is a need to reintroduce the taskforce. But I am particularly interested on behalf of young women in schools: if those products are not available, we can certainly make a push.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I know that DfE colleagues, particularly the Secretary of State, are keen to make sure that schools make use of the scheme, because the Government are funding it to make those products available. We would expect schools to draw down on that and have those products available in bathrooms for young girls. We do not have plans to reintroduce the taskforce because we feel we are making good progress in this area.

Q178 Lia Nici: In Scotland, women can get period products in their local areas. Do you think that the UK Government should be looking at something similar? For instance, you could go to your local sexual health clinic or GP—places where, if you are struggling, you can go discreetly to get that assistance.

Maria Caulfield: The family hubs being set up in most parts of the country now are particularly for women who may be struggling. Those products may well be available because the hubs are an NHS facility. When I say that the NHS offers free period products, I mean not just at in-patient facilities, but for out-patients. Family hubs would also be offering them.

As we are setting up women's health hubs in every region of the country, I can certainly ask whether those products will be available, so that women going in for whatever—a smear test, contraception advice—can then discreetly access those products as well. It is a good point and something I will ask the women's health hub team about.

Lia Nici: Could you confirm that and come back to us?

Maria Caulfield: Absolutely, yes.

Kirsten Oswald: I want to briefly interject and say that Lia is absolutely right: period products are freely available in Scotland. You do not have to go to a sexual health hub or a doctor's surgery, although the products are available in health centres. In recent weeks, I have been to schools, libraries and all manner of buildings that people go to every day. The products are freely and discreetly available; you do not have to go and announce your intentions. You go, take what you need, go away and go about your business. It is probably worth flagging that there is a way of doing that that meets everybody's needs in a discreet and helpful manner.

Lia Nici: There is a balance as well, when it comes to costs.

Kirsten Oswald: It seems to be a well used way of doing things and we do not hear of any challenges or difficulties. Women need these products; women have access to these products, and they use them. That is the beginning and the end of it.

Q179 Dame Jackie Doyle-Price: Minister Caulfield, as part of the Government's package of childcare reforms, what options are available to a single mum who requires childcare during the school holidays?

Maria Caulfield: Obviously, we are rolling out the 30 hours of free childcare. Applications are now open for parents of two-year-olds to receive 15 hours, and that is going to be extended more widely. For mums



HOUSE OF COMMONS

on universal credit, for example, 85% of childcare costs are covered, and that includes holiday clubs, after-school clubs and breakfast clubs as well, so those on universal credit would have most of those costs paid for, even outside of school times.

Q180 Dame Jackie Doyle-Price: Are you satisfied that there is sufficient provision for working mums who during term time are able not to worry about childcare because their children are at school?

Maria Caulfield: It is a balance. We know from talking to women that childcare costs are the single biggest pressure and sometimes the single biggest deciding factor in whether they go back to work, and if they do, what hours they do and whether they do flexible working and do not work outside term time. It is a big factor. The Government are expected to provide £4.1 billion by 2027, both in childcare costs and early-years costs. We recognise that.

I am not saying that what we are doing will remove all the cost pressures for mums, but for mums on the lowest incomes and on universal credit, the fact that 85% of childcare costs, including out-of-school times—breakfast clubs, after-school clubs and holiday clubs—would be covered is quite significant.

Jo Churchill: If you secure employment, it can be quite challenging to pay for childcare up front. We can facilitate an advance so that people are not running to catch up, if you see what I mean. Talking to the work coach is one of those things. As Maria said, we are trialling having work coaches based in general practices for the health effect. We have work coaches who have a specialist understanding of the childcare offer. I speak to the Childcare Minister quite regularly about how we can also improve the systems between the Departments because as the offer expands—in April, the offer will be expanding to two-year-olds, but, come September, it will be down to nine months—that is really important. We know that, along with travel and healthcare, childcare is one of the biggest barriers to women entering the workplace, so ensuring that we can support them adequately, so that they do not think, “Oh, I can’t take this because I can’t make the other 15% up,” or whatever, is really important. We can help with those things as we go through.

Q181 Dame Jackie Doyle-Price: This is the thing, isn’t it? On the face of it, 85% of childcare costs being met for a single mum on universal credit is great, but if that individual, as you say, still has to find that 15%, it is a big disincentive. You can see a situation in which women could make it pay while their kids are at school—you have obviously thought about that, and you have directed resource into early years provision—but that still leaves a real issue for a single parent who perhaps has two, three or even four children.

Maria Caulfield: Yes, but one of the other things being introduced is flexible working from day one. For young mums, when they start a job now, they may be able to ask to maybe do the school run first, or to start or finish a little bit later. There are more flexible working options that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

women can ask for right from the start of taking on a job. That will not cover the extra cost of that childcare, but it means that they may not have to require that childcare in the first place. There is no silver bullet for this; it is about making sure that we spend taxpayers' money wisely. That is why we are targeting it to those who would least be able to afford the childcare in the first place.

Q182 Dame Jackie Doyle-Price: I will come back to flexible working in a moment, but, to be honest, it feels to me like we are seeing a utopia that isn't there. Okay, the Government can make these things available to make life easier for working women, but, actually, it is about behaviours by employers and making women feel empowered to ask, because there is a serious issue here.

I want to move on to childcare and the growing issue regarding children with special educational needs. That is quite significant. I have been visiting my schools, and the demands being placed on them are quite peculiar, actually. I do not think that we have a proper understanding of what really is going on there. We know that children with disabilities will bring additional needs in terms of childcare, but we are told by Gingerbread that only 18% of local authorities have sufficient care opportunities to be able to support any women in work. What is your view of that, Maria? What is happening to tackle that?

Maria Caulfield: In terms of what type of care?

Dame Jackie Doyle-Price: Childcare for children with disabilities and special educational needs.

Maria Caulfield: This is a growing area where we are seeing emerging trends. I know from speaking to local authority colleagues that the sheer cost, both of care overall and particularly for children with special educational needs, is a significant pressure for local authorities, not just in the funding—although funding is significant—but in the lack of provision for children with special educational needs. A lot of children have to travel a long distance to get placements and support, and there is an issue with out-of-area placements. We are working with DfE colleagues to increase that provision because, for parents in particular but also for some children, if they are able to get that care in early, their outcomes are significantly better.

It is about assessments as well. This is something that mums in particular really struggle with, and it is almost a battle through tribunals to get their children assessed. With both autism and ADHD assessments, funding is one thing, but the real challenge is in getting the capacity for those assessments in place. We are working with DfE colleagues and with local government colleagues on that. It is not as simple as funding it; it is about capacity of the provision to meet the demand.

Q183 Dame Jackie Doyle-Price: But funding is an issue, isn't it? Local authorities have borne the brunt of austerity for the last 14 years and I know from my area that there is actually a perverse disincentive for local authorities to invest in provision for children with special educational



HOUSE OF COMMONS

needs and autism, because they then have a responsibility to them until the age of 25. So there is a real issue here, and, as you say, that is fuelling out-of-area placements.

It is one thing to portray this as a generous offer to working parents—which it is—but we seem to be failing the most needy here. We need to ensure that we have sufficient support for those children who are most vulnerable. To be frank, if a parent is lucky enough to get a school place for their child with a real need, that is great until the school holidays, but, as we are seeing, there is virtually no opportunity for them to access appropriate childcare. We also know that for some of those children, it could be very distressing to be in the wrong kind of environment.

The Chair is sick of hearing this, but my belief is that Government should do the most to support the most vulnerable, yet every time the state does something, it actually benefits the pointy-elbowed middle classes the most. This childcare package, which is focused more and more on the earlier years, with inadequate provision for children with disabilities and special educational needs, seems to be doing that. Really, are we satisfied that we are doing enough to get those women—and we are talking about women, because there is a gender pay gap; women tend to be paid less than men—on lower pay into work, Minister Churchill?

Jo Churchill: I think we are working exceptionally hard. For example, you talk about the provision in childcare. We have launched a range of workforce initiatives—“Do something big; work with small children”. We have worked with the Department of Health on care plans to make sure that not only can you enter into a career in care but it has progression and a pathway, and it is not always seen as the lowest common denominator.

I agree that as constituency MPs, we all examples of that downward pressure, but it is about making sure that we can actually build the sector. The actual childcare offer is £931 for a single child and £1,630 for two children or more. Driving that financial incentive helps parents, and I do not think that we should diminish that.

Are there other things we can do? How do we ensure that we have that suitable provision? With respect, that is probably best directed at a Department for Education Minister, but are we in DWP working with people? Yes we are, because all parents can access the childcare offer. There are those with limited capability for work who are missed out, and often that goes into families that are most vulnerable, but they can have conversations with their work coach and so on, and we can help them, because to a degree you are talking about a level of respite as well as support for parents.

So I will certainly take away the challenge of, “Are we doing it?” and I will have a conversation with the Minister with responsibility. I believe that we are doing a lot to support women with childcare. A long time ago, back in the '90s, and the early noughties, I had four children under five. I got no help. I went to work. I paid for my childcare by going to work, and that was it. In fact, it was topped up by the fact that we had two incomes, but



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I believe that work is an enormous power for good. Therefore I would say that it is work in progress, but this is such an enormous leap forward.

Q184 Dame Jackie Doyle-Price: What you have just said encapsulates it, really. You had no expectation of getting any help from anyone else. The state has now made a promise that it is going to give women that help.

Jo Churchill: Parents! I know you segued to lone parents, and I know we have 2.5 million single parents who are mums, but we also have, I think, 400,000 lone parents who are dads. You become a lone parent for a plethora of reasons, including bereavement.

I was talking to Minister Hollinrake in the Department for Business and Trade yesterday. We discussed flexible working and how people can know that they can access it. Making sure that we are better joined-up is important.

Q185 Dame Jackie Doyle-Price: They know that it is a theoretical thing they can ask for. The real point is that you had no expectation, but we have now given society an expectation that the state will help them. What I am saying is that I am not satisfied that there is genuine equity in that help. It could just be a result of where we are on this journey of delivery, because it is being driven by cost pressures and a desire to get more people into work, but as the policy moves on, we really need to focus on making sure that we are genuinely supporting everybody, especially those who need it most.

On the issue of flexible working, we have heard evidence that there is a stigma. Women do not feel that they can ask for flexible work patterns; they fear that there will be an impact on their career, and they worry that their request will be denied. How do you think the reforms will properly address those concerns?

Maria Caulfield: They will have a legal right to ask. It is about informing everyone, women in particular, that they have it.

I think the culture is changing towards flexible working, and covid has single-handedly done that. Presenteeism was a massive factor for women in the gender pay gap and in not being promoted. Physically being seen at work, whether you were doing any work or not, was a key indicator. That has ended with covid: people are working from home and doing remote or flexible working. The stigma around that has gone significantly. That will help women in terms of the gender pay gap, because this idea of constantly being in the office whether or not you are working significantly advantaged men. There is this idea about requesting flexible working, but employers know that it works. We see evidence that if people are able to work flexibly, they are often more productive, depending on the sector—obviously there are some sectors where it is not possible, like the health service.

The worry I have is for low-paid jobs. If you are a cleaner, you cannot work remotely, but you can still ask for flexible working. This is why we



HOUSE OF COMMONS

have been slightly reluctant to completely walk away from zero-hour contracts. The abuse of zero-hour contracts needs to be removed, but often for low-paid workers zero-hour contracts are a godsend. It means that when they are available and work is available, they can take it; then they are not available, it does not go against them.

It is about making the workplace as flexible as possible. The stigma around that is changing almost on a daily basis.

Q186 Dame Jackie Doyle-Price: Does it surprise you, then, that 30% of public sector workers who have requested flexible working have had their request denied?

Maria Caulfield: That is why we changed the legislation so that it is a right from day one.

Dame Jackie Doyle-Price: But you would expect the public sector, culturally, to be more open to this.

Gillian Unsworth: I do not want to take us back, but your previous point about the importance of employers in this is critical. One of the things we are doing a lot of work on in the Equality Hub is going out to employers and saying, "Look, we can have the best legislation and you can have the best HR policies, but it does not mean anything if your managers don't know how to deliver that." We work closely with bodies like CIPD and CMI and help them to work out how to get managers into that cultural mind-shift, recognising the benefit of giving proper consideration to flexible working requests and how to do that better.

There is still a long way to go in many organisations, but there are also some companies that are doing a fantastic job. We are bringing them together. We have held a series of roundtables—some focused on childcare and some on supporting women with specific health conditions in the workplace—and have shared expertise. Our aim is to get some of the frontrunners into the room with the employers that would like to do more, so that they can learn. We are creating that kind of momentum among employers, which is absolutely critical.

By far the greatest cause of the gender pay gap is workforce history. Women tend to drop out of the workforce for a variety of reasons, such as caring or various health conditions, and they then really struggle to get back in. We are focusing on those practical tools to get them back into the workforce. There is real appetite among employers, because we have such high rates of employment at the moment. They are being driven to make sure that they are keeping women in the workforce more, but often they do not know what to do, so we are trying to get that message out on what they can do.

Q187 Dame Jackie Doyle-Price: You mentioned companies. My specific issue is with the public sector. When I occupied Minister Caulfield's chair, I was horrified by how dreadful the NHS was as an employer, to be brutally frank. I get the impression, actually, that companies are more ahead of the game because they see the human capital of their employees. They



HOUSE OF COMMONS

measure their employees by productivity, whereas in the public sector we manage things by inputs and process. We define success by how much money we are spending, and, with regard to how we treat our employees, that becomes very dehumanising. I can see Minister Churchill smiling. What are we going to do about the public sector?

Jo Churchill: I think this legislation actually becomes live on 6 April. We are at the point that with every single person I engage with, I talk about job design. We have some of those entrenched views that jobs cannot be done any differently from the way they are currently being done. I would say that that is a public sector and a private sector thing. We need to make sure we are having conversations about job design and about how you can be more flexible.

I was smiling because the other day, in my role as Minister, I was having a conversation with an employer in cleaning work. They had changed their hours completely to fit in with when mums dropped off and picked up. They said that it has revolutionised how they are working: they do not have a lot of people ringing up saying they cannot make it, because that slightly traumatic time of day when you are trying to get the kids sorted and so on has been dealt with and you can go to work.

They also gave other incentives. The ability to make sure that people do so, and—to your point on the public sector—that public sector leaders feel empowered to do so is important for all of us, because it helps us to give that bigger suite of employment opportunities to people. It ends up being a barrier that should not be there.

The whole point of what we are trying to do in getting people back to work is breaking down those barriers and improving accessibility to work, with things like flexible working and the neonatal legislation that is coming in. These are all things that can help to smooth out specific bumps in the road in a female's life, and make sure that people can hold their place, as I think is everyone's right in the job market.

Maria Caulfield: I would also say that it is about management training, as Gillian says. According to the CMI, something like 80% of managers in the public sector have never had any management training. They go in because they have been a senior doctor or a senior nurse in the health service, for example, but have never received any formal management training. Managing staff in particular is an art form and a science if you want to build good teams.

When I was a sister, I had a small group of all female nurses. We were a research team and our clinics were on a Wednesday and a Friday. As long as those clinics were covered and staffed, I did not mind if the team wanted to do a long-day model, with a 12-hour shift, which we did. That actually worked better for the team, because they could then work three days and have more time off. The clinics always overran and they were staying until 7 pm or 8 pm anyway, so we felt they might as well stay and do those as their formal hours. We had a lot less staff sickness and a lot more staff retention. When they were there, they had their childcare



HOUSE OF COMMONS

covered because they did not have to do it for the whole week; they could do it specifically for the clinic days.

It worked really well, but you need to empower people in senior roles to have that management training. That is something that the NHS is now rolling out: there are now management programmes for all senior staff. Even the Departments—the civil service—are doing the same. For too long, we have taken it for granted that if you are experienced in your role, you will naturally be a good people person and manager of your team.

Q188 Dame Jackie Doyle-Price: The Fawcett Society has called for employers to advertise flexible working by default. Is that something that you would support? Bearing in mind that 30% of requests for flexible working in the public sector are rejected, should we particularly be encouraging Government Departments and state institutions to lead by example?

Maria Caulfield: One of the things we are doing is a pay transparency pilot, because it also disadvantages women when pay bands are not advertised and they have to go in to negotiate what they think might be on offer—and men tend to be much better at that. At the Treasury Committee, I think I gave a commitment to look at whether we could do flexible working transparency as well, as part of that. It is the Equality Hub that is running the pilot.

Gillian Unsworth: On the flexible working point, in the public sector—certainly in the civil service—all jobs state it, unless there is a very good reason why they cannot be flexible. I do not know the exact percentage, but the vast majority of jobs are advertised as being flexible and often part time.

There is a real business benefit to advertising flexibility. We have done trials with the behavioural insights team, with the MOD and the bank Zurich, where all hiring managers were required to say whether the job could be done flexibly or not and they had to make a business case if it could not. They put in the job advert what types of flexible working were open: could this be done part time, could this be done as compressed hours? In all cases, that increased the proportion of applicants who were female and also the number of people who applied to those jobs. It sets a really clear message. It is that cultural point, again: “We are an employer that will think about you as a person.”

The next step we are looking at is the pilots with pay in the job adverts as well. It all fits into having transparency around job adverts and making the statement at the beginning, “This is the kind of employer than I am.” That is more attractive and attracts more employees, but it also starts to make employers think about how they frame a job and how they deal with their employees right from the very start, which helps to move that culture on.

Q189 Dame Jackie Doyle-Price: My final question is to Minister Churchill. We have heard that the quality of support that work coaches can offer is patchy and inconsistent. How will you ensure that women, regardless of age and background, get the tailored support that they need to get into



work?

Jo Churchill: Driving down and making sure that we have a consistent offer right across DWP is hugely important. I meet my leadership team weekly and I have stats reported to me weekly.

One of the challenges we have is big and small jobcentres and, where it is easier to have more on offer, making sure that we have the full gamut. I would argue that our work coaches, who are being built up in numbers and have been consistently trained on what is on offer, are doing a phenomenal job. My job is arguably to drive that consistency in with those in leadership across DWP. Someone might come into a jobcentre as a young person; we have a youth hub offer in some places, we have a work employment coach in our branches and in all of our jobcentres, and we have those who specialise in 50PLUS and assisting people, because their needs might be different.

I have connected with jobcentre staff from five jobcentres in the last eight days. I think that says how interested I am in what our frontline offer is, and in making sure that it is tailored to women—and men—who cross our threshold, to give them the very best chance of getting into employment. Arguably, that is what it is about: making sure that if people need digital skills, they can access not only training but equipment.

Tomorrow, I happen to be visiting Smart Works, a fantastic charity that helps women to prepare for interview by helping them with their outfits and so on. You have the linkages, as we discussed earlier, into refuges. You have a good network across the piece. There are 651 jobcentres. Some of those that were stood up during covid are being pulled back into the estate. The consistency is a really important point. I look at the data weekly, because the true impact is making sure we get people into jobs.

Q190 **Dame Jackie Doyle-Price:** How granular is your data? If I were a work coach, there would be people across my threshold who were easier to help than others. How do you make sure that they are not just delivering for the quick wins?

Jo Churchill: I have meetings with work coaches who are randomly picked from across the country every couple of weeks, so they can tell me how it feels to them. I have spoken to people in the north of Scotland, Cardiff, Cornwall, East Anglia, the north-east, Kent and London. Every week—sorry, I am laughing because my private secretary is behind me—I ask for more and more granular data. I want to make sure that where we are delegating, because work coaches are working more intensely, that does not mean that we are not delivering the core service that runs through the body of jobcentres. It is really important.

We have all this there to help; we have people who specialise in people. That is why we want that resource, whether it is people getting lifted into additional jobcentre support, going on the Restart scheme or being recommended to go towards SWAPs. I was talking to somebody in the nuclear industry about a bootcamp that is going on in the south-west to help people enter the nuclear industry. Of those who currently do not



HOUSE OF COMMONS

work, 77% have the skills to enter that industry. Making sure that our support is consistent is probably top of my priority list.

Q191 **Chair:** Gillian, can I just take you back to your comments on helping people return to work? Does the Cabinet Office still have a returnship programme?

Gillian Unsworth: We do, yes.

Q192 **Chair:** How is that going?

Gillian Unsworth: Sorry, are you referring to the Cabinet Office as an employer or the pilot that we are running?

Chair: As an employer. Seven or eight years ago, I can remember the Cabinet Office boasting about its returnship programme and having a full four returners.

Gillian Unsworth: I do not think that that particular programme is continuing, but I do not have the figures to hand. I am very happy to go back and speak to—

Q193 **Chair:** Could you? I think it would be really interesting, because you have been advocating getting women particularly back into work and advocating flexible working. Is the GEO, which is based in the Cabinet Office, actually practising what it preaches?

Gillian Unsworth: I will check with the Cabinet Office returners programme. I think that is the best thing I can do.

Q194 **Chair:** Is the Minister for the Cabinet Office championing flexible working?

Gillian Unsworth: As an employee of the Cabinet Office, I can absolutely say that the culture is certainly there. It feels like it is a flexible employer. The last time I heard the Minister for the Cabinet Office speak at an all-staff event, he was very much encouraging people to work flexibly.

Chair: And not to be at their desks rather than their Pelotons?

Gillian Unsworth: I couldn't comment on the Pelotons.

Q195 **Lia Nici:** I have a question for you, Minister Churchill. The discussions about flexible working and the legislative change all sounds fantastic. However, we know that more women than men will ask for flexible working, because they are the ones who take on all or a lot of the caring roles in their family and their networks, and the elephant in the room for me is pensions. This is my experience. I worked in the education sector for the same amount of time as my husband and I earned quite a bit more, but because I took time off to have a baby and had family caring duties, my pension is less than his pension.

Is the Department looking at that issue? It is really important. My worry is that, with all the talk about flexibility, in 20 or 30 years' time we are going to discover that women are even poorer when they get to pension age, because they have less pension in the pot.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Jo Churchill: I agree with you that there is a pension disparity. I will hand over to James in a minute, but we have done the new state pension reforms to try to minimise that, and more than 3 million people, from 2030, will have a higher state pension than they would have done.

Q196 **Lia Nici:** What about legislation for private pensions and public sector pensions? In the whole reality of things, the pot with regard to state pension will be significantly lower than those that employers have actually contributed to.

Jo Churchill: Again, I apologise, but pensions, in the broader sense, are not my brief. One of the benefits of the additional childcare support and so on when you return to work when your baby is nine months old is that you are talking of smaller amounts of time away from the workplace; and obviously your state contributions carry on while you are on maternity pay and so on. The challenge is that we have the babies. The difficulty—for me—is that we also have a lot of women in the workplace who choose not to have a family. Trying to be fair—

Q197 **Lia Nici:** With that whole dynamic, it would be interesting to see whether any research has been done on, for instance, male couples compared with heterosexual couples, to see whether there is a disparity when people get to pension age and whether men are better off at pensionable age than women. Quite often, women don't necessarily want flexibility; it is just that life dictates that they need to have that flexibility.

Jo Churchill: Indeed. I think the statistics around female pensions are that we end up almost a third lower than men, and you would expect—I certainly know that my friends who are in same-sex couples have had two consistent incomes as they have approached retirement. Arguably, that is also about some of the choices we make. I am going to hand over to James.

James Wolfe: All I would add is that this is something that we think about really seriously whenever we are looking at policies around state pensions and private pensions. One example of that is that whenever there are changes to the rules around national insurance contributions, the DWP is always really involved in the discussions on the impact, potentially, on people's pensions. There is a lot for us to take away and think about, but I would just say that it does definitely form a central part of our thinking about pension policy.

Q198 **Lia Nici:** Good, because obviously, if women don't have babies, we will not have anybody in the future who is able to pay in so that we are able to pay the pensions out.

Jo Churchill: We are talking about the impact on women of pension age, and this rather goes back to some of the discussions that we were having in relation to the earlier point that 63% of customers that we have of pensionable age are women. Chair, with your indulgence, and because I was asked—

Chair: I am not sure there is going to be much indulgence, because we

have two sections of questions to get through in the next 15 minutes.

Jo Churchill: It was about the cost of living impact on the disabled and intersectionality. I just wanted to mention—

Chair: We will come back to that at the end if we have time. Bell.

Q199 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Minister Caulfield, perpetrators of domestic abuse are using cost of living pressures as a tool to intensify control over their current or former partners. What work are you doing with the safeguarding Minister to prioritise victims’—survivors’—safety during the cost of living crisis?

Maria Caulfield: One of the things that we have introduced—I think I touched on this at the beginning. Covid had a significant impact on domestic abuse and women’s ability to leave their situation, and the cost of living pressures were pretty swift after the restrictions were lifted, so we feel that the flexible fund trial done in May last year with the Women’s Aid Federation of England, which enabled women to have direct cash payments, made a significant difference to women’s ability to leave that situation. We are mindful of the cost of living pressures, whether they are around getting a deposit for a flat or being able to afford bills on your own that you were previously able to cover in a relationship. That is £230 million that is going into a lot of this work. We are extending the flexible fund until March 2025.

In addition, we recognise that economic abuse is a legal form of domestic abuse. We are working with creditors to have a bit more flexibility when it comes to the pressures that women fleeing domestic abuse face, whether it is debt with credit cards or other utilities debts, so that they recognise the financial pressures that sometimes either deter women from leaving a violent situation or cause women to struggle when they have left—and return, because there is a high return rate in those situations—are a key reason for that. That is why we have specifically introduced this funding so that women get that cash themselves.

Q200 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Minister Churchill, how many hours of training do frontline members of DWP staff in Jobcentre Plus and Child Maintenance Service receive in recognising and responding to domestic abuse? What does that training involve, and who is actually expected to complete it?

Jo Churchill: Work coaches are expected to complete it. It can last up to 13 weeks, and if a work coach has a particular interest, at their discretion they can ask for additional training if they are a particular link and so on. Everybody has 90 minutes of mandatory training on how to support vulnerable claimants and those with complex needs, including victims of domestic violence.

The domestic abuse content covers recognising those signs and supporting appropriately. It is also about being linked up to others, because economic abuse, as you stated in your question, and coercive behaviour often—and particularly in times of hardship—happen in and around controlling the financial payment. There is the Home Office’s “controlling or coercive



behaviour" guide. For the role of economic abuse, guidance is also fed down.

Q201 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: And what measures are in place to support survivors with additional needs, such as disabled people or women whose first language is not English?

Jo Churchill: Again, the work coach works with individuals and can always suspend the requirement for them to be looking for work while receiving benefit if there are acute periods of pressure for that individual. Particularly in and around challenges like domestic abuse, it may often take some time for that individual to find themselves in safer circumstances. Therefore, suspending the need for them to look for work is quite important in order for them to rebalance.

Maria Caulfield: Also, I want to point out that for the wider work on violence against women and girls—domestic abuse falls into this—there is a cross-Government group of Ministers that meets regularly. The Home Office chairs it. That is so that we all feed into the work that we do in the NHS, for example, in looking after our staff; there is a high percentage there, because there is a highly female group of workers who suffer domestic abuse themselves.

We need to be mindful of looking after our staff, but more widely they will come into contact with women experiencing domestic abuse. It is about supporting them to be able to recognise those women and signpost them to help and support. Every Government Department is represented on that violence against women and girls cross-Government board, whether it is DfE in educating young women about the signs to look out for, DWP in financially supporting women or Health, because we class it as a health issue. All Government Departments are focused on how we can better support women who want to leave those violent situations.

Q202 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: In that case, what is your Department's approach to equality impact assessments overall? Thinking about things like the Budget today, potential cuts to public services overall and what you have said about Government departments working together, how do you approach a situation when the decisions made by different Departments clearly impact women in a negative way? Is it flagged in a certain way? It does not comply with equality law if it is impacting women in this way. I just want to understand how your Department approaches that.

Maria Caulfield: Is there an example you can think of?

Q203 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: I am thinking generally. You were talking about people who work in the NHS perhaps not getting the pay that they need and how that may impact things like domestic abuse, as you said, in terms of how much money they receive and how much they and their partner work to fund their home. You are saying that, as it stands, when you have an equality impact assessment, you do not necessarily look at things like that. You do not flag it with the Government if a decision they make on how much people are being paid is directly going to affect how much money they receive in their pocket, thereby affecting them overall



HOUSE OF COMMONS

and their household.

Maria Caulfield: We obviously do cross-Government write-rounds when decisions are being made, and we input into those. There are things like the flexible fund, for example, which is a significant investment. We have extended that to March '25 with a further £2 million investment. We across Government are supportive of that, because it will make a difference for women to have that money and be able to flee situations. HMRC are doing training with their staff so that if women are contacting them in financial difficulty, they absolutely know the importance of supporting a woman who is experiencing domestic abuse. There is cross-Government work on this.

I am not sure that I have seen any policy that we feel will negatively impact women fleeing domestic abuse. All our effort is to try to help women, particularly by first recognising that economic abuse is domestic abuse. That has not been recognised previously by any other Government. There are reports that one in 10 women have debts specifically put in their name by men, so that they then struggle to flee because they have a poor credit rating and cannot get loans or a deposit or reference for a flat on their own. It is specifically done so that women cannot flee. The fact we are recognising that and trying to put measures in place financially and through a better joined-up approach across Government is something we are proud of.

Q204 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Minister Churchill, what progress is the Child Maintenance Service making in preventing abusers from exercising coercion and control over former partners, such as through abusive payment reference fields or non-payment or erratic payments?

Jo Churchill: Where a parent reports to the Child Maintenance Service that payments have not been made on time or in full, the service will take action to re-establish that compliance. If the case is on direct pay, the Child Maintenance Service will move the case to collect and pay and then take steps to recover the arrears for the individual. Following a recommendation in Dr Callan's independent review, we have reviewed the Child Maintenance Service domestic abuse training to ensure that it remains in line with best practice at the CMS. Is there anything else I should have mentioned, James?

James Wolfe: No, I think that is exactly it. We have been looking at our processes to make sure that they work correctly in those circumstances.

Jo Churchill: Yes, because it can be used as coercive control or the remaining link to cause pain.

Q205 **Chair:** Maria, can I take you back to your comments about the NHS? There are a high proportion of women in the workforce. Specifically, what role do equality, diversity and inclusion plans have in the NHS in tackling domestic abuse among your staff?

Maria Caulfield: They do have a role. There is no doubt about that. We are training managers across the board in identifying domestic abuse in



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the workforce. We are also in every ICB. We now have a sexual abuse lead for every ICB who is responsible for looking after patients and, particularly, staff. We have not just heard about domestic abuse, but had reports of sexual abuse within the workforce itself. In the last 12 months, significant work has been done so that in every part of England—I can only speak to England because it is a devolved matter—we are all singing from the same hymn sheet and so that training for staff, the reporting mechanisms and follow-up mechanisms of those reports are the same. We have seen incidents in the past where people are aware that a staff member is a victim of domestic abuse, but not a lot is done with that information.

It is about training those leads, which then filters down into every department in their area. That is firstly so that the signs are recognised. Whether that is coercive control, domestic abuse, economic abuse or whatever the risk factors are that could indicate that someone is suffering, they must be picked up at an early stage so that a woman does not necessarily have to report to her line manager. When domestic abuse is identified, how do we then support our employees? Is it with flexible working, time off, or other measures? We need to make sure that we are not just learning about more domestic abuse happening, but that we are supporting those women.

Q206 Chair: Where does responsibility sit to make sure that happens?

Maria Caulfield: That is why we have appointed a specific named ICB lead who will be accountable to NHS England and responsible for devolving that work at a local level. That is why we have named leads. Every ICB has a named person now, who will be taking that both for domestic abuse and sexual violence for patients and staff as well.

Chair: Would the remit sit with an inclusion manager?

Maria Caulfield: Not necessarily. It is up to the ICB who it identifies as its leads, but it can be a senior manager or one of the HR directors. We have not defined who that person is. It is up to the ICB to identify them, but they will be named, so that they know that accountability sits with them.

Q207 Chair: Thank you. I am conscious that we have three minutes left, so this is going to be very quick. Why is the NHS struggling to meet its target on breast cancer screening?

Maria Caulfield: Just to correct the record, the breast screening programme is working well for routine breast screening for women over 50, which is every three years. A specific issue has come to our attention in the last month for high-risk women who had radiotherapy to their chest for other cancers—mainly non-Hodgkin lymphoma. Guidance was issued a number of years ago—I think back in 2003—that they should be having annual MRIs because they were at higher risk of breast cancer. In some cases that happened; in some cases it did not. The NHS has identified those women who were not having annual MRIs and they are now being recalled, if they have not already been in the system.



Q208 Chair: Last week, Breast Cancer Now were in Parliament with the statistics around routine three-year screening, which actually showed that we are not meeting the targets. I cannot remember the specific number in my region, but I think we were only at about 53% instead of 70%. That is not very good. What is being done to make sure there is a targeted approach to the women who are least likely to take up screening?

Maria Caulfield: There is an issue with breast screening uptake. The invitations are going out as planned, and GPs send their lists to the breast screening teams when they are visiting those specific areas—it is once every three years—but the uptake has fallen. It is not because women are not being invited; it is because they are not attending. We have seen that covid has had an impact, because the breast screening vans, which are once every three years, got out of sync. Women got out of the habit of attending their regular mammograms, and so we are doing a particular push in those areas where uptake is the lowest.

We are not planning at this stage to make a shorter interval, so if you have missed those three years it could be then six years before you have had your mammogram, because that is the next time the van or the screening programme is in your area. If you do not attend that, it will be six years that you have not had a mammogram. We want to make sure that those areas where uptake is the lowest are particularly targeted, but it is getting that message out and getting women back into the habit of going for their three-yearly mammograms.

Chair: So you are sending out lung cancer vans?

Maria Caulfield: Yes.

Chair: Are you doing additional breast cancer vans?

Maria Caulfield: We are not at the moment. The screening programme is based on being in an area once every three years. If you are between that age range of over 50 to 70—or over 70 if you have requested to stay on the programme—you will be called. We are not planning a catch-up programme on that as yet, but it is really important that we get the message out that if you are called for your breast mammogram, you come forward and have it done.

Chair: What are you doing to get the message out?

Maria Caulfield: We are doing a lot of work particularly with primary care in getting out the message that if it is in your area, it will only be once every three years. If you have missed that time, you will not get recalled again until the next time it is in your area. It is really at a primary care level that we are getting the message out that if you get your invitation you should attend.

Chair: You have said three times that you are getting the message out—how? Is this just via contact from your local surgery? Is this via letter, text, email, or advertising campaign?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Maria Caulfield: The national screening programme is also doing some comms on this to get the wider message out about the importance of breast screening. It is not just breast screening; we are seeing rates falling in routine vaccination and immunisation as well. Since covid, people have got out of the habit of going for regular health tests and checks. That is the case with breast screening, but it is also the case for other screening programmes, and vaccination and immunisation programmes. It is why we have the problem with measles, because the immunisation rate has fallen particularly in the west midlands and London. That is why we are seeing an uptick in measles. Overall, there is a public health message with directors of public health at local government points who are trying to get those messages out about all sorts of health programmes. The invites are going out, but the participation levels are dropping.

Chair: Thank you. I think there are a couple of issues that we wanted to follow up on in writing, but it is obviously Budget day, so everybody wants to whizz off and find a nice seat in the Chamber. I thank all the witnesses for their contributions this morning. Please do write to us if there is anything you feel we have missed.