



Work and Pensions Committee

Oral evidence: Safeguarding vulnerable claimants, HC 146

Tuesday 26 March 2024

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Members present: Sir Stephen Timms (Chair); Debbie Abrahams; Marsha De Cordova; Nigel Mills; Selaine Saxby; Sir Desmond Swayne.

Questions 255-321

Witnesses

I: Mims Davies MP, Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, Department for Work and Pensions; The Viscount Younger of Leckie, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Work and Pensions; Elizabeth Fairburn, Customer Experience Director, Department for Work and Pensions; and Preeta Ramachandran, Southern Area Director, Work and Health Services, Department for Work and Pensions.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- Department for Work and Pensions ([SVC0056](#))



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Mims Davies MP, The Viscount Younger of Leckie, Elizabeth Fairburn and Preeta Ramachandran gave evidence.

Q255 **Chair:** Welcome, everybody, to this meeting of the Work and Pensions Select Committee and our evidence session with the Ministers, to whom we are grateful for joining us this morning to conclude the evidence in our inquiry on safeguarding vulnerable claimants. Mims, tell us briefly who you are, together with your colleague.

Mims Davies: Yes. Good morning, Sir Stephen. Good morning, Committee. Thank you for having us. I am delighted to be joined by Minister for the Lords, Viscount Younger, who will give some of your responses. Liz, do you want to tell the Committee your formal title and what you get involved in?

Elizabeth Fairburn: Yes. I am the Customer Experience Director at DWP.

Mims Davies: Over here is Preeta, whom I have known for a long time, who is very much on the ground with operations. Preeta, do you want to tell the Committee about yourself?

Preeta Ramachandran: Good morning, everyone. I am the Area Director for the south of England for Universal Credit. That is all the Jobcentres and service centres across the south of England.

Viscount Younger of Leckie: Shall I introduce myself? I have been in the Department for just over a year and I am the Under-Secretary of State and also the Minister for the Lords, meaning that I undertake everything in the Department that needs to be done in the Lords.

Q256 **Chair:** Thank you all for being here. Many witnesses have said to us in the inquiry that DWP should have a statutory duty to safeguard vulnerable benefit claimants. We have heard how local authorities willingly embraced such a duty in legislation not long ago. Would the DWP welcome a statutory duty?

Mims Davies: We are pleased as Ministers to give evidence this morning and put on the record—I have a few opening remarks, which lead into that, if I may—that we at the DWP care very much about supporting the most vulnerable in society. The narrative around DWP’s treatment of vulnerable people has been incredibly unhelpful. This gives an opportunity for those watching to see, hopefully, that that is not roundly correct. I encourage members of the Committee to see what we do day in and day out in our local Jobcentres, service centres and youth hubs, how our frontline staff feel about what they do and how much they care in the consideration they give in their work.

We provide training and guidance for all our customer-facing staff so that they are adaptable to all the different scenarios they may face. If we



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think as constituency MPs about the surgeries we get, what comes in front of us is wide-ranging. As DWP, our work does not stop there. We always look to improve our processes and update our guidance. That comes around complex needs.

If I turn specifically to the safeguarding duty, the primary function—and I think James will agree with us on this—of the Department is the administration of benefits, paying the right amounts at the right time, but paying benefits to people doesn't mean that we don't focus on the vulnerability that may be in front of us. We don't have a legal duty of care, but that doesn't mean we don't care. It is important for people watching to understand.

We have layers of support in place to make sure the Department can carry out that core function and provide vulnerable claimants with the right support, but we recognise that in some areas improvements can be made. We are always happy, as a learning Department with the varying complex needs of our case loads, to be ready to manage them.

Q257 Chair: Would the Department welcome the duty being made statutory or resist it?

Mims Davies: If we take what you refer to, complex needs training is out there and complements our current learning offer and allows participants to have tailored customer service. It includes a new trauma-informed approach to training and autism accreditation.

We work with people who have statutory duties and we see our route, through our tailored approach, through getting to know people with complex needs. We send them through to those with the specialities and the understanding of the statutory duties to be discharged.

The Department for Work and Pensions, which administers benefits and helps people into work, of course deals with complex case needs, but that specific duty, with such a large Department, although some people, clinicians and others, have those duties and we work with local authorities and others as you describe, for us is about signposting to that support. Liz, do you want to add to that?

Q258 Chair: Let me pick up that point. We have been told that the Department does not always consistently follow its safeguarding policies. As you said, we are aware that there are policies, but their implementation seems patchy. Would legislation around those current policies help, for example make sure that people are referred elsewhere when there is a safeguarding concern and when it is appropriate to make such a referral?

Mims Davies: We have the layers of support for those with complex needs. That can include safeguarding to other agencies that have those duties, NHS, social services, third-party organisations—

Chair: The concern has been raised that that does not always happen. Sometimes it does, but not always.



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Mims Davies: Yes, but the solution of a statutory duty that the Committee reaches for can be addressed through our continuing investment in training, guidance, development and links to other Government Departments and organisations that have that duty. Liz, do you want to draw into that?

Elizabeth Fairburn: Yes, exactly that. We are a big organisation. We work hard to embed the tools that I know this Committee is familiar with. We have talked to you about them before. We need to do that. Of course, on occasions we don't always get it right for customers and we know that. We take that seriously and we learn from that, but we are on a mission to push these tools, to make sure everybody knows what they are and applies them.

Q259 **Chair:** Might a statutory duty help?

Elizabeth Fairburn: Personally, I think putting a statutory duty in is a big undertaking for the Department when we need to embed the tools that we already have. That is not the right tool to get the right outcomes. Continuing to refer to specialist organisations that have a safeguarding responsibility is the right approach for the Department.

Q260 **Chair:** The written evidence you gave us refers to the framework to support vulnerable claimants. What is that? Is it written down? Could it be published? What do you think?

Elizabeth Fairburn: It is framework with a small "f". It refers to the infrastructure we have. We have talked a lot about this. Minister Davies has already referred to our tiered approach. We see it as everybody's responsibility in DWP to take the care of our customers—

Chair: Is it written down?

Elizabeth Fairburn: We could share a high-level summary with you. I am happy to do that.

Chair: Okay. That would be helpful. Thank you.

Q261 **Sir Desmond Swayne:** You are accused of not doing enough to find out about people's vulnerabilities and the additional support they need as a consequence. My prejudice is that it is not unreasonable to rely on people to tell you that so that you can help them, but we have heard that many people are incapable or reluctant to share their vulnerabilities and, therefore, they don't get the support they should get. How could you be more proactive in finding out about people's vulnerabilities to give them the support they need?

Mims Davies: The Chair alluded to that at the start, which is why I was trying to say that we have a trusted relationship and a tailored approach. Many times, disclosures and understandings are made between our work coaches, disability employment advisers or visiting officers because of exactly that trusted relationship, which then can lead to suitable



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signposting. We empower staff to notice things and to be approachable. Preeta talked about it before. If people are dishevelled when they come to us and are not able to keep themselves clean, you can pick that up. An experienced work coach, embedded in that community with their claimants and their customers, will be able to do that.

We always look for ways to highlight that. The UC build allows a colleague to record additional support that is needed and signposts from care leavers, forces leavers, former offenders, people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. We have Ask for ANI and J9 around domestic abuse. For those with limited digital access or no digital skills, we have our social tariffs and our engagement through the flexible support fund to help. Some people have difficulty communicating in English or need BSL. Different claimants need ESOL, particularly Ukrainians and others. We have been able to reach out and support people there. Of course, particular programmes and interventions are there for drug and alcohol misuse. These are all relevant questions for our work coaches. Multiple options can be chosen if they apply to an individual customer.

That is why I am pleased about the work we do around trauma-informed approaches as well. I saw that recently in Hastings. Preeta and James are itching to come in on this one, Sir Desmond.

Preeta Ramachandran: For our work coaches, it is about building up trust. In a number of interventions that we have with customers, they might come in and start to talk about debt but two or three appointments later we find out there may be alcohol or drug dependency. I went to Gosport last week, which is a health model office. Someone came in and started to talk about debt. Over time, they disclosed that they had an alcohol problem. On the safeguarding duty, we were then able to refer them to NHS England, which has a peer mentoring service.

It is about our work coaches being able to signpost to organisations that have a safeguarding duty. It is seeing that relationship build up over time and building trust with the customer. That is when they disclose or, as the Minister said, they might disclose as soon as they come in. Our work coaches are good at picking up changes in behaviours and changes in appearance. All of this over their own experience comes in. I have seen this in a number of Jobcentres that I have been to across the south of England.

Viscount Younger of Leckie: Much has been said, but crucial here is the quality of the DWP frontline operations. This is perhaps the gist of your question and it is important. The Committee will know that we have the six-point plan. We also have a two-day mental health training for all coaches and of course we recruit quite a lot. Maybe we can talk about recruitment later. It is important that those who come on board are properly trained—which we believe they are—to deal with vulnerability. We have 30-plus advanced customer support senior leaders. Again, this



is all part of the layers of support that are needed to look at the highly complex differences in the vulnerabilities concerned.

Q262 **Sir Desmond Swayne:** The ombudsman told us that the DWP “did not do all that it could to recognise the vulnerability of a claimant due to their circumstances and adapt its actions in accordance”. Do you ask enough? How about putting on the application form for Universal Credit a space for people to list any circumstances that might give rise to a need for additional support?

Mims Davies: That is a fair challenge. The trauma-informed approach comes in there again, with the signposting that Preeta described to external partners who will have the right help and advice for the customers who need support and are struggling. That is key. We see a lot of customers. It is time-sensitive. As Preeta says, sometimes it will take a little bit of a trusted relationship before people actively open up.

The trauma-informed approach tries to avoid and mitigate risk and also to create a safe and empowering environment for all. This is particularly key for those vulnerable customers who may have significant experience of trauma and adversity. The six key pillars of safety, trustworthiness, choice, empowerment, collaboration and cultural consideration come into play there. We learn from other people in Scotland and elsewhere about how to get that conversation going. How do you keep something in a safe and engaging space but learn how to do this better?

We have some innovation hubs in East Kilbride, Porthcawl, Stratford and Worsley. We link with local services to make sure that that is a welcoming and engaging place—also, Preeta mentioned debt—where people can say more what is going on. But would you divulge to someone within your first 10-minute appointment everything that is going on? It is about building that trust and then giving our work coaches the network and the empowerment and what to do with that information. For example, in your own constituency, Sir Desmond, we work actively through job fairs, Citizens Advice and other partnership organisations for people with more complex needs to be helped if they are further away from the labour market.

All of this is about manufacturing an understanding that coming to see us can help you access what you need. It may not be what we have, but we have the homelessness covenant and other areas where, working with partners and others, we can help people progress. We might not be the right, perfect responsive agency, but we have those links in the local communities for the people with those statutory duties who do.

Q263 **Nigel Mills:** This all sounds perfectly wonderful. I suspect the evidence we have had is that that is not quite what people experience. Could you talk me through? I suspect the most vulnerable claimants never come to see someone in a Jobcentre because they will not be required to look for work; but let us say I am very vulnerable and I apply for the personal independence payment—PIP—and get on the no work-related activity



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group. How do you make sure that I have the right benefit and I am not turned down because I got the form slightly wrong or could not face an assessment or something?

Mims Davies: Yes, Nigel, you are right. We could sit here and paint a perfectly rosy picture, but we know not every community in every area is a perfectly rosy picture. Equally, to say that DWP gets everything wrong is not fair. We need to find a middle way here. I tried to get it across to the Chair at the start that it is important to make sure that people know we are a learning and understanding organisation. Ultimately, if people divulge or engage with us, they will have a much better experience than if they do not.

The DWP visiting service is a national service that provides additional face-to-face support to our customers who cannot access the Department's services in any other way. We currently have 480 visiting officers, with further national recruitment under way. We will get up to 700, hopefully. If they have a general safeguarding concern about a customer, they can refer directly to the local authority safeguarding team. They have a district provision tool to link to adult or child social services with any welfare concerns. Visiting officers discuss wider services during visits and link to our advanced customer support senior leaders, who, with support, work with those agencies, which could be the local authority, police and other localised support networks. We are growing this. We have, for example—

Q264 **Nigel Mills:** Why did you stop face-to-face appointments for help to claim?

Mims Davies: You can have face-to-face appointments through the Citizens Advice service. That is our link. For example, in my local library, whether you are trying to get support through the household support fund or others, you can have that conversation. As we have discussed, people don't always want to come straight to us and so—

Q265 **Nigel Mills:** Two years ago, you stopped that face-to-face for help to claim—or have I misremembered that?

Mims Davies: We have other ways of reaching people, whether YouTube or other engaging ways to help with access through the household support claim or, indeed, the help to claim service. Liz, I feel you are itching to say more on this one.

Elizabeth Fairburn: Yes. The point here is that we can flex the right solution to the right person. The visiting officers is a great example. We can send them into the homes of our most vulnerable customers to support them. Minister Davies is right, we are expanding their numbers up to about that 700 mark to support the move to UC. We recognise that transition might be tricky for some customers and we deploy additional resource to do that. We heard this week from one of our visiting officers, who is vulnerable themselves. They do great work to support some of our most vulnerable customers. That is personalised.



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We referenced there the district provision tool, which is a great example of how we focus on localised services. This is not a national thing; it is specific to that local area. We know where the support is so that we can start to signpost.

Mims Davies: Yes, whether that is domestic violence or other support. Citizens Advice and the help to claim service since 2019 has helped 900,000 people with their claims. Whether it is the freephone number, digital channels, webchat or help to claim coming into a Jobcentre, we always have people, Preeta, waiting at the doors to help people be signposted. There is no barrier to helping the most vulnerable.

Q266 **Nigel Mills:** To go back to the scenario I gave you, I am a claimant with serious mental health issues and I am anxious. I need to apply for PIP and I want to apply for Universal Credit to be in the no work requirement group. I ring up and you send me a form and I fill the form in and put those things on. The only contact I will probably get is when I get my assessment notification and I will have to do a telephone assessment or go in person. Then I will get a decision letter. What should the process be for somebody who—you can probably tell from the form. They may not fill the form in particularly well or they may be worried about going for the assessment. They will not speak to any of your staff at any point in that whole journey, will they, unless somebody proactively—

Mims Davies: They may have an appointee or an advocate to help them as well. Preeta, do you see this a lot?

Preeta Ramachandran: For PIP, vulnerable customer champions help those people. If we found out they needed advanced customer support, the vulnerable customer champion would help them throughout the process. As the Minister—

Q267 **Nigel Mills:** How do you find out?

Preeta Ramachandran: They would have to disclose that, but we advocate having an appointee because, with the nature of PIP, a lot of our customers will be vulnerable and would have someone to support them in the application. There are other examples as well. For outreach, we go to GP surgeries. We work there. We are in some of the most deprived areas in community centres. We send our work coaches there. It is not all just face to face in a Jobcentre.

Mims Davies: No. That is why we set up the network of youth hubs, which we grew before and during Covid, particularly for young people, the under-25s, most at risk of long-term unemployment. Often, it is because a Jobcentre was not the right place for them with their complex needs. There might be homelessness issues, trouble at home, debt or substance issues. Again, it is a safe place for young people with the local partnerships for us to do warm handovers to the people who need their extra support.



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There is a way in. I certainly would not want anybody watching this to think that they would be left on their own, which is why we might look at appointees and make sure that is strengthened. Liz, you are directly doing that at the moment.

Elizabeth Fairburn: Yes. Appointees is a great example. I know that becoming a learning organisation is a key topic for the Committee. Appointees is a great example of demonstrating this. Through the work that our advanced customer support teams do and that we do with our internal process reviews, or IPRs, we know that we can strengthen and improve our appointee offering, even though it is good and we have been recognised for that.

We have kicked off some work. We want to enable our customers to live their lives. To your point, we want to be able to support them to do that. We recognise that sometimes they need additional help and the appointee can come in there. We are looking at how we can speed up the process but at the same time protect our customers from potential financial abuse. We have run several dedicated pinpoint workshops with our corporate acting bodies. Brilliantly, they brought in lived experience. The people in those corporate acting bodies have also acted as appointees and can see what our customers experience.

Throughout this year we will deploy lots of different things to enable a much better appointee system. We will include a decision tree. An appointee is not the only answer. A power of attorney could be required. It could be that somebody just wants someone to speak to in that moment to help them through a particular process and how we can do that.

Q268 **Nigel Mills:** In your review, are you looking at one appointee, one notification covering all the benefits?

Elizabeth Fairburn: Yes.

Q269 **Nigel Mills:** Are you looking at whether I can nominate them to do only certain things and can keep some responsibility myself if I want to?

Elizabeth Fairburn: Yes. To your point on the solution there, by the end of this year we want to build a digital solution where a customer can put an appointee on and all people in DWP will be able to see that appointee.

We are also looking at the ability to bring on a second appointee because we recognise sometimes their current appointee cannot act on their behalf. They may have gone away or, sadly, have passed away. We recognise then that they need a second appointee. At the minute, there might be a gap while we onboard a new appointee. We are trying to look at how we can do that concurrently.

We are also looking at how we can temporarily suspend appointees. With conditions like seasonal affective disorder, for example, the customer might need additional support for only certain months in the year. We



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want to enable them to live their lives and to deal with their own business and so we are looking at how we can use that temporary solution as well.

A collective of activities, sponsored by the serious case panel at the most senior level, is taken from learnings that we have seen through our IPRs and through our ACSSL visits and deployed through the Department to make a real difference to customers on the ground.

Mims Davies: James, do you want to add anything on that or have we covered most of it?

Viscount Younger of Leckie: No, it has been fully covered. Thank you.

Q270 **Nigel Mills:** We hear from vulnerable people that they struggle to manage their finances and it would be good to put proactive alternative payment arrangements in place to help them. The Department published a helpful online booklet that summarised the additional support available to customers, quite recently, last week, and yet you missed saying that alternative payment arrangements are available if needed. It seems strange to omit a primary tool that is available to help people. Did you omit that deliberately? Could you take a look at that?

Elizabeth Fairburn: No, we did not omit that deliberately. We will take that feedback on board. Preeta, do you want to talk about how we support customers? We have mentioned debt already.

Preeta Ramachandran: We have a lot of information around debt hubs. We signpost people to organisations like the Money Advice Service to support them with that. After any discussions about financial problems that they have, we signpost them to those organisations. I went to Stratford Jobcentre, which is trialling some of the new innovation. It has a small debt hub at the side. It is just a telephone service, but you can pick up and talk to someone. We are keen to build that into the Jobcentre in the future so that people can come in and get some advice on debt at the same time.

Q271 **Nigel Mills:** Is there a danger here? Minister, you opened by saying that your primary duty to pay the right amount of benefit at the right time pervades. If I look at the application form and it is not well filled in and they are not entitled to the benefit and I refuse it, the primary duty is satisfied, even though probably hand on heart I realise it is a bit rubbish because the person has struggled. Maybe if we were a bit proactive and reached out, we could intervene here and check.

The feeling we had when we went to Glasgow was that they had a system that was trying to help people into the process and not have slightly differently sized holes along the way that they could fall out of at any point. Do you worry that, for all the warm words, the primary duty to pay the right amount at the right time creeps in and people focus their work there?



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Mims Davies: There is a balance here of fairness to the taxpayers. People getting money and support must be entitled to it. The Chair will know I have been nearly five years in this Department in various guises. We have worked hard to understand our vulnerable customers, their barriers and the challenges that they have to making a claim that they are perfectly entitled to.

We are trying to find the right balance between the right safety nets for vulnerable claimants and ensuring that they are able to cope with decisions and processes that they need to undertake to comply with welfare rules. Equally, help to claim gives practical, tailored support for anyone who needs it and enables people to come into UC. Videos, appointees and all the outreach that we have—we have those networks locally and, again, connections with the CAB—makes sure that anybody who we might worry will slip through the net will not.

When we have got it wrong, when there has been a tragic case or something awful, we take it seriously. We have increased the number of our internal process reviews. If we or others have fallen short, we have worked hard to learn and understand that.

It is a core theme for us as a Department to get the core of what we do right but always make sure vulnerability, an individualised, tailored approach and time is given to the people with the needs, and that we create a trusted relationship to then signpost them on to those with the expertise and ability to help with the wider complex needs. We are trying to strike that fair balance. I don't know if James wants to add to that.

Viscount Younger of Leckie: Definitely. The gist of your question is how we can make sure that those at the sharp end are properly trained to deal with certain vulnerabilities. You pointed out that some people maybe do not fill in a form properly. It is a good point.

It is incredibly important for the Department that our training reaches right down to those who start. For example, from the start of April last year to the beginning of March 2024, more than 15,000 colleagues successfully started in operational roles in DWP. It is important that all 15,000 are trained properly to handle vulnerability. It is important that we roll out the modules that we have. Various toolkits and training roles have been mentioned before. It is a valid point.

No doubt it is not perfect and we are always learning, but it is important that it goes beyond. As Mims was saying, there is an obligation to the taxpayer, but it is not just that we give out benefits, which is the core of what we do; it is much more, and we do care.

Preeta Ramachandran: There is a real value around care across the DWP as well. It is one of our DWP values, from our Permanent Secretary right down. It is outstanding when you go into a Jobcentre and you see that level of care and compassion for people. As an area director, a key leadership message I give out is around how we have to support



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vulnerable customers. From the top down, it is a real value that we try to instil across DWP.

Mims Davies: I would not have stuck around five years if it wasn't working. In the DWP from April 2021 to December 2023, complaints pertaining to disability services have decreased from 2,690 in the 2021-22 period to 2,330. So we are going in the right direction, but I hope you are seeing from us that nobody wouldn't want to be a learning, understanding, approachable organisation. That care, as Preeta said, is embedded for those with the most complex needs.

Q272 **Chair:** The overall number of complaints has gone up in that period in the Department as a whole, hasn't it?

Mims Davies: I have only got my area, Sir Stephen, and so I am happy to share that, so obviously that is my area of focus, but I was pleased to see that because they can be some of the most complex and challenging areas, as Nigel has alluded to, and we are going in the right direction. Liz, do you want to say—

Q273 **Chair:** Can I pick up the point about help to claim? Our understanding is that in the last two years it has been a telephone-only service; it was face to face up until April 2022 but since then it has not been. Is that correct?

Elizabeth Fairburn: But the option to send a visiting officer is still there. If we assess it, we can do that.

Chair: Yes, but the help to claim service itself is no longer face to face?

Elizabeth Fairburn: Yes. You are right that the complaint number has gone up, but so has demand for our services. It is not out of kilter with the increased demand we have seen across the Department.

Chair: Fair point. Thank you.

Q274 **Selaine Saxby:** Thank you and good morning. To what extent is your complaints process adequately accessible and how could it be improved?

Viscount Younger of Leckie: Perhaps I could start by saying that we have definitely improved the transparency by publishing complaints data in last year's annual report, which you may know. At the official session on 28 February, the Committee asked why the Department does not publish complaints data by benefit line, for example. We took that feedback on board and that information was published, you will be pleased to hear, on 21 March, recently. We will continue to publish complaints by benefit line going forward.

On accessibility, first, perhaps rather obviously the DWP's complaints process is available at gov.uk. It happens to be the first option that appears, following work we have done to improve our complaints service and make it more accessible and visible to our customers. A customer can lodge a complaint through several different channels—in writing, by



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email, over the phone or via their MP, as you will know. They can also ask for a representative to support their complaint. This includes going via external organisations such as the CAB and others. The Department, by the way, will always accept that complaint.

It is important that we always look at our complaints service and it should be accessible and visible. Complaints remain significantly lower than pre-pandemic levels.

Q275 Selaine Saxby: What is done to ensure that claimants understand the complaints process and to support them through it?

Viscount Younger of Leckie: I have probably covered quite a lot in what I have said. I don't know whether anybody can add. Liz might want to.

Elizabeth Fairburn: The point about accessibility of the complaints process is good. We publish our process online. Our philosophy is that anybody can support a customer to resolve an issue in the moment when that happens. We actively train our people to do just that. If that does not happen, of course the complaint can escalate and we can then deal with it more formally.

As technology allows, we can become more accessible in how customers can complain. On the UC system, for example, a customer can raise a complaint through their journal. We encourage them to do that there with that online tool. As we bring other benefit lines through our service modernisation programme, we hope that other channels can open up to make complaints.

We can support customers to make complaints and we also actively use new technologies and test how we can scan the interactions that our customers have with us to spot complaints and spot vulnerability, but that is in early stages and relies on us developing that technology. We have a real desire across the Department to do more of that as and when the technology and the associated investment with the technology allows us.

Viscount Younger of Leckie: The investment in the new complaints process and restructuring includes extending to professional development of complaints handlers. All complaints handlers undertake a bespoke learning pathway. Using the complaints standards framework, we built colleague capability and learning. Again, it comes back to us being a learning Department, which is important.

Elizabeth Fairburn: That is in line with the PHSO standards as well.

Q276 Debbie Abrahams: Good morning, everyone. I want to focus a little bit on what Sir Stephen said at the beginning and explore some points there. I quite appreciate and understand that the vast majority of DWP staff will want to do the right thing and will want to support claimants. However, we are not quite there yet. This inquiry is to look at the systemic



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approaches used to ensure that happens. It cannot be isolated training; it has to be an organisation-wide approach.

Currently, according to Matrix Law, the ad hoc policies in existence are not generally applied. There is no systemic approach to safeguarding, no clear definition of vulnerable claimants. This has come not just from Matrix Law but from a whole range of evidence that we have received. The NAO says vulnerable claimants cannot be identified at application stage for UC. We are about to complete the roll-out of UC and it is not perceived as a priority. These are some of the headlines from the evidence that we have collected. I appreciate where you want to be, but this is where we are now.

On top of that, we have had some tragic cases and we know that we see only the tip of that iceberg. I will ask you some questions around that because of how harms and deaths are reported, ultimately, to the serious case panel. Before I get on to my substantive questions, you want claimants to trust you. That needs to be reciprocated and it is not. The perception is that DWP does not trust the claimants. If I went into a Jobcentre and asked, "On a scale of one to 10, what is the priority for safeguarding?" what would I be told?

Viscount Younger of Leckie: Could I start off by giving some reassurance to you because—

Debbie Abrahams: Lord Younger, I appreciate that, but please could you tell me? What would I get in response to that in answer? If I went down the road to a Jobcentre and asked, "Is safeguarding your No. 1 priority?" what would they say?

Viscount Younger of Leckie: I don't know whether they would say it is the No. 1 priority, but they would certainly put it extremely high on their list.

Perhaps it might be helpful to set out our stall, if I may, on this. You have raised an important point. We are a learning organisation and we have systems in place. You spoke about a systemic issue. We must and can consistently act on feedback and ensure that when we learn of experiences for our customers that have fallen below our expectations, we use this learning to make the necessary changes to improve what we do.

We have already said that treating complaints seriously is part of that, and using them as opportunities to learn and invest in the training and development of staff. We have touched on the training of staff, which is also critical for your questions and feeds into the whole Department's learning of issues—

Debbie Abrahams: Can I stop you there, Lord Younger?

Viscount Younger of Leckie: Yes, of course. Yes, please do.



Q277 **Debbie Abrahams:** Thank you so much for that. I will give you one example that, again, was provided to us. This Committee knows this case well and I know you will be familiar with it, too—Errol Graham. Evidence to the coroner from a senior member of DWP staff was that his case would be reviewed so that learning came out of it. There has been an absolute dearth of investigation. Nothing has happened since that inquest. The coroner had to write a number of times to the Department to find out what was happening, with no response. It was disgraceful. I appreciate that you are moving on but you cannot say, based on that example, that you are learning all that you need to do from that one example.

Viscount Younger of Leckie: Could I perhaps come back to you on that? Of course, I appreciate that that is one example and I don't normally want to be drawn in on specific cases. However, I am aware of this case, of course I am. It was an incredibly tragic case. I will say first that our condolences remain with Mr Graham's family.

You will be aware that the Department has made significant changes since this case, which has been recognised by the safeguarding adults board review. I don't know whether that helps, but it is important to get across how seriously we have taken this particular case. It does not reflect, which I was trying to say earlier, the changes we are making and I am trying to get across our systemic improvements.

Q278 **Debbie Abrahams:** Thank you for that. This question will be for Minister Davies. What systems and procedures are in place to identify potential risks and harms of new policies?

Mims Davies: What do you mean by "new policies"?

Debbie Abrahams: We know, for example, that a number of artificial intelligence systems and machine tools are used to assess potential fraud of claimants. There are nine at the moment. I could list the nine, if you like. The most recent account submitted by your Department said that it is testing for bias in these nine systems only to people with the protected characteristics of age, gender and pregnancy. In other words, the bias, for example, on the protected characteristic of disability is not included in the AI design. Would you like to confirm if that is correct?

Mims Davies: I am not leading on AI in this area but James might want to write on that point.

Viscount Younger of Leckie: Most definitely, yes. I happen to be responsible for AI in DWP as a Minister and so I am more than happy to take that back. A huge amount of work goes on in AI in the Department. In fact, we lead among Departments across the Government. May I take that specific point back? You have made the point that we have to get the design of AI systems right early on. Thank you.

Debbie Abrahams: May I refer you? It is in your own Department's accounts. It is there within your accounts. It says that that is the case.



This is the point I am getting to. If you are a learning organisation that systemically identifies the potential risks and harms to claimants, you would want to check on that one thing.

Viscount Younger of Leckie: Yes.

Elizabeth Fairburn: Can I come in on that? Aside from the AI points referenced in the annual report, other projects are live. I think I mentioned these when I met you last time. We use the white mail scanning now. For customers that write to us, we test how we pull out vulnerabilities using that white mail to ensure that they get the focus they need.

In addition and as a result of an action from the serious case panel, we are investing in our call listening service. We have some functionality live, but we depend on a big technology project to roll that out across the whole Department, which we expect to do next year. That will do exactly what you describe there. We will be able to pull out words that might identify a vulnerability for a customer. Additionally, if a customer complains and it goes to our complaints team, we scan the inbox for words of vulnerability there so that we can pull those out and get them to the teams that can support those customers.

Q279 **Debbie Abrahams:** Thank you. I appreciate what you say, but do you also appreciate the distress caused for somebody who has potentially been flagged as fraudulent, especially if they are already vulnerable?

Elizabeth Fairburn: Yes. We will take that action away.

Q280 **Debbie Abrahams:** Thank you. I will move on to the systemic approach that the Department takes, or not. I got a lovely letter back from Peter Schofield when I was concerned that the number of deaths investigated by the serious case panel did not reflect the total number of deaths, including deaths by suicide, that the Department had previously agreed to investigate. The Department seemed to filter out what the serious case panel could examine for areas that needed to be learned from. How can the serious case panel do its job to understand the issues if it gets only half the cases to look at?

Viscount Younger of Leckie: Perhaps it might be helpful for me to say a little bit about how the serious case panel works. Would that be helpful?

Debbie Abrahams: I know how it works, thank you, Lord Younger. I appreciate your help with that—

Mims Davies: Debbie, if I may, I have a couple of lines of note here that might be helpful for the Committee before we write fully on the AI point. It is a reminder here—and forgive me, I had not noticed it before—that the use of AI is for the earlier identification of vulnerable customers. That is part of it, but that full decision making will not be through AI. It will try to identify those who need support soonest. Your point is helpful and we



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will take that specifically away. Sorry—you were coming back in on something.

Q281 Debbie Abrahams: Yes. I was. Again, thank you, Lord Younger, for your points about the serious case panel. You made the earlier remark that this is about learning. Yes, absolutely, the DWP needs to be a learning organisation. If the Department is already filtering out some of the cases so that the serious case panel cannot examine the full range of deaths, how can we ensure that full learning is possible?

Viscount Younger of Leckie: You may be referring to the statistics. Certainly what I have down here is that of the 10 total PFD reports issued to the Department, eight had been subject to an IPR. The PFD cases in which an IPR was not conducted occurred prior to the implementation of the IPR process. It is fair to say that we take every death incredibly seriously and that leads into an IPR. You probably know the process on that.

Elizabeth Fairburn: Can I come in on a point of clarity? The serious case panel does not investigate the deaths. The coroners investigate the deaths. The serious case panel takes the learning from a number of learning sources. It is actually broader than just the deaths. We take insight from the process reviews, which you are aware of. We also look at feedback from ACSSLs; the example that I gave earlier on appointees is absolutely an example of that. We take insight from complaints. We take the themes to the serious case panel to tackle the most systemic issues across the Department. It is not there to represent the deaths.

On that point, I came from external, as you know, two years ago and I came into this Department with a different perception than what I see on the inside. Any serious case that happens in this Department, where there is a PFD especially, is escalated to that executive team straightaway. The executive team has full visibility of the cases and then we take the learning to the serious case panel so that we can make practical changes on the ground. The serious case panel does not investigate the deaths.

Q282 Debbie Abrahams: I appreciate that. Of the 60 IPR referrals—this is from the letter from Peter Schofield—that met the criteria, 50 were referred following a customer death and 29 were not. Why were they not? These were 18 deaths and 11 serious harms. Why not?

Elizabeth Fairburn: The key point on this is that when there is an allegation against the Department, customers need to disclose and they are not under any obligation to do that. If they share that information with us and there is any suggestion that it is because of something that the Department has done, we will then look into those cases. Customers take their own lives, tragically. Customers die. Many of those are not because something has happened with the Department.

Q283 Debbie Abrahams: Again, I go back to the point that this is about



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learning. The serious case panel is meant to establish and gather the learning for the whole system and it cannot do that if it gets only half the cases. There is an added complication. I will leave it after this point. Given that the Department agreed, after the NAO report, to investigate all suicides, why did that change? This is serious. This is a priority and we don't have this right. It is serious.

Viscount Younger of Leckie: We have made a further investment by appointing a chief medical adviser—this is quite an important step—who is responsible for reviewing all PFDs to ensure that learning is taken forward. This helps to identify themes that can be addressed by the serious case panel. It creates a feedback loop. Having a chief medical adviser is incredibly important as an extra to what we do.

Q284 **Debbie Abrahams:** That will be helpful. Finally, why did the DWP not become a trailblazer organisation for the roll-out of the UK central Government complaints standards?

Viscount Younger of Leckie: That is a specific question. Maybe Liz could answer that.

Elizabeth Fairburn: We have subsequently worked with the PHSO codes to implement those standards and have lodged the standards. We did not do the trailblazing at the time. We asked for information from the PHSO about how the insight from that would be used and did not get a response. That did not stop us introducing our own complaints standards that are in line with those PHSO standards. We have those. The Minister mentioned earlier the dedicated learning pathway for complaints handlers. We have done that with the oversight of the PHSO.

Mims Davies: Perhaps we might write as well about the link to the clinical governance, the work of the national medical adviser and how this works across Government around safeguarding and the link into the national suicide strategy. It would be helpful to put additional information there for you, Debbie.

Debbie Abrahams: Thank you. That would be helpful.

Mims Davies: As we discussed this morning, the Department does not have a statutory safeguarding responsibility, but it hasn't stopped us. I hope the Committee can land the point this morning. We have made considerable investment into safeguarding in the clinical teams across our safeguarding plans more widely in that realm. Let me draw that out in writing for the Committee afterwards because that will help Debbie with her questions and the links just heard.

Viscount Younger of Leckie: Also, if I may add, ICE gives additional insight. We work pretty closely with ICE. When ICE identifies a particular gap we, naturally enough, take that seriously and take it forward.

Q285 **Chair:** The serious case panel has been described to us as opaque and lacking transparency. I wonder whether, for example, the



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recommendations coming out of the serious case panel could be published or some other ways found to open up this process a bit.

Elizabeth Fairburn: Yes. I am trying to navigate that and get to the point where we can share the recommendations from that on the IPR. I am working on that.

Q286 **Chair:** What timetable do you anticipate for that?

Elizabeth Fairburn: The end of the year, but I cannot guarantee.

Chair: The end of this year. That is helpful. Thank you very much.

Q287 **Selaine Saxby:** Moving on to the exacerbation and creation of vulnerabilities, what policies does the Department have in place to ensure that it does not create new vulnerabilities within the system when new policies are introduced?

Mims Davies: I am quite interested in why our policies would create new vulnerabilities because we are discussing some of our claimants' existing vulnerabilities. Leaning into that, Selaine, what do you mean in particular?

Selaine Saxby: Some of the evidence we have heard previously suggested, for example, that a move from being an individual claimant to a household claimant then impacted on anyone in the household with domestic abuse. Some of the changes within the system in themselves created new vulnerabilities. It may be an unintended consequence, but we know that just accessing benefits for many people in itself creates an amount of stress on top of the situations they are already dealing with. The system creates a vulnerability. Does that make sense?

Mims Davies: That is helpful. Customers with complex needs who require additional support, as we said, potentially will have the visiting appointment. Reasonable adjustments are always put in place to ensure benefits can be accessed and maintained, taking into account how well a claimant may be able to cope with those processes. Indeed, the additional layer of checks around complexities and vulnerabilities are looked at. Perhaps Preeta can talk about how the UC flags are picked up.

Where we have had, for example, two unsuccessful visits, now we keep customers on the system and their claims are not closed. They would be escalated through the additional checks that Liz spoke about before and then the links to the police or local authority social services are made to ensure customer safety.

Also, fundamentally, it is slightly the opposite. Being able to know exactly what is going on in a household is helpful with the Ask for ANI service. Perhaps people will come into view because of UC when they don't have English as a first language and have been unable to tell anyone what is going on. A visit to a Jobcentre is a safe space to disclose what is going on. We have the black dot. If someone is being coercively controlled,



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they can put a black dot on their hand and wave that in front of their work coach, who can try to find a way to talk to them separately.

This brings some of the vulnerabilities into view. Maybe Preeta can give some practical examples.

Preeta Ramachandran: The system, as Liz said earlier, has specific words for work coach team leaders to see. If someone writes a word in their journal that perhaps implies that they are in distress, it is flagged. We can see that in the Jobcentre. That is one way. When you make the claim, for example, you can tell us if you are homeless or if you used to be in the armed services or if you are a victim of domestic abuse on the claim forms as well. The system has a number of ways to highlight that as well.

Q288 **Selaine Saxby:** To move on from there, recovering overpayments is a specific area that we know creates issues for claimants. Some of those are from DWP errors and then benefit deductions are applied indiscriminately, regardless of the claimant's vulnerability. Is this approach acceptable when these deductions can exacerbate a person's vulnerabilities and, I suggest, even create them in the first place?

Preeta Ramachandran: Our debt management team has created a vulnerability framework more recently. We have vulnerability champions. You can call the debt helpline. They will look at how you can repay the money if you cannot pay it all in one go. Lots of things have happened in debt management that help vulnerable customers with repayments.

Q289 **Selaine Saxby:** But is it appropriate, given that some of these issues are created within the DWP, to then expect a potentially vulnerable claimant to be proactive about fixing it rather than the other way around?

Mims Davies: No. 1, we have made every effort to avoid overpayment of benefits, particularly to the most vulnerable. Again, it is an individualised, tailored approach. When overpayments occur, we have a duty to recover them as quickly and efficiently as possible but not causing hardship to those making the repayments. Agents will look, rightly, to negotiate an affordable repayment plan. The number of times a person can request to change their payment plan is unlimited. The Department has reduced it to 25% from 40%. You can choose to repay sooner. The standard cap on deductions has gone down, which we would all see as important, so that we don't cause undue benefit hardship. Again, this is very much about the work coach understanding who they are working with and knowing what is going on in their lives. We take different deductions according to the debt categories as well.

Yes, sometimes UC is seen as the reason for these issues, but it can be more complex, as we have described this morning. We see the importance of supporting claimants who have incurred debt—and under UC it is a co-ordinated approach to deductions from benefit—with their financial obligations but ultimately in an understanding and supportive



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way that is affordable and keeps them as supported as possible. It is a fair challenge.

Q290 **Selaine Saxby:** Does the Department gather data on how many vulnerable claimants are being sanctioned?

Mims Davies: Do we have that data, Preeta? I am not sure.

Preeta Ramachandran: No, we don't. From the sanctions data, we cannot tell who is vulnerable and who is not.

Mims Davies: Let me write a note back on that because Preeta is correct. It is not broken down in a particular way.

Q291 **Selaine Saxby:** If I could turn that on its head, if you have already identified somebody as vulnerable, is it then appropriate to sanction them, given that the sanctions are supposed to be a deterrent?

Preeta Ramachandran: We have a number of ways to ensure that anyone who is vulnerable is not sanctioned. As soon as they come into the Jobcentre when they have their claimant commitment, if they have particular health conditions that stop them looking for work, we can put easements in at that stage.

If it then goes into the actual claim and we decide to look at that process, the work coach has to do a pre-referral form, which is then discussed with the work coach team leader. They have to agree that there is no doubt there that we have considered vulnerability. It is important that that is considered before we send that to a decision maker. Then another pair of eyes looks at it. When the decision maker decides to put a sanction on, they have to consider another prereferral form. Vulnerability is discussed again at that stage with someone at a higher grade.

Only through all that process do we decide whether vulnerability has formulated doubt here before we put a sanction on. The sanctions process has a number of safety mechanisms to protect vulnerable customers before a sanction is put on.

Q292 **Selaine Saxby:** Thank you. Mims, it would be helpful if you were able to confirm if that data is collated. The safety mechanisms sound great, but we don't know at the end if we are collating that data. That would be great.

Mims Davies: Yes. To add to Preeta's point, benefit entitlements never automatically just stop, particularly where there might be disability, medical conditions or other vulnerabilities. That goes to wider conditionality and sanctions and so I am happy to reiterate what the Committee needs.

Selaine Saxby: That would be great. Thank you.

Viscount Younger of Leckie: Also, on your question on overpayments, it is not but it could be a thematic issue. If it is a thematic issue, we learn



from that. It can get escalated via ICE or an IPR report and then can be fed into the serious case panel if necessary. We are not there, but that process allows us to understand whether there is a real issue.

Q293 Marsha De Cordova: Good morning, everyone. Before I go into my question, which will all be about the DWP as a learning organisation, is gathering the appropriate data and information to learn and make the necessary changes a core element of that?

Viscount Younger of Leckie: Yes, it is.

Q294 Marsha De Cordova: On my colleague's question, collating sanctioning data for vulnerable claimants seems to be basic. While you may have steps in place to hopefully prevent vulnerable claimants being sanctioned, it does happen in some cases. Data on anything pertaining to vulnerable claimants should be measured and should be collated if it is not. I look forward to hearing back on that.

Today you have talked a lot about being a learning organisation and, indeed, it was also in your written evidence. As you know, the PHSO told us that the Department's operations inherently lack transparency and that transparency is not sufficiently built into the culture of the organisation so that you can legitimately say you are a learning organisation.

We have spoken a bit about that today already, but I want to hear a bit more about how you are ensuring, in your culture and the way you do things and being more transparent, you are becoming the learning organisation that you aspire to be.

Viscount Younger of Leckie: Perhaps I could lead off on this. It is a fair point. The Committee may know that in 2020 we set the ambition to increase transparency. I am pleased to tell the Committee that we have taken and continue to take positive steps to do so.

We have reported the progression in the Department's wider advanced customer support activities in the annual report and accounts, which you may know about. On 19 March, just recently, the Department published the booklet, which I think has been mentioned already, "Additional Support for DWP Customers", which demonstrates the variety of activities taking place in DWP to meaningfully support customers experiencing any barriers, if they do so, and indeed vulnerability, which we have touched on a lot today.

To give you a little bit of granular detail, activity includes improved accessibility support such as the British Sign Language videos, which have been mentioned before. I have mentioned already the appointment of a chief medical adviser and the ongoing transformation in technology, which provides a more consistent base support. It is known that the NAO has recognised that we have made a step change in our reporting processes and in our transparency. It is an important point and, hopefully, the Committee will have seen that we have acted upon



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previous requests. We continually look at increasing transparency, particularly through the separate advanced customer support publication.

Q295 **Marsha De Cordova:** Did you want to add anything, Minister?

Mims Davies: No; James has covered a lot of it. The ambition we set out to the Committee back in 2020 was to increase transparency and we have taken some positive steps. Liz has highlighted it. We have seen some serious and concerning situations that, as Ministers and as a Department, of course we want to learn and be transparent about. I hope you will see steps in this. Of course, as a learning organisation with the complex needs and different communities out there, there will always be more to do, but we are in a positive place. Liz, do you want to draw out anything?

Elizabeth Fairburn: I will come in on the learning organisation. For me, a learning organisation is about having the systems in place to continue learning from the feedback that we get. That is exactly what we strive to do. You referenced the culture change there. That is a journey for a big organisation. I have seen externally what culture change looks like. It has to happen over time. We are definitely invested in doing just that.

We learn at different points throughout the organisation. If that is individually, Preeta will tell you that every day we give feedback to our online frontline colleagues, whether through complaints, observations or call listening, to ask how we could do that better and how we could handle that better. At a departmental level, we have infrastructure in place. For example, through the IPRs we do every month for UC and quarterly for other product lines, we meet with the leadership teams of those businesses and share the findings from the IPRs over that period. We sit down and decide the actions we will take on the back of that.

Then at the top level, we have already touched on the work that the serious case panel does but that is supported by several multidisciplinary teams that Preeta and I oversee to look at the specifics that we learn from various data sources, how we respond to that, what we are doing and what we are escalating to the serious case panel.

We can always do more in this space. Nobody ever stops learning individually or as an organisation, but that is the direction of travel. I want to formalise those and get them firing on all cylinders across the Department. We certainly have the infrastructure in place to do that.

Q296 **Marsha De Cordova:** Are you doing sufficient to ensure that the public knows about all the safeguarding processes and so forth and that the PHSO and everybody fully understand how your safeguarding processes operate? How is that shared and communicated?

Mims Davies: That is one reason that I invited people in to see and feel how it works so that the perceptions and some of our partners and others understand what we do. Whether it is our special points of contact for veterans, care leavers or others, we have committed people on the



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ground to reach out to those with the most complexities. They have those partnerships and relationships so that we can direct people. What is out there to be directed to or needed in each and every community will be different.

Although we are a learning organisation, we are a place-based and individualised organisation as well. That has changed quite fundamentally. We understand the local labour market, the complexities and the local needs as much as we understand the partnerships we need to match them—to an equal extent.

Q297 Marsha De Cordova: Short of people coming in, what do you put out to make sure there is sufficient—

Elizabeth Fairburn: We have our operational stakeholder engagement forum, which we meet with regularly and we share the updates from the Department with the 68 members of that OSEF group now. Different organisations can come and hear. If organisations out there want to be part of that, by all means let us know because we can expand that membership. We get great feedback from that community on how we share. They get input.

We also work hard to bring organisations in to shape some of these things. My team is starting to map various customer journeys starting with the most vulnerable to understand what this looks like through a customer's lens and how we can bring in expert organisations—Rethink is a good example—to ask what this looks like for a customer and what we need to consider at this point so that we can co-create those experiences and modernise our services.

Mims Davies: If I can build on that, Marsha, we recently met with one of the wonderful blind and vision charities. I met recently with a PIP claimant, with one of our colleagues, who had had a terrible experience, and we went through exactly why and what we learnt from it. We learn from colleagues and partnerships and charities as well. I meet with the charities consortium quarterly to discuss disablement and what they know that our customers need that we need to know. It is really important that people feel that they have got a voice with DWP that shapes those needs on the ground, and particularly where health conditions and wellbeing needs are there.

There is no barrier up and we encourage that on the ground, whether it is working with local GPs, working with local charities, youth hubs and so on. Some of our programmes have been very place-based or sector-based. Kickstart has been able to work with younger people with maybe more complex needs or barriers to work directly with local employers to know how best to support them to get them into work. It is equally learning on that level as it is on the corporate, strategic and transparent level.



Viscount Younger of Leckie: I would like to give two examples. We have mentioned the annual report, but this is talking about the visibility to the public of the Department, which is the gist of what you were saying. Certainly, the Department has shared IPRs via FOI requests, obviously subject to redactions and all of that, and the serious case panel meetings are on gov.uk. There is that necessary visibility for the public to see what we do.

Mims Davies: I will underline—Preeti knows this particularly in my area—that the people that work for us are dug in to their community. They love what they do. They are doing life-changing work every day and we all feel when it goes wrong. We all get it and we want to learn from it. That is about the care that goes into it, because it is a wonderful part of the civil service that you are very directly dug in to your community and making a change for it. I am always absolutely blown away at how far people will go. I think our previous Secretary of State Thérèse Coffey called some of our work coaches “mother hens” and I have met some of them. They are women who are helping with perhaps care leavers, people who have not got parents or somebody looking out for them at home.

Our teams on the ground really strive and we try to give them the tools to help people change their lives and understand complex needs. As the labour market changes and as the world changes, many of the people we see have more vulnerabilities and more complexities, which is why we need the statutory duty from others and their skill and ability to support us to signpost those people to the support they need. I would like to use this opportunity to pay tribute to the people who are doing this day in and day out. They are brilliant.

Q298 **Marsha De Cordova:** Thank you, Minister. On that point about staffing, do you feel that the Department has the capacity to make sure that safeguarding of vulnerable adults is consistently being made a priority? If so, how is that being measured or how are you sure that that is all working?

Mims Davies: James, you might want to lead on colleagues more widely.

Viscount Younger of Leckie: Yes, absolutely. I touched earlier on the number of colleagues that we have started—15,000 colleagues have started over the last year or so. We have a well-established process to forecast the demand for our services and adjust the number of staff that we recruit. It is important that we manage that side. Since April 2023, the Department has been operating an intensive recruitment programme with the intention of building and maintaining a level of 16,500 full-time equivalent work coaches to be able to support people into work. That is to give you a bit of background about the scale of the individuals who come in.

It is the package that counts. We have a detailed mental health training package, which includes a module on supporting customers, particularly



those who are at risk of taking their own life or self-harm. That is to provide colleagues with all the learning that they need to apply them in different scenarios. I think the point has been made earlier today about how the needs can be incredibly complex and the training, therefore, has to be up to the necessary quality.

We are constantly learning and we constantly revisit and strengthen the guidance and training for current staff and new staff. We have already mentioned the six-point plan and the advanced customer support referrals. There is a complex needs training event, which has rolled out this year, and that complements our current learning offer and allows participants to reflect on our tailored customer service. There is a lot that has been said, but this hopefully adds to the really important point that what we do is not just about giving out benefits and all of that; it is much, much more.

Preeta Ramachandran: Complex needs is right at the centre of all the training for our new work coaches. It is in their induction and their consolidation. When someone starts the job, you have got team leaders who sit out, look and watch the quality conversations that are happening, do the coaching back to the work coaches. That is really key. As the Minister said, we have got two-day mental health training and we have got our own place-based district provision tools that set out a lot of this information. It is at the front and centre of everything that we are doing with new work coaches.

Mims Davies: I think it is about empowering our colleagues to ask the right questions and be able to signpost accordingly. That is why I am really proud of our trauma-informed approach that is rolling out, because we know those who are experiencing adversity can have such a pervasive impact on a person's life and that can then have an impact on how they interact with services. That is why being able to talk to us and then go to a trusted partner—I am conscious it could be a retraumatizing experience sharing things, even with us. It is really important that our team are trauma-aware and adequately responsive. I know our teams are welcoming this, in the child maintenance area, in decision making and also in Jobcentres. I said earlier that we are engaging with a more complex group of people and of course we need a different way of engaging and integrating that into our core business in the way that James described.

Q299 **Marsha De Cordova:** Indeed. It is also about the staff themselves, isn't it? That is why I wanted to go with that because—

Mims Davies: They are brilliant, and they have got a lot to know and understand, yes.

Q300 **Marsha De Cordova:** Precisely. Obviously, you are familiar with some of the work that the PCS trade union produced about staff experiences and their testimonies about how they were feeling understaffed, difficulties with recruitment—I appreciate you have said that—working conditions



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and also retention. You are familiar with all of that. How are you overcoming that?

Mims Davies: It never ceases to amaze me when I am in Caxton House where there is an array of long service certificates—30, 40 years. I think we have had one person do 60 years with DWP, and regularly 40 years. People love what they do with us and, as James has described, there is a lot of training and learning to do and keeping that number of staff up to date and at that level with the needs is challenging. James, do you want to talk about colleague support?

Viscount Younger of Leckie: There are two very important points because you are mentioning staff, but the safety of staff and the health of staff is also important. It is not just looking after our customers; it is very important that our colleagues feel safe and well, and that they are supported properly. Through our Department's wellbeing and inclusion strategies and frameworks, we continue to work hard to create a safe, healthy and collaborative environment. That obviously has to go down to the local level, but it might be helpful if the Committee allows me to give some feedback from colleagues—and I will not give it all—about what they think, which perhaps strikes at the heart of your question.

In 2023, the people survey provided an important opportunity for us to hear about the things that matter to colleagues. Nearly 60,000 colleagues shared their views and the response rate of 68% was the highest since 2018. The score remains higher than pre-pandemic levels of 61%. The people survey core themes remain relatively stable for the work at 74%, my manager at 77%, my team at 83%, inclusion and fair treatment at 80%, leadership and managing change at 50%, along with resources and workload at 76%. That is just to give you a flavour that we do engage with our colleagues, that it is important to get feedback from them, and that to train them is important too.

Q301 **Marsha De Cordova:** I am certain you do. That evidence that was produced was quite stark also. Taking that on board is important as well, isn't it?

Viscount Younger of Leckie indicated assent.

Q302 **Marsha De Cordova:** The PHSO told us about a situation where they had investigated the case of Ms U and found that there were 118,000 other people in the same situation. However, the Department initially did not want to agree to deal with this as a structural issue, despite the evidence showing that there were systemic issues there. We were told that you would deal with it on a case-by-case or individual basis. I know that the situation has evolved since then, but why was the decision not taken, when you were alerted to it, to handle all of those cases that potentially had the same issue?

Elizabeth Fairburn: I don't think we can comment on that specific case, sorry.



Marsha De Cordova: You can't comment on it?

Elizabeth Fairburn: I don't think so. I haven't got the information. Maybe we could take that away.

Chair: It is now being handled, but it took quite a long time before the Department accepted that this was something that needed to be looked at. That is a point for learning from for the future, perhaps.

Q303 **Debbie Abrahams:** How do you measure the impact of safeguarding practices internally?

Mims Davies: How would you measure that locally, Preeti? Do you have particular metrics, not just local, because it is a systemic thing?

Elizabeth Fairburn: We have got standards in our quality framework where that is what we are looking for through all of our quality activity. Where we would be looking for adherence to process, we are now rolling out standards across all of our quality frameworks to say, where there is vulnerability, have we spotted it; have we taken the right actions; have we invoked the six-part plan, for example? Those quality assurance standards are being rolled out across that quality agenda.

Q304 **Debbie Abrahams:** How often do you publish those?

Elizabeth Fairburn: I don't believe we do publish the quality.

Debbie Abrahams: Okay, that is something for us to look into, if that is okay.

Mims Davies: I am trying to explain to the Committee that this is about a place-based safeguarding approach, as well as the systemic approach.

Preeti Ramachandran: On a local level, if something goes wrong or we get feedback from some of the higher learning that we have had—it could be, for example, unacceptable customer behaviour in the Jobcentre—we would sit down and have a case conference between everyone who was involved and say: where did we do well; where could we improve; how do we then build that into our continuous learning in the Jobcentre? We do measure the number of incidences of unacceptable customer behaviour and we look at how we can learn from those.

Q305 **Debbie Abrahams:** Some of the things that Selaine mentioned, and then that Marsha followed up with about sanctions data and the vulnerability—is that a specific metric you would want to have? I think your qualitative data is also incredibly important, but it needs to be both. It would be useful, in the spirit of learning, to have details of the process and the actual metrics that you will be using around that, which seems to be a bit of a gap.

We know that there have been six prevention of future death reports since February 2020. There would have been a seventh but the coroner



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accepted the psychologist from the Department who said that they would be reviewing that and, as we know, subsequently that did not happen. We have got six but it would have been seven. Five of these relate to the death of social security claimants and one from Child Maintenance Service. Has the Department carried out all the actions it committed to in response to these reports?

Viscount Younger of Leckie: I think the answer is yes to that. The first thing to say is that we take every death incredibly seriously. If we are mentioned as a person of interest, we take that particularly seriously. As far as I am aware, without discussing individual cases, yes, we have followed up promptly with those relevant cases.

Q306 **Debbie Abrahams:** I know that you rely very much on getting PFDs from coroners. One of the questions I put to the lawyers was that there might not be a PFD report, but did coroners inform the Department where there was a death, either by suicide or from other circumstances? I understand, from the lawyers anyway, that that does not happen. Is that something that you will also be looking into?

Viscount Younger of Leckie: Yes. We have improved the links between the coronial service and the Department. We have set up the coroner focal point, as you may know. That was in March 2016 and that has helped to improve the communication about what comes from them, what we should look at. In case there is any miscommunication or something falls between two stools, I think we have handled that okay.

Q307 **Debbie Abrahams:** When there is an unexpected death, do they automatically ask whether that person is a social security claimant or not?

Viscount Younger of Leckie: I don't believe it is automatic. I think that we naturally react to what the coroner tells us. As I say, we react immediately if we are mentioned as an interested person in a particular death. Mercifully, there are very, very few where we are mentioned, but that is when we would act very quickly.

Q308 **Debbie Abrahams:** You might want to look at that. In response to one report, DWP said that it would be rolling out further training on mental health, including new starters, and we have heard a little bit around that. However, according to the Money and Mental Health Policy Institute, a recent freedom of information request showed that 38% of customer-facing staff in DWP had not had this mental health training. Why is that?

Elizabeth Fairburn: Close to 60,000 people in our Department have now been trained in the mental health training. Clearly, we have got to roll that out, and it is a programme of roll-out, so it is not that they haven't received it; they just haven't received it yet. That will be concluded by early next year.

Debbie Abrahams: Fantastic. Thank you very much.



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Mims Davies: I want to add something quickly on a data point. As a Department, we are aware it is an area for improvement and learning for investigations. I think that the appointment of the chief medical adviser, as mentioned earlier, will help us with the clinical governance. That is being stood up at the moment and will link directly into the service modernisation that Debbie mentioned. We have got a strategic ambition to develop a single colleague view of the customer through the design of the system that can be sent and received across benefit lines, as Liz said, so that this is in one place and it will give us a faster understanding of a customer's circumstances, enabling colleagues to have a more holistic view.

That is why we are committed to the right use of technology, as we discussed earlier, to make sure that our programmes of work align and data sharing works across the Department. We have also got some supplementary support through the vulnerable customer champion linking into the ACSSLs. Is there more to do? Yes, but are we getting there and progressing and taking this through what is a big workforce? Most certainly.

Q309 **Chair:** I will put some final points to you and pick up on the point you were just making. I want to give you an example from a very recent coroner's report. This was a report last month, a terrible thing that happened. Somebody had a review, which had triggered a mental health problem. After the review she received three different letters setting out different sums of money owed to the DWP. These were sent directly to the claimant, despite the Department being in receipt of correspondence from the claimant's daughter asking for all correspondence to go through the daughter because correspondence directly to the claimant would be seriously harmful to her mental health. The coroner said the DWP staff missed six opportunities to record vital information about this person's vulnerability, including her own disclosure about her mental health problem. The request for all communication to go through the daughter was left unactioned for four months, even after being uploaded to the main DWP computer system. The coroner said they had not heard any evidence about how DWP staff were going to be trained to ensure these mistakes were not repeated.

That is obviously a horrible episode. Are you telling us that because of all the work you are doing—and clearly there is a lot going on—you think that awful things like that will not happen in the future or do you think, given the scale of the Department and the complexity of the people you are dealing with, there always will be horrible things like that going on? What is the destination here?

Mims Davies: Liz, do you want to cover that particular question?

Elizabeth Fairburn: You will know that we are working with the coroner on that case, but that is a fair question and there are obviously humans involved in the process and we will train and do as much as we can.



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Technology will play a role in that, which will start to make this process easier. I don't think we will ever get to a point where we can say that these tragic cases will never happen, but it is our endeavour for this not to happen. The lives of the people that we deal with are super-complex. Even with technology, there are customers telling us and disclosing some of this information to allow us to intervene, but we are certainly striving to be in a world where we don't get these cases. Obviously, there are a lot of moving parts that I think any organisation would struggle to guarantee, sadly.

Q310 Chair: We have heard that escalation routes, which used to be available to benefit advisers in the legacy system, and also the availability of implied consent for them to make enquiries on a claimant's behalf, have both been lost with the introduction of Universal Credit. Shouldn't those things be reinstated? Specifically, couldn't there be a direct line for benefit advisers to call DWP, as we understand there used to be and is not any longer?

Mims Davies: It is not my perception that people can't escalate things—far from it.

Chair: We were given very clear evidence.

Mims Davies: Absolutely. Let's hear from Preeta about what her view is operationally. As James described earlier—and hopefully we have all described—we feel that there are routeways and different and growing routeways for people to escalate. Preeta, putting your operational hat on, would you say that is what colleagues are feeling, because I would certainly not like to think that is the case?

Preeta Ramachandran: I am not sure I fully understand the question. Who is it that does not feel they can escalate?

Q311 Chair: Let me be a bit more specific. First of all, a direct line for benefit advisers to contact the Department. For example, there was one for tax credits with HMRC and there is not anything like that at the moment with Universal Credit. Wouldn't that help?

Preeta Ramachandran: I think we should probably take this away, Minister, and come back on this. On escalation, obviously anybody can come into a Jobcentre and ask for advice from our work coaches but they would be the customers.

Q312 Chair: Specifically about the consent issue, I think it used to be the case that benefit advisers had implied consent. It was accepted that if you were a benefit adviser, you had consent to ask a question on behalf of a claimant. As I understand it, now that has gone; there has to be explicit consent for the Department to do that, which is a cumbersome process, takes time and, therefore, is much more difficult.

Preeta Ramachandran: I think we should take this away.



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Mims Davies: Yes. We have got information that we store on a claimant's circumstances on their UC digital service record. There is obviously the work that we are doing on suicide prevention and the other interventions. I am struggling about where people feel that they have not got a routeway of escalation because we have mentioned the visiting officers, straightaway to your team leadership. Some of the people, for example, in youth hubs are exactly there because of signposting and routeway if there is concern. Also in the way that we have changed it, if people don't engage with us, we don't just let the claim go dormant; we do engage with them. If there is something specific in legacy versus now, let's take that away to go and see what exactly people feel might be missing in this process.

Chair: We are told that a benefit adviser's line was there before and is not there now.

Mims Davies: Thank you. Let's take that away.

Q313 **Chair:** A number of people have made the point to us that the Department does not share information sufficiently, for example with the health service or with social services. Is that a point that is covered in the framework that you are going to send us a note about?

Elizabeth Fairburn: The framework is a simplified version of the document that we have published, which is the "Additional Support for DWP Customers". That is in there. We strive to share that information where there is especially a vulnerable customer involved. We have clearly got to adhere to GDPR rules and keep our customers' data safe. I suspect some of that is tied up in the previous question. These are cases where our advanced customer support leads specifically, through the safeguarding adult boards that they sit on, would be able to discuss specifics and share information where it is appropriate to keep a customer safe.

Q314 **Chair:** Do you accept that the Department does need to do better in sharing information with the NHS and social services?

Elizabeth Fairburn: I would be interested to know what evidence we are looking at that suggests that we don't.

Chair: We have certainly had a good deal of evidence along those lines.

Mims Davies: Those leads in 2022-23 supported over 12,000 customer cases. Before a case reaches the ACSs, they would be supported by a vulnerable customer champion who would be the first point of contact for the colleagues who identify a safeguarding concern or a customer requiring additional support. Again, the priority is to make the right referrals so that the claimants can access the full local support they need, whether it is mental health condition support, debt management, homelessness, food poverty. As I mentioned earlier, Government per se



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might not be the right people for them. It is local authorities, charities, organisations, specialists who understand what those—

Q315 **Chair:** It is sharing information with the NHS, social services and local government that I was particularly interested in.

Mims Davies: I mentioned about sharing it within. I think Liz has just described how it can be challenging, which is why we have got stakeholder forums and groups and engagement, but I think it is a perennial problem sometimes with how you get people to disclose. Then when you are in a position where you can do that, which is why that trauma-informed approach I think will be transformational because—

Q316 **Chair:** Do you expect there will be further improvement in this area of information sharing?

Mims Davies: Yes, that is what we are here for, absolutely. We have looked to learn from other organisations who have seen the benefits of that to see what it can do for our organisation.

Q317 **Chair:** You made a point, Minister, about an awful PIP case that you have heard about recently. One of the points that we have heard is that sometimes evidence from medical professionals is rejected by the Department or rejected by its assessors when it really should not have been rejected. When is it appropriate for the evidence that somebody brings from a medical professional to be rejected?

Mims Davies: I think we should take a few steps back. It is about making the right decision at the right part of that journey so that people very much feel that this process is as positive as possible. We recognise that the overturn rate of appeal is high, but the numbers have to be seen in the context of the overall decisions. On PIP, 3 million initial decisions following assessment were made between October 2018 and September 2023. Of that 3 million, 8% have been appealed, 5% have been cleared at tribunal hearing and 3% overturned, but I fully recognise in those stats are people and experiences.

Q318 **Chair:** Is your answer that the Department should always accept the medical evidence that people submit from a doctor or whomever, or are there circumstances where it is right for the Department to say, "No, we don't agree with that, our assessor has reached a different conclusion"?

Mims Davies: There is a debate on this later today and I am looking at it very strongly. I think the main reasons for decisions to be overturned on appeal are—

Q319 **Chair:** The question is how the Department should deal with medical evidence that is submitted, whether it is appropriate sometimes to reject it and say, "We don't agree with that, we have got a different view," or should it always be accepted?



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Mims Davies: In the tribunal, it is often cogent oral evidence that makes the difference and not everybody is able to write it down or explain it in a way, which is why digitalisation of PIP and other things can be very helpful. At the risk of getting boring about it, we are a learning organisation when it comes to overturning of appeals, working closely with providers about making sure they are getting the right assessments and processing—

Chair: I don't think you are answering the point about how the Department should handle that.

Mims Davies: That is why we have got that clinical lead and learning in that, and of course people's complexities and health needs are changing and becoming more complex as well. I think there is a lot in all of this for us to look at and understand.

Q320 **Chair:** You have said that you would like to be in a world where these terrible things that happen from time to time don't happen any more. You are on a journey. How long do you think this journey is? When are we going to reach the point where it is as good as it is going to be? What is the period we are looking at?

Mims Davies: We have got some great positives, whether it is visiting officers and that reach into the community and making sure we stay connected with people—it is key to understand that just because people are in receipt of benefit does not mean they are okay, so we need to keep engaged with them. As mentioned this morning, decreasing our complaints, learning from that—they are going in the right direction—getting them down and learning from the trauma-informed approach are important. Given the complexities of what is going on out there post-Covid and other things, it is going to be more challenging for what is a very big organisation, but then on a local—

Chair: You have mentioned a number of things that will be finished in about a year's time, early next year. Is that the point when we will—

Mims Davies: You have got the big supertanker DWP and then the local level and the individual experience. If you can see change, improvement, learning and transparency running up and down that organisation, I think you are in a pretty decent place. Are we going to be able to stave off every single tragic and sad case? If only. There is no crystal ball in this, but it is the trusted relationships and partnerships and listening by the work coaches and our teams and people having the confidence to bring that forward.

Chair: What I am trying to understand, which I have not really understood, is this. You have explained we are on a journey; when are we going to reach the destination of the journey that you have embarked on? Will that be at the beginning of next year or is this much longer term?



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Mims Davies: Liz, maybe you can say when our homework is being marked a bit more strongly and positively. I think you as the Committee and how people judge us will be equally important.

Elizabeth Fairburn: I think there are two parts to this. There is the stuff that we are talking about today, which is tangible things that we can drive and we are intending to do that over the next couple of years to get this into the corners of the organisation. In addition to that, the service modernisation and transformation agenda plays a huge part in this, doesn't it? We have mentioned AI and the systems that we are operating on. Some of our technologies are legacy systems and we need to get off those platforms to enable us to do lots of the things that we have talked about—identifying vulnerability, capturing the right data points and so on.

We know that that is a longer programme of investment that goes on for several years. I don't think it is right for us to have a destination. That will always continue as a learning organisation. I certainly think over the next 12 to 18 months we can deliver some tangible step changes in what we are doing as a Department locally and at a system level. Then there is the second phase of transformation that enables some of this to happen without human intervention, which is where we are really striving to be.

Q321 **Chair:** On the example we were talking about a minute ago, the four months that the request was on the computer and nobody did anything about it, what is needed to put that right? That is not really about mental health training.

Elizabeth Fairburn: That is right. These are the early warning systems that, from my experience, say, "There has been no activity on that or there is some post that has not been actioned." On some of these systems we don't have the technology to enable us to pop that up to somebody and say, "Actually this case needs looking at." That is where we have got to build the functionality as we go forward with the new platforms.

Viscount Younger of Leckie: I absolutely echo what the others have said that there is a huge amount of investment going into service modernisation and AI in DWP, and I touched upon that earlier. We want to make life easier for the work coaches and those at the sharp end dealing with vulnerable people. We talked about data. A lot of what they need is data but often it is rather laboured to get the data. We want to use new methods, new ways, service modernisation and modernisation in AI to allow the work coaches particularly to have a better experience and to enable them to deal directly with customers, including vulnerable customers, with information that is more easily accessible.

As Liz quite rightly says, this is an ongoing, very important programme. There is no particular end date. It is a constant moving feast. Having said all that, we want to get to the point in our various AI projects, for example, where we reach proof of concept. Once we reach proof of concept, where we know something works and is going to be a real game



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changer for those working at the front end, we can then accelerate and roll that out. That will be a real game changer, but I would not want to be in a position to give any timeframe on that.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Minister. Thank you to your colleagues as well for the helpful information you have given to us. That concludes our questions to you and concludes our meeting.