HOUSE OF COMMONS

Education Committee

Oral evidence: Disabled students' allowance, HC 696

Tuesday 23 April 2024

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Mr Robin Walker (Chair); Caroline Ansell; Nick Fletcher; Vicky Ford; Andrew Lewer; Mohammad Yasin.

Questions 1 - 101

Witnesses

I: Tara Chattaway, Head of Education, Thomas Pocklington Trust; Sarah Todd, Chair, National Association of Disability Practitioners; Lesley Morrice, Chair, National Network of Assessment Centres.

II: Laura Blackman, Managing Director of Education Programmes, Capita plc; Glenn Tookey, Managing Director, Study Tech Ltd.

III: Baroness Barran MBE, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Education (Minister for the School System and Student Finance); Chris Larmer, Chief Executive Officer, Student Loans Company; Anne Rimmer, Deputy Director, Student Funding Policy and Student Loans Company Sponsorship, Department for Education.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Tara Chattaway, Sarah Todd and Lesley Morrice.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to today's session on the disabled students' allowance and Government reforms. We are taking oral evidence from three panels. Our first panel consists of Tara Chattaway, head of education at the Thomas Pocklington Trust; Lesley Morrice, chair of the National Network of Assessment Centres; and Sarah Todd, chair of the National Association of Disability Practitioners. Thank you very much for coming to give evidence to the Committee today.

From your perspective, how has the Student Loans Company changed the way it is delivering the disabled students' allowance? More importantly, why?

Sarah Todd: Under the previous system, there were difficulties with the student understanding how to navigate the journey effectively. The points of communication relied heavily on the student understanding what to do next and being able to carry out those actions. One of the key changes that I think the whole sector wanted to explore was how we could better support the student through that journey and more quickly so that they could take up the support sooner. To do that, what has been looked at is a procurement model whereby there are now two suppliers responsible end-to-end, effectively, for the student journey from needs assessment, recommendation of support and provision of certain elements of DSA support. With that comes benefits, but also a number of challenges that we will explore today.

Lesley Morrice: Prior to the new system coming in place, there were assessment centres around the country. The National Network of Assessment Centres has been going as an organisation for 35 years. We have been assessing DSA students for 35 years. There was a skill review that recommended changes, one of which was that we had a quality assurance group that audited centres and we had to complete monthly PPIs. That process was seen to be too slow for the student and not joined up, which is why it has gone down this route. Instead of having the number of assessment centres that it had previously, which were audited under DSA-QAG, it has gone to this new supplier where there are just the two main suppliers.

Chair: We will come back to the impact of that change. Is there anything from your perspective, Tara, that you want to add?

Tara Chattaway: Yes. We support blind and partially sighted students, which is a low incidence number that goes through. As part of the changes, there were lots of reports around disabled students' experiences. We did a report along with RNIB; Policy Connect had "Arriving at Thriving"; there was a report by Lord Holmes of Richmond; and the University of Birmingham did a longitudinal study that followed students that found that the DSA journey was really difficult.

A student would get a DSA1 letter telling them that they could contact an assessment centre. That would confuse students: they said, "I have already been assessed, so what is this?" It was not properly explained that it was an assessment of need. They would then need to contact an assessment centre randomly because all assessment centres were meant to provide the same quality of support.

We found that when students would go through the assessment process, some of them had a brilliant experience, because there were some really good assessors in assessment centres, but some of them would have a really poor experience and would be recommended stuff that was not relevant. They would have an assessment, a form would go to them and then that would go back to the Student Loans Company. There could some to-ing and fro-ing. They would then get a DSA2 letter to say, "You have been awarded the support." Then they would have to contact their non-medical help support, their trainers and the assistive technology provider. Again, that was a whole other level of admin.

Q2 **Chair:** That sounds like a long process. What sort of timeline are we talking about for that?

Tara Chattaway: For students with a vision impairment, it could take a lot longer, because some of their needs are a lot more complex and they are also relying on a number of different assistive technologies. Some of them did not ever take up the assistive technology training or were waiting a long time for it. Non-medical help is not in the scope of this. They would often contact their non-medical help provider, who would say, "We can only provide some of it." Then they would have to go back to the assessor. We supported some students who were way into their first semester of university and still not receiving the support that they needed to have in place because of this process.

The idea is that there is one point of contact for them now to be able to understand the journey. When we raised the issues with the Student Loans Company, and with DfE as well, they told us that they could not track the whole journey end-to-end to students receiving the equipment. They did not necessarily know how long that process was taking. Quite often we would raise issues and be told, "Nobody has really complained." That is the other thing: that there was no process to complain. We would speak to a student, and they would not know who to contact, so of course their experiences were not being fed out because that mechanism was not in place.

Q3 **Chair:** It sounds from what you are saying that there was quite a strong case for change. What has been the feedback so far on the new process, or is it too early to say?

Sarah Todd: It is too early to say. Overall, the communication and the clarity about the process and what has or has not already started have been extremely poor. The contracts were supposed to start over a year ago. They started in February this year, but my understanding from a communication yesterday, which was sent to only a small number of people and not circulated widely, is that only part of that process is under the control of the new suppliers at the moment and that there are still elements of the process that are to be introduced in the summer and further elements to be introduced at the beginning of the academic year.

Students are now having to provide documentation and evidence at two separate points in their journey to have an appropriate needs assessment, which means more admin for the students. Also, the data sharing of those documents is not yet in place appropriately. We effectively have two contractors responsible for end-to-end, but the student is taking on the burden of the administrative challenges. Those contracts are not ready to deliver end-to-end at this point.

Q4 **Chair:** That is partly what the reform is designed to remove in the first place, so that is frustrating. Lesley, what has been the impact on assessment centres? Presumably a number of assessment centres have been removed from the process, effectively.

Lesley Morrice: There has been a massive impact. The goalposts have changed again. I think the original tender was going to be for just the equipment supply, and in 2019 we were told that it was going to be for assessment centres as well. The tender process for the equipment suppliers went right through, as far as people putting in their tender bids, and then it was abandoned. It was subsequently announced that instead of having two separate tenders, the whole thing would be joined together—assessment, equipment and then the AT training.

When the quality assurance group closed in December 2019, it meant that centres were not being audited, so there were no real quality controls. Instead of assessment centres applying to DSA-QAG to open a centre, they were applying to DfE, and it seemed to be a sort of tick-box exercise.

Initially there were 69 main centres and a total of 256 centres, I think. Once the tender was announced, that dropped to 66 main centres but increased to over 1,000 total centres. A lot of existing assessment centres, some of which had been going for 35 years, found that they were losing business because so many other centres had a postcode log on the postcode search. As a result, a lot of assessment centres have gone out of business.

Q5 **Chair:** Are you also suggesting that with the 1,000 new ones in various different postcodes and so on, there was less quality control than perhaps there had been previously?

Lesley Morrice: Yes. A lot of them were doing telephone assessments which, of course, covid facilitated. To date, as far as I am aware, since the tender was announced some 40 main centres have closed or are in the process of closing. That will have an impact not only on existing students, but on students who are funded by other funding bodies.

Q6 **Chair:** Was this the only thing that the main centres were doing, or were some of them doing other work as well in supporting people in apprenticeships and other bits?

Lesley Morrice: A lot of them were doing other work, but the SLC and SFW formed the main bulk of what they were doing, so assessors and assessment centre managers have been made redundant. I know of a company that has had to make 31 people redundant, because DSA assessments were the main bulk of what they did.

Sarah Todd: There is a knock-on impact from those closures for universities. A number of universities had assessment centres that were part of the university structure, or they would work very closely with commercial assessment centres that were based on campus or near to campus. The interplay between the university disability inclusion support teams and the needs assessors meant that a lot of the workload—students coming back where there were difficulties with their support, with understanding where to be signposted for complaints or with suppliers, and all those types of queries and challenges that students faced—was being picked up by the university staff and the headcount of needs assessors.

The needs assessors and AT trainers who were university staff might also have a dual role within the assessment centre, the AT department and the university disability and support staff team. The universities are seeing a lot of headcount but also an increased workload as a knock-on effect of these reforms and the poor communication around how they are being delivered.

Q7 **Chair:** Is there any indication that some of that workload might be temporary while the reforms are being introduced and might go away when the contracting process is properly in place, or is that not known?

Sarah Todd: It is very difficult to say. In 1999 there was a Higher Education Funding Council report that said that for a minimum standard, a base level of support for inclusive practice, there should be a ratio of about 200 disabled students to one disability practitioner. Last year we commissioned some research from our membership. The average is currently 583 disabled students per practitioner, and 22% of our membership said that it was 750 disabled students per practitioner.

There have been post-pandemic changes, with one in six students now disclosing mental health needs, and an increase from the time of that report of 3% disclosures among disabled students to one fifth of the student population disclosing a disability. There are also NHS and local authority waiting times and issues with the ability to get evidence and support in the community.

All these things have an incremental knock-on impact on universities' ability to provide the base level of support. If you have these changes on top and their attention is drawn towards supporting the DSA-funded students, there is also an impact on the population of students as a whole with disabilities, of which there are about 450,000 compared with the 80,000 DSA-funded students.

Q8 **Chair:** I will come back to the point you raised about face-to-face versus telephone calls. Inevitably, the pandemic will have driven some of that, but what proportion of these assessments were taking place before the pandemic? To what extent has it returned to that?

Lesley Morrice: It was 95%-plus that were face-to-face. During covid, we found that some students still wanted to do face-to-face assessments and as long as it could be done safely in the institution, it was still happening. It certainly dropped. However, we understand that at least 70%-plus are now remote, and assessments are being done by telephone. In the DSA1 letter it tells the student that they can be assessed face-to-face, remotely or by telephone.

Q9 **Chair:** That change in the number of main centres presumably means that there are not as many places for face-to-face assessment available, if you think of the spread of universities around the country.

Lesley Morrice: I am not sure that there would be a difference in the number of physical locations, because the 1,000 could be just postcode. They were not all necessarily able to offer face-to-face. In fact, we know that a lot of them were not offering face-to-face. The Student Loans Company has not released the numbers or the locations of the physical centres that the new incumbents have, so we do not know how many there are.

Q10 **Chair:** Tara, for your VI students, are face-to-face assessments particularly important or less important?

Tara Chattaway: I think the option of having a face-to-face assessment is really important. It might happen over Teams, which is fine, but most assessment centres should be offering the opportunity to try out a lot of equipment. The two parts of the budget are non-medical help and the equipment. For blind and partially sighted students, quite a large sum of their budget goes on purchasing equipment, so it is important to understand what the right equipment is. For our colleagues at the National Deaf Children's Society who support deaf young people, a large part of their budget goes on non-medical help. It is really important to have that quality assessment.

You asked, "Are they working, or is it a bit too early to tell?". I think it is too early to tell. At a meeting yesterday, we saw some figures from the Student Loans Company to show that the time of the journey is much shorter than for end-to-end, which is great, but our question through this whole process has always been "What about the quality of those assessments?" Something might be happening much quicker, which is great, but are people having face-to-face, in-depth hour-and-a-half assessment processes? Are the assessments that go to the Student Loans Company of quality? Are the staff in the assessment centres trained? Do they have a proper understanding, particularly for our group of students with disabilities? Those are all questions that we would like answered.

There are some KPIs in place now as well for this whole process, which is great. That means that there is accountability to the suppliers, but those KPIs are all very process-driven: "In this timeframe, you will receive your DSA2. In this timeframe, you will receive your equipment." That is great, but there is nothing around the quality of the journey.

Chair: It is about getting the right equipment, fundamentally.

Tara Chattaway: Exactly, and that is why it is too early to tell.

The other question is whether the changes that are being measured and reported on are for students who have applied for DSA after that date. There are a whole load of students who applied before that date who are not part of this system because they are being picked up by the Student Loans Company.

There are those who are going through that journey and those who are also coming back in for assessment. We heard particularly from one student who has gone back in for an assessment because she has had a change of need and has waited a really long time. We spoke to the Student Loans Company about it; it said that the student should have contacted the Student Loans Company and not gone back to the assessment centre. How is the student supposed to know that if it is not communicated to them?

We are really concerned about what is happening to the group of students who are not part of this new system. We need to make sure that they are also reported on, and their journey is being monitored.

Q11 **Chair:** Is there a plan to transfer them into the new system at some point?

Tara Chattaway: My understanding is no, not at the moment. As Lesley said, there is the year plan of transitioning into it, so at the moment they are being picked up by the Student Loans Company. There has been such a lack of communication to students about what their journey is, what their experience should be and what they should expect. That is something that we are really concerned about with these changes.

Q12 **Chair:** Who should be communicating to the students? Should the Student Loans Company or the Department be taking the lead in that? Who should be leading that process?

Tara Chattaway: I think both. We discussed it yesterday, and they said that it is part of their workplan that they should be communicating to the student: "When you apply for DSA, this is what the process is; when you receive a DSA1 letter, this is what it is." Who knows what a DSA1 letter is unless you are already working the system?

"This is what you should expect, this is what an assessment is"—they have always been quite reluctant to share that information with students. Information is power, isn't it? Then they will know what that journey looks like for them and what they can expect.

Q13 **Chair:** Sarah, I saw you shaking your head earlier when we were talking about quality. Do you want to expand on that? How have disability services in educational institutions—you have already talked about the staffing challenge—been affected by the changes so far?

Sarah Todd: I will pick up the point about the KPIs and the quality data first. The data that was released yesterday looks at the KPIs for the time between point A and point B in the journey, a sample of students who have gone through the new process and have completed it end-to-end, and in the maximum of 50 days that they could possibly have completed it in. It is being compared with data that covers all students for an entire academic year who could have taken that whole year to go end-to-end through their journey. Taking the averages of KPIs from a small sample that could only possibly have a maximum of 50 days and comparing it with the last two years of full-year students is not like-for-like in deciding whether this has been a success so far. It will not be like-for-like for a considerable time.

One of the main things that we would all like to see from this inquiry is a time point—maybe at the beginning of 2025, once students have started their academic year and once disability support services have had a chance to see the impact on the students and on them, and there are genuine quality measures as well as measures of impact on the students—to really see what the impact of this reform has been. Until we get past that peak in September, October and November, we will not know the impact of this and the timing. I appreciate why this is happening now, but the timing does not lend itself to understanding whether it has been a success.

Q14 **Chair:** We have seen coverage of Cambridge opting out of some elements of this process to provide the students with better support. I think a number of other universities have considered doing that. Why do you think that is happening? Is that related to these changes, or was that happening already in some respects?

Sarah Todd: It was happening to a degree previously. The challenges that students and universities were having in the application to DSA, the evidence requirements and the lead times were costing more for the universities, and ultimately for the students, than if the universities were putting that provision in place themselves. I want to make it clear that there is only a very small number of universities that have the budget and can charge the tuition premium to be able to do that. The majority of universities are not in a position to do that unless there is some other form of funding.

You also need to consider that there are further education colleges that have degree courses with one or two students and are absolutely not in a position to understand how to do that. The closures of local provision for needs assessment and for non-medical help makes it even more difficult for the universities to contract out that level of support.

Finally, there is now a call for evidence for the non-medical help part of the DSA process, which will have an even larger impact on the universities. It is likely to come at a time when changes are made before we fully understand the impact of this set of changes and when most of the experienced staff have exited the market. Then there is a call for universities to need experienced staff to provide appropriate support for students. There is a layering effect here, and we cannot see that at this point.

Q15 **Andrew Lewer:** Given what Cambridge has done, if all of this Government funding were simply divided to each of the universities pro rata—if they all got the funding directly and got on with it themselves—and this whole system were just abolished, wouldn't that provide a better service to disabled students?

Sarah Todd: There are pros and cons. You have differences in the volumes of disabled students in universities and in the financial ability for the universities to put appropriate support in place. There is a danger there. You do not want universities to be incentivising students to disclose a need that they might not otherwise disclose to draw down funding. You also do not want that funding to come with some caveats—"It must be spent in this way"—when universities have such diverse needs in how they should be spending the funding.

Essentially, yes, if that funding were locally utilised, a lot of universities would agree that that would be an appropriate way to go, but it would need to be carefully thought out and the universities would need to have some flexibility in how they utilised that funding.

Tara Chattaway: I will pick up that point for low-incidence disability, particularly in respect of blind and partially sighted students, and also deaf students who, out of the group, tend to reach the top end of the budget and might have very complex needs. Someone with a vision impairment who is studying a STEM subject needs a very different type of support, and intensive support, from someone studying for an English degree. When we speak to students, one of the questions is, "Could you recommend one university over another university?", and they simply cannot, because of their level of vision impairment and the experience they have in different departments within a university.

Picking up the point about universities that may be very specialist—in music, drama or something like that—and that do not have the numbers, our concern is about ensuring that a student is able to access all of the support that they need, and that it is not based on the budgetary limitations that they have. Blind and partially sighted students and deaf students can be more expensive than other students. I think there would need to be a lot more work in mapping that out before we would say yes or no to such an approach.

Sarah Todd: To give you an idea now, for a student who is deaf, for example, while they receive disabled students' allowance funding for those aspects of their support that the university might not provide as standard, universities typically still top up that pot by about £100,000 per student because of the need for sign language interpreters, additional equipment and the lack of local supply to support the student's needs. While DSA pays a small proportion of what the student needs, the universities are already spending a lot—particularly on those students, but on DSA-funded students in general.

Lesley Morrice: On devolving it back to universities, years ago, not on a big scale, a lot of local education authorities that administered the DSA at the time were happy to take recommendations from disability advisers. If that were to come in, you would need the expertise in every single university and the technical expertise to be able to recommend appropriate assistive technology devices.

Chair: Plus different conditions, yes.

Lesley Morrice: Yes. To go back to Tara's point, when I started in this field one of the first students I assessed had already been assessed by her disability adviser. She had got some equipment through DSA that was totally inappropriate for her and we had to go back to the local education authority and say, "We know this student has exceeded the budget, but we need more because she was inappropriately assessed."

Q16 **Nick Fletcher:** The important thing, surely, from what you have just been talking about, is the quality of the assessment in the first place. Is that right? Yes. How do we get that assessment? Are we doing a lot of assessments over Zoom and not in person? Is that creating problems, too?

Lesley Morrice: It can create problems. While you can demonstrate some equipment over Zoom, there are others that you need a hands-on approach for: ergonomic equipment, for example, or some of the AI software or hardware. It can be problematic.

The other thing that is driving this reform is cost. They want to drive down costs. We don't know what the assessment costs will be, but we understand that they are about a third of what they currently are. We feel that it will not drive a quality assessment process, because the new suppliers will try to get as many through in a day as they can. We feel that quality will be affected by the time limitations and by whether it is a telephone or Zoom assessment, which does not suit all students.

Sarah Todd: One thing we have learned recently—this is anecdotal, because it has only been up and running for a matter of a month and a half—is that there is a KPI for the number of assessments that are approved and are not pending and that there is not a challenge on. We are finding so far that those assessments are coming through and being edited centrally by a quality review service within the supplier's framework before reaching student finance. That means that they have a higher likelihood of approval, but they are not an accurate reflection of what the needs assessor determined would meet the student's needs.

Q17 **Chair:** Who is doing the editing?

Sarah Todd: The needs assessor puts in recommendations, but centrally there will be a review process before the recommendations go to the SLC for approval. If there is a risk that there could be a challenge, pending more evidence, that means that it could influence the lead time from point of assessment to point of issue of the DSA2.

By putting a KPI in for that timeframe and for the percentage approval, you are incentivising the suppliers to streamline the assessments to only things they know they will get through. That will shape the market for what products are available. It will also mean that the students are not receiving support that is fit for purpose. It will put extra pressure on the university disability support teams. It will end up with the students going round the circle again to receive support that is appropriate.

Tara Chattaway: If that is, let us say, an unintended consequence of what is happening, that is something that as an organisation we are deeply concerned about. Part of the assessment process is that the student should see the full assessment and should be able to okay what is being recommended.

We heard time and again in the old system from assessors that they would make recommendations for blind or partially sighted students that were then rejected by the Student Loans Company. The Student Loans Company and DfE would constantly tell us as a charity, "That is not the case: we wouldn't do that," so we had two different teams telling us different information.

At the end of the day, it is about the student's experience. Sometimes with students, particularly with vision impairment, you do need to go outside the box. For example, there is a student at the moment who has come back into our service who was being recommended equipment that was inadequate for their needs for the course that they are doing. We have been able to support them, and they are going back through the system now to get the right support in place.

It is so important to do that quality check at the beginning to make sure that a student has the support and the right equipment. It will also save money, because if you are recommending the wrong equipment to somebody with a vision impairment, all it will do is end up in a drawer and not be used. They will still struggle in their studies, and then we will need to get involved.

Q18 **Chair:** Most people attending university with a visual impairment will have been through school or college with a visual impairment. Is there not a case for passporting what is in their EHCP, or the support that they may have had elsewhere in education, into what they do at university?

Tara Chattaway: Yes and no. Students with a vision impairment out of the centre group are the lowest numbers with an education and healthcare plan. Because of the support that is in place, not all of them will need an education and healthcare plan.

There are issues in post-16 education that we could have a whole different discussion about, where they do not get access to the equipment that they need. It is important to have that quality discussion before you go to university, because what you think you might need may not actually be what you need for that course, where you are learning at a much more complex level. There is a lot more critical thinking you need to access. You might have been using a piece of software that was okay when you were not doing that, but now that you are, you might need to have JAWS in place.

There is a case for that, but we need to make sure people are getting the right support post-16. Our message is that DSA is so important: it is the difference between someone staying in university and dropping out. It is so important to get that support set up when that student starts university, as early as possible.

As you said, it goes back to that quality assessment—taking the time and getting it right. If we are not measuring that for the changes that are coming in, we might be able to say that those changes are a success because KPIs are being met, but it will not be a success for the student because they will not be getting the support that they need.

The crux for us is what are we measuring success on. Are we going back to the student journey and making sure that it is right, or are we going where we are driven by processes and KPIs?

Lesley Morrice: The issue is that most of these students will never have had an assessment before. This will be their first assessment, so they do not know what a quality assessment looks like. They come out the door after having their telephone conversation and being told that they are getting a laptop, training, and x, y, z. They might think that that is a good outcome, but we would not think it was a quality assessment.

Sarah Todd: The same would also be true of the AT training provision. Just because that AT training provision happens quickly, it does not mean that that is the best thing to meet that student's needs.

It has not been shared widely, but I have had sight of a document that says that there will be minimum requirements in terms of the training for a needs assessor and an AT trainer and the CPD. While it is promising that it stipulates that there should be 25 hours of CPD each year, it is incredibly worrying that the minimum requirement in terms of an understanding of disability is that within six months of being employed, somebody has to have basic disability awareness training, and that's it.

Most of our AT trainers and most of our needs assessors that were in the sector would have had extensive knowledge. Naturally, there would have been those providers that were understood to be of a high quality, which the universities would have signposted to or contracted to and which the students would have preferred, and there would have been those that were not necessarily. Now, there is not a choice. My understanding is that somebody could be working with students for six months before having a basic level. That level of quality needs to be looked at very early on.

Q19 **Nick Fletcher:** Does the assessment continue throughout the course, or is there an initial assessment and then that is it for the entire three-year course?

Sarah Todd: It is an initial assessment, unless there is a need, a complaint or a change in circumstance that is identified, and then that student can go back. Those students that are already in the system would have gone back to their original needs assessor. Now, that is not a thing that they can do, so they will now go back to a supplier that they have not worked with before.

Q20 **Nick Fletcher:** You are concerned about it, but until you get the data in a year or so, you will not know. Is there anything that we can do now? Is there anything that we need to be aware of, where it is glaringly obvious that it is going to be unhelpful?

Lesley Morrice: If we had more information from SLC. Part of the issue is that we do not know how many physical assessment centres there are around the country. We do not know the locations of them, and no guidance has been given to universities or to students. Some of the letters that are going out to students still contain old information: "If you need any update, go back to your disability adviser." The disability advisers have not been told what to do either, so we need more information from SLC.

Q21 **Nick Fletcher:** How are you communicating with the ones that are already in the system? Who is going to do that? You said there was a concern about the ones that are already in the system, not the ones that are starting. What are your thoughts on that?

Lesley Morrice: It is difficult because, to go back to your previous question, the assessment centre has the responsibility for a student throughout the lifetime of their studies. If they go back for an increase in NMH hours, for example, you can make that recommendation to the Student Loans Company. If they want a small extra piece of equipment, again, you can make that recommendation.

There are certain circumstances in which a student can have a full review that is funded by the Student Loans Company, so students were always told, “Any issues, anything different or additional that you need, come back to us.” We are now having to say to the student, only because we have picked it up as we have gone along, “You now have to go back to the Student Loans Company.”

Q22 **Chair:** The assessment centre might not be there.

Lesley Morrice: That is correct. If the assessment centre is still there, the assessment centre will deal with it, but if the assessment centre has closed, they have to go back to the SLC. We have asked for a list of those centres that have closed for disability advisers, but we have not been provided with that. We know that there are about 40 centres out of the main 69 that have closed, but we do not know which ones, and disability advisers do not know which ones.

Nick Fletcher: The practitioners are sitting in the assessment centres. That is where they work—

Chair: Of the universities, in some cases.

Q23 **Nick Fletcher:** If the assessment centres have closed, where have these practitioners gone? There is obviously a skill there that is being—

Lesley Morrice: There is a massive level of skill and expertise that has been completely lost to the sector. Some have found jobs within the sector, but I know of colleagues who have 40 years of service within a university who have been made redundant. A lot of assessors and assessment centre managers have jobs elsewhere. Some have jobs as disability advisers, but others have left the sector altogether.

Q24 **Andrew Lewer:** You have touched upon this already, so I know the answer, but it is still worth asking whether or not the Student Loans Company took sufficient steps to consult with you, with other stakeholders and with students and student bodies. If not, what did it miss by not speaking to you about designing the reforms and implementing them—not just ahead of introducing them, but in the ongoing implementation of the change to the systems?

Tara Chattaway: I can talk from a charity point of view; obviously it will be different for my colleagues. There were a number of consultations. The Student Loans Company did a piece of work where it spoke to a number of different students, plotted the journey and identified the pinch points. It had two projects it was going to do: one was about how it could change its systems and be more accessible as an organisation, and the other was around the journey for students. A number of different charities were consulted on, the reports were read and recommendations were made.

We were invited to give our input to the quality standards. Then we were told that we could not give input to the quality standards and that they are driven by those that are awarded the contracts, which we were slightly concerned about. Then it went through the procurement process, and it went very, very quiet. All we had were updates, and there were delays in implementing it. Then we only had our first DSSG meeting yesterday, in terms of getting some of the updates on it. Some of the consultation with students was there; some of the consultation with the charities sector was there; but then it went very quiet, and we do not feel we had the chance to shape some of the stuff that has come out at the end of it. That has been our experience.

It also said to us that it was setting up a DSA quality committee and that when these changes came into place that committee would be able to scrutinise the providers and ensure that the quality framework was being implemented. But that group is very small in number; obviously it has not had a chance to scrutinise much, but also it does not understand where its barriers are, what the powers are, what the group can ask for or what its remit is and is not. It feels slightly tokenistic at the moment. There are probably not all the people there need to be around the table. That is something that we were told was happening, but it needs a little more thinking through.

Sarah Todd: Part of the difficulty is that because this was a procurement tender, anybody with a commercial interest could not participate in the discussions about shaping the service. That means that any needs assessor, needs assessment membership group or needs assessment centre could not be part of shaping what that service would look like. Universities that have needs assessors that have AT trainers obviously have a commercial interest, and those suppliers—the non-medical help providers and so on within the sector—have a commercial interest. While we have a quality group, the people on the quality group are not necessarily those who would have first-hand experience on the ground of what quality might look like in a one-to-one session with a student, for example. They would have the overview, but they would not necessarily have practitioner experience.

Lesley Morrice: That was our experience. There was very little consultation with existing assessment centres as to how to shape the new tender. We did not know that it was a combined tender until it was announced. In terms of the quality standard, we have offered to be involved. We were involved with DSA-QAG, the first quality assurance framework was drawn up in conjunction with them and NNAC members. Over the years, we would refine it and say, "Well, that is not working, because—".

Sarah Todd: And it was visible.

Lesley Morrice: Yes. We have not been given the opportunity, because our members have a commercial interest, but we feel that that is where the expertise lies.

Q25 **Chair:** I think we are nearly ready to bring in the next panel, but before we do, can I ask about the combining of the two phases? Lesley, obviously your members were very much focused on the assessment.

What do you feel are the risks in combining the assessment and the provision? Are there upsides in streamlining the process? Where is the balance?

Lesley Morrice: Certainly there is the upside of streamlining the process, but there are definite conflicts of interest. If an assessor is being told by their organisation, "You can only recommend certain pieces of equipment and software," "Don't make the reports too long," and "Use this report format," they will not bite the hand that feeds them. They will do as they are told. Similarly, the equipment suppliers to that organisation might want the assessor to recommend specific things. There is a risk of stifling innovation and reducing the amount of software and equipment that is available to disabled students.

Chair: Tara, have you anything to add to that?

Tara Chattaway: I suppose the benefits are about doing some tracking of end-to-end journeying, bearing in mind that it is not the end-to-end journey for all students because it does not include non-medical help. There are those benefits, but I think it goes back to how that stuff can be overcome if we ensure that you have quality assessments that are being carried out by experienced, knowledgeable assessors and that you have processes in place to make sure that you are not driven by numbers and turnover of students going through the system. That, for me, is the biggest risk.

The other risk is that without addressing these changes and telling students what they can expect, there is a concern—we have heard this—that they will not apply for DSA because they are worried about what is going on. Sometimes no information is scarier than having the information.

Q26 **Chair:** Thank you. That has been a very helpful panel to prompt some of our further questions. Sarah, do you want to make a concluding comment?

Sarah Todd: I will say one thing in conclusion, on the timing. Right now, we cannot see the full impact. It is essential that there is a review from a quality and an impact perspective on students and on the wider sector, prior to the next phase of any DSA reforms, because of that incremental impact on both students and on the staff.

As you highlighted, a lot of skilled staff have left the sector and new reforms are coming in, which means that the universities are likely to need those skilled staff and we will be right back to square one. One of the recommendations I would make is that there be a point in time that is determined where we can feed in and collect more evidence.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Laura Blackman and Glenn Tookey.

Chair: Good morning. Thank you for joining us. For our second panel, we have Laura Blackman, managing director of education programmes at Capita, and Glenn Tookey, the managing director of Study Tech. I will hand over to Caroline to open up.

Q27 **Caroline Ansell:** What do your new contracts with the Student Loans Company require you to deliver, Glenn?

Glenn Tookey: It requires us to deliver an end-to-end service for the student covering needs assessments, equipment provision and support, training on the technology that we deliver for them, and then aftercare should they need any help during their course.

Q28 **Caroline Ansell:** A point was raised by the previous panel about end-to-end. There was very much a feeling that the betwixt-and-between experience and the administrative-type burden sat with the student. How might you respond to that? Do you recognise that?

Glenn Tookey: I recognise the burden that there was on the student before, in terms of going backwards and forwards between different suppliers that were not necessarily connected together. But that is not the way the new restructure will work, and it is not the way it is working right now as we have started the new service. We are advised that the student has been approved for the disabled students' allowance, and we know their name and their contact number. We get in touch with them and start the whole process there. From that point, we handle them end-to-end.

We make the connection with the student. We do not have to wait for them to contact us, as has been the case before. From that point we handhold them in our system, which is an end-to-end system for ourselves and all our subcontractors working on the contract with us, with advisers at each different point in the process of the needs, details, contact numbers and requirements for the student, so the information is passed end-to-end. There should be very little need for a student to be chasing us around now; it is now down to us to chase them around to give them their provided services.

Caroline Ansell: Thank you. Laura, can I ask the same question?

Laura Blackman: The only thing I would probably add to what Glenn said is that the student is at the heart of what we deliver. We very much work for them delivering this service, reducing the hand-offs, taking the admin, burden and stress out for them, and making sure that they have the kit, the support and the training that they need, ideally before they start their studies.

Q29 **Caroline Ansell:** In your experience of the delivery of the contract—the start and end, if you will—there is support all the way through the assessment process. In terms of targets and key performance indicators, how do they line up?

Laura Blackman: We are measured against a series of benchmarks and performance measures. There are 23 different KPIs in the contract covering the full end-to-end of the service: everything from the provision of the needs assessment to the delivery of the kit and any assistive technology, right through to our compliance with commercial standards.

Q30 **Caroline Ansell:** Are there KPIs that directly centre on quality as well as meeting deadlines and the like?

Laura Blackman: Yes, the KPIs cover the end-to-end service. We are focused on quality, on student satisfaction and on making sure that we are delivering the outcomes that the Student Loans Company has asked us to deliver.

Q31 **Caroline Ansell:** Does that include student outcomes? This is obviously a new system, and there is some discussion around how it is playing out. Is there an inherent design flaw? Is it an implementation issue? Is there a focus on student outcomes? In this early time, when there is not the data or the feedback, I am sure that a cohort of students will have been affected. Some may not have been, but others will, some of them perhaps quite significantly.

Laura Blackman: The KPIs do not directly cover student outcomes, but student outcomes are at the heart of what we do. We have established an advocacy group that will comprise 10 members, representing a range of views and disabilities across the sector. We have organisations such as Disabled Students UK on it. We use that advocacy group to challenge us, to be that critical friend, to make sure we understand the sector in which we are delivering and to give us guidance on trends in the sector.

Early feedback from that advocacy group has suggested some areas that they would like us to focus on throughout the delivery of our service. One of them is, "Is the service doing what it set out to do? Are we helping students stay through the course of their studies? Are we helping students at the end get into employment?" As an organisation, we are interested in working with the Student Loans Company to explore how we can use our service and the data to measure those outcomes.

Q32 **Caroline Ansell:** That sounds very positive. Is there anybody in the system who is looking at the individual student and seeing whether they are reaching what is considered to be their potential, looking at projected levels or anticipated success? Is anybody looking at that, if that does not fall directly within your remit?

Glenn Tookey: Some of the key performance indicators do measure student outcomes. We measure failures and we measure complaints, so we measure the high level: "Are you meeting the service?" Then we have quality management systems; we have ISO 9001, 14001 and 27001. We have systems in place that allow us to measure every single failure in our business, and student outcomes are clearly part of that. Students give us feedback all the time. That gets fed into our monthly quality management reviews.

We look at every failure, whether it be a component failure, a communications failure or a failure to deliver to the student. Part of our system—it seems we all have extra parts to our system, beyond what is contractually required to make sure that we manage quality—is that we measure what the student perceives their attainment level and their challenges to be, right at the beginning of the process as part of the pre-assessment reviews that go into the needs assessment process.

Now that we are joined up, we can work that all the way through the system. When we get to the training part of the process, which is right at the other end and can be even one year on, we measure them again to see what the student thinks of the service that they have had and how they see their attainment and their capabilities. What we are hoping for, over the course of this contract, is to be able to show that we positively affect a student and that we do meet their outcomes—hopefully not just what Study Tech has delivered, but how the DSA end-to-end has improved their position at university and their attainment in the future.

Q33 **Caroline Ansell:** Can I ask some logistical and technical questions about how you measure? Is there a dashboard? Is there a team? How does that part of the process work, in terms of the reporting and analysis of the performance data?

Glenn Tookey: Ours is collected externally and internally in our quality management systems. We have a database that pushes every student through. On every student account and record, we have information that we have learned about them all the way through the process. That is something that the new system allows for, but the old system did not. It is joined up, so if the assessor has a concern they can pass that through and the trainer can pick that up.

Under the old system, a trainer would pick up a student and would not even necessarily know what their conditions were. Now, they do know all that. We also pass that back to the higher education establishment. If we have a complex case with a student who needs support, we can now connect straight back to that, because we have that information in our system. We connect it, we log it, and as managing director I review that monthly to see exactly what sort of feedback we are getting and where it is working. It is beyond the numbers and meeting the turn-around; it is about the quality of delivery of the service as well.

Q34 **Caroline Ansell:** Is there some qualitative data as well?

Glenn Tookey: It is qualitative and quantitative, yes.

Q35 **Caroline Ansell:** Laura, have you anything further to add?

Laura Blackman: It is very similar. We meet regularly with the Student Loans Company as well to review that data. It is very early days, as the previous panel mentioned, but already we are looking to see if there are any kind of trends, anomalies or things that we need to address. We also attend a joint supplier forum where we share data between our organisations, best practice and lessons learned. We are trying to provide a consistent service across all geographies.

Q36 **Nick Fletcher:** With regard to the targets, what does success look like? When do you tick that box and say, "That is exactly what it should look like"? Roughly what time period is that over?

Glenn Tookey: Success is probably broken up into lots of different time periods and then connected back, I guess, to one big time period. In the beginning, it is "Have you connected with a student very quickly, within 24 to 48 hours? Did they get their needs assessment booked in the way they like, face-to-face if need be, or remotely if required within a certain timescale? Did we deliver the equipment to the specification on time? Did we get their training? How much of their training did they take up?" One of the challenges with the old system was that very little of the assistive technology training recommended got taken up by the student. We now have a system where we make sure that they understand the value of training and take more of it.

You can take all those small measurements and put them together at some point in the future and ask, "End-to-end, did it work? Did the system work? Were there fewer failures? Is the student's satisfaction better at the end of the new process than it was in the old process?"

Q37 **Nick Fletcher:** The previous panel was talking about the quality of the assessment. Will you make sure that your assessments are where they should be? Will you do many of them in person, or will they be via Zoom? Obviously it is a commercial outfit, and you will want as many going through as possible, but as we have heard, it is the quality of the assessment that counts. There are an awful lot of students who you need to see face-to-face to get a feel for what is best for them.

Glenn Tookey: Nothing has changed about the assessment process. The end-to-end system has changed, but we still get advised that if a student needs an assessment, they get an assessment of one and a half to two hours. Certainly in Study Tech, 85% of our assessors are existing assessors from the old system. We have people assessing for us now who have worked in different areas in assistive technology, market or process or industry. We are retraining them and using the skills they had to put them into the assessment system as well.

CPD was picked up earlier in one of the discussions. Our tender submission, and it is one of the KPIs that we are looking to achieve, is that every assessor has 25 hours of CPD a year. No assessor connects with a student unless they have had the relevant training. I believe that the assessment process that we offer is at least as robust, and certainly has every single piece of quality. We have not lost the skills necessary for the sector; we have retained them. What is different about the sector now is that there are fewer assessors doing more assessments.

Q38 **Nick Fletcher:** Does that mean that they are doing more remotely?

Glenn Tookey: When we got to the height of covid, every assessment was remote. We are now only a couple of months into the new service and 20% of our assessments are now face-to-face. That is slowly growing.

In terms of closing of assessment centres, there was an explosion of assessment centres through the covid period in the last couple of years. Study Tech currently has 40 assessment centres open. There are 20 in zone 1 and 20 in zone 4 and we are building that. This is a lower-volume time of year. We are working with HEIs to re-establish assessment centres inside higher education establishments. We have formed an orderly queue of people who would like to retain assessment centres on site despite the commercial model being slightly different now.

We have already put a process in place where students can be seen face-to-face if they need. We are using existing assessors who are experienced. It is not a numbers game; we have resourced ourselves to meet exactly the numbers forecast for the service, which is 30,000 students.

Q39 **Nick Fletcher:** Do you believe that you are resourced enough to carry out the works that you need to do?

Glenn Tookey: Absolutely, yes.

Q40 **Nick Fletcher:** Laura: similar questions, really.

Laura Blackman: I will add that student choice is at the heart of the service we have designed. It is up to the student how and where they want their assessment completed. We can do that face-to-face or we can do that virtually, either via a Teams meeting or on the phone. We are neutral as to how a student conducts their needs assessment. We share with them the benefits and advantages of each route and work with them to do what is best for them.

Q41 **Nick Fletcher:** In my opinion—and it is only an opinion—if you offer an easy route for people, they tend to take it. If they can do something over Zoom, quite often they will, but that does not mean that it is the best thing for them. It will be interesting if you can test and measure your outcomes as being better with students you have seen face-to-face, compared to those you have only seen on Zoom. Personally, I would encourage you to see as many people as you can face-to-face, because I think you learn so much more about them.

Laura, do you believe that you are adequately resourced? How many assessment centres do you have across the UK?

Laura Blackman: Yes. We have ramped up our needs assessment team, so we are now fully staffed to meet peak demand, which we expect to see over the next month. We have assessors and assessment centres across the geographies that we support.

We have a number of assessment centre strategies. We have a primary strategy, which is physical assessment centres located across East Midlands, Wales, and London. We also have a secondary location strategy, which means that if the primary locations do not work for a student, we can flex and switch on accommodations closer to a student to allow them to do face-to-face. If that does not work, we work with students and their HEPs to come up with a solution that works for them, so they can have that face-to-face assessment. There are a number of different routes we can take to support students.

Q42 **Chair:** Can I ask the same question about face-to-face assessments that Glenn answered by saying 20% and rising? Is it a similar figure for Capita, or is it a different quantity?

Laura Blackman: We are currently seeing 94% of students requesting a virtual assessment but, as Glenn said, the number of students requesting face-to-face is increasing. It is still early. We are still collecting data, so that is one of the key things we are watching: where students want assessments and how they want them.

Q43 **Chair:** In terms of your planning, where do you both expect that to end up? Glenn, you say that it is 20% and rising. What is your estimate of where you expect it to be on an ongoing basis when this has settled?

Laura Blackman: Our estimates are currently at around 30% face-to-face. That is what we are currently geared up to be able to support. Again, we are monitoring trends, and we can flex that.

Glenn Tookey: I do not have an actual estimate on where it will end up. Over the 15 years I have been working in the sector, it has risen to a peak and then dropped through covid, and it is starting to rise again. The key thing is that we mirror our accommodation strategy to meet whatever the trend or the demand is, and I think we are ready for that.

Q44 **Vicky Ford:** When I first started this job seven years ago, I used to get desperately sad correspondence from people who were going through the PIP assessment process, which Capita ran and Capita still runs. When I say "sad", I mean desperate: people treated as objects, assessors who had no view of the individuals, and tick-box exercises. I remember that the first email was from a very disabled young man on the point of suicide because of the tick-box way that the PIP assessment process had churned him out with inexperienced assessors and horrific wait times, and it was not uncommon for MPs to receive those messages.

I have to admit that over the past few years I have not had those types of complaints about PIP, but I am really worried, given what we heard from the earlier panel, that you are going through this change very quickly. It feels as if it could be that tick-box thing again, and we risk losing some very experienced people. I heard what Lesley said about people with 30 years of experience leaving.

What have you learned from what went so desperately wrong with PIP six years ago? How are you doing it today? How can you assure us and those students, as well as the parents and families of often very vulnerable young people who are leaving home for the very first time, that you will be there, that they will not be treated as tick-boxes and that they will get the support they need at the time they need it?

Laura Blackman: Thank you for the question. We are only eight weeks in. Performance so far has been strong; we have had over 5,000 referrals so far. As I said, providing a great student experience is at the heart of the service we have designed. We have a very strong heritage of delivering needs assessments through our Contact Associates business, which has been supporting students for over 18 years. The majority of our needs assessors are very experienced, and they undergo rigorous—

Q45 **Vicky Ford:** You say "very experienced", but we have heard that somebody just needs to do five hours' training at some point in their first six months. How many do you have who are brand new and have not had that training? How many do you have who are absolutely bang-on, massively experienced?

Laura Blackman: 65% of our staff are experienced needs assessors. The others are new recruits from the market; they are a mixture of experienced needs assessors who have come to us from other organisations, and new market hires. What we were seeing was that training among needs assessors under the previous regime was a little inconsistent, which did raise some quality and consistency challenges. All our staff receive four weeks of intensive training. This is then followed by an eight-week speed to competency process. During those eight weeks, all staff receive mentoring from an experienced needs assessor. Initially, new staff do not assess a full range of disabilities.

Q46 **Vicky Ford:** When you say that somebody is an experienced needs assessor, what is the minimum amount of time that they will have spent working on assessing the needs of somebody with disabilities?

Laura Blackman: They have to have at least a year's experience.

Q47 **Vicky Ford:** Will that have covered multiple disabilities? Will you have somebody who is experienced in supporting people with hearing or sight issues, for example?

Laura Blackman: It can be mixed. That is why our training process has been designed to ensure consistency across all our staff, so all our staff can assess the full range of disabilities. When staff join us, they are only able—

Q48 **Vicky Ford:** What have you learned from what went wrong with PIP, to make sure that we know that that is not going to happen again?

Laura Blackman: The importance of data. We are capturing how we are performing. We are reporting and sharing that transparently.

Q49 **Vicky Ford:** Do you agree with me that what was happening five or six years ago when I first started this job was completely unacceptable?

Laura Blackman: Unfortunately, PIP is not within my remit, so I cannot comment on PIP. What I can share about PIP is that, as you mentioned, claimant satisfaction has improved—

Q50 **Vicky Ford:** This question, "What lessons has Capita learned from its work providing PIP assessments on behalf of DWP that affect its approach to DSA assessments?", has been drafted by our Clerks, who will have contacted you before you came and said that the Committee was likely to ask you this question. Capita has not sent somebody who is able to answer this question.

Laura Blackman: I can talk about all of the things that we have done—

Q51 **Vicky Ford:** We would like to have an answer to that question. What have you learned from what went wrong, which we know was going wrong? How have you changed it and how can you assure us? If you cannot answer that question, can I suggest you send an answer in writing?

Laura Blackman: Yes, I will certainly come back to you in writing. We have experienced staff delivering this service. All staff undergo rigorous training, and we are constantly looking for feedback.

Vicky Ford: That is what everybody told me six years ago.

Q52 **Chair:** On the point about the minimum requirement being training within the first six months, presumably you can assure us that that is not going to be left as long as six months for someone joining?

Laura Blackman: Disability training happens within the first four weeks for staff.

Q53 **Vicky Ford:** If you have somebody coming in for an assessment, what happens if they have very specialist needs and they need to speak to somebody about the type of reading equipment that we were just hearing about?

Laura Blackman: We do engage with SMEs in certain instances, so we can reach out to the likes of Connevans and VisionAid, which can help us with our recommendations. They can provide guidance on specialist kit and equipment that may support a student. We do have access to SMEs if we need them.

Q54 **Vicky Ford:** Have you looked at what types of equipment were being purchased before, what types of equipment you are now supplying and whether or not there is an equivalent range? The previous panel said that the way this is happening is going to stifle innovation, stifle choice and mean that there is less ability to support these young people.

Laura Blackman: One of the things that we are doing to make sure we are constantly innovating is—

Vicky Ford: The answer is no: you have not looked at what was being provided before and what is provided now.

Laura Blackman: We have looked. One of the things we are doing to improve that and make sure we are constantly innovating is tech Tuesdays. We invite various AT providers in to talk to our staff and demonstrate a range of equipment and services.

Q55 **Vicky Ford:** When you look at what you are now supplying to students, is there as wide a range of types of equipment as there was before?

Laura Blackman: Absolutely, there is.

Q56 **Vicky Ford:** Not just what they could get, but what they are getting?

Laura Blackman: Yes, and that is one of the data points that we will be collecting and monitoring and can report back on.

Vicky Ford: I will leave it there, but with a note that a question was not answered and that we need an answer in writing. Thank you.

Q57 **Andrew Lewer:** Could I ask both of you what proportion of your income from the contract is for needs assessments, and what comes from the supply of equipment and support? How does that divide up?

Laura Blackman: I am afraid I do not have the answer to hand. I can take it away and report back.

Andrew Lewer: That would be very helpful. Thank you.

Glenn Tookey: The proportion would be about 25% for assessments and about 60% for equipment, with the remainder for training. That is about 25% as well. The number of cases, of course, is pretty much the same: 30,000 flowing end-to-end. It is just that the value of each part, in terms of revenue, is different, and there is more value in the equipment.

Q58 **Chair:** It will differ from one case to another, presumably?

Glenn Tookey: It is completely different. Actually, we do measure exactly what equipment moves through the system end-to-end, and the scope of it is no different. I do not expect the value of our contracts and the movement of that to change dramatically over the period of this contract either.

Q59 **Andrew Lewer:** Does that sound about right, Laura? These two components of the contract are the main part of this contract, so you must have some idea how they divide up.

Laura Blackman: Yes. As Glenn identified, needs assessments are the smaller part, and then it is obviously student-dependent and dependent on the kit and the assessment recommendations.

Q60 **Andrew Lewer:** How much do you charge for a needs assessment?

Laura Blackman: That information I can get back to you on separately. What I can say is we charge a fair and reasonable price for those assessments. I think under the previous regime, providers charged the maximum possible allowance that they were able to, whereas now we take a very different approach.

Andrew Lewer: But that is not what they would have said. Who would come to this panel and say they do not charge a fair and reasonable price?

Q61 **Chair:** I have heard, in fairness, that the charge of assessment is lower than perhaps it was across the piece previously. The concern around that, which I have heard from talking to businesses in my constituency, is that there are some concerns that there is an incentive for someone with a very large chunk of the market to use the assessments as a bit of a loss leader in order to be able to make revenue on the products and that side of things. Glenn, you are nodding. How do you address that in terms of the overall value for money proposition?

Glenn Tookey: There has been a significant lowering of the value of the assessment, but we still make a positive return on every part of the service, which I think is what you are driving at. Is there a loss leader? Absolutely not. There is a profit margin. Remember, we have bid for a contract now and have a guaranteed volume of cases over a three to five-year period. With the previous model, you had to bid the lowest price to win any business at all. That was driving quality in exactly the opposite direction to what we are at now.

I have a secured number of cases. I bid a commercially viable price to operate that service for a reasonable return, and it is much more stable for us as a business. It allows me to recruit people on long-term contracts, being able to offer them a guaranteed amount of work, which you could not do under the old system. It means that I can invest in my business for systems, support and training my people, because I know how many people I need, how much business they have and what I need to train them on. It is a much more stable, economic and commercial system that I operate in now than in certainly the last five years.

Q62 **Andrew Lewer:** You referred to training. What was the package for your assessors, in terms of requirements but also their continuing professional development? How are you planning to make the most of the opportunity you say that this contract provides you with?

Glenn Tookey: As I said, 85% of our assessors are existing experienced assessors from the system. They all come to us with a set of skills. Not every single one of our assessors can assess every single case, but their capabilities and the conditions that they are experienced in and able to assess are noted in our system. They only get allocated a student who meets their capabilities.

We train them in a number of ways. We train them on technology, so that they understand the new products and services coming to the market, because that is quite a rapid change, certainly in this market. We make sure that the supply chain advises them. We work with disability awareness charities and a range of the third sector to make sure that they understand how to support students. We train them on the different condition types to make sure that they are up to speed with the latest thinking and the latest developments, and we support them all through our quality assurance and through our training services.

As I said, we have a smaller number of people working more cases for us than before. It is much easier for us to identify needs and train and keep that workforce up to a skilled level than it was with the very fragmented, large workforce in the previous model.

Q63 **Andrew Lewer:** You mentioned using subcontractors or SMEs. Where specific needs are identified, how do you keep on top of them and make sure that they are delivering services to the level that you would expect?

Glenn Tookey: We subcontract some of the assessments and some of the training. Most of the training and all of the equipment is undertaken in-house. All our subcontractors use the same system end-to-end. It is not a set of joined-up businesses when it comes down to the actual delivery of the operation. They all use the same system, and they all have access to the same data. They are all back-to-back contracted to meet the 23 KPIs. We measure them end-to-end and report that back to the Student Loans Company as an entire end-to-end process. We do not hide any of the subcontractor performance outside our reports; it is all inside. It is one system end-to-end.

Q64 **Andrew Lewer:** Laura, can I ask about qualifications and skills, continuing professional development, and assessing the performance of your subcontractors and SMEs?

Laura Blackman: It is very similar to what Glenn and Study Tech do. We have a robust training regime that all our staff go through. All staff are required to do 25 hours of continuing professional development a year as well. We have regular support processes throughout the cycle to make sure that staff are on top of what they are doing.

Each week, we have a digital drop-in where staff can come to ask questions, get support and flag where they need specialist advice. They can get feedback and recommendations on individual needs assessments as well, so we have a robust support mechanism around all our needs assessors.

From a subcontract management perspective, we have close relationships with our two suppliers who deliver assistive technology, training and support. Like Study Tech, we have back-to-back contracts in place. We manage them robustly against a set of KPIs, and we report on those as well.

The only other thing I think we do a little bit differently is that some of our needs assessors are also trained to do the assistive technology training, so that they can really build that relationship with students and help them to use the kit that they have recommended, which we believe will have big advantages.

Q65 **Andrew Lewer:** This is obviously very important to the students in question. Every now and then, given human nature, what people are given or assessed as needing will not match up with what their own assessment of their needs is. What are your processes for appeals and complaints for students and getting some sort of resolution? How do you balance a rigorous appeals procedure with not being massively time-consuming and getting mired in endless exchanges, form-filling and so on?

Laura Blackman: We really care about delivering a great service to students and making sure that they get the equipment and support to enable them to be as successful as they can in their studies. Where that does not happen, we have a robust complaints process in place. It is a three-tiered process designed to do exactly that: help students resolve their issue quickly and not present an admin burden.

The first step is that students can raise an informal complaint. They can speak to their needs assessors; if they are not comfortable speaking to the needs assessor about the issue, they can speak to the line manager. If that does not resolve the issue, they can escalate their complaint. At the point of escalation, we will then conduct a thorough investigation into what has happened and why they may be unhappy. We will write back to the student within seven days about what we found and how we are going to resolve it for them.

If that does not resolve the student issue, or if they are unhappy with the outcome, they are able to escalate that externally to the Student Loans Company via an appeal process. It is quite a robust mechanism we have, but the focus is on resolving issues quickly with the students at the first point of contact.

Glenn Tookey: We have a standard complaints escalation process that very much mirrors that of Capita, but I think it is about more than that. Our assessors engage with the students. The students have the opportunity to review the report and discuss the outcomes. We have a quality assurance process that is looking at the reports. The quality assurance process will pick up reports that we believe have not covered all of the conditions accurately or at the level, and we will go back to the assessor and the students to make sure the outcome is good.

Any student who has any expression of dissatisfaction, rather than even a formal complaint, will get picked up in our system and engage with us and we will manage them through the process. If we pick it up later on in the process, probably not with the equipment, but certainly at the training, if any of their needs have not been understood or accurately delivered, we can feed that back up the process. One of the benefits of this joined-up system is that something we learn at the beginning can get to the end and something we learn at the end can get back to the beginning.

It is more about how you embody delivering a quality end-to-end service that gives the students what they are looking for, and not relying on a complaints process to tell you where you are getting it right and wrong. It has always been much more real-time than numbers, mechanisms, reports and complaints.

Q66 **Andrew Lewer:** There is that ultimate external Student Loans Company recourse if none of that works out.

Glenn Tookey: Of course, yes. That is in place, and we have regular forums, regular supplier meetings and regular KPI reviews with the Student Loans Company as part of the new process. We have only just started, so we have not really got into the process of engaging with them. There is a team of three: Laura, us, and the Student Loans Company. We are working together to make this a success. We do realise that this is a massive change and we have taken the whole thing and turned it up the other way, but we have not broken it. That is really important. As a last word from me, this is working reasonably well.

Q67 **Chair:** I have two quick questions before we close this panel and bring in the Minister, who I see has joined us—welcome.

You have heard some of the concerns about communication that were expressed at the beginning of this session. What do you feel you can take away from this to improve the process of communicating with charities, organisations and stakeholder groups? Are you constrained in any way by the commercial arrangements with the Student Loans Company on that front?

We have also heard concerns about the cohort of people who have not yet been brought into this process, and sustainability for them if the assessment centres that they previously had contact with might have closed or changed. Is that a cohort that you anticipate engaging with as the process continues, and potentially bringing into it?

Glenn Tookey: Yes. Let's start with the last question. We are already engaged with students whose assessment centres are no longer there. There is a process agreed with the Student Loans Company, Capita and us to pick up the students based on the regions in which we operate. We are already engaged with students who have come back to us needing a review of needs and needing more help where their existing assessment centre is not in place. We are picking them up. We are operating as if they are brand-new students to us. We are reaching out to get the information required to support them. That is already happening.

Can you remind me of the first question?

Chair: It was about communication and the concerns of some groups representing disabled students and disabled student practitioners, who feel that they have been a bit in the dark.

Glenn Tookey: We have always been connected pretty much with the third sector. The team behind us are all known to me personally and have been part of our communication process all the way through, particularly the Thomas Pocklington Trust and its interest in the visually impaired and the blind. My company Sight and Sound Technology, which is part of the Study Tech team, is the UK VI expert in DSA. We have been connected with that for many years and that has not changed. We have also redoubled and reached out to the HEI sector, because clearly there is a danger that that will float away as new relationships are put in place. As I said, we have reached out and met 40 HEIs since the start of the year to discuss the new reforms and new processes. We sent a questionnaire out and have had 104 responses from HEIs. We are working around them.

We have reached out to the front of the sector, and we continue the relationships that we have had for many years. Study Tech has been operating for many years as an assessment centre and a trainer of students. We think that this is a continuation of the work we have been carrying on, just in a different format.

Q68 **Chair:** I think you can take it from what we heard in the first panel that there is more work to do to reassure and communicate about the way the process will work.

Laura, have you anything to add on Capita's approach to communication?

Laura Blackman: That is one of the reasons that we have created this advocacy group: to bring in experts from the sector, hear those different voices and get feedback on how we can better work and communicate with students. We recognise that this service is new, and we are keen to work with SLC colleagues on how we can improve communication to students.

Chair: It strikes me that, given the range of different conditions represented and the range of different organisations in this space, a 10-person advocacy group is a start, but may not be as comprehensive as perhaps is needed. Again, I encourage more communication on that front. However, this has been a useful panel. Thank you for your time today.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Baroness Barran MBE, Chris Larmer and Anne Rimmer.

Q69 **Chair:** On our final panel, we have Baroness Barran, Minister for the school system and student finance at the Department for Education; Anne Rimmer, deputy director of student funding policy and Student Loans Company sponsorship at the Department for Education; and Chris Larmer, the chief executive of the Student Loans Company. Thank you very much for joining us.

I will hand over to Nick for the first question and then I will pick up swiftly. I apologise that some members have had to leave because of other parliamentary commitments—Diana knows this is one of the perils of our existence—but I think we can remain quorate.

Nick Fletcher: Good morning and thank you for coming to this session. I will get straight into it. What is the Department's rationale for changing the DSA system in this way? What problems were you trying to fix? That is a good question, and I will start with you, Minister, please.

Baroness Barran: Thanks very much, and thank you, Committee, for inviting us today.

I think you have heard pretty eloquently, particularly from the first panel, about the problems we are trying to fix. There was a very inconsistent student experience, at best. For many students it was quite a stressful experience: they felt that they were having to drive the whole operation and link up with multiple points of contact along the way, with very little clarity about how to navigate that. That was clearly very far from what any of us aspire to. That was point No. 1.

Secondly, from a departmental point of view and the SLC point of view, there was very little visibility. Each individual case was taken separately and there was no easy way to establish quality.

The third point was value for money. I know that there was a discussion earlier about whether we are just trying to push down the price. We had no visibility on whether we were getting value for money, and we were buying individual laptops for individual students or individual bits of software rather than using any of our purchasing power. We try to spend taxpayers' money well, but the emphasis in the procurement contract itself was 60% on quality, 30% on price and 10% on social value. I hope that that gives a sense of where the focus was.

Q70 **Nick Fletcher:** Thank you for that. Do you think that that will fix the problems? Obviously you would not be doing it unless you thought so, but you have heard quite a lot this morning. What is your initial assessment of where we are?

Baroness Barran: First of all, I would say that there is a big commitment to fix the problems. I am sure Chris will talk more about this and you have heard snippets of it already, but there is a pretty robust system for tracking performance—both student experience quality and value for money. There are very clear reporting lines set up to the Student Loans Company. We meet monthly so that there is a clear line, at a ministerial level, to the Department.

Obviously it is a major change, but I think the risk has been managed by appointing experienced organisations, by having very clear quality standards that were developed in discussion with experts in the sector, including third sector organisations, and by having very good financial visibility. Any major programme change carries risk with it, but we have a good plan to address that and manage that, and for Chris and his team to execute that.

Nick Fletcher: Chris, would you like to add anything to that?

Chris Larmer: I echo what the Minister said. Prior to my current role, I led the operations team that looks after the disabled students' allowance, and I was very close to the challenges that we are trying to resolve with this. My perspective is very similar to the Minister's: primarily it is about the customer journey. Lesley, Sarah and Tara articulated very well that there is something to solve.

On the back of that, the big step change is taking the onus away from the customer, where it was on the previous model, back to where it should be, which is with SLC through the suppliers, so that they do not have multiple hand-offs and they get the services that they need in a timelier way with less effort on their behalf. Early signs are good, but I will not echo what everyone has said before. It is 57 days in, and we have a lot to prove.

Nick Fletcher: Anne, would you like to add anything?

Anne Rimmer: We have already covered the Department's perspective. We worked jointly with the SLC on the procurement. We supported the Department and provided oversight. Obviously, as the Minister mentioned, it reports regularly to her, but we also have quarterly reporting into our performance and risk process so that we are monitoring the performance of the KPIs.

Nick Fletcher: Thank you. Unfortunately I have to leave, so I will hand back to Robin.

Q71 **Chair:** Thank you. Minister, I appreciate that some things are commercially confidential, and you cannot go into all the detail about the procurement process, but in terms of the structure of the way this was done, it was very interesting to hear about that focus—60% on quality, 30% on price—and the background that you talked about. Beyond the 23 KPIs, which we have heard a lot about already, how will you measure quality and outcomes from the process? Is there a role for the Office for Students in looking at the persistence of the student cohort who are accessing DSA and how many of them complete their courses?

Baroness Barran: It is not something that I am aware that we have considered; I am looking at Anne to see whether we have or have not.

Anne Rimmer: The policy objective of the DSA is to bring disabled students up to the level of their peers. The OfS and the Department look at the performance of institutions in terms of outcomes. The Department looks at how students perform across different courses and how those break down into distinct characteristics. We know from past evaluations of the disabled students' allowance that students find it a critical support for their programme. We will continue to monitor their feedback on whether they consider that the DSA supports their studies.

Baroness Barran: The figures in that research, which comes from 2019, were that 68% of students reported that it allowed them to participate more fully, while 37% reported that they would not have been able to participate at all if they had not had it. Those are quite significant numbers.

My only slight concern from listening to the earlier discussion about student outcomes—this does not answer your question about the OfS, but I am happy to take that away and look at it—is that there are so many variables in every student's life, and this is one element within it. We need to get the right weight for its contribution to final outcomes.

Q72 **Chair:** Obviously it is very early in the process, but it would be very interesting to have an analysis of the completion rates for students who are accessing DSA before and after these changes. Hopefully, if it has resulted in a better-quality approach and better outcomes for those students, you should see those rates improving.

Baroness Barran: Only if there is evidence that people were unable to take up their allowance previously, and I am not sure that we have evidence for that. The evidence we have is that it was complicated and potentially stressful for students, particularly as we see a higher percentage of students claiming the allowance who experience mental health issues such as autism spectrum disorder or ADHD. We can imagine that for many of those students, just the process of claiming it, the anxiety of imagining that you might not get what you need, and all those things could be substantial.

The other element, which you may or may not want to cover today, is non-medical help, which is also part of the student experience outside DSA. As you know, we have a call for evidence and we have concerns about that, but I do not want to divert the discussion.

Q73 **Chair:** I appreciate that. We heard from our first panel that they are very keen to make sure that the process has been properly assessed and measured in a qualitative way, not just on the basis of KPIs at the time but before any assumptions are made on read-across from this process to that. Can you give any assurance that there will be a process of assessment before that call for evidence is responded to?

Baroness Barran: We are assessing this all the time. As you know, the wheels of government do not always turn as fast as one might expect. A call for evidence does not mean an implemented policy in very short order.

If I may, I will just say one thing slightly in defence of the KPIs. The Committee may not have had a chance to look at them. There was a sense given that they are all about process. Of course there is an element of process, but process is also part of the student experience. Once you have received your equipment, how quickly do you get the call to book in your training to use the equipment? We do not want to leave students hanging around. However, specifically, there are student satisfaction metrics in those KPIs, and also complaints and other things. There are both explicit and implicit KPIs relating to student experience.

Q74 **Chair:** Were you involved as a Minister in setting those KPIs, or was that a process run by the Student Loans Company?

Baroness Barran: Personally, I was not. I am looking left and right here.

Chris Larmer: I was very involved.

Baroness Barran: You were very involved. That is the good news. That is the answer you wanted.

Q75 **Chair:** Thank you. In terms of the structure of the process, why were contracts offered in four regional lots? The DfE in general uses interesting interpretations of regions, which are sometimes somewhat different from those of other Government Departments. Why were suppliers allowed to take on more than one of these contracts?

Baroness Barran: SLC led on the procurement but, as Anne said, our invest co looked at it. I think the balance that SLC sought to strike was, first, to get the economies of scale in terms of purchasing power, and secondly, to spread risk so that we did not have a single lot. There were multiple bidders—there were 15 initial bidders and nine considered at the main awards—and there was nothing predestined that two suppliers would get two lots. Chris, this is your patch rather than mine.

Chris Larmer: Thank you, Minister. I totally agree with all that you have said. The first driver for it being regional and for having four regions was that it was an enabler for us to get to the one-stop service model that is so important to the customer, which we got from the research. Four slots, through the research that we did, seemed like the optimum amount for economies of scale and volume pricing. Those four slots were determined by the DSA applications received and previous trends, which felt right.

From my perspective, between two and four was right. With anything less than two, we lose that tension between suppliers, and we lose that contingency, which we may come on to. Four felt like the maximum to try to get this one-stop working as well as we could.

Q76 **Chair:** Was there any element of previous locations and expertise? Both Capita and Study Tech were operating in this market in its previous iteration. Did the determination around where they were placed relate to where they had existing expertise and connections with universities?

Chris Larmer: There was consideration of that. Without going too much into the actual procurement specifics, as an example—but not so relevant for this Committee—Welsh language was a key criteria for the Welsh Government, for obvious reasons.

Q77 **Chair:** When Government Departments work with private companies, there is always a concern about the risks of insolvency. We have seen some pretty big ones in the past that have affected Government. What account was taken of the risk of having two major primes working on this, and the risk of insolvency and contingencies on that front?

Chris Larmer: Sorry, Chair?

Chair: In terms of the process, how exposed is the Department to the insolvency of one or other provider? We have seen very large companies get into difficulties previously, and we have seen small ones that have scaled up getting into difficulties in other areas of government. What account was taken of that in the process?

Chris Larmer: Apologies, I misheard. It followed the full Government procurement process, and that part of it was taken into account. Then we get into the contingencies and why we have a minimum of two. It is embedded within the contract that if either supplier fails, the other supplier steps up, at least from an interim perspective. If both fail—which is highly unlikely, bearing in mind that one of the suppliers is a consortium of SMEs and the other heavily subcontracts already in the market—the contingency thereafter is that the Student Loans Company takes temporary ownership of the process.

Q78 **Chair:** We have heard that, during the process, it changed from one that was about separate assessment and delivery to one in which they were combined. Is that correct?

Chris Larmer: Yes.

Q79 **Chair:** The process was initially under way on one basis and then it changed to another. What alternative delivery models did the Department or the SLC consider?

Baroness Barran: There were a number of different models.

Chris Larmer: Do you want me to take this?

Baroness Barran: Yes, do.

Chris Larmer: There were five. The first was to continue with the existing arrangement, which we deemed not appropriate, both from a customer perspective and a value-for-money perspective.

The second was to procure separately for needs assessment and assistive technology, which was considered on the first one. We believed from getting further customer research that that would not have enabled the one-stop shop. Apologies for mentioning that again, but it is so important from a customer perspective.

Thirdly, working with other Government Departments was considered but was not deemed feasible in the timespan, because of the differences between the Government Departments that do similar activity.

The fourth, which I have mentioned, was to bring it in-house. We did consider that, but it is not the core role of the Student Loans Company. Not progressing that option enabled us to have that as a contingency, which I think we all recognise is very important.

The fifth one was the competitive tender exercise for one-stop on a contractual model, which was favoured by SLC, DfE and the Welsh Government.

Q80 **Chair:** You heard concerns from the first panel around communication in this process. It is inevitable that when something goes into a procurement process, there will be a period in which it is more difficult to communicate. From the Department's perspective, what was the process of engaging with stakeholders, including students themselves, when designing and implementing these reforms? Now that that commercial process is effectively over and you have providers in place, how can you improve communication across the sector to ensure that the right people are getting the information they need?

Baroness Barran: There was a lot of work with the sector in terms of consultation. As you heard earlier, we did have substantial input from disability organisations. We worked with them to develop the quality standards before the ITT, and there is now a procurement sub-group that I think I am right in saying is working with us.

Chris Larmer: Yes.

Baroness Barran: Then we have the DSA quality committee, which includes a number of organisations, and which is to be an independent validator of the quality standards. The Department is absolutely committed to continuing to consult, work with and listen to all those groups.

As you rightly say, Chair, there is a moment during procurement when stuff goes quiet. We are also in the very early stages; as Chris said, we are at day 57 or something. However, we welcome—I am sure I can speak for both our organisations, but Chris, please come in—quick and early feedback.

There are also mechanisms. Both of the suppliers get student feedback from every individual student, and the Student Loans Company takes a dip sample of student experience. We are trying to track that quickly and respond quickly, but we also have regular systems to make sure that we have that input. Chris, do you want to say anything from your perspective?

Chris Larmer: I think you have covered all of it. I would just add a thank you to Lesley, Sarah and Tara from the first session for their support throughout and their organisations' support throughout. It is my accountability to make sure that we get the communication right for the sector and that we leverage the expertise that is clearly in the sector. That is my accountability. The likes of this forum and the other forums we have in place help us to understand where we can do better. The first session clearly shows that I and the team can do better, and we absolutely will.

I do believe, though, that we have the structure in place through the disabled students stakeholder group, the sub-group that has helped us design it, and the quality committee. I have gone to each of the two DSA quality committees that we have had so far, and I am going to the next one on 10 June. Again, this Committee has helped with that, but we are committed to working with all parties moving forward.

Q81 **Chair:** Are you comfortable that the quality committee has sufficient access to the expertise that was previously distributed among a very wide range of assessment centres and in the quality group that held the ring for them? Understandable concerns were raised around commercial issues with competitors. Do you have access to the right people to ensure that quality is of the highest standard?

Chris Larmer: My view is that it is set up to do that and the terms of reference are to do that, but the feedback from the first session means that I will revisit that to make sure that we have the right people on the DSA quality committee.

Chair: Thank you.

Q82 **Andrew Lewer:** We have talked a little bit about metrics and measurements already, but in terms of measuring not just how to set this up but its ongoing success, what performance metrics are you using, what data are you collecting and what is the baseline that you are measuring all of that against?

Baroness Barran: It may make sense that we start with what SLC is doing, because that then feeds into the Department.

Chris Larmer: Yes. I will just make a broader point, if I may, on how we view it. We have heard it before. For me, from my previous role in the operation side, the customer will decide whether this is a success or not.

From our perspective, that is twofold. There is one around what they say and some of the qualitative KPIs that we have in place around the survey. Did they get the choice for face-to-face and telephony? Were their needs understood by the needs assessor? Those sorts of qualitative feedback we will get from customers. However, it is also about what they do. I do not want to quote Tara—I think it was—from the first session, but DSA is so important. It makes the difference in disabled students staying in education. That is what they do. This has to make it as likely as possible, through the processes that we have put in place, that they stay within education.

The Chair has already referred to the KPIs, and we have probably talked a lot about them. They are in six key areas, as far as I am concerned. They feed into the disability quality committee, they will obviously feed into the supplier meetings that we have with both Study Tech and Capita, and they also feed into the benefit realisation infrastructure that goes into the Department.

Q83 **Andrew Lewer:** What is the baseline that you are measuring improvements from? Do you have a baseline?

Chris Larmer: If we took, for instance, the qualitative bit from the surveys, we have been doing surveys previously and that is the baseline that we would look to improve on with, for instance, the service metrics. We also have data around how long it takes and around the multiple hand-offs. Those are the types of examples. We would baseline against that and then we can demonstrate the improvement.

More broadly, I am not sure that we are getting to the strategic business case part, but there are bits around the cost to serve and all of those things that we can feed into the Department's tracking.

Q84 **Andrew Lewer:** How does the Department keep track while making sure that you are not just doing a huge amount of process that SLC is already doing? All that takes up time, effort and money that is then not available for equipment for disabled people to use, because you are spending it on assessing assessments instead.

Anne Rimmer: We work with the SLC to work from their KPIs. We understood this from the procurement. We expect regular reporting on them. The DSA, as a priority for the Department, features in our oversight governance of the SLC. For instance, the DSA features in our annual letter of priorities that the shareholders send to the SLC. It features in the regular conversations that we have with Chris and with the ELT. We work from that shared set of metrics so that, as you say, we are not duplicating or replicating needlessly.

Q85 **Andrew Lewer:** I just want to make the broader point that process is not free. There is an amount of process from everyone in these committees. We did it in Housing yesterday: "Are we checking this? Are we making sure that that does not go wrong? Have we got an extra process to fit in with the other?" It all costs money, which you then do not have to provide the service that is the whole point of the exercise.

You have already covered whether student experience is part of the dataset; I have had an answer to that. How do you ensure that the data that suppliers give you is reliable, given their understandable incentive to say that all is well? How do you guard against the risk that the processes of assessment and provision will be controlled by one company? They are doing the assessment and providing the equipment. How is that mitigated?

Baroness Barran: Chris, do you want to come in? I feel like those are operational questions. I can add on at the end from the Department's perspective.

Andrew Lewer: It is not a grilling to catch people out; we are just trying to get the information. Whoever is best.

Chris Larmer: I will give you my view. I think—correct me if I am wrong, Andrew—that your question is broadly around conflict of interest.

Andrew Lewer: Yes.

Chris Larmer: The first bit of the introduction of the contracts enables us to manage that better than, for obvious reasons, we could previously. As you would expect, SLC adheres to Government standards around conflicts of interest. Through this contract, we expect Study Tech and Capita to do that with enduring adherence.

I would describe three lines of defence, from a risk management perspective. The first one is that my team still own the overall disabled students' allowance product and offering. Our highly trained colleagues have that quality check against the needs assessment reports that we have had coming in. That is the first line of defence.

The second line is that because we have moved to this model, I have a supplier management team who work with but support and challenge Capita and Study Tech. Data—as you would expect, Andrew—is key to that. They will be analysing the data once we get further trends.

Then the third line of defence is GIAA. It is due to audit me and the process in October.

Baroness Barran: It may be worth adding, in terms of actual controls—I know you made, quite rightly, the point about process costs—that the two prime contractors have a duty to inform SLC of any conflicts of interest, with very severe consequences if they do not. It is agreed up front how they will be dealt with.

There is also an open book accounting agreement. SLC can look at the accounts of the contractors on an open book basis to make sure that there is absolute transparency, which we definitely did not have previously.

Andrew Lewer: Thank you. That is very helpful.

Q86 **Chair:** More broadly, we heard clearly from the first panel a big focus on measuring quality, reporting back on quality and ensuring that students recognise the quality of what is being done. How will the Department ensure quality for students by holding suppliers to account for the outcomes and the quality of their performance?

Baroness Barran: Our direct relationship is with SLC. As Chris said, it is accountable for the quality. We do not have additional metrics beyond the 20 much-discussed KPIs, but there is additional customer research that both the prime providers and the SLC do, and then we have our stakeholder groups and support to make sure that we are getting an independent voice from the sector. You will very well know that if problems start to pop up, you as MPs will get to hear about them as they come through. We try to triangulate the information that we get.

There is something very important about these early stages to build confidence, so that the narrative among disabled students becomes one in which this is a service you can trust, where you get what you need and it is not stressful. These early days are very important.

Q87 **Chair:** Chris, what alternative options exist if a student feels that they have been failed by their supplier? We had cases under the previous system where people might have been given the wrong assistive technology. If they go through the complaints process and come to the SLC saying, "I have the wrong outcome here: I don't have the support I need," what can you do about it?

Chris Larmer: There are key stages. The first is that they would contact their supplier, who I would expect, as part of the contract and agreement, to resolve the issue. If that is unsuccessful, they would come to my team again. We have 200 highly trained DSA colleagues, with tenure of decades in some cases, who would be able to offer support with that, and the supplier management team who would liaise directly with the supplier. In those cases, we would work with both Capita and Study Tech—often directly with Glenn—to resolve that, with a different needs assessment. We would take that forward as appropriate.

Q88 **Chair:** Do the contracts contain any definition of performance failure? What are the Department's contractual rights in the event of consistently poor performance?

Chris Larmer: You do not want me to mention KPIs again, Chair, but the KPIs are a critical part of those contracts. There are standard terms attached to the contract in this case, because we have the two suppliers. If normal performance management has not led to the recovery of the service that we want—which I would fully expect it to, although it is early days—we have an option built into both contracts whereby the other supplier would take on part of the lot of the supplier that has not delivered. Then we have clauses around termination if needed. Similarly to the contingency model I talked about earlier, it would all go on a temporary basis to the other supplier.

Q89 **Chair:** Has the SLC intervened on any performance issues to date, or is that just an ongoing low-level conversation?

Chris Larmer: Yes, it has. That was not for their performance in the 57 days; that was in the quite rigorous process of making sure that their readiness checks were in place so that when we went live on 26 February this year, we did so as successfully as possible. That would be me with the supplier team that we have spoken to earlier. I have also had calls, and will continue to have them, with my oppo in both areas: Glenn, or Richard from a Capita perspective.

Q90 **Chair:** On face-to-face assessments, we heard earlier that there are quite different approaches across the two contractors. I think 94% for Capita were remote, with around 80% for Study Tech. There was a view that the face-to-face assessments are likely to increase, but from what we heard from the first panel, there will still be fewer than under the previous operating system. Is that something that you are comfortable with, or do you expect them over time to go back to where they were before the pandemic?

Chris Larmer: It is customer choice, but no, I do not agree with the first part of it, from the data that we have had from the suppliers for the first 57 days. Previously, from our data, it looked as if about 10% were done face-to-face. It is nearer 20% now, which feels right.

In the qualitative feedback that we got from customers on the old model, around 40% of customers felt that the old model was not giving them the choice between face-to-face and virtual. That is obviously not where we want to be. We need to make sure that the choice is there for the customers to make and that if they do make that choice, the service is there for them. I expect more face-to-face moving forward—if that is right for the customer, because sometimes face-to-face is not right for the customer.

Q91 **Chair:** Giving every customer that choice requires the providers or their subcontractors to have a footprint in every HEI or FE organisation. It is quite a large footprint that we are talking about, compared with what they have today. Is that a process that you are monitoring, in terms of how that will change over time?

Chris Larmer: We are absolutely monitoring the customer demand, which is the key part to it, and the expectation of the suppliers that they react to that demand within a reasonable time.

Baroness Barran: I would make two points. The first is about face-to-face. It is an area where more work is needed to understand what students want. In preparation—I would like to say I had done it earlier, but that would not be true—I looked at the information for students on both the Capita and Study Tech websites, and it is extremely clear that it is your choice. It sets out two or three reasons why you might want face-to-face, two or three reasons why it might be preferable for you, and it is very clear that the expectation is of around two hours for the assessment.

The proof of the pudding will be in the eating, but it might be interesting for the Committee to be aware that there are suggestions from students that if they are clear on their needs, they feel that the needs assessment part is superfluous and they would rather go straight to the purchasing of the equipment. That is something that we are going to look at. I would underline that it is not from a cost point of view; that is an exploratory bit of work in response to student feedback.

The point is that for some people face-to-face is right, and for others a video call or telephone call is right. We need to be confident about whether it would be appropriate or not.

Q92 **Chair:** From what you have seen, are you comfortable, in terms of the information that is there for those students in the cohort currently, that they are being given a genuine choice with pros and cons on both sides, not guided in a particular direction?

Baroness Barran: After this session, perhaps I can do a mystery shop. I am not sure if that is ethical; I did not do it beforehand. But as I say, I felt it was very clear, transparent and balanced.

Q93 **Chair:** I have to say that from my experience in the Department, I am not surprised to hear that Minister Barran does her homework before coming to a Committee session.

Concerns have been raised by some of the providers that did not win this process, around the suggestion that by focusing on the cost of assessment, there could be an incentive for the cost of assessment to be brought down and the cost of equipment to be used to compensate for that. It was very interesting to hear about, and very open of Glenn to talk about, the balance of revenue in the various parts of the business. Are you comfortable that there is sufficient breadth in the supply chain when it comes to assistive technology, and that the margins are being managed in a way that does not allow for anti-competitive behaviour in the equipment and assistive technology market?

Baroness Barran: From our perspective in the Department, there has been a longer trend of what we might politely call consolidation in the market and a reduction in the number of suppliers. That is where the transparency of the contract, the open book accounting and so forth gives us visibility in a way that we simply did not have before.

The second point to make is that we need to get the mix right. We previously had a cap for needs assessment costs, and every needs assessment's price was right at the top. Through the procurement process, we have established a market price, if you like. We just need to get the balance right between a high-quality needs assessment and sufficient funding to meet students' needs in technology and training. As I think the Committee is aware, there is a tiny, tiny number—I think it is 0.1%—of students who hit the cap. It is very rare that students hit that £26,000-plus cap on what is available.

Chris Larmer: I agree. The nature of the commercial process for the first time has allowed us to do it in a market-led way around the prices. Effectively, going through that process has enabled us to set or reset the prices.

I think your point is an important one. As well as that, in the contract, there is an annual review of those prices. That is linked to CPI but, more importantly to me, it looks at whether they are too high or too low, because that is part of your questioning. The high bit is around value for money and making sure that customers get as much of the allowance as they can, but if it is too low it will drive the wrong behaviours, which none of us wants. That important checkpoint is there as well.

Chair: I will bring in Mohammad, who has waited patiently.

Q94 **Mohammad Yasin:** The DfE has recently called for evidence regarding the non-medical help system. What is the rationale behind that?

Baroness Barran: Some patterns are a little bit similar to what we saw previously in the other areas of DSA that we talked about. It is a very fragmented market. We think that there are around 500 suppliers. Again, each package of support is chosen individually and purchased individually, so there are no economies of scale in purchasing.

Students have told us that there is a lack of integration between the DSA end and the higher education providers' support. We get the same message from students about it being complex for them to navigate administratively. We have also heard about specific shortages of particular elements in the workforce, for example those with British Sign Language skills.

Q95 **Mohammad Yasin:** Are you proposing any further reforms to the DSA application process?

Baroness Barran: It is much too early to say. What we have announced is a call for evidence, which is to find out more detail about those concerns but also others that students and other stakeholders would want to raise with us. Is there anything you want to add, Anne?

Anne Rimmer: I will just say that we know how important it is to understand the student voice and the HEP voice in particular on the way non-medical help is aligned with broader teaching and the experience of the sector, which, as we have covered today, is incredibly knowledgeable. Before we form any views, we want to benefit from that expertise. Because non-medical help was not covered by this reform, is there anything that we should consider, recognising that this policy has been in place for a long time? It is worth considering if this is working as well for students as it needs to.

Q96 **Mohammad Yasin:** If you go back to 2015, when a large proportion of what used to be funded via the DSA was shifted to institutional budgets, both core and disabled student-related funding was slashed per student. The concerns are that the latest plans result in an overall cut to disabled student support funding. Do you agree with these concerns?

Baroness Barran: I am not sure that we agree, but could you just say again the date that you were talking about for the slashing of support?

Mohammad Yasin: 2015.

Baroness Barran: Are you talking about the contribution towards a personal computer, the £200?

Q97 **Mohammad Yasin:** In 2015, a large proportion of what used to be funded through DSA was shifted to institutional budgets. As a result, the funding was cut for both core and disabled students. The concerns now are that it may be the same exercise happening again and that it will result in cutting funding per student, both disabled and others. I just want a clear answer that it is not happening this time.

Baroness Barran: I am just looking at the data. Including non-medical help, which I think I am right in saying—this is my maths, not the Department's, which is always risky—that if we take 2017-18, the per-student amount was £1,843 on average. We know that the average is only so helpful in this area, but it gives us a sense. In 2021-22, which is the latest data that we have, it was £1,940. I have not gone back to 2015-16, because I thought it was worth looking at the last five years. I apologise: I do not have that institutional memory. That was before my time in Parliament or in the Department. Anne may have a better institutional memory.

The point that I am making is that we want as much money as is reasonable to go to the students for the stuff that is helpful to them. As I said earlier, it is about getting that balance right. I thought it was worth raising those two figures because that does not look like a slashing of funding per student, and that is obviously over a time when the number of students in receipt of DSA has gone up by 19,000 from just over 68,000 to just over 87,000. Anne, do you want to talk about 2015 and what was introduced?

Anne Rimmer: In 2015, the requirement was introduced that students needed to make a £200 contribution to the cost of a computer. The rationale was that, as I have said, the objective or the goal of DSA is to bring students up to their peers. A basic computer is now a mainstream cost of study, so it was considered fair that students would make a £200 contribution to the cost of the computer when recommended by their needs assessment. This is for hardware only; students are not expected to fund recommended specialist software or the training for that software. This was a £200 contribution for laptops to reflect that a laptop is now a basic—

Baroness Barran: A basic human right.

Anne Rimmer: Pardon me: a basic cost of study.

Q98 **Chair:** To clarify this issue, it would be helpful if you could provide us, after this meeting, with a time series going back a bit further on the overall funding.

Chris Larmer: Of course.

Anne Rimmer: Yes, absolutely.

Mohammad Yasin: If you can give us some data—

Baroness Barran: Gladly. We have it all; I just did five years rather than nine years.

Q99 **Mohammad Yasin:** Some disability rights organisers are really concerned that removing further individual payments and transferring them to universities will confuse students even more. What safeguards are in place to avoid that and to ensure that universities, which are struggling financially already, will get proper support to deliver an equal disabled student support experience?

Anne Rimmer: Higher education institutions have obligations under the Equality Act to provide support and accessibility to students, but the DSA recognises that there are specific costs that students may face as a result of their disability. The underlying rationale for the DSA is to mitigate that risk.

The call for evidence—I do not want to risk repeating myself—is about understanding what this means for students on university campuses who are learning today. We can be at risk of being quite far away, sometimes, from what that student experience is. This is about making sure that we know, in 2024, what those experiences look like and how we can make sure that policy is supporting them. The DSA as an entitlement protects the students, who get that additional funding where they need it, recognising that HEPs have a legal obligation. The call for evidence is separate from that.

Q100 **Mohammad Yasin:** Are you taking the concerns from some disability support organisations on board?

Baroness Barran: Absolutely.

Q101 **Mohammad Yasin:** They are concerned that disabled students will be confused as a result of this change and that universities will not be able to look after them because they are financially struggling already.

Anne Rimmer: I do not think there is any change proposed, and I think that is clear. We are not consulting. It is to understand what is going on, and we ask questions to help prompt that so that people are not faced with a blank sheet of paper. There is no change proposed that students need to be concerned about at this time. We are gathering evidence to understand what, if anything, would be appropriate.

Mohammad Yasin: Okay.

Chair: That is helpful to me.

Baroness Barran: Can I pick up on something that was mentioned earlier, which felt like it might have been a misunderstanding about universities opting out of DSA? The DSA is a student right. The universities cannot opt out. They can do more; they can do as much as they can afford to do. I just want to make that clear.

Chair: That is fair, and it is certainly the case that some universities are doing more off their own bat than others. There is a question around how they can afford to do that. I know that the University of Worcester in my constituency prides itself on being very inclusive and doing a lot on that front. The concern would be, with the state of student finance in general, that there will be more pressure on the pot that is available for DSA if it is to achieve its aims. Obviously, with the Government's aspiration to halve the disability employment gap, ensuring that people have the opportunity to pursue studies successfully is very important. This is an area in which the Committee will continue to take an interest.

You have been generous with your time. We will write to you off the back of this session, I think, and if you could write with a little bit more data in terms of the overall DSA funding over the years, it would be helpful to the Committee. Minister, Chris and Anne, I am grateful for your evidence today.