

Work and Pensions Committee

Oral evidence: Carer's Allowance and young carers, HC 592

Wednesday 24 April 2024

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Members present: Sir Stephen Timms (Chair); Debbie Abrahams; Siobhan Baillie; Nigel Mills; Selaine Saxby; Sir Desmond Swayne.

Education Committee Member present: Mr Robin Walker.

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Witnesses

I: Andy McGowan, Policy and Practice Manager, Carers Trust; Dr Rebecca Lacey, Reader in Social and Lifecourse Epidemiology, St George's, University of London; and Alek-Zander Chullan-Hoyte, young adult carer.

II: Mims Davies MP, Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, Department for Work and Pensions; Andrew Latto, Deputy Director - Devolution, Pensioner Benefits and Carer's Allowance, Department for Work and Pensions; and Vikki Knight, Director, Fraud, Error & Debt Strategy, Department for Work and Pensions.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Andy McGowan, Dr Rebecca Lacey and Alek-Zander Chullan-Hoyte.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome, everybody, to this meeting of the Work and Pensions Select Committee for our evidence session on carer's allowance.

Members will know that it has been announced overnight that the former Chair of this Committee, Frank Field, who had become Lord Field of Birkenhead, has died. I think everybody knows that before entering the Lords he was for 40 years the MP for Birkenhead and he was my predecessor as Chair of the Committee and Chair of previous Select Committees as well. I want to make the point that Frank dedicated his life to the fight against poverty, setting up the Child Poverty Action Group in the 1960s and then campaigning throughout his time in Parliament. He achieved a great deal. In doing it, he managed to transcend party divisions, as some of the tributes overnight have recognised. He is going to be very greatly missed across Parliament and I think mourned across the country as well. I am sure I speak for all members of the Committee in paying tribute to his achievements and his memory.

I bid a very warm welcome to the witnesses who have joined us this morning. I will ask each of you, very briefly, to tell us who you are, starting with Becca Lacey.

Dr Lacey: Good morning, I am Becca Lacey and I am a reader in social and lifecourse epidemiology at the Population Health Research Institute at St George's, University of London. I lead research that looks at inequalities in young caring, and inequalities in the outcomes for young carers in the UK.

Andy McGowan: Good morning. My name is Andy McGowan. I am the Policy and Practice Manager at Carers Trust. Carers Trust is the infrastructure body for local carer services with a network of around 130 local carer organisations. I lead on their UK policy work on young carers.

Alek-Zander Chullan-Hoyte: Good morning. My name is Alek-Zander, I am a young adult carer. I look after my mum who has a condition called polymyositis, which is a degenerative spinal condition that affects the muscles. She also has a number of other issues. I benefit from services provided by my local Young Carers Project and from Carers Trust as well.

Chair: Thank you all very much. Should we call you Alek or Alek-Zander?

Alek-Zander Chullan-Hoyte: You can say Alek.

Q2 **Chair:** My first question is for you then, Alek. Thank you very much for joining us. Looking back over your experience caring for your mother, how old would you say you were when you became a carer? Looking back at that experience, is there support from the Department for Work and Pensions that you wish that you had been able to get or not?



Alek-Zander Chullan-Hoyte: To answer the first part of your question, I was identified as a young carer when I was about 12 years old. My mum was coming out of hospital at the time when I was identified by a social worker who referred me to my Young Carers Project. That is where I got the support that I am still benefiting from to this day. Sorry, could you repeat the second part of your question, please?

Q3 **Chair:** From the age of 12 you were a carer for your mother. Did the social worker ask you to take on the role or did it just happen?

Alek-Zander Chullan-Hoyte: No, because I am the only child in my house, I don't have any other relatives to rely on, so it automatically fell on to me to provide a care responsibility. It was only then that, being identified through a social worker, I got—I think it was a leaflet, or something, about the Young Carers Project, which was Lambeth Young Carers at the time. We contacted them and they did an assessment on me to assess my care responsibilities, see what I was doing around the house and then that was when I was identified as a young carer.

Q4 **Chair:** Looking back on all that, is there support that you wish you had had from the benefit system, which perhaps you should have had or was that not really an issue in your experience?

Alek-Zander Chullan-Hoyte: That was never really considered because I didn't really understand what I would be entitled to at the time. I think it was only after turning 16 that I became aware of what is now called carer's allowance, which is financial support provided to carers like myself. But, unfortunately, because I was in full-time education and I have been since the age of 18 and then going on to university at 21, I wasn't entitled to that because I didn't meet the threshold for carer's allowance. Then going on to work, where I am at now, because I work over the threshold of hours, I am still not entitled to that allowance.

Q5 **Chair:** You have never been entitled to carer's allowance through that whole period?

Alek-Zander Chullan-Hoyte: Never.

Chair: Okay. Well, we will ask you some more questions about that. Thank very much for being willing to tell us about it.

Q6 **Sir Desmond Swayne:** I will start again with Alek. There are different estimates for the numbers of young carers. If we are going to help young carers and young adult carers, we first have to identify them. I have an estimate here on a school census that is just 40,000. In the 2021 census, there were, I think, 127,000. What are the issues, the difficulties, with identifying young carers? How can it be improved and what can the DWP do to help with that process?

Alek-Zander Chullan-Hoyte: Off the top of my head, I think perhaps a set of criteria in a number of characteristics where a person may be a young carer, a person may not be a young carer and I think implementing that in different areas, identifying young carers through



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schools, using the criteria to identify from schools, through hospitals, through other day-to-day areas of life as well. I think Andy may be able to touch on that a little bit as well.

Andy McGowan: Yes, I am really happy to come in. It is a really important point because the challenge is, as you say, the estimates from the census are based on when adults are asked the question. What we are seeing, particularly post-Covid, is when you ask young people themselves, you get a much higher and more accurate reflection as to how many young carers there are.

The 2021 census identified around 127,000 young carers under 18. Yet looking at a variety of different studies where young people themselves are being asked, we are looking consistently at around over 1 million young carers under 18 and another 600,000 young adult carers. We are looking at around 10% of all young people, so it is not a niche group.

On the issue of identification, I think the big challenge is many young carers do not see themselves as young carers. It relies on the professionals working with them and their families to be able to identify that they might be a young carer. What we heard in Alek's situation is a prime example of how the system should work. Mum was being discharged from hospital. A social worker comes in to look at what support is needed for the family, and identifies Alek might be a young carer and linked in to support.

We did a snapshot survey in 2022, which found that on average young carers were caring for three years before being identified. Most concerningly, there were young carers who started caring when they were six but were only identified when they were 16, so 10 years without any support.

What are some of the things that DWP can do in the identification piece? What we see through our network of young carer services is that schools and children's social care are by far the biggest identifiers. It is usually when young carers reach crisis point. What we would like to see is more awareness, first on the education side in further education, universities, training providers, but also with employers. I think there has been a big focus on the back of the Carer's Leave Act on carers who are already in work or maybe wanting to return to work but we feel there needs to be a greater emphasis on how we identify young people moving into work for the first time.

My final point on this is that we recently, as part of our Young Carers Futures programme, delivered a young adult carer awareness raising session specifically to staff working in two of the youth hubs, in two particular geographical areas. Before the session, we asked them what their awareness was around the needs facing young adult carers and their ability to support. Three quarters of staff working there said they didn't understand what the issues facing young adult carers were and around 70% said they didn't know how they might be able to support



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young adult carers. That highlights a real opportunity to replicate that approach across the vast number of youth hubs that we have through the DWP Youth Offer programme.

Dr Lacey: Can I come in on that? I have a couple of points to follow up. Firstly about identification, I think we hear time and time again that what it takes for young carers to be identified is a crisis or a series of crises, if it happens at all. We are really hampered by a general lack of societal awareness of how many young people this is affecting.

On the research that Andy just mentioned—actually there is research that we have done and we are going to be publishing very soon—since the pandemic the estimates of young carers have really increased. We think about 12% of young people are young carers now. That equates to about 1.1 million children across the UK. We are not talking about small numbers here.

Speaking again to the importance of that early identification, we have some research that we are doing with Carers Trust that shows quite clearly that mental health and wellbeing of young people is impacted very quickly after they become a young carer. It points to the importance of early identification but also early support for mental health and trying to alleviate the kind of care burden that many young people are facing.

There is an important inequalities angle to that because we see that that is particularly the case for young people who are in the lowest income households across the UK. Their mental health and wellbeing seems to be particularly affected. We have to do better at supporting and identifying those young people in particular. We know that mental health has a really important knock-on consequence for young people remaining engaged and able to go to school. We know it is an important determinant for going on to things like further and higher education and into work as well.

Then just to speak again to the point about data, I think a lot of people think that the census is an official source of data. It is very good for lots of things but it is very poor for when we are looking at young caring because, as Andy mentioned, it is answered by adults in the household. It is a massive underestimate of the numbers of young carers that we have in society.

It is brilliant that we have now a question about young caring on the school census but that relies on children being known to schools as young carers and being reported by the schools on the school census forms. There are a couple of hurdles there. The research that we do is asking young people themselves. We use big UK representative samples to do that. We are not talking about small numbers of young people here.

Q7 Debbie Abrahams: Good morning, everyone. I want to follow on from that and start with Alek. From your own experience, what is the impact of you caring for your mum on your health and wellbeing?



Alek-Zander Chullan-Hoyte: That is a good question. I think from a younger age, I would say there was definitely times where I couldn't focus as much as I would like to on my education, because there is a lot of time that I have to take out to do responsibilities around the house, take mum to appointments, for example, and then that would allow me to—I wouldn't be able to have opportunities to meet up with my friends, for example, because I haven't got the time to do that. Going towards further education and then into work as well, I think that had a—I don't know, it is funny because you can't really focus so much on the job at hand because you are always thinking in the back of your mind, "Is mum okay? How's she doing?", stuff like that. Especially now she is a little bit more independent but there are times where she could, for example, have an accident. It is a constant worry as to what might happen if I am not there—what might happen if I go on holiday, for example. There is always that constant worry. Then that affects my own mental health as well. I think that definitely has had a negative impact, especially within the last few years or so.

Q8 Debbie Abrahams: Did it change over Covid because you couldn't get out and about? One of the things I did a project on young carers and the impacts on their health many years ago, and I remember that being a real issue, that you would be spending a lot of time caring for your relative or sibling so you are less likely to be able to go out and be with your friends and so on. Then on top of that you have Covid. Did it affect you more during Covid?

Alek-Zander Chullan-Hoyte: I think it did as well. I don't think it affected me as much but I think it affected more how I could look after my mum. With Covid, she was a lot more afraid to go outside because of the virus and the impact from that. I think that may have impacted me in encouraging my mum to go out and be a little bit more independent. It makes me think that I am not doing as well as I could do as a carer, because that should be my role to encourage her, be more confident for her to go out and I can't really do that as well as I would have liked to.

Q9 Debbie Abrahams: Thank you very much, Alek; I am going to move to Becca. I know you have undertaken this longitudinal study and, as you say, that has provided much better quality data with your work around young carers. Do you want to tell us a little bit more about that?

Dr Lacey: Yes, sure. It has been more than one study. We have had a whole programme of research looking at the longer-term impacts of young caring and young adult caring across the UK. Everything that we do uses really great data. It uses data that is funded by the ESRC, called Understanding Society. It is a really big UK-wide study that has followed people since 2009 and it is representative of the UK.

I have already spoken a bit about the prevalence stuff that we have done and that shows that the prevalence of young caring has increased since the pandemic. We thought it was about 8% of young people who had care responsibilities before Covid. Since Covid, it looks like it is now about



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12%, so that has increased. In absolute numbers it is a big increase in the number of people.

There is a big inequalities aspect to young caring. This is some research that we have been doing alongside Carers Trust. A young person's chances of becoming a young carer are not equal. It seems obvious to say that but actually the inequalities are really stark. We are showing that young carers are two times more likely than their peers to come from single parent households. They are four and a half times more likely to come from households where parents are not working. They are two times more likely to come from families where parents hold primary or secondary school level qualifications as their highest level of qualification. They are three times more likely to be living in the most deprived areas of the UK in the index of multiple deprivation.

This is an important context for our discussions this morning about how we can better support young carers to access things like further and higher education, when we are talking about young people who are coming from households where there is going to be little in the way of financial support to realistically access those opportunities. That lack of finances will also be one of the reasons why young people are caring in the first place, particularly those who are caring for a huge number of hours.

Q10 Debbie Abrahams: Does the study cover the impacts on health, including mental health?

Dr Lacey: Yes. I have mentioned that a little bit before. We have longitudinal data and what we can look at, which is quite neat, is we can track individuals over time. We have a study coming out where we have looked at individuals up to 11 years prior to becoming a carer; look at their health, what trajectory they are on, how becoming a carer affects their mental health and then subsequently for about 11 years after. We can look long term and, importantly, we can compare them to their peers who don't become carers. That was the research that I was talking about before. We can see that quick impact on mental health and wellbeing and then also the inequalities in that.

Q11 Debbie Abrahams: What about socioeconomic inequalities? Are there any other cohorts that are particularly adversely affected?

Dr Lacey: Sorry, what do you mean by other cohorts?

Debbie Abrahams: For example, single parents, groups from black and minority ethnic communities and so on. Are they also disproportionately disadvantaged?

Dr Lacey: That is what we are doing right now so I can't tell you too much about those results. We are literally running that this week or next week.

Q12 Debbie Abrahams: There was a study that was published in the *Journal*



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for *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health* in January, which was very much pointing to that as well.

Dr Lacey: Yes. That is a big focus of our work. In social epidemiology, we take that inequalities angle to everything we do. We are hoping that we can pull out the groups of young carers that have particular disadvantages around their longer-term outcomes, looking at different ethnic minority groups, different levels of household finances and economic position, and also looking at gender inequalities will be an important one.

Q13 **Debbie Abrahams:** Just for the record, when did you start your longitudinal study?

Dr Lacey: We have working on young adult carers since—when did we start EUROCARE? 2020. But the data that we use goes back to 2009.

Debbie Abrahams: Very helpful. Thank you so much.

Chair: We are delighted to welcome the Chair of the Education Select Committee this morning.

Q14 **Mr Walker:** Thank you, Chair. I am delighted to be able to join you, thank you for the invitation. I wanted to ask about the 21-hour rule and the impact of that. You mentioned, Alek, that you were unable to get carer's allowance during your studies in further education and higher education because of that. Can anyone on the panel give me a broader view of the impact you feel that has on young carers?

Andy McGowan: Absolutely. I am happy to start. One of the challenges we are seeing with the 21-hour rule is the impact on choices that young carers feel they can make. We are seeing young carers, where potentially the course they want to go on to do—particularly because we see through our young carers services that maybe the immediate time after school, 16, 17, they may well be catching up and redoing because their attendance and attainment in GCSEs has been impacted.

When they are starting to think about, "What choices do I want to make about my future career, what educational choices", we are hearing from young carers where they are having to decide, "If I do this full-time course that is most linked to what I want to do and that is going to serve me better in my knowledge, but I am very mindful that if I do the part-time course, that is less than 21 hours". Of course, they don't look at it as 21 hours and 20 hours, but that is the reality. If they do a part-time course they know they would be eligible for carer's allowance. The thing we have to remember is that the amount of care they provide isn't changed by the 21-hour rule. What is changed is the impact on their ability to study.

The other concern we are seeing is the number of young carers who, alongside education, are also taking up employment because of the lack of financial support, either through the wider DFE mechanisms and the maintenance system but also through carer's allowance. For example, for



Young Carers Action Day, I brought a young carer to Parliament who is currently studying the international baccalaureate, a really intense, full-time programme. She is holding an offer to go to Oxford University next year, which is amazing. She is brilliant but because she doesn't qualify for any financial support at all she is currently holding down three part-time jobs alongside studying the IB. What she is finding in her area is she can't find an employer who can offer enough hours but also the flexibility around her caring role and her studies. For her, understandably, one of her biggest concerns now is, "Am I going to have the time to be able to juggle employment and my caring role for my sister and then also get the offer?" That is then impacting on her mental health. That is the area we are particularly concerned about.

As Becca said, we know young adult carers are more likely than their peers to report severe psychological distress and self-harm and, most alarmingly, make attempts on their own life. Sutton Trust's COSMO study showed that. We haven't looked in as much detail from a policy perspective at what the implications are on the mental health and wellbeing of young carers not having this financial support.

We may well come on to the principles of carer's allowance later but one of the founding principles historically has been about providing support when carers are unable to be in full-time work. That has been one of the founding principles of carer's allowance. For adult carers, it is the balance between caring and working. For young carers, you have to add into the mix the balance between caring, working and education.

Mr Walker: Also qualifications.

Andy McGowan: I think that is the concern, and also the long-term impact if they are not able to stay in education or go on to further and higher education.

Q15 **Mr Walker:** If I think about education policy at the moment, we have the Department for Education increasing hours post-16, a focus on people taking more A-levels, the advanced British standard, potentially broadening the curriculum to be more like that IBacc scenario and T-levels being more demanding than previous vocational qualifications. All of those things are going against the direction of travel when we are only 21 hours of study, aren't they?

Andy McGowan: Absolutely. It is worth reflecting that the education landscape has changed massively since carer's allowance came in. Carer's allowance has not changed in its approach, even though we changed the focus about young people being in compulsory education until 18. The carer's allowance context and the rationale and policy has not kept up with changes in educational policy but also practices. We know many more young people are taking on paid employment, particularly, as Becca was saying, because they don't have the financial support available in the household to give them access to the same opportunities.



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Dr Lacey: I would like to come in to say that the current system for carer's allowance and that 21-hour rule means that there isn't a level playing field for young carers compared to their peers when it comes to opportunities and accessing those opportunities. No young person should be having to choose between financial support and getting an education. We know that education is so important for social mobility in this country and the importance of this stage of the life course for setting people up for careers that they want to have and for their own aspirations.

I think it is really important that we have a point of intervention for trying to break the cycle of the young carers becoming the cared-for of the future, education being a potential route. To come on from that, in some of the longitudinal research that we have done that helps to evidence the difference between young carers and their peers in what they can access, we have found that young carers are 38% less likely to go on to hold a university degree than their peers. This varies considerably by the number of hours that a young carer is providing, to the extent where if somebody is providing 35 or more hours of care per week they are 86% less likely to hold a university degree than their peers. It is a big, extreme difference that exists at the moment and is probably partly a consequence of—

Q16 **Mr Walker:** Certainly from my experience of young carers, working with them in Worcester, these are people who in many respects are more mature than their peers, more organised, having to juggle many things already, and therefore very ready to take on either study or work if they get the opportunity. It is a huge waste of potential if those people don't get to advance.

You mentioned not keeping pace with education policy. Is part of the problem where the ownership sits? You have DWP, which is responsible for carer's allowance, you have the DHSC, who are responsible for care, and also the mental health side of things, which Debbie has brought up already, and you have the Department for Education, who are responsible for the qualifications. Are they just not talking to each other enough, do you feel? Is that part of the issue?

Andy McGowan: For carer's allowance, that is absolutely where the opportunity sits. We will no doubt come on to what is happening in Scotland at the moment. They have revisited what is the purpose of carer's allowance but also, what are we trying to achieve? The Scottish Government acknowledged that the 21-hour rule was a barrier to education and they also decided to focus not on the ability to be in full-time work but the inability to take on any type of work for students. I think that is a very key point. I know the Government's current view on this is that carers who are in education should be supported through the maintenance system, referring in numerous parliamentary answers to the grants and loans system. It is really important to note that in England since 2016-17 there have not been any maintenance grants. We have only a system of loans.



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The other factor to bear in mind is that support does not take into account everything Becca was saying about the increased levels of financial deprivation faced by carers but also the wider educational challenges and barriers they face. There is absolutely the need for a joined-up approach. If we look on the DFE side, we have the 16 to 19 bursary. There is a small number of groups at the national level, so children who have been in care, children who are financially independent and those who are receiving DLA or PIP. The rationale for that is because they do not have the financial support to be able to support them through their education.

If you have no adult in the household who is able to work, if you are in a single parent household when you are caring for your parent's health needs, in reality you don't have someone who is able to financially support. We have seen from the changes in Scotland young carers being able to access some of the opportunities that Alek talked about earlier. That is a real opportunity to look at how do we tackle this situation.

Q17 Mr Walker: Becca, in your studies, do you have any figures for how many young carers manage to access any kind of educational maintenance or support, both in FE and university?

Dr Lacey: Not right now, but I could follow up with the Committee in writing about that. I am very happy to do that.

Q18 Mr Walker: That would be really interesting and certainly interesting from the perspective of our Committee as well. Coming to you, Alek, obviously you managed, which is phenomenal, to get through that post-16 educational piece and to go on to study at university. How did you manage that?

Alek-Zander Chullan-Hoyte: During college there were grants provided to me but that was not just for my care responsibilities, that was because of my household income at the time and I was working alongside that as well. That was mainly the gist of how I managed to survive through that. Then for university, again there was grants and the maintenance loan as well that helped me get through university. It was quite difficult because my university accommodation was very expensive at the time.

Q19 Mr Walker: In London?

Alek-Zander Chullan-Hoyte: No, I was outside of London, I was down in Portsmouth, but even there accommodation was quite expensive. If it wasn't for those grants that I was getting—again, that was not young carer-specific, that was just general grants because of my household income. If it was not for that, alongside some financial support for my mother, it would have been very difficult.

Q20 Mr Walker: It is fantastic that you are able to take those decisions and go down that route. Did you at any point get discouraged because of your caring responsibilities from being able to pursue studies?



Alek-Zander Chullan-Hoyte: Fortunately, I didn't, because my mum was very encouraging of me to pursue my education. I think if it was not for that, it definitely would have been a lot more difficult to follow through with education.

Q21 **Mr Walker:** In the group that supports you, presumably you talk to other young carers in that respect. Do you find any of those people are not pursuing those types of opportunities because of their caring responsibilities?

Alek-Zander Chullan-Hoyte: Absolutely, yes, because everyone's caring responsibilities are different and everyone's opportunities are different as well. It depends, carer to carer, what they would like to do in the future and what their current situation is with their care responsibilities.

Q22 **Mr Walker:** You were 12 years old when you were identified as young carer and, as we said, that is an example of good practice when it comes to children who are carers. What difference, if any, did it make to you at school? Did your school or your college specifically identify you as a young carer and treat you any differently as a result?

Alek-Zander Chullan-Hoyte: That is a very good question. I will have to think about that. I would say no, because I think the concept of what a young carer actually was was not really understood. Going on to how I was identified, if it was not for that social worker, there was not another opportunity even up to now where I would have been identified. Again, if it was not for the social worker, I don't think I would have been identified as a young carer even now.

Schools knowing what young carers actually were was not a concept that was understood. They didn't know what support or assistance teachers could have provided to young carers in the schools, and because of that I didn't benefit from any support at all from the school side. I think they did know that I was a young carer but they didn't provide any support to follow up on that. Going into college, it was a similar sort of thing, especially when mum never really attended parents' evening. They understood the reason why but never really acted on that, if that makes sense.

Q23 **Mr Walker:** It is striking because there is an example of good practice there in that you were identified relatively early, the support was there, but even then the rest of the system did not necessarily dock into that and wasn't able to provide the right support. I know from talking to my schools about these issues that it is a very mixed picture. Some go out of their way to try to identify and support young carers but they are probably the minority.

Alek-Zander Chullan-Hoyte: I think that is changing as well, especially now where teachers are understanding what a young carer is. People like Andy, for example, are going out to schools. Carers Trust and my local Young Carers Project are going into schools and providing training as to



what young carer is and what support might be needed for them. For me, personally, it was too late for that so I never really got a benefit from that.

Q24 Mr Walker: Andy, you wanted to come in earlier. How do we go about providing a better balance between educational and caring responsibilities and provide the opportunity to do both?

Andy McGowan: Absolutely. On the points from earlier, what we have at the moment is a real postcode lottery in access to support in education, particularly further education and higher education, and also those undertaking apprenticeships. Over the past seven or eight years, we have run a programme called Young Carers in Schools alongside the Children's Society. There is that alongside a lot of the policy developments. In fairness to DFE, young carers are much more prominent in DFE policy now. What we still have is that real variation.

The other barrier that we often face—you asked Alek about going on and feeling pressured not to go—is that I often hear from young carers talking about that concept of guilt, saying that they know if they go away to university or if they go into work maybe a parent at home will have to pick up more care. But also then it is the financial challenge of being able to afford to go away to university or to undertake a course from that perspective.

How do we tackle this? Improving support and the life opportunities for young adult carers is a prime example of why we need a cross-Government national carer strategy. As you mentioned, issues around identification of young carers and education sits with the Department for Education and issues around how we support young adult carers to get into employment and benefits obviously comes within DWP. The fact that we have over 115,000 young adults in England and Wales caring for more than 20 hours a week, 30,000 of those are caring for over 50 hours, we are not going to tackle getting these young carers to achieve their potential if we don't get that right within social care. That is a prime example of where you need a cross-government approach to how we tackle this strategically as well.

Q25 Mr Walker: Becca, can I bring you in on that?

Dr Lacey: Andy has just made a really important point. I think we need to take a step back to think about how we reduce that care load. There are excessive levels of care load for some young carers. As Andy says, they are not small numbers of young people. It is thinking about how we can broadly improve population health.

I want to go back to the point about the barriers to accessing university in particular. We are increasingly seeing that young carers are having to make decisions that are not matching what they really want to do. They are driven by the practicalities of, "Can I afford to go and stay away from home? Who is going to look after my mum if that is the case?" I think



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university and university funding also has a very traditional picture of what students look like. Not all students come from middle class, two-parent households and that is particularly not the case for young carers, as we are seeing. That is such an important part of the context.

We have to think about how we better improve access to universities because some of our research has shown that actually—I talked briefly about the really big difference in obtaining a university degree but what we show in that study as well, which is a potential point of intervention, is that where young carers go on to obtain a university degree, we don't see any difference around their access to work. That is a key intervention point. If we can get the financing and equality of opportunity in accessing the careers that young carers want to pursue that, I think that would make a really big difference.

Q26 Mr Walker: That is very striking. One thing that may be helpful in that respect is, with the lifelong learning entitlement, people being able to take courses in a more piecemeal fashion and engage with that. I think that would be worth exploring with universities.

Are there any universities that stand out in their approach to young carers or their willingness to engage with this issue and make space? I have frequent meetings with people like the Purpose Coalition who say that they are very interested in supporting social mobility. This strikes me as a good area for them to focus on.

Andy McGowan: Yes. We host a network called the Young Carers Alliance, which is a network of over 200 organisations and about 600 individuals. We have seen a number of universities joining the alliance and also looking at what they do in their own institution. We are a long way behind where we have been in schools. From a school's perspective, it has been on the radar nationally for, as I said, about seven or eight years. Young carers have only just been added to the equality of opportunity risk register at the Office for Students this January. That was through work that myself and Becca did to help make that case, because they were not included on the first iteration.

There is definitely the appetite there for universities. It is how do we get the consistency. One of the young adult carers who I recently brought to Parliament was looking at different universities and she typed in "carer" to one of the universities websites and it came back, "Did you mean career"? That is a really tangible, simple example of how that could put off a young adult carer, particularly if you have had good support at school or college to then look like there is no support available. Getting more consistency around support in higher education is key. I think that is where the role of OfS can help with ensuring that that change is moving forward.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. We are a bit up against the clock now, which I apologise for, but bear that in mind.

Q27 Nigel Mills: I am sorry for being late. Alek, what support would have



made a difference to you in school? What would have helped you through all that? Was there anything in particular you wish you could have had?

Alek-Zander Chullan-Hoyte: I would have to really think about that. It would have been nice to have a bit of mutual understanding and support where my caring role was better understood and the schools could have helped by, for example, providing maybe a bit more respite or relaxation on getting into school on time or with homework tasks and exams even.

Q28 **Chair:** Did you ever have to miss school?

Alek-Zander Chullan-Hoyte: Not too much, thankfully. I think there may have been times where I had to. It was a long time ago. I am trying to remember off the top of my head, but I think I may have had to leave school a bit early to go to hospital with my mum. I remember when I was moving house, during the middle of my ninth year of education, I had to take about a week off school to help my mum move furniture between houses. They were not that far apart but I had to take time off just to do that. I didn't get support through that but it was—sorry, I am butchering the answer here. That is an example where I would have had a bit of time off for that. Could you repeat your question again, sorry, Nigel?

Q29 **Nigel Mills:** I asked you what support would have made a difference, but I could reframe it now by asking do you think you missed out on anything or there was stuff that you couldn't do because you were a carer?

Alek-Zander Chullan-Hoyte: That is a difficult one to answer. To be honest, I can't think of too much. I think just because I did relatively okay through schools but I can only speak for myself, I can't really speak for other carers as well. The support that carers need in general depends from carer to carer because everyone is different, everyone's caring responsibilities are different. I was quite fortunate. It is a bit weird but not having enough support didn't detriment me too much. It still would have been nice to have the support if there were times where caring was difficult for me or there were challenges in my overall wellbeing. I think that would have been the most important aspect of support that has been missed.

Andy McGowan: When we do surveys of young carers, consistently what they say will help as a top priority is having more support in education. The thing they say practically would make a difference is for every school to have a young carers lead or a student carers lead, so that if mum's rushed into hospital at 2 o'clock in the morning, they don't have to go and explain to their geography teacher, their PE teacher, their history teacher. Having a young carers lead who can help co-ordinate who needs to be told, what support, what flexibility can make a real difference. Then also having a young carer policy that sets out what support is available.

Covering a lot of the things that Alek said about flexibility and deadlines, access to mobile phones is a key issue in schools at the moment. There are those practical things. It means that young carers know that this



support is available if they are struggling rather than things getting to crisis point and then having to try to play catch-up. That is for schools but also colleges and universities. We have called for all education settings to be required to have that lead and policy. When DFE next update keeping children safe in education, that is one of the things that we would welcome seeing included in that.

Q30 Nigel Mills: What about your financial situation, Alek? Did you struggle financially because of the caring you were doing? Would it have helped if you had had access to some level of carer's allowance?

Alek-Zander Chullan-Hoyte: It definitely would have helped a bit because it would have decreased the financial dependency on my mum and also would have allowed me to work a bit less so I could focus on the care responsibilities. Thankfully, it wasn't too much of a detriment per se but it definitely would have been supportive if I had had more financial support available to me.

Q31 Nigel Mills: Is that a typical experience, Andy?

Andy McGowan: Yes, absolutely. In our latest survey last year, actually for the first time, which is why it is really striking, getting more support with finances and money was one of the top priorities for young carers across the UK. What we see in practice, during the Covid pandemic and since then, is two types of need for financial support. One is potentially one-off support and financial support. Their laptop has broken and no one is able to work from that perspective. We have seen the issue with siblings where their sibling—potentially you have an autistic brother—has damaged the only device they have in the household. Not being able to replace that can have a big impact on being able to take part in education and access opportunities. We also see a group of young carers where it is ongoing financial pressures.

Alek mentioned earlier about not being able to access the opportunities that his peers might be able to, whether that is leisure activities, socialising, going out with friends or even potentially purchasing the textbooks they need for that for their course. That is what we have seen from the introduction of the young carer grant in Scotland. One of the biggest benefits of that has been young carers in the evaluation said they have been able to access opportunities that previously they were not able to.

The final point is what Alek said about reducing the need or the pressure to take on more employment alongside education and caring. That is key when we look at that mental health impact as well.

Q32 Siobhan Baillie: Alek, you mentioned that you worked during college. Did you work through university as well?

Alek-Zander Chullan-Hoyte: Mainly during the summer.

Q33 Siobhan Baillie: What course did you do?



Alek-Zander Chullan-Hoyte: I did law and business. At university, right?

Siobhan Baillie: Yes.

Alek-Zander Chullan-Hoyte: Law and business, yes.

Q34 **Siobhan Baillie:** What are you doing now? Where are you working right now?

Alek-Zander Chullan-Hoyte: Right now I am a paralegal in a law firm in the City.

Q35 **Siobhan Baillie:** That is deeply impressive and a credit to your mum as well for encouraging you. How did you find the transition as a young carer into work? Did you receive any support services to that?

Alek-Zander Chullan-Hoyte: It was a bit difficult. I think because I was working in retail before and because they knew my mum personally, they understood what flexibility I needed. Going into the legal industry, where I am now, was a bit more difficult because they didn't really understand or come to me about any additional support that I may need because of my caring role. Thankfully, the pandemic has helped where flexible working has come into play, because with flexible working I could, for example, work from home a little bit more often. I could take a little bit more time, for example starting work later or finishing work early so I can go to an appointment. Flexible working has helped a lot with adjusting for my caring role. Where I am now, they understand and acknowledge my role as a young carer. Accessing a bit more flexibility for working, is not an issue because they understand that role, but if I didn't have that flexibility I think it would have been very challenging.

Q36 **Siobhan Baillie:** Well, lawyers are odd, and I know that because I am one, so I wouldn't expect them to be the best. Did you feel able to talk about being a young carer in your interview, for example, to be a paralegal? Was that something that you felt comfortable talking about at the early stages of trying to get the job?

Alek-Zander Chullan-Hoyte: That is a good question. I don't think I mentioned it in interview, just because it was a line of questioning that did not come up. If it did come up I think it would be a little bit challenging to talk about because it may subconsciously impact my ability, whether I would be suited for the job. Yes, that is what I would say about that.

Q37 **Siobhan Baillie:** A lot of parents don't want to talk about their kids or caring responsibilities. I think it is something we all have to change across the board, so don't feel bad about that. Did you get any formal support? Did you know about the DWP Youth Offer, about helping young carers into work?

Alek-Zander Chullan-Hoyte: No.



Q38 **Siobhan Baillie:** Did anyone mention the fact that the jobcentres are set up to help young carers into jobs?

Alek-Zander Chullan-Hoyte: No.

Siobhan Baillie: Andy, do you want to talk about that?

Andy McGowan: Yes. I think that is what we have seen. We talked earlier about the prominence of young carers within education policy, but in looking at youth employment and what barriers we need to try to tackle to support young people into employment, caring responsibilities is not one that is coming up regularly. As I mentioned, the awareness-raising session we did for staff from the youth hubs was a very good test for us to see what the level of awareness is. The fact is that three quarters of staff in those settings providing that support on the frontline said they didn't have an understanding of what the needs were or, more concerning, how they might support the young adult carers they do identify.

I think there is a real opportunity through the youth hubs, but also in youth employability, work coaches too. How do we ensure they have that awareness, but also when we are thinking about the systems and processes that are in place, are they asking the question of whether they are a carer and then what are they doing with that if they do? I think there is a real opportunity there. How do we make sure that if a young adult carer is identified, say through the jobcentre, they are then linked into their local carer support? We heard from Alek earlier the difference that can make. We are very keen to see an increased focus on young adult carers, given what we see in the data now.

If we want to tackle youth unemployment—and I think there is collective and widespread support for that—we will not do that unless we get it right for young adult carers. In our survey last year we found that over 45% of young adult carers say they struggle to balance caring and employment. Understanding how employers can better support young adult carers is key because we have seen a real focus on flexibility of employers through legislation recently, but when we speak to young carers, many of them are working in sectors where flexibility is expected of the employee. They are on shift work, they are paid hourly and so I think there are real opportunities there to increase the awareness.

The final point I would like to make about the opportunities, obviously the Committee will be very aware of the big focus on the issue of overpayments and earnings thresholds within carer's allowance at the moment. Earlier this year we saw one of the largest increases in wages for young people. We saw 21 and 22-year-olds brought into the national living wage for the first time. Both of those developments are absolutely welcome, but I think there is also a risk of unintended consequences.

For carers aged 23 and above, the amount of time that they can work this year compared to last year has gone down by eight minutes to put



them over the earnings limits. For an 18 to 20-year-old in employment, it has gone down by an hour. For a young adult carer who is receiving carer's allowance, all they need to do is stay on at work for one extra hour and inadvertently they find themselves over the earnings threshold. That is an area where we are very keen to make sure they are not forgotten in this conversation.

Q39 Siobhan Baillie: I am interested in your view on the DWP Youth Offer and whether you have any comments on that and whether people know about that. Separately, just on the threshold, because we are looking at the earnings threshold and income limits and things like that, in the previous session—and forgive me, I can't remember the lady's name, but she was brilliant. The CSJ was talking about this on the panel. She was looking at having an hours limit rather than earnings limit because it would allow entrepreneurial people and high earners to still be carers without having to stop work. Have you ever looked at that as a comparison?

Dr Lacey: No.

Siobhan Baillie: She said it was happening across Europe in some countries.

Dr Lacey: I am very sorry, I don't feel I can comment on this. It is not something that we have focused on in our research. Ours is more about the longer-term social—

Siobhan Baillie: No, that is all right. I was just interested. Thank you.

Chair: Thank you all very much. That concludes the questions we want to put to you. We are very grateful. You have given us a fascinating session of evidence. We particularly want to congratulate you, Alek, on managing all of this and completing your education and getting into work as well. Well done and thank you for being willing to tell us about that.

Alek-Zander Chullan-Hoyte: Thank you.

Chair: The Committee is suspended. Thank you, if you would like to step down, we will invite the Minister in to talk about these things as well.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Mims Davies MP, Andrew Latto and Vikki Knight.

Q40 Chair: Welcome back to the Work and Pensions Select Committee for our evidence session on carers. We are very grateful to the Minister, Mims Davies, for joining us this morning. Mims, can you introduce your team?

Mims Davies: Yes, good morning, Chair. Before I even start, may I send my condolences to Lord Field's family? Frank was an expert on welfare and an incredible campaigner, constituency MP, Minister, peer and Select Committee Chair and he will be greatly missed by us all. I will also say on



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a personal level that when I joined the Department in 2019, just before the end of his stint on this Committee, I evaded his forensic scrutiny, so of course I welcome yours this morning. I know my private office in particular paid tribute to him, some of those who were there at the time. May I pass to Vikki and Andrew to introduce themselves?

Vikki Knight: Thank you very much. I think the whole Department sends their sympathies. I am the director for fraud, error and debt strategy.

Andrew Latto: Good morning, everyone. I am Andrew Latto. I am the Deputy Director for carers' benefits policy. May I add my commiserations to Mr Field's family? I worked for him when he was a Minister. Lovely man.

Chair: Thank you for what you said about Frank. We have paid tribute to him already this morning and I am grateful to you for doing so as well.

Mims Davies: Indeed.

Q41 **Chair:** As I think you know, Minister, we have heard that it is quite a struggle to survive on carer's allowance and the carer element in Universal Credit. Why is carer's allowance is less than, for example, jobseeker's allowance? Do you think the current rate is adequate and do you recognise that there is quite a strong case for a higher rate to reflect the value of carers' contributions to society?

Mims Davies: Thank you, Chair, and thank you for the opportunity to talk about carer's allowance today. I think for anybody who watched the Westminster Hall debate—indeed, Chair, you took part in it—this is an area of interest for all of us. If we are not carers now, we are likely to need care ourselves. I certainly have come from a caring family, when my dad was made disabled when I was 11. I know you spoke to young carers about their experience earlier. Of course we must rightly pay tribute and thank our carers for all they do day in, day out. I mentioned on Monday that it is challenging and hard. It is precious time with your loved one, but it is incredibly difficult. I also wanted to pay tribute to the team at DWP, largely in the north-west, which provides financial support to 1 million unpaid carers through the carer's allowance day in, day out. As you can imagine, this is capturing national interest and rightly so. As I say, no one is immune to this, no constituency MP and certainly not this Department. I think even this week we spoke about your time in the Department back in 2008.

Carer's allowance has been going pretty much since I was born. I spoke to two previous Ministers of the Department this morning and said, "Is there something I am missing? Is there a miracle out there that makes this more simple, given a complex mixed and changed picture?" I think the Government recognise and value the contribution that carers make. Carer's allowance ultimately is to provide a measure of financial support and recognition for people who are not able to work full-time because of their caring responsibilities and the time they need and want to be with



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their loved one. It has never been intended to be a carer's wage or indeed a payment for particular services of caring. It is not intended to replace lost or forgone earnings. I think it is important to set that out.

The current rate of carer's allowance is £81.90 per week. Since 2010 it has increased from £53.90, providing an additional just under £1,500 a year through carer's allowance. The current earnings limit for those in receipt of carer's allowance who are able to maintain contact with the employment market is £151 a week, and that is net of the allowance expenses. In addition to carer's allowance, carers on low incomes can claim income-related benefits such as Universal Credit or pension credit and those benefits can be paid to carers at a higher rate than those without caring responsibilities through the carer element, the additional amount for carers respectively.

Of course we have, rightly—and I am very proud of this—supported carers since 2010 by giving them credits to protect their future pensions, certainly when you are making sacrifices and doing the right thing. I am very pleased that we, as the Government, brought that in in 2010. I hope that covers some of the initial points, Chair.

Q42 Chair: It is striking that carer's allowance is about £10 a week less than jobseeker's allowance. What is the reason for that difference?

Mims Davies: I think I have tried to explain that it is a contribution, as a measure to what carers do, but it is not intended to be a replacement of a wage. Andrew and I have discussed this at length. How long have you been in the Department, Andrew?

Andrew Latto: Thirty years.

Mims Davies: I want to say at the outset to the Committee and those watching, my own experience, my own interest in this area, paying tribute to the Carers Trust, Carers UK and everybody who does this work, young and old: I have been there and I get it. It is a complex, difficult and challenging thing to do. We don't want to create a system that is even more complex. This is not perfection, but since I have taken this policy role, it has been a great interest of mine. I have said that to Carers UK. I have had a good relationship with it since I came into the House. One of the reasons I am here is because of caring and the impact of that in my life and my knowledge. I am meeting with Carers UK shortly to find a way that works for the whole of the mixed picture.

Andrew, to the Chair's point, would it be right to say I have been challenging you and you have been challenging me on what the answer is and what we can find?

Andrew Latto: The technical answer is that when it was established in 1976, the jobseeker's allowance was based on your National Insurance record. You pay the contributory Jobseeker's Allowance. You pay two years of National Insurance, I think it is, and in return you get a



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Jobseeker's Allowance for six months without any means test. Carer's allowance is not based on your national insurance record, so it is not based on what you have previously paid in. It is also not means tested. The original signal was people who have paid into the national insurance fund should get a premium for having done so. That was the original cause for the £10 difference.

Q43 Chair: It is probably an outdated basis, isn't it, given all the changes there have been since 1976?

Mims Davies: Having philosophical questions on this yesterday as I was preparing for the Committee, I genuinely am very interested in Committee's views on these issues. I know the previous Committee looked at this in 2019. When I joined the Department when Amber Rudd was in the hot seat as Secretary of State, she made some significant changes and there is interest from there. If there was a simple answer, I think many that have gone before would be looking at it again now.

I am also equally aware that we have to get value for the taxpayer. We have to do the right thing. We are a benefit-administering Department. We are not looking to put people into difficulty. My focus is on progression, jobs, a completely focused way of supporting the most vulnerable and those people who do the best for society, having that safety net for people. I think any country, any government will be struggling with how you do this best and how you help people in those very individual circumstances.

Q44 Nigel Mills: Do you think it is enough to live on, Minister?

Mims Davies: This is why I think keeping people in the labour market, where possible, where they can combine some caring duties with some of their work—we want to encourage people to do so. The earnings limit in carer's allowance is designed to enable carers to maintain a link, where possible, with the labour market and give them greater financial independence. Caring can be lonely and isolating and work can be a positive outlet. If you can get some balance between your hours and your caring, this is a positive way for people to keep connected to the labour market and get that wider support.

I encourage employers, and I know that some, for example, are paying carer's leave and are having very positive engagements. I was in an engagement with businesses in the City yesterday that were actively doing that. I think it is job design and understanding. As I said earlier in the Committee, chances are, if you talk to anybody, they have some level of caring or commitment going on and it is only ever growing.

The earnings limit has increased from £139 to £151 a week, net of allowable expenses, and that is up by 50% since 2010. The earnings limit is used ultimately to determine whether or not someone in receipt of carer's allowance is considered to be gainfully employed, so it is about striking the balance between how people actively combine their caring



duties with some work, where we want to encourage people to do that. But of course there are other interventions, whether it is the UC side of things, the Household Support Fund and of course all the help that we have been giving during the cost of living challenge that we have had.

Of course enabling carers to earn more through work while keeping their carer's allowance is part of the way that we help people to balance that, Mr Mills, but I have been there. When you have a financial shock and you go into caring, it is very difficult to adjust. I totally understand that. That is what Carers UK is making very clear to all of us.

- Q45 **Nigel Mills:** There was quite a lot there, but it was not quite on the question I asked. We have recommended previously that the Government should do some kind of rebasing exercise on benefits to check they are roughly in the right place and people can afford to live. I don't think many of us think that a basic level of income support is generous, and yet we are giving carers £10 a week less. I know we are not trying to pay them for their caring and we know it is kind of like a gesture. It is not meant to be, but are we not putting them in an impossible position where they have to care, maybe they cannot get anything else, but we know this is not quite enough for them? It just seems to be a strange position to be in.

Mims Davies: Andrew has spelt it out, and I tried to at the beginning of the Committee, that this is a contribution to the caring responsibilities and that it is not a wage. The primary purpose is to provide a measure of financial support, but I think we have always been at pains at the Department to say that—and everybody lives differently, everybody has different responsibilities—it was never intended to be a carer's wage or replacement for services directly. Carers on low incomes can claim income-related benefits, such as Universal Credit or pension credit. We have tried to make the system work as well as possible, but this is a growing group. As I said earlier, anybody who thinks that they might be immune to it needs to think again. This is something that is happening all across the globe.

- Q46 **Nigel Mills:** You mentioned they may be entitled to other benefits. The position is not brilliantly clear or easy with the overlapping benefit rules or the underlying entitlement. We had somebody quite graphically explain that you have to try to explain to somebody claiming a state pension that they need to claim carer's allowance, knowing that they won't get a single penny of carer's allowance, because if they do get carer's allowance they might get slightly more pension credit than they currently get because they otherwise wouldn't be entitled to it. Trying to explain that to somebody as a logical thing to do is not that straightforward. Is there a way we can at least communicate this better or make that process a bit easier?

Mims Davies: I am sure Andrew will want to come in on this, because again this has been something we have been thrashing out extensively since I have taken on this portfolio. On the policy and how it works with



pensionable age, I understand that. I think one point that you make, Mr Mills, is about communication and getting ahead of this and helping people. It would be fair to say to the Committee, although we send the uprating letter and we engage with people, we send text messages—and Vikki and I have discussed this—it is how we can get ahead of the curve using the VEP system. Obviously there are some brilliant advocates and support that we have in this area, but everybody's situation is different. "Please contact us if your circumstances change."

Andrew, do you want to pick up on that pension point? I know that is a frustration many people have. I have thrown that around as well. Can we explain to those watching and the Committee why we are in this scenario?

Andrew Latto: Speaking as a technician, I will outline that there are three benefits in play. There is Universal Credit, and 60% of full-time carers who are entitled through the benefits system, which is 1 million of them, would have capital or income levels at such a low level that they claim Universal Credit. For those 60% of the working-age population who are full-time carers, they may claim carer's allowance as well, but it is subtracted from their UC and the UC rules basically are the ones that apply. Carer's allowance for people under state pension age is a benefit that supports those who have capital or income that puts them above the UC threshold, but none the less they are providing care, which means their earnings potential is reduced. That is a reflection of that reduction.

It does get quite complicated and this something we have looked at on numerous occasions to try to sort this through. When you reach state pension age, the state pension is also paid to you as a recognition of the fact your earnings potential has been reduced because you have probably left the labour market on grounds of age. We are not compensating you twice through giving you both a state pension and the carer's allowance. However, technically we do ask you claim carer's allowance because that means we can conduct an assessment in your pension credit claim, if you are a low-income pensioner, and give you the carer's premium.

It is not just the financial charge; it is the emotional charge. That is something I am quite focused on. When you reach state pension age, it looks like the Government don't care that you are a carer any more because we are taking away the benefit that has the word "carer" attached to it. There is something there about empathetic communication. It is not too difficult to explain we are not giving you two payments for the same thing, but it is quite difficult and I understand that myself. Approaching state pension age myself and having caring responsibilities, I would probably be quite offended by that message.

Q47 **Nigel Mills:** It is quite hard to explain why you would claim a benefit you know you won't get. That is a bit confusing.

Minister, you gave us, quite rightly, a long answer about the importance of earnings and staying in work and staying in touch with the labour



market. Can you just explain to us perhaps why the earnings limit is there and why it is set where it is and works how it works?

Mims Davies: The earnings limit is designed to determine whether someone is in gainful employment or not. Successive Governments have found that a monetary figure is the easiest way to measure this. As suggested by a previous witness, I think there would be some difficulties in moving from an earnings limit to an hours limit under current arrangements. We are coming to increasingly rely on data collected by HMRC and have no regular hours worked information as a way to do that. I think it is the balance of being clear that, to be carers, people will have to take an impact on their earning capacity and the hours that they can work to be a carer, as Andrew has explained, but equally to try to keep them in touch with the labour market.

I know you heard from young carers earlier. Whether it is in education, or perhaps that continues as they move towards working age, it is trying to also help those people to go back into the labour market when their caring comes to an end and not necessarily have to choose fully between not working at all and being able to balance work. I fully appreciate that not everyone is able to be in that position. They may have health conditions themselves; they may be claiming PIP; there may be other things going on with them individually. Again, this will always be about individual situations of both the carer and the person they are caring for.

Q48 **Nigel Mills:** Do you think that the cliff edge is a good idea? It does put some people in a strange position where they get offered a bonus, but they can't have it or there are some extra hours that could cause a real problem or they are scrabbling around making sure they have paid the right pension contribution in this period to make sure they are under. It just creates a level of uncertainty and complexity that is probably not driving behaviours we want, is it?

Mims Davies: I think this whole Conservative and previous coalition Government have worked very hard to get away from a cliff edge with bringing in Universal Credit. If the carer is earning more £151 a week net, they are classed as in gainful employment, therefore not eligible for carer's allowance. Tapers are designed to make sure that work pays when it comes to means-tested benefits, so they already work well for carers who are claiming Universal Credit. As I spelt out in the debate on Monday, 90% of those receiving the UC carer element and declaring earnings have a work allowance for those with either a disability or a child. A cost-neutral taper would need to begin at a lower level of the current earnings limit. In reality—and maybe Andrew wants to come in on this—we are concerned that perhaps introducing an allowance for some might introduce a disincentive to work for carers on the lowest incomes as well as significantly complicating the current carer's allowance scheme.

As I said in the debate on Monday, we are keeping this under review and trying to understand this and find out how we can do something that does not create more administration, more cost and more burden on



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carers, but works best in the largesse of cases. I don't know, Andrew, if there is anything I missed there.

Andrew Latto: I will add one pragmatic point. The conditions for entitlement to carer's allowance is caring for 35 hours a week. That is a very big. When you are caring for 35 hours a week for somebody who is receiving a disability benefit, obviously the Government need to be concerned that that person is getting the care that is being provided. What we can't do is police. We police the 35 hours a week at the beginning of the claim, so we write to the disabled person and say, "This person says that they are caring for you for 35 hours a week. Are they?" and that is the test. We don't test that again.

We have a proxy through the earnings to assess, "Okay, this person now has earnings above a certain amount," and I accept the amount can be discussed, but that is your way of testing that the person is still providing such a high level of care that their earnings potential is quite low. It is something that we can, to a degree—and we will come on to this in a moment—automate through HMRC because we can see when people's gross earnings have changed, so that allows us to do something to prompt the person to tell us. "Is there something going on? Do you need to tell us something? Have your circumstances changed?"

Mims Davies: We talked about it on Monday. It is where we can see a pattern of hours. I am very conscious that many carers are on zero-hour contracts because that is what suits them. I am very conscious as well about being committed to certain hours, for example if whoever you are caring for is unwell and you need to do things differently, so this is why these kind of contracts can be suitable for some people in some situations. For example, you might be working in retail and because of a holiday you are asked to cover a couple of extra hours that week. There is a pattern where you do a bit more here and there, but you are generally doing the hours as a whole. Obviously our systems and our knowledge and our understanding is built in to try to make sure that that works for the individual who is doing the care, very mindful of individualised work situations and caring situations. I think the more we can do that the better.

Q49 **Mr Walker:** Following up on Nigel's point about pensions, one category of people the Education Select Committee is looking at closely in the inquiry on children's social care is kinship carers. It is very clear a lot of those are grandparents, a lot of those are people who might be living with at least one person in the household on a pension. It strikes me as particularly difficult, particularly pernicious, the way that all the systems work for that group when they are taking care of children, who are often in very difficult circumstances, and they are not able to get the support that would be available to parents of working age. Has DWP been engaged in the work that has gone on with a cross-Government kinship strategy and are there any changes you have considered to look at how to support that particular group?



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Mims Davies: I am aware of the work cross-Government. I very much welcome that and the work that kinship carers do. I am not sure if there is anything specific that has come across my desk in the time I have been here, but I am very happy to take that away. Andrew, is it something you have been leaning into?

Andrew Latto: I can say one thing about that. There are several thousand pensioners on child tax credits and we think many of them are probably kinship carers. We are looking now, because tax credits are closing, at where we can accommodate them in the DWP benefits system. I know there will be a lot of kinship carers. Essentially, the support in the benefits system comes with who gets paid the child benefit, so if the child benefit is paid to the grandparent as the kinship carer things should fall into place. If it isn't, then probably not.

Mims Davies: Thank you, that is very welcome. We have a cross-Government group that will focus on disability employment with DFE and DCMS, particularly on young people. There are fora where I am able to take this. I have actively, as the Minister in the Department, tried to get more of that cross-Government cohesion. I know, as an experienced parliamentarian and previous Minister, that you know that is important and we must deliver on that.

Q50 **Nigel Mills:** In your continual reviews, have you thought about linking the earnings limit to a multiple of the national living wage, so that each year it stays as a certain number of hours working at that role than it being a slightly more haphazard way of increasing it?

Mims Davies: I will be completely honest with the Committee, I am looking at absolutely everything that works. As the national living wage has changed, it is the group of people who are encapsulated in caring support—we have mentioned kinship caring—and the growing number of young people with wider support and people 50-plus with musculoskeletal needs. Again, my mind is open on this, about how it works with paying the benefits the right way, the least complicated way, but reaching people in the best way so that they can continue in work and try to deal with that cliff edge. If it was easy, none of us would be sitting here again trying to fix this. I strongly welcome suggestions, both inside and outside of this committee room, of how we do it better. I am working with Minister Whately on wider issues.

Q51 **Nigel Mills:** It is quite easy to say the earnings limit will always be at least 14 hours at the national living wage or 16 hours at the national living wage. That is not complicated, is it?

Mims Davies: Yes, but that comes with a degree of a price tag. Equally, I want people to stay in work and be able to work. Andrew, why isn't it as simple as—

Andrew Latto: Technically it is very simple to do exactly that. It would, as the Minister says, cost money. That is one part of it. The other thing



we have to bear in mind is that this would only help the 40% of carer's allowance recipients who are not on Universal Credit.

Mims Davies: Exactly.

Andrew Latto: You would be spending public money on people who are a little bit further up the income distribution.

Mims Davies: For me, I am very mindful that any gear change on this, which is positive and welcome, has to work for the whole as much as possible.

Q52 **Nigel Mills:** It is just slightly bizarre, isn't it? I am caring my 35-plus hours; I have my 12-hour a week job. The Government puts the national living wage up, my employer puts my pay up and now I lose my carer's allowance. I have done nothing; I have not changed anything at that point.

Mims Davies: Yes, which is exactly why, with Minister Whately and the work that we do in the Joint Work and Health Unit and the impact that family carers have in taking the wider responsibility and challenge from wider society and the NHS, I am very mindful of that. I have put something together, which I will continue to try to move forward, if that is deemed the best way. As I am trying to very clearly say to the Committee, there is wide-ranging thought and insight on how to do this best.

Q53 **Chair:** Can we come on to the question of overpayments that arise in the sort of situation that Nigel has described? You have referred to this Committee's report—or the predecessor Committee's report—from 2019 about this. It looks from the data as though there has not been much progress in resolving the overpayment problem over the last five years. Would you say there has been progress or—

Mims Davies: A few things. First, I want carers and those watching and those who they are caring for to be mindful that obviously things that are in the national press will be concerning. We are a very large Department, 80,000-plus people doing a huge amount of benefit administration. There will always be things that go wrong and we are always very sorry for that. We want to take an individual, tailored approach to any situation. In this area, 95% go right. Vikki, I think we are very mindful—

Chair: I am wondering whether there has been progress in the last five years on this particular problem.

Mims Davies: I think so, but for those people where maybe it isn't the case that it has gone right for them, they won't necessarily be feeling that.

Chair: I understand that.



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Mims Davies: When I say, "Yes, everything is fine, of course it is better," I really do not want people to think that anybody is going away thinking that that is the case.

Chair: What is the progress? What has happened in—

Mims Davies: As I say, 95% of things are going right. Vikki, do you want to just drill down particularly—

Vikki Knight: Let's say a couple of things. I will ask Andrew to come in on the VEP side of it because I think that is an area to do, but I just want to reiterate what the Minister has said on two things that are important. Where there is an overpayment and people have experienced an overpayment, we actively encourage those people to contact the Department if they are finding those overpayments a struggle to repay. As you know, Chair—you have done a lot of work with us on debt recovery—in the letters that we send we offer individual repayment plans to those individuals. I want everybody who may be scared by the reports that we have heard to know that we have 2,500 staff in debt recovery to do that. Obviously a priority is how we stop people building up those individual overpayments.

Chair: It is the progress on that that I was keen to hear about.

Vikki Knight: Absolutely. The first thing that I will say before Andrew talks about the data that we have from HMRC, for anybody listening, if there is any change of circumstances, they are the individuals that know very best how their circumstances have changed. Again, we actively encourage people on any benefit where those circumstances have changed to please contact us. Andrew, did you want to talk about the VEP side?

Andrew Latto: Can I say something on VEPs, which is the reporting of earnings and pensions, income from HMRC? I will describe the process quickly. If somebody claims carer's allowance, on an average week we have about 7,000 carer's allowance claims. We notify HMRC and we say, "Can you tell us if this person has any earnings?" That is for all people on carer's allowance, not just those who report earnings. We get a report from HMRC that there has been an alert on that person's earnings, for example if they have earnings that they haven't told us about, if it is the point of claim, or they have earnings that have now gone up above the £151 limit. Those earnings do not take account of the care costs that you can subtract. We have to call them to say, "We see your earnings have gone up—"

Q54 **Chair:** Can I just check: do you request that from HMRC when somebody applies for carer's allowance?

Andrew Latto: Yes, we add them to the list of people getting carer's allowance.

Q55 **Chair:** All right, but these VEP alerts are generated automatically, are



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they? Do you get one every month that somebody who is receiving carer's allowance is earning more than the earnings limit?

Andrew Latto: We get about 100,000 notifications a year that there has been something with the earnings, either—

Q56 **Chair:** What I am trying to understand is: do you just get an alert at the start when this person is earning or do you get it every month?

Mims Davies: No, it is a regular feed.

Q57 **Chair:** You get it every single month, right. The big puzzle here is how is it, then, that people accrue overpayments of up to £20,000 or more if the Department is being told every single month that they should not be getting carer's allowance?

Andrew Latto: Every month when we get them in we apply an algorithm that calculates the ones that are mostly to be generating overpayments for various different reasons, like they have not told us they have any earnings or the earnings have gone above the £151. We contact those people to say, "Something has happened with your earnings. That may be perfectly acceptable because you may have care costs that you can subtract from your earnings, but can you just let us know if your earnings have changed so that we can calculate whether you are still entitled to carer's allowance?"

The issue will be if they have been on carer's allowance for a long time, particularly if they were there before VEPs existed—we have only been getting VEPs recently—and they may have built up overpayments over quite a long period by the time that we have uncovered them. It is something we are seeing in the press reporting at the moment.

Q58 **Chair:** Indeed. Wouldn't it be an idea for the Department to write to everybody? Once this alert is received saying, "It looks as though this person is earning more than being eligible for carer's allowance," the Department should write to them and say, "There is a question here. Are you still eligible?" just so that they know, because people seem just not to be aware. It happens by accident, as Nigel has described, and then years later they are clobbered, they are prosecuted because they have had a massive overpayment.

Mims Davies: I think Vikki will come in on this. If I may say a couple of things, Chair, you asked, "Are things better?" One thing I would reflect and one of the points that is important for the Committee and those watching to understand is this. I think it is better in the fact that some of the changes that came in in 2019 have a more individual approach—that we are doing things in a more individualised way. The way that I have been describing it is my style and how I would want this to be administered in the engagement that we have with those who are caring. I was here a few weeks ago on safeguarding appointees, visiting officers, getting things right and always having the individual needs at the heart of this. The latest national stats show that the rate of overpayments due



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to fraud and error fell to 3.6% in 2022-23 and that is a 10% drop from 2021-22, from 4%.

Q59 **Chair:** That is in carer's allowance, is it?

Mims Davies: Yes. The overpayment rate for carer's allowance is 5.2%. Perfect timing for Vikki because I am conscious she is responsible for fraud and error, so it could be in a few weeks we are back here, "Why is fraud and error so large? Why are you pushing to penalise individuals who are doing the right thing?" Sorry, do come back.

Q60 **Chair:** Let me just pick up Andrew's point about the VEPs. You said that you look at them and see which are the most likely to be problematic and then you will pursue those. What are the business rules to determine whether a VEP alert should be actioned?

Andrew Latto: Broadly speaking, it is a carer's allowance case where we think there are no earnings but they are showing up as earnings or a carer's allowance case where there are earnings but we think it is below £151 and the VEP feed is telling us it is more than £151. You have also asked though for the other ones that we don't action, should we just write to everybody. I can probably safely say that is a very legitimate question and clearly will be something we can look at.

Mims Davies: Yes. On the earnings point, Vikki, it is 2.1%—

Vikki Knight: Just for the record, let's put the figures right. At a global level, we are at 3.6%. I am sure this Committee is aware of that, and we are due for the updated statistics on fraud and error for next year. For the previous year it will be next month, on 16 May.

Q61 **Chair:** Is that the global or the carer's allowance?

Vikki Knight: Global. For the carer's allowance, the last time we sampled was in 2019, so we extrapolate that every single year and we take into account the increases of that. That is at 5.2%, which is £170 million in overpayments. Within that, 2.1% is because of earnings, so overpayment due to earnings. That is £70 million.

Q62 **Chair:** All right, so we don't know whether that is going up or down since 2019?

Vikki Knight: We obviously migrate. Analytical statistical colleagues will make some assumptions depending on where it is, but the last time we did the sample was 2019, yes.

Mims Davies: Thank you for that clarification.

Q63 **Chair:** Let me just put to you, because you have touched on it already, the widely publicised Vivienne Groom overpayment case earlier this month. The judge made the point that he was truly unimpressed by the Department's handling of that case. What is the Department's response to that criticism?



Vikki Knight: First of all, you wouldn't expect me to discuss individual cases. I also want to be absolutely clear that the Department, DWP, does not prosecute. We will investigate where we have had those cases. We will refer that evidence from our investigators to the Crown Prosecution Service. It will base it on a public interest test and then it will take that to the courts and the courts will decide on that. As we said last month with the Minister and you here with Liz Fairburn, we are a constantly learning organisation. We look at any complaints, any feedback and any concerns about that. I will not cover individual cases, but I do want to be clear because there has been a number of reports of DWP prosecuting. We are not an organisation that can prosecute. We refer the evidence to the CPS.

Q64 **Chair:** When a judge in an open court criticises the Department, I think it is fair to ask the Department what its response to that criticism is. I am wondering what it is in that particular case.

Vikki Knight: The case is complicated.

Mims Davies: Yes, and I think with individual cases that you see in the newspapers there is always more to it than meets the eye, hence the test of matters going to the CPS, but there are steps before that where we engage with claimants, we try to set up repayment plans and we work with them actively to not be in this situation.

Where the Department's fraud investigators have correctly followed the guidance and the procedure, of course we have a balance of our duty to the wider taxpayers for recovering overpayments, and safeguards are in place to manage the repayments fairly. That is set out in legislation. Claimants have a responsibility to ensure that they are entitled to the benefits and inform us at DWP if there are any changes in their circumstances that could impact their award. As we heard today in this area, certainly for me it is more communication, more learning. As you said, Chair, and the judge in this case, we will look at that feedback. We are a learning organisation but I hasten to add that in all cases there is obviously always more that the judge has looked at and the CPS has looked at. Therefore, what we see in the paper is not always the whole picture.

Q65 **Chair:** I will ask you about something else that the Department said in response to that 2019 report. It said, "The Department will commission and publish new research with carer's allowance claimants. The research is expected to report in the summer of 2020." In the debate on Monday, Minister, you mentioned that research and you made the point about how useful it is and I thought that you were hinting that that research would be published now.

Mims Davies: Would I dare hint, Chairman, even in a debate, to you?

Q66 **Chair:** Can we hope now to see it?

Mims Davies: My predecessor Minister Pursglove told the Committee last autumn that the Department commissioned research on the experiences



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of claiming and receiving carer's allowance. As I have been trying to say in both Monday's debate and today, we are reviewing that research and that learning. Before this was in the newspapers, as I have said, it is a policy area and a huge interest of mine, I was looking at exactly that. As you know, we commissioned research—

Q67 **Chair:** You were looking at publishing it; is that right?

Mims Davies: No, learning from it and then being in a position to publish it before the evidence is made more widely available. Obviously the Department will not publish a report while any process is ongoing. I think there is some really interesting stuff that I am learning from. The Secretary of State is aware of your interest. The hinting that I would like to be in a position to proceed differently, I will let you know when I can but I am genuinely using it for part of the discussion we are having today.

Chair: I think I am encouraged by that. I will raise one other final point.

Mims Davies: Andrew has just confirmed that we will be in a position very shortly to publish because the Secretary of State is in agreement with where I would like to be. I don't think it will be long coming.

Q68 **Chair:** That is very heartening. Thank you for confirming that. A final point from me before one of my colleagues comes in: what discussions has the Department had with Social Security Scotland about the roll-out of carer support payment in Scotland and the implications for previous carer's allowance overpayments?

Mims Davies: I feel you should just come to our meetings, Chair. Andrew and I are discussing this regularly.

Chair: Please invite me.

Mims Davies: You are always welcome. You know the Department very well. We are administering this for Scotland and working with them and learning from them, but there is a division between what we do and what Scotland needs. Perhaps, Andrew, you could put flesh on the bones of that.

Andrew Latto: In my spare time I am also responsible for Scottish devolution in DWP, so I spend a lot of time discussing exactly this kind of issue with my Scottish counterpart. All the debt that is attached to carer's allowance claims in Scotland transferred to the Scottish Government, Scottish Ministers in 2018 when we transferred Executive competence. That is all Scottish Ministers' debt and they are responsible for that to the Scottish Parliament. However, we have agreed with them that for a temporary period at least we are administering carer's allowance as their agents in Scotland. That includes we are recovering their debt for them.

We are in discussion now about what happens when we transition fully to the carer support payment, so there is no longer any carer's allowance



cases. We are transferring them successively over to Social Security Scotland. As things stand at the moment, we will continue to make the recoveries as necessary and we pay that money to the Scottish Government but there will come a point where that changes.

Mims Davies: In support of, “Can we do things differently? What is the right thing to do?”, I have been observing with interest the approaches taken by Scotland. They have the powers to do things differently. We look forward to the evaluation of their new policies being published once they take place. Andrew is very involved. For me, it is a matter of interest to see how it goes.

Q69 **Siobhan Baillie:** This is slightly going back a bit. You spoke very clearly, Minister, about the changing world that we are in with different people caring or people caring. We are encouraging people to care for loved ones at home, so we are getting lots of people making that choice. We are also encouraging lifelong learning and we know there will be lots of different changes of careers. We recognise nationally the new ways of working and we are legislating for flexibility so that there are more opportunities to work around caring responsibilities, which I think lends to the work that you are doing in looking at the earnings limit quite carefully, so I am really pleased about that. What we absolutely know, even if there is a change of earnings limit, is that there is an impact of caring on opportunity options and basically changing career, stepping away from careers.

My two questions, with that all in mind, are: do you think the Department is doing enough to support people as they step away from their careers and then when they go back, and the loss of a loved one where the caring stops? Separately, are we doing enough to support carers to plan for later life because of the gap that will impact on their pensions? Constituents are still shocked by all this when they talk to me.

Mims Davies: I spelt out to the Committee earlier the fact that we have supported carers, giving them credits to protect their future pensions, since this Government came into power in 2010. I think it is incredibly important. Through the job help website, which I initiated when I was Minister for Employment, there is a wide-ranging “Where to start?” for many of the people we come into contact with—and maybe also those who we don’t, but who just need help in the wider labour market—and “What’s next?” There is a section on there about what you need to tell us and how to do things if you are a carer. Please use that on gov.uk.

We have seen the Carer’s Leave Act getting Royal Assent. The ability to give a right to reflect flexible working for employees where there is better access to that—the measures of the Carer’s Leave Act—is really important. As I say, some employers choosing to pay and help those who are caring is incredibly welcome. As I tried to spell out in Monday’s debate, I think this is genuinely something where we need a whole-system approach. This is not something that DWP can do on its own. Local authorities, the NHS, carers themselves, employers—this has to be



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everybody working together. As I said at the outset, if you are not caring now, you will be or you will need to be cared for, in an ageing society with more complex and difficult needs.

Work is incredibly good for you in so many ways. I know when my mum was caring for my dad, if only I understood quite so much—and I was young when that was the case for me—I would love to have been a lot more help myself. It is about understanding this and having employers and sectors battling presenteeism, using virtual and different ways of working, whether this is if you have a disability, neurodiversity. There is a great way of getting more people in the labour market, doing more that suits them, that we want to achieve as a society and as Government. I think the Prime Minister spelt that out very strongly on Friday and it is incredibly welcome. I continually have, and the Minister for Employment, Minister Churchill, constantly has, people saying, “We have got gaps in the labour market”, but have you looked at job design? Have you looked at who is down the road who needs a chance?

Also, I think we need better, quicker return schemes. In certain areas such as finance or accountancy, you already have a certificate and you can get right back at it, but if you have been in other sectors it can be more difficult to return. Where we can work with employers and sectors for return schemes—brilliant. I was with the Beer and Pub Association yesterday. They have some brilliant apprenticeships at any age and career stage that can be done flexibly.

In my view and the role that I have as Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, we need to stop talking about inclusion and getting things right and writing nice things on the website and actually do it. If we all do it as a whole system approach, whatever people’s circumstances are, we are going to shift the dial on productivity, we will have people happier and we can have a labour market that is truly flexible. It is brilliant but we can do more.

Q70 Mr Walker: Can I come to the 21-hour limit on the carer’s allowance? We heard some concerns about the way that is working earlier. Can you talk us through what is the logic of that limit?

Mims Davies: As a previous Minister in the Education Department, I am not going to deny that one of the reasons I set a cross-Government focus for young people—and anyone who knows me knows that that is an absolute focus for me in all my ministerial role, my focus in the time at DWP—to make sure that the system works for young people, whether they are care leavers, carers or from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Government rightly think it is really important that carers maintain links with the education system.

Young carers do an immense job, an incredibly challenging job, stepping up in a way that they are absolutely heroes in everybody’s eyes. Carer’s allowance was principally introduced as a measure of financial support, so the Government continue to think the right way to support younger



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carers and those in full-time education is via the education maintenance system, with the previous skills Bill and other things about how do we make things work. That is why the general principle for full-time students being precluded from entitlement to income-related benefits or income maintenance benefits is how it is.

As ever, we are trying to work closely and this again comes to policy officials and all across Whitehall, every single Department, putting themselves in the place of the person we are trying to make this work for. If we ensure that that is what we do between the two Departments, we make sure that young carers know what support is available for them, and we make sure that the education system and the hours work for what they have to do. I think that is the way forward.

We have really been trying to build this point and make sure that, when people develop policy, it works for everybody. Would I say this is perfect? No. I think there is more to do and more to achieve. Andrew, do you want to add any more on that?

Andrew Latto: Yes, I want to add two things. Hearing all the evidence from the previous session, I think it is quite interesting that people say they don't know whether they are working 21 hours or 20 hours. We did quite a lot of work with further education colleges to say, "Your full-time course doesn't count as a full-time course for carer's allowance". People can get carer's allowance because it is not 21 hours in the classroom. It is less than that, so it does not breach the rule. We put up posters and all kind of things to advertise that fact. The issue with the 21-hour rule is a bit like the proxy rule on the earnings for people who are in employment. How can we ensure that the people who are getting carer's allowance are full-time carers? There is a hard edge and that is the kind of thing we need to look at. You made a point earlier about T-levels. We are very conscious of the fact that T-levels don't fit the—

Mims Davies: We tried very hard to make that known.

Mr Walker: It is not just T-levels. The work the Department is currently doing on the advanced British standard is predicated on an increase of post-16 study hours across schools, sixth-form colleges and the FE sector. That is about asking students to spend more time. Given the Government's other aspiration to have everyone pursuing education, employment or training up until the age of 18, there is a real concern there, isn't there, that young carers who have significant caring responsibilities, might drop out of education—they are already at greater risk of being NEET than many other categories—if that rule runs up against the way in which study is being conducted within that age group?

Mims Davies: It feels that very often I have sat in this Committee and made audacious land grabs for skills and other things that work for my claimants and you tempt me once again on that one. Andrew has spelt it out on the cross-Government working group that I set up to make sure that things work for young people, and that our policies are designed for



the most disadvantaged, for the people who are left behind, the people who come to us. You mentioned NEET. There are times when people end up in the hands of DWP. That is 19 very often, at 23, 24. Hence, we have built this network of youth hubs and partnerships for that starting place. Quite often the young people have multiple barriers and multiple needs. I pay huge tribute to the FE sector and many of them understanding exactly the type of student that you are talking about.

We need to make sure that cross-Government partnership and policy designs work for those young people. Is it fully there? No. Do DFE need to do a bit more knowledge and engagement beyond the standard people? In my view, yes, please. Is all lost? Absolutely not, but I think there is certainly more understanding in those types of groups of policy design. We are on it. We have another meeting shortly with the new Minister in place. I welcome that engagement and, of course, this being highlighted by the Committee.

Q71 Mr Walker: I think it is definitely an area where more work would be welcome. Another area is the career opportunities for young people, and we had the excellent example earlier of Alek talking about the way in which he had been able to progress through FE on to university and into a job, which is fantastic but unfortunately relatively rare among that cohort. We did a piece of work on the Education Committee on careers education, information and guidance. One of the areas that was highlighted in that was the challenges facing young carers in being able to engage with some of the support and activity there is. It was quite striking listening to Andy's evidence earlier about the feedback from the youth hubs that many of them did not necessarily feel equipped to deal with the issues facing young carers. How can you make sure that there is better support with all the work that the DWP can do in careers at reaching that group? Isn't part of this constantly putting pressure on the education system for better identification?

Mims Davies: I think this is a triangular situation. DCMS is doing some great work on NEETs and prevention, and giving a helping hand for those who specifically need this. From what we learned in Birmingham and other areas, we then built this network of partnerships—some are more mature than others—as a result of Covid and doing it during Covid. I mentioned FE. I know for example in Kent they are particularly good around social mobility and understanding the needs. I am keen to look at where it is working well. You make an excellent point on that. That is again why the job help website and youth hubs are where to start, whether it is the Careers & Enterprise Company or others.

I think that generally we need to do careers better for everybody—more reaching out from employers and more help with the different programmes that we have at DWP, communities help, and what we have learnt through kickstart, which is throw out the CV, meet the young person, see the talent and you will never look back. I hasten to add to employers, whether it is young people and carers, people with disabilities,



other needs: don't keep creating a digital middle-class recruitment process. If you really want to be inclusive, you have to get into the community, reach out and make it a lot easier for people to come over your threshold. You don't know what you don't know. Young carers maybe not having that support need all the more help.

I will say, and this goes to Siobhan's point earlier, as a carer, you are an advocate, you are resilient, you are organised, you are fighter. The skills and abilities you have—my understanding of what was showcased in the previous session—are undoubtedly incredible. We need people to understand that. It is the same also for people who have been in care. They are exactly the same young people, and there is a danger that we talk our young people down but these particular young people are the most able. It is just giving them the confidence, the pathways and the network to build from that.

Q72 Debbie Abrahams: Good morning, everyone. I am conscious that yesterday one of the Prime Minister's dementia advisers resigned specifically on this issue. I take the point that the DWP is not responsible for prosecutions and you provide the cases to the CPS on that. He described these prosecutions as "beyond the pale" and said that the Department was in breach of its own rules for protecting vulnerable benefit claimants. Do you want to comment on that?

Mims Davies: First, I am really sorry to see this and hear this. We have some amazing champions for the sectors that I work with and have developed a positive relationship with. I know that we make every effort and we have all discussed this morning we would like to do more and use better systems, more communication, to make sure where, for example, overpayments occur or there are issues, that where we have a duty to recover them, it is quick and efficient without causing undue hardship to those making repayments. Again, I pay tribute to Amber Rudd, the Secretary of State in 2019, who picked up a huge amount of this, and we continue to work with anyone who is struggling.

Anybody reading that particular case would find it disturbing from what they see in the newspaper. I thank him for his work. I am happy for him to pop in to have a cup of tea and see if we can work things out and go forward. I didn't have the pleasure of meeting him directly previously because he was involved particularly with the PM. This is very much the exception. I don't want people watching this to think this is any kind of normality or something that they should expect. The balance here between fraud and error, getting it right for the taxpayer and being able to support people and not have them in situations is key. Vikki, we discussed this before we came in. Is there anything you want to add?

Debbie Abrahams: Just briefly, because I want to follow up on that specific question.

Vikki Knight: There are two things I want to say. Last month you heard evidence from the Minister and Liz Fairburn about how the Department



protects the most vulnerable people in society. That is no different from our staff who work in our counter-fraud function. As the Minister said, this is a minority of cases, but I do have to say that prosecution is part of our deterrent. As the NAO report said in 2023, we need to use prosecutions as part of our deterrence of fraud and error but we must do that in the right way and protect vulnerable customers.

Q73 Debbie Abrahams: Absolutely. That brings me on to my question to the Minister on Monday in the Westminster Hall debate. There seems to be a little bit of a paradox in that. I mentioned the medical adviser, a retired GP who contacted me. She is a medical adviser at the first tribunal level on appeal to disabled people who are also providing care. She said that she had noticed over the last six months the statement that has been included in her bundle. I will read it out again: "Although (Ms X) has identified a high level of personal restriction, he/she is entitled to Carer's Allowance. To be entitled to Carer's Allowance a person must provide at least 35 hours of care to another disabled person each week. The tribunal may wish to explore this further." What she was saying—and I will say it again and I said it on Monday—might seem a benign statement but it is basically saying, "How can you be caring for somebody if you also have a disability need?" She said, and it is her language, "I feel it conveys an overall sense of we don't believe you". You said that you were going to look into this, Minister. Have you managed to find out why this relatively threatening statement is being included in bundles to appeals?

Mims Davies: I understand you raising it and thank you for doing it again. As we know, there are around 100,000 people who are on PIP and on carer's allowance and have caring responsibilities. I am very happy to look at why this specific line is there and what is going on there. Andrew, we heard about it on Monday. I don't think there is much I can usefully add unless Andrew can at this juncture, but I am happy to try to write and say more to the Committee.

Andrew Latto: We are doing some specific work in the Department precisely on this issue about people receiving either on the higher rate of PIP and carer's allowance or in pension credit, one partner is getting a disability allowance and the other partner is—but it is perfectly possible for that to happen. There is no reason why somebody can't themselves have a high level of disability and be a carer. We need to take that away and look at it.

Q74 Debbie Abrahams: Thank you. I would be very grateful because, as I say, this seems to be a contradiction in the actions that we say about supporting vulnerable claimants and questioning the behaviour of tribunals. That is not on.

Another question I want to ask is about young carers, and we are talking about paradoxes again, really. You said in response to Nigel's questions about the purpose of carer's allowance that it is in recognition of caring responsibilities. There seems to be something out of kilter when a 10-year-old is deemed to have a caring responsibility and that responsibility



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is not being recognised. Why should an adult have their caring responsibility recognised and yet a child does not have that right for the caring responsibility that they are undertaking, often for a parent or a sibling? Why isn't that recognised?

I will leave that there but I wanted to draw the point, which I think I also mentioned on Monday, Minister, which is there are significant mental health impacts for young carers and these are lifelong. You may care to read not only the longitudinal study that a witness to a previous panel had about that, but there is also a quite shocking report in the *Journal for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*. That was January 2024. They said not only is there a disproportionate impact on low-income families, families of ethnic minorities, single-parent families; they are also more likely to be hospitalised due to mental health in adulthood and experience suicidal ideation, and that Covid has made this worse. That is in a peer-reviewed journal. I think the significance of this will be lost, especially in the context of last Friday's speech by the Prime Minister really questioning the sincerity and genuineness of young people who are not in work at the moment. I just want to leave that with you because it is a very significant one.

I am conscious of the time, Chair. Also on the dementia adviser, he said it was not just that one thing. It was the pattern of how the Government have treated disabled people over a period. On this, I understand that the Department has had the report of the UN Committee on the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on the breaches that they have been investigating most recently over the last six weeks and you have had that since Friday. Can we expect to have this published at any time soon? I understand from the committee that they had expected it to be published on Tuesday and I am quite surprised at the delay.

Also can we expect to finally have the section 23 from the EHRC and some confirmation on that two years on when the EHRC has questioned the Department about potential discrimination of disabled people against the Equality Act? What does this say about how the Department is treating disabled people?

Mims Davies: Thank you. There is quite a lot in there, as I would expect from you with your characteristic forensic list to me and the Department. A few things, if I may. When my dad was injured when I was 11 and subsequently through the years of looking after him, I know he felt a terrible burden at times and it was difficult. My admiration and respect for young carers who are doing that at a much more tender age without support of wider family or another parent is huge and we need to be mindful of that. The Committee and those giving evidence this morning absolutely show that starkly. There are some real questions here, as I say, about caring as a whole, hence, again, the interest in that. I agree, as I opened my response on Monday, during Covid, post-Covid caring has only got harder, and on young shoulders it will only be more difficult. We all must recognise that, and I bear my own responsibility for that.



To break down a couple of the points, the Prime Minister made a very wide-ranging speech on Friday, and I know that some stakeholders in some of the sectors will have seized on individual lines or sentences and perhaps may be reading matters into it that are not there. We as a Department are working with the Prime Minister and with the benefits system as a whole, and with communities as a whole. Certainly, since I have taken this specific role, I go into a room, and one side of the room is full of very vulnerable people and advocates for those people who want to be supported, and rightly should be, and want to have the system work for them. That is exactly what we are striving for and we will always look and learn from any feedback. The other side of the room is often people who want their abilities to be understood—what they can do, what they can contribute positively to. They also want work to potentially be featuring in that.

I don't think it is beyond the wit of man—and we will always be striving for this in the Department, as any Minister sitting before you would—to try to make sure we have a holistic, individualised approach, and an understanding, learning Department, bringing trauma-informed approach for young carers and the long-term need for support, for example, HSE and the work that we have done there to bring mental health to have parity with physical health, so an understanding of that. This is not about being regressive but it is about balancing that if you are disabled it does not preclude you from wanting to be part of the labour market as equally as you being a carer does not preclude you. We need to build a system and continue to give people the confidence that that is there for them and not being any kind of scaremongering role but learning as a Department, learning as a society. Are we going to get that right all the time? No. We are on the same page on this. We might be looking at in different ways but we are definitely on the same page. Equally, we have a responsibility to the taxpayer to make sure that—

Debbie Abrahams: That is disingenuous.

Mims Davies: No, the point is for exactly that reason, for the taxpayer and the most vulnerable, that the money is there and available to go to the most vulnerable. There is a way of giving a safety net and balancing all the needs across government, whether it is the defence rise that we saw yesterday and the other support that we want to give people, whether it is through schools or the education system, that we find a way that the most vulnerable are supported. Vikki is the lead for fraud and error. Otherwise we would be coming back to report to this Committee about why we are not protecting that cash because it should be going to the most vulnerable. For us, it is a whole approach of trying to get that balance right. I say to the stakeholders and the people listening, people who may be concerned, that is what I strive to do in this role and I will continue to have that at the forefront of my mind.

Q75 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Our time is up. Minister, thank you very much, with your colleagues, for the answers you have given us. You have



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indicated that you will follow up one or two of those in writing and we are keen for you to do that.

Mims Davies: Always.

Chair: I think we will probably drop you a line saying the things that we would be keen to hear more about. We are very grateful to you. Thank you to the members of the Committee as well.

Mims Davies: Thank you, Committee. I welcome this interest and hope we can move forward together on this. Thank you very much.

Chair: We are keen to work with you on it. Thank you very much.