

Public Accounts Committee

Oral evidence: Jobcentres, HC 823

[Thursday 15 May 2025](#)

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 15 May 2025.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Chair); Mr Clive Betts; Sarah Hall; Lloyd Hatton; Chris Kane; Sarah Olney; Rebecca Paul.

Work and Pensions Committee member also present: Johanna Baxter.

Gareth Davies, Comptroller & Auditor General, Head of the National Audit Office, Laura Brackwell, Director DWP VFM, National Audit Office, and David Fairbrother, Treasury Officer of Accounts, were in attendance.

Questions 1 - 77

Witnesses

I: Sir Peter Schofield KCB, Permanent Secretary, DWP; Barbara Bennett, Chief Executive and Director General of Jobs and Careers Service, DWP; Katherine Green, Director General for Labour Market and Poverty, DWP.

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General

Supporting people to work through jobcentres (HC 769)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sir Peter Schofield KCB, Barbara Bennett and Katherine Green.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to the Public Accounts Committee on Thursday 15 May 2025. Work coaches and jobcentres play a critical role in identifying needs and providing support for benefit claimants. A shortage of work coaches and jobcentres is limiting support available to the increasing number of universal credit claimants, with over half of jobcentres scaling back their services to manage workloads.

The proportion of claimants in the intensive work search category moving into work has fallen in the past three years and there is substantial variation across the country. There are also concerns about significant changes set out in plans to reform employment support, bringing together DWP's jobcentres and the National Careers Service, which is an initiative led by the Department for Education. We will be looking at this issue carefully in the session today, as well as challenging the



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Department on the shortage of work coaches to support people into work and examining performance.

To help us with all that quite complex stuff, we are very pleased to have a return of the permanent secretary, Sir Peter Schofield KCB. You have been in the role since 2018, Peter, so you are a seasoned permanent secretary. Before that, you were director general for finance at DWP. We also have Barbara Bennett, chief executive and director general of the jobs and careers service. Barbara was appointed the chief executive and director of jobs and careers service operations recently, in March 2025. You are very brave to come here already, after such a short time in your new job, but a very warm welcome to you for your first-time appearance.

Sir Peter Schofield: I should say that Barbara has been in the role of DG operations for a couple of years before that, so she is not completely fresh.

Chair: Good. Finally, but by no means least at all, is Katherine Green, director general for labour market and poverty. Katherine was appointed the joint director general for labour market and poverty in November 2024 in a job share with Sophie Dean. How did you decide which of you was coming?

Katherine Green: It is a Thursday, so it is my time.

Chair: We are also very pleased to welcome Johanna Baxter, who is a member of the Work and Pensions Committee. It has done inquiries of its own, so I am sure she will bring a useful wealth of knowledge to this hearing.

Without any further ado, permanent secretary, I think you have been warned that we will be raising a question about one of our Treasury minute recommendations and your rejection of it. I hope that you have been warned of that.

Sir Peter Schofield: Yes.

Q2 **Mr Betts:** Good morning, permanent secretary. I hope that, having been warned, you can actually come back with more positive news for us on this matter. The issue we raised was the concern about the length of time it took to process PIP claims. These claims are really important to people with disabilities who really need that support and assistance. The target of dealing with the claims was within 75 days, but only about half of the claims were processed in that time.

I think we said in our previous recommendation, "Could you give us a time period when you will actually start hitting the target of 75 days for most of these claims?" You came back and said that you disagreed with that recommendation. Why is it so hard to give us a timeframe?

Sir Peter Schofield: It was the specifics of the wording of the recommendation. I understand why the Committee is pressing me on this



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matter. As you say, Mr Betts, this is an important part of our service line. The good news is that we are gradually improving the clearance rate of PIP claims. As you say, we are now up to 52% that are cleared within 75 days, which is the standard. To go beyond that, we are doing this in the face of big increases in applications for PIP. The caseload since that standard was set is something like double what it was before, and there is an 80% increase in the year-on-year claims that we are getting, so we are seeking to do this in the face of big demand.

As we discussed at the previous hearing on customer service, the way to make big strides in this area is not to try to find more colleagues to put on to this, because, as this Report says, there are limits to the number of colleagues and resource I can put into doing things the same way. The solution, as we have delivered on universal credit and the state pension, is transformation. So the answer to the question is the health transformation programme, but that is being rolled out over the next four years.

I know that the Committee is asking for something more like months rather than years, but that is the reality of where we are in terms of delivering progress on this that is more than the incremental improvements that we have seen so far.

Q3 Mr Betts: You are saying that it is going to take four years to get 75% of the claims dealt with in 75 days.

Sir Peter Schofield: No, my point is that to make a big step improvement, when you have such a big increase in the number of PIP applications coming in, takes transformation and rapid change. One way is to put more and more people on to this, but we simply cannot afford to do that within the current constraints that we are in. The solution, as we have done, as we talked about when I was here before in December, is transformation. The transformation programme that will deliver change in PIP is the health transformation programme, which we have talked about with the predecessor Committee here.

That will make rapid progress on things such as being able to apply online, because, within the 75 days, we allow about 20 days for the whole process of a claimant to fill in the application form and send it back in the post. Where we have been able to roll out the early PIP online service that we are developing at the moment, it has made a massive difference to that. My point is that that will not be rolled out fully across the country until the completion of the health transformation programme, which is in the years running up to 2029.

Q4 Mr Betts: Why does it take four years to roll out the transformation programme?

Sir Peter Schofield: I refer you to the hearing that we had on this a couple of years ago in this Committee, and the full conversation that we



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had. We do 2 million health assessments every year. The existing contracts run until 2029. The health transformation programme is developing new ways of delivering the service in different parts of the country on a trial basis. We will roll this out gradually over the course of the rest of the commercial contracts that we have, but the full service cannot be in place until the end of these current contracts, which is 2029.

Q5 Mr Betts: I still am a bit confused, coming at this anew. If you can roll it out in part of the country, why can you not roll it out more widely? It is presumably the same sort of roll-out.

Sir Peter Schofield: The whole process is one of testing and learning as we go along, and working out what the best way is. We are trying to do an end-to-end service, so you can send the application form off and get it back rapidly, but you then need to have people working in a different way to manage that process further downstream, so that the whole end-to-end process works more effectively.

Q6 Mr Betts: Will there be parts of the country where this 75% timeframe is hit?

Sir Peter Schofield: Yes. In the postcodes where we have rolled out PIP online, we are seeing much more rapid progress. I can write to you in terms of those postcodes.

Q7 Mr Betts: Is that already happening?

Sir Peter Schofield: That is already happening in some postcodes.

Q8 Mr Betts: There are postcodes where you are hitting the target now.

Sir Peter Schofield: Yes.

Q9 Mr Betts: I suppose that the other question that everyone is probably thinking about is, "If 52% are currently dealt with in 75 days, how long do the longest claims take to process?"

Sir Peter Schofield: Remember, it is not just about the speed at which you manage the case. In some cases, the case is delayed because the claimant wants an appointee or a supporter to help them fill in the form, so we allow time for that. In some cases, it is a very complex case where we are looking for more evidence from medical professionals, so that takes longer as well. One point I made in the response in the Treasury minute is that there is also a question about getting the right decision. Sometimes waiting for the evidence, while enabling the claimant to have someone around to help them fill in the form in the way they want to, gives a better result overall.

Q10 Mr Betts: That did not quite answer the question.

Sir Peter Schofield: I suppose that my point is that you could push this and push this and you might end up with the wrong outcome, which is

that people do not have time to fill in the form and get the support that they need.

Q11 Mr Betts: To put it in a further context, there are changes proposed to PIP, to eligibility and to the process. I think that everyone accepts that the form is incredibly complicated for many people to deal with. Is that an aspect of reform that could lead to speedier and more effective decision making?

Sir Peter Schofield: Yes. Already there is the PIP online process, which is a more intuitive process. Where you answer a question and the next question is not relevant, you will bypass a whole load of questions and it will take you to where you need to go to. Already we can see that it is a more effective process where we do that. As we roll this out more effectively, we will see more of that.

Q12 Mr Betts: If there are changes under the welfare reform proposals that are going to come before Parliament in the not too distant future, will that speed the process up and mean you can hit these targets more easily?

Sir Peter Schofield: The Secretary of State announced on Monday a review in the way that we deliver the PIP assessment, so that is one of the things we are working with stakeholders on. Minister Timms is working that through with roundtables over the coming period, and we will have more to say on that in due course.

Q13 Mr Betts: But that could lead to a more effective processing of these claims?

Sir Peter Schofield: Ideally, yes, absolutely. I have said this before. I regard the PIP process as being a really difficult process. I have sat with people filling in the form and some of the questions that we have to ask people are really difficult and intrusive. The whole process is one that causes some concern and worry with people. I really want to change and improve that.

That is one of the things the health transformation programme has been trying to do. The PIP review that the Secretary of State announced will be trying to do the same, but it is not necessarily just about speeding up the process. It is about making the process one that people understand better, that they have more confidence and more trust in, that gives the right answer more often, and that is delivering a better service overall for customers.

Q14 Mr Betts: When eventually decisions are made about whatever we are going to do with PIP in the future, you will be able to give us clearer answers then about what effect that will have on processing arrangements and times.



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Sir Peter Schofield: I suggest, Mr Betts, that I write to you with a bit more about how PIP online makes a difference to the clearance rates, because I can understand the concern the Committee has on that. We will be able to keep the Committee up to date as we roll out the health transformation programme and, more broadly, as the PIP review reaches conclusions in terms of streamlining the process and improving it for customers.

Q15 **Chair:** That is very helpful, permanent secretary. Thank you.

We often in this Committee examine when things are going wrong, but you have very helpfully produced this letter this morning about your increased fraud detection. I do not want to spend too much time on that. There is quite a lot of detail in there. Can you confirm that this is in the public domain? Can we publish this?

Sir Peter Schofield: Yes, it was published as a national statistic at 9.30 this morning.

Q16 **Chair:** Brilliant. Is there a soundbite? Is there anything you want to say on that?

Sir Peter Schofield: This Committee has regularly challenged me in terms of progress on driving out fraud and error in the benefits system and talked about some of the measures that we are taking. I am glad to say that we have seen some of the benefit of that coming through. The overall fraud and error across the benefit system has fallen from 3.6% last year to 3.3% in the year just gone, so from 2023-24 to 2024-25. The biggest single mover in that was universal credit, which fell from 12.4% to 9.7%, so a 25% reduction. It is almost down to where it was prepandemic, which was 9.4%, but obviously there is more to go at.

We have a fighting fraud and error plan. There is legislation in front of Parliament at the moment. There are things that we are doing to drive further, so it is a promising first step. We want to go further. We want to drive out fraud and error to below the level that it was pre-pandemic, and beyond if we can. We are grateful to Parliament for considering the measures that are currently in front of it.

Chair: Thank you very much for that. It is something that this Committee has paid attention to over time and it is great to see it going in the right direction, so well done. Thank you.

Q17 **Chris Kane:** Good morning Sir Peter, Barbara and Katherine. Before I start, can I say that I went for a visit to my local jobcentre in Stirling? We are going to talk an awful lot about it, but I would like to recognise the work that the staff are doing in centres around the country. They are working hard and we should recognise that. We will talk about some of the pressures that they are under, but it was a really informative visit and I would like to put on record my thanks.



I want to talk about work coaches, please. They play a critical role, working directly with benefit claimants to identify their needs and provide support, but there are not enough of them. That comes through in the Report. Looking at paragraphs 2.17 through 2.21, which is where I want to concentrate my questions, in 2.17 it states that, "DWP allows jobcentres in some circumstances to reduce the support they provide for claimants". A framework for local flexibility has been introduced: "From September 2023 to November 2024, more than half (57%) of jobcentres used the local flexibility framework at some point to help manage their workload". Sir Peter, how concerned should we be that over half of jobcentres have had to reduce their support for universal credit claimants due to the shortage of work coaches?

Sir Peter Schofield: Thank you for your comments about our colleagues all across the country. I could not agree more in terms of the excellent work that they do. As the Report sets out, the demand for work coaches changes on a fluctuating basis. I thought that figure 5 was quite a good illustration of that, which showed the demand moving quite significantly from one month to the next as different things happen in the labour market, and, likewise, demand fluctuates between different parts of the country.

The reason we have a shortage is because we see fluctuations in demand that happen on a regular basis and we forecast on a six-monthly cycle, but the planning of resource is often over a longer timeframe. For example, our departmental expenditure limit for 2024-25—the year just ended—was originally set in November 2021. Then, of course, you have the situation in which, every year, when we look at our resourcing, we have to balance the work pressures for jobcentres against the pressures in other service lines. There is always a judgment that we have to make.

If you see in figure 5, broadly speaking, over the last 12 months we were able to smooth the recruitment, retention and supply of work coaches so that although we were not meeting all of the peaks, we were meeting the broad trend in demand. It has become more difficult more recently because of resourcing constraints. It is probably fair to say that we will never ever have exactly the right number of work coaches in any one place, and it fluctuates from time to time.

The crucial thing for us, getting to the heart of your question, is, if we have a shortage of work coaches, how we manage that in a way that has minimal impact on service outcomes, which primarily is getting people into work. That is the purpose of the national changes that are set out in that chapter and then the local framework that we have. We want to leave local leaders the flexibility to make the right decisions in their areas according to their position in terms of work coach numbers and demand, but within a framework that means that we have consistency and minimise the negative impact of not having enough work coaches. My answer to your question is that I do not think that we should be



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concerned because, where there are not enough work coaches, we have reduced the frequency of interventions on the things that we think make the least difference to outcomes, primarily the outcomes about getting people into work.

Q18 Chris Kane: At the start of your answer, you described what I would imagine is normal planning for your Department. You are going to get variations in job figures around the country. You have introduced a temporary framework to, I assume, allow for a temporary change in this. Your answer, to be fair, described how you would work under normal circumstances but the framework seems to be here to work in abnormal circumstances. Can you speak to why the framework was needed on a temporary basis if, as you are describing, it is merely normal pressures that leads to the shortage of work coaches?

Sir Peter Schofield: My point is that there may be a national average picture, but what you will see locally is very different from that. There are times when there are enough and times when there are not enough. You need to leave flexibility, so the temporary measure is temporary in the sense that the leader of that jobcentre can decide how far down that ladder of changes they need to go on a temporary basis to manage a temporary shortage of supply. Is your other question whether this is this a short-term flexibility to put in the overall system?

Q19 Chris Kane: I heard from your answer that this shortfall is a perfectly normal thing that is just to be expected, yet you have a framework and we are seeing throughout the Report that there is a huge workload. We will come on to all of that, but the shortfall is having an impact on staff and outcomes. I heard that this is just a normal, everyday thing. Am I getting that right from your answer?

Sir Peter Schofield: As you see from figure 5, if you look back over the last few years, you will see that there have always been times when, averaged over the country, there have been not enough work coaches to meet demand. More recently, we have put in place this framework that gives us a consistency of approach. We are looking at whether this framework should be something that we keep in place over the longer term to give us that flexibility, but also consistency in how we approach things.

Q20 Chris Kane: Can I ask Barbara some questions now? What impact has the reduction in support had on claimants?

Barbara Bennett: The impact that the reduction in support has had on claimants has been minimised, because the flexibility framework has deliberately been brought in to impact and to keep and preserve the core support that we give. The flexibility framework has deliberately been created so that, for those who need intensive work search support of 10 minutes or 20 minutes, et cetera, that has been preserved. We have deliberately looked at those things that are not needed.

Q21 Chris Kane: You said that it has been minimised, but what has been minimised? What is the impact, even if it has been minimised?

Barbara Bennett: We are comfortable that, across all our jobcentres, the impact on the core regime that the Report talks about, in terms of the evidence base that we know about how people get into work, has been actively managed, as Peter says, to make sure that we are only focusing, in the flexibility framework, on those activities that do not impact getting people into work.

Sir Peter Schofield: If you see in figure 8, Mr Kane, it sets out the different levels. The first thing we reduce is that initial conversation with the claimant about their claim and needs from 50 minutes to 30 minutes. We regard 30 minutes as sufficient to enable us to have a decent conversation with a new claimant about what their needs, their skills, their ambitions and the opportunities are. We do not think that that is going to make a significant difference at all to outcomes.

If you look further down the table in figure 8, you will see the variety of certain changes that we make. The one that we move to at the last resort, level 5, is moving all claimants in the intensive work search category to a fortnightly meeting after 13 weeks, rather than a weekly meeting for some of them. Again, we think that we can still have the quality conversations on a regular basis and achieve the same outcomes even if we have to move to a level 5 position on the ladder.

Chris Kane: We will probably pick up on that.

Q22 Chair: I would like to pick up on it now, because it follows. Thank you for your excellent questions, Chris. I hear what you say, permanent secretary, but, if I were a claimant sitting here, I would be coming in with a very complicated form and only having 30 minutes to explain to a work coach or whoever is interviewing me. Not only is that work coach having to check all my data and criteria, he or she is then having to assess what regime I need to go on to, all in 30 minutes. Is that really satisfactory?

Sir Peter Schofield: I have sat with work coaches in exactly that situation. Where a conversation needs longer, we will allow longer and often adjust the diary of the work coach to be able to do that. The crucial thing is to get it right. This is a framework that we put in place to give guidance to local leaders, but local leaders and work coaches are always encouraged to do the right thing for their customers, so we try to make sure there is flexibility. It is not always the case; I have seen work coaches whose diaries go all through the day without a gap, but, by and large, we allow that flexibility. Absolutely, I could not agree more that, in that situation, where there is a situation where the customer needs longer, the customer will get longer. I really want to make sure that that happens.

Q23 Chair: The other thing is that we find in our own MP surgeries that some people who come to see us are much more articulate and marshalled with their thoughts than others. Others are naturally much more long-winded.

Sir Peter Schofield: Stepping back a little bit in terms of what we are trying to do with the whole service as we develop the jobs and careers service, up until now we have had quite a rigid approach to the framework. The rigid approach to the framework is based on robust analysis set out in the Report, which goes back a number of years, about a good way of getting people into work and helping to achieve good outcomes. Where we need to get to is not to lose those outcomes but to allow much greater flexibility in the way the system works.

There are some things we are trying out. We have the two trials that are set out in paragraph 1.14 in the Report, but there are other things that we are doing on a more agile basis all across the country, trying new ways of working, a bit more flexibility here and a bit more flexibility there. What does that tell us about outcomes? How does that help us deliver a tailored service depending on the different needs of the customer, so that ultimately we can get to a position in which the resource that we put on is focused where it is most needed and, for those customers, for example, who are motivated and able to self-serve, there is a digital journey to help them along the way?

We are part way in the process. Looking back, we have a rigid process that is based on evidence. We need to get the same outcomes with a more tailored approach that enables us to take the resource that we have and spread it further across a wider proportion of the population.

Chair: We will be coming back to aspects of that answer, such as the national expectations of work coaches and the digitalisation.

Q24 Chris Kane: Paragraph 2.21 states, "DWP is examining whether some of the measures in the local flexibility framework could be made permanent". Can you tell me what sorts of measures could be made permanent? When do you think you will make a decision as to whether that will be the case?

Sir Peter Schofield: Barbara may want to say a bit more, but for example, there is the 30-minute claimant commitment rather than 50 minutes. Will we have found out that that is sufficient? As I say, our analysis is that that is something where we think we can have all the right conversations in time. Is that something that we think we can roll out and make permanent all across the country and give time to do other things as part of the process of getting people into work? It is any of these things. As we put them into place and see what the impact of putting them into place is, we can then take a view about whether we want to keep them as we go forward.



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Q25 Chris Kane: To move us on, you might want to write to us when you have decided what is going to be permanent and when it is going to be made permanent. That is what we are trying to get to. What will be made permanent and when will it be made permanent?

Sir Peter Schofield: There is a phased approach to rolling out the jobs and careers service, which I am sure we will come on to. There are two randomised control trials, so the major studies that are referred to in paragraph 1.14. There is the one using video and other channels as opposed to face to face, and the one thinking about flexing some of the frequency of engagement. Those are quite long-term studies, because you need to see what the long-term impact is of getting people into work and them staying in work. We expect them to conclude during the course of next year. I am sure we will report back to the Committee at that point.

Q26 Chris Kane: Can I move on now to funding for work coaches? This is paragraphs 11 and 2.12 of the NAO Report. You do not have the funding for the coaches that you asked for. Why? Why have you not secured enough funding to pay for the work coaches that you need?

Sir Peter Schofield: It goes back to my first point at the beginning of the conversation, that the departmental expenditure limit for DWP is set in spending reviews. Often, those are on a multi-year basis, so the spending review for 2021 set budgets for the following three years. Over the course of time, sometimes the demand that comes through in practice is different from the demand that was assumed at the time that the budgets were set.

Then we have a conversation among our executive team and with our Ministers when we set the budgets for each and every year. We then need to look overall. The demand for different service lines may be higher and we may need to put more resource into those areas. It is a budgeting process, where you are comparing the pressures that are coming from different parts of the organisation and making those decisions.

Q27 Chris Kane: It is a holistic conversation with the Treasury and you come back to it and say, "Actually, we made a mistake. We did not need as much but we can take less."

Sir Peter Schofield: You are planning the resourcing of a major organisation and have to take into account the changing demands in different parts of the organisation.

Q28 Chris Kane: Apologies; I am just trying to get a sense. What I heard there was you saying, "We set a figure at month 1. Then we realised at month 6 we needed less and adapted accordingly." Is that what you are saying?

Sir Peter Schofield: I am saying that our DEL budget is set in negotiations with the Treasury in a spending review, based on certain assumptions that are made at the time, which we talk about with the



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Treasury. They will be based on our best assessment of demand across all our service lines, expectations about efficiency measures that we can make, and maybe funding for new initiatives that the Government agree we should take forward. Those get comprised into a departmental expenditure limit, so a total number for the whole Department, set from one year to the next, over—in the case of the spending review in 2021—three years.

Then you get to the beginning of the relevant financial year and say, "This is our DEL that was set back in the spending review. How are we going to allocate that DEL in order to make the most impact on our services?" You might find a DEL pressure. Mr Betts was asking me earlier about PIP, for example. There may be pressure to put more resource into PIP to improve the service there to meet demand, or to put more into jobcentres. At the end of the day, you are balancing things up and may not have enough work coach numbers to meet the demand that we see at the time that the year begins.

Q29 Chris Kane: It is the Department's decision to reduce the number of work coaches, rather than the funding following the decision for that.

Sir Peter Schofield: I am sorry, but the two follow, do they not?

Q30 Chris Kane: I am just asking for clarification of what I am hearing you saying. I am just making sure I understand it.

Sir Peter Schofield: We have a budget and make a decision about how we are going to allocate the budget.

Q31 Chris Kane: Can I ask about what you are doing to increase the number of work coaches? The Report talks about some of the regional variations in where you are managing to recruit and retain the staff. Can you talk to what you are doing to increase the number of work coaches?

Sir Peter Schofield: Barbara should talk a bit more about that. This is the other thing that comes out in the Report. You get the funding and then you need to make sure you have recruited and retained the work coaches. That is a crucial job for us in terms of attracting, retaining and encouraging people to believe that DWP is a place where they want to work and they feel motivated by the purpose and values of DWP as an organisation. There is a lot that goes into that in terms of how we attract and lead, and a lot of work to support line managers in different places. Barbara, do you want to say more?

Barbara Bennett: I am really proud of some of the improvements that we have made over the last year or two around improving the recruitment and the process that our potential work coaches go through. As you know and will have experienced in the Stirling jobcentre, it is quite a set of skills that we need. We need to make sure that, when



people are going through the process, they know what the job will entail. What we are asking for from our work coaches is quite tough.

We have made a lot of efforts. We have created a microsite and been using local employment forums as well. We use things such as armed forces HIVEs to make sure that we take our jobs from lots of different types of customer cohorts. We also use specialist sites to make sure that we are recruiting from diverse backgrounds. We have a national and a local approach. We want to make sure that nationally we have the right number so that it ties in, as Peter says, with the demand, but do not forget that our work coaches serve the communities that they live in, so we want to make sure that those work coaches really do emulate the needs.

We talk about performance, but the most important thing that we need from our work coach is that they are able to deliver with empathy as well. That is one of the improvements that we have made. Our work coaches that we are recruiting have the right personal skills as well as the right technical skills to be able to do the job. If they are invested in, as they have been—and we have made improvements in that space—they are more likely to stay as well. Our attrition rates from regretted attritions are quite low and the majority of our moves are around turnover, so they have gone to different types of roles within the organisation or reduced their hours. We are really glad that we have managed to reduce our regretted attrition, because we want to make sure that our work coaches come, stay and deliver a really good service for our customers.

Q32 Chris Kane: You are definitely getting it right in north-east England and Scotland. The Report says what you estimate and what you have. In Scotland, you are 0.1% higher than what you estimated, so that is pretty much bang on as much as you will get. If you look at southern England, though, you have a shortfall of 12.3%. What lessons can you take from the regions where it is working perfectly, in terms of your estimates meeting your expectations? What lessons can you take to apply to the rest of the country? What specifically are you going to do, or are you doing, in regions such as southern England, which have the biggest shortfalls?

Barbara Bennett: It is a really good question. This talks to some of the more environmental-societal impacts on attrition, as well as the things that we can do internally to increase retention. Our work coaches and teams are subject to the same pressures in the employment market that our customers are. If there is a high number of jobs available with the skills that we have, there is a natural move around the country into different roles.

One thing that we have been specifically doing within southern is a specific programme of retention. We have increased the amount of performance management to make sure that our teams know what is



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expected of them. We have things such as the Aspire programme, where we have leadership investment in terms of ensuring that our teams feel invested in. There are some more macro impacts that south has. It has a very buoyant labour market, and we tend to see higher attrition in those areas where they have buoyant labour markets so we have to pedal even faster.

Chair: Clive Betts wants to come in, permanent secretary, with a question on resources for the Department.

Q33 Mr Betts: I understand, permanent secretary, that you have a budget that is fixed and have to then decide how best to allocate it, but, if there are particular possibilities for increasing efficiency and saving money, the Treasury can be persuaded to put extra resources in. We are thinking here of the sessions we have had with HMRC, where it got extra resources last autumn to deal with the fraud and error in the taxation system. Why could you not have put a similar argument forward to get extra money for work coaches or fraud and error in the Department—things that could actually have saved money?

Sir Peter Schofield: We do and we have. On fraud and error, for example, we have had significant investment in every recent fiscal event, in a similar way to HMRC. On the labour market, we had £240 million additional in the autumn Budget for “Get Britain Working” and driving that forward over the course of this year. We can make cases for additional work coaches as well. That has happened in the past, but again, the Treasury will be balancing a whole range of different priorities across the board.

Treasury will be looking at us to drive additional efficiency through the jobcentre network as well. The Report itself talks about some of the initiatives we have made to take cost out of the jobcentre network to free up more work coaches to work in frontline roles. The example in here is the investment in technology to improve the process where a customer fails to attend. It used to be a very bureaucratic process. A work coach, having finished the time slot, would then have to go away and do a load of paperwork. That has been automated and freed up, I think, according to the Report, 250 work-coach equivalents of time.

There are things that we can do and things the Treasury expects us to do, and in fiscal events, we have regularly seen additional investment in the labour market interventions that we have. We will still have a lack of flexibility in the way I have described to Mr Kane, because we review the demand every six months and that will change from one place to another, from one month to another, in the way that figure 5 shows. I hope that that helps.

Q34 Lloyd Hatton: To build on the line of questioning that Chris was pursuing, one thing I found quite difficult to understand when going through the Report

was, when you look at areas where there is a serious shortfall in the number of coaches, it often is only at quite a large level. We are unable to go down to that granular level. Could you perhaps explain in a bit more detail why it is that the DWP does not publish that information at a more granular level?

My constituency falls within the southern district of jobcentres, but we do not really have any more detailed information at that granular level. That means that you are unable to see whether, even in one of the worst affected areas when it comes to shortfalls, there could actually be some areas that are doing better and some areas that are doing even worse. I would never be able to know, for example, what is going on in my jobcentre in my constituency.

Sir Peter Schofield: I have been to the Weymouth jobcentre. It is a fantastic jobcentre as well, with amazing colleagues. We have a huge amount of data, but there is always a question about how much data you publish. We publish our annual report and accounts, which this Committee will be, I am sure, talking to me about in due course, in a

couple of months' time. It seems to be getting thicker and thicker as we publish more and more data. A lot of data is available on Stat-Xplore, our online system, as well. If the Committee is interested in more detailed, granular data, I am always happy to look at that, and indeed to write to you about the situation in Weymouth if you would like to know.

Q35 Lloyd Hatton: I definitely would welcome further information for my constituency. The reason why I was raising it today, though, was that it is useful for us, when we look at these quite large districts, to say, "This is one of the worst affected areas when it comes to a shortfall of coaches". Is it fairly evenly spread, or are there black spots but also some areas that are performing better?

Sir Peter Schofield: Absolutely, yes.

Q36 Lloyd Hatton: That is why it is helpful for us as a Committee, but also more generally.

Sir Peter Schofield: Barbara should say more about that. One thing I would say is that there is a lot of work that goes on supporting between jobcentres. There are activities that do not need to be done face to face, so, for example, colleagues in the north-east of Scotland might be helping out colleagues in London on some of the tasks that can be done in that way. You are right. Even within one district, there will be variation in the headcount numbers.

Barbara Bennett: As you will expect, we monitor it on an individual jobcentre level, at a district level, et cetera, and especially as the Report highlights. We are really keen to make sure that, where there is a shortfall, there are other jobcentres helping, just building on Peter's point. We have asked the teams in Scotland to support the teams in a few of our southern and London jobcentres on those non-core activities



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that can be done virtually. That helps us to smooth the resource temporarily, but also means that we have the opportunity to learn as well. From a leadership perspective, we have just moved one of our teams, for example, in Liverpool, to be able to support the team in Birmingham, so some of the activities that have worked in Liverpool are translating across to Birmingham. It is really active.

One thing we do is manage performance at all the levels, but also attrition at every level. Our teams want to be able to deliver the best service, so they will try everything that they can, so at a leadership level, we smooth that demand out. It is not easy. It is active. It is a weekly conversation that we have with our teams. We do get there, but we have to make sure that we understand the nuances. For example, a Winchester jobcentre will be different from a Weymouth jobcentre, but they talk to each other and collaborate. There is a lot of support within clusters, which is one reason why we run a lot of our performance and management information based on clusters and districts. They will try to solve things locally before they go out to ask more widely. It is also some of the journeys to work for our customers. Given some of the transport links, for example, it could be easier to get to a Bournemouth from Weymouth than it would be to get to maybe somewhere next door.

Q37 Lloyd Hatton: That certainly would be the case in my patch. If you were able to provide any further information, that would be very helpful. To move on, the big question is why you find it so difficult to retain work coaches. How are we going to address some of those challenges where we have the biggest shortfall of coaches, such as in the southern region?

Sir Peter Schofield: Barbara has picked up on it. The correlation between the vibrancy of labour markets and the shortage is something you see nationally and regionally, but also locally. The civil service does not always pay as well as some other employers in local areas. We do have that sense of purpose and those values that are the things that draw people to want to be there and stay.

For example, I spent quite a lot of the covid pandemic working out of Ms Paul's Redhill jobcentre. It was lovely to just spend time with colleagues who had been there year after year. I am sure that, in a very vibrant labour market, they could have found other places to work, but they felt really attracted to the role, which is helping people into work and to move on in their lives. The key point for me is that absolutely it has to be a working environment that people feel supported and content in, but also it has to be people who are motivated by the core purpose of what DWP is all about.

Q38 Lloyd Hatton: That certainly sounds like the strength, but what I am asking for is to understand what the challenges are and how you are looking to reduce that. Also, could you go into a bit more detail about



why turnover is so high when it comes to people not actually sticking around that long as a jobcentre coach?

Sir Peter Schofield: Barbara will want to say more. I will give you an example. We recruited really heavily during the covid pandemic. We doubled the number of work coaches from 13,500 to 27,000 in a relatively short period of time. It was a massive period of expansion. When the rest of the economy opened up and there were other roles, quite a lot of the people we had recruited then decided that it was not for them and decided to move on. We saw a reduction in the way that we needed to see, but also quite a number of people did not want to stay because it was not the role for them.

Sometimes it goes with that sort of fluctuation, but what are we doing? A lot of this is down to line management in local areas, and the coaching that is done. Barbara and her team do a huge amount of work on that.

Barbara Bennett: In southern in particular, we know that there is a buoyant labour market, so the opportunity of alternative roles is there. One thing that has happened in southern, and we are seeing it as a national pattern, is that because of the demographic of our work coaches, it is less about attrition and more about reducing the number of hours that they are working, so we are having to deal with that as well, because that obviously adds to the FTE hours as well.

As I said earlier to Mr Kane, we are doing a lot more to use technology in terms of attraction, so websites such as LinkedIn. We have a new microsite. We have just launched some personas, so that you can see what work coaches currently doing the role experience and what the challenges are. We are also allowing people to come into the jobcentre. There is nothing more vibrant than going into a Salisbury jobcentre, working with a work coach and seeing what the role is like itself. Also, we have just changed the onboarding process and the early learning process, because one issue is about dropout through the process as well.

Q39 **Lloyd Hatton:** On that point, Sir Peter began to talk about the issues around pay compared to other job opportunities, particularly in certain regions, and then talking about dropouts there during the initial period of starting the role. Are those, as far as you are concerned, the two main reasons why retention can sometimes be a challenge? Would it be pay and struggling to keep up with competitors and other employers, and people perhaps not completing that onboarding process and dropping out at quite an early level? As far as you are concerned, are those the two biggest challenges when it comes to retaining work coaches?

Barbara Bennett: Up front through the process, that is more around keeping them through the recruitment process. The retention issue will be around salaries and the availability of other roles in the locality. Our retention in Scotland, for example, will definitely be different from our



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retention in the south, just because of the local labour market. The retention is not a national picture. One jobcentre might have a new business that is open in the locality. That will make a massive difference. Redundancies in the area have a key impact, as does whether there are new businesses that have sprung up where our work coaches might be interested in working.

Sir Peter Schofield: There is a role for line managers in giving that sense of purpose and the flexibility that people have to have a really kind of contented career in DWP. As I say, many of the work coaches that I sit alongside have worked for DWP for many years and would not want to work anywhere else because of the nature of what we do.

Q40 Lloyd Hatton: If I might move on slightly, I am also interested in looking at the existing workforce of coaches and how we enable them to be as productive as possible. I know that the Report touches on a number of the significant changes that have been made to reduce wasted time or particularly cumbersome administrative tasks, particularly using AI. Could you perhaps go into a bit more detail about what more could be done looking forward, particularly with all the changes that the Government proposed earlier this year, to improve the productivity of the existing coach workforce?

Sir Peter Schofield: There are number of headings in this that we could unpack. One is automating current processes, so the same process but automating it a bit more. That failure to attend process I mentioned earlier is a great example of using technology to take some of the bureaucracy out of the process.

The second is thinking about whether the processes that we currently apply need to be applied in a one-size-fits-all type of approach, or whether you can tailor them more effectively to different types of customer. That is where a number of the tests that we have talked about in the Report really come through. How do we work out which are the ones that are most effective, and for whom, and how do we apply those?

The third is thinking about a broader range of customers who we could be reaching, so, for example, people who are on what we call the universal credit health journey. For people who have a fit note and are found not fit for work, the regime leaves them alone, as you will see in the Report, but actually about a fifth of them, at least, want to look for opportunities for work. One thing we have been doing is trying out additional work coach support. We published an evaluation of that a couple of months ago, where we are providing some support to those people and seeing some returns from that. Those would be three broad headings. I am very happy to go into a bit more detail on any one of those three if you like.

Q41 Lloyd Hatton: That is really helpful. It would perhaps be useful for this Committee to better understand whether this is a systematic approach. Is



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this a strategy that will be implemented by the DWP to look at how we can make our existing coaches more productive. Is this something that is just being picked up on a more ad hoc basis, or is it actually a concerted piece of work?

Sir Peter Schofield: It goes back to what I said to the Chair at the very beginning. This is at the heart of the national jobs and careers service and what it is all about. It all comes together in a phased approach. We can go into that in a bit more detail. There are those three elements that I described. As I say we can go into any one of those in more detail. Those are part of the overall strategy of building a new national jobs and careers service that provides tailored employment support for a range of people, beyond those just in the intensive work search group in universal credit.

It will, crucially, have to be done without kind of a massive increase in resources, because that is the world that we are in at the moment. How do we use digital solutions for those for whom that is the right way forward? How do we then focus our people on the things that only people can do most effectively, particularly those people with complex needs who need that support all along the way, particularly people with health conditions?

Q42 **Lloyd Hatton:** Are you confident that, through greater digital resource, particularly AI, we can increase the productivity of coaches, particularly if there is not going to be a huge increase in funding for jobcentres?

Sir Peter Schofield: There is a lot already out there. Part of the process going forward is about working out what the best solutions for our customer base are. Barbara, the national jobs and careers service has its digital offer. We have our own offer as well.

Barbara Bennett: We have a great example of where we are using Copilot in Slough. That is helping work coaches with CVs, cover letters and skills. That is already having a big impact. 60% of our jobcentres have some kind of pilot where they are trialling something new, especially in this space.

Productivity for me is about how you free up the work coach from all the non-face-to-face time so that they maximise the time in front of the customer. As well as the jobs and careers service, looking at who we are seeing, where we are seeing and the frequency that we are seeing customers in the future, we are doing things now. To answer your question, we have a programme of work that the Committee can have a look at. I have trained all of my grade 6s and grade 7s on continuous improvement exactly to answer that question.

Q43 **Chair:** Your Secretary of State, Barbara, in launching the White Paper, said that he had been given £55 million of extra funding to look at AI solutions



and you are testing AI proofs of concept. Is that £55 million going into that programme, or is that for something else?

Barbara Bennett: The £55 million is looking at two things at the moment. One is a coaching academy to look at how we upskill our work coaches on what the jobs and careers service is going to be, but the majority of that at the moment, yes, is on digital programmes. What could digital nudging be? We are excited about looking at public employment services internationally, where we are taking best practice to help accelerate some of our thinking and seeing what has happened in other countries.

Sir Peter Schofield: To reassure the Committee as well, there is a lot of enthusiasm. My investment committee sits over the £55 million and tests the different proposals that have come forward. This is being used for a number of different things, but we need to know that this is going to take us somewhere before we release the money. It is being very carefully managed—I thought you would want to know that—but there is lots of excitement in terms of some of the different things that we are trying as we do that.

Chair: We will certainly want to come back to that.

Q44 **Mr Betts:** We have talked about the differences between jobcentres, how they operate and what their performance is. In 2023, you brought in the performance framework to monitor their operation, but you haven't set any performance targets. Why?

Sir Peter Schofield: The performance framework took a greater focus on outcomes rather than inputs. That is the first thing to say. Previously, our focus tended to be on, "Are we doing the right activities in jobcentres?" This took us on to a focus on outcomes.

The question of targets is one that is, "What is the use of targets specifically when you have such different situations all across the country?" Take the into-work rate, which is a crucial metric in that framework. The into-work rate varies very considerably in different parts of the country, according to the local labour market, vacancy numbers and the nature of the demographics in the place.

What we do with it, rather than setting a national target, is look at the trends in different places. We can compare and contrast performance in analogous jobcentres or districts, where there is a similar labour market or demographics. You can look at whether a place is improving or worsening on how it is relative to its peers. That is the nature of the performance discussion. It is not really about a target. An average target would not necessarily help you, given that there is so much variation across the country, but a focus on trends and divergent performance really gets into the heart of what is going on.



Q45 **Mr Betts:** I did not actually suggest an average target. Can you not have particular targets for particular jobcentres in particular circumstances?

Sir Peter Schofield: Barbara, why do you not talk about how you manage that in practice? The reality is that you could have a target in a particular jobcentre and suddenly an employer closes or vacancies come through and it becomes meaningless. It is more the quality of the conversation, based on trends. I do not want a situation in which someone says, "I have hit the target. Therefore I am doing a great job," when there is actually something else going on that has really facilitated that progress, or someone has missed a target but done all the right things. The numbers give you an opportunity to get into a conversation, but the real value in terms of driving performance, I have found, across the organisation, is in seeing what is going on in terms of trends and comparisons, as opposed to "Have you hit a target that I set in a different world in a different situation, which may no longer be relevant?" I have found it more useful as a way of driving performance in time.

Q46 **Mr Betts:** How do you have the conversation? How does it work when you look at a jobcentre? Obviously you have the information about how it is performing and you think it might be performing better, or it is doing very well. How do you have that conversation to get that dialogue going and get the response?

Barbara Bennett: To give you reassurance, it not only happens weekly and fortnightly, but it happens at every level, so at the national, district, area and jobcentre levels. Our work coaches want to deliver well. Our teams really want to deliver well, so performance is really important to them, as well as, as Peter said, having a quality conversation. As well as looking at the performance framework that is in the NAO Report, we also look at leading indicators, because we know that the feedback that we get from any updates and changes that we make to the performance is not going to show in the performance framework for another two or three months when the RTI information comes in.

We monitor leading indicators, as well as the clustering that we have talked about, so actually making sure that we are comparing like-for-like jobcentres. That has to be the first question. Can we explain why a jobcentre is performing differently? Is it to do with the deprivation index? Is it to do with the incidence of number of people who do not have English as a first language, for example? These are all restrictions and considerations that we make.

If the differences cannot be explained by those societal and environmental factors, we will, and do, also look at some leading indicators. How much flexible support fund has a jobcentre invested in? How many sector-based work academy placements has it made? How much is it drawing down on local provision? There is the number of employers as well. One thing that is really important to us is that we



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could get everybody in the jobcentre job-ready and close to the job, but actually the work that our strategic relationship teams do on employment is as important as it is on provision.

When we are managing the performance of a jobcentre, we look at those external factors. We look at the internal factors, but we also look at "how?" I spend a lot of the time with the independent case examiner as well and with our customer experience teams. We could get people ready, but I would rather spend more time, effort and energy, where we can, making sure that it is the right provision and the right conversation that we are having with our work coaches.

Q47 Mr Betts: We might explore the variations of a little bit more in a minute. One key indicator, as you said a few minutes ago, Sir Peter, is the into-work rate. Are you concerned that the rate has been falling since 2021-22? Obviously there were changes due to covid, but it has not really recovered, has it?

Sir Peter Schofield: As you will understand, immediately after everything opened up it rose up above 9%. That was a time when there were massive vacancies. We have seen in the labour market statistics, even last week, the continuing fall in the number of vacancies in the economy. It does concern me, but I understand the external factors that are making a difference.

That gets into the heart of what we should do about it. What should we do about it in DWP and more broadly across Government? There is a lot of work to be done in terms of the mission-based approach to Government. How do we see the work that is being done to drive progress on some of the key missions, whether that is clean energy or NHS waiting lists? How does that play into the opportunity to put people into jobs and create vacancy opportunities for people in our customer base? Katherine can talk about how we are working across Government, if you like.

The answer is that the labour market is making it more difficult and vacancies coming down will lead to a reduction in into-work rates. I want to turn that around. I am sure we can work harder to drive that, but we can also work harder across Government to help Government create more opportunities and vacancies for people and fill vacancies from our customer base.

Q48 Johanna Baxter: You mentioned the quality of the conversation and the outcomes for people. You might be aware that the Work and Pensions Select Committee has this morning released a report on safeguarding vulnerable claimants. Do you have any initial reactions to that report in the context of delivering the best that we can for claimants?



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Sir Peter Schofield: Debbie is giving a presentation today at 11 am to say a bit more about that. It is a 120-page report, so I have not managed to work my way through it.

Q49 **Johanna Baxter:** I appreciate that. There is a summary at the beginning.

Sir Peter Schofield: I know there is a proposal for a statutory safeguarding duty. Our Secretary of State has said that as part of the Green Paper consultation process we are looking at how we strengthen our safeguarding approach.

My main point would be to say that we absolutely believe we have a responsibility to provide a caring environment for the people who we support. Both this Committee and your Committee, Ms Baxter, have regularly challenged me in terms of how we are making progress on that.

In the annual report and accounts, which we will publish in July, we will say more about the work of the serious case panel and how that is helping to drive the improvement in how we train our colleagues, how we make sure we have support for customers with complex needs and how we make sure that those complex needs are highlighted to any colleague who is engaging with that customer. Our colleagues need to know about and be fully aware of those needs. Before we make decisions that have an impact on that customer, we need to have fully considered any complex needs that they have and take those into account. There is a lot that we are doing. We report on that regularly through the minutes of the serious case panel and in the annual report and accounts.

I know a lot of work has gone into producing this morning's report, so we will spend some time reviewing and reflecting on that and reflecting on responses to the Green Paper consultation, which also covers this very point.

Q50 **Johanna Baxter:** I want to talk about paragraphs 3.8 and 3.9 in the Report, which look at the into-work rates. Paragraph 3.8 outlines that the proportion of universal credit claimants who move into work each month has declined since 2021-22. How concerned are you about that? What are the main reasons for the drop in the into-work rate?

Sir Peter Schofield: Barbara and I regularly talk about the into-work rate. When the number starts to go down, it is something that we talk about. We try to understand what the reason for that is and what we can do about it. It is also something that the labour market outcome board, which Katherine chairs, reviews. Katherine might want to say something about that as well.

You always have to take account of the things that are going on beyond DWP's immediate control. A bit earlier, I mentioned to Mr Betts vacancy numbers coming down over that period. They peaked immediately after



the pandemic, which probably correlates with the 9.7% into-work rate that you will see in figure 11 across the page from the paragraphs that you were talking about, Ms Baxter. Over a period of time, vacancy rates have drifted back to where they were pre-pandemic. That is always going to have an impact on our ability to get people into work. I do not know whether you have done more work on this in the outcome board, Ms Baxter?

Katherine Green: Yes, I can say a bit more. Across the Department, we run a outcome board that looks at all of our labour market activity. Jobcentres are an absolutely crucial piece of that, but the Department also funds wider infrastructure. I know that your report refers to the extra £785 million that we spent in 2023-24 on things such as the Restart scheme, which is a programme for the long-term unemployed, and Access to Work. We try to look across the piece at all that activity and say, "Is it adding up to the positive labour market outcomes that we want?"

On the into-work rate—we have touched on this—our internal analysis shows that there are definitely drivers of the into-work rate that are external to the Department's activity. The local economy, the composition of the caseload itself and, as I said, that wider support system, with programmes such as the Restart scheme, will contribute to the into-work rate. We also see things such as seasonal fluctuations; you have to aim off on those.

We know we are getting a more complex caseload coming through the system, which I am sure we will come on to. We have talked a bit today already about the health and disability issues that we are seeing. There is a more complex underlying caseload that is contributing to that. If we are seeing customers who are further away from the labour market to start with, that will make the into-work rate more challenging. There are a wider range of activities that we undertake that will influence it, as well as those coaching conversations.

Q51 Johanna Baxter: I understand that there are multiple issues that feed into that rate. You mentioned seasonal fluctuations. I understand what you mean by that, but the decline over a couple of years is not just seasonal. I am just wondering which of those factors might be most prevalent in driving the rate that we are seeing.

Katherine Green: It is a genuine mix, but we should take seriously the more challenging composition of the caseload. We really are seeing that coming through the system. It is an active objective of this Government to bring into the system—we will come on to talk about the future jobs and careers service—the mix of people who are at the moment inactive and may not even be interacting with our services.



The issue that we are seeing around the link between health issues and work issues is also a really big driver. If you look at the inactivity figures nationally, for example, health, sickness and disability is the biggest driving factor of the increase in inactivity over the last four to five years. That is one I would really look out for. That is what we are looking at internally as well.

Barbara Bennett: I look at three things. The first is the mental health composition, which seems to have increased incredibly. Across the country we have had a 9.7% increase in the caseload, but in places such as London it has been over 20%. There is a big diversity in that.

I also look at the number of customers that are coming into intensive and the number of jobs available. If you have a more complex customer, one of the things you need to do is change the nature of the jobs. We are spending so much time on this with employers. For example, we have been working with the DVSA to try to support them in their drive to recruit driving instructors. We are looking at how we can broaden the group of people who they typically look at, to encourage them to think of jobcentre customers as part of that. Those probably would be the top three that I look at.

Q52 **Johanna Baxter:** Given the increase in the number of complex cases, particularly those with mental health conditions, how does that square with the reduction in the amount of time you spend working with individuals?

Sir Peter Schofield: The fact is that we are doing different things for that customer base. For example, we have allocated 1,000 work coaches to support people on the health journey. We are doing much more in the way of supporting and signposting people to specialist support. All across the country, you are seeing trailblazers being developed by local authority regions. Nine of them are focused on economic inactivity, particularly around health issues.

The point is that this is not just about the work coach. The work coach support is there, and there is more of it for people on the health journey. Alongside that, we need to develop provision external to the Department that we can signpost people into.

That is at the heart of this. How are we going to make progress on helping people with complex needs who have been a long way from the labour market? The jobcentre plays a massively important role, but more important are the partnerships and the connections with local providers, whether that is the health service, the people who are supporting those with English as a second language, housing issues and a whole range of different things. The great thing about what we are seeing with the trailblazers is they are a real opportunity to bring that together in a local



area. You have joined-up provision for the customer, which is helping them on their journey.

Q53 Johanna Baxter: Just finally in this section, is there anything more that jobcentres can do in the short term to increase the proportion of people moving into work? I appreciate that some of the issues that you have spoken about are longer-term, but what can you do to address the intowork rate?

Sir Peter Schofield: Yes, there are some great examples that different jobcentres are trying out, which are making a massive impact.

Barbara Bennett: We have 11 health model offices, which are trialling interventions that really work with people with health conditions. In Salisbury and many areas across the country, we are trialling putting work coaches in GP practices. One of the things that we have just done is totally refreshed our training for people with complex needs. This is an area where our work coaches were saying that they needed additional training. We have also refreshed our complex needs tool. That went live about six months ago.

Local provision is absolutely vital. One of the things that our teams do is negotiate the local provision. They look at the needs of an individual and make sure the provision is really tailored to the individual. We can talk about the national programmes, but where it really makes a difference is where you have an employer, a work coach who feels fully engaged and local provision. That is the sweet spot where you can genuinely move somebody close to the labour market. Wherever possible—the jobs and careers service is moving us towards that—it is really vital that we get all those ingredients to an individual.

Sir Peter Schofield: This is at the heart of this. I am seeing some brilliant examples of this. I was in Dover jobcentre just before Easter. They shared the story of a guy who had been on their caseload for years and years. The Port of Dover gave this individual an opportunity. It was work shadowing, first of all, and then work experience. That encouraged the employer to think, "Yes, this person could be a real asset to the organisation." There is a wonderful video that the team showed me afterwards with this guy and his employer. He was talking about how the employer had taken a chance but is really happy with who they have recruited. For this guy, it has transformed his life. He is absolutely passionate about the work he is doing and the change that having a job has made.

This is exactly Barbara's point. It is not just the work coach or the jobcentre on its own. It is about being part of a wider community. In that case, it was about working together with the employer to help someone move into work. It is win-win. You fill a vacancy and you change a life.



Chair: Thank you very much. I must applaud all of your efforts to get around the country to see what is going on on the ground. It is really good to hear that. I am sure the people really appreciate the opportunity to talk to you face to face. Well done on that.

Q54¹ Chris Kane: Can I ask about NAO paragraph 1.11? That paragraph says, "DWP requires its jobcentres to provide a nationally consistent, centrally defined service", but the "Get Britain Working" White Paper is looking to work in a more devolved way. Devolution is increasing. How will your current approach of a nationally consistent and centrally defined service need to change to allow for greater devolution?

Katherine Green: First of all, as you say, the wider "Get Britain Working" White Paper was published back in autumn. That sets out the broad range of labour market interventions and activities across the whole of Government, both local and devolved. A central part of that is creating a new jobs and careers service that will be more locally responsive.

Let me just explain what sits around that and then let us come to the connectivity. Peter has mentioned the trailblazers. There are 17 of those, which focus on inactivity and youth. They are in 17 different mayoral strategic authorities. Those are giving money to the mayoral authorities to have flexibility to try out new and innovative ways of tackling both inactivity and youth unemployment. I should say, though, that at a national level we will bring together a single evaluation. The whole point is, "What can areas learn from each other?" Some will naturally be more successful than others.

The third and fourth parts of that are about delivering a youth guarantee. The Government's wider efforts on youth will be partly delivered through jobcentres and the youth offer and through a wider range of activities. We have youth hubs around the country.

We have also launched an independent review headed by Sir Charlie Mayfield, which is looking at the whole employer side of this. We have touched on this several times in this conversation, but it is absolutely critical. Employers are also seeing rising numbers of individuals who are harder to retain in the workplace due to health issues or disabilities. That review is looking at how we can work with employers to tackle that issue.

All that needs to come together into a national and devolved model. The primary way of doing that is through something called a local Get Britain Working plan, which the mayoral strategic authorities are responsible for. They will be working in partnership with the jobcentres through the area managers and regional managers.

¹ **Correction** - Letter from the Director General, Labour Market and Poverty at the Department for Work and Pensions relating to the oral evidence session on 15 May on Jobcentres, 29 May 2025



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I have been on a couple of visits recently, to Newcastle and Leeds. We saw brilliant collaboration between local jobcentres and the mayoral strategic partnerships. They showed us some local hubs—these are much more common now—where there is a jobcentre presence in perhaps a library or with GP services in the same area. These local Get Britain Working plans will bring together how those partnerships work at local area level, with the jobcentre as a key partner.

I will pass back to Barbara to say a bit more, but, as part of all that, we are looking at the national and local responsiveness of the jobs and careers service. It will need to be more locally responsive to the issues that are outlined in those plans.

Q55 Chris Kane: Before we come to Barbara, as a Scottish MP, you are already working in a devolved nation, in a devolved environment. You are going to have to put resource into this new devolved world in England. Can I just get an assurance that you are aware that you already have a slightly different way of working in Scotland and that that will not be inadvertently and negatively impacted as you are understandably focusing on getting ready for a new way of working in England?

Katherine Green: Absolutely, yes. To give you reassurance on that, my job-share partner and I were up in Scotland about three months ago talking about exactly this issue. I am very conscious there is a different level of devolved support there. We absolutely need to look at this across the nation.

Chair: That is a very helpful reply on this question of how the devolved model is going to work. We will now take a short break. The clock is now at 11.20. If we could be back promptly by 11.25, that would be really helpful.

Sitting suspended.

On resuming—

Q56 Johanna Baxter: Turning to the reforms to employment support, what impact will the White Paper reforms have on the number of work coaches that you need and on work coach caseload? I ask this in the context of your answer earlier about planning your resource around spending reviews. Of course, we have one coming up. I am assuming that you will have taken a view on the resource that you need in that financial context and in the context of the White Paper that is in front of us.

Sir Peter Schofield: Yes, that is a really good question. As we are right in the middle of those conversations, there is a limit to what I can say about that now. The spending review will be concluded in June, so not far off now.



Answering your question, the crucial thing is to step back and think about what the model for the jobs and careers service is. It is a different model from what we have seen up until now. That is why it is not straightforward to say, "The caseload will be this, and therefore the number of work coaches will be that." We are working on how to do something rather more sophisticated and nuanced than the way we have done this before.

Particularly in a world where there is more opportunity to use technology in a different way, that is about understanding our customers and identifying which customers are motivated or in more of a straightforward situation in their lives, for whom an online journey could be the answer. A lot of work has been done already looking at some of the online processes that we have now. The jobs and careers service has a brilliant tool to enable you to work through your skills, the careers that you could potentially move to and the opportunity for training courses near you. You can put in your postcode and look at training courses that might be appropriate. DWP has Find a Job.

If we put all that together and do it in a way that nudges people in the right way, we could potentially take a whole group of people who currently go through the work coach process and serve them online with minimal touch points with a work coach. The beauty of that is it means our work coaches can spend their time much more intensively on those customers for whom a more detailed and in-depth conversation is more appropriate. Our ideal, to be honest, is to take the same resource—if the Treasury is listening, a little bit more resource would be helpful.

Johanna Baxter: I was going to press you on that next.

Sir Peter Schofield: The more resource we have, the more we can do and the more quickly we can do it.

The fundamental point is that we are seeking a dramatic increase in the number of customers we serve and the number of employers who want to use DWP services. We want to do that by doing things in a very different way, in the way that I have described.

Q57 **Johanna Baxter:** I understand it is a complex picture and you are not going to be providing exactly the same service in exactly the same way as work coaches do at the moment or previously. Given the upcoming spending review, do you think you need more resource? If that is the case, how will you monitor and manage the impact on the caseloads of work coaches?

Sir Peter Schofield: We have an additional £240 million for the year we are in, of which £55 million is for the jobs and careers service. There is a process of using that money in the way that Barbara described earlier, managed through our investment committee, to make sure we are getting the right outcomes from it.



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The crucial thing in this work is working out what we can do differently that may be effective. That drives into questions about what we need to roll out more fully in future years. In a way, the spending review comes at an inconvenient time. We are starting the process. The £55 million became available on 1 April. The spending review process that we are in at the moment will set budgets for the three years after 1 April next year.

As best we can, we are identifying the sorts of needs that we have. We are developing a phased approach. Through the course of this year, we are doing trials in the way that Barbara described. We have pathfinder work in some parts of the country, where we are doing things in a very different way. We are developing the digital product by working through what types of activity really help customers and move them on their journey, tailoring it around their needs.

When we move into phase 2 of the jobs and careers service, which is 2026-27, we can roll out further the things that we have tried this year that have worked and we can work on the integration of the National Careers Service with our operation. In phase 3, the year beyond that, we plan to have a fully online jobcentre in your pocket, a digital offering that brings everything together, with a completed roll-out in 2028.

That is part of our proposition to the Treasury, and we will see whether we get the funding that we need to do that.

Q58 Johanna Baxter: How realistic is the vision for a universal service with which all people can engage, given the current shortage of work coaches?

Sir Peter Schofield: As I say, it comes down to this. We often describe it as a pyramid, do we not, Barbara? At the top, you have a larger number of people who can engage with us digitally. What we are looking to do is to reach those customers who do not use the jobcentre at the moment. The Report talks in quite a lot of detail about the different customer groups in universal credit who regularly come to a jobcentre.

We want to extend that to people with health conditions. We want to extend that offering to people more broadly. Those might be people who are not on benefits at all but who need help in finding a job.

On the other end of the spectrum, it is about tailored support and signposting to the specialist support that might be offered in local areas through the trailblazer work. It is about taking the existing resource and doing it in a more sophisticated and tailored way. It is completely different from what we have done in the past.

That is why we are taking our time, through the course of this year, to develop different ways of working in both the two big trials referred to in paragraph 114 and some of the more local flexibility and the changes that different people are doing in different parts of the country.



Barbara Bennett: It is exciting, is it not? It is a great opportunity for us to be able to test new ways of working. Building on what Peter says, it is about digital.

The thing that I want to build on is the impact that it will have on our work coaches. There will be a work coach academy and we will be training our staff. That is a lot of what the jobs and careers service will look at. We are taking inspiration internationally and looking at what public employment services look like in other countries.

In Flanders, for example, VDAB delivers an independent journey for those people who can self-serve. That sort of thinking and the evidence base from our trials are inspiring us to look at what types of things we want to be testing. That will have an impact on how many work coaches we have, where they are and where they deliver. If you go to Newcastle library, for example, you will see that we have three work coaches there. One of the things that the jobs and careers service is looking at is place and how we can take jobs to the people as well as people to the jobs. That is quite exciting for our teams.

Q59 **Johanna Baxter:** I just want to pay tribute to the work coaches in Paisley who are going out into health centres in my area.

Barbara Bennett: It makes a huge difference because the people are more likely to talk about their barriers with people who they think will understand.

Q60 **Sarah Hall:** Thank you for coming along today. I want to turn back to the support that is available for people with health conditions and disabilities and look specifically at the work coaches that have been planned and rolled out. How do you plan to build your capacity so you can provide more support for people with health conditions and disabilities? How do you decide where to place those resources? Is there going to be an even spread? Is it going to be based on need and demand?

Sir Peter Schofield: I will start on that one, and then Barbara may want to add in terms of how we do it locally. We have been trying this for quite some time in a smaller-scale trial. We published the results in March. It is something that we called additional work coach support. That basically took people who were waiting for a work capability assessment or had been found not to be capable of work at the current time and worked through a conversation with them to think about how we could support them on their journey, and it then looked at the outcomes for them in terms of finding jobs.

The evaluation, which we published in March, showed that that type of intervention did make a difference. It had some significant impacts in terms of helping people find work. It is a voluntary offer, but it is available. The next stage is what Ministers have announced, which is around the 1,000 work coaches who have been allocated to this. That is



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approximately two per jobcentre, but Barbara will say a bit about how we allocate that in practice. That additional work coach conversation is being rolled out with a wider range of customers.

On top of that, we have the Connect to Work programme, which is being rolled out all across the country this year. That is tailored support for people who have health conditions to move into employment. That is building on that. Alongside that, we have the trailblazers—nine of those are based on inactivity, particularly around health—in a number of mayoral combined authorities in a number of parts of the country.

Taking all of this together, some of that provision is available right now, such as the additional work coach support, Connect to Work and the trailblazers, but it is building towards an offer for the support that was announced as part of the spring statement by the Chancellor alongside the reforms to health and disability benefits, which is £200 million next year and rising to £1 billion by the end of the spending review period. We are consulting on how that money should be used. We also have these trials, which will enable us to work on what we have found works over the course of this year. That will be in place for 1 April.

That is the overall landscape, but, Barbara, how are we allocating the 1,000 additional work coaches?

Barbara Bennett: To answer your question, yes, it is about need. You would not necessarily have them all in the same areas. As we talked about earlier, the need is different depending on which jobcentre and which area you are looking at. If you take Manchester, for example, we work with Mustard Tree and other organisations in the area.

We would really ask ourselves, “What are the needs?”, and make sure we are also upskilling our work coaches in the area. In Carlisle, they have a need for scaffolders. We have just set up a specific project for people who have just come through the prison gate. It has to be tailored to the need. We make sure that we manage that resource effectively because, as we know, the national footprint changes depending on the local location.

Q61 Sarah Hall: In terms of understanding the needs of people with health conditions and disabilities, what work is being done? Is it co-produced support? People have very specific needs, do they not? It is about understanding what employment or training is appropriate in those different conditions. What work is being done around work coaches themselves having that lived experiences, in terms of health conditions or disabilities?

Barbara Bennett: Yes, a high proportion of our own staff identify as having health needs, which helps with the empathy. When we are designing and co-designing those services, we have a shadow board for our team. Some of the members of that team are specifically there to help us design. You are absolutely right.



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When we come to some of the trials that we are doing with our health model offices, it is about the provision and how we tailor it and have that conversation locally. We work with third-sector organisations. We work with charities—the RNIB and the King’s Trust, for example. We work with lots of organisations that are specifically there to help people with complex needs who face barriers.

One of the things that the jobs and careers service is looking at the infrastructure that needs to be in place. That is about how we make sure we have the right conversations in place, the right level of investment and the right relationships and how we are upskilling our leaders. Although our leaders already talk to some of the businesses that are in the area, what are the conversations that they need to have?

I will add one final point, if I may. We have invested quite a lot in single points of contact within our jobcentres. We have SPOCs on domestic abuse and refugees, for example. Although they will have a caseload of their own, their main job is to advise work coaches when they know they have somebody with complex needs coming in to see them.

Q62 Sarah Hall: Is this an evolving process? People’s needs will change.

Barbara Bennett: Yes, you would expect that. The fact that the needs of our own employees evolve helps us make sure that we really do have our finger on the pulse of the needs of the locality.

Sir Peter Schofield: Katherine might want to come in on Connect to Work or the trailblazers because they use specialist providers that have great expertise in particular areas of support.

Katherine Green: Yes, let me just add to that. As we were describing, we see the jobcentre as a sort of local integrator, but it also refers on to other services. We have Connect to Work; the first site went live last month. That is a place-and-train model. It is a very intensive model for people who have a disability to find a job and look at adjustments within that job.

From October last year, we have been piloting something called WorkWell, which is us working in partnership with the health service through ICBs. The jobcentre can refer to WorkWell, but there are other referral routes. That is basically a conversation with a really expert health professional to look at the health and work barriers together. There are 15 pilot sites. It will be really interesting to see the results from that. That is part of the wider infrastructure. It is really important to see the services that are around that the jobcentres can refer to. People are also referred back to the jobcentre from those other services.

Q63 Sarah Hall: To what extent will the redeployment of work coaches result in a further reduction in the support available for other UC claimants?



Sir Peter Schofield: Yes, it does do that, which is why the use of the flexible framework helps us. If we reduce the frequency of some of those interventions, as we go down that ladder that we were talking to Mr Kane about earlier, and we identify, "We safely did that, and it did not have a detrimental outcome," that then frees up work coach time to do these other things that we have just been talking about.

The experience with the flexible framework that we have had over the last few months has enabled us to have more of an understanding about how we can safely move people off different bits of activity. We do not stop anything, but we potentially reduce the frequency of things. We can do that safely, freeing up work coach time to do all the things that we have just been describing.

Q64 **Chair:** Just to follow Sarah's question, it is a relatively simple exercise to tailor needs to resource when you have a relatively stable economic situation. What do you do in the case of an unexpected event? If a major employer suddenly goes out of business and a huge number of people are suddenly cast on to the jobs market, how do you cope with that?

Sir Peter Schofield: Barbara has a rapid response team. Barbara, you can talk about that. More broadly, what have we done in times past where there has been a wider economic downturn? That is another question. Where it happens in a specific place, it is Barbara's team.

Barbara Bennett: Sadly, we have protocols in place for when this happens because understandably this happens fairly frequently. We do have a rapid response team. If they have been notified before a major event has happened, they will be able to plan. Typically, the first thing we do is create a pop-up jobcentre in the location or bring in resource from other jobcentres. We do direct matching. We bring in employers. We will run a job fair. We will hopefully get information from the employer. We will do very targeted work. We will work with them on pension needs as well, for example. We look at the requirements. It very much depends on the circumstances in which an employer is no longer in existence. We will tailor our support. Yes, it is a fantastic support that we have.

Q65 **Chair:** I am rushing a bit because we are beginning to lose our quorum and we want to get through everything. On the question that the permanent secretary asked himself, which was one I had been wondering about earlier, how do you look at statistics and trends? We have seen in the last unemployment figures that unemployment is going up and vacancies are going down. It looks as though we are getting into a tighter jobs situation. Therefore, your need for job coaches is even greater. How do you start to plan for that?

Sir Peter Schofield: Exactly as you say, Chair, it is about looking at the early warning indicators, one of which is applications for universal credit. That is not data that we publish, but it is early-warning data that is real-time. There is a lag in some of the labour market statistics because they look back rather than looking at the current situation.



That is what we do. We look at the administrative data as well as the published economic data. We make sure we are able to talk to colleagues in the Treasury about what they are seeing and understand their view about the wider economy and how that is going to play into the labour market.

Let us hope this does not happen, but in the past, when we have seen an economic downturn, the Treasury has then been willing, picking up on Mr Betts' question a bit earlier, to say, "We can see there is an urgent need. Get on and recruit." For example, back in 2020, when we agreed to double the number of work coaches in the middle of the pandemic, the Treasury was willing to provide the money because they could see the value of acting fast and helping people who fall out of work to bounce back quickly into something else, where that is possible, rather than risk people falling into long-term unemployment. They know that the work of jobcentres in those situations can make a massive difference.

Chair: That is really helpful.

Q66 Johanna Baxter: We have touched on the new jobs and careers service a little bit throughout the session. What is the timetable for setting that up?

Sir Peter Schofield: Yes, I talked a bit earlier about the phases. That was really relating to answering that question. Phase 1 is when we are using the £55 million that we have talked about already. That is partly around trying different things at what we are calling pathfinder sites. It is also developing a coaching academy and putting the first set of work coaches through that. The jobs and careers service will have more of a focus on those people who most need it. That training is about making sure that we are giving those people the very best coaching that we can. We are developing some of that.

Alongside that, there is the digital spend. That is looking at some of the existing offers that are already in place in the national careers service, DWP and elsewhere and working out, in a user-based way, how to develop services that meet people's needs. When we come up with something, we need to make sure we are doing it in a way that we know will work for those people who could be independently finding a job without a lot of work coach support. This is the year of trying different things out and working them through.

Phase 2 is about taking the things that we have found have worked and looking to roll them out at a bit more scale. That is in 2026-27. At that point, we will be looking at how we integrate the national careers service with the wider DWP offer.

Phase 3 is the year after that. We will be looking to have the digital offer fully in place end to end, which we are calling "jobcentre in your pocket". Phase 4 is making sure the jobs and careers service is fully there by 2028-29 in the way that we would want it to be. That is also my



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proposition to the Treasury, but it is dependent on getting the funding to make that a reality.

That is the plan that we have set in terms of getting from where we are now to where we want to get to. At the heart of it is an approach of tailoring what we do to what works and what meets the needs of customers. That is not necessarily relying on doing big, long-term randomised control trials, which is what we have relied on in the past. They are very robust and evidence-based, but they take such a long time. To get something in place, you need to do a combination of those and the things that I have just described.

Q67 Johanna Baxter: How are you going to measure the success of the service? Bearing in mind that it will not be fully operational until phase 4 in 2028-29, I understand and appreciate that you are going to be testing things as you go through. Once we have it, how will you measure the success of the service?

Sir Peter Schofield: That is a really good point. There are two levels here. One is how we are measuring progress on the whole Get Britain Working agenda, which Katherine can talk about. That is around this ultimate aim of an 80% employment rate.

Johanna Baxter: Yes, I was going to come on to that.

Sir Peter Schofield: We can come to that later. There are eight metrics that we have set out to address that. The jobs and careers service plays its part within that, through what we are calling the three Es. Katherine will remind me what the three Es are.

Katherine Green: It is employment, engagement and earnings. Those were the key objectives set out in the White Paper back in autumn for the jobs and careers service.

Sir Peter Schofield: It is in paragraph 1.17. Barbara, do you want to say a little bit about how we are measuring against those?

Barbara Bennett: Yes, it is employment, engagement and earnings. As we are evolving through the test-and-learn process, one of the things that we are testing and learning is the metrics. As Peter said earlier, one of the things that we want to do is make sure that whatever metrics we use are relevant and are a good litmus test of how well we are delivering.

The thing that I am really interested in is whether this breeds the right behaviour from our work coaches. We want to make sure we are aiming for the right outcomes. I do not have more on that at the moment. One of the things that we are doing in parallel to the testing and learning is testing and learning the metrics.

Q68 Johanna Baxter: Looking at it from a claimant point of view, there is something there about how we measure the sustainability and the quality



of employment that people then move into. Is there a view in the Department about how you would measure that? Is it the amount of time people then spend in that role that they then secure through the new jobs and careers service? Is it whether they are still in employment two or five years down the line? How are you measuring the sustainability of work that people are moving into?

Sir Peter Schofield: If you look at figure 10, it has the post-November 2023 framework. The second half of that table is looking at a sustained increase in earnings over three months. It is partly about one month to the next. That is the into-work rate. We are also looking at sustainability beyond that over three months. Those are specific metrics.

Coming to the question that you might be going to ask, I would go back to the 80% employment rate. How do we get to that point? That is all about looking at those places or groups where the employment rate is below 80% and seeking to act in those areas to narrow the gap. Katherine may want to say more.

Q69 **Johanna Baxter:** My question is around how big a challenge it will be to get to that.

Katherine Green: It clearly is a stretching aspiration. It has been set as an aspiration. You will have seen the employment rate figures that came out earlier this week. As Peter touched on, the fact of the matter is that the UK does have some areas and localities with an 80% employment rate, but it also has some with a very different and much lower employment rate.

The ambition that the Government have set for us—I will talk about the metrics in a second—is really focused on how you bring those areas and localities, and the characteristics of the individuals that coincide with those areas, up to a higher level. That is what the whole of Get Britain Working is really about. How do you bring that level up across the board?

That is why the Government have set out eight metrics. These were published last month. These are about the Get Britain Working agenda as a whole, about the labour market as a whole. Those focus on the particular groups and characteristics that have a less good employment rate. There is a metric about reducing the gap between the median and the bottom 10% in terms of places. There are particular metrics that are about characteristics, such as bringing the health-related inactivity rate down, bringing the disability employment gap down and bringing the proportion of young people not in education, training or employment down. That also includes employment among parents and the female employment rate.

Those metrics try to focus on the characteristics that tell us where the barriers are. That is the whole point of having a place-based and a characteristic-based strategy.

Q70 Sarah Hall: I am going to turn briefly to jobcentre funding. Katherine, my question is to you. How much extra funding are you expecting to put into jobcentres in the future?

Katherine Green: As Peter alluded to earlier, we are in the middle of a spending review discussion and negotiation with colleagues at the Treasury. We have made a proposition that will allow us to build on the £55 million that has been included this year for further transformation and a number of work coaches, which we think will allow us to manage the demand coming through. We do not yet know the result of those conversations with the Treasury.

Within that whole conversation, we are talking about the future of the other pieces of funding that we have alluded to today, such as the trailblazers, the Restart scheme, Connect to Work and all those programmes. Those are all subject to that discussion, which is very live but will be concluded in a matter of weeks.

Q71 Sarah Hall: In terms of the £55 million that has been made available, what progress has been made in deciding how to use that?

Barbara Bennett: As Peter quite rightly said, we are carefully drawing down on that and making sure we have business cases available to do that. At the moment, we want to use that money not only for digital tools but to look at improvements to coaching and how we train our customers for the service that we are going to be delivering going forward.

It is seed funding. We are hoping to be able to find ways to do more investment, but that is where we are at the moment. It is probably proportionate with the maturity of our thinking through the testing and learning. Peter might want to come in on that.

Sir Peter Schofield: You described the pathfinder work in some parts of the country, the coaching academy and the development of digital services. Those are three of the crucial elements of the drawdown of the £55 million.

Q72 Sarah Hall: So those are the priorities coming forward.

Sir Peter Schofield: The way that we are doing it, closely controlled by my investment committee, is to make sure the money is allocated in packets as proposals come along. We have not fully allocated the £55 million just yet. It is there to be drawn upon by good proposals coming forward by different parts of the organisation. The things that we are focusing on so far are the three that we have just described.

Q73 Sarah Hall: Those are the priorities, but the rest of the money has not been ring-fenced for anything else. It is going to be dependent on what is identified as a need.



Sir Peter Schofield: Yes, exactly. We have one pathfinder that we are just putting in place now. If that is successful, we would love to do something else in another part of the country to go further. We have started with the coaching academy in one place. We are looking at where we can go further on that. It all depends on whether the early work shows that what we are trying out is making a difference. Then we can justify rolling it out further.

Following the theme that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster mentioned, we want to innovate and try new things, but we recognise that some things will not work. We will recognise that quickly and stop those things, and we will pile in behind the things that do seem to work. That is really the thinking about the £55 million.

Q74 Chair: We are soon going to have to draw this to a close, but there are a few questions from me, to any of you who wishes to answer, about how you are going to make the existing system better. I want to start by looking at work capability assessments and fit notes. Do you have any proposals to alter the current system?

Sir Peter Schofield: In regards to the way jobcentres work, a great example—Barbara talked about one already—that I saw was in Poplar. We are based in the community centre built by the Poplar HARCA housing association. Across the way there is a GP surgery. We have representatives of the jobcentre in that surgery. When customers come in for a fit note, they get the fit note from the doctor, but then they can be referred to a DWP colleague on site who can say, “Would you like to have a conversation about work and what you can do?” We engage people where they are. We are not expecting people to come into the jobcentre itself. We are engaging people where they are. That is one example of the culture and way of working I would love to see the jobcentre of the future represent.

In terms of work capability assessments more broadly, the Green Paper consultation is under way. There is further work there.

On the point about the role of jobcentres, I know colleagues have talked about this in your constituencies as well. This is happening all over the place. We are finding opportunities for work coaches to take their caseloads out of the jobcentre. You can have a different type of conversation with customers in different settings.

Q75 Chair: We are all in favour of innovation on this Committee. I have a few more questions. Why is the evidence base for your current modelling of supporting claimants so old?

Sir Peter Schofield: The reason for that is that it is a big exercise to do it. You are basically trying to compare, over a period of time, with a big enough evidence pool, the impact of one set of interventions on one group of people with another set of interventions on a different group of



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people who look very similar but do not have those interventions. You have to do the interventions and not do the interventions for the control group for a period of time. You then have to leave a while before you can then see what the impact of that was in terms of the success rate of those two cohort groups. It takes a long time to do and to get the results.

It is a difficult one. More recently we have done propensity testing, which is easier in a way, in which you are basically saying, "I know that this person should have this intervention, but I am deliberately not going to give it to them because I want to see the impact of not giving it to them compared to a different group who I am giving it to." That creates other issues as well.

These things are important because they are the gold standard for an evidence base. They are the bedrock of the regime that we have been running over many years. As I say, we are doing the two that are described in the Report, but alongside that we want to get a bit more agility and try things in a different way so we can get results more quickly to enable us to develop the service in the way I was describing to Ms Baxter.

Q76 Chair: I understand the difficulties, permanent secretary. Without evidence, how will you make sure you provide a better service?

Sir Peter Schofield: It is about evidence. We are comparing and contrasting the evidence that we gather over shorter time periods. We are doing different things in different places so we can get comparison groups.

Let me explain the sorts of things that we are trying. We will have the core regime in one place and there will be a deviation from the core regime in another place. You can then compare the outcomes in that way as well. We are trying to do that more quickly.

The problem with it is that the result will not be to the gold standard. There will be a lot of assumptions that you are basing into that. Sometimes the best is the enemy of the good. This is what we are trying out here. Can we do things in a more agile way? Can we try things and test them as we go along? When things have not worked and what we have tried is not as good as the core regime that we are trying over here, we can stop it. We can see if something else has worked more effectively.

In the Poplar example, we have seen the results of having conversations with a work coach in a setting that is not the jobcentre. That seems to be making a big difference for people who are long-term unemployed. Across the way from the GP surgery, we were in the community centre. Upstairs, ESOL classes are going on. Downstairs, digital classes are going on. There are classes about how to cook for a family on a budget. The housing association is already there. You can come to one place as a



long-term unemployed person. You can have a conversation about jobs and you can get supported in all different ways in one setting.

Barbara's colleagues were seeing the outcomes in that place. They did not have a randomised control trial. They were just saying, "Individuals who I never thought would get a job are getting jobs". It is worth doing. That is the nature of some of these test-and-learn trials that we are doing in the short term.

Q77 Chair: Yes, understood. I can see certain colleagues are getting twitchy and need to go. I have one very last question. You talked about the Green Paper and we have talked about evaluation. On what sort of timescale, on your best guesstimate, might we see the results of some of these innovative ways of working?

Sir Peter Schofield: The consultation on the Green Paper on health and disability is a 12-week consultation. That began at the beginning of April and so it carries through to the end of June. The Government will need to make decisions off the back of that.

In terms of some of the innovative things that we have been talking about more broadly, we will hopefully be seeing those as we move through the different phases that I described as we roll out the jobs and careers service. We will be seeing things in different places at different times. We can share examples in your constituencies, if that would be helpful as well.

Chair: That is very helpful. Thank you to my colleagues for their forbearance. It has been a quite tricky session. In particular, thank you to our witnesses. It has been a very interesting session. We have covered a lot of ground and you have been very candid with your answers. We thank you for that.

An uncorrected transcript of this hearing will be published on the Committee's website in the coming days. The Committee will consider the evidence that you have so carefully provided today and we will produce a Report, no doubt with recommendations, in due course. Thank you again.