



Work and Pensions Committee

Oral evidence: DWP's response to the coronavirus outbreak, HC 178

Wednesday 3 February 2021

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Members present: Stephen Timms (Chair); Debbie Abrahams; Shaun Bailey; Siobhan Baillie; Neil Coyle; Steve McCabe; Nigel Mills; Selaine Saxby; Dr Ben Spencer; Chris Stephens; Sir Desmond Swayne.

Questions 403-505

Witnesses

I: The Rt Hon Thérèse Coffey MP, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, and Peter Schofield, Permanent Secretary, Department for Work and Pensions.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Thérèse Coffey and Peter Schofield.

Q403 **Chair:** Welcome, everybody, to this meeting of the Work and Pensions Committee. I particularly welcome the Secretary of State, Thérèse Coffey, and the permanent secretary, Peter Schofield. Thank you both very much for joining us. We are looking forward to seeing how this camera arrangement works out during the course of the morning.

May I start, Secretary of State, with a couple of questions? We have taken evidence on a number of occasions recently from Baroness Stroud about the work of the Social Metrics Commission. You said in December that work on a new poverty metric based on the commission's work had been suspended. When do you expect that to resume?

Dr Coffey: I am considering the different metrics that are there. I am thinking more broadly about some of the measures and referring to some of what she has done with her commission, which I think is an important contribution. Right now, I am not intending to resurrect that yet. We already have existing measures, but it is not my intention to resurrect that yet. I do not have a fixed time at all about restarting.

Q404 **Chair:** You said that you do not plan to resurrect it yet. Do you plan to resurrect it?



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Dr Coffey: My predecessor is the person who wanted to do that. I have met the Baroness about it. As I say, there is some important work there. Right now, my focus continues to be about measures perhaps more focused on aspects of material deprivation, as our response as a Department in how we are helping people.

Q405 **Chair:** Baroness Stroud made the point to us that, “we are making Government decisions, some of which are very good, but they are in the dark.” Do you think that she has a point there?

Dr Coffey: I don’t think so. As I have said to the Committee before, my main focus in the emergency response to the pandemic has been about Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. You will be aware that our principle is to try to make sure that people are able to work their way out of poverty. That is why universal credit is a back-to-work benefit. I am conscious that right now there are only about half a million vacancies around the country, but nevertheless we need to help people to get ready to get back into work.

At the same time, the measures that we have undertaken through things like the Covid winter grant have been part of our response with that focus on, as I say, almost the basic elements, as well as other policies that have been under way about helping people with their rent, discretionary housing payments, the LHA, and some of the other measures taken to help people during this time in other parts of Government as well.

Q406 **Chair:** You mentioned the winter grant. That is due to end next month. Are there plans to extend that?

Dr Coffey: We have been in a situation where we wanted to make sure, during these difficult times, that people were well catered for. The money can be used right up until the end of March. We have already said to councils that if they wanted to think ahead and perhaps use some of that, bearing in mind what could be happening over Easter, it was definitely an option open to them. We get an update from councils later this month on how they have spent, in effect, their first 50%. That is something that we will look carefully with councils at—perhaps at where the needs are—before making any further decisions. The holiday activities fund is due to kick in at Easter. I do not have the precise details of that, but that is where there is some ongoing support to families, particularly disadvantaged families, during the Easter holidays.

Q407 **Chair:** No doubt we will come back to that at some point. Can I ask you about something else? The Committee warmly welcomed the benefit increases at the start of the pandemic, including putting the local housing allowance at the 30th percentile of local rents. On 30 September, when you came to speak to us, you referred to “the substantial increase in LHA, which is permanent”. Then in November it was announced that it will not be permanent, because it is going to be frozen. Did the Treasury overrule you on that?

Dr Coffey: No. The uplift in cash terms has been permanent and has been made permanent. Certainly, I think that is what is there. I do not think that any announcement was made at the time, last year, Stephen, on the

reinstatement of a link to the 30th percentile. We are actually starting to see that we need to understand the rental market anyway, and what has actually been going on. That work will understandably be taken, but we made the uplift in cash terms, and that has certainly been preserved.

Q408 **Chair:** Is the intention now to freeze it indefinitely again?

Dr Coffey: Like all benefits, I do an annual review, so I would not say that anything is indefinite.

Q409 **Chair:** Would you accept that if it is frozen, that will restore the postcode lottery that we had just before the re-linking?

Dr Coffey: No, I don't accept that, partly because, as I have just explained, we will need to understand what is happening in the light of the pandemic, and what is going on with different aspects of rental values. Anecdotally, it is a mixed bag. In some parts of the country, rents are coming down.

Chair: Hence my reference to the postcode lottery, but you have made the position clear. We will no doubt come back to that.

Q410 **Nigel Mills:** Secretary of State, you have just been talking about uplifts becoming permanent, at least in the cash cost, and I think you recognised on the first question that the pandemic crisis will not end at the end of March. Can you tell us any positive news about the uplift to universal credit at this stage?

Dr Coffey: Discussions are still ongoing with other parts of Government, and no decision has yet been reached. I am conscious that this is an important decision to be made. The mechanisms around it are a key part of it, but I am afraid I cannot share any news yet with the Committee.

Q411 **Nigel Mills:** Is this your Department's big ask for the Budget? Is it the top line of your Budget submission that you would like to keep the uplift in place?

Dr Coffey: As you would expect, we have looked carefully at a number of ways to try to help people during this pandemic. Some of those may politically get a bit more complicated. Some of those are still being considered. I am conscious that the Committee may want to have some kind of revelation. There isn't a revelation to make. I am absolutely resolute that, as the Prime Minister has set out previously, the effects of this pandemic are ongoing, and we recognise that we need to continue to support people.

Q412 **Nigel Mills:** Have you made a Budget submission for an extension to this uplift or for it to become a permanent feature, or have you asked for both to see what the Chancellor bites on?

Dr Coffey: It does not quite work like that. Budget proposals are still being worked out and will go through the normal process. I think it is fair to say that this has been a separate approach, which is under active discussion.



Q413 Nigel Mills: What would your preference be? Obviously, you oversee the welfare system and its performance. Do you think that keeping the uplift of £20 a week would be the right thing to do? Do you think it has made the benefits system a better system, or do you think it would be the wrong thing to do because it has somehow reduced work incentives and you do not think it is a good future?

Dr Coffey: I don't think it does reduce work incentives. Internal analysis across Government suggests it would not be a disincentive. In fact, it is important to keep reminding people that, in effect, the whole purpose of universal credit is about getting people back into work and encouraging them to work, unlike the cliff edges that may have happened with tax credits and similar things. I am very supportive of universal credit. Right now, there are questions about whether standard allowance should be done. There have always been discussions about what more could be done with the taper rate and different ways like that, but it is an ongoing discussion. If we had a decision, I would love to tell you, but we haven't quite got there yet.

Q414 Nigel Mills: Okay, but you did not give me the answer as to whether you think this would be a welcome thing to retain or whether you are unsure about it. If the money was there, you would like to keep this—that was the sound of what you said.

Dr Coffey: I understand, Nigel, why you are wanting to press there, but I am part of a Government where we discuss our policy proposals internally and then have collective responsibility. I am not going to try to use this as a way to champion one cause or another when that is an active discussion that is ongoing. As you know, I will put forward the collective agreed approach of the Government.

Q415 Nigel Mills: Here was me thinking that Marcus Rashford made these decisions, so I am glad to hear that it is a collective decision by the Cabinet after all. While we are on these options, have you studied the strange proposal, which appears to have turned up in the media a couple of times, for paying universal credit claimants a £500 or £1,000 one-off bonus? Is that something that you recognise as an idea? Do you have any thoughts on the merits or otherwise of that?

Dr Coffey: I am aware that the idea had been raised. There are a number of reasons why, understandably, there is still a level of financial support for people, which is welcome. But as I have discussed earlier, we need to do delivery mechanisms in a different way, and that would not be one of the Department's preferred approaches on providing that financial support. Nevertheless, financial support is underpinning that desire. We are just not sure that is the best way to deliver it.

Q416 Nigel Mills: Why would you not think that is the best way to deliver that financial support? Are there some big downsides to it?

Dr Coffey: There is an element of complexity. We do not know quite how long the economic impact of aspects of the pandemic will last. Previous experience would be that a steady sum of money would probably be more



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beneficial to claimants and customers, to help with that budgeting process. How can I put it? I wouldn't say no to a one-off payment, if in the end that was the decision that was taken, because it still would be financial support. As I say, there are a variety of ways that we can continue to try to consider the financial support to help people during these times.

Q417 Nigel Mills: That is one of the options that is under consideration. Have you been asked to supply any figures or calculations as to how much those options might cost?

Dr Coffey: Yes.

Q418 Nigel Mills: Would you like to share with us how much the £500 or the £1,000 might cost?

Dr Coffey: Part of the challenge of doing these—*[Inaudible]*—forecasts is that it does not necessarily reflect the dynamic nature of the benefits system. I don't think I am in an exact position, but I would suggest that some of the figures in the media are not far off.

Q419 Nigel Mills: Much of the system may become slightly less dynamic if there was a £1,000 bonus if you were still in it in early April. I suspect people wouldn't be rushing to take a job or to increase their hours and miss out on their issued bonus. It could have some adverse impacts.

Dr Coffey: I think there is a very fair point about disincentives. There are some challenges about fraud. There are some challenges about if, say, tax credit recipients received it and then moved to universal credit very quickly afterwards. There are a number of reasons why there is a simplicity to a one-off, but there is actually quite a lot of complexity as well.

Q420 Nigel Mills: I presume we know how to pay bonuses to every welfare claimant. Do you think, if there was a decision to go down the bonus line, that you would have to extend that to all the equivalent legacy benefits, whereas the UC and tax credit uplift didn't go to all the legacy benefits? Do you think it might end up costing the Treasury more than they think in that situation?

Dr Coffey: I understand why you are saying that. I am very keen to try to help people move onto UC. We think that the majority of people would be better off, although it is of course important that they check that carefully for making their own natural migration—in terms of once you have applied, you don't go back to legacy benefits. It has never been the intention, since Parliament passed the move to universal credit, that people, in a way, can pick and choose what benefit system they are on. We have already been through that. I am conscious that people with an element of uncertainty may want to have greater clarity on what their likely entitlement would be. That is why things like benefit calculators are important.

There is an estimate for the people on legacy benefits. It has been estimated that people are not claiming all the benefits to which they are currently entitled, or have been entitled, and UC simplifies that by pulling



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together the six main benefits. That is why we estimate ourselves that the majority of people would be financially better off on universal credit than staying on legacy benefits.

Q421 Nigel Mills: I guess what I was trying to get to was that the reason why the £20 a week uplift wasn't given to legacy benefit claimants was that we were told the system was too difficult, it would take too long and it couldn't be done. Would that excuse apply for a one-off bonus?

Dr Coffey: I think it is fair to say there is a combination of factors—just under a year ago, people newly into benefits, similar rates to statutory sick pay and so on. I think we have given evidence to that effect before. Is that fair to say, Peter?

Peter Schofield: Yes.

Dr Coffey: But, yes, there were some technical challenges that would make what we did nigh on impossible to have delivered in the same way. Peter, do you want to add some more?

Peter Schofield: As the Committee knows, last year, back in March, we implemented very quickly the £20 uplift to universal credit. We were able to get that in in a matter of weeks. That is something that the agility of the universal credit system enabled us to do. The primary policy rationale for the £20 uplift was related to people who, as the Secretary of State says, were coming into benefits—coming into universal credit for the first time and needing to manage with the loss of income that they were facing in that context. So it applied to people making new claims to benefits going into universal credit as opposed to legacy benefits, but it is absolutely fair to say that in March last year we were able to implement a change to the rate of universal credit very quickly, and we wouldn't have been able to do that with legacy benefits.

Q422 Nigel Mills: I have one final question, Peter, while you are on the camera. The Secretary of State said that if the bonus policy was pursued, there would be some quite significant fraud risks. If you were asked to administer those £1,000 bonuses, would you be happy to do that? Would you think that was consistent with how Parliament normally votes money for the welfare system? Is that something you think you could do, or would you be seeking an instruction before you would go ahead with that?

Peter Schofield: As you can imagine, we are providing advice to Ministers on a range of options, as the Secretary of State has said. As accounting officer, I will have to look at the deliverability of any of those options. I think it would be speculative to comment on any particular option at this stage, before we know what the Government have decided to do. We would make that decision in the light of the decision of the Government in due course, as the Secretary of State has said.

Q423 Chair: Can I just pick up a point here that disabled people, more than others, have borne higher costs in the pandemic? People in receipt of severe disability premium were not allowed to switch to universal credit



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until changes made last week. They have had 10 months with no extra help at all with their legacy benefit claims. Why have they been treated so badly?

Dr Coffey: I would not say they have been treated badly. There was a legal case. In effect, the route was blocked not due to our decision but in response to the legal case and legal judgment. I am pleased that that has now been lifted and the gateway is open.

Q424 **Chair:** But the consequence has been that people who are on employment support allowance as well as jobseeker's allowance have had no extra help at all, even though it is clearly established that disabled people have faced significantly increased costs during the pandemic. Surely they should have had extra help.

Dr Coffey: I am not aware specifically of extra costs that would have been unduly incurred, but I hear what you say. I am pleased that the gateway is now open, but we had to respond to the legal judgment and act accordingly.

Q425 **Debbie Abrahams:** Good morning, Secretary of State and Mr Schofield. You will be aware that last week the coroner reporting on the inquest into Philippa Day's death issued a prevention of future deaths notice against the DWP and Capita after finding 28 failings. This is the fifth prevention of future deaths report to the DWP since 2013. Philippa, as you know, was 27 when she died in October 2019, after going into a coma having taken an overdose of insulin. She had known mental health problems, as well as type 1 diabetes, and had been battling with an application for PIP after being on DLA. But her money was stopped in January 2019, and in huge debt she overdosed in August 2019. The coroner stated, "Given the sheer number of problems in the handling of her claim, I am unable to conclude that each of these was attributable to individual human error. He also stated that "deficiencies in the system's ability to process PIP claims without causing unnecessary distress to claimants" were evidence, and he listed those. As the Secretary of State for the Department, what steps have you taken and what steps will you be taking in response this PFD report?

Dr Coffey: Thank you, Debbie, and I am aware of what was issued by the coroner. Clearly, it is a very sad situation. I also wanted to make you aware that we have not received the formal report, and we are not expecting it for another week or so. That is a separate report that would come from the coroner. Once we have that, we will be in a better place to understand and, in effect, respond to it.

What I would say is that I do take these matters seriously. As I have discussed previously at this Committee with the perm sec, we have strengthened the serious case panel. It now meets quarterly and works on themes. Those are the sorts of approaches, I hope, that will enable us to get the systemic changes and improvements on how we handle this on an ongoing basis. I cannot quite remember the date of the last serious case panel, but as I committed before, we are putting notes on gov.uk and I



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think there is an element in the annual report that is part of our future proposals. Is that right, Peter?

Peter Schofield: Yes, that's right. The serious case panel last met in November and meets next in March. As we committed to the Committee back in July, we will have an update on the serious case panel's work in the annual report and accounts in the summer.

Dr Coffey: Can I just add something? I know this tends to annoy Committee members, sadly. We spoke to your Clerk and, strictly speaking, this is not sub judice because there is no active legal case, but we had been informed, before the inquest, that the family intended to bring legal proceedings against the Department. The timeline for that was extended in order to still allow it to happen. The timing of the inquest—it wasn't exactly known when that would conclude. So trying to refer to individual issues about the case right now is not something that I am going to be able to do in this forum.

Q426 **Debbie Abrahams:** I regret that, given that this is the first time that Parliament has had an opportunity, through this Committee, to scrutinise and to hold you to account for yet another death. I appreciate that you have not had the PFD report, but you will have seen the coroner's report, and it was absolutely scathing. It was a 58-page report and was scathing of the Government's handling of Philippa's application. Are you convinced that the serious case panels and the processes that you described to the Committee last July will have done enough to protect and safeguard vulnerable claimants like Philippa?

Dr Coffey: As I say, I am not going to refer to the specific situation of—

Q427 **Debbie Abrahams:** You don't have to, but knowing the circumstances, Thérèse, are you convinced that what you have introduced now will prevent other Philipphas?

Dr Coffey: I think that we are seeing, through the serious case panel and some of the actions taken, definitely there are changes about improving more generally aspects of that. Peter introduced this concept in the first place; I strengthened it by raising the level to be director general and perm sec level and having it chaired by one of our NEDs. But Peter, you might want to give a couple of examples.

Peter Schofield: Yes. There are a number of things that we have done over the last year or two that make a difference, I think.

Q428 **Debbie Abrahams:** Well, obviously not "two", Peter; otherwise, the tragedy that happened to Philippa wouldn't have occurred.

Dr Coffey: Well, it happened before I became Secretary of State, for sure.

Peter Schofield: It happened before the serious case panel was in place.

Dr Coffey: Yes.

Peter Schofield: I will not talk about a case, but there are a number of changes that we have made that I think will reassure the Committee. One



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that we talked about in July relates to how we make sure that we improve the processes for identifying that someone needs additional support, making sure that we have better additional support markers placed on claims. To give you an example, if a claimant in that initial conversation as they apply for disability benefit says that they have a mental health condition, but they have support from a family member, for example, in making a claim, we would still mark that with an additional support marker. We are making further changes to make it even more visible to an agent that a claimant has additional support needs. That will now, from later this month, become a watermark in the package, in the IT, so that you can see it on the screen very, very clearly.

As I talked about last July, we have changed the processes to require an escalation before any decision can be made to withdraw benefits from someone with an additional support marker. We talked about that in quite a lot of detail at the Select Committee back in July. We have clearer escalation routes, so every disability benefits centre has a vulnerable customer champion, whom colleagues can approach if they have concerns about a vulnerable customer. We have been talking to Capita and also Atos/IAS about how they are changing some of their processes for revisiting decisions on whether a face-to-face assessment is required.

We have improved mental health training, so now 30,000 colleagues have already had mental health training and we are looking at how we can bring elements of the mental health training modules further forward in the induction process for new colleagues. We are carrying out further training to make sure that colleagues—*[Interruption.]*

Q429 Debbie Abrahams: May I take this opportunity to say thank you? I hope you can still hear me. What a contradiction there seems to have been with the response to the report that we produced on the wait for the first UC payment. On page 47, at paragraph 134 of the report, we quoted the NAO: “the Department does not have all the information it needs to track vulnerable claimants and ensure its support is effective.” It stated that the DWP “does not use data ‘flags’ or markers to highlight”, although I appreciate that you will introduce the watermark, which is a new aspect that we would like to hear a bit more about. We recommended that you made improvements to formalise how the Department “identifies and defines vulnerable claimants, as part of its overall approach to safeguarding vulnerable people”, and we wanted that to be “a substantial piece of work”. I wonder whether you can recall what your response to this recommendation was last month.

Dr Coffey: There definitely have been changes. I am afraid that I do not have the report in front of me.

Q430 Debbie Abrahams: Well, basically, you blew it off and said that everything that it sought to identify was hunky-dory. You said that, “our approach to vulnerability seeks to identify individuals who have complex user needs and/or require additional support to enable them to access our benefits and services”, in much the same way as you have just described.



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Peter Schofield: What we have not done is have just tick-box-type arrangements in the system, because we wanted to reflect the fact that everyone's needs are different. Instead of that, we have a pin-note approach, which is what we set out to the Committee and the National Audit Office on a number of occasions. That enables agents to have better understanding. Rather than putting people into boxes, we have a full description of what the needs are of claimants who are vulnerable and have additional support needs. The additional support marker, which we have already, is in addition to pin notes, which set out the details of someone's support needs. So, we have the two together.

The challenge we have regularly from the National Audit Office is that, if we do not have the simple tick-box-type arrangement for different types of situations, we cannot then aggregate the data. The answer is that we are, and have been, looking at what we can do to address that so that we can aggregate data. What we did not want to do, however, was to lose the detail of someone's individual needs, because those are absolutely relevant to enable us to provide the right support to claimants when they approach us.

Q431 **Debbie Abrahams:** Thank you for that. I mentioned the NAO in our report, but I was specifically referring to the recommendation, which did not say that it should be a tick-box exercise. It was quite specific and recognised that that was not what was always needed. As I say, you blew the Committee off on that. That was after a significant piece of work and a number of interviews with our inquiry. I will leave that one.

My final question, Secretary of State, is about what you said last September—that the Department “does not have a...safeguarding duty” or “a duty of care” for its claimants. It has been pointed out to me that the DWP does have a duty under existing legislation, including the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, the Supplementary Benefits Act 1976 and indeed the Equality Act 2010. Do you finally accept that you have a duty to safeguard vulnerable claimants?

Dr Coffey: We don't have a statutory duty specifically relating to safeguarding. Wider duties exist, which we already undertake. That is why we have offices around the country that work often with bodies that have statutory duties specifically regarding safeguarding, so that we work together to help people. That might be through local councils. It might be through local medical professionals. That is where we will continue to work in that regard.

Q432 **Dr Spencer:** Thank you, Secretary of State and permanent secretary, for talking to us today and answering our questions. It is very much appreciated. I would like to talk a bit about test and trace support payments. This is for when people self-isolate, either because they have tested positive for coronavirus or because they have been found to be a contact of someone who has coronavirus. I was delighted to hear you talk about Maslow's hierarchy, Secretary of State. For the benefit of people watching at home, this is a psychological idea where people's motivation focuses first on primary needs like keeping warm, getting food and sleep,



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and then other needs, such as psychological fulfilment and altruistic needs, are higher at the top. Unless you are safe and fed, you cannot go on to do other things, such as altruistic behaviours.

We know that concordance with self-isolation is not as good as we would like it to be, and there are lots of people who are having to make very difficult decisions, focusing on their job and ability to go to work, and being hit by the need to self-isolate where that could impact on whether they can put food on the table. It is all well and good telling people that they need to self-isolate, but we need to be able to support people to do so. The test and trace support payments are hugely positive, helpful support for people to do that.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development did an FOI request and found that only a third of people who apply for these are successful, and there is a postcode lottery going on in terms of local authorities that are awarding these payments. As I said, this is for people who need to self-isolate and want to do the right thing but who will have serious financial difficulties if they do so. Do you think that the support is working, and what improvements do you think need to be made?

Dr Coffey: The DWP does not administer those grants. I think we would need primary legislation to introduce such a new payment, and that is why, through the Department of Health, I think they have used the grant process through local councils in order to do that. I do not know the arrangements in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. I do not know the exact mechanism, but I suspect that it will be under the Local Government Act 2003, where they can make it a grant in that regard.

There is primarily a link to people who are receiving benefits as a way to target it on lower-income people, but my understanding is that councils also have a discretionary element that they can pay. It may be the case that people have applied and they do not have the benefits link, but I would not know the situation locally on how it has ended up working for discretionary payments.

Q433 **Dr Spencer:** Do you think that the Department could do more in terms of supporting people? The people for whom this is going to be a particular challenge are people who have uncertain work situations, people who are on benefits, and people on low pay. The discretionary payments are also trying to resolve the situation for people who have no recourse to public funds. Do you think that the Department could be doing more to support people to make the right decision in terms of our response to coronavirus?

Dr Coffey: As I say, it is the responsibility of the Department of Health, which is using councils to distribute those grants as a public health response, to help people to manage while they self-isolate. Our Department continues to operate with a record number of claimants and households that we are helping through our usual processes, including the potential of the different plan for jobs schemes that we are doing in order to help people to get back into work. We do not have powers to distribute



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individual welfare grants. That is one of the reasons I think the Department of Health ended up doing that through our local councils.

Q434 Dr Spencer: How about extending eligibility to statutory sick pay? It is clear to me that we are going to need test and trace facilities for some time. In all the plans I can see going forward, to get out of this pandemic, at no point has anyone said that test and trace won't be used as an ongoing thing, in terms of people who are getting coronavirus. What are your thoughts about extending eligibility for statutory sick pay?

Dr Coffey: The rate of statutory sick pay is the legal minimum for those people who are eligible for it. In terms of extending eligibility, there was a consultation. We are still finalising our cross-Government response to that consultation on statutory sick pay. I am hopeful that it will be published reasonably soon, alongside other papers which we want to do. "Health is everyone's business" was the original consultation and I am afraid that is still under consideration.

Q435 Dr Spencer: Thank you. You anticipated my next question, which was when are you planning to respond to that consultation? Will you be able to respond to it before we hit the March/April cut-off, which currently a lot of our support packages are leading to? Will you be able to respond to it with regard to a future plan on how things are going to go over the next year or so?

Dr Coffey: I can't give a guarantee, Ben. I would like to get us to be in a position to publish it before the end of April, but that is not guaranteed. That is not a commitment, before anybody tries to say I am making commitments. It is an ambition.

Dr Spencer: Thank you. I think you made that very clear.

Q436 Neil Coyle: Thanks for joining us this morning, Secretary of State and permanent secretary. The "Health is everyone's business" consultation began in July 2019 and closed in 2019, I think. What is the hold-up in finalising the Department's response?

Dr Coffey: It's a cross-Government approach. We have had an election in between, so there have been some considerations of different mechanisms. Covid has been significant in absorbing Government's time and the time of other Ministers across Government. I think we have made good progress on it, but it is not decided yet.

Q437 Neil Coyle: It seems it should be taken into consideration in the run-up to the Budget, rather than by the end of April, but my main criticism is about the Health and Safety Executive. In January, the HSE was contacted nearly 3,000 times by people worried about risky workplaces and people feeling pressurised into returning to work, but there has been no enforcement action. How are you working with the HSE to ensure enforcement is taken when it is needed?

Dr Coffey: The figures I have been given are that the HSE has been contacted 68,000 times since last April. Not all those will have necessarily been about things on which HSE could act. I know the Committee is aware



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that there is a combination of where HSE acts and where local authorities act. My understanding is that about 19,000 to 20,000 concerns have been triaged and assessed to determine what interventions are necessary, involving some site visits and prohibition notices.

Action has been taken, but you will be aware that the approach that a lot of regulators often take is not just to issue all sorts of notices, but to provide quick and effective advice. Spot checks have been going on over the last year, in order to make sure that effective actions have already been taken by businesses on issues that have been raised as concerns. Of those 100,000 spot checks, HSE has informed me that about 90% of businesses, where they have undertaken spot checks, were found to be taking reasonable precautions.

I am conscious that I don't know which of these figures were already in the public domain, but the information that I have in front of me suggests that 156 visits have led to notices being issued.

Q438 Neil Coyle: Secretary of State, when the HSE came to us they hadn't even prioritised care homes with inspections for the workforce or the residents. That was deeply worrying. Public Health England has published reports on who is more at risk, including the black and minority ethnic population, but also professions like security guards, taxi drivers and bus drivers. How are you, as the Government, influencing the HSE to ensure that they are taking the findings of those reports into consideration and prioritising the workforces most at risk, including taking enforcement?

Dr Coffey: HSE is the regulator in this regard—

Q439 Neil Coyle: And you are the Department with ownership responsibility, so what are you doing to ensure it is taking enforcement action? Does it have the powers and resources necessary, and what political leadership are you showing, to ensure that those groups are prioritised? Or are they not valued?

Dr Coffey: I think that is quite a pejorative way of putting it, Neil.

Q440 Neil Coyle: Well, I am asking you to explain what action you have taken, and I am not hearing anything.

Dr Coffey: HSE have received an extra £14 million over the last year to help with the capacity that they needed, and wanted to undertake, understandably, a higher level of response than perhaps you would normally expect. That was a 10% increase in their budget, to empower them—to help as they monitor compliance. Understandably, the responsibility is on the employer, and a safe place of work, but there have been a number of different interventions on how to reduce transmission. As I say, there is a relationship with local authorities. There has been much greater collaboration, working between the two. I am not aware specifically of what you referred to on the PHE report, but I am confident in the HSE, that they have stepped up their approach, stepped up the number of visits, are doing the spot checks, and that we are seeing good—



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overall, the reaction is 90% of businesses, as I indicated earlier, were found to be taking reasonable precautions.

Q441 **Steve McCabe:** Good morning. Can I ask first about the minimum income floor, Secretary of State? You suspended it during the pandemic and as far as I know your suspension runs out at the end of April. What are you going to do?

Dr Coffey: We are working across Government, largely being led by the Treasury in terms of aspects of fiscal elements, because there is a fiscal element to extending the suspension of minimum income floor. I think it is fair to say we have a lot of self-employed claimants. Prior to the Covid pandemic, I am sure Committee members will be aware of the gainfully self-employed test and, actually, our own finding was that about half the people were not deemed to be gainfully self-employed. It is something in my mind, that I think we do need to start to work to encourage people to think about whether they will still be able to have a gainfully self-employed career in the future, but no decision has yet been taken about whether or not we want to extend that.

Q442 **Steve McCabe:** So we don't know what is going to happen at the end of April, yet. I notice the Chancellor said, on 20 March, that it would be suspended for the duration of the coronavirus outbreak. It is not likely to end in April, is it?

Dr Coffey: No decision has yet been taken.

Q443 **Steve McCabe:** No, I meant you don't have any reason to believe the outbreak will be over by the end of April, do you?

Dr Coffey: I am hopeful of the great success that is happening with getting vaccinations around the country, but I am not in a position to say whether or not that changes any other aspects of how we manage that sort of intervention, fiscally.

Q444 **Steve McCabe:** The Social Security Advisory Committee recommended to you that if you were going to reintroduce the minimum income floor you should give claimants at least one month's clear notice and develop a plan to phase its introduction. Will you be paying heed to that advice?

Dr Coffey: Of course, there would be notice of this. There is an element of how long—if I take a slight step back, Stephen: there are several hundred thousand people who are self-employed. The process even to reintroduce a minimum income floor will just take time. It will take months in its own right to get through that entire cohort. So, it is not a case of—like a big bang that would happen. It may be that at the point that we decide to remove it, people will still, in effect, have that individually suspended. As we go through the process of doing it, that's when changes will be made on an individual basis. That's my understanding of the process. It's not just a big-bang approach. I don't know if Peter would like to add any more.

Peter Schofield: The Secretary of State is right about that. It would take time to go through that cohort of self-employed claimants and to be able



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to have those conversations around gainful self-employment. It couldn't happen in a big-bang way, as the Secretary of State says.

Q445 **Steve McCabe:** Have I misunderstood something here? When you suspended it, wasn't that for everyone? Wasn't that a big-bang way? When it ceased to apply for the duration of the coronavirus, wasn't that for everyone? Couldn't you describe that as a global implementation in a big-bang way? Isn't that right?

Dr Coffey: Yes, it was a unilateral approach.

Q446 **Steve McCabe:** So, you could do it that way, but you can't reverse it that way. Is that what you're telling me?

Dr Coffey: The regulations then shift that and then remove that, as it were, as a unilateral approach. Then you start through the regulations to go through on an individual basis for the assessment.

Q447 **Steve McCabe:** Let me make sure that I've understood. I don't want to misrepresent you; I just want to make sure I've understood it. If people were self-employed before you suspended it, the rule was that the minimum income floor applied. Then you suspended it for everyone. That meant it no longer applied. You can claim universal credit without the minimum income floor being applied to you. But if you then decide to reinstate the minimum income floor, you are going to go through everyone on a case-by-case basis to decide.

Dr Coffey: Exactly.

Q448 **Steve McCabe:** That's the policy. So, when the Chancellor talked about it, he didn't know how it worked, I presume.

Peter Schofield: You need to assess whether they are gainfully self-employed, which you do on a case-by-case basis. You can switch it off and stop applying it from then on to everyone. As you switch it back on, you have to reintroduce it through those conversations you have with each and every claimant over a period of time. It just takes time to have—

Q449 **Steve McCabe:** If that's how it works, I'm grateful for that. Just put my mind at rest here. If you're hoping to give people reasonable notice—the Social Security Advisory Committee said one month—and if you're planning to do it with a phased reintroduction, how does that work if you are doing it on an individual basis?

I'm struggling. It sounds to me that you could get a call and be told to come into the office or attend your screen and have a quick conversation, and discover that it has been reapplied to you. Is that not what's going to happen?

Dr Coffey: We have about 4,500 advisers around the country who have particular skills on self-employment. They will be undertaking that with the claimants in their Jobcentre Plus area, to go through that individual process.



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There is some work already under way by our work coaches around the country, reminding people that they might be making errors in their self-declarations that are ongoing now, about what should or shouldn't be included as expenses, say, in their assessments.

There is a level of upping some of the enforcement of that, but no formal process has started yet about gainfully self-employed. We don't want errors to turn into unintentional fraud. A proactive approach is already under way, reminding people of exactly what they should be doing in terms of their monthly declarations.

Peter Schofield: Yes. I think the proposal from the SSAC is that you would have a month before you then started that phased reintroduction of the minimum income floor. It would be phased anyway, but you would have a month's delay before you even started. I think that is the proposal from SSAC.

Q450 **Steve McCabe:** Obviously, Secretary of State, I raised this because I am seeking some clarity on behalf of those people who feel they have been unfairly subject to the minimum income floor in the past. I was hoping we would have some clarity about what happens at the end of April. I am not sure I am entirely clear. I think you are suggesting there will be individual conversations, but you are not going to make a definite decision about it just yet. Is that fair?

Dr Coffey: The decision is under consideration, as are other aspects. An announcement will be made—at some point, we will introduce minimum income floor, but I cannot give you a date now—and then, as and when, those individual formal conversations will start to happen as part of the formal process that we do. There are some informal discussions now with people who are self-employed, just reminding them of the guidance on what they should be doing with their declarations. Once we start the formal process—

Steve McCabe: I think you said there quite clearly—

Dr Coffey: Then you get into the whole gainfully self-employed test. That is when a decision will be made about what the minimum income floor is.

Q451 **Steve McCabe:** But it is your absolute intention to reintroduce it at some point. Okay, thank you.

I want to ask about the link between the wait for universal credit and the issue about rents, food banks and psychological distress. Just as an aside, following Ben Spencer's comments, how much do Maslow's ideas influence your policy?

Dr Coffey: For me personally, I think it is the case that we continue to work with our claimants, trying to help them in different ways on budgeting elements. There are advances with a phasing of effectively people's annual payment and how that could be done potentially over 13 payments instead of the 12 monthly payments. There are already some bridging payments for people moving from existing legacy benefits to universal credit. It is an important part of what we want to do, and I would



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like to increase some of the approaches that we could take through MaPS on how we are proactive in—

Q452 **Steve McCabe:** I was asking about your interest in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. How much does that influence the Department's policies?

Dr Coffey: It is at the bottom of my mindset when I am thinking particularly about how we have responded in Covid with the direction of things like the winter grant.

Q453 **Steve McCabe:** I mention Maslow's theory in passing only because I thought the major criticism was that there was no scientific basis to it, and he accepted that criticism himself, so I was surprised to hear that it could influence social security policy in this country.

Your Department has fairly well spurned the Committee's suggestion that you should carry out or commission research on a possible link between the wait for the first universal credit payment and rent arrears, food bank use and psychological distress. Why is that?

Dr Coffey: I am conscious that we already have a number of tools available to help people with cash needs and other elements through our work coaches. I want us to make sure that our work coaches can use those full levers. It will be a mixture of things. It could be flexible support funds, helping people to stay in work or get into work—it is a variety of things, and our work coaches are doing that on a daily basis.

I am conscious—again, I have said this before, and I have said it in the House—that there are some quite rational choices that people make when they have got small elements of cash and, all of a sudden, a bill comes in which they feel they need to pay. It is about how they can get extra support. It is about trying to have that individual relationship with work coaches that I see up and down the country all the time.

At my latest meeting with a focus group of work coaches that I have, they gave an example of the flexible support fund where they actually paid for somebody's car tyres to be replaced; otherwise, they would have failed their MOT. They could not afford the tyres, and that meant they would not have been able to keep in work. It is about having that flexibility of looking at individual situations, with work coaches empowered to make decisions to try to make sure that people can keep that link to work or be helped to get into work.

We have mentioned before how the flexible support fund can also be used for aspects of childcare such as initial payments, but also for other things like having appropriate clothes to go for job interviews and similar. That flexibility is there; I believe our work coaches on the ground do a magnificent job helping people who are struggling—some struggling permanently, some struggling just on occasion—and I am not convinced we need any extra research to help us to see what we have on the ground.

Q454 **Steve McCabe:** Obviously, the example of the car tyres is very encouraging, I suppose—if you can afford a car—but the issue here is the evidence the Committee took from Citizens Advice, London councils and



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the National Audit Office, all stressing the link between rent arrears and the wait. The Disability Benefits Consortium and the Trussell Trust stressed a link between food bank usage and the wait, and I think we had evidence also from Dr Wickham, among others, about psychological distress. If I can return to the Maslow question, it seems funny: if you are someone who uses a theory like that to influence your judgment, why on earth aren't you willing to commission a slightly broader bit of research into things where people are telling you repeatedly that there are problems?

Dr Coffey: Because, Steven, there is no need for anybody to wait for financial support.

Q455 **Steve McCabe:** Is your argument that when you give people a loan, they are no longer in difficulties? Is that what you are telling me, Secretary of State?

Dr Coffey: I am saying, trying to link the two, that people can get financial support quickly.

Q456 **Steve McCabe:** They can get a loan. Is that what you are saying?

Dr Coffey: They can get a payment, as I have explained before. In effect, when people take the advance, they get 13 payments in a year, not the 12 monthly payments, which is the standard process for most recipients of universal credit, and a lot of people take advantage of that. I have greater concerns, in a way, about how universal credit has been trashed in the past by others, and people have not turned to us for help quickly enough. That is where we have seen some aspects in our own internal discussions and among frontline work coaches, where people have got themselves into difficulty and turned to us quite late to get benefits. I want to change that approach, or people's fears about it. Universal credit is there to help; that is what it is designed to do, not only for people out of work, but for people in work.

Q457 **Steve McCabe:** I don't think you will ever have heard me trashing universal credit. I am simply someone who thinks that where there are problems with it, we could address them.

Dr Coffey: It is still the policy of the Labour party, and in the manifesto on which you stood for election, to scrap universal credit.

Chair: Replace.

Q458 **Steve McCabe:** I don't think this is the place for this debate, but, to be perfectly honest, Secretary of State, the policy of universal credit that the Tory party first got elected on and the one that you are now applying are two different things. Yours bears very little relation, including the taper, which has absolutely no relation to what was originally promised. However, my question was whether you intend to do any further research. As a woman who relies on a theory produced in 1943, you are quite happy and content to use that to govern the policies of your Department, but when you are asked to commission some research on current problems, you are dismissive of that. Is that the position?

Dr Coffey: We have an established policy for universal credit that is an incentive for people to work. Of course, on universal credit you will be better off working than not working, unless you cannot work, and that is where other elements will support people in their incomes. I am not going to get into some big theoretical debate about Maslow's hierarchy of needs. I referred to it before; it is not trying to be some big change on social security policy.

The welfare system is there to help people; the welfare system we have with universal credit is about both in-work and out-of-work benefits. I think it has been very successful. It has certainly removed all the cliff edges that you often got in tax credit designs, where we ended up with people just refusing to work more than 16 hours a week because the marginal tax rates under that policy were considerably higher. The taper rate shows that flex, and we have seen the success of it during the pandemic. People have had hours reduced, and universal credit elements have gone up. We have that dynamic situation with universal credit, and it has done exactly what it was designed to do.

Steve McCabe: Most people would say that the progressive reduction of the taper has been one of the failures of your universal credit policy. Thank you, Chair.

Q459 **Chris Stephens:** Secretary of State, I have a number of questions around deductions and sanctions. You will be aware that I have submitted written questions in relation to some of these issues. You said in a letter to the Chair of the Committee that the original suspension of sanctions recognised the need for the Department's civil servants to focus on processing claims, and sanctions conditionality would be introduced in July when covid cases were low. Given that recent levels of the pandemic are higher than they were in March, again creating additional pressure for DWP staff, why has the focus not returned to processing claims rather than processing sanctions?

Dr Coffey: I am not entirely sure I understood that question. The sanction process is a formal administrative process. The priority for the Department is to respond to the number of people turning to universal credit as a source of income. It was right that we prioritised that. I think it is also right that we reintroduced the claimant commitment during the summer as a way of helping people to get back into the mindset of being ready for work and applying for work. There are consequences that can happen with sanctions, but even now we have a situation where our focus is more on reinforcing the commitment. I am conscious that work coaches might want to use different levers in order to administer that, but there is still a very low level of sanctions that have been applied. Peter, you might want to say more about the approach that has been taken.

Q460 **Chris Stephens:** Peter, sorry, I am going to ask specific questions on that in a second, but I need to press the Secretary of State on this. In November, 19 major charities called for the reintroduction of a pause of conditionality in sanctions for six months. Why are they wrong?



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Dr Coffey: It is a general principle in the benefits system that people get that support under certain conditions. They are eligible in different ways for that support. The conditionality, which we have done through the claimant commitment, is an appropriate mechanism. I don't see the need to have removed the need for claimant commitments or that aspect of conditionality, in spite of what has been happening. We know that there have been an increasing number of vacancies. There are different schemes through the plan for jobs. We are starting to refer people. JETS opened in Scotland last month. Those are the sorts of things where we want to try and help people get ready for work.

Q461 **Chris Stephens:** Peter, I know you were going to answer some of these questions. There is obviously the sanctions assurance framework that was put in place. We now have copies of that because of freedom of information. What reassurance can you give people that the framework is being followed in practice? Who is monitoring it to ensure that the framework is being kept to?

Peter Schofield: The key here is around the conversations that happen at the point where that claimant commitment is discussed and agreed between the work coach and the claimant. That is where the key focus is. Coming back to the questions that you were asking the Secretary of State earlier, we suspended those claimant commitment conversations because back in the spring/early summer last year we were facing very big increases in claims for universal credit, which we are not seeing at the current time, and we needed work coaches to focus in on helping to process claims.

From July onwards, the conversation turned from processing claims into helping claimants think about progressing their work search, and that is really where the claimant commitment conversation comes in. That claimant commitment is generally led by a conversation with the claimant, talking about where they have come from, the nature of the opportunities that they want to explore and the nature of the support that they need. It is about articulating the discussion that is agreed in terms of how that claimant will move on in their work search, given the circumstances that we are in, the nature of the vacancies that are around, the skillset that they bring to begin with and the support that they might need.

It is really led by that conversation, in a supportive way. Obviously, with any conditionality regime, there has to be some element of the condition, which ultimately becomes a sanction. The last sanction numbers we published showed that sanction rates were at 0.35%, so they were incredibly low compared with where they have been in the past. The reassurance that I give you and the Committee, Mr Stephens, is that those conversations are led by the circumstances of the claimant and the labour market in which they operate, and the nature of the statistics that we publish. Obviously, we keep abreast of sanction rates of jobcentres all across the country, just to keep an eye on what is going on.

Chair: Can I just interrupt for a moment? I think Siobhan Baillie wanted to pick up on a point here. Siobhan?



Q462 **Siobhan Baillie:** You have virtually answered this. Part of my question was what sanction levels were. Certainly, my local work coaches would say that it is almost vanishingly rare to issue sanctions, but there is obviously a lot of pressure. Have you done any analysis on how many people in that 0.35% who are receiving sanctions are disabled or have mental health conditions? Is a review going on to think about whether there are groups of people who struggle more than most with benefits claims and paperwork, for whom sanctions are just not appropriate?

Dr Coffey: Not that I am aware of. We want to treat people as individuals, and the relationship between the work coach and the claimant is key in that.

Peter Schofield: The number is so small that it comes down to individuals. It is absolutely consistent with the guidance that we give to work coaches that they absolutely take into consideration the nature of the individual and any reasonable adjustments or support that they might need. That is absolutely baked into the conversation that happens.

Chair: Chris, do you want to come back in?

Q463 **Chris Stephens:** Yes, thanks. On sanctions, Peter, given that meetings with claimants are reduced, what support are they getting?

Peter Schofield: The conversations, as you say, rarely happen face to face, although jobcentres have remained open for vulnerable people for whom that is the only way of getting support. As you may well know, we recently restricted opening hours to try to reduce the number of our colleagues who need to come into jobcentres on a regular basis, but they are open on a daily basis.

The main contact is over the phone. Many hundreds of thousands of conversations are happening every week all across the country with claimants checking in. Obviously it starts with the claimant commitment conversation, but then there is checking-in on progress on finding work and supporting colleagues. I am in Caxton House, but for a lot of the pandemic I have spent time in my local jobcentre, as you know, hearing about the conversations that work coaches have been having. Often, despite the nature of the situation—low market and lower vacancies—people have had good news. There is a real sense of support coming out from our work coaches to people looking for work in what can be quite difficult circumstances.

So that happens mainly over the phone, but we are trying other techniques as well. We have been using video where that might work more effectively. More claimants are now getting used to doing things over video, like we are doing today, so that is becoming more familiar. That actually comes with the nature of how we think about the service we provide going forward. All the evidence in the past has tended to be that face-to-face engagement on work search reviews is the best way to help people into work, but we are almost forced because of the pandemic to try different ways of interacting, and we are testing as we go along. Some of



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these approaches also seem to be quite effective, particularly contact over the phone.

Q464 Chris Stephens: In relation to work coaches, you have talked about the guidance they are getting and about ensuring that claimant commitments are reasonable in order to follow public health advice. Could you write to us about what that guidance is to make sure that we are confident that what is being asked of claimants is reasonable in the current circumstances?

Peter Schofield: I am very happy to write to you.

Q465 Shaun Bailey: Good morning, Secretary of State and Mr Schofield. I have a couple of questions around fraud and victims of identity hijacking. I am conscious that the Committee has heard that there are still individuals who are suffering deductions as a result of identity hijacking. What is the Department doing on that? In terms of resolving those issues and reaching out to people, have you had to up the work that you are doing in that space, particularly as a result of the pandemic?

Peter Schofield: Yes, very much so. Sadly, as you say, there are claimants who have been the victim of stolen identity. We have done a number of things. We have created a specialist stolen identity team. We are improving the process all the time. I know there have been some difficult situations in the past where it hasn't worked the way it should have done, but we are improving the process all the time.

For example, if you got a letter from part of DWP that says that you owe us some money, or you get a letter or communication from our debt management team seeking to recover that money, you can phone the number on the letter and they will then refer that case to the stolen ID team. They will then contact the claimant, normally within a few days, to triage the situation and to get a good understanding about what has gone on. They are able to suspend any debt recovery. It may be that the circumstances are very clearcut, in which case it may be that we can refund any money that has already been recovered. In any case, we would suspend recovery of debt while we investigate the claim further. It is a system that we have put in place more recently. It is an improvement on what we have done before, seeking to respond to concerns that colleagues have raised in the past.

Dr Coffey: I think it was last June that we tried to improve the process that was there, wasn't it, Peter? I am conscious that you have looked at this in detail. There is now a regular weekly list going from analysts to where there is recovery, to make sure that any inappropriate thing is suspended.

Peter Schofield: Yes, so alongside the response to incoming calls from claimants who say, "Look, you are saying I owe money, and I don't recognise this debt"—I don't want to go into too much detail on this—we have identified organised schemes to seek to hijack identity. Where we can connect that with a claimant, we are able to sort of avoid the claimant having to get in touch with us, because we are able to suspend recovery,



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as we know it is linked to an organised piece of fraudulent activity. We are able to link it that way as well. That gives a bit more reassurance, and we have already reported a significant set of cases of hijacked ID to the Committee in the past, back in October.

Q466 Shaun Bailey: That is useful. Thank you both. In June 2020, the Department reported 5,894 instances of identity hijacking. Given the situation we are now in—Secretary of State, you touched earlier on the fact that we are going to have more people accessing the system—are you confident that the system in place at the moment is robust enough to ensure that this doesn't happen and that the problem is reduced or eliminated? You have talked about having implemented a new system. Have you done any modelling on the impact that that is going to have? I think there is a general acceptance that the system is going to be put under pressure over the next few months as things carry on. What work are you doing to ensure that the pressure is alleviated so that we can resolve these security issues?

Peter Schofield: Changes are being made all the time. I think that when I came to the Committee in October, I talked a little bit about the use of data and analytics, which is becoming a more powerful tool week by week. It enables us to identify the type of activity that looks suspicious and to take action, ideally before it gets into payment but certainly before it goes too far down the road.

It is all about using data and analytics to prevent fraud before it happens, which is really where our focus is increasingly moving towards—prevention, rather than detection. Obviously, detection is used when it is about recovery and it has gone out, but ideally it should be prevention. Data and analytics are an increasingly powerful tool.

The hijacked identity fraud that we spotted very, very significant amounts of in the summer of last year and through the autumn was all detected by us and very little of the money actually went out, because we got in there first. Not only were we able to suspend those claims and stop the money going out, other than a relatively small amount, but we are also then able, as the Secretary of State said earlier, to connect up to claimants who looked like they were the victims of fraud, and to stop recovery where that was the appropriate thing to do.

Dr Coffey: It is going to be a constant battle with people who want to try and take advantage, and fabricate claims all over the place, some in a very serious organised way, others perhaps chancing their arm—I suppose that could be the expression—and seeing what gets picked up and what doesn't. Some of that does get shared, unfortunately, on the internet, but we are alert to it and acting on it.

Q467 Shaun Bailey: Okay. Does the Department have what it might term an "acceptable risk" level of fraud? I am just thinking more generally in terms of a base fraud level that it tries to keep to. If you do have that, how is it reviewed, and have you done any modelling on the impact of increased pressures on any sort of "acceptable risk" level of fraud going



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forward into this year?

Peter Schofield: These issues are the subject of conversations that I have regularly with our chief risk officer in the Department, and they are reviewed by our departmental audit and risk assurance committee.

Dr Coffey: I have to say that February is my focus on fraud. We are very conscious of some of the challenge that we are facing, with some serious investigations now. But we want to make sure that every penny of taxpayers' money is going to people who are entitled to it. It is right at the top of the radar for us both.

Peter Schofield: To give an example of what the Secretary of State has just described, we talked before—back in October—about some of the easements that we have allowed in the system in order to manage the very significant increase in claims going through. I guess you could argue that there the risk balance was in favour of making sure that new claimants got paid their money in time, as opposed to clamping down on each and every risk around fraud.

However, as we talked about in October, we put in place mitigations as we went through. One of those is that with those claims where we are concerned that there is additional risk, we have categorised them into 84 different categories according to their risk profile. We are now in the process of doing something that we are calling a retroaction, which relates to the Secretary of State's February initiative. It is something that we are well advanced with. We have got 1,400 staff on it, looking over those claims, from the most risky to the least, that we paid out on back in the early summer of last year, to make sure that we can identify and deal with any that proved to be fraudulent. This is a big focus for us over the next few months.

Q468 **Shaun Bailey:** Can I just quickly ask a question about the wider roll-out of universal credit as well? Are you confident that you will still reach your 2024 target? I am just conscious that the OBR seems to have suggested that that roll-out might not happen until 2026. Given the pressures that the Department has obviously been under and the way that you have really had to step up over the last year, are you confident that you will have the resource to do that?

Dr Coffey: I am determined to make sure that it happens. I know that it is a big task for the Department. Of course, that is also co-operation with HMRC, and people on tax credits moving on to UC. I have set this as a clear priority for the Department. This is a priority for the Prime Minister. The DWP being such a fantastic organisation, we try to respond to what we are aiming to do. I am conscious that, on the move to UC—the managed move—a certain approach was taken. We are assessing that right now, but I am keen to get on with it.

Q469 **Sir Desmond Swayne:** With respect to the delay in managed migration, clearly as that proceeds more people will find that they move to universal credit through natural migration and therefore will not have transitional protection available. Have you given any thought to the level of savings



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that may accrue to the departmental budget as a consequence of that?

Dr Coffey: No, I haven't. It is not a case of having a policy to try to make savings on transitional protection. Some of it has been literally about being able to manage, and absorb that number of people coming in, but last year we managed to bring 100,000 people in a day on to universal credit, understandably with a lot of easements. That does not mean that I foresee us doing that as part of our process when we move to UC, but we now need to work with people like HMRC to understand when certain kinds of easements that have been in place will be switched off, and to allow the natural migration processes to continue in the way that was originally intended. Understandably, a lot of the focus of teams here has been about the initial absorption, some of the retroaction that has been referred to, and the plan for jobs. Rest assured, the move to UC—natural or managed—is still very firmly on our agenda.

Q470 **Sir Desmond Swayne:** When will the Harrogate trial kick off again?

Dr Coffey: Good question. I have some meetings on that coming up in the next month.

Q471 **Chair:** I wanted to raise a couple of questions about the impact of the suspension of face-to-face assessments for disability and health benefits. We all well understand why those face-to-face assessments have been suspended, and I think the Department have done a pretty good job in introducing other ways of assessing things, but there are a couple of problems that I wanted to ask you about.

One is that because of the disruption there is a big backlog of claims for industrial injuries disablement benefit, one consequence of which is that some claimants are a year older when their claim is decided than when they applied. That means, given the particular rules around industrial injuries disablement benefit, that their award is less than it would have been. Shouldn't those claimants receive what they were entitled to when they claimed, not when it was decided, given that there has been a long delay because of the disruption, which we all understand the reasons for?

Peter Schofield: On the industrial injuries disability benefit, we are trying to do more assessments through paper-based methods but, as you say, there is a backlog. One piece of reassurance and one response to your specific question, Chair. The piece of reassurance is that we will back-date people's awards to the point where they made their claim, so people will get their money but, as you say specifically, the link to age applies to the point where the condition is assessed as opposed to the date of the claim. All I can say at the moment is we know that. We are looking actively at what we can do to address that, particularly when they might end up with a reduced claim through no fault of their own. I cannot give you an answer today, but we are actively looking at that.

Dr Coffey: I think Justin wrote to you in November, hopefully setting out the approach. But as the perm sec says, there is still some further work to be done.

Q472 **Chair:** Will you drop us a line about that, Peter?



Peter Schofield: Yes, we can write to you.

Q473 **Chair:** Thank you very much. On a related point, we have been sent details of somebody who applied for employment and support allowance. Their work capability assessment was due to take place last March. For obvious reasons, it was cancelled. Because they were deemed unsuitable for a telephone assessment, their application has never been determined. Ten months on, they have still not had a decision. In the case of PIP applications, alternative arrangements were made. Shouldn't something similar be done for ESA applications?

Dr Coffey: We have worked through guidance with the deputy chief medical officer, PHE and others to work out the appropriate time to do face-to-face assessments. I was under the impression that we had started doing some again, until we had the national lockdown, on a voluntary basis. Understandably, I don't know the precise details of what has been shared with you, but I am sure that Justin would look into it, if you wanted to refer it to him.

Q474 **Chair:** Okay. Perhaps I can drop you a line about the details. It does seem that there are some people who applied for ESA before last March and whose applications have not been determined, because nothing has been put in place to make an assessment.

Peter Schofield: We are talking to CHDA, who are the assessors of work capability assessments, to see what could be done. For various reasons, it is more difficult in the case of fit-for-work assessments compared with assessments for PIP, but we are looking at that. We can cover that in the letter, if you are prepared to write to us, Chair.

Chair: I will be very happy to do that. Thank you.

Q475 **Dr Spencer:** Dr Coffey, when you appeared in front of us last September, you said that you expected to publish the Green Paper on health and disability by the end of the fiscal year. Are you still on track to do so?

Dr Coffey: I think it is fair to say that we are well advanced in its preparation. I am hopeful that we will do it before the end of March, but I cannot give that cast-iron commitment.

Q476 **Dr Spencer:** How are you organising prioritisation at the moment, in terms of getting these responses out? There is the Green Paper, but we also spoke a bit earlier about the other reports. What is your approach to prioritisation at the moment?

Dr Coffey: Because these are cross-Government approaches involving other Departments, we have to work at a certain pace with them. For example, we are still actively working on the national disability strategy, supported by the disability unit in that regard—again, working across Government. It is important to me. It is important to the Government, but as I say, we have to manage aspects right across. At the moment, I would say some of the Green Paper could be incomplete if we did not have full contributions from other important Departments. It is better to have a good paper, which may be slightly later than we had hoped for, than not.



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Q477 **Dr Spencer:** So, from the DWP's perspective, the delay in getting the paper out is not on your side. It is a different Government Department that is slowing things down.

Dr Coffey: I am not trying to blame anyone, because it is an interdependency that often happens. I am not trying to blame other Departments at all; it is just a recognition of the reality of some Departments, such as Health. Understandably, its principal focus is the Covid pandemic. I hope that we will make progress soon and quickly, and I am still keen to try to get it out before the end of March.

Q478 **Selaine Saxby:** Thank you, Secretary of State, for your time this morning and for answering so many questions for us. I want to ask you about the kickstart scheme. Obviously, it has been announced that it has created 120,000 temporary jobs so far, but apparently less than 2,000 have been filled. What are the reasons behind that low take-up, and what steps are being taken to address it?

Dr Coffey: Thank you, Selaine. Going back to September, when this was launched for expressions of interest, there was an overwhelming surge of interest. I think it is fair to say that we have gone through a number of processes and improvements on how we evaluate all the different applications that have been made. I will not pretend otherwise: there has been a backlog in processing some of that. We have brought more resources in to simplify some of our internal checks. As I put in the "Dear Colleague" letter to MPs last week, some of these process checks have been done specifically with the intention of ensuring the quality of the placement for the kickstarter is there with the wraparound employment and employability support, as well as additional roles, not just replacing roles that have been there. Then there are also the financial assessments that have been made and some of the checks have been done there on viability and other financial assessments that I am sure you would want us to do.

I think we are now in a state where we have a steady state flowing through. There have been some issues with some companies not able to take people on at quite the pace they intended. It is not about blaming companies in any way, but there are currently 10,000 vacancies on the system, so there are opportunities right around the country. I anticipate about another 30,000 in the next four to six weeks as we go through our process working through the gateways and other employers directly. Today is the day when employers can come to us direct and may not need to use a gateway. I am pleased to see kickstarters being placed right around the country. We have had some successes where people have already left kickstart and got permanent jobs. It is a slow but steady start, and I anticipate it will pick up.

Q479 **Selaine Saxby:** Thank you for that. You mentioned in your answer a change to the scheme, whereby if you have less than 30 placements, you can apply directly to the scheme. What were the reasons behind that? Do you think it was something that we should have done at the start?
[*Interruption.*] Apologies for Henry.



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Dr Coffey: That's alright. It's always lovely to hear a bit of puppy love, as it were. When the scheme started, we did not quite know how many people would apply. I had made a specific policy decision to open it up, unlike the future jobs fund, which was only available through certain gateways—30 had been used as a threshold then. I think that was a sensible start. It had always been my intention, as we made progress, to remove that threshold.

It is important to stress that an employer who applies to us directly, if they apply for a handful of jobs, even then they may not fit the criteria, which we want to ensure that the quality of the placement for the kickstarter is appropriate. It may be that we need to encourage them to go through a gateway that we have already effectively assessed for the quality of the employability support. That is a key part of this work search—one element of it—not just the job placement. It was the right time to remove the threshold, but gateways are still an important part of the kickstart programme.

Q480 **Selaine Saxby:** Thank you. Under the scheme, employers can extend the date right through to December of this year. Do you think that scheme might be extended further given the continuation of the pandemic?

Dr Coffey: If it is a huge success, the Chancellor has always said there is no limit to the number of kickstarters. I am sure he will want to evaluate whether that is still an appropriate plan for jobs intervention into 2022. Kickstarters can keep going effectively to six months after December, so into June, or the end of May, but it is important that we continue to see whether it is working.

Chair: Neil Coyle has a quick point here.

Q481 **Neil Coyle:** It is crucial that the Government get this right, not just because of the £2 billion cost to the taxpayer, but because in Bermondsey and Old Southwark we have seen a tripling of youth unemployment. It is absolutely critical that this is done well. Young people are ready, and employers are ready. They have created the 120,000 posts. The FSB and other small employers asked for direct access for employers previously, but they were denied that. They have called for the Department to unstick the blockage now. Why is the Department for Work and Pensions still holding up the placement of young people in work?

Dr Coffey: As I say, we have had to assess the quality of the different roles. There is then the specific thing of how we upload the individual jobs, the matching that we try to do, referring young people to employers and the interview process. People are under way—it is not a case of unduly holding things up. As I indicated earlier, there has been a backlog in processing some of the applications, but the good news is that it is under way.

Q482 **Neil Coyle:** Do the 120,000 posts that the Department claims have been created include these posts that have not yet been assessed?



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Dr Coffey: The posts have been assessed and those are what have been approved. To explain the process—

Q483 **Neil Coyle:** Hold on. What's the hold-up, then? For 90% of people who are still waiting for those posts to be taken up, what is the hold-up? If they have been assessed already, why are they not in post?

Dr Coffey: Let me explain how the process works, if that is okay—I think that will be informative for the Committee. People have been applying for a number of roles, either directly or through gateways. It may be that they have applied for 50, and it may be that the 50 are spread out over the entire year and they don't want to take 50 people on straight away, but they have done the application. Roles are assessed on the initial application and 50 are approved. We then go into a stage where we issue a grant agreement and that is returned. Once returned, we work out with the employer when they want to bring the job roles in, so it may be that they only want to bring on 10 in the next two months. That form, or vacancy, is then uploaded and distributed to work coaches who work with their customers—their claimants—and that is when the process happens. So, it may be that the person with 50 actually only wants 10 in the two few months, so it is a managed process and there are account managers with every employer.

At this point, I think this is a useful opportunity for me to say that I was made aware very recently that I made an error last week and I am trying to work out the best way to communicate it. As 120,000 has been mentioned continuously, there was, I'm afraid, a keying error and what I should have said is that over 110,000, rather than 120,000, jobs had been created at that point. It so happens that, as of today, it is about 120,000 vacancies that have been approved, but not when I made that statement through orals and the letter. There will be a more formal way that I will share that information with the House, but I thought it was worthwhile to bring it up now.

Q484 **Neil Coyle:** But Secretary of State, that still means that one in 12 of these posts, which you are saying have been created, is not filled, and employers and the FSB are saying publicly that they are ready to take these people on. When will these young people get those desperately needed opportunities? When will those 120,000 posts be filled?

Dr Coffey: That will depend on the demand from the employer as to when that will happen. I know that the FSB are working with Adecco Working Ventures. Those vacancies, as far as I am aware, are being processed. It is my understanding that about 50 forms were received in January about individual job details. They are being uploaded and shared with work coaches around the country.

Q485 **Neil Coyle:** The FSB say they have 700 roles pre-cleared in a grant agreement. Will those posts now be advertised through jobcentres, and what is your target for numbers of placements by April?

Dr Coffey: Overall, it was 700 that were approved. The grant agreements were issued and finally signed by Adecco on Christmas eve. I think I am



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right in saying that. Those jobs are now being processed through individual job forms that have been uploaded to the DWP system and have been processed by DWP and their work coaches.

Q486 Neil Coyle: That was six weeks ago, so when will they be advertised in jobcentres, and how many of these places will you have appointed by April?

Dr Coffey: My understanding, Neil, is that the job forms that were wanted for the individual job roles were handed back sometime towards the end of January. That is what has been processed and they are being uploaded to the system and circulated around the country, according to where the employer is ready to go in the next month. We only advertise the jobs through work coaches, in effect, up to a month before the employer wants them to start. I am not pretending otherwise, Neil. I would love for this to have happened earlier, but that's where we are.

Q487 Neil Coyle: Employers are saying that the delay is the Department for Work and Pensions, which is blocking employers taking on young people when we have really high youth unemployment rates. The Department is delaying it, and the message from employers is, "Get a move on."

Dr Coffey: We are not blocking anybody; we are following the process that we have got. As I have indicated, there has been a backlog on some of the gateway approvals. The forms are now coming through, and the individual job placements are being processed, uploaded and shared with work coaches. I want that to happen as quickly as possible, but those individual job placements are now the bit of the system where it flows thorough into the interviews that young people have with employers.

Q488 Chair: Thank you. You have just updated the figure of vacancies from 110,000 last week to 120,000 this week. Have you an update on the number of people in post, which I think was 2,000 last week? Have you got an update on that figure?

Dr Coffey: I don't have an update on that. My understanding is that an unfortunate keying error in the wrong column led to that difference. I am still waiting for the actual report coming through from internal audit, but that is the information that was shared with me this morning.

Chair: Thank you. We would certainly be interested in the numbers actually in post as they become available.

Q489 Chris Stephens: Secretary of State, I have some questions about staffing. You will be aware that the Committee recommended that you look at rewarding staff for their excellent performance in processing millions of universal credit claims during the pandemic. You will be aware that some devolved Administrations have given a thank you payment. Can you give us an indication of whether you are considering that approach? What is your approach going to be on staff pay and remuneration going forward?

Dr Coffey: I think it is probably best if the perm sec answers that.



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Peter Schofield: Obviously, there are a number of things going on here. One is the pay pause that was announced by the Chancellor back in November, which applies to public sector employees, including DWP, but we are waiting to see what the pay remit guidance says on that. Quite apart from that, we are absolutely engaged with the Treasury and are looking at what we can do in the context of the pay pause. I can't really say any more about where we are in those conversations, but I updated colleagues across DWP earlier in the week about the fact that we were having those conversations, so people know that that is going on.

The fact is that I am so grateful for the amazing work of colleagues across DWP, and I know that the Secretary of State is, too. There have been phenomenal achievements through the pandemic so far. I know that people are under huge pressure and are being asked to work in different ways with all the pressures they face, both in work and outside work. I take the opportunity, as I do with colleagues directly, to thank them, through this Committee, for the work they are doing. Conversations are going on with the Treasury about pay, but I can't say any more at the moment.

Q490 **Chris Stephens:** It sounds very much like it's the traditional approach: if you want to give staff a pay rise, you are going to have to meet that from your own budget. Would that be a fair summary, Peter?

Peter Schofield: It's more complex than that, because we have to operate within the framework of the pay remit, which is less around whether you have the budget for it and more around the approach that the Government is setting for public sector pay more broadly. That is why we are having conversations with the Treasury.

Q491 **Chris Stephens:** Thanks, Peter. We will move on. Can you give us an update on the progress of recruitment of work coaches and the target of doubling the number this financial year?

Peter Schofield: Yes. The latest numbers I have are that we now have about 8,500 starters—people in post—with about another 2,000 where we have made appointments and have start dates but they haven't yet started. We are on track. We had various milestones along the way. We had a milestone to have delivered 4,500 starts by the end of October, and give or take a few days we were there. We then had a target to deliver further by Christmas, and we have got to that point. We are meeting our milestones and we are very confident that we will get to the point where we will get 13,500 work coaches by the end of March.

Q492 **Chris Stephens:** Thanks very much, Peter. Moving on, we've got a written answer from Ministers that says the IT equipment the Department has allows 80% of DWP staff to work from home, yet we are being advised as a Committee that about 42% of staff are still working from a DWP office. What is the cause of that mismatch?

Peter Schofield: There are two things going on. One is to build our resilience across the organisation. We are ensuring that by the end of March every member of staff will have the facility—the IT—to enable them



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to work from home. I talked earlier about the work we are doing, particularly in jobcentres, to try to reduce the number of colleagues who have to come into the office. We are rolling out IT kit to people at a rate of around 2,500 items of kit a week. We are confident we'll get there by the end of March.

Of course, it is in the nature of some of the things that we do that people may need to be in the office from time to time. As I said earlier, we are ensuring that jobcentres are open for vulnerable people, for whom the only way they can access support is to come in person to a jobcentre. So, we have reduced the working hours to 10 till 2. That face-to-face facility—

Dr Coffey: Not the working hours—the opening hours.

Peter Schofield: Sorry. The opening hours—absolutely.

Chris Stephens: That's open to the public. I get that, yes.

Peter Schofield: Yes. Thank you, Secretary of State. Those are the hours open to the public—10 till 2. That is an example of the type of activity that we need to do in person in offices. There are other types of work that need to be done in person.

We are looking all the time at whether there is more we can do to enable colleagues to work from home, but there will always be a limit. As you say, we are now up to about 60% of colleagues working from home, which is an all-time record. It is amazing the way colleagues have responded to being asked to work in different ways over the course of the past year—working in very flexible ways, working from home. Working from home has its own challenges, of course, as many of us find from time to time, if you're home-schooling or living alone, coping with aspects of loneliness. That is a challenge for folk as well. We've a big initiative through February to ensure we're providing support to colleagues, particularly on issues around mental health, whether they are working in the office or from home. Everyone has different needs and challenges.

Q493 **Chris Stephens:** We're getting feedback as a Committee that there's not enough modern compact Surface Pro kits, which are probably most suitable for a busy home. Can you tell us what steps the Department is taking to ensure that those working from home have the most appropriate equipment at hand?

Peter Schofield: It is a variety of different types of IT. You're right that a lot of our newer IT is Surface Pros—other reputable types of technology are available, I should say very quickly. We also have a number of smaller desktops, and sometimes the right solution is to put a desktop in someone's home, so that they have got that as well. It depends on what technology we have available. Obviously, in addition to the desktop, to the device, we are also trying to ensure that we provide support to people in terms of the workspace they've got at home, such as keyboard, desk, chair and screen.

Q494 **Chris Stephens:** Thanks, Peter. This is an important question: how is the



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Department keeping track of how many people, including agency staff, are working on DWP premises? I'm thinking there will be some offices that you share with other Government Departments. How is DWP keeping track of the people who are coming in?

Peter Schofield: How many people are coming in? There are a number of ways to do that. For example, in this office there is a register every day of how many people are in the office. Different buildings will do that. We also have ways of using the system to enable us to know how many folk are working remotely, so we can get the data uploaded that way. It is a manual count on the one hand—for example, we get a manual count of the number of people who work on the different floors of this building, Caxton House, in Westminster, on a weekly basis—but technology also enables us to assess how many folk are working from home, so we get that automatically through as well.

Dr Coffey: We have also started lateral flow testing on some sites, haven't we?

Peter Schofield: Yes. There is an awful lot that we are doing. For folk who are having to come into the office for whatever reason, we are trying to make sure, obviously, that that is as safe as possible. We talked to the Committee in October about what we are doing to make our workplaces Covid-safe, and what we have done along those lines, but obviously there are further steps all the time. The latest thing is that we are rolling out lateral flow tests for offices where there are more than 100 folk, and we are going to roll it out to those where there are 40 or more.

Chris Stephens: Sure, Peter, but—

Chair: Final point, Chris.

Q495 **Chris Stephens:** Yes, Chair. The current public health guidance in many parts of the UK is that anyone who can work from home "must" do so, rather than "should" do so. Why is that not the DWP policy for its staff?

Peter Schofield: Because people have essential work that needs to be done face to face, in some cases, or in the office. It is, "Where you can work from home, you should work from home." Not everyone can work from home, and we are an essential service. We are trying to make sure that more of the essential service can be delivered by folk working from home, but some of the essential service—for example, as I say, when vulnerable people need to access support face to face—we need to have people opening the doors of jobcentres and being there for people when they need them, just as they have throughout the pandemic.

Chris Stephens: Okay. I think there are number of points that we can pick up, Chair. Thanks very much.

Chair: Thank you, Chris. We still have a number of points that we would like to cover. Be quick if you can, colleagues.

Q496 **Neil Coyle:** In August 2018, the Department revealed that it had



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commissioned research into Government policies contributing to food bank demand. That report was due out, according to the Department, in October 2019. It is nearly one and a half years late. Where is it, and why has it been suppressed?

Dr Coffey: We actively look at different elements of evidence and research. If they are part of policy formation, it is stuff that we consider. I do not have a specific answer on that single report, but if they are contributing to policy formation we will still have them under review.

Q497 **Neil Coyle:** Can the permanent secretary provide a date for when it will be published? A ministerial answer said that it would be “in due course” in September 2020, so when will it appear?

Peter Schofield: Why don't I write to you, Mr Coyle?

Q498 **Neil Coyle:** You don't know. This plays into the wider public perception that the Government are failing to tackle child poverty, in particular food poverty. The Government will keep being embarrassed by campaigns like Marcus Rashford's if you fail to address this problem, so publish the report, reveal the interconnectivity and deal with the problems. You are deliberately withholding this information—that is the public belief.

Chair: You are going to drop us a line, I think.

Peter Schofield: I will write to Mr Coyle, I think, Chair.

Q499 **Neil Coyle:** I also have a quick one on cold weather payments. A lot of people say that the weather stations that determine eligibility are too far away, or in a different microclimate, for example. When is the Department reviewing how decisions are made on eligibility for cold weather payments?

Dr Coffey: Cold weather stations are run by the Met Office. They are in locations right around the country. I think it is a method that we have had in the past, and it is a suitable method ongoing.

Q500 **Neil Coyle:** Sorry—the Department uses them. You do not have to use that measure. The Department has previously said that it would look at eligibility. You are now saying that you are not bothering to look at eligibility. Is that your answer?

Dr Coffey: I am satisfied with the eligibility that we have, and the conditions in which—

Neil Coyle: That will be a massive disappointment, but thanks for the honest answer.

Q501 **Nigel Mills:** Secretary of State, I think about 600,000 people still have a Post Office card account. Do you have any update on what the future is for those account holders? Will there be a replacement, or will they have to try to find alternative banking arrangements of their own?

Dr Coffey: It is still our intention, working with the Post Office, to bring that to an end. I know that this is actively being considered by the



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Minister, Guy Opperman. We need to try to resolve that. It is not in the best interests of the Post Office. It is not necessarily in the best interests of the current recipients. I think there have been ongoing letter campaigns as well. I would like more to be done on this, but I will be open with the Committee: it has not been the top priority for me in the last year. But the Minister knows that it is still something that will need to come to an end. An alternative system, through the payment exception service, is one way of doing that, but no decision has yet been made on the final date when it would happen.

Q502 Siobhan Baillie: The Department has the relationship support brief, and the team have done some really successful work on reducing parental conflict. We know that Covid is causing huge pressure on families. Many are just about managing, but quite a lot have actually already split up or are about to split up and there is an increased desire for relationship support services. I'm just thinking about Baroness Stedman-Scott's great announcement on the £70 million of funding for this. Can you give me some information about how that will be spent and whether there is going to be some cross-Department working with the MOJ on the divorce reforms as well?

Dr Coffey: With collective responsibility, Departments sign up to the proposals that are circulated by the MOJ, and they have appropriate discussions, but it is not our intention to make particular comments on the divorce reforms. More broadly, there is a role—I think I have mentioned this to the House before—where the Department for Education, MOJ and MHCLG are looking at ways to perhaps enhance some of the family support that we do, working together more collaboratively. I think reducing parental conflict is an important scheme. But as people, I think, will be aware, Siobhan, this is moving increasingly to how we support local councils to undertake that level of training on trying to mitigate some of these challenges that people have. Unfortunately, the people who end up suffering are the children, particularly when it comes to child maintenance. So that's why Debbie Stedman-Scott is still actively working on it. I don't have any more detail than that for you on exactly how the money will be spent, Siobhan.

Q503 Chair: Thank you. Two very quick points from me. First, there is an obligation on the Department to carry out a review of the benefit cap in the course of this Parliament. When do you think that review is likely to be carried out?

Dr Coffey: I think the Minister in charge, Mims Davies, may have recently answered a parliamentary question on this. I don't have that to hand. What I think I have said to the House before is that we are in quite an odd, unusual economic period, with potentially counterintuitive and shifting trends, and I think that needs to be considered in the context of any decision regarding a review. I am very conscious of— I don't want the benefit cap review to end up having unintended consequences because of this economic dynamic that we have right now. I think it's important to try to have it at a slightly more stable economic time. But I am very aware of our legal obligations to do that.



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Q504 **Chair:** So you think it will perhaps be a next year rather than this year sort of timescale?

Dr Coffey: Possibly. It is under some consideration, but I think we need a little bit more stability. As I say, I don't want to end up with a situation where potentially we end up with a lower benefit cap unduly, because of the consequences, all the effects, of what is happening right now. So some more stability is needed, I would say.

Q505 **Chair:** Okay. Thank you. Lastly, the review of special rules for terminal illnesses has, I think, been under way for a couple of years now, but it has not yet been published. Are you able to indicate when it will be?

Dr Coffey: It is fair to say there is an active discussion happening across Government on this particular policy. The Minister has set out the approach. We have done a lot of engagement and say thank you very much to all the stakeholders where we have had that engagement with them. I am confident some of the proposals that the Minister is advocating will— It's important that we have, again, that internal Government discussion on how, potentially, to bring some of that forward. Quite a lot of it will require legislation, so it's not just a quick fix to be done. But I know how hard Justin has been working on this and, in particular, thanks go to the stakeholders with whom he has engaged.

Q506 **Chair:** Should we expect an answer alongside the Green Paper? Is that perhaps the way forward?

Dr Coffey: That would be nice. I would agree it would make a sensible alignment, but I can't guarantee that is going to happen.

Chair: That concludes all our questions to you. Thank you very much indeed for your time this morning and for giving us very full answers to all the questions that we have raised. It falls to me now formally to end the meeting.