



Select Committee on Food, Poverty, Health and the Environment

Corrected oral evidence: Food, Poverty, Health and the Environment

Thursday 11 June 2020

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Members present: Lord Krebs (The Chair); Baroness Boycott; The Earl of Caithness; Lord Empey; Baroness Janke; Baroness Osamor; Baroness Parminter; Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick; Baroness Sanderson of Welton; Baroness Sater; Lord Whitty.

Evidence Session No. 17

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 119 - 130

Witnesses

I: Jo Churchill MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Minister for Prevention, Public Health and Primary Care); Will Quince MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Minister for Welfare Delivery).

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Examination of witnesses

Jo Churchill MP and Will Quince MP.

Q119 The Chair: Welcome to this public evidence session of the Select Committee on Food, Poverty, Health and the Environment. I particularly welcome our two witnesses, Jo Churchill and Will Quince, Ministers in the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Work and Pensions respectively. Thank you very much for joining us for the final evidence session in our inquiry.

The meeting is being broadcast live on the parliamentary website. As our ministerial witnesses will know from their previous experience, a transcript of the meeting will be taken and published on the Committee website. The witnesses will have the opportunity to make corrections to the transcript where they see it as necessary. I remind members of the Committee and our witnesses to be as succinct as possible in their answers because we are on a pretty tight time schedule, and we have quite a few questions to get through.

The first few questions are directed at Jo Churchill. I am going to kick off by asking about the childhood obesity strategy. Do the Government remain convinced that they can meet their target of halving childhood obesity by 2030? Related to that, what is the Government's current timetable for publishing their responses to the consultation launched as part of chapters 2 and 3 of the childhood obesity plan? Finally, why do you think there has been so little progress on bringing down the rates of childhood obesity? Do you think the blockages are political, financial or logistical?

Jo Churchill MP: Thank you very much indeed for inviting me to give evidence today. That is quite a lot of questions, so I will take them in the order you asked them.

Do the Government remain convinced that they can still meet their target of halving childhood obesity by 2030? Yes, because we have to remain convinced. There is a really good story to tell in this area and we need to get on with it. I am sure we all recognise that with obesity and those who are overweight there is a huge cost to the individual, and to the NHS and the wider economy. That is why we have set out a bold ambition, and why the Government remain absolutely determined to reduce obesity across all ages and, most important, to drill down on the childhood obesity ambition and make sure we get there by 2030.

The three chapters of the childhood obesity plan make up the full package of measures, and they are ready to go. The pause has been largely for the reason we are meeting like this today: Covid-19. There is no lack of will in this area. We have had some important successes since publication of the first chapter. The top-line one would be the SDIL—the soft drinks industry levy—which has decreased the sugar in drinks by about 29% between 2015 and 2018. That has led to significant investments being made to promote physical activity for children in schools and healthier eating programmes. We are working with councils

to try to help reduce childhood obesity locally through trailblazers and ground-breaking schemes so that we know more.

Moving on to the current timetable, we will respond to the consultation on chapter 2 of the childhood obesity plan and take the measures outlined in chapter 3 as soon as we can. In that space, I am very keen to do the work, particularly on infant formula, but we need to tackle it across all ages, starting from the early years. Giving all children, irrespective of where they start in life, the best possible chance is right, and we are determined to do it. One in 10 children enters primary school obese, and that rises to one in five by the time they leave, so for the early years of education there is quite a challenge to make sure we turn that around. Children in poorer parts of the country are more than twice as likely to be carrying too much weight or to be obese. The evidence is stronger for the correlation with Covid-19, but we already know that it sits there for other diseases, so that makes it even more imperative.

You asked why so little progress has been made and whether the blockages are political, financial or logistical. The problem has been decades in the making. We are talking in the first six months of 2020, and we have 10 years. Every day that passes is a day lost in meeting the target of halving childhood obesity, so we need to drive forward quickly.

I would argue that we all have a role in reducing obesity. There is self-responsibility and taking responsibility as parents for our family's health. Government needs to sit as an enabler, but even with the best efforts of government we must have that buy-in of personal responsibility. I have carried too much weight in my life. It is hard. It is really tough. People say, "You should just lose weight", but it is not that simple. It is always very complex; there are often other issues challenging the household.

In this space, we have a good story. UNICEF's *The State of the World's Children* report, published last October, said that, even though much remains to be done to tackle childhood obesity, the UK is paving the way to ensure that children grow up in a healthy food environment. We need to make sure that we act quickly, and I welcome the Select Committee shining a light on that.

The Chair: To pick up on a bit of the evidence we received, one of our expert witnesses told us that all the things the Government have done are good, but they are not nearly enough; they are not being done at a pace and with a sense of urgency that is anywhere near the scale of the challenge. In light of the fact that many of the consultations in relation to chapter 2 closed in 2018, or early 2019, do you feel that you are moving at sufficient pace?

Jo Churchill MP: Yes. There is a challenge. When we went out to consultation, we had 6,000 respondents. In the light of the recent challenges of Covid, we need to pick up where we were and push harder. There is a lot of energy and vigour in the team to do more and make sure that we deliver those steps.

There is often demand for more at speed, but we have been doing a lot. We have run trailblazer programmes in BAME communities; we have run them on advertising in Lewisham. Those things and the consultation, and making sure we have evaluated it, help inform us as to the right policy decisions. The next steps are ready to go. We were keen to push on at the beginning of 2020, but unfortunately in the last six months the situation has been somewhat overtaken by the pandemic. There is willingness to get going, and the Prime Minister has indicated willingness to get the agenda front and centre and under way again.

Q120 Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick: What assessment have the Government made of the food industry's progress to comply with the voluntary reformulation programme? You referred earlier to the adoption of the soft drinks industry levy and the reduction in that area, and healthy eating programmes.

Jo Churchill MP: The line was a bit wobbly, so I will go to the written question I was submitted and hope it is the same one. Basically, Public Health England oversees the reduction reformulation programme on behalf of the Government, as set out in the chapters of the childhood obesity plan and the subsequent *Prevention* Green Paper. Under the reduction programme, we have seen a 3% reduction in sugar, with larger reductions in breakfast cereals and yogurt. I will probably get it the wrong way round, but I think that for breakfast cereals it is around 8% and for yogurt it is around 10%. Some categories are lagging behind. The most notable is that we have not seen much advance in confectionery at all.

Having said that, we are the only country in the world to reduce sugar in products other than soft drinks. We were told that reducing sugar would affect market share. Market share has risen, so you can reduce sugar in a formulation and sell more. I would like to see reformulation going on at pace.

Q121 Baroness Parminter: Minister, thank you very much for the written evidence we have received, which is very helpful. In it, you say that if the voluntary reformulation programmes are not successful you will look to take other actions. It is clear that sugar and salt voluntary reformulations will not hit their targets. First, are you taking action now to consider what to do? Secondly, will that include fiscal measures?

Jo Churchill MP: We have been incredibly clear that, where progress is not being made, we will consider what further action can be taken. The SDIL lays down a very strong marker to the industry that the Government are willing to take regulatory action. I do not think I can add any more. We have shown that we will do it.

We need to send a strong message that it is not about reducing sales; it is about reducing sugar and ultimately helping people to make healthier choices. It is part of an education programme on driving down the sugar in our food choices, and the salt, which is often exceedingly high. Proper

labelling and so on help in all that education, but the Government are willing to take action if needed.

The Chair: Are you prepared to say when?

Jo Churchill MP: I probably have to stand back a bit from when, in that the past six months have shunted everything somewhat. It is part of the programme to make sure that we do things in a coherent way, and the industry is well aware. There was a lot of talk at the time about whether we were up to it and whether we would do SDIL. It has been done and it has carried on. That marker reinforces to the industry that we will do it.

I would prefer people to take the message, particularly post Covid, that it is something that as a nation we need to address. Post the PHE report, we know that obesity is a variable. We can modify. Therefore, reformulation sits at the heart of it and is a much better thing to inform our action. The PHE's sugar report is out later in the year and that will help inform our decision-making, so I think we can say that it will be within the 2020 timeframe.

Q122 **The Earl of Caithness:** Minister, it is quite clear that the only thing that has effectively worked on sugar is through the law. All the evidence we have received from those in the food industry is that they do nothing but blame each other and drag their feet. The retailers blame the manufacturers, the manufacturers blame the retailers and they all blame the hospitality industry. When they are not blaming each other, they are blaming the Government. Where is the fault?

Jo Churchill MP: Perhaps with the benefit of having four children, I would argue to all of them that it is not about who is to blame; it is about making a change. The Government cannot do it on their own. Businesses, healthcare professionals, schools, local authorities, families and individuals all have a role to play. They also have a role to play in demanding of manufacturers and supermarkets that they help us in making those choices.

As a country, we know we need to eat more fruit, vegetables, fibre and oily fish; we know we consume too many calories. In particular, very obese young children who are struggling consume about 500 calories more a day than they need, as well as too much sugar, saturated fat and salt. We know that it is hard to eat healthily when unhealthy options are all around us. In my honest opinion, we will not get anywhere by playing the blame game; it is about all of us doing it, and we must focus on making healthy choices easier. It is about reshaping the environment, providing people with a healthier choice and encouraging them to make it.

Recently, I was chatting to a lorry driver who told me he wanted to lose weight. He said that on the regular drive to drop his goods there were no service stations, cafés or outlets where he could get a healthy meal that could be eaten in his wagon or wherever and that did not involve a knife

and fork, and so on. We need to think about how we can service people better in their daily lives—children and everybody else.

The Earl of Caithness: Would you not agree that this has been going on for years? Governments have said exactly what you have said and nothing has happened.

Jo Churchill MP: I think a great deal has happened. You shake your head, but nobody else has brought in the soft drinks industry levy or used a sanction.

The Earl of Caithness: That was government action, not industry.

Jo Churchill MP: Indeed, but the industry has responded, in the formulation space in particular, by a reduction in cereals and yogurts. We have signalled that we will be mandating calories in out-of-home purchases. That is already very visible in many food outlets. It comes down partially to self-responsibility and making sure the choices are there.

There is a balance to be struck between the measures that government puts in and what business does as a reaction. Businesses told us that they would lose market share with SDIL; they did not. Businesses say that “buy one, get one free” promotions affect their bottom line, and that is why they do them, but there is a supermarket chain that no longer does them. During the Covid crisis, supermarkets made very rapid changes to their points of sale, ends of gondolas and so on, and there have been far fewer special offers and promotions. It can be done, and now we know that it can be done I will insist that we work harder and faster.

The Chair: I hope you are successful in getting them engaged harder and faster.

Jo Churchill MP: So do I. This is a public evidence session.

Q123 **Baroness Sanderson of Welton:** A couple of references have been made to this. What assessment have the Government made as to the extent to which obesity is a risk factor in patients who contract Covid-19?

Jo Churchill MP: I am sure everybody is aware of the PHE report that has just reviewed the disparities in risks and outcomes. It looked at reports from the Intensive Care National Audit and Research Centre in the UK. There have been reports from the UK Biobank and the OpenSAFELY collaborative. All of them showed that obesity is associated with a higher risk of a positive test for hospitalisation with Covid-19 and a subsequent higher risk of admission into intensive care and of death.

The NHS England team looked into the relationship between BMI and diabetes and the risk of death from Covid-19. The analysis shows how important a healthy weight is to a more positive outcome from Covid-19. For me, this is a very teachable moment and puts things into very sharp relief through Covid-19. We know it is more important than ever to

support the reduction in obesity and for us all to aim for a healthier lifestyle and weight. We have a teachable moment, and we should seize it.

The Chair: As a minor detail, or not so minor, did the studies you refer to—for example, the PHE study—separate the effects of comorbidities with obesity, such as type 2 diabetes and heart problems, to isolate the effect of obesity per se?

Jo Churchill MP: I believe there is further work to be done by PHE on the effect of comorbidities and how weight affects that. Presumably, there will be a regression analysis to see which is the overriding factor—the comorbidity or the weight. I believe that is the next stage in that part of the scientific and evidence-based research PHE is carrying out.

Q124 **Baroness Osamor:** What assessment has been made of the health impact of Covid-19 on people living in more deprived areas and in lower income groups, in particular those living with food insecurity?

Jo Churchill MP: The PHE report on the disparities in the risk and impact of Covid-19 shows very clearly that people who live in deprived areas have higher diagnosis rates and, therefore, higher death rates than those living in less deprived areas. The mortality rates from Covid-19 in the most deprived areas were more than double those in the least deprived areas. That goes across both genders. Gender was also something we looked at in the report.

The report provides us with some important conclusions, but there is more to be done to understand better the drivers behind the findings, including the relationships between different risk factors and environmental factors, and what we can do to close the gap so that the action we take is the right action. If we do not do that, we could end up compounding the situation rather than—if anybody is listening to this—driving the improvements that produce change.

Everybody has been struck by the conclusions of the PHE report. That is why it is important that that work is continued. We will ensure that everything necessary is done to protect those most vulnerable to Covid, based on the best science that is available; hence the shielding programme, hence the PHE report, et cetera.

Q125 **Baroness Janke:** I want to ask about the economic effects of Covid-19 on public health. In answer to a previous question, you recognised the relationship between health and people's living conditions and how poor they are. Is anything being done to mitigate that effect, particularly given that there is much evidence about health inequalities that were shown to be worsening even before the outbreak of Covid-19? There is quite a lot of evidence of that in the Marmot 10-year review.

Jo Churchill MP: We recognised it immediately, and that was partly why the Government took swift action with furloughing so that the majority of people were captured. There is undoubtedly recognition of the importance of securing support for the most vulnerable during the current crisis.

More than £3.2 billion additional support has been given to local authorities to address pressures in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, £750 million has been pledged to ensure that charities can continue their vital work. The more we know about the virus and its impact, the easier it is to put the right interventions in place to protect lives and limit the spread, and that was why we asked PHE to review the factors affecting health.

Making sure that we are doing the right thing is a challenge. It is also part of the food strategy. We have to make sure that we are getting things right there. Yesterday, I think there was an announcement about another tranche of funding to help food banks, but that is not my area. Rather than quoting facts and figures, that is all part of the mix that we can set out to ensure we are doing the right thing on health inequalities and that we target the poorest families through government schemes, such as furlough, free school meals and the healthy start voucher, so that families with the biggest challenges can access food.

From this autumn, the healthy start voucher covers pulses as well. It has been digitised so mums and dads can just buy a pint of milk with it; it does not take the whole paper voucher. A digital card reduces stigma, as well as making it easier for the individual to use. We recognise the situation. As ever, there is more work to do to improve it.

Baroness Janke: Are you making an actual assessment, and does it take account of regional disparities? There was very strong evidence in the Marmot report that certain areas had much worse health inequalities than others and that was attributable to the effects of poverty and deprivation.

Jo Churchill MP: That is a much broader question. Just before Covid, the chief medical officer started to look into that particular area. I know about some of the smoking disparities. It is not a food matter necessarily, but there are smoking disparities between, say, Blackpool and somewhere in the south. Coastal areas are disproportionately affected, and there are very high rates of smoking. Bolton is another area with very high rates of smoking.

Those different health inequalities are tapered all the way through the Green Paper. That is why I would like to get on with the work in the *Prevention* paper. This is probably the wrong place and time, but we are keen that everybody brushes their teeth after they have a meal, and that is not always available to children in really challenging circumstances. Many agree that fluoridation is another area that would have one of the biggest impacts to help children where health inequality is something we want to target.

The Earl of Caithness: Minister, you said in reply to our Chairman that a lot of the blame was on Covid over the last few months. Can you give us one example of what you would have done had there not been Covid?

Jo Churchill MP: I would have made sure that we were kick-starting the consultation on the marketing and labelling of infant food and how to improve it, so that parents and carers have honest and accurate information on what they feed their baby at this critical time. I referred to the evidence from the trailblazers and the local action taken there. I mentioned the one in Lewisham. We have five of them throughout the country, so I would be making sure we have done something there. There is out-of-home calorie labelling. We want customers to access information more easily. Front-of-pack labelling is coming down the line; there are energy drinks. There is so much to do in this space. I was going to use the term “oven ready”. That is perhaps not a good one in this instance, but much of it is just sitting there, ready for us to get going with it.

What I would like to emphasise is the vigorous response in this space. We have committed to responding to a number of the consultations on chapter 2. That is work I would have done at speed had we not been diverted, but I repeat that, if the diversion and the pandemic have taught us anything, it is that as a nation we have an ambition to reach a healthy weight target and make sure we are all more active. That is what we should be aiming for. The one big thing I would have kicked off in this last period is the launch of the consultation on front-of-pack labelling. I hope that gives you a flavour. There is a lot we can get on with.

The Chair: That is very helpful; it gives us a very clear flavour.

Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick: Minister, you suggested earlier to our Chair that the Government are willing to take regulatory action. Could I push you a bit further on that? What type of regulatory action? What is the timeframe? If you cannot provide that answer today, could you write to the Chair within the next few days?

Jo Churchill MP: I will take the latter option. The challenge in this space is the pandemic. Until we get ourselves going again and drive down on these things, with the assurance of a trajectory, I suppose the best thing I could do, although we will write to you, is to come and talk to you in six months so that you can hold our feet to the fire as to how far we are getting.

Baroness Boycott: Minister, you mentioned several times the early start vouchers. When are you going to increase their value? They have not been increased for a decade and they have not kept up with inflation.

Jo Churchill MP: They are under constant review. They are still at £3.10 for pregnant women and for any child under four. We are making sure that the system is robust and we have taken away some of the other challenges within that space. As I said, we have changed over from a paper version. In consultation, those who used it indicated to us what they did not like. We have run trials to make sure that the digital works, and next year we will be bringing that forward. Arguably, it is a good place to segue to DWP because the work spans across, making sure that people have an adequate amount of choice to make the right healthy

choices for their family. Extending it to different products in the autumn is part of that.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. You have given the signal that we are going to move on to Will Quince for the next few questions.

Q126 **Baroness Boycott:** I have two questions about tackling food insecurity. First, will the Covid crisis change the Government's approach? Secondly, what evidence is there that the data collected from the family resources survey will provide a sufficiently accurate picture of the scale of the issue to allow the Government to assess the impact and possibly make substantial policy changes on levels of food insecurity?

Will Quince MP: Thank you, Baroness Boycott, Chair and the Committee, for allowing me to give evidence today.

There are a number of questions in that. The second part around tackling food insecurity can largely be broken into two. The first is around the issue of immediacy, and that in part falls to my department through support under the benefits system, but the longer-term drivers of both poverty and food insecurity span multiple government departments. That is why I work very closely with my counterparts in numerous other departments to look at the longer-term drivers.

On the approach to measuring food insecurity, I suppose the answer to the question is yes and no. It has been a relatively long-term piece of work. We have long thought that the data we hold in this area is insufficient. For a long time, we have had the national and regional statistics on the number and proportion of people on low income. They have been set out in the HBAI—households below average income—statistics published annually, but what we have not had is very good data, in fact very little data at all, on food insecurity. As Baroness Boycott rightly pointed out, that was why, in 2018, we introduced the new questions on food insecurity in the family resource survey. That is really game-changing.

There have been challenges. Covid-19 has affected all aspects of government surveying. The family resource survey is a face-to-face procedure and usually takes about an hour. It is now having to be done over the telephone. It is a survey of around 20,000 people, so it is robust and should give us very good data. Incidentally, the data in relation to the food security questions is due to be published in March 2021 as planned. Having said that, and despite the fact that the survey currently covers 20,000 people—and, because of Covid, we suspect, certainly for the first half of this year it will need to be conducted by telephone—the Secretary of State and I are looking at how we can increase the cohort of people. Data is powerful and it drives so much of the policy in the department. The decisions we take are evidence based, and the family resources survey and other work we do—for example, with the Trussell Trust and the independent foodbank networks—feed into that.

Baroness Janke: In our report, there is some evidence that the poorest

decile of UK households would need to spend 74% of their post-housing income to follow the Government's guidelines on a healthy diet. How is that sort of evidence assessed in the DWP, particularly when looking at levels of benefit?

Will Quince MP: That is a very interesting point. Successive Governments have made assessments and decisions as to rates of benefits, taking into account over the period of time competing demands on public expenditure. Benefit rates are reviewed annually. As you know, the end of the benefit freeze is this year. Previously frozen benefits were increased by inflation, by 1.7%. You will also know that, as part of the measures to support people through Covid-19, the Government have made an increase of about £6.5 billion to the benefits system. What we do not do is break down benefits into individual components as to what they are designed to pay for. Benefits are not designed in that way. Nevertheless, we always keep those things under review, and benefits are reviewed annually by the Secretary of State.

Q127 Baroness Sater: Could you tell us what work has been done to ensure that people living in the most deprived areas, who are already living with food insecurity, can still access the food they need, despite the additional challenges that have arisen as a result of Covid-19?

Will Quince MP: I entirely understand what a difficult time this has been and continues to be for people, in particular those on low incomes. As a Government, we have taken significant action to support those affected by coronavirus, including some of the key HMT measures such as the income protection scheme, mortgage holidays and additional support for renters.

In my own department, we have injected £6.5 billion into the welfare system, as I previously mentioned, which includes changes to tax credits, the increase in the universal credit standard allowance of £1,040 a year, which is equivalent to £20 per week, and a significant change to the local housing allowance, increasing it to the 30th percentile. That should mean that an average family in receipt of the housing element of universal credit, or housing benefit, receives about an additional £600 per year.

In broader cross-government support, there is also a £16 million grant from DCMS to Defra to provide food for those who are struggling because of Covid-19. That is through two very good food organisations: FareShare and WRAP. Food charities are able to access grants of up to £100,000 through the food charities grant scheme. You may have noticed that yesterday, during Prime Minister's Questions, the Prime Minister announced something that I and a number of Ministers have been working on for some time: a £63 million local welfare assistance scheme to be administered via local authorities. The Government have taken unprecedented measures to support people through Covid-19, and my department and Her Majesty's Treasury have introduced those measures at pace, getting support to people very quickly indeed.

Q128 The Chair: I would like to move on to something that has been touched

on a number of times during this session: the use of food banks. What assessment have the Government made of the use of food banks by benefit claimants during the Covid-19 outbreak? Has the information on food bank use during Covid-19 prompted any considerations as to whether changes need to be made to the existing benefits system? For instance, have the Government made any assessment of whether the rise in food bank use as reported by food aid organisations is attributable either to the five-week wait or the amount provided through universal credit?

Will Quince MP: There are numerous questions in there. The first thing is that the Government do not collect data on the number of food parcels distributed by food banks, and there is no official data on food bank use in the United Kingdom. Developing official statistics in that area would potentially place quite an onerous requirement on food banks, many of which are independent charities in their own right and—

The Chair: I am sorry to interrupt. The Trussell Trust, for example, reported an 89% increase during April 2020 compared with the same month last year, including a 107% increase in parcels given to children. The Independent Food Aid Network reported a 175% increase. The data is there; the charities are already collecting it.

Will Quince MP: We work very closely with the Trussell Trust and I speak very regularly with the chief executive of the trust, but much of the data collected reflects the situation before many of the measures that we have taken as a Government to support people affected by the Covid-19 pandemic were fully implemented or have taken effect.

You hit on a very important point, which is that we do not have very good data as to food insecurity and food bank use. That is why the family resources survey and the additional questions are so important, and why the Secretary of State and I are looking at ways in which we can increase that. We also have a literature review in relation to food bank use because we are very keen to understand that better. The plan had been to release it over the summer. That is still the ambition, but obviously staff have had to be redeployed to process claims. I very much hope we can still meet that timeline. We are constantly trying to learn more about the drivers of food bank use.

The Chair: Do you think it is acceptable that many people in the country should rely on charitable handouts to be able to feed themselves and their families?

Will Quince MP: No. Let me be absolutely clear. We do not want anybody to feel they have no choice but to visit a food bank, but while there is a need in the country, am I grateful and thankful that organisations such as the Trussell Trust and other food bank organisations are out there, along with many other charities that support people up and down this country? Yes, of course I am.

The Chair: May I briefly return to the family resources survey and the

relationship between that and measures of food insecurity? How are you planning to link the data you get from the family resources survey to the national diet and nutrition survey that tells us about the state of the nation's nutrition and health?

Will Quince MP: That is very much work in progress, and when we get the results of the survey and we get the answers to those questions, I will certainly be looking to sit down with my counterparts in the Department for Health and Social Care, because you are right in your suggestion that we would want to compare the two and then look at the evidence.

The Chair: I hope work in progress does not mean we have not yet thought about how to do it.

Will Quince MP: No, it is not a case of that. Obviously, the data is not yet published and, understandably, we have had to divert many of our staff. Around 10,000 staff in the DWP have been redeployed to help with the unprecedented demand on the universal credit system. To put that into context, we have had 2.3 million claims for universal credit since the middle of March.

The Chair: Okay, thank you. It is a fair comment.

Q129 **Lord Empey:** Good afternoon Minister. In written evidence to the Committee, the Government told us that the repayment period for universal credit advances will be extended to 24 months and the standard deduction cap will be reduced to 25%, but that will not take effect until October 2021. Are you still on track for that deadline, and, given that it will represent the second necessary concession on both deduction caps and repayment time, is it time to rethink the five-week wait? What I do not understand is the public policy benefit in having that delay, which causes all sorts of hassle, gets people into debt and so on. Could you spell that out for the Committee?

Will Quince MP: Yes, of course. There are a number of questions in there too. The first one, and I suppose the most important, is that I can confirm that we still plan to deliver the increase of the UC advance repayment period from 12 months, where it currently is, to 24 months. That is despite the huge pressures on the department and the reduction in the deductions cap from 30%, which recently came down from 40%, I hasten to add, to 25% in October 2021. Both are fixed-date commitments in the UC programme plan and I am absolutely committed to them.

I suppose part of the reason for what we have done is that we are constantly looking to improve universal credit. It is an evolving system. It is a relatively new system. We listen to stakeholders, we listen to Peers, and we listen to Members of the House of Commons, who share their lived experience and the lived experience of their constituents. We believe that the department's advances and deductions policy strikes a fair balance between the claimant's need to meet their financial

obligations and their ability to ensure that they can meet their day-to-day needs.

On the broader point about the first assessment period and why there is the wait, the universal credit assessment period and the payment structure are fundamental parts of the design. The assessment period runs for a full calendar month from the date of the entitlement to universal credit, and the pay date will be within seven calendar days after the end of that initial assessment period. Subsequent pay dates will be the same each and every month. It is not possible to award a universal credit payment as soon as a claim is made, as the assessment period has to run its course before the award of universal credit can be calculated. That is the fundamental difference between the previous system, which was a system based on advances, and was, I hasten to stress, deeply flawed, compared with a system that is based on arrears and is more akin to the world of work.

The advances are a way of helping the claimants most in need. Not everyone takes an advance. Around 65% of claimants take an advance at present. During Covid-19, I think that figure is actually significantly lower because a cohort of people is coming on to the universal credit system with very different needs. The advances are to provide additional support until the first regular payment comes in, by allowing them to receive 13 payments instead of 12 over a 12-month period.

A number of people have asked why we cannot bring the change in temporarily for Covid-19. Apart from the many issues, and indeed the cost—it would cost between £2.2 billion and £2.7 billion to make some of the changes that organisations are calling for—any change to the policy, or indeed any structural change to the universal credit system at the moment, would require a hugely significant system development at a time when all resources, rightly, are focused on the processing of new claims.

We continue to review our policies. I am constantly reviewing our policies, listening to stakeholders, but we have no plans to change that at this time. My priority, and I think the priority of all Ministers in the department, is ensuring the safety, security and stability of the system, and making sure that people get their payments wherever possible in full and on time—and in this case it is actually over 90%.

Lord Empey: Thank you for that, Minister. Most people accept the principle of universal credit, but it has to be said that in the evidence we have received, time and again, the issue about the gap came up. Whether it is five weeks or six weeks is largely neither here nor there; it results in people getting back into arrears with their rent, and all sorts of hassle. Bailiffs are involved. Courts are involved. It seems that an enormous amount of hassle and effort goes into handling that gap, and I urge you and the department to look very closely at that, because it kept coming up again and again in our evidence.

Will Quince MP: If I can add two more points, Lord Empey, the first is that the satisfaction level with universal credit is as high as with the previous legacy benefits system, if not a little bit higher.

The second is that, in relation to those who take out an advance, the repayment of that advance over a 12-month period is currently in the region of £50 per calendar month. As of October next year, when we move it down to 24 months, that figure will reduce to about £30 a month. I stress that, as part of the recent Covid-19 measures, the package of support we have put in place has increased universal credit by £80 per calendar month, so even those currently paying back an advance at £50 or £55 a month are still in the region of £30 per month better off, even having taken an advance, and they will have had 13 payments over a 12-month period instead of 12.

Those moving on to UC from legacy benefits already get a two-week run-on of housing benefit. As of July, next month, they will also have a two-week run-on of other legacy benefits, which will see people keep an additional £200.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Lord Whitty has a question for both Ministers.

Q130 **Lord Whitty:** Thank you, Lord Chairman. The Government have commissioned Henry Dimbleby to come up with a wide-ranging food strategy. I recognise that that is on pause at the moment. He is likely to come up with a wide range of recommendations involving several government departments, your own two departments, undoubtedly Defra and the FSA, and probably others, such as Education. Has any thought been given as to how to follow through his strategic recommendations across departments both at ministerial level and in Whitehall?

Will Quince MP: DWP officials have been involved in cross-government discussions to support and shape the development of the strategy at a senior level. We bring quite a large amount of data with which we are able to support that work. As you rightly say, at the moment it has been temporarily paused.

The key in what you are saying, and you are absolutely right, is the importance of co-ordination in food policy and how we are going to make sure that the relevant government departments work together, including DHSC, DfE, BEIS and, indeed, the DWP. It is important to stress that the answer to that question is above both Minister Churchill's and my pay grade. The whole point of the exercise is government departments working together, and I know that has been happening at ministerial level and indeed official level. The Government are committed to responding to the review's recommendations in the form of a White Paper, I believe, within six months.

Jo Churchill MP: The food strategy remains a priority across government, as has been said. Defra holds the lead. It is great that the independent review will look at the food system as a whole, given that we

know that it is the whole system that contributes to a healthy food environment.

My officials have been in discussion with Henry Dimbleby over the past year, and even over the last few weeks, as we have better understood the links between obesity and those referenced earlier on Covid-19. We are looking forward to the initial report, which we expect this summer, and Henry will give us a fuller report towards the end of the year. It explores the issue across Whitehall governance of how an effective joined-up food policy would work and will make recommendations as necessary. While it would be premature to pre-empt it, the cross-governmental work that has gone on during Covid is a very good example of how much we can move things forward working together when we try.

The Government are committed to responding to it, as Minister Quince said, within six months of the final report. It is a very exciting time because I think there is hope. We have just done a hospital food consultation, for example. Across public procurement, across the Department for Education, there are so many areas that this affects, and I am looking forward to the report and seeing how we can move forward with the recommendations across government.

Lord Whitty: I appreciate that it is above your pay grade. It is well above our pay grade. With such a broad, sweeping policy, which involves so many government departments and the private sector, has any thought been given to an independent body pursuing it, on the lines of, for example, the climate change committee, or is it all going to be internal within government?

Will Quince MP: I think that is something we will have to take away and come back to you in writing. I am sorry to say I do not know the answer.

Jo Churchill MP: I agree with that, adding the rejoinder that, until we have actually seen the initial report and work out what the best fit for the recommendations is, it would seem to me a little presumptive to decide now how we are going to fix the problem.

Lord Whitty: I appreciate that.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Will Quince, could I ask you a further question about advances made on UC during the coronavirus outbreak? Has your department given any thought to writing off those advances, given the exceptional circumstances that people find themselves in?

Will Quince MP: The answer to that is that it is considered, but there are several issues. We have temporarily paused the recovery of benefit overpayments until further notice, and that change will allow us to move a significant number of staff to front-line roles so that we can focus on getting money to those who need it most as quickly as possible.

The recovery of advances is automated. It is not like benefit overpayments. Pausing the recovery of advances would mean removing

automation and, therefore, creating new manual processes. If we were to create a new manual process, it would mean diverting staff away from the processing of claims and, of course, our primary objective of getting people paid in full and on time. Then you have to take into consideration the potential arguments around fairness, around those who have already received and repaid an advance or those who are currently repaying an advance.

No, it is not something we are considering. We looked at measures at the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis, things that could be operationalised very quickly and provide support to the people facing the most financial disruption. That is why I went for increasing the universal credit standard allowance by £20 a week, putting £80 a month into the pockets of some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people in our country. I think that is a fairer way of getting that support to people.

The Chair: Thank you very much. We are drawing to the end of our time, so I thank both Ministers for joining us as witnesses. We appreciate that this is an incredibly busy time for both of you, so we are very grateful to you for giving us an hour of your time, and we are grateful to you for the answers that you have given to our questions.

There were one or two points that you offered to follow up in writing. We are on a pretty tight time schedule because we have to finish our report in the next 10 days or so. If you could ask your officials to put their skates on, that will be very helpful to us.

Jo Churchill MP: Noted.

The Chair: In the meantime, thank you very much indeed for your evidence, Will Quince and Jo Churchill. Thank you, members of the Committee.