

## Work and Pensions Committee

### Oral evidence: Safeguarding vulnerable people: how the DWP learns lessons from serious cases, HC 599

Wednesday 22 July 2020

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

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#### Witnesses

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

#### Examination of witnesses

Rt Hon Dr Thérèse Coffey MP and Peter Schofield.

- Q1 **Chair:** Welcome, Secretary of State and Permanent Secretary, to this meeting of the Committee. We are very grateful that you have been able to join us this morning. We are also very pleased there are going to be many members of the public observing our meeting today. We are going to be discussing in this session cases in which people have died by suicide, so let me just make the point at the outset, that anyone who feels that they might attempt suicide should call 999 for an ambulance straight away or call the Samaritans anytime, day or night, on 116123. Secretary of State, I know you would like to make a short opening statement.

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** Thank you, Mr Chairman, and it is good to be here with my Permanent Secretary. I want to associate myself with your



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comments earlier. It is a difficult time in people's lives when they feel that the only way out is to unfortunately have death by suicide and that is something that none of us would ever want to happen to anybody at all.

Thank you for allowing me to come and meet the Committee to discuss these important matters. When I wrote to you in March I did say I would be happy to provide an update for the summer recess on our plans to improve customer experiences, including elements of how we identify vulnerable people early and try to tailor our processes to help them.

It is fair to say the Department interacts with millions of people. We make billions of pounds-worth of payments every year. In the overwhelming majority of cases our claimants are happy with the service that we provide. However, we do recognise—I recognise—that some of our vulnerable claimants need extra support, particularly those that do not have strong family support networks or community networks.

Through the customer experience directorate—which I hope Peter will get a chance to talk about, because it was he who drove this when he became the Permanent Secretary a few years ago—we have made some changes to ensure that vulnerable claimants' needs are considered at every stage of the customer journey. Coming here today to talk about things like the serious case panel, which includes, at my request, the Permanent Secretary and his entire executive team, demonstrates this commitment. There are elements where the serious case panel will look at themes, so the title may almost be slightly misleading itself but it is taking themes from cases, which means that we then look at our systems and learning lessons on how we can make changes or improvements where necessary.

I am very happy to pause there and welcome any questions that you have.

**Chair:** We have quite a number of questions to ask and the first is to be asked by Debbie Abrahams.

**Q2 Debbie Abrahams:** I recognise, Secretary of State, you have not been in post long and many of the things that we will be discussing were before your tenure—also yourself, Mr Schofield—but I have been raising issues about the deaths of vulnerable people, and vulnerable claimants in particular, for over six years now and it started with the death of David Claxton, not by suicide but this was after he was sanctioned and he was left with no money and, as a diabetic, he went into a coma as a result. I spent time with his sister and, as you can imagine, she was absolutely devastated.

The Government's peer review process into claimants' deaths has been replaced by internal process reviews and now you talk about the new serious case panels. As Faiza Ahmed's brother said last night, the DWP showed no remorse about the suicide of his sister after a coroner issued a prevention of future death report citing the DWP as one of the responsible authorities. Why should we, and more importantly why should the families of those who have died, believe that the new serious case panels will be any different from their predecessors. Is this now a new priority for you?



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**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** I missed the name of some of the people you referred to, Debbie, I am sorry. I could not hear that.

**Chair:** The sound went down when you were saying the name of the person.

**Debbie Abrahams:** I will happily repeat that. The first person was David Claxton, who died after he was sanctioned, back in 2014. The second person was Faiza Ahmed. She passed in 2016. But it was her brother's comments, particularly about the families who have been left grieving for their loved ones that I would like you to consider in terms of the new changes you are introducing. I have three questions, so I would be very grateful if you could be brief in your responses. I do not want to have to interrupt you.

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** Internal process reviews replaced peer reviews about 2014, 2015 and the original peer reviews started in the mid-noughties. It was decided by people at the time that the peer review added slightly different meaning outside the Department—it was seen potentially as trying to apportion blame. At the time, it was largely driven by processes where procedures followed. The change that happened with moving to the internal process review—which is still happening, it has not been disbanded at all—is again an internal look of making sure that we have learned from the different elements of a process. We have seen a significant increase in number of issues raised that require internal process review, so it has stepped up quite considerably to about 76 in the previous financial year, about half of which have been completed. So they are proving more effective in understanding that.

The serious case panel review was started under my predecessor, Amber Rudd, and when I came into the Department there were some changes that I made to make sure that the panel was the Permanent Secretary with his directors general. It included the independent case examiner and also required one of our non-executive directors to chair the panel. That is now under way. There have been two meetings of the panel in that format.

I am pleased to say that I will be sending to the Committee the terms of reference and also draft minutes of those two meetings. We are committing to put those on gov.uk in the future. It is important to stress that this is not intended to be a replacement for a coroner's inquest. It is not intended to be a replacement for the complaints process or the role of the independent case examiner. It is designed to help us to learn from actions that happen. I am very conscious that when things go wrong they can go badly wrong for people. We need to be much more agile in how we pick that up.

**Debbie Abrahams:** Can I move—

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** I was just about to mention the PFDs. There have been four since 2014, and the lady to whom you refer is one of them, but I am quite limited on some of the things that I can say because of the



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number of legal cases that are under way. I am somewhat restricted in some of the things I can share.

**Debbie Abrahams:** There does seem to be a new focus for the Department, which I am sure everybody would welcome. However, as you have just mentioned in terms of coroners and the important role that they play, the coroner for Errol Graham was told by the DWP's chief psychologist, David Carew, that the Department's safeguarding policy was being reviewed in light of the coronial investigation and this would be completed by last autumn. You may know, Secretary of State, about Errol's case. He died in 2018, weighing just four and a half stone, eight months after his employment support allowance had been stopped. He was only 57.

The coroner's decision not to give a prevention of future deaths report was dependent on the satisfactory progress in the revision of your safeguarding policy. As she said to you in her letter, "the revision of the DWP's safeguarding policy is important, not only in this case but also likely to be highly relevant in future cases where the DWP are involved with vulnerable people who go on to die in similar tragic circumstances". Why did the coroner have to write to you three times over the last six months before she received a response from you last Friday? Does this reflect your commitment to protect vulnerable claimants?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** Again, you have mentioned Mr Errol Graham, but because of the legal case I cannot talk about our interactions on that. But it would probably be—

**Debbie Abrahams:** Can you say why it took six months to reply to the coroner?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** Because of the legal cases that are under way, I cannot talk specifics relating to any individual.

Q3 **Debbie Abrahams:** What I am trying to get at, Secretary of State—and I apologise for interrupting but I am aware of the time limits that we have—if this is a new priority for the Department, if there is a culture change where it is going to be more transparent about the things that go wrong, so you can learn lessons, why did you not reply in a timely fashion to a coroner who had made her decision? It was very clear that she would not issue a prevention of future deaths report because she thought that you were going to, again in a timely way, revise the safeguarding policy. What confidence can we have?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** The answer I have to give you about Mr Errol Graham, and the situation involving that, is the same. I appreciate that is a frustrating answer for you to hear but it is directly connected to an ongoing legal case. Let me take a slightly different way to try to answer your questions slightly more broadly.

If you think about where we have come on the journey; we now have safeguarding officers, we have 10 in place and we are recruiting another



15. This is one of the key changes that are happening in order to make sure that we have much more of a focal point involved in issues of people's welfare. It is fair to say, legally, we do not have a legal duty of aspects of what you would consider to be safeguarding. That is something that is usually held by adult or children's social services in that essence, but we recognise that we are a touchpoint for many people around the country, and it may be that their GP was the last to see them and it may be that we were the last person to have an interaction with this person. As a consequence we have made that decision, we got the funding from Treasury so we could recruit people, so we could put more of an emphasis on that. There are things like case conferences that can be initiated so we can have that sort of discussion with the multiagency approach.

That is a big change that has happened but I cannot go into the back and forth in what is a quasi-judicial process and also the legal cases that we have relating to individuals. Can I get Peter to say a bit more?

**Peter Schofield:** Can I come in on that because there have been a number of changes? We cannot talk about that case. I can talk about the serious case panel that met on 19 March, which looked specifically at safeguarding issues. That is when we took some important decisions, which included the creation of the safeguarding lead roles that the Secretary of State has just described. Those have an important role in terms of being the focus of escalation in every part of the country. We can make sure that as we case conference and look at these serious cases that come through we can address them collectively with other partners. We also looked at the circumstances under which we would make a decision as to whether to continue payments when we have lost contact with a claimant. That also was discussed and led to a change in the guidance, which has been implemented. That again was discussed at the serious case panel on 19 March.

It is part of an ongoing process that the Secretary of State has described in which we genuinely want to listen and learn and make sure that when we see things that have gone wrong we make changes and make sure that they do not happen again. It is part of embedding this. The serious case panel sits at the top of a process, but the internal process reviews—the system for collecting and tracking and tracing and implementing the recommendations that come from those internal process reviews—is a new process we put in place as well. It links to a new approach to complaints. All of this is part of our attempt to become a Service Excellence organisation, which is the context when the serious case panel was first announced back in September last year.

Q4 **Debbie Abrahams:** Again, I am trying to get a response around whose responsibility safeguarding was. It was a very interesting one, and again I welcome anything that is effective and that is recognised in the failures of the past, which include, for example, not being able to find a report of previous case panels and passing them on to investigators, such as Professor Harrington and Dr Litchfield.



I want to move on to my final question. Alison Turner, Errol's daughter-in-law, has said the inquest was traumatic enough, but then the family waited in anticipation to be informed about the changes and received absolutely nothing. You did not even have the courtesy to contact the family to let them know of what was happening or the fact that there was going to be a serious case panel in relation to her father-in-law's death in January. She had to find that out from a journalist. That was a real body blow for her.

Jodey Whiting died in 2017, one of thousands of claimants who died after being found fit for work between 2014 and 2017—I recognise not in your tenure—but after nearly a year, when they have been asking for a new inquest and new evidence, the Attorney General has still not replied to them.

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** I think I got the gist of that.

**Chair:** We are losing you, Debbie, unfortunately.

**Debbie Abrahams:** Can I just finish this point? I mentioned Mohammed Ahmed. He felt that the Department showed no remorse, but not just that, they were defensive, even blasé about what had happened. Is this how the state should have been treating grieving relatives?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** Obviously I am not responsible for the decisions of the Attorney General, and I am neutral entirely on the decision whether or not the Attorney General—

**Debbie Abrahams:** You just mentioned the Departments would be reporting together, that there was going to be a multiagency approach around this. Surely this is one part of it.

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** I am aware of the application. As DWP, we have said, in an exchange between private officers, we have no view on this. It is up to the Attorney General to make that independent decision, so if there is another inquest there will be another inquest. It is best that DWP does not try to influence that.

Q5 **Debbie Abrahams:** Three examples of how families have been treated. Is this right?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** Again, Debbie, you are misunderstanding the themes of what comes out and gets discussed rather than individual cases. Of course they will be learning from different elements of that. You have the wrong impression if you think the panel just sits there and will go through one particular case of one individual. This is about trying to work out what is happening more generally and we will get lessons from whether it is referrals from the independent case examiner or some ideas on that. It will be elements of correspondence that MPs or Ministers have, or wider elements of correspondence regarding complaints, as well as issues that have been picked up already with our internal process reviews. It is not intended to be a replication—

Q6 **Debbie Abrahams:** I would hope that for anybody who has lost a relative,



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across the board—these key themes—you would want to treat them all with dignity, respect and courtesy, recognising the grief that they are facing instead of being defensive, showing no remorse and obfuscating, in many people's minds.

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** I do not feel that we are being defensive. We have taken a big step forward, a recognition that some things just were not working the way they should. We have elevated that within the Department.

Peter, when you became Permanent Secretary I remember you telling me you didn't think the process was working. You set up an entirely new customer service experience directorate to get that focus on it, and I can assure you everybody in DWP comes in trying to do the best for the people they are interacting with. However, they also have a responsibility to make sure, which is our legal duty, that we pay the right benefits to the right people. If that is incorrect then people can appeal.

Q7 **Chair:** Can I pick up on this—it may be a point for you, Peter? You have described to us a new safeguarding structure that has been set up in the Department, and that sounds like a very welcome step. Is that going to be responsible for liaising with family members in a case where something has gone tragically bad wrong?

**Peter Schofield:** I wanted to pick up on Ms Abrahams's point about families, because I understand the point she is making. One of the things we have done in serious cases is go to meet the families—senior members of my management team do that. I met a family—I am not going to go through individual cases, it would be the wrong thing to do—who had experienced a very significant loss. My Director General for Service Excellence went to meet one of the families mentioned by Ms Abrahams, and the same is true of director level as well.

It is important for us as a senior leadership team to do that in those serious cases. That supplements the process that I have described, because this is part of it. We have to get the process right. We also have to be serious about being a listening and learning organisation. That starts with people like me.

Q8 **Chair:** Would the safeguarding set up that you have described be engaging with the families of those who have died?

**Peter Schofield:** It will vary. The point of the safeguarding leads, although this is not their only role, but the reason for setting this role up is that we were conscious that often when something goes wrong it goes wrong because someone has fallen between the cracks of different agencies as they play out in local areas. We have one set of relationships with some vulnerable people—other organisations, it could be adult social services, it could be the housing supplier, it could be the police, it could be any number of organisations—they all have different relationships and what we have not been great at is pooling the information that we have.



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The point of the safeguarding leads is to be a point of escalation to build those networks together. I try to go out once a week—I have not managed to do it the last few months—to local DWP offices, and I try, when I do that, to meet local partners. What I have seen in many different parts of the country is brilliant examples of different agencies coming together often to pool case conferencing about vulnerable families. People would share information.

I saw a great one in Newcastle, and a great one in Margate, and there are brilliant ones in Leeds. This is part of the future here. The safeguarding leads make sure that that sort of network happens in all the different parts of the country.

**Q9 Nigel Mills:** Secretary of State, you said a few minutes ago that you were now going to publish the terms of reference. Is that correct and, if so, when might we expect to see them?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** I will send them to the Committee Chairman today. You can publish them when you think best. We have to then wait and get a grid slot, as is the usual way of Government publications. I would hope that would happen over the summer, going up on gov.uk.

I had this conversation with you, Stephen, I was slightly reticent early on because I wanted the panel to have some attempts at having these meetings, seeing how it was working, so we were clear that it was trying to achieve the outcomes that we want from it. I am looking forward to whenever you, as the Committee, decide to publish it. It may be slightly quicker than we get the grid slot.

**Q10 Nigel Mills:** You also said you would publish draft minutes on gov.uk.; is that going to be a regular publication after each meeting of the panel?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** Yes, the panel is expected to meet quarterly and the intention is the minutes would go up within a month of that.

**Q11 Nigel Mills:** Those are the substantial minutes, rather than just six people attended, discussed something, meeting closed at midday or something? Will they get the summary of the themes that were discussed or any actions that were agreed?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** Yes, they will include the actions, they will include elements of the themes. We have to be careful on a lot of these things about personal disclosure. Some people are very keen for their issues to be public because they think that is a great way of raising awareness. Other people are less keen because sometimes they are dealing with very confidential matters. We will be careful with the information we share.

**Q12 Nigel Mills:** I was thinking of previous correspondence, you were not keen on publishing a thematic report perhaps once a year on what the panel have looked at and what lessons have been learned, because you wanted the panel to influence policy in the Department. Have you moved on from that now and are you more keen on publishing more of the panel's work



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and what lessons have been learned and what difference has been made to the Department's processes as a result of those meetings?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** We are still going through some of those elements of what else could be published or how we publish it. Peter is quite keen. We do an annual report and accounts that you are quite interested in putting a section in there, Peter?

**Peter Schofield:** Yes, there is a brief section in the annual report and accounts that were published last month for the year just gone, but it may well be that it is the right thing to do. The problem with minutes on their own is they do not necessarily tell a flow of the story of how the work has progressed and things that have happened over the course of the year. We are trying to work out the best way of doing it, but a reasonable section in the annual report and accounts may be a quite useful way of just summarising what has been done over the previous year.

Q13 **Nigel Mills:** Do you accept that what people want to see is where things have gone horribly wrong that the Department have learned lessons and made changes so hopefully these things will not happen again? That is the intention of what you published, is to show how lessons have been learned and how things have been improved.

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** I just want to reinforce though that we are not going to get into the ins and outs of individual cases. It is important to not exactly manage your expectation but be clear about the thematic process. I hope it will inform the Committee and the wider public of some of the lessons learned and what processes we may change as a consequence.

**Peter Schofield:** Yes, the thing will be what has changed. What impact has the panel had alongside the other elements of listening and learning through the IPR process that we described earlier?

Q14 **Sir Desmond Swayne:** What external expertise will the panels be exposed to and will that be in the form of permanent membership or ad hoc?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** I am not planning to change the members. We have one of our non-executive directors to chair, we have the management in place. The panel can invite people if they wish to, to come and give some help or some challenge, but it is not intended to be the big new bodies. It is intended to be an important way of how we learn and try to learn more quickly.

**Peter Schofield:** The independent challenge comes from the independent case examiner, Joanna Wallace, who is a standing member and one of the non-executive directors chairing it. Accountability is down to the leadership of the Department, the Permanent Secretary, the directors general—we are the ones who want to get it right in support of Ministers and the people we serve. We will bring in expert support as and when we need it, depending on the topic. I can imagine a number of different types of expertise that we would want to bring in potentially, depending on what



the topic is that we are looking at. We are absolutely open to that. But the independent challenge comes from the two members I have just described.

**Q15 Sir Desmond Swayne:** What lessons have you learned from best practice across Government, particularly on safeguarding?

**Peter Schofield:** When we set up the customer experience directorate last year we did quite a lot of work with other organisations like NHS trusts and with College of Education colleagues as well and their side of things. The main thing that we learned, which we have been putting into practice, is the importance of having a process that brings it together and a dedicated professional team that can assess the issues as they come along, and enabling us to be able to track the implementation of recommendations that have come through.

We have had IPRs since 2014, 2015, but they were done in a piecemeal way. Although there was learning through the organisation we did not have a way of doing this in a systemic way across the whole organisation, and we did not have a way of bringing this to a senior enough level to make sure that this changed all across the organisation. It was my decision to bring this to director level and have a director in charge of it.

The Secretary of State challenged me in the autumn and said, "You should raise that up further still". Ever since then, from March, and then the meeting earlier this month on 2 July, I have been a member. I am a member now. My whole executive team are members.

What we are learning therefore, and what we have learned from other organisations, is senior engagement, systemic examination of what has gone wrong, and a systemic way of tracking the implementation of recommendations.

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** Every person who joins DWP has mandatory training; they have to take training on how to identify vulnerable people. Work coaches, in particular, are encouraged to identify early on in the claim process those with complex needs who may require some more specific support. That is an important part of what is done there. We do work across government—Peter has already described the situation in Newcastle for example, where we have been doing some particular work on housing. There are other elements where due to journal entries people have identified things in Essex where potential modern slavery issues have arisen.

There is that element of sharing information with the appropriate agency or organisation to try to flag at least that there may be issues going wrong. The importance of the safeguarding leaders is a key step in that.

**Q16 Chris Stephens:** To pick up on that theme around training of staff, can you confirm that before front-line staff can deal with individuals that they have undergone that training, and can you give a commitment about refresher training for all staff when it comes to dealing with vulnerable



claimants?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** It might be more straightforward, because that is a genuine operational matter, for Peter to explain what happens.

**Peter Schofield:** After staff have been through their basic training, then within the first five or six months they would have gone through the mental health training that the Secretary of State has described. Something like 30,000 of our front-line staff have been through that training. On top of that, there is further training, particularly in Jobcentres, around identifying issues around homelessness or domestic violence. We ran out a training course in connection with Women's Aid on issues around domestic abuse and we work on homelessness.

That is then supported by every Jobcentre having a complex needs tool, which basically is a catalogue of local partners, local experts, local provision, which can provide support and be signposted to for anyone who is in a particular vulnerable group. Staff are trained as to how to use that. On top of that, everyone is trained in terms of the six-point plan on issues around risk of self-harm.

Q17 **Chris Stephens:** In terms of the system and how it operates, is there an opportunity for DWP staff to flag a concern? How do staff report that someone is vulnerable, or are there other staff who can raise those concerns?

**Peter Schofield:** All of that. As we get to know a claimant and it emerges that they are vulnerable in one way or another, we would make sure that that is noted in their file. But in any event, if there is a difficult situation that emerges then absolutely we would encourage our colleagues to raise that and escalate that.

I have been working quite a lot over the last few months in my local Jobcentre and many of the folk in front-line roles are working from home for various reasons, but are obviously having telephone conversations with claimants. One of the interesting things they have done is put a Skype chat in place at the beginning of the day, which enables anyone, even if they are working from home, if they are on a phone call with a vulnerable person and a difficult issue starts to emerge to quickly use that Skype chat to engage with a manager in the Jobcentre to provide support in real time.

It happens in real time. I have talked already about the approach to case conferencing and escalation—I have not talked about service innovation leads but they happen locally—but escalating up to the safeguarding leads, I have described already. There is a system in place in the way that you have asked.

Q18 **Chris Stephens:** Before I hand over to my colleague, Mr Spencer, could you just say something quickly, Mr Schofield, about the start of a claim? Is there any assessment made when a claim is initiated, which identifies any vulnerability just to ensure the claimants are treated in the correct way?



**Peter Schofield:** Obviously we get evidence in different ways at different points, but at the start of the claim we seek to do that and we would put notes on the file in order to identify and build that picture as we go along. Obviously not everyone who is vulnerable presents as vulnerable in the first meeting, so sometimes we have to build that over a period of time.

Q19 **Dr Ben Spencer:** Thank you both for talking us through this session, it is very important and quite a complex area. In my line of questioning, what I want to explore a bit is how the Department conceives of or defines a vulnerable person and scopes that, the responsibility that the Department has to vulnerable people, and its role in relation to signposting or not to services and unpick that a little bit. That is quite crucial to what we are talking about as a Government body that comes across lots of people and lots of very difficult situations. I am hoping to understand what your role is and what your role should be as part of the exploration, the evidence. To start off, how does the Department define a vulnerable person? All of us here have different ideas in terms of what a vulnerable person is, but how is it defined within the Department?

**Peter Schofield:** You are right, one of the challenges I have had from previous Committees is around changes to the way we do Universal Credit. We do not have boxes, we have notes that you write and the NAO were asking whether that is an effective way of assessing whether someone is vulnerable or not. I would say it is because it is very difficult to put individuals into boxes and categories. What we do is try to assess the needs of the individual as they present to us, as we meet them.

The normal way that a Universal Credit claim would work is that—obviously we have not been doing it face to face recently—there is an initial meeting as part of a claimant commitment, which is just trying to understand the nature of the individual. They may, as part of their application, have disclosed a health condition, in which case we would seek to understand that. We would also, as part of the process, seek to understand the nature of their situation. Obviously they disclose a whole load of situations about family and aspects of whether they have a partner and where they are living, and those sorts of issues. That is the sort of thing that starts to give you a picture of whether someone is likely to have additional needs in the claim process. Let me put it that way—as general as that.

What we then seek to articulate is what those needs are and how we need to adapt our service to support that individual. We seek to address and seek to write that down and document that in the claim notes. That then is something within Universal Credit. If you are in a service centre or if you are in a Jobcentre you can have access to that and you can see that. You can adapt the way you provide the service to that.

For example, on one of the specific things, the Secretary of State talked a little bit about the duty to refer homelessness. As part of that claim, it will become clear where someone is living and then it may emerge whether they are at risk of homelessness or are indeed homeless. In that situation, a number of things happen. One is within Universal Credit we say, “We do



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not expect you to look for work, we expect you to look for somewhere to live". That is your commitment, but as part of the duty to refer we also have very good links now with local housing providers, with the local council, sometimes with charities that are able to provide specific support in that way. We can signpost them on.

I have seen great examples. The Secretary of State talked a little earlier about Newcastle and that crisis in Newcastle a few months ago with the Jobcentre folk. We talked about how that works in practice and they are very positive about the fact that we have a way in to understanding the nature of a situation and are able to signpost people on.

Is that our role? I do not think it is formally written down, and I do not have the resource to be the safety net at the end of day but I do think it is our role to be a signpost, to know about other provisions, to understand the needs of our claimants and to be able to signpost them on to the type of specific support that might be able to help them.

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** There is quite a wide range of vulnerabilities that you can think about. I think it was Amber, my predecessor, who pushed on the whole domestic abuse, domestic violence, brought Women's Aid to do some training on that around the country. You have talked about homelessness. Maybe there are things like self-harm, thoughts that could lead to suicide or something like that, modern slavery. There is a wide variety of elements and our staff are trained and encouraged to consider them. I think every Jobcentre has its own toolkit specifically with local organisations that they can directly refer people to.

**Q20 Dr Ben Spencer:** Focusing on one particular area of this, self-harm and suicide, which is one of the main themes of the evidence session today. Looking at the people who are going through the benefit system as a whole, do you have information about whether on a population level they differ as a population from the population as a whole? Is it a group who are going through on average because there is a high element of mental health issues, perhaps drug and alcohol issues? Are you dealing with people who are at higher risk of self-harm, as an average—obviously everyone is individual but as an average, compared with the rest of the population—are you looking at a more vulnerable group in that sense? I realise I have sabotaged myself in using "vulnerable" in a generic way as part of my question but I am sure you get the gist in terms of where I am going on this line of questioning.

**Peter Schofield:** I am not going into stats and averages and all the rest of it, but I do want to stress the point about being open to understanding the needs of the people we serve and doing that in an open way, enabling that evidence and building that evidence in the way I have described. Everyone has different needs. Everyone is in a different situation. The better we get at building our relationship with the claimant on the one hand, and with local providers of different specialist sources of support on the other, the better we can be at being a link and a signpost. That is what I am asking my people to do.



At the end of the day we do not have every specialism and every skillset within DWP. Why would we? But we do, in our own particular way because of the nature of our role, have contact with many vulnerable people. When we come across that and when we see a need then we need to be in a position to be able to signpost claimants to the sort of support that could meet that particular need.

**Q21 Dr Ben Spencer:** Leading on from that, just thinking about the wealth of people who come into contact with you, do you think there might be a use in connecting systematically the data of the people who are going through the system? For example, how many people who are claiming have drug and alcohol problems? How many people who are claiming have former mental health diagnoses and secondary care mental health issues at the time? Just to look at that and try to explore a bit, it strikes me that there is perhaps a big opportunity here. Many people, perhaps the first interaction they may have is through statutory services, and it is a way in terms of a routine, in terms of getting people help and support that they need when they are at a particularly low point who maybe have not approached mental health services because of stigma, because of various barriers. You have a population and an opportunity to put people down the path to treatment.

**Peter Schofield:** There is an even bigger point than the one you are making. For me it is about understanding the nature of the people we are serving but there is a bigger point here, which is around stepping back and looking at the causes of vulnerability and where we can link with other organisations, other Government Departments, how we can look at the sorts of issues that lead to someone eventually coming to DWP for support. How can we work upstream, using what we know about local issues through to feeding policymaking both within the Department and elsewhere in Whitehall? I would say it is an even bigger picture than the one you have described.

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** Coronavirus is a good example where we specifically reached out to people, for example, who get their pensions through what is called the POCA account, not through a bank account but through the Post Office Card Account. We did proactive contacting of people to see how they were, to see if they could access money, visiting officers did go and make some assessments. In a handful of cases, people were really struggling but, by and large, most people were fine. We were also part of the effort of the national shielding service and, again, once we were able to get some data from NHS England, which is very personal data, we were able to use our datasets to try to prioritise the people to contact, to follow up on the letters that had been sent out by NHS England. A lot of people just did not register initially for any help, so we proactively undertook tens of thousands, if not more, calls trying to get hold of people, almost at one point it was on a daily basis.

There is some potential I would say, but on health data, you have to have the individual's consent to hold that data. Although the intentions are right,



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it is really important that we do not just assume that people would want us to have that data and that we can then do further work with that.

**Chair:** I will just bring in Neil Coyle who, I think, has a supplementary question in this area.

Q22 **Neil Coyle:** If the system Madam Secretary of State described was effective at understanding claimants' needs, identifying them and logging them, then in the main discrimination could be avoided by the Department and it would not face legal cases of discrimination against claimants. I am aware that there were something like 50 cases of discrimination against the Department some time ago. Madam Secretary, can you tell us how many cases the Department is defending now that are based on disability discrimination?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** How many cases is the Department defending on disability discrimination, is that what you said, Neil?

**Neil Coyle:** Yes, how many individuals have taken cases against the Department of Work and Pensions for discrimination of how their benefit has been processed or paid.

**Peter Schofield:** I have not come with that information but I can write to the Committee.

**Chair:** The Permanent Secretary will write, thank you. Chris Stephens.

Q23 **Chris Stephens:** Mr Schofield, if I could take you back to my earlier question on training. I am curious what discretion frontline staff would have around issues in relation to benefit sanctions, what discretion they would have and whether there is a review of policy being carried out in this area?

**Peter Schofield:** In terms of vulnerable people, all of this comes back to the work that we were discussing at the March serious case panel around what point you would consider stopping a payment. The guidance that we have introduced now is very much that we would escalate that up through the system—we would do case conferencing. The same comes in terms of sanctions. Sanctions are a last resort, as you know, and we would only seek to do that in a situation in which—well, we would not do it unless we had been through a process of understanding the nature of the individual and why they were not working with the system and doing what we were asking them to do in terms of looking for work.

The key thing for me is you do not do it when you have the opportunity of understanding and reaching out and working with another partner organisation who might understand the needs of that individual better than we do. That is where the case conferencing and the work of safeguarding leads comes in as well.

Q24 **Chris Stephens:** Obviously one of the things the Department is looking at piloting is the yellow card system where there will be an initial warning prior to a sanction. Is that something, Secretary of State, the Department is developing in terms of policy? Is that something that could be scaled up?



**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** It is something Will Quince and I have briefly discussed. He would be leading anything on that, but I am not aware that anything has come to me for elements of clearance, but I would not necessarily expect them to. As Peter knows, I am a great believer in trust and empowerment of our work coaches, our Jobcentre managers, it is not about trying to remove aspects of hierarchy and responsibility but I very firmly believe in that approach. Our work coaches know the people with whom they work.

Q25 **Chris Stephens:** Mr Schofield, there have been recent cases of people who have sadly died as a result of starvation and by suicide after their benefits were stopped. Could you, first, confirm—my colleague, Debbie Abrahams, mentioned a particular case—that the safeguarding policy was revised in autumn 2019 and could we get a copy that has been revised? What checks are made before someone's benefits are stopped, and is there a different process for someone who has been identified as being in a vulnerable category?

**Peter Schofield:** Yes, absolutely. That was the nature of the conversation that we had in the serious case panel on 19 March. The issue here is that in the past there has been an approach where if we lose contact with a claimant, for example if they do not come forward and participate in what we term our mandatory intervention, but that might involve a work capability assessment, for example, then we would seek to contact the claimant. We would use a number of different ways of seeking to do that and if they have not been successful we would send a visiting officer out to visit them at their home. If that did not work we would try again. The system had been that if after two attempts we failed then it may well be then that the decision maker might make a decision to stop the benefits. The change now is that if we have tried all of that we would then take that back and have a case conference about the individual. Particularly, obviously, if it is someone with vulnerabilities that we know about, then we would seek to involve other organisations that might have a different way of knowing about that individual. It might be that we could involve their social landlord, it might be that we could involve local adult social services, there may be all sorts of different organisations that we could work with and bring into that case conference. Then we would seek to understand what do they know about that individual and how can we support them.

If that fails that could then escalated to the safeguarding leads. In that way, basically, what we would seek to do is to provide support not removal of benefits. Now, obviously, at the end of the day, if it emerges that no one has any contact, we do not whether this person really exists, and it could it be a fictitious claim, then you would go down the route of stopping benefits.

All I am saying is that the approach now is to work not just within the Department but to work with all sorts of other agencies, other organisations to make sure that we understand the vulnerability and the circumstances as best we can before we make any decision like that.



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Q26 **Chris Stephens:** Thanks, Mr Schofield. If you could just provide us, please, with a current copy of the safeguarding policy I am sure the Committee would be obliged.

**Chair:** If that is something you are able to do.

**Peter Schofield:** I will write to the Committee.

Q27 **Chair:** Thank you. What you have just told us is very interesting. You have explained you cannot go into the details of the Errol Graham case and I understand why that is but it is a matter of record that what happened with him was he missed a work capability assessment, DWP staff tried to contact him and I think tried quite hard to get hold of him, were not able to contact him at all so his benefits were stopped. By the sound of what you have just described to us, Mr Schofield, if that kind of situation was to happen again there would instead be a case conference and the benefit would not be stopped if there were concerns about that claimants wellbeing, is that correct?

**Peter Schofield:** I can't talk about the Errol Graham case. I will repeat the evidence that I gave in response to Mr Stephens, which I think gives you the answer to your question.

Q28 **Chair:** Okay. If there are safeguarding concerns about somebody, their benefits will not be stopped?

**Peter Schofield:** If there are safeguarding concerns then we will work with other agencies to seek to understand what is going on. The thing I am not going to preclude is that, at the end of the day, is it a fictitious claim or is it a false claims. This is all about getting the best possible evidence and information we can knowing that some people—we will know them—may worry about a contact from the Department for Work and Pensions and everything we are trying to do in terms of how we approach claimants is seeking to address that but people may worry about that. They may be more ready to receive an enquiry from their landlord or from social services or from maybe a third party, maybe a third sector charity who they are working with in whatever way. If we can identify them and find a better way in which to build an understanding about what is going on, that helps us make the decision in the most informed way we can.

Q29 **Chair:** Yes, but if through this case conference system, for example, the social landlord of the claimant says, "Yes, we are quite worried about the wellbeing of this person", in that situation you would not stop their benefits?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** It is difficult to try to set blanket rules when you are dealing with individuals. What Peter has set out is the approach that has now been taken by the Department but we cannot say in every situation, every case, this X, Y or Z would definitively happen. It has to be tailored to the individual situation.

**Peter Schofield:** At the end of the day what we are obviously seeking to assess is if someone is entitled to benefits. Are they able to engage with



the way that we assess the process? We are seeking to pay benefits to everyone who is entitled to be paid and to make the process as straightforward as we can. For some people that means additional support as they go along. Sometimes we are not best placed to do that but we can work with other organisations to help them through that process.

**Q30 Chair:** Can I raise another point with you? The Information Commissioner's office, some years ago—2016, 2017, I think—found problems in how the DWP learns from what happens when a serious case goes wrong. At that time the Information Commissioner's office was told that the DWP would improve things but then a couple of years later the National Audit Office found the same problems still there. Do you know—and I appreciate this before the time of both of you—why it was that the improvements were not made after the Information Commissioner identified them and was told that they would be addressed?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** I don't know anything about that? Maybe Peter does.

**Peter Schofield:** No, I don't. I would only be speculating but it may be—and I don't know whether this was around a serious case or anything like that, or more broader information, data management issues, I don't know. I would go back to the changes that we have made to internal process reviews by bringing them all together under one team by having a tracking system for recommendations, by having the escalation through to a serious case panel involving the permanent secretary and every member of the executive team. That was not in place in 2016. As I said earlier, one of the things we have been seeking to do is to be able to embed learning. We are a large organisation and it might be that we might at the time have felt we were absolutely implementing a recommendation but we just did not have the same systems that we have now to embed learning over every part of the organisation. That is the thing we are seeking to change.

That would just be my speculation in terms of that particular issue, but I want to assure the Committee that is what all these change are all about.

**Chair:** That is helpful. You can understand that it is a public concern that the issues were raised previously and nothing seems to have happened. What you are telling us now is that significant structural changes have been made to address them.

**Q31 Neil Coyle:** You talked through the fact that there is a higher prevalence of conditions and circumstances that might make some people more vulnerable, where do you think the biggest gaps are in how the Department safeguards people?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** I would like think if there were gaps they have been well and truly addressed now and the roll out of the safeguarding leaders across the country—we only have 10 at the moment but recruitment is under way for a further 15—will provide that focal point within an area that can make sure, or do its best to ensure, that there are not gaps.



**Peter Schofield:** Just building on that. As I say, one of the interesting things I see as I go around the country is local relationships working well, and I have given some examples. In Newcastle, Leeds, a fantastic one in Margate, I was there that not long ago, Wiggan Hub, Leeds Social Justice Service. These are all examples of where we a part of a local network of organisations that have come together to share knowledge about systems, processes, provision but also those situations, those individuals or those families that are most at risk. What I would love to see is that sort of partnership in every community and every part of the country. That is probably the biggest area of gap at moment. I am not sure that they are everywhere but we are doing everything we can and that is part of the role of the safeguarding leaders to be part of that.

We are playing our part but we want to part of local networks that bring provision together.

Q32 **Neil Coyle:** It sounds a little bit like you think things are sorted, which I think will surprise many of the organisations and individuals covered. If you think the safeguarding leaders are part of the answer to preventing any further suicide or premature death, is the Department in a position that it would support adult safeguarding reviews if a suicide or a premature death occurs after you have rolled out in full the safeguarding leadership approach?

**Peter Schofield:** Some of the examples of internal process reviews have come to us because of adult safeguarding reviews. We are engaging with those, that is one of the ways that we get alerted to—

Q33 **Neil Coyle:** Sorry, I am asking if the Department would support an automatic presumption of an adult safeguarding review in the case of a suicide or premature death of someone known to the Department?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** Adult safeguarding reviews are largely undertaken by adult social services.

Q34 **Neil Coyle:** It is a multiagency approach but the Department can lead on asking for one and should be an active participant in seeking them. Are you saying you support them going forward?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** I think there is an element that already happens there but I expect the safeguarding leader would probably be more dedicated to a particular area of the country.

Q35 **Neil Coyle:** Coming back to the Permanent Secretary's description of the approach that advisers should take, which has led you to conclude that you think things are as safe as possible, my information suggests that there is quite a bit of difference between people in similar circumstances on different benefits or at different stages of applying for a benefit. The description you gave, Permanent Secretary, is the working ability assessment approach. How does that differ for Universal Credit?



**Peter Schofield:** The seriousness, in a way, is different between ESA and Universal Credit. So with ESA if you are found fit for work then you will go through the process I have described but then your eligibility to ESA would finish, at which point you would no longer be getting any money. You would have to then make a new claim presumably for Jobseekers Allowance in that situation.

The problem with ESA—the risk you have is that someone’s money will stop. With Universal Credit the point of the work capability assessment is really to assess the conditionality, to assess whether you should be looking for work or not. If you go through a work capability assessment and you are found fit for work and then you go back to the Jobcentre, the Jobcentre will then start a conversation with you about what you can do in terms of whether it is a work related activity or what issue. You go back into a relationship with a work coach who can then be understanding need and assessing need. It is a different situation but it still gets you back to the same point. What we were seeking to avoid in our discussion in March was with ESA the risk was that because someone is found fit for work their money stops. That does not happen in Universal Credit in the same way.

Q36 **Neil Coyle:** What you are saying is MIND is accurate that there is a different approach for different benefits and if you miss your first appointment for Universal Credit application your case is closed. It sounds like you are accepting that is the case. The point is, as the Secretary of State has said, the circumstances you are under, if you are declined, if you fail to get support, it could contribute to a worsening mental health position, for example. Do you not think there is a case for strengthening that support across the range of benefits and at the different stages of accessing different benefits and support?

**Peter Schofield:** Yes, I want to improve every benefit and the way we do everything and we have to go on learning from things that have gone wrong. I am glad to say things go wrong very unusually but when they do wrong, as the Secretary of State said earlier, the consequences can be very significant. I do not want that to happen. I really do not want that to happen. This is all part of listening, learning and improving.

You are right, there are different processes for different benefits, partly because the benefits are designed in different ways, though Universal Credit gets around that to a large extent on the working age side of what we do. One of the things we are looking at is how those arrangements vary across different benefits and whether there are changes we need to make elsewhere. Absolutely doing just that.

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** The safeguarding leaders are not dedicated to specific benefits so they work right across. There should be generally a consistent approach, regardless of which benefit you have. It is fair to say there may be some benefits that flag more straightforwardly some of the issues that arise. There is an online gov.uk help tool, which we input into, which I appreciate may not be widely known but people can put in some of the issues they are facing and then it generates tailored support.



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Q37 **Chair:** Where is that tool?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** It is on gov.uk, it is called Find Help.

Q38 **Chair:** Find Help?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** Yes, so it could be a variety of things, you are struggling to pay your bills, you have recently become unemployed, and you might be having challenges with mental wellbeing, so it is intended as a signpost for people looking for help on a variety of issues who might not know where to turn.

Q39 **Neil Coyle:** I hope you share that Find Help tool with this Committee. You acknowledge some things have gone badly wrong in the past and you say you do not want them to go wrong in the future but I am not quite hearing how this is bedded down fully. Permanent Secretary, you mentioned about a guide for staff and the training, perhaps you could share the guidance on suicide prevention or self-harm prevention with the Committee. Could you just tell us when that was last updated and how many Jobcentre Plus staff have been trained on that particular bit of guidance?

**Peter Schofield:** The guidance I was talking about was about stopping payments and has recently been made. The meeting of the serious case panel was 19 March. I do not have a date for you but the guidance was made since then. It is in place now. On training, I go back to my answer to a previous question to Mr Stephens about the nature of training and how we roll that out. I will write to you on your—

Q40 **Neil Coyle:** Can you provide the Committee with the numbers of people trained in it? You also referenced the prevention of self-harm guide. I am asking when that was updated and how many Jobcentre Plus staff are trained on that. I appreciate you may not have that figure to hand this morning but you can provide it to the Committee, I hope.

**Peter Schofield:** I will check the transcript and write to the Committee.

Q41 **Steve McCabe:** Good morning. I want to ask a couple of quite short questions about these meetings that the DWP officials have been having with families of people involved in some of the most serious investigations. How many meetings have there been?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** I am trying to remember the number. It is a handful, isn't it?

**Peter Schofield:** It is a handful.

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** Where DGs or senior people have gone.

Q42 **Steve McCabe:** So it is fewer than 10, so is that with fewer than 10 different families or is the same family more than once?

**Peter Schofield:** No, different families. It is a lot of the high profile cases but I do not want to go into them.



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Q43 **Steve McCabe:** Sure, sure, but fewer than 10.

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** That is my knowledge.

Q44 **Steve McCabe:** Of course. Can the family request this meeting or is it at the discretion of the DWP officials?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** There is a complaints process, where complaints are investigated and similar. I do not know generally if that automatically triggers a meeting, probably not, but there may be elements that come from complaints, which, if they meet the criteria for which IPR is mandatory—and admittedly that is an internal meeting—we have a great director of customer service. Again, I think there is discretion. I do not want to give you the impression that every single person who makes a complaint is going to get a meeting with a DWP official.

Q45 **Steve McCabe:** No, of course not. I am asking because I dealt with a case myself of a woman in a wheelchair who went down to 5 stone, who submitted 497 pages of medical evidence and nevertheless had her benefit stopped, reinstated and stopped again. Obviously a meeting in that situation might have been helpful. I was just wondering who triggers the meeting, if it was down to the Department.

**Peter Schofield:** I am very happy for you to write to me, Mr McCabe, on this.

Q46 **Steve McCabe:** Okay, that would be extremely helpful, thank you.

**Peter Schofield:** You asked about the process. I just wanted, to be honest, my senior folk to meet some of the families where things had gone wrong. This is not part of a process, this is not part of a kind of automatic trigger, this is not X follows from Y and therefore a meeting happens and is triggered. It is not that. I just wanted my senior folk, including me, to meet some of the families because it is all part of changing the culture about how we lead out.

The complaints process works in the way that the Secretary of State has described, these meetings were simply around me making sure my senior folk were having that sort of engagement. I thought that was important for us in terms of the sort of organisation I wanted us to be.

Q47 **Steve McCabe:** I agree with you on that, but if the meetings are now part of the fabric of the Department it is important to know how they come about and who arranges them.

Since, as you say, you wanted to have this feel for what people were experiencing, could you very briefly give us an insight into what you have learned from that relatively small number of contacts?

**Peter Schofield:** I do not want to get into—

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** There are aspects of litigation right now, which makes it difficult for us to go into that. I think it has reinforced the acceleration of—



Q48 **Steve McCabe:** I am not asking you to give me specific detail. It would appear that you are trying to get a feel for what the difficulties were. You must have learnt something by now other than just about litigation surely?

**Peter Schofield:** There is a set of issues that I think will come on to the agenda of the serious case panel in future meetings and you will see the minutes of those meetings and an update in the annual report next year on the work of the serious case panel and the issues that have come out.

Some of the things that flow from a whole range of different contexts, but particularly from IPRs, will lead into the right systemic themes for that panel to look at.

One of the things that I reflect on as Permanent Secretary, is the challenge of a very large organisation, the risk that people get moved from one contact to another and we do not join up enough. I am glad to say there are a lot of things that we have done to improve that. Universal Credit itself is a massive step forward on that because of the nature of the one service engagement that we have with a work coach. The Committee knows well how this works with a dedicated work coach, a dedicated case manager and a service centre and one benefit that brings a series of benefits together. That, in itself, is a good way of avoiding the risk that someone has different contacts with different members of the organisation and is told different things for different reasons.

It is a part of a culture that we are trying to change. Universal Credit is part of that and part of making that happen. That is a broad theme to try to answer Mr McCabe's question in a reasonably open way.

Q49 **Steve McCabe:** Thank you for that. I would now like to turn briefly to the question of the safeguarding review, which I think we mentioned earlier in relation to Debbie Abrahams' question about the correspondence with the coroner. I was not clear from your answer. Has the safeguarding review now been completed?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** I cannot answer any questions regarding this.

Q50 **Steve McCabe:** I am sorry?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** I have just told you, I cannot answer questions regarding this as there is ongoing litigation.

Q51 **Steve McCabe:** What, you cannot tell me if there is a safeguarding review?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** I cannot answer any questions on this as it is involved in litigation.

Q52 **Steve McCabe:** You have already said that there is a safeguarding review so presumably you can answer that because you have already said it.

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** I am not sure what you heard me say earlier, but I cannot answer any questions regarding this due to litigation. I appreciate it is not the answer you want to hear, Stephen.



Q53 **Steve McCabe:** I do not want to interfere with your desire to protect yourself in any legal way but I am just very confused. Are you saying that the litigation is such that you cannot confirm what you have previously said that you are conducting a review? Is that what you are saying? You have been advised by lawyers that you cannot confirm something that you have previously said?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** I do not want to go down this route, recognising there are ongoing judicial reviews and litigations involving this whole area. I appreciate it is frustrating but it is not appropriate—that is what I have been advised—for us to comment, even though we have parliamentary privilege. As you know, I like to discuss matters with the Committee.

**Steve McCabe:** Well, Chair, in view of that, I think we will just have to assume that the Department has decided to draw a veil over its current position. I do not think there is much point in pursuing this. I find it quite extraordinary that we cannot find out whether or not there is actually a review taking place, but we have to accept that the Secretary of State is using her legal advice.

Q54 **Shaun Bailey:** Good morning, Secretary of State and Mr Schofield. I want to look at the IPR process a little bit more. In particular, could you elaborate on what you said earlier about the lessons-learnt element of things? In regards to the IPR process, have you conducted any sort of review as to how that is operating at the moment, identifying where it has gone wrong and being able to utilise the results of the IPR process to try to improve the outcomes from the Department?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** One of the things that I thought it was important to say—earlier on I got the number slightly wrong, it was not 76, it is 79 that were initiated last year—they are internal process investigations in effect and I think they are different processes for aspects of complaints. I know that there have been some lessons learnt, but I am not quite sure what I can say at this moment in time and I do not want to give the impression either that I see every IPR because that is not my role. We certainly get themes and outcomes of discussions that have come out of the serious case panel. Peter, I do not know if you can add anything more?

**Peter Schofield:** Yes. We have been doing IPRs for five or six years, as the Secretary of State has said, and as we have gone along a number of things have changed, probably as a result of IPRs, but we do not have a record linking changes that we have made to specific IPRs up until now.

The system we have put in place over the last 12 months will do that, so we have that tracking system and are able to do that. As I say, the escalation then is up the serious case panel to embed systemic issues. There is a difference between things that need to change in specific areas of the organisation that can just happen potentially and things that are more systemic where we need to escalate it up: maybe it needs more investment—safeguarding leads require more funding, for example—and these sorts of things will go to the serious case panel.



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Over a period of time, we will be reporting on the work of the serious case panel, so that will bring out the systemic issues that we discuss, and we will be tracking implementation of recommendations from individual IPRs going forward as well.

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** The IPR group has increased in number. There are now 12 investigators who are part of the IPR group. I believe there are 27 on the team in total and what has happened recently is that there is a more senior IPR group who will go through that at a more senior level, whereas I think in the past IPRs were locally initiated and it was of a lower scale. We have stepped that up.

Another important thing, it is not IPRs; we have changed our complaints process. I was very keen that we try to have something that was simpler and more straightforward, actually somewhat independent within the Department. I hope that reform that we have now done with the one national team in the customer experience directorate will make a good difference, moving from a two-tiered approach to just a single tier approach, and we can genuinely learn more quickly from that.

**Peter Schofield:** That is one of the changes we made that we discussed at the serious case panel on 2 July, the most recent one. Exactly as the Secretary of State has said, we used to have a two-tier process of complaints. So you made a complaint, it was dealt with by the business area where you made the complaint and then only if you were not happy with that it got escalated to a central team. It felt a bit processy and what we really want to do is have a team of dedicated experts managing complaints who just try to resolve the issue there and then. That has been brought together into a single place. It comes under the customer experience director as well. Although IPRs, which is the internal investigation in complaints, is resolving things with the claimant, they are two separate processes that come under the same director within DWP, so we are able to learn best practice as we go along.

The other thing is we have learnt from working with the independent case examiner. The independent case examiner is the next level up. If you are not happy with how your complaint is being assessed by the Department you can go to the independent case examiner. They have a great track record of investigation of concerns and how to do that in a professional way. We have learnt from some of that in how we built the IPR team that the Secretary of State has described. We are learning as well from other parts of the wider DWP family about doing complaints and investigations better than we have done before.

Q55 **Shaun Bailey:** That is really helpful. I just want to come back on a point you raised about identifying systemic issues and I am conscious that the National Audit Office in their report did state that one of the issues perhaps with IPRs was they were not necessarily able to capture or focus on larger trends or larger trends could be missed. It sounds if there has been some work in the Department but in terms of capturing the larger trends of issues



that are clearly arising, what work is the Department doing to refine that process so they are being drilled down on and the Department can act on those as they come to light?

**Peter Schofield:** A lot of it is around the quality of the IPRs themselves. I talked about bringing in a trained team to do it, learning from the independent case examiner. A lot of it is around the approach to the investigation, the way it is written up so it is very clear what the conclusions are and what the actions need to be. Then it is about the follow up that I described earlier—tracking the implementation of the recommendations.

By bringing it together, to be honest, under my customer experience director, I have much more confidence that these are genuinely going to lead to real listening and learning, changes and improvements in the service that we provide. As I say, anything systemic that comes out of a whole series of IPRs we then take to the serious case panel. The Secretary of State has described that process for how the serious case panel would work and take forward its recommendations.

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** I would say this whole relationship with our claimants, with our customers, has been really important to me since coming into the Department on how we really do step that up. This is not just life as a politician, it is like when I was in business and the interaction with customers is really important and getting feedback from that is one of the next phases I am trying to do, how we get everyday feedback more quickly back into our learnings and assessment. That is the next project, in a way but it was important to prioritise and escalate this particular phase.

Q56 **Chair:** Thank you. If I could follow up on the National Audit Office report that Shaun has referred to, it said that you were going to carry out a review on strengthening internal process reviews and the Department's response to serious cases. I think from what you have said you have described some of the actions you have taken as a result of that review. Is it possible to publish the findings of that review?

**Peter Schofield:** It was not really a review in the sense of a review with a report at the end of it. It was the work that I have described that led to the creation of the serious case panel and the work that we have done to implement the changes to the way we do IPRs.

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** That said, the NAO report is not particularly the reason why we have made these improvements.

**Peter Schofield:** No, I am trying to remember the precise wording but the NAO reflected on—this is in the section on how the Department is trying to improve its processes. The NAO was writing down what we were telling them about the work that we were doing, which we have been describing to the Committee this morning. There is not a report.

Q57 **Chair:** The NAO understood that a review was being carried out, but that is not quite what was happening by the sound of it.



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**Peter Schofield:** I do not know whether that is what they thought, but to me the key thing was just making the changes. It is not for me about writing a report and, great, there is a report, for me it is around changing. As we realised what we needed to change, we are putting that into practice.

Q58 **Chair:** One other question on this before we move on to one or two other areas of things the Department is dealing with at the moment. You have explained to us that you have strengthened the safeguarding arrangements. I think you said you have put a safeguarding lead in each region, is it, of the Department?

**Peter Schofield:** Yes.

Q59 **Chair:** Is that building on something that was there before or is that a completely new structure that you have established to address this?

**Peter Schofield:** No, these are new roles and they were funded out of the Service Excellence project that was funded by the Chancellor in the spending round back in September. It is new funding for the year that we are in.

Q60 **Chair:** Have all those people now been appointed?

**Peter Schofield:** We have the first 10 in. That covers the regions. But, as the Secretary of State says, we want to appoint another 15 so we are out there with a process of recruitment at the moment.

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** Some of those regions are quite big.

Q61 **Chair:** So, you are appointing a lead for the subregion, wherever appropriate, to make sure—

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** Yes, so we should reach 25 fairly soon and I am keen to, if we can, go even further.

Q62 **Chair:** To break the areas down to smaller areas?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** Yes.

**Chair:** Okay, that is very interesting.

**Peter Schofield:** But we do have service innovation leads who work at a district level and they feed in as well. That is a role that has been there for quite a while.

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** We describe them as districts, but it is quite challenging, the way DWP organises its regions. It is not how we would think of regions.

**Peter Schofield:** Yes, it is not local authority district level.

Q63 **Chair:** So the service innovations leads have had had safeguarding added to their remit as part of this change, is that right?



**Peter Schofield:** They look at all process improvements on a product level. This is one aspect of this: how do we get the process working well? They fit in the escalation route up to the safeguarding leads to give us more local presence. That is the point.

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** I think it is fair to say we have acted on this but we have now got the dedicated roles.

**Chair:** Thank you. We have a couple more members who would like to ask you questions about other aspects of the Department's work. The first of them is Neil Coyle.

Q64 **Neil Coyle:** My question is around people who are made vulnerable as a result of lack of access to support through no recourse to public funds restrictions. Citizens Advice estimates 1.4 million adults and 100,000 children are affected by this system. Why does the Department accept that two children born in a British hospital and sitting next to each other in a British school have different access to benefits and support?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** The Home Office sets the categories as part of their immigration status, and that is the policy that we follow. We can only pay benefits to people who are entitled to them. I do know that people can apply to the Home Office to consider change of circumstances and see if the no recourse to public funds can be changed. We cannot do that; that is solely a role of the Home Office.

Q65 **Neil Coyle:** Your position is that the Department is hamstrung by the Home Office. The Committee recommended that in order to work alongside the Government's previous coherent communication strategy on Covid—of preventing spread of disease, and protecting the NHS from the spread of disease and being overburdened—it would have been sensible to suspend NRPF conditions to allow families to better protect themselves and their children, and prevent disease. Why was that recommendation not accepted by the Government?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** Again, it is the Home Office that decides policy on this. There were a number of different measures that would have helped people who do not have access to recourse to public funds. For example, the furlough scheme applied regardless, and the self-employment income support scheme applied, and there were some other ways, protections for renters from evictions, and similar. We can only pay out benefits in line with the law and that we are allowed to do so, and that is one of the elements there.

Q66 **Neil Coyle:** Those vulnerabilities, the result of the conditions, have contributed to the higher prevalence of disease and death among the black and minority-ethnic community. Can you update us on cross-Government work on people subject to no recourse to public funds that you have mentioned was under way earlier in the Commons, and which other Ministers, including the Home Office, have spoken to?



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**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** You have made quite an assertion there, Neil, of a direct link between no recourse to public funds and prevalence of infections or deaths among people of certain ethnic minorities. I think the Home Secretary has rejected that assertion in the past, but you will be aware that there is a specific review being led by Minister Kemi Badenoch on this wider issue, and I do not really have anything that I can add to that.

Q67 **Neil Coyle:** The point has been made that there have been many, many reviews, and often a Government say they accept recommendations, but we do not see the action. Perhaps you can tell us what action the cross-Government work on no recourse to public funds is leading to that would help prevent the spread of Covid and better protect people by giving them access to benefits that your Department is responsible for.

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** If people who do not currently have recourse to public funds can apply for a change of that status, they can apply directly to the Home Office.

Q68 **Neil Coyle:** Secretary of State, that was a condition before. You and other Ministers have said there is new cross-Government work looking at this, specifically related to Covid. What has changed? What action is coming out of your Department, your Government, in response to the unique challenges and circumstances we have been facing this year?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** We have not specifically changed any laws connected to the payment of benefits. There are some aspects of hardship funds that were provided to local councils. Where it is possible there may be some access to that. This really is being led on the immigration status by the Home Office, and also the review undertaken or led by Minister Badenoch. There are no changes to our processes at the moment.

Q69 **Neil Coyle:** Thank you for being candid. You have been very honest that despite the Government knowing there is a higher prevalence of deaths among disadvantaged black or minority-ethnic people across this country due to Covid, your Department and your Government has made absolutely no change to access to support for the 100,000 children and 1.4 million adults who are subject to no recourse to public funds. Just to be absolutely clear, nothing has changed?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** In terms of the policy about whether somebody has no recourse to public funds or not, no. It would be illegal for us to pay benefits to people who are not legally entitled to them. That is not something that I would in any sense want to do. Again, Neil, you have made a very strong assertion making that direct link, and I am not aware that you have the evidence to make that direct link between the two.

Q70 **Neil Coyle:** Again, thank you for your honesty. My final question: the Prime Minister suggested that people subject to no recourse to public funds should have access to Universal Credit, and that the Government should publish the figures for the number of people affected by this policy.



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**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** I recall his appearance at the Liaison Committee, which I think he then followed up on another occasion.

Q71 **Neil Coyle:** Absolutely. When will the Government meet the Prime Minister's commitment to extend access to Universal Credit and to publish the number of people affected?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** He did not make a commitment. He did not make a commitment, Neil.

Q72 **Neil Coyle:** You can dispute the first point. On the second point, he did say the Government should publish the number of people affected. When will that happen?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** I do not know the answer to that, but I am sure the Chair of the Committee can write to the Prime Minister.

Q73 **Chair:** It certainly is true the Prime Minister said in terms that people in that situation should be entitled to help of one kind or another.

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** Indeed.

**Chair:** Absolutely right. But as Neil correctly says, people in that position do not have access to the safety net. It is a real problem in terms of public health, as Neil has highlighted. Thank you.

Q74 **Selaine Saxby:** Good morning. Thank you for coming along today. I was going to talk about employment support, particularly in light of the current situation that we find ourselves in. Do you expect the Department to continue to provide employment support as we move forward, and in particular, how are you preparing for a possible increase in unemployment as the job retention scheme phases out?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** I think it is fair to say that the furlough scheme and the self-employment income support scheme have really been amazing in the impact they have had. Without them, I could imagine that the number of people unemployed would be considerably higher right now. We have set out in the summer statement the different schemes that we want to do across Government, and we have been working very closely with the Treasury, and particularly DfE, but also other Departments. In particular, we are extending the work and health Programme in terms of support for those people who have been unemployed for more than three months. We also have a particular element of expanding the youth offer that we do. The kickstart scheme will be rolled out during this year, and that is a particular thing that will largely focus on young people. The Chancellor has set aside about £2 billion over this is and the next financial year to support that, where we anticipate hundreds of thousands of high-quality work placements and directly funded, in effect, salaries.

The other thing I think is important is we successfully secured some additional funding to increase the flexible support fund. We are conscious it is not all going to be about schemes. People who are coming to us for the first time, it may be that they have been an engineer in Bridgend, or



something like that, and they have not had to look for a job for the last 20 to 30 years. They have just worked with that one supplier. Therefore, we want to be able to tailor support. It may be that we involve recruitment agents to help people for example, build a LinkedIn profile, something they have never had to do, or there may be other elements where our work coaches can use the flexible support fund. I am very keen to be a super flexible support fund, to really help tailor that, to help people get into work in different ways. There is a variety of that. We have a programme called sector-based work academies—I am calling them SWAPs. We are more than doubling the number of places in that, in particular in priority areas like construction, other infrastructure, and social care, so that we can get training, work experience, and a guaranteed job interview. We would love to do even more SWAPs, but an element of that is making sure we have the suppliers so we can make that step up, and more than doubling is already a challenge.

**Q75 Selaine Saxby:** Thank you. In my constituency it is the youth who are particularly badly affected. Particularly concerning the youth programmes that I think we are all seeing, when do we expect those to come online? Earlier you mentioned “later in the year”, but do we have a date? Is it going to taper into the job retention scheme dropping off? For those people already there, some of them have already been unemployed for three months.

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** I am expecting a kickstart scheme to be open for applications next month, whether that is private sector, third sector, or local authority employers. We really want to see people starting those jobs from October and November, because we are very conscious of the long-term impact there could be from people just not working and being further away from the labour market.

**Q76 Selaine Saxby:** Is there anything in particular you are doing to link this into the Prime Minister’s build, build, build ambitions?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** Yes. One of the important things that I have tried to make sure happens as part of the design of this scheme is that we try to boost in particular the areas where we think there is long-term work available once people get that initial work experience. That has been an important link for me. The Future Jobs Fund just over a decade ago had a narrower range of opportunities, and we want to make sure it is as broad as possible, and ultimately taxpayers’ money is being used to help people help with the recovery. It is not going to be solely about private-sector employers. I would not want to give that impression either. It is wide-range and, frankly, important experiences for people to enjoy and learn from.

**Peter Schofield:** There is a theme that links to what we were talking about before, around working locally with local players, local employers, local authorities, and local enterprise partnerships. It is a theme we were talking about in the context of safeguarding young vulnerable people but there is also something around working together to provide opportunities, particularly where you have employment opportunities in the way the



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Secretary of State has described in particular sectors that might be predominant in particular areas. We work locally through Jobcentres with local leaders and local employers to use things like the flexible support fund and the other interventions that the Secretary of State has described.

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** Minister Davies in particular has been leading on this. She is responsible for employment generally, and Jobcentres generally, but she has really put a lot of focus into the youth offer. Some new youth hubs have already been created that will have specialist employment coaches for young people, quite often with senior Jobcentres that want work coaches taking the lead on the 18 to 24 age cohort in order to try to have that focus. It will vary according to, obviously, the scale of the number of young people in one particular Jobcentre Plus or another.

Q77 **Selaine Saxby:** Thank you. The second part that I was keen to speak about was sanctions, which have been reinstated from 30 June, I believe. I wonder if you feel now is the right time, and how people will go about that to make sure they are still complying with the health requirements of self-isolating and not being caught between a catch 22 of, "Should I be looking for a job, or should I be at home following health guidance?" I am interested in your thoughts on how that is working and the timing of it.

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** Selaine, we started this carefully. I wanted to make sure that we had the claimant commitment element going. We have not done that for new claimants so far. The work coaches have been phoning their cohort of people to have initial conversations to do that. The claimant commitment is not a big change or shock to them. I am conscious that a lot of this will be a light-touch element of claimant commitment. It is not our intention particularly to go out actively seeking to impose sanctions or similar, and I expect if there are any applied at all, it would be very rare. That is my expectation.

**Peter Schofield:** Exactly. To begin with, Jobcentres were making outbound calls, just getting to know the people who had claimed Universal Credit in their area. As of, I think it is 15 July, we ask all new claims to go through a claimant commitment. It is all about encouraging folk to be thinking about job opportunities. It is about starting to move people forward. It is completely consistent with public health issues and the state of the job market locally. No one is going to ask anyone to do anything that they should not do, but it is about starting to have that conversation and building that relationship between the work coach and the claimant to help them on their journey towards work. Building on what the Secretary of State was saying, it also helps them to think about what the things are that they would need to do. What do they need to do? What skills would they need to grow? Where do they come from in terms of their skills background or their work experience background, and where do they need to get to? How can things like the flexible support fund and some other interventions help them on that journey? This is really about building that relationship in a very open and constructive way.

Q78 **Chair:** I will follow up on that. I very much welcome the return of the



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approach, as you have said, that was adopted in the Future Jobs Fund. At the end of last month, the Prime Minister talked about an opportunity guarantee for young people. Is the kickstart scheme the vehicle for delivering that, or will there be other things alongside that to provide that guarantee?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** There is a wider variety of opportunities for young people. There is a particular focus, also led by the Department for Education and devolved Administrations accordingly, on things like traineeships and apprenticeships. The kickstart scheme is not just short-term. A sector-based work academy programme would be just a few weeks, six weeks usually, although we will see if we can vary that. The kickstart scheme is six solid months of work, as well as time, by the way, to develop some of the other things that have been said; to start the work-search journey. There is a variety of opportunities that will be given to young people.

Q79 **Chair:** The timescale for implementing that guarantee—is it the timescale that you have indicated for the kickstart scheme, or would it be on a different timescale?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** That is a good question. I know when we are trying to get the kickstart under way and the increase in the swaps. I cannot recall now exactly what Gavin is doing in education.

Q80 **Chair:** Okay. If it is possible to drop us a line, that would be helpful.

For people who are too old for the kickstart scheme, if we look back 10 years ago there was a very big Work programme that was introduced for reasons that we all know. Employment support has been on a much more modest scale in the last few years. Is there a Work programme-equivalent being worked up, and when might we hear about that?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** We already have an existing Work and Health Programme of employment support. It is expanding along those lines. I cannot remember the timeline for that. We are talking to our providers around the country on how we can get that going. Certainly in England and Wales it will be under way quite quickly, I think, because we already have existing providers. I think in Scotland the Scottish Government are responsible for schemes that are, in effect, longer than a year. We are responsible for schemes of less than a year. That has not been devolved. We are accelerating some work in that particular regard. I would anticipate the escalation will be under way certainly in the autumn.

**Peter Schofield:** As the Secretary of State says, we are looking to do that quite quickly, because in England we can do it through existing providers. It is about scaling up, putting in more money, creating more places with the existing provision, and using it not for people who have been more than 12 months unemployed, but we can start using it now.

Q81 **Chair:** Yes. You will be using the existing programme but increasing the scale?



**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** Yes.

**Peter Schofield:** Yes.

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** We thought that was the quickest way to try to get support. We do not have our heads in the sand. While we want all these interventions to work, we are not blind to the potential impact there could be of long-term unemployed. We are also setting up some schemes that we would not anticipate to come in until the next financial year, April, effectively a month on from the start of the situation. I can assure you we are putting a lot of effort into the other schemes to try to keep that as relatively small as we can.

Q82 **Chair:** You are envisaging a new programme, perhaps in the next financial year?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** Yes. Because up until literally a few months ago we had record employment rates. It did not need that sort of intervention. However, we recognise that we may need that intervention, and we are preparing for that. If we do not need to use it all, great.

Q83 **Chair:** Might that look a bit like the Work programme?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** Probably.

**Peter Schofield:** We will be using third-party provision, almost certainly. Yes, coming next year.

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** I think that is with the contract design, the elements of that. We wanted to accelerate the work we are doing on the programmes that we want to get under way or expand this autumn, rather than getting into the full details of the longer term.

**Chair:** Okay. Thank you. I thank you both very much indeed for all the information that you have given us this morning. There were some points to follow up on, and we will look forward to that as well. I wish you and all the members of the Committee a recuperative break over the next few weeks. Thank you both very much indeed.

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** Thank you.