HOUSE OF COMMONS

Work and Pensions Committee

Oral evidence: Universal Credit and “survival sex”, HC 2025

Wednesday 12 June 2019

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 12 June 2019.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Frank Field (Chair); Heidi Allen; Ruth George; Steve McCabe; Nigel Mills; Chris Stephens; Derek Thomas.

Questions 94 - 233

Witnesses

I: Will Quince MP, Minister for Family Support, Housing and Child Maintenance, Neil Couling, Universal Credit Senior Responsible Owner, and Donna Ward, Policy Director, Children, Families and Disadvantage, Department for Work and Pensions.

Written evidence from witnesses:

Department for Work and Pensions (UCX0018)

Examination of witnesses

Will Quince MP, Neil Couling and Donna Ward.

Q94 **Chair:** Welcome. Will, might you introduce yourself? Not that you need an introduction, but welcome and then we will hear from the rest of your team.

Will Quince: Mr Field, thank you very much. I would like to thank you for the warm introduction of what is my first appearance before your Committee. I am still relatively new in role, but it is a priority of mine to look at how vulnerable groups interact with Universal Credit and I desperately want to improve their experience. I am joined here today by Neil Couling, who has the title of Universal Credit Senior Responsible Owner and Donna Ward, who is the Policy Director for Children, Families and Disadvantage. I would like to say—

Q95 **Chair:** We are going to invite you to give a short statement. We are excited to hear it, but is it possible for you to speak up a little so we can all hear your statement?

Will Quince: Of course I can, Mr Field.

Q96 **Chair:** Welcome. Your statement?

Will Quince: Thank you very much. I firstly want to thank the Committee and you, Mr Field, for kindly inviting me to attend the oral evidence session which was in private, and I very much welcome the Committee's call for evidence. I do genuinely think it is essential that we hear from those that have lived experiences, as well as the groups who support sex work and we will of course consider very carefully the evidence that you have presented us with about links between survival sex and the benefit system.

I want to reiterate to the Committee how seriously I personally take this issue. I am hugely concerned to hear of individuals who feel that they have no choice but to turn to sex work in order to get by. Only yesterday the Secretary of State and I met with a number of the stakeholders that the Committee have also heard from that provided you with evidence. I want to better understand what factors contribute to someone being in that position and what my Department can do to address this. I do want to reassure you and the Committee, Mr Field, that although this inquiry is highlighting the problem of survival sex for the first time many of the concerns that have been raised have also been raised by numerous other stakeholders and have been highlighted before also by Universal Credit claimants and the Department is taking action.

I am conscious we will go into these points in more detail during the session, but I did want to highlight a few of the examples of where we have made changes. We do want to better understand poverty, so as you know, and I know you welcomed, Mr Field, we are taking forward the

Social Metric Commission measure and we are also developing new food and security measures.

Q97 **Chair:** A euphemism for hunger?

Will Quince: I think in terms of the Social Metrics Commission it is all about better understanding poverty and the drivers thereof. If we have a better understanding, we therefore also have a better understanding of the levers that we need to put in place to address it.

We know that the fiscal position has been very tough since the financial crisis, but the Department has had some good wins in the past two Budgets with an increase to Universal Credit, help for all claimants with the transition from legacy benefits and we now expect Universal Credit to be worth £2 billion more than legacy benefits. We have scrapped the waiting days, as you know, Mr Field, and made advances widely available, reduced the deduction rates and reduced and reviewed sanctions.

I would also like to very quickly take the opportunity to address some of the misunderstandings about Universal Credit that were apparent in the last evidence session and also reported in the media in order to reassure people who may be listening and watching at home. First, Universal Credit claims do not have to be made online, so people who are unable to access digital support can make a claim on the phone, in person at a Jobcentre or through our relatively new partnership with Citizens Advice. Secondly, Universal Credit is available to those without bank accounts through the Payment Exception Service. I would accept, as you would expect me to, there is a lot more that we can do and I look forward to discussing what this inquiry tells us and where we should focus next.

Q98 **Chair:** We are going to look at many of those, if not all of those areas, Will. Does it mean that from the earlier part of your statement that you have now, in effect, withdrawn the evidence that you gave us on survival sex, which was pretty hard line—that there is not much connection at all?

Will Quince: Thank you for raising that. I want to apologise for that first letter that I sent to you, because I do not think it very well reflected my views on this issue. When it was first raised to me, I asked officials at the Department what evidence we had on this and what information we held on this and the answer was, "Very little". As a result we came back with a response that we do not know very much about this and we do not have a very good understanding of it, and I think that is what led to that response. What has changed is, having invited me to the oral evidence session, having listened to those very brave testimonies of the young women who have gone through the most horrific experiences gave me a better understanding through their lived experiences. What it showed me more than anything is that we need to better understand this area, and as a result I am very keen for us to work with those stakeholders and women, and in some cases men, who have been through this tragic and huge ordeal, to better understand how it led to that.

I am conscious that is not just about the DWP. Listening to their testimonies, they were failed in many cases by other parts of Government too, especially in some of their younger and formative years. I am very keen to work with those stakeholders. In many cases they are stakeholders that we have never worked with as a Department before and we are very keen to change that.

We had the stakeholders before us yesterday at the Department. It was a very interesting and informative meeting and I think initially they were concerned that we were just inviting them in for a repeat of what they had already told the Committee. Nothing could be further from the truth. I want that to be the start of a journey and I intend to work with them very closely to better understand this issue.

Q99 **Chair:** What surprised you about their evidence yesterday? Then I will ask Ruth to come in.

Will Quince: I think there were a number of things that surprised me about their evidence. The first is that we have not really engaged with them before, and that is something that we need to change. The other is some of the misunderstandings around Universal Credit. In the oral evidence session I was concerned in particular by two of the women who have not applied for support because they feared it was a difficult and complex system, and that is something we need to change. I am particularly keen to get some of the stakeholders, and I have already made the invitation, to visit Jobcentres, with me if possible, and also for me to go to visit them, to see what they are doing.

I know, for example, in your constituency, Mr Field—

Q100 **Chair:** You are coming up, aren't you?

Will Quince: I am looking forward to the visit very much. Your Jobcentre has very close links with a number of charities and organisations that support women who are in this position, but I am conscious that across the country that may not be the case. I am very keen to see how we can link up Jobcentres and some of the charities that do incredible work supporting women in this case, because I am also conscious, and this came out from the evidence from the stakeholders, that people are not always keen to disclose that they have been involved in sex work.

Q101 **Chair:** No. I was knocked sideways by evidence from Tomorrow's Women, who I think you are going to come and visit with me. That is very good of you.

Will Quince: I am indeed.

Q102 **Ruth George:** Thank you very much, and thank you for that answer, Minister. What are you going to be doing going forward and what issues are you going to focus on that were particularly brought out in the evidence that you heard yesterday and earlier?

Will Quince: The key is that this is the start of a journey, so I am very keen to get a better understanding of the issue. Vulnerable groups fall within my portfolio and we already do some really good work with some other vulnerable groups, around prison leavers and care leavers and survivors of domestic abuse.

Q103 **Heidi Allen:** The vulnerable thing, is that a new thing? I do not remember hearing that as part of the job title prior to you having this role.

Will Quince: That is a very good question, to which I do not know the answer. I have been in role for two months and since I took on the role, vulnerable groups and the support they are offered within the system falls under my portfolio.

Q104 **Heidi Allen:** I do not remember hearing it in the job title of your predecessor.

Donna Ward: I think it was subsumed in your poverty portfolio.

Will Quince: Quite. So it is not as part of the job title per se, but the support for vulnerable groups, for me it is one of the most important parts of my area. Although they are small in number compared to the wider benefit system, they are some of the individuals that with some of the smallest but quite intensive support you can provide the biggest benefit for and really transform their lives, which is why I have been giving it so much focus in the past two months, and particularly around prison leavers. It is a huge passion of mine because of the work I did previously on homelessness and it will not come as a great surprise to the Committee that prison leavers, care leavers and survivors of domestic abuse are also the highest risk cohorts when it comes to homelessness.

Chair: They may not be as small as you think, though, Will. Sorry, back to Ruth.

Q105 **Ruth George:** Yes, that is one of the key issues around housing and Universal Credit. That was something that some of the claimants brought out—that on Universal Credit they did not meet the needs of their landlords and so they were getting evicted. The five-week wait meant that they could not take on a tenancy, or that they simply did not want to take that risk. That was quite a specific issue that came out that you obviously know quite a lot about and are concerned about housing. What are you going to look at to make sure that the housing needs of people on Universal Credit can be met so that they do not have to rent a room for a day and sell themselves simply to get a roof over their heads, as we heard in the earlier session?

Will Quince: You are absolutely right; housing is a priority for me, given my work prior to taking on a ministerial role. There are numerous things that we are doing, in particular around landlords. For example, we held a roundtable at No. 10 only yesterday around "No DSS" and encouraging more landlords, lenders and insurance companies to let to those that are in receipt of benefits. We have had some really good successes in that area. Metro Bank only yesterday announced that they are taking out their clause that those with a buy-to-let mortgage will not be able to let and the vast majority of mortgage lenders have now headed in that direction. We still have the historic element that we need to deal with and we still have the element around insurance to deal with, but we are making huge progress there.

From a departmental perspective we are also working very closely with landlords around alternative payment arrangements and the development of a landlords' portal.

Donna Ward: Can I add to that? We are also going to have housing as a top priority for the Spending Review. I know the Committee is going to look at the Spending Review in more detail, but certainly I, as the lead official for poverty, am developing a lot of evidence especially around the lower end of poverty and developing our own destitution measures, because the problem with some of our poverty measures is that those people who are really suffering a shortfall on housing are so far below the poverty line that if we try to give evidence to Treasury about how changing the LHA rate affects the poverty line, it does not say very much because these people are really far below.

One of the top priorities for me and my team is to get the evidence really in place on poverty, destitution and poverty at the lower end, to persuade the Treasury that this is something to really focus on for the Spending Review and I think we will probably be talking to you about that in due course.

Will Quince: I would add to that, Ms George, that given my lobbying as part of co-chairing the All Party Parliamentary Group on Ending Homelessness before becoming a Minister around the LHA rate, it will not surprise you to know that that is a priority of mine and indeed the Secretary of State and we are looking at options in that regard at the moment ahead of potentially looking at the Spending Review.

Q106 **Chair:** As you have already made that your priority for the Spending Review, may we have your note on what your submission on the Spending Review is, please?

Will Quince: We are not there at the moment. I am conscious as part of anything to do with housing—

Q107 **Chair:** We just heard you have already decided.

Will Quince: No, I did not say that at all.

Q108 **Chair:** Donna said it, though.

Will Quince: It is a priority of mine to look at housing because we know, for example, that full-time work is the best route out of poverty, but the key to work is having a secure and stable home. That is why it is very clear to me that it is essential as part of my role, and this is something that I recognise acutely, that the DWP cannot tackle these issues alone and it has to be done across Government. To some extent I am probably making a bit of a nuisance of myself with other Government Departments, in particular with the MHCLG.

Q109 **Chair:** In the meantime, if we cannot have your note, can we have Donna’s note? You are quite long down the path, aren’t you?

Will Quince: What I can say to you is we are looking at numerous options relating to the LHA. It is imperative that it does go hand-in-hand with the Department for Housing, Communities and Local Government, because the LHA is one thing, but supply is another and that is why I am working very closely with the Minister for Housing and the Minister for Housing and Homelessness around housing supply, especially social, council and affordable housing.

Chair: Yes. Our first disclosure about the review, which is good. Back to Ruth.

Q110 **Ruth George:** Yes, great that you have sat down around the “No DSS” rule and mortgage lenders, but unfortunately it is a huge cultural issue among landlords now that they feel that they simply cannot afford to have people on Universal Credit. I heard from a young woman in Andover yesterday who had been evicted, a whole block, the landlord had evicted 30 tenants en masse who were on Universal Credit because they all had arrears and he simply could not afford it, and now he will only let to people who are in work and not on Universal Credit. I think that the housing situation is only going to get worse unless something systematic and serious is done about it. The landlord portal still does not apply to private rented, which is the vast majority of the sector that people on low incomes are in, and alternative payment arrangements are still too difficult to get. People are finding that they cannot get a tenancy because they cannot guarantee that their rent will be paid until they are in arrears. Until that happens people who need a tenancy, whether they are coming from domestic violence or from prison, will not be able to get one, and that is what needs sorting. That is something for this Department. Are you on to it?

Will Quince: I can assure you this is absolutely an area that I am focused on. I met with the Residential Landlords Association only last week. They were raising a number of issues around changes that we could potentially make within the Department. I am looking very closely at that. This is an issue that I am acutely aware of, and in some parts of the country I am also aware that, in part because of a supply and demand issue in areas of the country where we have very high pressure on housing, landlords are being more choosy, but in other parts of the country there are myths around, for example, claimants of benefits, and we need to bust those myths. We are going to do a huge piece of work around working with landlords and the sector, so that includes mortgage lenders and those that insure buy-to-lets to reassure them around some of the misconceptions and myths around letting to those on Universal Credit.

I think it is important to say as well those who transition on to Universal Credit often come with rent arrears. Evidence does suggest on Universal Credit those arrears do begin to fall.

Q111 **Ruth George:** I do not know which evidence that is that you are looking at, but all the evidence that this Committee have had, that other Committees have had— We heard from Riverside housing trust, a huge housing association, just the other week at the APPG on hunger and food poverty, and their arrears under Universal Credit are five times what they are for people who are not on Universal Credit, and it is a very stark and huge difference. I think the Department really needs to listen to those landlords and providers and RLA are saying exactly the same. Arrears are higher for people on Universal Credit than they are for those not on Universal Credit and the Department needs to look at that very seriously and stop talking about myths, I am afraid.

Will Quince: Neil can perhaps come in.

Chair: Apart from your evidence, all the evidence suggests that going on to Universal Credit increases housing debt. The only person who disputes that is you, so it is very appropriate that we should hear from you now.

Q112 **Heidi Allen:** We heard it on Monday in Belfast as well. The situation is the same in Northern Ireland. It is everywhere.

Neil Couling: I would urge a bit of caution with the comparisons that people are doing between people on legacy benefits and people on Universal Credit. People are moving on to Universal Credit after a change of circumstances or a new claim. Often that may be a debt-creating event, so their relationship may have split up and they have become unemployed. People on the legacy benefits that the landlords are comparing to have been on those legacy benefits for a while. Any arrears they may have may have been under management for a while. What you would need to do to do a proper comparison is to go back in time and look at new claims to legacy benefits and see what the arrears position was for those.

Q113 **Chair:** Have you done that work? If so, we would love to see it.

Neil Couling: The work has been done by some of the landlords themselves and they found that 70% of people had arrears positions on the legacy benefits.

Q114 **Chair:** Which landlords are these because they have not given us evidence?

Neil Couling: The ALMOs have put that data out, the Association— I forget the full title now, but they put that information out, so it is not true to say it is just us but there have been lots of comparisons that look at a cohort of Universal Credit claimants and a cohort of legacy benefit claimants. Because the two groups do not have the same circumstances, it is risky comparing them and trying to draw a conclusion from that.

Q115 **Chair:** It is very risky for them moving on to Universal Credit back to—

Neil Couling: What is clear is that the arrears do clear over time, and that is what our published data says and we have some work—that we said we are going to publish—going on about eight landlords showing the propensity to have arrears. In fact, many arrears are building up because people are delaying their claim to Universal Credit, not the act of Universal Credit itself.

Q116 **Chair:** It is delaying Universal Credit, then, that causes it?

Neil Couling: No, delaying their claim to Universal Credit. You can see that in the NAO report in the data they published there in figure 15 on page 45, you can see that the arrears start to build up 12 weeks before somebody makes a claim for Universal Credit, which is why we have the *Metro* campaign for example, trying to bust a few myths around here to get people to make claims as soon as they can.

Chair: We will probe you more on that. Ruth, and then Chris.

Q117 **Ruth George:** The basic problem is that Universal Credit pays in arrears and your rent you have to pay in advance. So even if you have been on Housing Benefit and you have your two-week run-on, then you have three weeks where your rent is not being met, so that is an issue that I am sure we will come on later, on the five-week wait.

Neil Couling: It is true for some tenancies but not all. Yes, you do point to a fact that some landlords do charge rent in advance and that will create—

Q118 **Ruth George:** Almost every landlord charges rent in advance. Most charge a deposit as well, Neil, and Universal Credit does not take that into account.

Heidi Allen: I have never rented in my life where I have paid at the end of the month. That is absolute rubbish. You pay in advance.

Neil Couling: Okay, well, some social landlords charge rent in arrears, not in advance.

Q119 **Ruth George:** Well, maybe after the meeting you can supply us with the figures with the proportion of landlords that accept rent in arrears.

Neil Couling: Some landlords charge weekly, some two-weekly, monthly, four-weekly.

Chair: We can come back on that. Is there anything further, Ruth?

Q120 **Ruth George:** Going forward, what work are you going to be doing to gather evidence of the prevalence of the problem of survival sex and Universal Credit within the Department?

Will Quince: That is a great question, and that work has already started with the stakeholder meeting yesterday. I am very keen for that to be the beginning of a process, and it shows how seriously the Secretary of State is taking it that she organised that meeting so quickly. That was a relatively short meeting. We only had about an hour, but I am very keen for that in particular within my portfolio to be the beginning of my engagement with those stakeholders and as many women and men who have been in this position too, so that I can get a better understanding of that lived experience. I intend to visit a number of these charities. Subject to me still being in the role post mid-July, I intend to not only visit you, Mr Field, but also numerous other charities across the country over the summer recess where I will have that opportunity to get out of London and get a better understanding of the issue.

One of the fundamental issues that we have at the moment is that we do not have a very good understanding of the issue, because we have not had that engagement with these organisations before. As I say I am keen to change that.

Q121 **Heidi Allen:** Is that not pretty desperate, not to have had an engagement with organisations like that before? Not you personally, Will, but the Department?

Will Quince: I think there are two points there. The first is that engagement is always a two-way process and as far as I am aware we have not had much engagement inward from those organisations, whereas there are other organisations that, as you can understand, lobby the Department on a regular basis. My understanding is we have not had that, so in many respects this is the beginning of a relationship with those organisations. This is a new issue to me, I am a new Minister and I am keen to get this right, and that means working with some of the key stakeholders and those with lived experience to get the understanding and build up a base.

Q122 **Chair:** We will come back to you, if we may, after your July visits.

Will Quince: Yes, of course.

Q123 **Ruth George:** In order to build up trust with the largely women but some men that you will be working with, how will the Department be treating the income that they earn for the purposes of Universal Credit?

Will Quince: In what respect?

Q124 **Ruth George:** How will you be treating the income that they earn from sex work as relates to their benefits?

Will Quince: That is a great question. Neil can probably answer that in a bit more detail, but because sex work in many respects is legal in this country, there are ways in which we have to treat the income. Neil can probably go into that in a bit more detail.

Q125 **Chair:** Yes, quite right. Give it to him. Come on, Neil.

Neil Couling: Thank you, Chair. In tax credits any declared income like from sex work that is declared by the tax credit applicant is treated as self-employed earnings and will be treated as self-employed earnings under Universal Credit in the same way.

Q126 **Ruth George:** They will be subject to the minimum income floor and deemed to be earning the equivalent of 35 hours at the minimum wage?

Neil Couling: Should they be determined to be gainfully self-employed through that route. The minimum income floor—

Q127 **Ruth George:** There is a real risk for any woman that self-declares that she is in the sex industry and self-employed that she will be subject to the minimum income floor?

Chair: I think you realise what a difficult issue you have here.

Will Quince: Of course I do, and this is one of the most difficult areas that I am trying to get through to—

Q128 **Chair:** We will talk to you after you have done your visits.

Will Quince: If I may come back to this point specifically, because it does create a problem and potentially why so many of the women are not disclosing their sex work to the broader authorities, but particularly in our case to their work coach at the Jobcentre. In many respects, if those women are vulnerable and have other complex needs that we can help with, we do need to know about that. You are right, this is a very difficult catch-22 situation that I am keen to get a better understanding of, so that we can then work out how we address it. At the moment there is a disincentive for women to disclose that work but we desperately need them to.

Q129 **Chair:** If they are on a benefit?

Will Quince: Quite. But we desperately need them to in order to then identify them to then offer them that support that we would like to.

Chair: We will come back at the end of July. Chris?

Q130 **Chris Stephens:** Minister, if I could maybe follow up a point that Heidi made and that is basically the Department's approach, you sat in with us in the private session when you heard from witnesses and you then said that you were engaged with stakeholders to discuss how issues might be addressed. The concern we have is that the warnings on Universal Credit and survival sex first appeared in the media in *The Guardian* in October 2018. Then the BBC followed this up in November 2018, where it spoke to five charities in England who had reported women being pushed into or back into sex work as a result of Universal Credit.

I will ask you, would it not have been prudent to engage with those organisations earlier than you have?

Will Quince: That was before my time as a Minister. I will openly admit that I was not aware of this issue before I became a Minister, and that was despite working largely in areas very similar to this around homelessness and rough sleeping and working with other vulnerable groups. Now the Committee has made me aware of it; it is on my radar; it is a priority for me and this may well sit as part of my vulnerable groups portfolio. I take the vulnerable groups portfolio incredibly seriously. It is an area that is probably taking a disproportionate amount of my time at the moment. I cannot speak for what went on before. All I can do is give you my firm commitment that I take not just the findings of this Committee very seriously but also the evidence provided by those women who very bravely gave their testimonies and also the stakeholders who I will continue to engage with now. As I say, this is the beginning of the journey, not the end. That is why I am genuinely very grateful to the Committee for raising this issue and for bringing it to my attention, because there is clearly an issue here that we need to take very seriously and address.

Donna Ward: We know that the UN Special Rapporteur mentioned this and obviously it is on your website as well, so in his interim report that came out before Christmas we did see that.

One thing I would say is, from the stakeholders that we met yesterday, they were quite keen not to focus in just on this specific issue, because they were very clear that this is a manifestation of destitution more widely. I was definitely aware of what the Special Rapporteur had said, but the way I have approached it, as being somebody who needs to lead the poverty work with the Treasury for the Spending Review, is to do more work on destitution generally. Certainly, before Will arrived we have been doing that work.

Q131 **Chair:** But you denounced the UN.

Donna Ward: I did not.

Q132 **Chair:** Your Secretary of State did. Now you are calling in evidence.

Donna Ward: On the Special Rapporteur report, we did a fact check of that report. He made a lot of good points. It was factually correct. I think where the Secretary of State took issue with it—and where I as a civil servant cannot be involved—was the political interpretation of a lot of what has happened, but in terms of the facts, of austerity, cuts to local government funding, of the reliance that we have on the labour market and the risk that we face if there was a recession, all of those things were really good points that we have taken on board and we should take on board.

Q133 **Chris Stephens:** Let us ask a politician, because it is quite revealing that the Department is taking seriously the Rapporteur’s report. I must say, as someone who sits in the House of Commons, when the Rapporteur’s report has been mentioned on a regular basis it is very often pooh-poohed both by Ministers and some Back Benchers. Minister, in terms of the Rapporteur’s report and the wider issues around poverty, is the

Department seriously engaging with that report and looking to fix the issues that are found in the Rapporteur's report?

Will Quince: That is a great question. I take every single report of this nature incredibly seriously. I am not going to say that I do not regret the quite inflammatory language and in some cases the quite overtly political tone of the report, but there are areas in there that of course I recognise and I know that we need to do a considerable amount of work on. Any report of that nature is always going to highlight areas. It was more the tone and some of the language used that I thought was unnecessary, but of course there are areas in there that I will be working with officials on over the coming days, weeks and months to see where we can build a further evidential base and, where necessary, take action.

Q134 **Chris Stephens:** Thank you. I think that is helpful. That is something we can live with. It seems to me, Minister, as if you are going to take a more proactive approach to investigating problems with Universal Credit as they arise, so can you talk to us about how you see your approach going forward in relation to that and what you think the advantages are of taking that approach?

Will Quince: Okay. Great question. So far we have, as part of the Universal Credit journey, listened to stakeholders, this Committee and Members of this House and where we have been able to make changes. You have seen in the past two Budgets how changes have been made. The Committee is well-versed in those changes and there are more changes to come, for example the two-week roll-on of Housing Benefit for those transitioning on to Universal Credit. As of next year that will include ESA, JSA and IS2. If there are further changes that we need to make to Universal Credit as it is rolled out, then of course we are willing to look at that, based on an evidential base. In particular, and this is where my focus is, I am conscious that there are some vulnerable groups that are going to require more support for all sorts of reasons and that is why I will be working very closely with officials and the Secretary of State to see how we can better support vulnerable groups through the Universal Credit system.

Q135 **Chris Stephens:** Thank you. That does seem to be in contrast with these, as it was referred to by Mr Couling, controversial advertisements that have found themselves in the *Metro* newspaper. Can I ask—I know the Chair has written to the Secretary of State on this matter—if you or other Ministers were asked to approve those advertisements and what communications officials had with Ministers in relation to these advertisements?

Will Quince: This is not within my portfolio—this is for the Minister for Employment—so I do not want to mislead the Committee in any way by answering those questions. I am very happy to write via the Chair in response to those, unless Mr Couling would like to.

Neil Couling: I think we answered this in parliamentary questions yesterday about this. The text of the advertisements were shared with Ministers, but the decision to authorise expenditure is mine as head of the Universal Credit programme.

Q136 **Chris Stephens:** Sorry, so the Ministers approved the—

Neil Couling: Yes, that is what the parliamentary answers say.

Q137 **Chris Stephens:** Okay, that is interesting and, Mr Couling, did they approve that the communications would be without either the departmental or Universal Credit branding?

Neil Couling: They are very clearly marked as advertorials. In fact we have increased the size of the warning about them being advertorials above what the Advertising Standards Authority required, at our insistence.

Q138 **Chris Stephens:** Did they approve?

Neil Couling: Yes, because we need to quite innovatively challenge the myths that are around Universal Credit. It came out—obviously I was not at the private session—in that session that some of those myths are lodged in people's minds and two of those witnesses have not claimed Universal Credit as a result.

Q139 **Chris Stephens:** I just want to be clear that Ministers approved advertisements going out into the newspapers without the DWP branding or the Universal Credit branding?

Neil Couling: They are clearly marked as DWP but they are not branded as the normal Universal Credit because they are designed to catch people's attention and cause them to enquire because of the misrepresentation of what Universal Credit is like that has been going on in parts of the media.

Q140 **Chris Stephens:** Well, that is your view, Mr Couling, in terms of that—

Neil Couling: That is the basis of—

Q141 **Chris Stephens:** You referred to them as myths. Some people are referring to the advertisements as an episode of "Jackanory". It is people's opinion.

Neil Couling: I missed that, sorry.

Q142 **Chris Stephens:** Some people are referring to the advertisements as an episode of "Jackanory", so some people have a view—

Neil Couling: They are real claimants. It is quite telling that when we went to the organisation and said if they would like to volunteer case studies, would people like to volunteer to be in them, we were overwhelmed with responses from our staff because they are deeply frustrated by the way in which Universal Credit is presented in the media right now. Deeply frustrated by that.

Q143 **Chair:** How much did the advertisements cost?

Neil Couling: I am afraid I cannot share that with the Committee because it would expose our pricing structures with *Metro*, but we have committed that when the campaign is finished we will provide a total expenditure to that.

Chair: Very good.

Q144 **Heidi Allen:** I have to say it is absolute music to my ears that you will focus on vulnerable groups. I have lost count of the number of times I have said to various Secretaries of State that they need to be treated differently. "I, Daniel Blake" is not a fiction film. It is how life is for the most vulnerable.

Today we are focusing on sex workers but there is a whole remit of different people who you might argue would fall into that vulnerable group. What have you learnt so far in your two months about how the five-week wait specifically in conjunction with the benefit freeze—Ruth will come on to ask some questions around the advance payment angle and debt—is affecting the most vulnerable?

Will Quince: The first stage is within my portfolio—I have prison leavers, care leavers, survivors of domestic abuse and homelessness and rough sleeping. The key—and I am very much looking forward to meeting you to run through your experiences of vulnerable groups and how better we can serve those cohorts of people that we know by their very definition have some very specific and complex needs—

Q145 **Heidi Allen:** What have you learned about the five-week wait?

Will Quince: The question is about the five-week wait specifically; well, at the moment we know around 60% of people are having the advance and I think it is important that we listen to stakeholders, this Committee and others—

Q146 **Heidi Allen:** Why are they taking that advance, Will? Why is it so high?

Will Quince: Because it is a benefit paid in arrears, and the reason we have introduced that, by reducing the seven-day waiting period, by having the advance available, it is for those that do need it within that period. As I said we also have the two-week run-on and I think it is important to say—

Q147 **Heidi Allen:** The two-week run-on is not in place yet for everybody.

Will Quince: No, not for everybody.

Q148 **Heidi Allen:** No, so what do people with no financial resilience at all, not a bean in the cupboard, not a penny in the bank, do while they are waiting for five weeks?

Will Quince: This is why we have from day one that availability of 100% advance of an indicative award, which is interest-free, repayable over 12 months, and as of 2021 that will be extended to 16 months. It is wrong to say that people are not able to access money on day one. It is an advance, not a loan.

Q149 **Heidi Allen:** That was not my question. It was how the five-week wait and its interaction with the benefit freeze is affecting people. The point is, Will, if you do not have a penny in the bank— A vulnerable person is a world that you and I fortunately I am sure have never occupied. No family, no friends, no support network. *[Interruption.]* Let me finish, please. Not a penny in the bank; a benefit freeze that means that benefits are not increasing with the cost of living and the cost of heating their homes and putting food on the table for them and their families, potentially—we are asking them to wait five weeks, take an advance payment that will be then taken away at a later date from a very small amount that, because of the benefit freeze, is not keeping up with the price and the cost of living. How are they expected to live?

Will Quince: Two points there. The first is benefit freeze comes to an end next year and we will have—

Q150 **Heidi Allen:** I am talking about people today, Will, not next year.

Will Quince: Of course, and then in terms of the five-week wait it is important to say that they are able to get 100% advance from day one, but—

Q151 **Heidi Allen:** But that reduces their payments.

Will Quince: It does, but with Universal Credit, because it is a system in arrears, you either get that money at the beginning or the end and over a 12-month period it is still the same amount of money, so it is spread over 12 months. We do recognise that affordability is an issue for people. That is why, as of 2021, it will extend to 16 months. It is also why we have reduced deductions from 40% down to 30%.

You do raise an interesting and good point around those vulnerable groups.

Q152 **Heidi Allen:** These are people with no money and no food in their cupboards.

Will Quince: That is why we do need to have additional support for those that do find the system challenging. That is why we have commissioned Citizens Advice with the "Help To Claim" service, which means people will have that help via Citizens Advice to be able to access their full benefit on day one.

Q153 **Heidi Allen:** How do they get food in their cupboards, Will, without going to food banks? How do you live with no money and that then gets you into further debt that is going to reduce very tiny payments in the future? How do you live?

Will Quince: I am sorry, I just cannot agree with the premise of the question, because you are able to get up to 100% in advance on day one.

People are working with work coaches to have that money on day one. We have seen that happen and we are now encouraging work coaches to really work with that individual on a one-to-one basis to understand how much they do need over that period, not to take the full amount if they do not need it, and because you do not have to take it all in one go, you can also take it in smaller amounts, multiple times, throughout that period.

Q154 **Heidi Allen:** Will, you do not understand.

Will Quince: Yes, of course I understand that there are some people—one thing that came out in the evidence session is that people are scared of, in their words, taking on debt. What I would say is, it is not debt. It is an advance—

Q155 **Heidi Allen:** Of course it is debt.

Will Quince: It is an advance of benefit of their initial indicative award. What I would say is that we need to make sure that advice and the support that they are given at the Jobcentre around what to do and how to access that support is better for those vulnerable groups. I am acutely aware of that.

Q156 **Chair:** So, Heidi, we have learned that in fact you could run a system where payments are made on day one.

Will Quince: In effect you can get an advance on day one.

Q157 **Heidi Allen:** Why not make it a grant, something I have asked various Secretaries of State for, not for everybody? If you and I lose our jobs—who knows, it could happen sooner for me than for you—perhaps we could cope. We have a bit of cash in the bank. If you have nothing, why wait four weeks for retrospective proof that you have had no income? If you have nothing in the bank now you do not need to wait four weeks to prove that. Why not make that day one, not a debt, not a loan, not an advance payment, but a grant for the people who are the most vulnerable? If that is your focus, why will you not look at that?

Will Quince: As you well know, that would be a decision that is well above my pay grade. Nevertheless, I think it is important to say that those that need it are able to access an advance on day one, and that is up to 100% of their initial indicative award.

Q158 **Heidi Allen:** But it reduces their future income. That is the bit you are not getting. If it is a tiny amount to start with because it has been clamped down by the benefit freeze, they can barely live on that, and then you are going to take some of that away because you are repaying that advance payment, how do they live on that tiny amount?

Will Quince: I recognise your concern, but I think the key—

Q159 **Heidi Allen:** How do they live on that tiny amount, Will?

Will Quince: The key is people being able to access their money on day one. That change was made to the system. We also reduced, as you know, the waiting days. We have the rollover of Housing Benefit. The system improves again next year with the rollover of JSA, ESA and IS, so we are making improvements to the system. Neil might want to go into this in a bit more detail. I do understand the point you make, and I know we are going to meet and discuss this in more detail and I am sure—

Q160 **Chair:** Can I just ask, we now learn that housing is the priority for the Public Expenditure Review? Might you put this in as well as an equal priority?

Will Quince: As you would imagine, Mr Field, as an ambitious guy housing is not just the one priority that I would intend to put forward.

Q161 **Chair:** We are suggesting it ought to be equal.

Will Quince: I totally agree, housing should, and that is why I am working very closely with every—

Q162 **Chair:** No, we are talking about money to pay the benefit from day one, which you admit you could do but do not do.

Will Quince: We do it in advance at the moment, so anybody that does need that payment is able to access it on day one. It is wrong to say that people are not able to access money on day one. I take your point and I know we are not necessarily going to—

Q163 **Heidi Allen:** Shall you and I try it—live a few weeks on a benefit that has been reduced by that advance payment?

Will Quince: I know we are not going to agree on this point, and I understand the force with which you make your point. I will of course continue to listen to the Committee and key stakeholders. As you and I both know, this is a decision well above my pay grade. Nevertheless, if there are further improvements within the Universal Credit system that we can make, I will of course look to make them. I keep all areas within my portfolio under review.

Q164 **Ruth George:** On the deduction, I brought a debate last week to Westminster Hall and set out numerous examples of my constituents who were reduced to living off around £20 a week by the time that their deductions had been made, by the time they had made up their rent shortfall because of the LHA and because their benefit had been reduced when they moved on to Universal Credit. That is not enabling them to live. That is for bills, for food, for everything. This is what is happening, and the advance payments and the deductions made because of that added to many other debts that we can see from the answers to parliamentary questions that myself and other members of the Committee have been asking are simply building up to a system that is completely unsustainable for people to live on.

Will Quince: There are two points that you make there. The first we have in part addressed: as of October this year, the amount of deduction goes down from 40% to 30%. Your second point is largely in relation to LHA rates, and I am also acutely aware that in some areas of the country in particular where there is high demand and limited supply, people have to supplement the rate from benefits that otherwise would be used for the cost of living. I am acutely aware of that. That is why, Mr Field, LHA and wider housing issues are a priority for me as we approach the Spending Review.

Q165 **Ruth George:** When the reduction goes down, the maximum deduction goes down to 30% that will mean that those people who at the moment are living on around £20 a week will have around £26 a week to live on. Do you think that is then going to be adequate?

Will Quince: It will go from 40% to 30%, but then also we have the ending of the benefit freeze next year and as we approach the Spending Review there are a number of interventions that I and the Secretary of State will be looking at.

Q166 **Ruth George:** These are people who are suffering now, but you are talking about things that are going to happen, or possibly going to happen, in the future. Why is the 30% deduction being delayed until October? Why is the 16-month ability to repay being delayed for another two years and why the two-week run-on until over a year's time? If these are things that need doing surely they need doing now for the 840,000 households that are suffering deductions at this moment now, and the further 1.5 million that are likely to be suffering them by this time next year. Should that not be something that you have asked of Neil, of your Department, and what are the answers that you have had, please, Will?

Will Quince: Yes, so a lot of those do not fall in my portfolio, so Neil is going to answer that first and I might come in afterwards.

Neil Couling: I think, Ms George, I have written to the Committee before setting out the dilemmas of running a major programme and running a major programme that is taking on volume now; the caseloads grow by 130,000 a month. There is work we need to do on the system in order to keep it viable as the caseloads grow. That means you have to fix into that development schedule any policy changes you want to make.

I used to be able to slow the programme—and I have done that before—in order to accommodate some of the policy changes, the ones announced in the 2017 Budget. I slowed the roll-out in order to do that. Roll-out is now complete. There is no way of stopping natural migration itself. You need a social security system for people to apply to, so the only way I can accommodate policy changes is to schedule them carefully into the existing development schedule. I think I have written on that before, Chair, to all—

Q167 **Chair:** It is not money. It is merely difficulties of doing it?

Neil Couling: It is the question of the system needs continual development. We are developing it in an agile way. We are bringing improvements into the system all through this period and it is a question of scheduling a policy change like that with all the other improvements that we need to make.

Q168 **Ruth George:** Surely, the numbers moving on to this make it more important to sort it out quicker. You are going to have another 840,000 households by next July.

Will Quince: On that, it is important to also say there is not a week goes by where I don't go to Neil and ask for another change to Universal Credit, and you see his head go to his hands as I ask for another request. There are so many competing priorities but, as Neil rightly says, the system can only accommodate so many changes at one time.

Q169 **Ruth George:** Do you not understand that the actual claimants are the people whose heads are in their hands, because they don't see the way out of the situation—

Will Quince: Every change, every single change that I propose is about claimants and vulnerable groups largely.

Ruth George: I am sorry, but that answer is not good enough.

Neil Couling: But our absolute priority has to be the maintenance of the system. There are currently now 2 million people on it. They depend on payments every month from that and I am not prepared to take steps that will jeopardise that, despite the fact that I would like to introduce these changes quicker than we can. That is—

Chair: The point has been made. You have given us your answer. We will report on that.

Q170 **Derek Thomas:** Minister, I know that you are a compassionate man. I know that you and I would absolutely want to look at the life of someone who has been driven into sex work, and look at what can we do to actually give them the life chances that they need in order never to be in a position where someone is driven into that trade—driven in—but obviously we are talking about Universal Credit in particular today, and I think Donna is right that we need to look at the whole of everything going on not just the welfare system.

In terms of that particular group of people, do you see any particular challenges they face or any differences in terms of how Universal Credit applies or does not work compared to other claimants, if you have a broad group of claimants? Is there a particular issue you are concerned around the people that are driven into sex work and how Universal Credit needs to be addressed? You said a bit about it. I wonder if you could—

Will Quince: Yes. There are two parts to that question. The first one is I don't think I can be any clearer: I do not want to see anybody feeling that they have no choice but to undertake sex work. You rightly say that this is not just a role for the DWP. What was hugely sad, as part of the oral evidence hearing, was that actually a number of those women were failed long before they came into contact with the DWP. That is why it is so important, in particular, that the Department for Education and the Department for Health and Social Care also get a read-out of the testimonies of those women, because they were largely let down by those two systems, so I want us to intervene far earlier.

But yes, you are right, I think one of the biggest challenges that I can see us facing is, in order for a work coach to be able to deal with anybody and to assist with complex needs in particular, they do need to know about them. My worry is—having spoken with some of the stakeholders and listening to the oral testimony of the women—how we ensure that those very vulnerable women feel comfortable to disclose to their work coach either previous or existing sex work or even the threat of sex work that they might be forced to undertake because there are a number of levers that we can put in place.

There are things that I think I need to take away and look at—for example, making sure that there is a private room available in Jobcentres, which I understand is the case at the moment, but I want to double-check that. As with a number of other vulnerable groups, we do have SPOCs or specialist contacts, who are especially trained in particular areas—so, homelessness and rough sleeping, for example—in supporting survivors of domestic abuse. We want to ensure, where we can, that we are training up work coaches to have a better understanding and also to know what levers they can pull in order to better support people with these lived experiences. In order to do that, they need to know about them.

I need to work with stakeholders to get a better understanding of how we do that. What I also want to do is work with stakeholders to ensure that we are getting information out there about Universal Credit, about the system and about a work coach and how you will have a personal contact that will be able to support you through this journey, because I think there is a bit of a misunderstanding about that out there at the moment.

I am conscious that we at the DWP will not always come into contact with these women and men in this very vulnerable group, but stakeholders and perhaps the Home Office—via the police or UKVI—may well come into contact with them more than we will. It is understanding how we can work with those other Government agencies to ensure that that information is out there, so it is not a scary experience going into a Jobcentre and you will get that support from a work coach and they will understand if you disclose about sex work.

Donna Ward: Just from the stakeholder event yesterday, I think if I had to pick two things that we were better at in the Department, it would overlap the most with these women’s concerns: one is about dealing with people with addictions and the other is about being much better at dealing with people leaving prison.

Yes, clearly, sex work is a particular issue that they raise, but actually it is some of these systemic issues within the system that the Department is doing some work on, on the addiction side, following the Dame Carol Black review on prisons, so we should not just think of this as, "They have a specific problem that nobody else has." They have quite a number of problems that a lot of other people have.

Will Quince: Can I touch on the prison piece, Mr Field, if I may very briefly? This is an area of real focus of mine, because I am conscious that there is a very vulnerable cohort that we are potentially letting down at the moment, and a huge talent pool of women in particular that are coming out of prison and we are supporting, so a great question.

We have a pilot just concluded around computers in prisons. We already have 135 in-prison work coaches that are working with men and women to better equip them with leaving prison and going into the world of work and contact with the Jobcentre. The pilot has ended in terms of being able to make that Universal Credit application ahead of leaving, but there are areas in which I am working—

Q171 **Chair:** Will that overcome the five-week wait? They can lodge it before?

Will Quince: No. You cannot submit your claim or you cannot start until day one, but what it will do is, you can get it all revved up in advance. Those in-prison work coaches can gear people up also with training, support and other—

Q172 **Chair:** So they will not get the money any earlier?

Will Quince: No. What I am conscious of, Mr Field, is too often people are released on a Friday, which means that they are not able to access support until Monday. When people are released from prison, I am also conscious that attending— We would love people to come to the Jobcentre on day one and be able to access an advance and get all the support that that the Jobcentre provides, but we are conscious that many people are in prison a long way away from where they actually live or where their local connection is, so they have perhaps a day of travelling.

If you were in Cornwall, for example, that would be a long way to go back from a prison in the midlands and the north, but also their probation and all sorts of other requirements that they have to undertake. Visiting the Jobcentre is not necessarily their number one priority, so we want to ensure that there is some flexibility to help people to access that on day one. We are doing all sorts of work in that area and it is a real area of focus for me.

Q173 **Derek Thomas:** I would obviously hope that the prison population— You know exactly who they are, you know their circumstance and everything about them, so a little bit of clever working out would mean they do not even need to go to the Jobcentre in the next two or three weeks because you could do all of that, dare I say, online or certainly in some other way before they even leave. I have done a lot of work with the Ministry of Justice on that very issue, because the way we dump people, particularly on a Bank Holiday weekend, and then they are into criminal activity because in their minds they have no choice, so we are absolutely failing people and we have to improve on that, so I am glad you are focused.

In terms of the Department, what assessment have you made of the Citizens Advice "Help to Claim"? Is that really working? Is that helping people to claim and then maintain their—

Will Quince: The honest answer is it is too early to tell. It launched in April. My early anecdotal evidence around my constituency and others is that it is working well as an alternative to necessarily approaching the DWP or the Jobcentre, because there are some people that need that extra support, in particular our vulnerable groups. Citizens Advice is there to help people get their support from day one and get it 100% right first time.

My understanding is it is working well but I think it is too early to tell. As with all policies, contracts and commissions of this nature, we will keep it under very close review. We will be working very closely with Citizens Advice to ensure it is working. If there are tweaks that need to be made, of course, we will look at those.

Q174 **Derek Thomas:** I worked with people that we describe as "hard to reach" long before I came to this place and for a long time, and we are talking about that group particularly in the sex trade. How are we going to get the information that you talked about? Even for Citizens Advice, is it on the radar? Some of the ladies we met recently, I know some of them had access to support and voluntary groups. Do you think that the Citizens Advice Bureau or even the Jobcentre is even on their radar when it comes to wanting to become part of what they might see as a system, the welfare system, although they will need it?

Basically, have we just lost a group of people potentially for as long as—how would I say this?—they are able to do the job? Have we just lost them because they are concerned about the undisclosed income, how they get that income, and the fact that they are just not connected, like lots of other hard-to-reach groups, in a human social way to the kind of people that we are putting in place to help them?

Will Quince: I think it is a very fair question and there are a cohort of people that are very hard to reach. I suspect even with Citizens Advice, for all sorts of reasons and do not want to or will not engage with the Department and other Government agencies.

What I am keen to do is work with other Government Departments. If you take the homelessness space, for example, we are doing some great work around outreach. Some of it is being done by local authorities. Some of it is being done by MHCLG. In other parts it is actually now, following the most recent Budget, being done by the Department of Health and Social Care around tackling some of those complex needs around alcohol, drug addiction and mental health.

We need to be far more joined up, in particular, around the homeless community. People very often have a problem or fear around authority and if they build up a relationship with an outreach worker, we want that outreach worker to also have a good understanding about the DWP and the Jobcentre so they can cross-refer.

Q175 **Heidi Allen:** Are you funding that?

Will Quince: At the moment my understanding is no, but I am looking at all of these innovative options, hence why I have been meeting with Heather Wheeler, the Minister for Housing and Homelessness. I have met with Jackie Doyle-Price, the Minister for Health and Social Care. I am very keen for us to get more joined up—so, one point of contact where they come into contact with some very vulnerable people that are very hard to reach. It could almost be a one-stop shop.

We are early days. You probably expect nothing less for me to look at some of these quite innovative and interesting ideas, but it is that kind of joined up approach that we need to take if we are going to truly help, access and support some of these very vulnerable and hard to reach groups.

Q176 **Derek Thomas:** That is great, and we know from this very process that it takes time to get something right, and actually get people to go in the same room. It has to be worked at.

You made some helpful comments earlier about the fact that it is not necessary today for everyone to have to go online to claim and for their online journal. Unfortunately, that is not my experience in my constituency. As you have already referred, Cornwall is quite rural. There are people that are just not having a good time because—going back to the links bit—public transport isn't connecting them to the Jobcentre exactly when they are supposed to be there because they cannot get online, so how much can you scale up the provision? I know the Government are getting everything digital but actually for some, for some time in the future, that is still not going to be realistic.

How much can you scale up the provision so that we can get to a place, hopefully soon, where someone in this cohort you were talking about, but also someone with severe learning disabilities, supported maybe by very elderly parents, is not required to do everything online because that just isn't a tool that is available to them?

Will Quince: I will bring in Neil but, largely, we should be there because people are— Yes, you are absolutely right, it is a digital-by-default system, so it is an online system, but telephony is available, face to face in the Jobcentre is available, home visits are also available in exceptional circumstances. I am conscious there are vulnerable groups, hence why we got the "Help to Claim" service, and others who do need an element of—for want of a better phrase—handholding because of the very complex needs that they have. I will hand over to Neil to go into a bit more detail about the system.

Q177 **Derek Thomas:** Can you mention, Neil, about the online journal because that comes up regularly with people that cannot do that?

Neil Couling: First of all, on the comments from Ms George earlier, on the dilemma about "How do you build and scale a system up?", one of the things we have done recently, so a thing we prioritised, is our ability to take and maintain claims by telephone. We recently introduced some new enhancements on that that allow that to be a much smoother process for the claimants. We currently have about 13,000 claims that are supported on the telephone as of today.

It is a non-static figure because some people manage later to come online and do things online. As I have said, I actually don't like the phrase, Minister, "digital by default" because it assumes that everybody can do things online I think there will always be a bunch of people who need our services who will not be able to go online itself.

Q178 **Derek Thomas:** I agree absolutely.

Neil Couling: Your specific point about the journal?

Q179 **Derek Thomas:** I have come across people—not in the sex trade—who just cannot do the journal. Their mental health isn't in a position. With their learning disability they just cannot engage in that way, and they have suffered as a result of that. There does not seem to be any understanding or compassion or discretion towards those individuals.

Neil Couling: For individuals who have a carer they can be made an appointee and can do the journal for them, although if they are very—

Derek Thomas: Sorry, can I interrupt you there?

Neil Couling: Yes.

Derek Thomas: I do not mean to follow on the behaviour of other members around the table but I do want to interrupt. A carer; if you have someone, an adult, with severe learning disabilities, their carer might be 85, 90 years old.

Neil Couling: Yes, so you still may need to have the claim maintained on the telephone for that purpose. That can be done. As the Minister has mentioned, there are home visits. If people are experiencing difficulties, they should tell us they are experiencing difficulties and not just try to carry on here. Each of our Jobcentres has a local plan for how they deal with vulnerable claimants. It is tailored to the locality.

The aim is to support people where we can on the digital service but, where we can't, we need to offer a service to them. As I say, if there are appointees we can give training and support to people if they need guidance, or if it is not going to work for them, if you are illiterate, for example, you are not going to be able to manage an online journal.

Will Quince: I would add to that—because I am always very interested to hear what feedback constituency MPs get because, like many of you, I have a very full constituency postbag and sometimes they contain issues around the DWP—that I am very keen to ensure that where there is a policy intent at ministerial level that it is being implemented on the ground. If there is that disconnect, we do in part rely on stakeholders and members to inform us of that. If there is evidence that you have that that policy intent, as Neil has just rightly set out, is not being implemented or enacted on the ground, please let me know about that.

Q180 **Steve McCabe:** I want to ask a couple of questions about the nominated bank account and the Payment Exception Service, where the client does not have a bank account. As I understand it, the Department does not do any checks or verifications on the nominated bank account so, in theory, you could be paying the money direct to a pimp or an abusive partner, is that right?

Neil Couling: No.

Q181 **Steve McCabe:** What checks do you do on the nominated broadcast then?

Will Quince: There are two in effect, but Neil can go into that. One is online and the other is face to face at a Jobcentre.

Q182 **Steve McCabe:** When someone comes to the Department and gives you the name of a bank account that isn't theirs, what is the procedure?

Neil Couling: We will ask the claimant why they want that money paid into that account. There is a procedure where if somebody cannot get a bank account, for example—

Q183 **Steve McCabe:** Yes, but you say, "Why do you want to pay it into that account?" They say, "Because I haven't got a bank account and this is my boyfriend's bank account."

Neil Couling: Yes, so that—

Q184 **Steve McCabe:** That is just asking a question. What I am asking is: what is the check on the verification that that isn't being done under some kind of coercion?

Neil Couling: I have given evidence to the Committee before about domestic abuse and the work we have done with our work coaches.

Q185 **Steve McCabe:** Yes, but we are asking about this—

Neil Couling: No, it is the same thing because this kind of financial coercion is effectively the same thing that is going on in a domestic abuse situation, so we look for signs that there may be some coercion going on here. Ultimately, it will be a matter for the criminal justice system not the

Jobcentre to sort out here, but we have trained our staff to try to look for the signs that—

Q186 **Steve McCabe:** You would make a best guess, but what I am asking is: is there a formal kind of verification process? If I say, "This is my boyfriend's bank account," or "This is my friend's bank account and I do not have one," you would use maybe a bit of a best guess to assess this, but in essence there is no other check, is there?

Will Quince: It is not best guess,

Q187 **Steve McCabe:** What is the other check? You said there were two. One is a best guess. What is the other one?

Neil Couling: We match the accounts through something called Bank Wizard that we have access to, the banking system, to check that the account that they are saying exists is in their name. The point I am trying to get across here is that if somebody does not have a bank account and does themselves willingly ask for that money to be put in somebody else's account, that could be legitimate.

Steve McCabe: Yes, of course.

Neil Couling: It could also be coercive as well, which is why the check, as I say, is on: can we identify the coercion? Not that money being routed to another bank account is necessarily wrong, but it could be. That is why we have trained our people to look out for that.

Will Quince: Mr McCabe, if I can add on to that. You are absolutely right in what you say around concern about coercive control, and that is certainly a concern of mine. The online system does not allow that because of the checks Mr Couling rightly pointed out. Face to face does enable— What it does rely on: is the claimant being honest with you about their situation? We have gone through that training. I would be interested to know if there is another way you think it could be done, but that face to face where we have trained individuals who will know some of the signs to spot. It does not mean we won't miss some people.

One other thing to add is we are working very closely with Lloyds Bank, so where people do not have a bank account but would like one, Lloyds will now take identify checks from the DWP, so they can set up a basic bank account. If someone says, "I do not have a bank account," we are able to offer that and say, "You could set up a bank account quite quickly and easily via our ID check with Lloyds Bank." We are trying to minimise the risk but, nevertheless, with any coercive control relationship, the risk is always there. If there are any ideas that the Committee has about how we could reduce that risk, I would of course be interested to hear them.

Q188 **Steve McCabe:** I asked that, Minister, because I was struck that, if I want to use the Payment Exception Service, obviously I have to have proof of identity before I can go to PayPoint and that is the usual things: driving licence, passport, utilities bill. That suggests to me that the

Department is anxious to protect the money. The person who is taking the money out of PayPoint you want to know that is the person who is entitled to it.

At the other end of the scale, if you are using a nominated account, it does not seem there is quite the same level of check about the Department putting the money in that could then be available to someone else, so I was slightly surprised that you did not require any proof of identity or any character reference for the person who was the owner of the nominated account. I am surprised. That strikes me as not a particularly onerous check, but it would be one check that could be carried out.

Neil Couling: What would we be checking, Mr McCabe, sorry, because we check identity? Are you the person who is claiming? Are you the person who is entitled to this money? Is that your bank account?

Q189 **Steve McCabe:** Yes, but we are talking about where it is a nominated account. I am asking what checks do you carry out on—

Neil Couling: What would you be checking, is what I am asking. What would you like me to check there—that that person exists? Has a—

Q190 **Steve McCabe:** No, but I would like to know if that person is a pimp, if they have a reputation for running a group of girls, if they have a reputation for locking girls up or knocking the living daylights out of their partner and taking every penny off them that the state should be paying to them. I would quite like to know that, yes.

Neil Couling: I am not sure I could quite do a criminal records check like that.

Q191 **Steve McCabe:** No, but you said you are quite happy to talk to Lloyds Bank and you have these trained staff who try to tease out if people are telling the truth. I am only asking why you ask for proof of identity for the individual who is obviously asking for the Payment Exception Service because they do not have an account or they don’t feel safe to use an account but, at the other end of the scale, you quite happily pay the money into an account without any guarantee it will get to the person it is intended for. That is all I am asking. It is not an unusual question, is it?

Neil Couling: No, but I was also asking: what is it you want me to check? I get the spirit behind why you are asking this but—

Q192 **Steve McCabe:** You have not been able to think of anything you could check to verify that?

Neil Couling: Not in a verification sense that would match what we are doing around—

Q193 **Steve McCabe:** It would not be worth finding out if the bank has any question marks about that nominated account? It would not be worth trying to establish where that person who owns the nominated account lives? It would not be worth trying to find out anything about them at all?

Would that be too difficult or not worth anything?

Neil Couling: I don't know. I have not explored that idea but—

Q194 **Steve McCabe:** You don't know. Fair enough.

Neil Couling—you might make that as a recommendation for us to consider.

Q195 **Steve McCabe:** Yes, but it hasn't occurred to you so far. That is what I am saying. You do not think it would be worth it?

Neil Couling: I suspect there will be a limit to what the bank can tell us about a person who is not in contact with the social security system, but I would not want you to take that as the final—

Q196 **Steve McCabe:** No. As I say, I am curious that it is a requirement of the Department for some proof of identity for the purpose of safeguarding the cash, when the person is using the Payment Exception Service but it does not matter at the point that the money goes in. Most people hearing that would think, "Hey that is a funny system. They are concerned about one bit of it but not the other." That would be the normal conclusion anyone hearing this would draw, wouldn't it?

Neil Couling: It is the equivalent of going to a cash machine and using your PIN number in a cash machine to withdraw your benefits out. There is some form of identity check in that: do you know the PIN?

Steve McCabe: Yes.

Neil Couling: In the system there are identity checks going on here but at this point, where the person does not have a bank account, the best outcome I think is for that person to have a bank account. That is what we encourage.

Q197 **Steve McCabe:** I can understand that but we have been through before, as you pointed out earlier, there are a host of reasons why people do not have bank accounts and we know that.

Tell me about the Payment Exception Service. What are the very limited circumstances in which it is available?

Neil Couling: The limited circumstances are that you don't have a bank account, so we have been trying to encourage people to have bank accounts. We think that is important, not just for the efficacy of the social security system but also people's financial inclusion as well, which is why we are very pleased that Lloyds Bank has agreed to use our identity rules to allow people to open bank accounts, and we hope that other banks will follow Lloyds' route on that. It is a question of we would rather that people do things online with us but we have the telephone service—

Q198 **Steve McCabe:** Why doesn't it say that on the website? Why doesn't say, "The Payment Exception Service is a way for people who do not have a bank account to collect pension payments"? What you have just said.

Yet, “Only available in very limited circumstances” suggests it is more than not having a bank account, doesn’t it? Why is that extra sentence there? I said, “What are the very limited circumstances?” You said, “It is that they do not have a bank account”, but your own website says, “The service is a way for people who do not have a bank account to collect benefit or pension payments”, full stop. “They are only available in very limited circumstances”, and I asked, “What are the very limited circumstances?”

Neil Couling: What we would like to avoid is people thinking that the Payment Exception Service is an option they can select when they have a bank account.

Q199 **Steve McCabe:** The only limited circumstance is that you do not have a bank account.

Neil Couling: Yes, because the Payment Exception Service by its very name is there to—

Q200 **Steve McCabe:** So that is a superfluous statement, “They are only available in very limited circumstances”. The answer is, “If you do not have a bank account it is available”. It does not apply to anybody else. Is that right?

Neil Couling: It is probably the alternative to saying, “Look, we don’t want you to take these out if you have a bank account”. Yes, I—

Q201 **Steve McCabe:** I am trying to make sense of what you are saying and what you say here. How many people are currently in receipt of a Payment Exception arrangement?

Neil Couling: I do not have that figure to hand.

Q202 **Steve McCabe:** You do not know that.

Will Quince: I can write to you, Mr McCabe.

Q203 **Steve McCabe:** You can tell us that. Could you also tell us how many have applied since March 2018 when it came in because, obviously, I am interested to know? Could you further tell us if in every one of those cases it is because they don’t have a bank account or if there are any other limited circumstances that might have slipped your mind this morning?

Neil Couling: Sure.

Steve McCabe: Thank you very much.

Q204 **Heidi Allen:** I suppose just my reflection on that exchange, and I get where Steve is going, is, how can you be sure that the money is going to safe hands? I wonder whether when you are doing your general work on the benefit system on fraud, there must be some intelligence and user data around where money is ending up as opposed to where it should have gone to, so perhaps something on that.

Work coaches: again, this session is about sex workers but the same thing that applies to all claimants, not just vulnerable ones but especially for vulnerable claimants, where you are trying to build a relationship. I do get that side of Universal Credit. The work coach being this sort of phenomenon that builds a relationship with a person and encourages them, in whatever way, shape or form, asks those difficult questions to start to learn about the person, whether there are some other issues there. Why is it that in the entire time that we as a Committee have been looking at Universal Credit as it is rolled out, every single piece of evidence we have taken, and Frank and I visiting food banks and charities around the UK, I have yet to meet a single person who has had the same work coach throughout their claim?

Chair: Although that was the original design that IDS told us would actually happen. It was a friend for life.

Will Quince: Everybody should have a work coach that is bespoke to them.

Heidi Allen: They do not. I have yet to—

Will Quince: Hear me out first, if I can set out the policy intent and then, by all means, if you set out how that may or may not be happening and we can take a look at it.

Inevitably, it is a human business. If people go on paternity or maternity or sickness or compassionate leave, or all sorts of reasons, that might change and then they would be allocated a new designated work coach. Also, I have a GP but if I am sick and go to a GP practice if I need to see them quickly and mine is not available I will see another GP. That is inevitable too where people are on holiday or not available, but as a rule you should have a work coach that is bespoke to you, that will complete your pin notes and have a good understanding of you and your individual issues. You are also able, if you want to, to choose to have another work coach for all sorts of reasons.

I am interest that isn't happening. My experience—

Q205 **Heidi Allen:** I have not met a single person, Will, that has the same work coach or whenever they ring up they get a different person every time. That is some of the difficulty we heard particularly with young women in the last session, and I cannot imagine being in their shoes. All sorts of hellish experiences, and every time they try to make contact they get a different person, they have to explain all over again, "Well, the reason I haven't got a permanent address is because X, Y, Z, and actually I am working in a brothel and there is a reason I cannot come to the appointment, X, Y, Z". Every single time they have to deal with a different person.

Will Quince: That is hugely disappointing to hear. Having introduced pin notes that should not happen in any event because people should be able to see, whoever it is, the most up to date information about that individual and a flag as to any vulnerability.

Q206 **Chair:** Do you challenge her on whether people do always get the same work coach?

Will Quince: No, but if I ask Mr Couling to respond. I haven't seen it personally.

Neil Couling: We owe you an apology, Chair—and particularly Ms Allen—because I think it was at the June or July hearing last year that we promised to go away and do a piece of work and come back to the Committee. We have done a piece of work but we have failed to come back to the Committee, so I apologise for that. We will come back to the Committee I hasten to add with the findings from this.

The headline finding is that in 16% of cases you do not see the same work coach as the Minister outlined. Mostly—

Q207 **Heidi Allen:** Not just see, it is speak to, it is your relationship—

Neil Couling: I will come on to speaking in a moment. In terms of face to face in the Jobcentre, it is 16% of cases where that does not happen. If you think that, for example, a civil servant will have six weeks' annual leave in every year, that is 12% of their work time. That is not outwith—

Q208 **Heidi Allen:** The visits are not the regular contact with Universal Credit because it is an internet-based system.

Neil Couling: I will come on to that in a second, if I may. We have gone through and we will itemise for you the reasons why people are not seeing the same work coach. We have had a good look at that because you asked us to. I am just sorry we have not come back to you with those findings.

In our service centres we have a concept of a case manager and the idea is that you have a caseload yourself that you manage. We have spoken before about the number of claimants that a case manager has at any one point in time. Our new telephony service, which we introduced last year, tries to route calls to the case manager through two ways. If you have given us a number when you make your claim that in the system will automatically route you to the team that deals with your claim. Again, you might not get the actual case manager but the pin note should be there with any vulnerability. If it does not go to that person it goes to the team there.

Also, if you ring on a different phone, the phone questioning will ask you, "What is the number that you gave us when you made your original claim?" again in an attempt to route people. About two-thirds of people are being routed through that route and we have about one-third that then go back to what we call the national tier, basically a virtual telephony system where calls are handled around the country.

We are trying to get to this model of a case manager that knows your case that you are used to speaking to so you do not have to repeat the life story every time you have an inquiry with us.

Q209 **Heidi Allen:** A case manager team and pinned notes are not the same as a human being who understands and is building a relationship with you. I think it is fair to say that the promise, the branding that is wrapped around Universal Credit, that you will have a relationship with a work coach that is deeply misleading, isn't it? You have not been able to achieve that.

Neil Couling: We are talking about two slightly different things here. The work coach will support you in your job search through the Jobcentre. That will be allocated to you and then there is a case manager who will deal with the administration on your claim. The work coach and the case manager will collaborate on a case where a work coach may be told something that is pertinent to the administration of the claim or, similarly, the case manager may hear something, note something on the journal saying, "Oh, look out for this, this claimant—"

Q210 **Heidi Allen:** It is again accepting—this is a question for Will, if I may—that there is a range of case managers that you might speak to and you may or may not see your work coach and get in that often. As I say, every single person I have ever spoken to about Universal Credit has never ever spoken to the same person, either in person or on the phone, twice, ever. Will, for vulnerable people, can you look at this? Can you see whether there is something you can do to guarantee that vulnerable people see the same people and speak to the same people.

Will Quince: Absolutely, and it is something we can discuss when we pick it up at our meeting. There is another thing that I am looking at also. Pin notes are a very positive development. Other areas I am looking at are other ways in which we can better identify vulnerable groups within the system so there is more of a flag. Pin notes work to some extent on that, but I am looking at other ways in which whoever accesses someone's file can automatically see if they are a care lever, if they are a prison lever, if they are a homeless person or if they are a survivor of domestic abuse, so you automatically know the triggers and what to think about and what extra support that individual may need.

Q211 **Heidi Allen:** There is a suggestion I made again—repeated to the Secretary of State—that I think you should treat vulnerable claimants as platinum customers. They should be handled in a different way. They should have access to grants rather than a five-week wait and advances in a different way. For the majority of people, I am sure Universal Credit, once it is fully rolled out and the roll-ons and all the rest of it are in place, will work. I am absolutely certain of that. But for very vulnerable people, the "I, Daniel Blakes" of this world, the young women we met two weeks ago, they will always struggle with the system as it is based.

Can I ask you to commit to looking at a whole range—given the liberalities in your portfolio—of options that might be available to treat these claimants very differently and handhold them through the entire Universal Credit process?

Will Quince: Yes. I am already working very closely with a number of the stakeholders within the sphere of those vulnerable groups. That will include you, Ms Allen. I will certainly commit to looking at all aspects of how we can improve the access and the service delivery of Universal Credit for vulnerable groups. You are absolutely right when you say they are a key group that we want to ensure that we are providing the best possible service for, in particular, because of some very complex needs that may be unique to those cohorts of people. I am absolutely alive to this.

As I say, I have already given a disproportionate amount of my time to vulnerable groups and will continue to do so, because I genuinely believe if we get this right it is our best opportunity to transform the lives of those individuals.

Chair: Very good.

Q212 **Nigel Mills:** What we have picked up is there are some good things happening at some Jobcentres, but it is patchy around the country. Do you have a plan for how you can move best practice around the country so everywhere adopts it?

Will Quince: Yes, I am looking at this very closely because, you are absolutely right, in many Jobcentres across the country they have fantastic links with some of the support services, some statutory funded and some not, charities and voluntary groups and others within their local community that they signpost and cross-refer.

What I am very acutely aware of is that there are too many people that are not claiming all the benefits that they are entitled to. We know that there is circa £2.4 billion of entitlements out there not being claimed. I want to ensure that we are working far more closely with food banks and other charities and organisations, up and down the country, to ensure that if someone comes to them and says, "I am not receiving this," and they think, "Hang on, that just does not sound right," that there is that link within the Jobcentre, so that they can pick up the phone or that they can visit or cross-refer and ensure that that person is getting the support that they are rightly entitled to.

Your question around consistency is how we make sure that that is happening in every Jobcentre up and down the country. That is the challenge that we face, and it is something I am looking at very closely.

Q213 **Nigel Mills:** Would you ask them to report which charities or third sector groups or food banks are working with each Jobcentre, so that you can see which ones have some on the list and which ones perhaps have none?

Will Quince: Yes. At the moment, my understanding is that does not happen. It is certainly something I can take away and have a look at.

Q214 **Nigel Mills:** Because what gets reported and measured gets done, doesn't it?

Will Quince: Yes.

Q215 **Nigel Mills:** In terms of customer satisfaction, you have published some quite attractive looking numbers for satisfaction nationally. Do you measure the satisfaction of each individual Jobcentre or at least each cluster or is that not done?

Will Quince: I am not aware of satisfaction reports or studies into individual Jobcentres. You are right when you say the most recent figures—which I think was a 2018 survey—in relation to Universal Credit, the claimant satisfaction was around 80%. What is also interesting is to look at the complaint rate because that is also a good indicator of how well or not a system is working. I believe the current complaint rate is 0.4%. That is down from 0.6% in March of this year, so it is—

Neil Couling: It is an error.

Will Quince: Oh, it is an error, right.

Neil Couling: It is 0.04%.

Will Quince: Right, 0.04%.

Neil Couling: Down from 0.06%.

Will Quince: I missed off a zero, but thank you for that correction because it is even better. I do also take very seriously the complaints and issues that come through MPs' offices. As I understand it, they are declining also but it is something I keep a very watchful brief on. I am not aware of any figures down to Jobcentre levels but I will inquire within the Department as to whether that is collected.

Q216 **Nigel Mills:** How do you pick up if a Jobcentre or a cluster is not performing at the level that you think they ought to? Is that just luck or something?

Will Quince: No, it would be general management practice with any organisation. This is no different to any other but, Neil, you might be able to expand.

Neil Couling: Yes, I used to run the Jobcentres, so I have some experience of trying to do this. First of all, in every Jobcentre we do have a plan that sets out how we will work and support vulnerable groups. That is available for a senior manager like me or my colleagues who are now running the Jobcentres to have a look at, see whether it is comprehensive enough and, frankly, pull learning from one area to another. So, "I have seen something good happening in Birkenhead why don’t you try that in Manchester or something?” if you are the manager there.

The managers themselves locally will look to local feedback, will look for issues that are coming up, which claimants are expressing to them. Then we have our suite of management information that tries to adduce from that, for example, around payment timeliness: at what speed are we paying claims and so forth. We look across a very broad range of activity to try to capture just what is going on.

Q217 **Nigel Mills:** Are you slightly concerned at a 0.04% complaint rate? That might tell me that everything is wonderful or it might tell me that there is no recognised complaint process and I am not picking up what I ought to be picking up.

Neil Couling: The equivalent for JSA, the last time JSA took new claims of any volume, was 0.08%. I think it compares well with that but I am not saying we have transformed the entire system and everybody is happy out there.

Q218 **Nigel Mills:** It just seems extraordinarily low. It suggests that no one just knows what the process is.

Neil Couling: I could say the same about inquiries from MPs. We are not deluged with inquiries from MPs.

Ruth George: Which are not very helpful.

Will Quince: That is why we also monitor the incoming correspondence and issues raised by MPs because that is also a very good indicator, because when someone has a frustration with any system or Government Department, they do tend to go to their MP, or MSP, or AM in Wales, who then raises that with the Department. That is why we also use that as an index as well.

Q219 **Nigel Mills:** It is not a wonderfully reliable system, is it? Rather than having a direct complaint system so you can get things resolved, let’s hope someone makes it to their MP and—

Neil Couling: We do have a complaints system that picks that up. The case officer is there to hear those complaints and, ultimately, to the ombudsman when referred through your local MP. That system has been in place for a long time. Universal Credit has not changed that.

Will Quince: Do not forget that a complaint is a point at which an issue has failed to be resolved. We try wherever possible to address issues that arise long before the point at which someone makes a complaint, so an initial concern or issue with Universal Credit, for example, can often be dealt with. That is not a complaint. The complaint comes when the issue isn’t dealt with or we have failed to deal with the issue at the point at which is raised.

Q220 **Nigel Mills:** Okay, so we are on a definition of complaint being an issue that is not resolved the first time it is raised or something?

Will Quince: Well, someone coming into a Jobcentre and saying, "I have an issue with my Universal Credit," that is not a complaint. That is a, "Can I have some help with this because something has gone wrong?" and we fix it. If we don't fix it that may lead to a complaint, but that is an indication that there is an issue with the system or something has gone wrong at a human level—

Q221 **Nigel Mills:** Saying, "I have not been paid on time this month," is a complaint.

Neil Couling: The last time I was here before the Committee I laid out those cases where we paid compensation.

Q222 **Nigel Mills:** It is a serious point, Will. I can say, "I have an issue with the system and I have this problem," may not be a complaint but, "I have not been paid on time this month," would be a complaint and an issue because it is something that should have happened but hasn't. Even if you can then go and make the payment the next day and resolve it that would still be a complaint you would want to track, wouldn't it?

Neil Couling: Yes. We do track that. That might not be a failing of the Department, for example, if a self-employed claimant has reported their earnings late to us. That does happen because often Universal Credit is a smaller part of their income than the self-employed. They might be busy the day they are due to give us information on that month's earnings. That will show up as a late payment but there isn't much the Jobcentre or the service centre can do about that if they do not have the information from the claimant. You can interrogate this data but you have to do it intelligently and not just think, "Ah, every late payment must be your fault, DWP, do something about that."

Q223 **Nigel Mills:** Not every complaint is valid in other words.

Neil Couling: Yes.

Q224 **Nigel Mills:** If you are not getting them you don't know, do you?

Neil Couling: We do have a system that allows that to come through and I think we are very well attuned to what is going on with Universal Credit.

Q225 **Steve McCabe:** I wanted to ask the Minister: do you feel any anxiety when you hear Mr Couling's rather encouraging statistics compared with the fact that there aren't a group of claimants in the country that we took you to meet, who would not give you an entirely different picture?

Will Quince: There is a very good reason why I ask the Department at least once a week, but where I can twice a week, to get out and about visiting stakeholders, food banks, Jobcentres, to get that real-life lived experience. It is very, very important in my view for Ministers to see what is happening out there on the ground, as well as listening to officials because in some cases there is a disconnect and we need to understand why that is happening.

As I say, over the summer, should I still be in this role—the Prime Minister giveth and the Prime Minister taketh away—I have a summer where I plan to do a lot of these such visits with stakeholders in this area and lots of others and different organisations, charities and voluntary groups, to get a better understanding of the operation of areas within my Department or portfolio within the Department out on the ground.

Q226 **Steve McCabe:** You are planning to do that because you suspect there may be something wrong with the picture you get at one end and the picture you get at the other.

Will Quince: No. I think you have added two and two and got five there.

Q227 **Steve McCabe:** Why else are you doing it?

Will Quince: I think it is prudent for any Minister to get out and about meeting with key stakeholders and groups up and down the country.

Q228 **Steve McCabe:** Just in case.

Will Quince: It is not just in case. It is ensuring that lived experience and what is happening on the ground matches the policy intent that comes out of the Department at ministerial level. It is very, very important and a number of those visits—including one, I look forward to a full day with Mr Field up in Birkenhead.

Q229 **Steve McCabe:** I think we can all offer you a visit, Minister.

Will Quince: I am going to have a busy summer at this rate, yes.

Q230 **Ruth George:** Could I just ask, Will, if in speaking to claimants on Universal Credit the utter sense of powerlessness and hopelessness that they feel with the system has come across to you? I met claimants yesterday who just had £10 deducted off their claim by their work coach, just for failing to comply with any sort of requirement on them: if they are not on time; if they do not log on on time when they have to; regardless. They have no means of redress against this. They are completely in the hands of the work coaches and case managers at the DWP. These are not people who feel they are in any position to complain.

Will Quince: I do speak with claimants and a number of the support groups that work with them. I listen very carefully to what they say, particularly around sanctions. Sanctions are an area that both I and the Secretary of State are looking at more generally. You will have noted the Secretary of State’s announcement in a recent speech about long period sanctions. That is a positive move, so down from three years down to six months. Nevertheless, it is an area that I am acutely aware of that needs looking at and, as I say, the Secretary of State and I are looking at it very closely.

Q231 **Chair:** Will, here this morning you have had a group from across the

House of Commons that have expressed severe doubt about how well the system is working, and your chief official sitting next to you seems to assure you it is all going hunky-dory. You have been busy already going to meet organisations, where do you think the truth lies between what we see in the system going on and what your officials tell you that it is all right?

Will Quince: What I would say to that is I want to ensure that our welfare system works for everybody, so that those are receiving it, those that are paying for it and, ultimately, that it is sustainable for the future.

Q232 **Chair:** No, what is your impression so far from your trips? Where do you think truth lies: the Committee, the doubts, the worries that the Committee expresses or, in fact, that it is actually going on all rather well?

Will Quince: I think there are areas that are going very well and, if you look at Universal Credit as a whole, more people are getting into work and staying in work and the job figures bear that out. That is a very good thing. What concerns me is the support that we provide for vulnerable groups, and I am very keen to get that right. That is why, in particular, that is an area of focus for me because I know that there are some people that are having difficulty accessing the system for all sorts of reasons. It is largely down to complex needs. It is about ensuring that we put the right levers in place, the right measures and the right interventions.

Q233 **Heidi Allen:** Being poor is not a complex need, Will. If people do not have one of these things that we all take for granted and can log on, do their journals, have a bit of cash in the bank to see them through for five weeks, I don't mean to be rude but being poor is not a complex need. It means the system is not built for people like you.

Will Quince: I do not consider that rude whatsoever, and I very much hope to have a constructive and, in some cases, a robust relationship with the Committee. We all want to get this right and if there are areas where we need to make changes, and we have an evidential base on which to do so, of course I will look to do that and I will make that case to the Secretary of State and, if necessary, to the Treasury as part of future Spending Review bids.

I would like to think, as part of stakeholder engagement, and the work that the Department has done with this Committee over the past few weeks and months, you will have seen the fruit of some of that in terms of Spending Review bids and Budget announcements. I very much hope that there are more to come and that is why I do very much value the work that the Committee does. I look forward to working with all of you because we do ultimately want the same thing. We want the system to work for everybody but, in particular, for those vulnerable groups that are struggling.

Chair: We will end on that note. Thank you very, very much.

House of Commons