HOUSE OF COMMONS

Work and Pensions Committee

Oral evidence: Support for the bereaved, HC 2023

Wednesday 17 July 2019

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Watch the meeting

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

Questions 108 - 182

Witnesses

I: Will Quince MP, Minister for Family Support, Housing and Child Maintenance, Department for Work and Pensions, and Helen Walker, Deputy Director, Children, Families and Disadvantage, DWP.

Written evidence from witnesses:

Department for Work and Pensions (SFB0006)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Will Quince MP and Helen Walker.

Q108 **Chair:** Will, welcome. Might you identify yourself for the sake of the record?

Will Quince: Yes. Will Quince, Member of Parliament for Colchester and Minister at the Department for Work and Pensions.

Helen Walker: I am Helen Walker, Deputy Director for Poverty and Disadvantage at the Department for Work and Pensions.

Q109 **Chair:** As you know, one of the things we are looking at is bereavement support payments and the changes the Government have brought in. What moves are you making to check whether this has been the success the Government hoped it would be?

Will Quince: That is a great question. Bereavement support is an area that I am hugely passionate about. If you look at my experience on the Back Benches through the Parental Bereavement (Pay and Leave) Bill—now Act—and also the work with Carolyn Harris MP on the Children's Funeral Fund, it is an area that I have had a focus on since entering the Department only three months ago, although it does feel a little bit longer than that.

Bereavement support payments obviously kicked in on 6 April 2017. I am keen for us to have a full evaluation of that. The key to it, though, is having some robust, meaningful data in sufficient quantities to be able to do a full evaluation thereof. I am keen to do that as soon as possible.

Q110 **Chair:** What does that mean in timing, Will?

Will Quince: It is very difficult for me to say. What we do have at the moment is around 3,500 claims per calendar month, about 62,000 currently in process, and somewhere in the region of 25,000 that have flowed off. What I want to do is have enough data to make it meaningful. I get quite a lot of anecdotal evidence from stakeholders, who I meet with regularly, and we obviously get anecdotal evidence from claimants that have had the support. As to having the data in a meaningful quantity, to be able to look at it and form robust decision-making as a result, the honest answer is that it is hard for me to say, but I am working very closely with officials. As soon as we do have sufficient data—and we meet very regularly to discuss that—I want to do a full evaluation.

Q111 **Chair:** How many have claimed so far under the new rules, Will?

Will Quince: Well, 25,000 have flowed off, so they have received the benefit. In effect, they are the number of people that we could at the moment potentially analyse. The problem is a lot of it is still quite raw in terms of that data, so in my view we need a more significant amount of data, and more people in that, in order to do a full assessment and evaluation of it.

Helen Walker: At the end of 2018, we had had about 62,000 claims in payment.

Chair: Sorry, what was the date?

Helen Walker: That was at the end of 2018.

Chair: So you had 62,000—

Helen Walker: Claims in payment. Obviously, it is a benefit that lasts a fairly long time. In the evaluation, we want to look at a whole range of things, including looking at people by age, by gender, by other sources of income, how BSP would interact with other benefits, and what people's outcomes are after they have flowed off the benefits. We obviously want to give the benefit plenty of time to bed in as well, so we are working very closely with analysts to make sure that we have the sort of numbers we need to do a very through and robust analysis, which we will obviously bring—

Q112 **Chair:** 62,000—

Helen Walker: It seems a lot, I know.

Chair: It's the size of a constituency that will be judging each of us soon in a general election.

Helen Walker: Some of those have only just very recently started to make the claim, so they have not had the full experience of the benefit. The 25,000 number is quite small, once you start to split it up by all the different sorts of things that we would want to analyse by. No one has been out of the benefit yet for more than a year, so we would not have time to see what happens in the longer term as well as immediately.

Q113 **Chair:** Helen, your data was to the end of 2018, and we are now—

Helen Walker: The 25,000 was to the end of June.

Will Quince: Yes, so just completed.

Q114 **Chair:** When you do think you will be able to tell us you are doing the survey?

Will Quince: The honest answer is that I do not know. What I will do is come back to the Committee as soon as I feel an official has advised me that we have sufficient data to do it. I do not want to do it prematurely and then not have that robust evidence base on which to make an informed decision. As Helen rightly said, if there are a number of people who have only been off the benefit for a year or less, what we do not necessarily know is whether it was long enough and what their circumstances are. When you break that number down into children—for example, the number of children they have, the impact it had on their family, whether they needed to move house, what other support they got, whether they got further support from the benefit system more widely—you do need that data to make an informed decision.

What I do not want to do is to make an ill-informed decision and the Department to understandably say to me, "Well, we will do another evaluation in a year's time, when we will have significantly more data". I am absolutely keen to get this right. That means doing it on the basis of robust data, and we need a sufficient quantify thereof to make that.

Chair: I am rather sceptical, but let's leave it there.

Q115 **Heidi Allen:** This is the second time that this Committee has looked at this area of welfare. Pleasingly, we made progress after our last report and the initial 12-month period was extended to 18 months. How do you feel, Will, in terms of whether that is right, that 18 months? Is that about right?

Will Quince: The first thing I will do is pay credit to the Committee. Obviously it was before my time in the Department, but I—

Heidi Allen: Do you think it is right?

Will Quince: I am glad that the Committee did push the Department in that regard, because I think 18 months is obviously much better than 12 months. As to whether I think it is right, anecdotally, I would suggest it feels about right, but the key is going to be that of—

Q116 **Heidi Allen:** Where did you get those anecdotes from, Will?

Will Quince: Speaking with bereaved parents. For example, I recently had a roundtable with a number of key stakeholders from not just the industry but charities that support people that are bereaved. The key is going to be the evaluation, because that is going to give us that robust dataset, and also that lived experience from those individuals. I have been clear with officials: I want to drill down into as much detail as possible. Obviously, we have a fiscal envelope to work within. Anything outside of that would need to be a wider request to the Treasury.

Q117 **Chair:** Is what you are telling us that, on the tales of a few people, you are judging it is about right? But you have 25,000 people out there who have been through and lost benefit. I just want to underscore the importance—

Will Quince: What do you mean, Mr Field, by lost benefits?

Q118 **Chair:** They have completed their claim.

Will Quince: Yes. That is why the evaluation is going to be important. As you would do with any Government policy of this significance, you would do a full evaluation. I am keen to do that as soon as I possibly can, but as I say, I am desperate to get it right.

Chair: So are we.

Will Quince: I am absolutely passionate about supporting those who have been bereaved. If the 18-month figure isn't right, that would clearly be borne out in the evaluation. We would be able to make a decision based on that, and therefore almost certainly would require Treasury approval, but it has to be evidence-driven. I completely understand why you would push us to do the evaluation sooner. I want to do it as soon as we possibly can, but it is about our dataset.

Q119 **Heidi Allen:** To continue exactly along those lines, I would hope our report will be part of that evaluation piece of work, because of course we receive evidence. Of course, 18 months is much better than 12 months. It must be horrid. I cannot imagine what it is like to go through this—the difficulty, particularly for the children, and the knock-on effect within the family.

We have heard time and again that it would work far better if the payment were to stop, for example, when the youngest child leaves education and they are perhaps about to go out and find work; there is a natural separation point there in the household. Do you have a view on that?

Will Quince: Yes. Under the old legacy system, in effect that is what happened. It was a—

Q120 **Heidi Allen:** It suggests that there must have been an appreciation that that is a natural break point.

Will Quince: It was, but you have to appreciate the time in which that legacy benefit was created, which was in the 1920s. That was a period in which far fewer women worked and the family was supported by one main earner. The circumstances of families across the UK have significantly changed since then. It was never designed to be—and isn't designed to be—an income support benefit. It is designed to be a benefit to support people through a hugely distressing period in their life, for which adjustments inevitably would need to be made. That is why we have designed it with an up-front payment and 18 months of support—so people can make those adjustments during that period in which, inevitably, the loss of a spouse or a civil partner would have an effect.

Q121 **Heidi Allen:** Is that something you would look at? I guess it would be a blend of the old policy and the new—a trigger when the youngest child leaves, or even leaves primary education.

Will Quince: It is a relatively new benefit, because it came in on 6 April 2017, but we keep all things under review, and we will look at your Committee's report very carefully. We will also look at the evaluation very carefully. If something isn't working as we would want it to, subject to ensuring that it is also fair to the wider taxpayer, of course we are willing to look at it, and I keep all policies of this nature under review.

Q122 **Heidi Allen:** Do you have a personal view as to whether that might be an appropriate area to look at, when that youngest child leaves education?

Chair: If you do, might you share it with us?

Will Quince: The key is going to be that evaluation. I can give you what my personal thoughts are on it, but I am fortunately not in the position of having lost my wife. It is that lived experience of those individuals that have gone through it and have claimed and experienced the benefit that is going to be key to this. I can give you my view; what I am most interested in is their view and whether it is working. When we have sufficient data in terms of those individuals—and I say "data", but these are people—and the lived experiences of sufficient people to make an informed decision about whether the benefit is working or not and whether we need to tweak it, then of course I will look at that, and then I would make a decision based on that, along with the Secretary of State.

Q123 **Heidi Allen:** The other angle that you have touched on already is around cost to the taxpayer. This benefit change as a whole was designed to save the Department money. How are the savings stacking up?

Will Quince: It was not a policy designed to save money. It was designed—

Q124 **Heidi Allen:** There was an anticipation that money would be saved, though.

Will Quince: Eventually, yes, but it is primarily designed to better reflect the way that we live at the moment as a society. Don't forget that under the previous benefit there were some perverse rules that desperately needed changing. For example, it was for those 45 or over. If you were under 45, you were not able to claim it. It was also taken against your benefit.

Q125 **Heidi Allen:** Where are we numbers-wise, Will, in terms of what the anticipated cost difference is compared to where we are? Do you have that data?

Will Quince: That is a very good question. In the first two years of the policy, it was a £40 million cost, approximately. We anticipate around half that as a cost in year 3, but what we do not anticipate is any savings to the Department within this spending review period, so up to 2019-20.

Q126 **Heidi Allen:** What about beyond?

Will Quince: We have not done that analysis.

Helen Walker: We do not have any current estimates of what the savings will be going forward, so we could not give figures you on that.

Will Quince: Also, it would largely depend on the evaluation and any tweaks that we may want to make to the policy after that, hence why we would only look at it up to the end of this spending review period.

Q127 **Heidi Allen:** Can I ask one final little question, if I may, Chair? Sorry, it is a bit mean, Will, but it is the world we are living in at the moment with who knows what is going to happen next week. The evaluation piece of work, I have no doubt at all that you would like to do that piece of work but the honest truth is that you might not be in the job after a little while. Is this something that the Department will do regardless or does it require you being there to ask for it?

Will Quince: An evaluation will take place regardless because it is a new policy that we would want to look at to see how effective it is. Whether or not I am in post a week from now—I would love to be, but whether or not I am—I will certainly be leaving very strong handover notes. If I am not, I will certainly be joining you on the Back Benches, pushing very strongly and forcefully for a full evaluation of this policy because it does need to happen.

Q128 **Heidi Allen:** If it is a usual thing—as you say, a new policy gets evaluated, which is fair enough—there must be a timescale when you would expect to do it.

Will Quince: That is where the variation is and the timescale depends on the dataset. I would like to think any new Minister would take the same approach as me and that, as soon as we do have that dataset, because we want to make an informed decision on that—

Q129 **Heidi Allen:** Sorry, I may have missed it. When do we expect to have that dataset?

Helen Walker: We are working closely with our analysts to ensure that we have a robust set of data, but we are unlikely to have it until we have a sizeable body of people who have flowed off the benefit for a reasonable amount of time. We have not fully designed what will be evaluated yet, so I cannot give a commitment as to when we would have the data.

The other thing to say, as the Minister said, is that we are looking at that timescale, but if we were to change the timescale, we could be in the position of fundamentally changing the nature of the benefit, because one of the reasons it was reformed is that we did not want it to be, as the Minister said, an income replacement, but a one-off death grant to help with the immediate payments around bereavement.

The reason we had the monthly payments is that, when we were consulting about the changes, people felt that small incremental payments going forward would help with those expenses. The Committee rightly pointed out that to stop that at the anniversary of the death would not be a good thing, so we have continued it to 18 months.

If we were to expand it beyond the 18 months, we would have to look at whether that fundamentally changed the nature of the benefit as well, so it would not necessarily be a simple, straightforward thing, but it will be part and parcel of the evaluation.

Q130 **Heidi Allen:** Numbers-wise, where are you up to, in terms of numbers of people going on to this, versus what you would consider to be enough for a decent dataset?

Helen Walker: I don't have a number. I would need to go back and work with the analysts.

Heidi Allen: Perhaps you could let us know.

Chair: Come back to us on that.

Will Quince: Yes, we can certainly do that.

Q131 **Chair:** This idea that new benefits should be evaluated—is the Department doing that for Universal Credit? It is a pretty big new benefit, isn't it?

Will Quince: That would be a question for the Minister.

Chair: The Secretary of State, all right.

Will Quince: Or the Minister for employment.

Heidi Allen: You are very mean to Will, because he is very good.

Chair: No, fair enough. All right, Chris.

Q132 **Chris Stephens:** Just looking at timeframes and timescales, six months after the death of a spouse or civil partner, a bereaved Universal Credit claimant would usually be subject to some sort of conditionality requirement to move towards work. Why has the Department chosen six months for that particular part of it?

Will Quince: As you rightly say, those who are bereaved and also receive UC will not be subject to conditionality for six months after a death. This is a mandatory easement that is set by legislation, so that is the reason for it. It will also apply, incidentally, after the death of a child or a cohabitee partner.

Q133 **Chair:** When you said it is set by legislation, which legislation is that set in?

Will Quince: It is a mandatory easement, Mr Field. It is the period that is set in legislation.

Chair: I thought it was just ministerial policy. I cannot remember passing anything that said, "After six months of you losing a partner, you are going to be—" but let's leave that aside for the moment, because that isn't the point of Chris's question. What you said is quite interesting.

Q134 **Chris Stephens:** As you say, if it is set in the legislation and departmental policy, is there any discretion that a work coach could apply in those circumstances?

Will Quince: After this period has ended, yes, there is discretion. That is open to work coaches, in particular with regards to children and caring responsibilities, yes.

Q135 **Chris Stephens:** Could you tell me how many times that discretion has been used by work coaches?

Will Quince: No, I don't have that data to share with you at the moment. What we are doing is undertaking a piece of work to capture data on where we have supported a claimant by applying an easement. The plan is that we are aiming to complete that work by the end of this year, so I will be able to share that with you in due course. But you rightly raise a point that we recognise, which is why we want to have that data. We are working on it, and we hope to be able to have that by the end of the year.

Q136 **Chris Stephens:** Is that a calendar year or financial year?

Will Quince: My understanding is that is the end of this calendar year.

Chris Stephens: Thank you.

Q137 **Nigel Mills:** Could you just update us on where you are with responding to the McLaughlin judgment, please?

Will Quince: Yes, certainly. We recognise that we have incompatible law on the statute book. While we are actively considering possible options, there isn't one simple or obvious solution. This is something I have taken a very close interest in over the past three months because of the significance of the ruling. In nearly all cases, there is a very easy solution to most problems; invariably it is the wrong one. This is something that we have to get right, which is why I am looking very closely at it. We have to consider all the issues fully, and there are a number of very complicated issues. In my view, it would be wrong to make a decision on what action we will take before we had considered all of them.

There are a number of options that I have on the table at the moment. I want to make a decision as quickly as possible but, because of the complexity, every time I think I am looking at a potential solution, there are more unintended consequences of that that then lead to more issues, but I desperately want to find a solution to this as quickly as possible.

Q138 **Nigel Mills:** Do these options include do nothing?

Will Quince: No, they don't. Well, of course there is always an option on the table of doing nothing. It isn't one that I am looking at. They include things like a remedial order, which you would expect. They also include the potential of making ex gratia payments. Every option has unintended consequences, and I am trying to ensure that we make the right decision.

I appreciate that the judgment was handed down in August of last year. That is a long period of time. I only picked up the brief three months ago. I am determined to find a resolution, but it has to be the right one.

Q139 **Nigel Mills:** Speaking of remedial orders, there has been one laid to the Fatal Accidents Act, so if you were cohabiting for two years, you would be entitled under that Act. Doesn't that seem a bit strange, to set a principle there and then try for a different one in a very similar situation?

Will Quince: Initially, it is easy to see why one would jump to that conclusion. It is important to say that the courts cannot strike down primary legislation and only Parliament can change primary legislation. Of course there are similarities between the two judgments, but there are some very distinct differences, too. For example, the Fatal Accidents Act is a one-off payment. They have had a two-year definition as the basis of their solution.

It is important to stress—and this is when I look at period of coming up to 12 months that we have had—that the judgment was handed down in 2017, and they are only now laying that remedial order, so even for them, that did take some considerable looking into the issues and the complexities thereof. I desperately want a decision as quickly as possible, but it has to be the right one. I will look at this case and the potential precedents that it might set, but I think we are not entirely comparing apples with apples.

Q140 **Nigel Mills:** But one arm of Government is effectively saying that a two-year threshold should apply to trigger this entitlement. It would be a bit strange for a different arm of Government to decide that they wanted a different threshold. Has that two years come from nowhere, or is it thought to be a sign of an enduring relationship or something?

Will Quince: Helen, do you want to talk about the two years and why they chose that?

Helen Walker: As I understand, they have defined two years as being a stable and long-term relationship, comparable to those of spouses and civil partners, for the purposes of dependency damages, so they have aligned the two with that. I don’t know if it would necessarily be the right thing to do in our circumstances, because obviously we might have circumstances where there are also children involved and a whole heap of other things to consider.

The thing is we don’t want to jump quickly to a solution and take precedents from other legislation that might not be directly comparable and, as the Minister said, create unintended consequences. We will be looking very carefully at this. If there are precedents within it that are helpful, we will look at those, but I do not think we are in a position yet to say how we would proceed, or what would be the right thing to do.

Chair: I don’t think anyone would accuse the Department of jumping quickly. Sorry, Nigel.

Q141 **Nigel Mills:** Presumably, if somebody has been in a relationship for a fortnight, you are not going to think they are eligible, so at some point you are going to have to have some threshold for this.

Helen Walker: At this point we cannot say what we think we are defining as a relationship for the purposes of addressing this, or how we are going to proceed. I do not think we should be drawn on that until we have really thought about it, because we do not want to make a mistake that leaves us with a position that we cannot necessarily justify to someone who has been bereaved.

Q142 **Nigel Mills:** Are you going to consult on the options? You could just consult on all your options and see which ones generally found favour and which ones had more objections.

Will Quince: That is an option. What I need to do is see all of the potential options open to me, and then whittle those down to the most realistic. I think the decision should come from the Department, but of course that would be guided and informed by conversations and close working with a number of key stakeholders in this area to ensure that we are getting it right.

Q143 **Nigel Mills:** Is one of your options looking at giving the payment to the children, presumably via the surviving parent, rather than paying the surviving partner?

Will Quince: It is not at the moment. I know that is the way in which other countries do it. I think there are very good reasons why not to do it that way. Other countries do have orphan benefits, for example, but this benefit is designed to support the individual who takes over the responsibility, or previously had part of the responsibility, for the financial affairs of that couple. The children do not ordinarily have responsibility for the financial affairs of a family or a household.

As I said a little bit earlier, this is not an income replacement benefit. It is a payment designed to assist people who are going through a hugely distressing and difficult and emotionally charged period in their life, to help get them through that period. I do not think making that payment to the children would answer many questions. In fact, it could pose more questions than it does address issues.

Q144 **Steve McCabe:** As I understand it, the average cost of a funeral has increased by about 6% a year for the past 14 years. I just wondered, on that basis, why the other expenses component has been cut for the past 16 years.

Will Quince: Yes, Mr McCabe, you are right, in that the additional element of the Funeral Expenses Payment has been capped since 2003, although it has plateaued recently. The cost of funerals has been rising for the past few years. There are also far more options available now, in terms of simple funerals, and more funeral directors are offering that, and crematoria in particular are offering that as an option. In my view, the key to this is to ensure that we have a sustainable model that is fair to the taxpayer but, most importantly, supports those who need it, that covers the cost of funerals.

I am alive to the fact that £700 has been frozen since 2003. It will not surprise you to know that I will be looking at a number of options ahead of a potential spending review bid. I obviously cannot go into the detail thereof, but I suspect you would expect nothing less of me than to be looking at how we could increase that. I certainly want to see it increased.

Q145 **Steve McCabe:** Is that your way of saying you are planning to review it?

Will Quince: I keep everything under review. This is something that I am acutely aware of—that stakeholders tell me is insufficient. As a result, as I say, I am looking at numerous options ahead of a spending review bid.

Q146 **Steve McCabe:** I appreciate the difficulty you have over this, but if it is under review—and you accept that it has been capped for 16 years and it is not adequate in that sense—when would you hope to come to a decision?

Will Quince: Any uplift in this element of the Funeral Expenses Payment would come with significant cost, and that would require Treasury approval. As I say, my personal view is I would like to see it increased. That is also the view of a number of key stakeholders. The question is what we do with it. That is why I have numerous options, and I am looking at those ahead of a potential spending review bid. It is still a little up in the air as to when the spending review is likely to be. I suspect we will know a little more perhaps in a week or so, but we are aiming for that being in the autumn.

Q147 **Steve McCabe:** Can I turn to one other aspect of this? This Committee—or in fact its predecessor—back in 2016 suggested there was quite a lot of concern about who was eligible for funeral expenses. You are probably familiar with that. The Committee at that time suggested that there was probably a good argument for some kind of eligibility checker. The Department was not terribly keen on that idea at the time, but it did promise to explore more appropriate solutions, as it put it, that would better address the problems of people not understanding eligibility. What are those more appropriate solutions, and what has happened on that?

Will Quince: That is a very good question. I would very much like to have an eligibility checker of the type you speak of. The problem in this is because the eligibility criteria are very complex and hugely complicated, it is very difficult to implement something like that. In fact, it could potentially confuse claimants more.

Speaking to stakeholders, and indeed those who have tragically been bereaved, very often what they want to do is speak to somebody in person. What we are doing is rolling out a new process that will allow people to report a death earlier. That has been piloted, and as part of that, we are able to promote the Funeral Expenses Payments. The trial is currently in the pilot area, and what we are planning to do is progress that out to a full rollout in the autumn of this year.

Q148 **Steve McCabe:** I noticed that when the Department replied, it used the plural “solutions”. Were there other things under consideration as well?

Will Quince: In terms of making people more aware of the Funeral Expenses Payments?

Steve McCabe: Yes.

Will Quince: Yes—updates, for example, to gov.uk. We are also looking at refreshing our leaflets, and looking at where it would be appropriate to make those available, outlining clearly what people could be entitled to and the eligibility and criteria for those benefits. We are looking at that at the moment. If the Committee, as part of its report, would like to make suggestions as to where it would be appropriate to have the leaflets and that information, I would be very interested to hear it. I want people to be as informed as possible of what they are entitled to.

Although my own personal bereavement was slightly different, I know it is a hugely traumatic period. You need that information to be as easily accessible as possible at the key touchpoints at which you are interacting with the state, or indeed third parties. For example, it could be at a hospice, a hospital, the registrar, or gov.uk. I want it to be as widely available as possible, also bearing in mind the sensitivities around where we have that information. Any advice or guidance from the Committee would be very welcome.

Q149 **Steve McCabe:** I would certainly accept that. I appreciate that you have not been long in post, but it is three years since the last time we made recommendations, and we seem to have come as far as a pilot in that time. If the Committee is able to make further recommendations, is there an expectation that things might happen a bit more quickly?

Will Quince: All I would say, Mr McCabe, is do not underestimate my determination to do whatever I can in this role to make it as easy as possible for bereaved individuals to receive the support that they are entitled to. Subject to me still being in post, I will look very closely at what the Committee provides. I want to make this information as widely available as possible.

Steve McCabe: I think we should probably settle for that for the time being, don’t you, Chair?

Q150 **Chair:** Where we all go with a death is, first, to register it and, secondly, to be greeted by the funeral director. Aren’t they the obvious points for handing out leaflets?

Will Quince: Yes, and they do. We are working very closely with funeral directors. As I say, I had a roundtable very recently with a number of the key funeral providers, but also a number of charities and other organisations that represent crematoria and burial grounds and others. We are trying to get there to those touchpoints, but certainly, with the two you referenced, that information is regularly and consistently handed out. What I am keen to do is look at the other touchpoints. The point at which you rightly suggest that information is available is very reactive. I am also looking at proactive options, so there—

Q151 **Chair:** If we went to our registrars and asked them, we would expect them to be able to give us a DWP leaflet on this?

Will Quince: I would hope so, yes.

Helen Walker: Yes.

Q152 **Chair:** Because they are very sensitive, registrars, certainly.

Will Quince: Yes.

Q153 **Nigel Mills:** Can I just take you back to the cost cap? It just seems slightly bizarre to have had something capped for that long and it not be lined up for review. Either we are trying to help people with the real cost of a simple funeral or we are not. Don't you think it really is time to get that cap looked at, and then get it linked to inflation, so that we can make this a bit fairer?

Will Quince: The answer to that question is yes, but it would be subject to Treasury approval.

Q154 **Nigel Mills:** We are about to have a spending review. Is that one of your Department's requests?

Will Quince: As I say, it is one of the numerous options in this regard that I am looking at that is on my desk at the moment. I am conscious it needs looking at; I am determined that it be looked at. It does require Treasury approval.

Q155 **Nigel Mills:** Have you costed how much raising the cap would be?

Will Quince: Yes, I have. It depends, of course. There are numerous options as to how you would raise the cap. You could do it by CPI. You could do it based on, for example, raising it by inflation since 2003, or you could just raise it to an arbitrary figure. The other thing to bear in mind—

Q156 **Nigel Mills:** What arbitrary figure are you thinking about?

Will Quince: I am not going to go into the detail, as you would appreciate. There are two other things to stress. The industry now has a number of other options available that have reduced the cost of a funeral. A simple cremation, for example, I think the average cost is around £1,200. We also make available interest-free social budgeting loans, and those on UC can access budgeting advances. That is in addition, but I accept fully what you are saying. It has been frozen since 2003, and I would like nothing more than to be in a position to be able to increase it.

Q157 **Nigel Mills:** Is it one of the things you will be requesting in the spending review, that there be a Treasury permission to reform this on one of the sensible lines you have just set out?

Will Quince: The Department will set out a number of options ahead of the spending review. All I would say is this is a priority of mine. There are a number of options. I will make a decision as to the most appropriate of those options to go up towards a spending review, and I am determined to fix this.

Q158 **Nigel Mills:** It is not a large number in the scheme of your Department, presumably, with spending review requests.

Will Quince: No, it is not. Most of the options will be in the low to mid-ranking millions, but these are still significant sums of money for the Department to find without Treasury support as part of a spending review. As I say, do not underestimate my determination to fix this, because this is an area that I know needs attention; stakeholders tell me consistently that it needs attention. We are very much aware of that as a Department. There are numerous options on the table at the moment. Several of those I think the Committee would be hugely supportive of, or I hope certainly that they would, but they do require Treasury support and approval.

Q159 **Chair:** Will, if you take your mind back to your desk, where all these calculations are, what do your desk papers tell you on updating this benefit from the last point at which it was frozen? What is the figure in your papers on that?

Will Quince: There is probably no secret. If you were to tot up that figure since 2003—quite rudimentary maths on my part—it would end up being just shy of £1,000.

Q160 **Chair:** No, but how much would that cost your Department?

Will Quince: Somewhere in the region of £8 million to £12 million.

Q161 **Chair:** You spend a third of Government expenditure.

Will Quince: Indeed. As I say, that is still a significant sum of money to find outside of Treasury support, which is—

Q162 **Chair:** No, it is very significant for taxpayers, sure.

Will Quince: Quite; I totally agree.

Q163 **Heidi Allen:** In our last evidence session—I don't know if you caught up with it, Will—we heard evidence from, among other people, some funeral directors, and possibly the same figures that you have been meeting with. One of them, Simon Cox from Dignity, gave us what seemed like great news. It was that the Department was now looking at, instead of an invoice coming at the end after the funeral, proactively being able to present that pro forma invoice to the DWP to say, "This is how much the funeral is going to cost. Can you pay it?" That is brilliant news. Can you tell us how that has come about?

Will Quince: Yes, certainly. I don't think we have had an opportunity to announce this yet, so I suppose this is the formal announcement of this direct to the Select Committee. You are absolutely right, Ms Allen, that we do not need to wait for a final invoice to process a claim. Funeral Expenses Payments can be made in advance of a funeral taking place, if the contract between the funeral director and the claimant has been received by the decision-maker.

What is significant about this is that if a contract is provided, we do not need to know the date of the funeral, so this is quite game-changing. This came about through the work that we do with the stakeholders and, in particular, the funeral providers to try to make it as easy as possible for those to be able to make a claim in a timely fashion. I hope that that will be good news for the Committee.

Q164 **Heidi Allen:** Talk us through the process. From a timescale point of view, how swiftly might that invoice be paid? Just put us in the shoes of somebody arriving at the Jobcentre with their pro forma invoice in their hand, or having emailed it.

Will Quince: Yes. Helen, do you want to talk through that process?

Helen Walker: Yes. They could arrive at a Jobcentre, in which case they could be given the claim form to send in and post in to our processing team. They are much more likely to be referred to the phone service and to make the claim over the phone, because that is a speedier way to do it now and get things flowing. Virtually, as soon as they send in that paperwork to the claims processors—

Q165 **Heidi Allen:** They can e-mail that in as well, can they?

Helen Walker: They normally would post it in. That is the normal way that they receive things. The forms cannot be completed online at the moment and we are looking at that, although we understand that quite a lot of people are quite happy to post these things, and they are often posting lots of things around a death anyway.

Q166 **Heidi Allen:** When I managed my mum's funeral last year, that was all by e-mail; everything I had from the funeral director was by e-mail.

Helen Walker: They can forward it in. It is not a problem. We have many different ways that we can receive the information, but typically people post things in to us. The bottom line is that as soon as the person who is handling the claim receives that information, and they have checked that all the other eligibility criteria are met, they can make the payment.

Will Quince: It is processed straight away.

Helen Walker: Our target time is 15 days, but we can turn around quicker than that if everything else is checked out.

Q167 **Heidi Allen:** From the minute it arrives on that person's desk, 15 days, and that payment then goes direct to the funeral director?

Helen Walker: It could go direct to the funeral director, if that is what the person has asked us to do, but it depends what they are claiming for. They might not be claiming entirely for things that are being organised by the funeral director, so they might have some elements of the bills that they are paying themselves. It would depend very much on the individual claim, but we could pay directly to the funeral director if that was the account that we were asked to pay into.

Q168 **Heidi Allen:** They would receive that money within 15 days?

Will Quince: That is our target, yes.

Helen Walker: That is our target turnaround time.

Will Quince: There will be some that exceed that, and there will be some that are earlier than that. We want to get it done as quickly as possible, but it is processed immediately.

Q169 **Heidi Allen:** Assuming the paperwork is fine, there are no queries on it and they have asked for the money to go direct to the funeral director, how soon after that 15-day window—or do they get it on the 15th day?—is the funeral director paid?

Helen Walker: They could get it before that. I can't honestly tell you the point at which the claims processor has a claim that they are saying, "Pay". I cannot tell you whether it would be one day, two days or three days. We would need to check that and come back to you. At the point they have all the information they need to say, "This claim can be paid", they can make that payment. The 15 days is our target time for turning a claim around. I think in the last annual report that we published, the average clearance time was 18.6 days, but some of that will be because not everybody sends us in the information, even in the 15 days.

Q170 **Heidi Allen:** Yes, that is accepted. I mean, it is brilliant—and, forgive me, Will, this might not be in your brief, I forget exactly what your brief covers—and that tells me we can do it for childcare payments, too.

Will Quince: You are tempting me down a road that I would need to go away and think about.

Chair: You would love to go down, but you won't.

Will Quince: Quite, Mr Field, quite.

Heidi Allen: The point is: paying in advance is doable and direct to the provider of the service.

Q171 **Chair:** Might you take that back and make that point?

Will Quince: I note the comparison that you are making. We may wish to pick it up separately and discuss that, which I am very happy to do.

Q172 **Heidi Allen:** It is exactly the same.

Will Quince: Yes, I am very happy to look at that.

Q173 **Chair:** It is a very important precedent, isn't it? It is great and it is wonderful, your statement today, thank you. It does show that if a Minister is willing, these changes can be made. Thank you.

Helen Walker: As the Minister said, we will take it back, but it is a different system with often quite different legislation.

Chair: No, don't go back on it.

Heidi Allen: It is whether the system is doable or not.

Chair: It shows it works. It is wonderful.

Helen Walker: But the Social Fund is a different payment system with a different set of processes and a different legislative base.

Q174 **Chair:** Of course it is, but the Department has shown how it can, if it wishes to, respond to needs.

Will Quince: Yes. As I say, you are tempting me down a road, and already I am thinking about the considerable differences between the two, but I think this is one to take offline. I can absolutely see your line of questioning and the potential similarity. As Helen rightly says, there are also some considerable differences.

Chair: There is a larger number, for a start.

Will Quince: As I say, I am very happy to pick up with you separately on that issue.

Q175 **Heidi Allen:** It is the concept, isn't it, of an up-front payment? You are right, it is a very different payment indeed, but to assist a claimant, it can be paid up front. That is the whole flaw with childcare payments, as you know, particularly in that regard. We want people to get into work, and being able to pay that up front is one of the biggest barriers to why they can't at the moment.

Q176 **Chair:** Is it your responsibility, or is this another—

Will Quince: Childcare within UC will sit within my portfolio, yes.

Chair: Great, so we are talking to the right person.

Will Quince: You are, yes. As I say, I am very happy to pick up with you separately, once I have given a little more thought to both the similarities and the differences between the two systems.

Chair: Sure. Thank you for the statement, but also thank you for seeing that it could lead to improvements elsewhere. Chris, we want another improvement now.

Q177 **Chris Stephens:** Yes, we do. This may or may not be the last question; we will see. The Scottish Government have a definition of a simple funeral. They have published advice on how funeral directors describe the services, and what they should include. Is that something that the

Department is looking at for the rest of the UK, and has it gained any lessons from what the Scottish Government have done?

Will Quince: Yes. This is one of the issues where Scotland has used its devolved powers to take a different position from that of England and Wales, or certainly England. I am watching very closely what is happening in Scotland. Obviously, it is very early days, based on their policy. I have some initial concerns, based on what they are doing around the definition of a simple funeral.

What we very intentionally do around the additional element of the Funeral Expenses Payment is we do not prescribe what those additional elements may be. That is because everybody grieves differently and will want different types of funerals, so we have taken a very different approach.

I am very interested in what Scotland is doing in relation to eligibility criteria. It comes with another significant additional cost, but I am very interested to look at the impact that that has on take-up. Even if we were to look at that potential approach in the future, I would need to see the evidence from the Scottish model to then see the impact that there would be if it were rolled out more widely in England, but I am watching with great interest what is happening in Scotland.

Q178 **Chris Stephens:** The stakeholders who helped devise the Scottish model, because there was a lot of consultation, have they pushed your Department to—

Will Quince: At the roundtable, the Scottish model was raised. I think they can see some of the advantage of that model, hence why—as I said to them, and as I repeat to the Committee today—I am watching it with very close interest. The changes, because of the scale in Scotland versus the scale in England, would be considerable. I also want to see the impact that that definition has, and if it restricts people, in terms of what they would want to spend that additional element of the Funeral Expenses Payment on, but I think it is very interesting, what they are doing, and I watch it very closely with interest.

Q179 **Chair:** The numbers between here and Scotland are not relevant, are they? If you are doing a funeral, it is 100% you, the family, doing the funeral.

Will Quince: What is relevant, Mr Field, are the numbers in terms of the Treasury impact. If you increase the eligibility, for example, which is what the Scottish Government are doing, that clearly has an impact on the cost of the benefit. Hence why any change in that regard would be significant, given the numbers in England, and would require Treasury approval.

Q180 **Chair:** I thought what Scotland was doing was slightly different. They may be doing that with extra English money. We have been searching in this inquiry and the previous one for a simple funeral, so that every funeral director would go in and present to people, "Here is what we do", whatever phrase we come up with, rather than go in and start adding huge costs or huge additions that are very costly. That is where it is not just the 6% a year going up; it is 6% on a bill of x, rather than 3x.

Will Quince: I will ask Helen to pick up on that specifically, but on what I was referring to in terms of the eligibility changes, which is probably the most significant change that Scotland has made, here in England, say you had four siblings and three were in receipt of state benefits and one was not. They would potentially not be entitled to a Funeral Expenses Payment, because one individual of the siblings would be required to cover the cost of that funeral. Under the Scottish model, that is not taken into consideration. If just one sibling—Helen can correct me if I am wrong—is in receipt of state benefits and therefore entitled to—

Chair: Sure. Will, I am not asking about that.

Will Quince: You are referring specifically to the simple funeral?

Q181 **Chair:** As I understand it, the Scottish Government have defined what a simple funeral is.

Will Quince: Yes, they have. Helen, do you want to talk a bit more about it?

Chair: That could be something we adopted, and that we would require all funeral directors to give to people as a basic decent funeral, and if they want anything more, it would cost more. One of our things we have been trying to grapple with is these rapacious funeral directors who, when you are very vulnerable, knock the costs sky-high. If we have a culture of, "This is what everybody goes for," we would limit those extra costs, way outside what the state might pay or not pay.

Will Quince: Helen will come in and answer it in far more detail than I can, but in terms of what they have done, in essence it is guidance; because it is an unregulated industry across the whole of the United Kingdom, it is just that. Helen, would you like to talk a bit more about what exactly they are doing?

Helen Walker: You are quite right, in that what Scotland has defined—rather than a simple funeral—is the low-cost options in a clearly priced package, and then people can have add-ons if they want. As the Minister has rightly said, it is guidance and it is not enforceable if there is no industry regulation.

When we have looked at this before, talking with a range of stakeholders—including people who represent the bereaved—it is that that sort of package does not always necessarily take account of people's personal or religious preferences and things like that. We also have far more choice in the market now, with things like direct cremations.

We very much agree with the Committee that we should be driving transparency in the industry, for people to be able to see that lower-cost funerals are an option that people should be actively pointed to and encouraged to take up.

The other thing Scotland has done is publish a glossary of terms, which explains the most common terms. As part of the work that we were talking about earlier, when we are piloting the further information that will be given to people when they report a death, we are looking at whether or not the guidance and the leaflet that we are talking about might be augmented by taking on board some of the things that Scotland has done. We do not want to go as far as to define a simple funeral, because the evidence we have is that that might not be the most helpful thing, rather than driving transparency of the low-cost options.

Chair: Very good. I think, Chris, we will look more at what Scotland is doing before we report, but thank you both very much. We hope to see you back.

Will Quince: I hope to be back.

Q182 **Chair:** You said earlier that the Department would publish what it wanted before the spending review. Did I mishear you or did you misspeak?

Will Quince: What was this in relation to, Mr Field?

Chair: It was in reply to a question that Nigel put to you. You said before the spending review, you would be laying out the Department's priorities. Did I mishear?

Will Quince: I am afraid you may well have. I will be laying those out to the Treasury, Mr Field.

Chair: I see, not to us.

Will Quince: I would certainly not be putting those in the public domain, but I would say rest assured that I suspect you will be in favour of the option that I will no doubt put forward to the Treasury in due course.

Chair: Great. Thank you very much for the session.