

Work and Pensions Committee

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

Wednesday 30 September 2020

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

Questions 210 - 273

Witnesses

I: Dr Thérèse Coffey, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions; and John Paul Marks, Director General, Work and Health Services, Department for Work and Pensions.



Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Thérèse Coffey and John Paul Marks.

Q210 **Chair:** Welcome to this meeting of the Work and Pensions Select Committee, and a very warm welcome to the Secretary of State and John Paul Marks. Thank you both very much for joining us. We have had one or two technical difficulties, but we hope we are going to be okay to run through all the questions that we have planned to put to you.

Can I start by putting a point to you, Secretary of State? As you know, the Committee welcomed the £20 per week increase in Universal Credit that was introduced at the start of the pandemic. It is due to be removed in April, but wouldn't it be inconceivable to cut everybody's benefit before the pandemic is over?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: Mr Chairman, you will be aware it was a one-year measure, which the Chancellor thought was a sensible part of the way that we injected a further £9.4 billion into welfare support for people in this difficult time. That legislation does automatically come to an end, but I will be open with you—what we continue to do with welfare support is still in active discussion with the Treasury.

Q211 **Chair:** So that particular point remains under review at the moment?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: Yes. There are a number of different elements. More broadly, we have been thinking quite carefully, of course, for our spending review, which is under way. Normally the Budget would be the time for announcing AME events, as you will recall from your time as Chief Secretary to the Treasury. With the Budget no longer happening in this calendar year, being put back into early 2021 or sometime in 2021—I do not know the date—we will need to try to have a separate process in how we take that forward in our consideration, but overall I am so proud of what DWP has done, our civil servants, in responding.

I think the comprehensive package has been absolutely useful in terms of stemming some of the challenges. Of course some people have lost their jobs; we know that. The further winter plan will continue to help, and we need to keep considering some of the other levels of support that we may wish to provide coming ahead. I do worry about financial resilience and am very conscious of debt challenges. Frankly, the biggest element for me is the basic Maslow hierarchy of needs, and that is roofs over people's heads, so that is part of what is driving me in my considerations as we go forward with potential further measures.

Q212 **Chair:** As you know, the Committee has also very warmly welcomed the achievements of the Department in managing the huge number of claims and all the challenges of the last few months. We have been very impressed by what the staff have managed, and indeed by some of the decisions the Department has made as well.

Can I raise another issue with you? Universal Credit and Local Housing



Allowance were both increased at the start of the crisis, but the benefit cap was not, so some people have not had the benefit of the increases because they have been newly capped. This has particularly been an issue in London, where rents are higher. The Employment Minister told us on 23 April, and I quote, "This hopefully will impact a very small number of people". In fact, the number of households capped has almost doubled; it went from just under 80,000 to 154,000. Why was the Department's expectation so wide of the mark, and how will the Department respond to the fact that so many people have been newly capped in this way? For example, will there be additional funding for discretionary housing payments?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: Discretionary housing payments have been an important part of how we try to help manage, through local government, some of the variations that were happening. I think the substantial increase in LHA, which is permanent, will have helped a lot of people around the country.

I agree there are a significant number of households, and every household of course is a family. I do not want to put words into the mouths of other Ministers. In terms of percentages of overall claimants, it is still a very small change, but I do recognise every household matters to that family unit.

Q213 **Chair:** Yes, an increase of 80,000 households. From the Minister's comment, clearly the Department was not expecting such a big increase. Now that we know that big increase has occurred, are you looking at the possibility of further funding for discretionary housing Payments?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: I think a proposal as part of our spending review bid has gone in. That has in no way concluded.

Chair: That is very helpful, thank you very much.

Q214 **Selaine Saxby:** Thank you, and good morning. I am going to start with the Kickstart scheme as part of the Plan for Jobs. Around the time of the announcement, there was some noise about how this would work for smaller companies, with the 30 employees involved at the time. Now it has settled in, are you able to update us on how it is going to work for small businesses and whether the FSB has changed its position a bit?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: I will start straightaway by saying the FSB is now a gateway on a national level. I do not quite understand how we got to where we were with the FSB, so I picked up the phone to the person I know at the FSB and very quickly, within a week, we got that, so that it was going to become a gateway. I do not want to linger particularly on the FSB because I think we are in a good place. It is in a partnership with Adecco. The FSB is not used to this sort of member services element, but already we have been in discussion about it over the summer. Certainly the Chambers of Commerce, which are probably more used to doing localised member services, were always up for becoming gateways and pulling together different ways that smaller employers could access Kickstart.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

It is worth taking a step back, Selaine. We looked at the Future Jobs Fund and found there were some strengths. I fully understand why the Government did what they did, but I felt that quite a lot of that was very restricting in the different sorts of criteria of the time. In the end, hardly any private sector was involved in the Future Jobs Fund and we wanted a different approach. We wanted to make sure it was open to any organisation, whether it was local government, voluntary sectors or the private sector, because we know this is a mutually beneficial arrangement that helps young people to get on the first rung of the jobs ladder, but it also is helpful for businesses to have that extra work.

The key differential from something like the furlough scheme is that these are new jobs, additional jobs, and there is also the extra wraparound care, which is funded as part of the Kickstart scheme. I am afraid I only saw the numbers last week, but we have already had applications for well over 60,000 vacancies, which are going through our vetting process. It is important that we take our time—not be slow, but take our time—to be thorough because we have already estimated that, unfortunately, about one in seven applications has been, frankly, verging on fraudulent. We need to be careful about that, which is why we have gone through a very systematic process in how we make sure these are legitimate businesses, legitimate organisations, and they are additional roles.

I am pleased with Kickstart and the fact that any employer can access it. One of the reasons for having the 30 threshold was to have an element of assurance about the wraparound support because that is an important of Kickstart, but I am pleased with progress.

Q215 Selaine Saxby: How are you going to assess the success of the scheme as we move through it?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: The essence, first of all, is whether we are getting enough applications for the vacancies, doing the matching and those extra skills come through. It is not the intention necessarily that Kickstart automatically leads to staying in that job and carrying on, but it may be, and it may well be a gateway for apprenticeships as well. A huge announcement was made yesterday about lifetime learning. I see Kickstart as an important offer, particularly focused on young people at risk of long-term unemployment, to help give them the support and the skills so that, if that is not the right role for them potentially or if that employer is not creating lifetime jobs, it helps them to go and get a new job.

John Paul Marks: As the Secretary of State says, we have been able to publish our gateways online and we will keep doing that. We have over 500 gateways, so that route for small and medium enterprises into Kickstart is now established, including the Federation of Small Businesses.

On evaluation, we will do both quantitative and qualitative evaluation on, as the Secretary of State says, starts, successful placements and being able to see the outcomes, but also on value for money and additionality. The Future Jobs Fund had a very positive evaluation, but we have been



HOUSE OF COMMONS

able to expand the scope, so hopefully we can get voluntary, private and public sector opportunities for our young people and prove a bigger return for the taxpayer and our young people, particularly those at risk of long-term employment. We think the programme can have an excellent impact.

Q216 Sir Desmond Swayne: About 15% of NEETs are not on Universal Credit. How are we going to reach them?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: The initial phase is focusing on people already in contact with the jobcentre through Universal Credit. I have made it very clear to officials, and they know this, that this cannot be uniquely for people on benefits, the criteria being that they are at risk of long-term unemployment. That is the avenue. The other important thing to stress is that all referrals will be made through jobcentre coaches. The doors, in my view, are open—literally and physically—for people who meet that criteria, and that is the overriding element. But we are starting off with the cohort that we know about and want to start to help with getting to work as quickly as possible.

Q217 Sir Desmond Swayne: If you are 26, you have missed the boat. What is available?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: Our main focus is 16 to 24-year-olds. Again, I have said to officials that it will depend on where we have different matching opportunities. Post 16 to 24-year-olds are not excluded, but the priority is the 16 to 24-year-olds. In our wider Plan for Jobs, getting people back into work, we have increased the number of SWAP placements, sector-based work academy placements, which are opportunities to learn some new skills, perhaps a bit of pivot in your career. If your sector is potentially not the one that is recruiting, or is even laying off, you might want to get some help there.

We have something called JETS. That is trying to put the work and health programme on real rocket boosters—again, a huge expansion there—which I am sure JP will be happy to talk about.

We are also bringing in job-finding support. We have not contracted this yet, so it will not be starting until next year. The intention is to help quite a lot of people who have been working for a long time and have never had to prepare a CV, do not have a LinkedIn profile or whatever it is. We will be involving recruitment agency processes to give more targeted support to that kind of cohort. We are opening up youth hubs right across the country to try to help with the youth offer, which is not unique to Kickstart. It might be traineeships, apprenticeships and signposting, and also working with the National Careers Service. JP is living and breathing this, so he could add a bit more colour.

John Paul Marks: The Secretary of State has covered the main elements, but we announced in the summer that we would double the number of work coaches. We are rapidly recruiting work coaches across the country to eventually increase the number to over 27,000 by the end of this



HOUSE OF COMMONS

financial year. For youth opportunities, as the Secretary of State said, Kickstart is a part of intensive support for young people, though Kickstart would be more for those longer-term unemployed young people who might have more barriers or who are on a benefit after a longer period of time.

For a lot of other younger people, it might be a quicker opportunity into work: work experience, apprenticeships, traineeships, et cetera. We have also put in place youth employability work coaches—young people are supported by work coaches with lower caseloads so they can spend more time with that customer. There is the job entry targeted support—JETS, which the Secretary of State talked about—and the work and health programme. It already has a good evidence base, good starts and good referrals. It is established, so we are building on that, increasing the number of placements and referring earlier to that provision. That is not just for 18 to 24-year-olds but for our whole caseload, and we are making sure that is available everywhere.

Job-finding support, as the Secretary of State said, is accelerated early support for those that need it, alongside the work coach offer. We are trying to get some of that in place using our Flexible Support Fund now. We have a number of those contracts going through, but then national provision across in the country in the new year.

On sector-based work academy placements, again, the evidence base about their effectiveness is very strong, hence the announcement to scale up. We are aiming to do 40,000 SWAPs by the end of this financial year, and double that next year. There will be a long-term unemployment programme next year, recognising that, as the labour market changes, we will want to make sure anybody with a health condition or a disability or who is longer-term unemployed has the support they need.

The final element is a significant increase in the Flexible Support Fund—all our jobcentres in their communities working with their combined authorities, and with the voluntary sector. I think last week you were talking to some of our partners who work on reducing youth unemployment and improving youth opportunities. We have been working with them on our youth hubs to try to make sure we can put our work coaches into the community, connecting with partners who build good relationships with young people to make sure that wherever they are—in school, coming out of school, college and university, wherever it be—they are able to access employment support if they want to.

Q218 Selaine Saxby: You touched on it very briefly, but how do you plan to make sure that disabled young people can access the Kickstart scheme?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: I know that Justin, the Minister for Disabled People, has done a number of roundtables with various organisations. I think it is fair to say that a lot of people on ESA are not expected to find work because they are in the limited capability support group. The intention is to continue to try to expand aspects of that, but other elements of our youth offer are there and open for ESA claimants. We saw last year that we had increased



HOUSE OF COMMONS

expenditure on things like Access to Work, and a record number of people in the age group we are focusing on got support. We will continue to try to support them.

We are trying to do a much more flexible, blended offer to try to help, so there has very much been a cross-ministerial effort. I and Mims, the Minister for Employment, have led on it but everybody has chipped in, from our Lords Minister, with her extensive experience, and others with their own focus on the people they primarily help.

John Paul Marks: We have started to see over 500 gateways published. For example, the Institute for the Blind in Wales, which has just come on as a gateway, is working with us. We know from Help to Claim that around a third of people who access Universal Credit have a health condition or a disability. Kickstart can work very well for those customers, and we will try to make sure it works for them.

Q219 **Steve McCabe:** Secretary of State, you mentioned Access to Work, will that be available on Kickstart placements?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: It is my understanding that, if it is a job that is being created, there should be support.

John Paul Marks: Access to Work, as you know, is for an adjustment for an employee. It might be a workplace adjustment around a particular desk or chair or travel to work.

Steve McCabe: Or equipment.

John Paul Marks: Or equipment. Record investments. We are continuing to make sure that Kickstart should be treated like a full-time job, with an interview process and support in work, as the Secretary of State said, if possible.

Dr Thérèse Coffey: Paying into pensions.

John Paul Marks: Yes. We are covering the NICs and the auto-enrolment costs. Things like the Flexible Support Fund will help with travel; Access to Work would help with travel and adjustments.

Q220 **Selaine Saxby:** Broadening out from the Kickstart scheme into the entire Plan for Jobs, what support is the Department giving to disabled people and people with health conditions, many of whom perhaps feel their relationship with work has changed through the pandemic?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: We are no longer in the situation of stay at home, so the situation is still about work. If you can work from home, then do, but we are not going to get involved in the middle between employers and employees in terms of trying to be individual arbiters in that regard. There is a lot of guidance for employers to be Covid-safe. HSE has been doing some pretty good work, and I know some more is coming.



We need to try to make sure that employers are helping transition people back into work safely and support them to follow social distancing if they are being required to come into the workplace, if they cannot work from home. Of course, the onus is on employers. I am sure the incentive of trying to get going again fully in their business will be an important part of making sure that people feel safe.

Q221 Dr Ben Spencer: I would like to continue on the theme of people living with disabilities and talk a bit about the disability benefit system and assessments. Face-to-face assessments have been suspended for quite a while now. Could you provide an update on how that has gone?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: We took an early decision, in line with staying at home and other lockdown elements. We have tried to make sure that services were kept going, particularly prioritising new claims. For quite a lot of people who were already on disability benefits or health-related benefits, reassessments would more or less roll over—I think that is the best way of saying it. There has been a significant increase in the number of people for whom we are trying to be more paper-based, do more telephony. We are in discussion about how we can safely reintroduce a limited number of potential face-to-face assessments, because we want to make sure that people are getting the support that they are entitled to.

I know that Justin has been very active in trying to make sure that we help with those elements of how we handle things for those in our society who need support. In that regard we are still working on some plans, and we are not at a stage yet where we can share exactly what we are going to be doing, but the vulnerability of people is very much in our minds.

Q222 Dr Ben Spencer: The Minister for Disabled People has previously told us that the numbers of people applying for new benefits have decreased. That was quite concerning because that would imply that the change to the system is perhaps acting as a barrier for people applying for benefits. Do you have any more data on that? What is the state of play there?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: I do not have numbers to hand. I think it did fall, but I am not aware that there is a particular reason why. Our processes effectively stayed the same. The difference is in the assessment element and how we manage the assessment. We have prioritised new claimants in that regard.

John Paul Marks: That is exactly right. We have seen new claims for Personal Independence Payment coming back again, so you are quite right. We were historically seeing around 50,000 new claims a month for the Personal Independence Payment. That dropped when Covid hit. As the Secretary of State said, we took immediate steps to suspend any activity that was reassessing that caseload, and we stopped referrals from DLA on to PIP, full PIP rollout, to avoid that risk, but the new claim demand has now recovered and is close to what it was this time last year.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The main hypothesis is that, when Covid hit, people either deferred claims that they were in the process of either going through or were starting, or they could not access the support organisations they were working with. We took steps to make both PIP and ESA available online so that people could make their claim if they could not get to a support organisation. We also removed the need to provide a fit note for an ESA claim if you had Covid, or if you were unable to get one because of Covid, to still process new claims for ESA and Universal Credit without the fit note.

Dr Thérèse Coffey: One of the things that has happened in the response to the pandemic is that we have accelerated quite a lot of online elements, which had been in the pipeline potentially or we were still experimenting with, things like doing an online portal for new style ESA, that opened up in April. We are trying to do more with aspects of telephony. We have now made it possible, as far as I am aware, that third parties can join the PIP assessments to kind of help people. Of course Help to Claim has kept going. Although I appreciate Citizens Advice and Citizens Advice Scotland have not been able to do the physical proximity, certainly their telephony and online support have still been going.

Q223 **Neil Coyle:** Secretary of State, you mentioned that you want to better support people who are more vulnerable. Longer term, what is the Department going to do to tackle the complexity of the assessment process and other barriers that seem to prevent disabled people accessing support? Disabled people are saying they need these extra support services because of the complexity of the process, so how will you tackle that?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: That is part of the policy formulation that we are still doing, which we expect to publish in the Green Paper.

Q224 **Neil Coyle:** When?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: I had hoped it would be before the end of the year. I think it is fair to say our policy challenges are still concentrated in a particular area, so I am going to try my best to get it out before the end of the year, but I cannot, hand on heart, say that we definitely will. I am sure we will get it out before the end of the fiscal year, if that helps.

Q225 **Dr Ben Spencer:** I know we have talked quite a lot about methods of assessment, and we have previously asked you quite a bit about the process of audio-recording telephone assessments. I would like to ask you for an update on that, but part of that question, it just strikes me, is whether we are talking about yesterday's world here. So many different organisations now do things over video-conferencing and Zoom. We are focusing in this question session on face-to-face assessments, paper assessments, et cetera. The Department is just rolling out internet forms at the moment, but the rest of the world is now doing everything through Zoom and video-conferencing. Does the Department have ambitions in that regard to move things forward?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dr Thérèse Coffey: I think I am right in saying IAS started last week, certainly sometime in September. I have 21 September written here, there we go.

Chair: Sorry, what started on 21 September?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: Audio-recording of telephone assessments by IAS, but that has not yet started with Capita. I can assure you that getting Capita going quickly on this is under active management. We did try to get some extra capital on video assessments. We were not successful in getting additional money, so we have reprioritised some of our capital budget to get that under way. JP will know a little bit of the detail of that.

John Paul Marks: I think it is quite right, the challenge. We do want to have a multi-channel service that works across all our benefits. As the Secretary of State said, ESA went online. That has worked really well. Most claims for contributory ESA are now done online. PIP is also going through that process. The online service has been quite limited, but it will extend this month. For video, CHDA has started trialling how to do fit for work decisions via video. We are starting that now. For PIP, we are also trying to test doing video assessments for around 500 customers, so we can understand whether that improves the healthcare professional's capacity to ensure a positive experience for the customer and be able to get more evidence to support a recommendation on a functional assessment, so we are pushing on video, with audio for telephony. As the Secretary of State said, we are still looking at Covid-secure face to face when it is safe to do so.

Q226 **Dr Ben Spencer:** Have you spoken to the NHS about that? The NHS has been doing video assessments, clinical assessments, for quite some time now with outpatients. If doctors, nurses and health professionals feel that is appropriate and they can have good clinical interactions, surely—

John Paul Marks: Yes.

Dr Thérèse Coffey: You will be aware that GPs were not always the most enthusiastic about it, but in the last six months they have embraced it in bucket loads, which is great. I think it is fair to say there is an element of how we make sure that we can show that the pilot work is as effective in that regard. We have done quite a lot of work on telephony to try to show that, and some of these discussions continue within Government on how we can validate the effectiveness of it.

Q227 **Debbie Abrahams:** Most of my questions in relation to the assessments have been answered, and I am glad to see the progress it has been making. Can I just nip back to question 2? The Secretary of State will be aware that during the Select Committee's Covid inquiry we heard anecdotal evidence of the increased likelihood of disabled people being discriminated against and made redundant. Since then, we have had evidence from Citizens Advice showing that disabled people are twice as likely to be made redundant compared with the working-age population as a whole. What



discussions have the Government been having with employers and employer organisations on this? Are you concerned about breaches to the Equality Act?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: While I have not had discussions directly with Justin about the Equality Act, I think you will be aware that, while we are titled Work and Pensions, it is BEIS that leads on, in effect, labour regulation enforcement and aspects of discrimination. I think Justin has made good progress. We have tried to get some gateways in terms of access to the Kickstart scheme, and we will continue to try to make sure that people are covered in that regard. Clearly, if people think they have been discriminated against, they can, of course, go to an employment tribunal to challenge their redundancy or dismissal. That is an important part of our overall legislation in making sure that people are not discriminated against in that regard.

Q228 **Debbie Abrahams:** Thank you, Secretary of State. I am absolutely aware of that case, but this is about joined-up Government. This was something that we made the Department aware of and, of course, you will potentially be seeing this in the increase in claimants. It is something that we need to be aware of, and you do have an overarching remit for disabled people across Government.

Related to this, I note the additional support that you are providing through Access to Work to enable disabled people to work from home. Given that only 36,000 out of the 4.1 million disabled people are currently supported by Access to Work, how many more disabled people will be in receipt of Access to Work?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: I don't know the answer to that. As you will be aware, disabilities will cover a wide range of different conditions that people may endure. I don't think we have set targets about numbers of people. It is absolutely demand led, but we will continue to try to advertise or advocate that this support is available and can be taken up.

Q229 **Debbie Abrahams:** Can I put a plea out to anybody listening, then, that if they put in their application for Access to Work that that will be received? It will not reach the 4.1 million, but hopefully that is potentially something the Government will be supporting.

Secretary of State, you will recall the session we had back in July. The Chairman received a response to the letter that he wrote subsequent to that session on 22 July. We received that last night at 7.30, two months after it was sent. Do you think that allows effective scrutiny of the vital points that were made in that letter?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: I am conscious that this letter only arrived yesterday. I can accept responsibility for that. I am conscious that there were a number of ways that I wanted to make sure that we were precise in responding to the questions, but I also wanted a legal assessment. I am very conscious that what we share with the Committee is important for your understanding. It does have parliamentary privilege, but I am also



HOUSE OF COMMONS

conscious of other aspects that can follow from what is set out in the public domain, and I need to act accordingly. It was not my intention for the letter to arrive so late, but there was more that I needed to do once I had come to the conclusion on the best way to try to answer.

Q230 Debbie Abrahams: I have literally had only a short time to go through this, but can I just pick up on a few points? First, I was heartened, I have to say, in some regards in relation to the session that we had. You seemed to indicate that there was a change in culture in the Department and that you recognised the importance and the way that disabled people and their families had been let down. Yet I notice in the second page of your letter a backtracking on this, when you say, "The Department for Work and Pensions does not have a duty of care or statutory safeguarding duty." Given that you provide services to vulnerable people, if there is not something in statute, should there be? Shouldn't there also be a moral obligation on the Government in recognition of the services that they provide to vulnerable people?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: I felt that the line of questions submitted by the Committee was taking us down a track that implied we had a statutory duty, and that is why I was being quite careful in trying to point out that we do not. I do not think it is the responsibility of DWP to have that statutory care duty. We are not the local councils, the social services, the doctors and other people who have that.

Q231 Debbie Abrahams: But you are providing services, Secretary of State, and that is simply not good enough. You are providing services to vulnerable people, so whether it is in statute or not, do you recognise that this should be something that the Government take most seriously?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: Which is why, Debbie, as was discussed in the session in July, Peter Schofield became the Permanent Secretary and escalated it. When I became Secretary of State, I escalated it even more in what we were doing, making sure that we got on with this. I wanted to be clear that some of the terminology we use in terms of safeguarding, leaders and similar is not construed by the Committee or by Parliament to mean that we have a legal duty in that regard. This is what I am doing and have done, Debbie, in order to try to accelerate the amount of support that we are doing in working with safeguarding teams, safeguarding boards, usually run by adult or children's social services, in order to provide the outcome that I think we both agree is about how we can help more. I just wanted to reinforce that.

Q232 Chair: I think you will appreciate that we may well want to come back to you on the content of that letter, given that we have only just received it?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: I understand, yes.

Chair: We are a bit against the clock at the moment, but Debbie, yes.

Q233 Debbie Abrahams: Certainly in relation to our inquiry that is due to publish, the Secretary of State should be aware of the issues that we



HOUSE OF COMMONS

identified around the ad hoc way in which the vulnerability of UC claimants has been being recorded by the work coaches. There is no systematic way in which this is recorded. It is done very differently by different work coaches at a local level. Again, I put it to you: does that reflect the change in culture and priority to ensure the safety of vulnerable people by the Department?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: I think there is information held to try to make sure that we treat everybody individually but—

Q234 **Debbie Abrahams:** But it is not there, Secretary of State, it is not there. That was quite clear in the evidence that we received.

Dr Thérèse Coffey: I would like to say that I look forward to receiving your report, and I will be able to consider your concerns and suggestions in an appropriate way.

Q235 **Nigel Mills:** Secretary of State, could you let us know how many current UC claimants there are? I think it went up by 3.2 million at the peak of the crisis. What is the latest number?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: We are back to normal levels of claims, just slightly above average but not much. I have to admit that, off the top of my head, I have forgotten that number. Has it gone to 4 million?

John Paul Marks: Total caseload for claimants is just short of 6 million now, so basically up from 3 million to 6 million from pre-Covid to where we are now.

Dr Thérèse Coffey: Apologies.

John Paul Marks: For new claims, as the Secretary of State says, we are back at a level that is very similar to last year. I think this week we are on around 35,000 to 40,000 new claims for Universal Credit per week.

Dr Thérèse Coffey: I believe it has shifted up a little bit less—sorry, Nigel.

Q236 **Nigel Mills:** What are you predicting that that number is going to do for the rest of this year, or for the rest of this fiscal year? Are you thinking those numbers will stay stable, or are you expecting there to be a rise in claims, perhaps, as the furlough scheme comes to an end?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: We are planning for a potential rise in unemployment. That is why we are doubling the number of work coaches, increasing the number of decision makers and expanding the number of sites in order to help more people who may need our help. I think the furlough scheme has been a huge success in keeping people connected to their jobs. I think that the Chancellor's intervention, or the Government's intervention, with the winter plan and the successor scheme will also be important. I am not going to get into individual planning scenarios, but the OBR has set them out and what they are forecasting. Let's put it this way: we are not too far off those numbers in terms of our planning.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q237 **Nigel Mills:** Do you have enough capacity in your various places around the country to process all those UC claims? Because I think in the peak of the crisis—

Dr Thérèse Coffey: We were due to take on 4,500 work coaches by the end of October. I have confidence due to the release of civil servants from other Departments who have applied. That cohort will not come in until something like 2 or 3 November. By the end of that first week of November, I think we will have secured that challenge and we will carry on with the different waves.

In terms of real estate, that is, to be open, going slower than I had hoped. We are doing a bit of a deep dive to try to see how we can accelerate some of the additional estate provision that we are looking for. Meanwhile, we still have just over half of our workforce usually working in the office. We are really grateful to our civil servants for the response that they have done, and we continue to try to provide kit to work from home as appropriate.

John Paul Marks: The only thing I would add briefly is that one of the things the team has done a good job on through Covid is innovating our services, responding to the point made earlier, to make it much more multi-channel. Taking ESA new-style benefits for example, our capacity to cope with a new claim surge, if that did come later this year, is much improved. The same is true for Personal Independence Payment because we have now rolled out telephony assessments. The same is true for the work capability assessment. Then for Universal Credit, because of things like proving your identity, the capacity to upload your tenancy agreements and the fact that we have put in more checks around child verification, these elements mean that the system is robust to cope with an additional surge if we get one, and, as the Secretary of State says, there is an unprecedented scaling up of the number of work coaches to continue to drive down unemployment.

Q238 **Nigel Mills:** Are you expecting to have to redeploy your workforce like you did in March and April to be able to process all the UC claims, or do you think people can stay in their normal jobs next time?

John Paul Marks: From my perspective, it will depend on how big the surge is and how long it lasts. As the Secretary of State says, last week's announcement by the Chancellor in terms of the Job Support Scheme is very positive from a DWP perspective. We know the number of employees supported by the furlough scheme has been reducing over time, so we do have resilience in the UC operation to absorb additional increases in new claims. Of course, only up to a certain limit, and if that was much more disruptive, the thing that gives me confidence is that we have just gone through the process of that redeployment. The people we move from debt, child maintenance or disputes are trained. They know what to do. They have just gone back so, if we have to, we could implement that continuity plan again. But our intent is not to do that, not to disrupt those services,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

and to be able to manage through the autumn, ensuring that we continue to pay people on time and in full.

Q239 **Nigel Mills:** Do you think you can spot early those people who may become more difficult to get back into work so you can try to focus the support resources as quickly as you can on those that need it most, or would it still have to be a process of wait and see for most claims?

John Paul Marks: As part of the design of the claimant commitment, we worked with the Behavioural Insights Unit and with lots of partners, back in the day, around how to ensure that that in-depth diagnostic at the beginning of the work coach journey understands exactly that question. Somebody who has been in work recently, has a CV, has a good work history and is motivated clearly might be very eligible for immediate job-finding support from the provision that we would put in place. We might expect them to move back into work within one, two or three months. For example, in August we saw a very good movement into work rate, with a lot more people finding work from the UC caseload than coming out of work.

Of course, the other end of the spectrum would be somebody for whom those things are not true, with more complex barriers, which is why at the other end of the spectrum we have things like the work and health programme, more intensive support from voluntary sector partners through the Flexible Support Fund, and a work coach throughout the journey to help that customer get back to work, appreciating it would take more time.

Q240 **Nigel Mills:** How do you encourage people to claim UC quickly if they do fall out of work in the surge we all hope does not happen, rather than waiting until they have had their redundancy cheque and spent it before they start to realise there is a problem? Is there a way of intervening earlier to get those claims made as fast as possible so they can get the support they need as fast as possible?

John Paul Marks: If I go back to my experience of March and April, I think at one point we had 105,000 Universal Credit claims on one day. I think we have managed to get the message out there that Universal Credit is available online and people should claim it, but I agree with you that we need to continue to reinforce that message for everyone. Our Help to Claim service supports tens of thousands of people as well. We have done more proactive communications, more advertising, more marketing, and it is a bit like the message earlier around Access to Work, it is a demand-led service. Anyone who is entitled should claim, and the same is true for Universal Credit. It is available online and people can access it.

Q241 **Steve McCabe:** Secretary of State, good morning. You said early in the pandemic that you would look carefully at people who had lost out because they had wrongly claimed for Universal Credit. Presumably, that also applied to people who had been wrongly advised to claim it, which was already a recurring problem. I notice in your letter that you are saying you



HOUSE OF COMMONS

do not intend to return them to legacy benefits; fair enough. What are you going to do? Are you still looking at how you can do something for these people who have lost out?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: It has always been an important part on our website to encourage people to use an independent—we actually signpost them to an independent benefits calculator on, in effect, what would be the right choices—rather than DWP providing individual advice in that regard. We did look at it carefully, and it was a decision that was made that we would not reverse, as you have just pointed out. The sorts of things where I hope that we have helped is that we have now created a checkbox so that people are proactively saying, “Yes, I have checked my eligibility.” I think that was a helpful addition and an important element of the process to get in for people who were unfamiliar, I would say, with the benefits system in particular.

In terms of support, quite often people would be eligible for some of the other benefits, in particular the JSA, and that can be a gateway to a number of different schemes. I don’t know if you have anything to add, JP?

John Paul Marks: No, I think that is exactly right. The principle has always been that the legacy benefits are closed to new claims. Once someone has found work, had a child, moved house and so on, it triggers a change of circumstance, which causes a new claim to Universal Credit.

Q242 **Steve McCabe:** I understand that argument. I suppose the question I am really trying to understand, Secretary of State, is that you say you are not going to return them because it would unravel the process. I get that, but I am not quite clear how correcting an error, which may not be the individual’s fault, particularly if they were advised by, say, the jobcentre, or compensating someone for an error would lead to unravelling the Universal Credit process. I am finding that really hard to comprehend.

John Paul Marks: We addressed this at the Select Committee I appeared at last year. The jobcentres do not offer advice to customers on legacy benefits about moving to Universal Credit, because a move to Universal Credit is not something that is voluntary, currently. It is triggered by a life event.

Q243 **Steve McCabe:** I presume what you are saying there is that they are not advised to offer advice. You are not saying that there are not people who were advised and that there have not been examples of mistakes, surely.

John Paul Marks: What I am saying is that, to trigger a change of circumstance in the legacy benefit system, you have to have a change of circumstance. That is something that happens in an individual’s life. The jobcentre will not be giving people advice about whether to move house, for example.

Q244 **Steve McCabe:** I am aware we are under pressure, and I do not want to delay too long on this, but if this person has lost out and it has clearly not been their fault or largely their fault, how would correcting that or



HOUSE OF COMMONS

compensating them unravel the whole process of Universal Credit? How would that be the case?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: I am inferring from your line of questioning that you have a particular case where—

Q245 **Steve McCabe:** Well, there have been cases at this Committee. I have cited one with one of your senior officials, yes, but there has been more than one. I come back to the central point: would it unravel the process if we were to try to compensate folk who lost out? Surely the answer to that is no. Therefore, you must be telling me you have decided you are just going to leave that aside and move on. Is that what you are saying?

John Paul Marks: We have legislated to close the new claim gateways for legacy benefits, so there is no new claim gateway. We have also legislated to define the changes of circumstance that trigger a new claim to Universal Credit. I am very happy to look if there are particular cases. The only other element, of course, is where there has been stolen identity and fraud, whereby we have looked at what is possible. I know that the Minister for Welfare Delivery is—

Steve McCabe: I think I have gone as far as I can.

Dr Thérèse Coffey: There have definitely been some issues with ID fraud, and we have acted on that.

Steve McCabe: Fair enough. I was picking up the point that you were looking at it carefully and doing what you could.

Dr Thérèse Coffey: We have looked at it, yes.

Q246 **Steve McCabe:** Let me move on. On the Understanding Universal Credit Government website, it says that the minimum income floor has been temporarily relaxed. That applies to all UC claimants for the duration of the outbreak, so the minimum income floor has been relaxed, as we know. In your letter, you say the temporary suspension has disrupted the evaluation plan but you are planning to reinstate the minimum income floor. If I have it right, the suspension ends in about six weeks, in the middle of November. I have two simple questions. One is to ask when exactly you are going to reinstate the minimum income floor, because the duration of the outbreak sounds a bit different from the middle of November. What is happening to the evaluation, and do we have a timescale for it now?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: As I said earlier to the Committee, we are now in a position where the stay at home/lockdown approach is not that anymore. I appreciate there will be some local measures that make things more challenging, but we think we are at the point now where the economy is starting to recover. We want people to go back to work and, as a consequence, start to get into reinstating the MIF. How we go about that is still under active consideration. I cannot update the Committee at the moment because no decisions have yet been made.

Q247 **Steve McCabe:** So it might not be the middle of November? The relaxation



might continue?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: I am very aware of the regulations' timing, but we are actively considering it. In fact, I had submissions last night on this.

Q248 **Steve McCabe:** Okay. The evaluation, is that in the same place? Presumably not much has happened about that.

Dr Thérèse Coffey: No.

John Paul Marks: It was progressing and then Covid hit. There are a series of waves of evaluation on the caseload, and once it is complete we need to put it to the Ministers with advice on its conclusions and for publication.

Q249 **Steve McCabe:** I raise these points, Secretary of State, because you will be aware that the self-employed are one group that has been particularly hard hit in terms of income. It has been much harder for them to get any of the other support the Chancellor has offered, so there are a lot of anxious people out there.

Dr Thérèse Coffey: I am conscious of various campaigns. I actually think the Self-Employment Income Support grant has been very generous.

Steve McCabe: If you can get it.

Dr Thérèse Coffey: Indeed, and I appreciate people have arranged their affairs in particular ways that make it more or less straightforward to access that. There is definitely a situation now where we recognise that there are not lots of vacancies, but how long do you endure a particular situation where people can no longer continue being self-employed, and what might we need to do to help them start, even in the shorter term, to look for some work while their sector recovers and allows them to go back to their dream job? This policy is very actively and carefully being considered, I can assure you, Steve.

Q250 **Chair:** Can I just check? Gov.uk currently says about the suspension of the minimum income floor, "This change applies to all Universal Credit claimants and will last for the duration of the outbreak." Is that correct?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: The regulations are until 12 November. That is why, as I say, we are under active consideration.

Q251 **Chris Stephens:** Good morning, Secretary of State. For my first question—and I refer to the register of Members' interests—it will probably come as no surprise to you that I am going to ask about staffing. Could you tell us where we are in terms of recruitment of new work coaches and the Department's commitment to recruit 13,500?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: I think we have made sufficient job offers to recruit the number of people. As I was saying earlier, there may be something like a week's delay to reach that 4,500 due to moving people within Government Departments. There is a process there in terms of getting people into work. Of course, we also have to recruit people at the AO level,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the decision makers. We did take the opportunity, and I don't know the figures on how many people effectively got promoted who were already working in DWP.

John Paul Marks: About 2,000.

Dr Thérèse Coffey: It is about 2,000, okay. We now need to try to backfill that element, and that recruitment was already under way as well. I think it is probably best if I hand over to JP on this to go into more detail.

John Paul Marks: Briefly, there are basically three waves of recruitment, ultimately bringing in around 24,000 to 25,000 additional headcount to the Department. It will take us up to an organisation with staff in post of around 100,000 by the end of this financial year. As the Secretary of State says, at an almost unprecedented level, we are bringing in hundreds of work coaches each week across the country; 4,500 offers with start dates will be made in October; actual bums on seats may include the first week of November because of people starting in the first week of the new month. Then we continue from there.

We are also backfilling. We are recruiting into our child maintenance services, backfilling where we have had promotions, and also making sure that we continue to bring our processing capacity up to the demand line that we need to be resilient for the future as well. So, a massive amount of effort; big credit to our people in the capability team. I would say to colleagues and customers who might be interested in applying, please do, because there are lots of campaigns still live, and people can hopefully come and join the team.

Q252 **Chris Stephens:** Thanks, JP. That is helpful. Obviously, could the Committee be kept up to date on the developments? It is pleasing that we are seeing DWP staff promoted. I think that is a good thing. However, I want to ask you a bit about the health and safety report, particularly the one in Leeds. I am very concerned about the report. Can you tell us, JP, what action the Department is taking to ensure that both new and existing staff are being accommodated safely, and what areas are you looking at in terms of homeworking, or remote working, or working in other facilities?

John Paul Marks: I can. The first thing to say in terms of the overall estate is that, as a Department, we have around 800 buildings. We have just been through a significant refit of the jobcentre network to make it Covid secure. You will now find all the enablers that we are now used to seeing when we walk into shops and restaurants in your local jobcentre: hand sanitiser at the door, face coverings, one-way systems, screens, 2-metre distancing, and so on. We were disappointed that we did not meet the standard on the Leeds Quarry House health and safety inspection, and we have put that right. Around 200 of our colleagues were in that building, which would normally house over 1,000 people, so the fact that we did not get all of our compliance right on that day in that site was disappointing, given the occupancy rate. But it required things like improving our one-way system signage and also making sure that where colleagues are



working together in agile huddles, they are always compliant with 2-metre social distancing. We have done more communications. We have invited the Health and Safety Executive in to inspect around nine sites already, plus other inspections that they have done themselves across our jobcentre network. All the rest of those inspections have gone well. I meet with our trade union colleagues regularly around making sure we continue to get this right. So far through this pandemic, we have not had any workplace transmissions of Covid in clusters in our workforce. We want to maintain that standard, of course, and be an exemplary employer on this. It is our priority to get this right, and we are always working with our trade union colleagues to make sure we are listening to the feedback and aligning with the latest health and safety guidance.

Dr Thérèse Coffey: Quarry House is not customer facing; it is a corporate hub. As JP has pointed out, there is perhaps a little bit of a lapse that happened with people—as we see in Parliament—talking to each other and not being quite far enough apart.

We challenged one particular aspect that HSE pointed out in their initial report. It was about passing each other. I am pleased to say that HSE evolved their position and they found that DWP was no longer in breach in that aspect.

However, it is important to have a safe environment. Only two sites are closed. I was very pleased by the PCS finally agreeing that more calls could be made from home. At the time, they were only allowed to be done in the office. That was a welcome step forward that has relieved quite a lot of pressure on people who were working in the office rather than at home.

Chair: Thank you very much. I apologise, but we do have to move on, given the pressures on time.

Q253 **Neil Coyle:** How do lockdowns affect jobcentre operations?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: The initial national lockdown?

Neil Coyle: I mean the localised lockdowns.

Dr Thérèse Coffey: For localised measures, every site has its own risk assessment, and as a consequence there is a difference, but we are still effectively open for business. There are only two sites closed currently, the Portakabin in Camlough and the shared office, I think it is, in Flint, where we need to make sure we have sufficient cleaning provided safely.

Q254 **Neil Coyle:** What is the caseload for work coaches, and what will it rise to? What is the revised estimate, given the changed volumes?

John Paul Marks: At the moment there is variation across different jobcentres based on their local demand, but it is averaging between 140 and 200 in terms of intensive caseloads for work coaches. Within that, there will be a proportion of clients who are self-employed and a proportion who will have health conditions.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q255 **Neil Coyle:** The average was almost 600 earlier this year. Can you share with us the total caseload, not just the intensive caseload?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: I am not aware of it being 600.

Q256 **Neil Coyle:** It was in the NAO report that the Department did not dispute. I believe it was 574.

John Paul Marks: Yes. For that number what they are doing is dividing, I assume, total caseload by number of work coaches. But, of course, customers who are in work or who are in the LCWRA group, with no conditionality, will not be seeing a work coach. The number that I worry about—because I agree with you, we have to make sure the work coaches have a sustainable caseload—is the number of customers that I am asking them to see and interact with. Pre-Covid, that would have been around 100 or 120 on average, but at the moment it is between 140 and 200, depending on the jobcentre. When we double the number of work coaches, that will bring us back to have demand aligned with supply by the end of the year.

Dr Thérèse Coffey: There is a lot of buddying up as well, to help try to manage that, so it does not just get concentrated on one jobcentre. The use of the virtual service centre was also very important for the relationship. We have done our best to try to balance the load after the initial surge.

Q257 **Neil Coyle:** Can you share with us the additional training and support that work coaches are getting, given the changed jobs with Kickstart, for example? Could you share that with us after the session. I am conscious of time, Chair, so shall we go on to managed migration? Harrogate is paused. When will that restart, and when do you expect managed migration to begin on scale?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: We have not set a date for the resumption of managed migration. We are conscious that quite a lot of people will have moved during the pandemic, so analysis is happening on that and a way forward will be presented to Ministers.

Q258 **Neil Coyle:** If you have not set a date, how are you estimating the cost? It has already risen by almost £600 million, I think, because of the delays that are already expected. How are you managing that expectation, and how are you working with the Treasury on the costs?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: Understandably, we have done some internal costings on the current prediction, which was part of our SR bid, and we are continuing to work on it.

Q259 **Neil Coyle:** You do not have a figure?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: We do have our initial estimate, but I am not at a point where I can share that with you.

Q260 **Neil Coyle:** Will it be hundreds of millions more on this?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dr Thérèse Coffey: I am not in a position to share that figure with you.

Q261 **Neil Coyle:** Maybe hundreds then. The delay to managed migration does mean that the transitional protections for people could be more problematic. How will you ensure that no one loses out when managed migration does take place?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: Because that is the commitment we have made, and we will make it happen.

Q262 **Neil Coyle:** Will you extend the transitional protections for a longer period?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: As I say, the whole managed-migration element is on pause. What we are doing is being reworked, and we have to do it on the basis of what has happened in the last six months, recognising that many of the people who may have been in the original cohort of managed migration have already moved. There is an element there that we will continue to revise and update.

Q263 **Neil Coyle:** I think it is really welcome if you are saying you will extend those protections. That is good news.

Dr Thérèse Coffey: You cannot put words into my mouth, Neil.

Q264 **Neil Coyle:** I am not. You just said it. But you also said earlier, Secretary of State, that your primary concern is roofs over people's heads. There is a group of people in this country who have no recourse to public funds due to Home Office rules. When we discussed this previously you said that they would be entitled to the Job Retention Scheme, for example. With that ending, what discussions are you having with the Home Office, and what support will you provide to ensure that people do have a roof over their head?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: You will be aware that, of course, people without recourse to public funds can apply to the Home Office for a change of condition, and I do not know the scale of what has happened there. I think we have also tried to see if, potentially, some of the local payments through the welfare funds could be used in that way. I think an extra amount of money has been given to local authorities, particularly in areas where the local measures are tighter on people being able to access work. We will continue to work with MHCLG on some of the most effective ways to try to deliver support to people who really need it.

Q265 **Neil Coyle:** Will work coaches and jobcentres be supporting people to make those claims to the Home Office to change their conditions, and how are these people logged at jobcentres?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: I do not believe that DWP civil servants will be acting as advisers to people on making a change, in effect, to the conditions of their immigration status.

Q266 **Neil Coyle:** You are saying that they can do this if they can work out how, but there is no support to do it, and you have cut access to legal aid. So,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the reality is they will not have a roof over their head, potentially.

Dr Thérèse Coffey: I did not catch the end of your question, sorry.

Neil Coyle: You are saying that there might be alternative support, but DWP will not provide it, and there will be people with no roof over their head.

Dr Thérèse Coffey: DWP are not immigration advisers, but that route is open to people who have an immigration status that currently has the condition of being without recourse to public funds. People can apply to the Home Office to get that changed.

Q267 **Neil Coyle:** Do jobcentres make the recommendation to people that they do that, even if they are not filling out a form for them?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: I do not know the answer to that.

Q268 **Neil Coyle:** How are they logged at jobcentres? These people turn up, but what happens to them?

John Paul Marks: Most people who come to a jobcentre have an appointment booked for them because they are in receipt of a benefit. If somebody walked in off the street wanting to make a claim for benefit, but their immigration status was no recourse to public funds, then we have what we call complex-needs plans for every jobcentre. For example, let us say they were homeless, they might be able to make a referral to the local shelter. If the need was around fleeing domestic abuse, or needing support with food, we are able to signpost them to the local food bank. Ultimately, as the Secretary of State said, there are things like the Test and Trace Support Payment. My understanding is this is local assistance, support from local government, including a £15 million discretionary pot, which could include support for those with no recourse to public funds. Local government, which will also support this with the Home Office and the jobcentres, will try to make sure people can access local support in their community wherever best they can.

Q269 **Shaun Bailey:** I will keep it very brief, because we are conscious of time. A few questions from me about the Child Maintenance Service. First, how many staff were redeployed to help with the process of Universal Credit during the start of the pandemic, and how many have now been redeployed back into the Child Maintenance Service? When it comes to your monitoring of fraud and of enforcement issues, what metrics is the Department using to measure success and to be sure that payments are made? Finally, is there any view about possibly reviewing the process around the Child Maintenance Service, particularly initial assessments, to ensure that fraud is stamped out and that payments are made?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: In February this year, the Child Maintenance Group headcount was 5,561.6. We redeployed 1,507 FTE to help with benefit processing between March and July. Of those 1,507, 1,026 had returned to CMG by the end of August, and we are still in the process of returning approximately another 200. In the meantime, we have started a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

recruitment wave for new people to go into the Child Maintenance Service. For operational reasons—I do not know if JP is best placed to answer this, because he does not run the Child Maintenance Service—some people will be staying in the legacy benefit and Universal Credit sphere, but the recruitment process is already under way.

John Paul Marks: There are 350 new recruits in the Child Maintenance Service. The reason for not returning everybody is to do with consolidating the footprint and keeping teams together where we have built that capability in our working-age business.

A final point: the child maintenance latest statistics were published today, and they show good improvement in some of the compliance rates. Work is continuing with partners like Gingerbread to listen to feedback about how to further improve that, but the compliance rate overall in March was 89%, and was up to 91% in August. On collect and pay, which is the more enforced element of what the Child Maintenance Service delivers for over 250,000 children, the compliance rate has improved from 56% back in 2016 to 72%, so it is continuing to deliver improvement.

The last point on the process: we have gone live with a new apply-for-child-maintenance digital service, which launched in January. It has received over 30,000 online applications to date. We will be iterating that so people can access the service faster, and we are continuing to listen to feedback on how to further improve the service.

Dr Thérèse Coffey: Regarding elements of fraud, I am very conscious that CMS is often between two parents who sadly are no longer, for whatever reasons, together, and situations can become very challenging. Our interests will continue to be about how we make sure that as much money that is due as possible gets through to the child, because that is what it is about. Definitely the online thing has worked, and I know that Baroness Stedman-Scott, who is absolutely passionate about this and is the Minister responsible for that service, is already working on some potential policy improvements to try to help some of the issues that are becoming exacerbated during the pandemic.

Q270 **Selaine Saxby:** The UK will stop receiving funding from the European Social Fund at the end of this year. What impact do you expect this to have on DWP programmes? What planning has the Department done, and is the UK Shared Prosperity Fund possibly part of that solution?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: Yes. We both stood on a manifesto commitment to lock in the money for training and support. That is absolutely going to be upheld. It is fair to say we are working together with MHCLG on proposals on the future UKSPF, and of course with Treasury on how we think that can work. We are mindful, of course, of all the different schemes that operate, not just in England, but in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. We are still actively working on the UKSPF proposals going forward, including aspects, potentially, of further devolution. My preference will be to have



HOUSE OF COMMONS

more of an obligated authority, so that we make sure taxpayers' money is being used effectively around the country.

Q271 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. I will raise one final point with you. You have touched on an example of HSE taking enforcement action. It has been pointed out to us that, in the course of a year, HSE normally investigates 100 disease cases, but it has already had 100 times that in Covid requests since the beginning of the pandemic. There was a modest funding boost for HSE at the start. Do you think it now has the resources it needs to ensure workplace safety in the pandemic, and will you keep that under review over the next few months?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: Yes. I think the additional resources it received have really helped with its capacity. I know that the new chair of HSE, Sarah Newton, has been working very closely, understandably, with the chief executive, Sarah Albon, on how to make the best use of those resources. I think we are very close to finalising how HSE can continue to expand its provision in order to undertake the important regulatory role that it does. I know there has been some very specific, close working with local authorities on recognising that local authorities have responsibility and duty. HSE does not have the powers in certain workplaces to be able to undertake some of that, but there is a lot of work that has happened on that, and I think we will be able to share some of that information soon.

Q272 **Chair:** I noticed in the letter to us last night that you mentioned that a letter with the latest information about HSE's Covid-related activity will be sent shortly. That is something we can look forward to in the near future, is that right?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: Yes.

Q273 **Chair:** That means it will be sent to us? Is that the intention?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: Yes, that is my understanding. I think there are just a few things to finalise, and I hope it will be with you—Nic might go mad now—next week. Is that the plan, Nic?

Nic Crowe: I think so.

Chair: That is very, very helpful. I thank you both very much indeed for covering such a wide range of subjects, just about within the time that was available. We are very grateful. As we have said, there may well be a number of points we will need to drop you a line about.

Dr Thérèse Coffey: Sure. I understand.

Chair: Thank you very much for being with us. That concludes our meeting.