

1. When will your review of the investigation process, as mentioned in the NAO report, be complete? Will the findings of this review be made public?

The actions committed to within the NAO note are being taken forward within the normal course of business within the Customer Experience Directorate. This review is internal improvement work so will not lead to the publication of a report.

Progress updates will be shared with the Serious Case Panel as necessary, with the Secretary of State, and with Ministers as relevant to their portfolios. This is ongoing work and, due to COVID-19, we expect to conclude this before the end of the year.

2. When will the Department decide whether to publish the Serious Case Panel's terms of reference and recommendations, and the outcomes and recommendations from investigations? Might you set out for us the issues that need to be considered, to help the Committee to understand the time the Department is taking to think about this?

Recommendations that are made at the Panel may relate closely to development of government policy, and as the Panel is relatively new I would like to ensure the operation of the Panel is embedded in the Department before deciding on what may be published.

3. How many families has the Department contacted to discuss the most serious investigations completed, and how many apologies has the Department issued to families?

Over the past year, the Director General for Service Excellence has met two families. There have also been meetings with other families at Director or Deputy Director level.

These are private meetings – unless the families choose to publicise them – which aim to explain the department's processes and actions, and for DWP leaders to hear families' experiences first-hand. These meetings take place on a case-by-case basis and at the discretion of the family, where they may find it more helpful to speak to someone in person rather than by correspondence.

4. It has been reported that DWP told an inquest in 2019 that it was undertaking a review of its safeguarding procedures. Did this safeguarding review happen? If so, please can you provide a summary of any key findings and actions taken as a result of the review?

The Department is continually looking at ways to support vulnerable claimants. The purpose of this internal work is to identify areas where more could be done to build on the support we currently provide.

We have identified a number of areas for improvement and allocated funding accordingly. The key areas identified are set-out below, along with an indication of progress on actions we are taking forward through our Service Excellence Plan and Customer Experience Directorate.

As part of the DWP Service Excellence Plan we have established a Customer Experience Directorate to co-ordinate policy development, guidance and learning, as well as monitoring the implementation of change. We have raised staff awareness of the training available to them on Civil Service Learning, our online learning platform. Awareness of other learning products has been reinforced in the delivery of Universal Credit, through our work to support safeguarding through holistic and empowered decision-making. This highlights the importance of considering a range of evidence, and when appropriate, to seek further evidence to inform a decision - thus ensuring a safety and support approach is taken.

Funding has been allocated for 37 Senior Safeguarding Leaders for each geographical District. We are developing these important roles and in the interim we have temporarily appointed 10 senior partnership leaders, starting on 20 April, to prioritise safeguarding issues - regional leads in England and one each in Scotland and Wales. They will act as the single point of contact in the region, working specifically with Local Authority, NHS and Police colleagues to help protect our most vulnerable customers. They will be supported by the Operational Safeguarding team within the Customer Experience Directorate.

As part of the DWP Service Excellence Plan, we will co-ordinate policy development and develop our partnerships with local safeguarding boards to ensure DWP is included in local safeguarding arrangements. This will ensure concerns can be raised, and safety and support provided, with input from other agencies and local organisations.

5. It has also been reported that DWP and the Information Commissioner's Office have previously discussed DWP's investigation procedures and that, following this, DWP launched a review of the procedures (then called Peer Reviews) in 2015 to improve accountability, responsibility, and recommendation tracking. What changes were implemented as a result of that review? What can you learn from the successes and failures of previous investigation procedure reviews to ensure that the work you are doing now will be more effective in improving these crucially important processes?

The ICO discussion to which you refer highlighted that the responsibility for tracking recommendations then sat with One Service Networks (OSNs – regional staff management groups which brought together colleagues in working-age and retirement benefits). However, OSNs no longer exist due to Departmental restructures, and to ensure we track recommendations from Internal Process Reviews we are establishing a team to do so within the newly formed Customer Experience Directorate.

The introduction of the Serious Case Panel will strengthen our ability to learn from the experiences of our customers, by drawing on from the information tracked by this team.

6. What has changed to allow Work Coaches the ability to tailor the support to the needs of an individual? Can the Committee see a copy of any new guidance issued to Work Coaches to allow this increased support, and receive information on the training delivered to ensure Work Coaches are aware of and understand this guidance?

We have taken a number of actions to improve learning for jobcentre colleagues to enable them to proactively identify, support and signpost customers with complex needs.

We continue to ensure learning and development opportunities are refreshed and expanded frequently. For example, the 'complex needs' module within Universal Credit Work Coach learning (addressing claimants with particular challenges in accessing the service, moving towards work, and financial independence) is continually updated.

We are working with jobcentre staff to help them identify and support customers with complex needs. Each jobcentre has a 'complex needs toolkit' that is maintained and reviewed locally, and enables work coaches to signpost customers to expert partner organisations. Additionally, colleagues have access to a District Provision Tool, which provides access to the full range of support delivered by the Department, as well as external providers, local authorities and independent volunteer and charity organisations.

The Department is also working closely with specialist partners; for example we worked alongside domestic abuse and homelessness partners, including Shelter and Women's Aid,

to develop and co-deliver a series of events for Jobcentre Customer Service Managers. The events equipped colleagues to refer customers to the most appropriate support. Following these events, we developed guidance and learning products for Customer Service Managers with the help of specialist partners.

7. You say that the Department is increasing communications with coroners, to increase awareness of the Coroner focal point. Will any new guidance be issued to coroners to set out the circumstances in which DWP wants to receive information from them? Will this include any case of death by suicide of a person DWP serves?

A letter was issued to Coroners on 28 February giving details of a new Coroner Focal Point email address, and asking for all correspondence with the Department to be shared via this route. A follow-up letter was sent on 21 April, setting out more context and reassuring Coroners that the Focal Point remains accessible during the COVID-19 outbreak.

8. Can you set out details of your plans for the increased capacity of the investigation team, and how staff across the Department will be made aware of the role of the investigation team and when they should be contacted?

An additional 20 colleagues have been identified to join the investigation team. However, their recruitment has been paused while resource is focused on frontline delivery.

Senior leaders in Service Delivery are aware of the IPR process and how cases can be referred. Wider communications will be shared across the business as we return to business as usual, to ensure roles and processes are properly understood.

9. Thank you for setting out the current membership of the Serious Case Panel. When will a decision be made about external experts sitting on the panel and the circumstances in which this would happen? Are there any reasons why a relevant external expert couldn't be a permanent part of the panel?

In my letter of 20th March I set out the current SCP attendees. We do not currently plan to amend this.

10. You have said that investigation materials are held for six years, but that anonymised records of recommendations are held for longer than this. How long are these recommendations held for? Will you consider a review of the historic recommendations the Department holds to identify any systemic issues that have arisen previously, as well as improving procedures to ensure recommendations are recognised and acted on in the future?

It is my intention for the Department to act more quickly. We do not intend to undertake a review of the historic recommendations beyond what has already been assessed.

11. You have committed to the establishment of a new organisational learning function responsible for "rigorous tracking" of investigation and Serious Case Panel recommendations. Can you give the Committee any details about how this tracking will be done? What role will Ministers play in ensuring that recommendations are implemented?

Recommendations will be tracked by the Panel to ensure action is taken to implement them.

The secretariat – which sits within the Customer Experience & Organisational Learning team – will be responsible for undertaking that tracking and updating the Panel as necessary. Escalation will be to the Panel, and to the Secretary of State and ministers as appropriate.

12. Many of the actions you have committed to are expected to be completed in the next month. In the light of the COVID-19 outbreak, is this timetable realistic?

The planned expansion of capacity within the IPR team has been paused to ensure colleagues are focussed on delivering frontline services during the COVID-19 outbreak. This means that the timetable for improvements will need to change. At this stage I am unable to commit to specific dates until we better understand the longer term impact of COVID-19. However, the Customer Experience and Learning Team remains in place and is looking at how we continue to support our most vulnerable customers during this time.

Despite the challenges of responding to COVID-19, the Serious Case Panel meeting on 19 March still took place via conference call, as the Department takes this work extremely seriously.

13. Your letter explains that DWP has secured £36m to improve support for the most vulnerable customers, and that some of this money will go towards ensuring correct benefit decisions are made first time and ensuring that safeguarding procedures are in place for vulnerable customers. Will £36m be enough, given the scale of the task DWP is now facing due to the COVID-19 outbreak and the likely increase in the number of vulnerable people?

The additional funding announced through SR19 provided the opportunity to make targeted improvements in our capabilities in certain areas, such as in decision making, safeguarding and organisational learning – the funding complements existing DWP activity. A number of these measures have costs which are broadly fixed or do not increase proportionate to a changing customer base; others will be more affected by an increased number of customers interacting with DWP.

14. You say that mental health training is being delivered to all DWP staff who have direct contact with customers. Given the COVID-19 outbreak, will this training be delivered remotely to ensure staff are able to support vulnerable people as needed? When do you expect all front line staff to have received this training?

As part of our overall contingency response during the Covid-19, we have focused on training as many staff as possible to facilitate payments – including handling inbound and outbound telephony and case management.

As a result, we have had to pause some of the training we were deploying, including Mental Health training. However, the material we are currently delivering raises awareness of complex needs and supports colleagues in taking appropriate action where, for example, customers declare self-harm.

15. How will DWP evaluate progress against the findings from the NAO report? How regularly will progress be evaluated?

16. How regularly will you, in your capacity as Secretary of State, receive updates on progress in resolving the points raised by the NAO?

I have asked the Director General for Service Excellence to update me on this work and other organisational learning activities as necessary.



Work and Pensions Committee

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From the Chair

Rt Hon Dr Thérèse Coffey MP
Secretary of State
Department for Work and Pensions

6 April 2020

Dear Thérèse,

Thank you for your letter of 24 March 2020, responding to many of the questions in my letter of 5 March 2020 about the National Audit Office report *Information held by the Department for Work & Pensions on deaths by suicide of benefit claimants*. We were grateful for your Department's continued engagement on this, especially in the face of the current crisis.

We were pleased to see the steps the Department is already taking to address the very serious concerns raised by the NAO's report. I would be grateful, though, if you could answer some further questions which arise from your response.

You set out in your letter several actions the Department has already taken, and some which will be taken in the future. Some of these actions relate to transparency, such as consideration of whether some of the findings from these serious investigations could be published by DWP. You also explain that DWP has discussed the most serious cases with families and apologised where the Department has made errors.

In addition to this information, please can you also let us know the following:

1. When will your review of the investigation process, as mentioned in the NAO report, be complete? Will the findings of this review be made public?
2. When will the Department decide whether to publish the Serious Case Panel's terms of reference and recommendations, and the outcomes and recommendations from investigations? Might you set out for us the issues that need to be considered, to help the Committee to understand the time the Department is taking to think about this?
3. How many families has the Department contacted to discuss the most serious investigations completed, and how many apologies has the Department issued to families?
4. It has been reported that DWP told an inquest in 2019 that it was undertaking a review of its safeguarding procedures. Did this safeguarding review happen? If so, please can you provide a summary of any key findings and actions taken as a result of the review?
5. It has also been reported that DWP and the Information Commissioner's Office have previously discussed DWP's investigation procedures and that, following this, DWP launched a review of the procedures (then called Peer Reviews) in 2015 to improve accountability, responsibility, and

recommendation tracking. What changes were implemented as a result of that review? What can you learn from the successes and failures of previous investigation procedure reviews to ensure that the work you are doing now will be more effective in improving these crucially important processes?

Your letter also sets out some improvements made to the guidance DWP gives to its own staff and to coroners. In particular, it explains that there have been improvements that allow Work Coaches to “tailor the support they provide to customers based on the customer’s circumstances and needs”. Might you please let us know the following:

6. What has changed to allow Work Coaches the ability to tailor the support to the needs of an individual? Can the Committee see a copy of any new guidance issued to Work Coaches to allow this increased support, and receive information on the training delivered to ensure Work Coaches are aware of and understand this guidance?
7. You say that the Department is increasing communications with coroners, to increase awareness of the Coroner focal point. Will any new guidance be issued to coroners to set out the circumstances in which DWP wants to receive information from them? Will this include any case of death by suicide of a person DWP serves?

Additionally, your letter sets out some of the internal mechanisms you have created to resolve the problems raised by the NAO:

8. Can you set out details of your plans for the increased capacity of the investigation team, and how staff across the Department will be made aware of the role of the investigation team and when they should be contacted?
9. Thank you for setting out the current membership of the Serious Case Panel. When will a decision be made about external experts sitting on the panel and the circumstances in which this would happen? Are there any reasons why a relevant external expert couldn’t be a permanent part of the panel?
10. You have said that investigation materials are held for six years, but that anonymised records of recommendations are held for longer than this. How long are these recommendations held for? Will you consider a review of the historic recommendations the Department holds to identify any systemic issues that have arisen previously, as well as improving procedures to ensure recommendations are recognised and acted on in the future?
11. You have committed to the establishment of a new organisational learning function responsible for the “rigorous tracking” of investigation and Serious Case Panel recommendations. Can you give the Committee any details about how this tracking will be done? What role will Ministers play in ensuring that recommendations are implemented?

We appreciate that the Department currently faces significant challenges due to the COVID-19 outbreak. The following questions relate specifically to how DWP plans to ensure it supports the most vulnerable people it serves during this outbreak:

12. Many of the actions you have committed to are expected to be completed in the next month. In the light of the COVID-19 outbreak, is this timetable realistic?
13. Your letter explains that DWP has secured £36m to improve support for the most vulnerable customers, and that some of this money will go towards ensuring correct benefit decisions are made first time and ensuring that safeguarding procedures are in place for vulnerable customers. Will £36m be enough, given the scale of the task DWP is now facing due to the COVID-19 outbreak and the likely increase in the number of vulnerable people?
14. You say that mental health training is being delivered to all DWP staff who have direct contact with customers. Given the COVID-19 outbreak, will this training be delivered remotely to ensure staff are able to support vulnerable people as needed? When do you expect all front line staff to have received this training?

There remain some unanswered questions from my letter of 5 March 2020, which I would be grateful if you could now answer.

15. How will DWP evaluate progress against the findings from the NAO report?
How regularly will progress be evaluated?
16. How regularly will you, in your capacity as Secretary of State, receive updates on progress in resolving the points raised by the NAO?

The Committee will want to examine your response, once received, and consider what further work we wish to do on this subject.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Stephen Timms', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP
Chair, Work and Pensions Committee