



Department
for Work &
Pensions

Minister for Disabled People, Health
and Work
4th Floor
Caxton House
Tothill Street
LONDON
SW1H 9DA

www.dwp.gov.uk

Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP
Chair, Work and Pensions Select Committee
workpencom@parliament.uk

14 July 2020

Dear Stephen,

Thank you for your letter of 1 July about health assessment for benefits during the Covid-19 pandemic.

First of all, I welcome the Committee's acknowledgement of DWP's rapid response to the pandemic. Our focus, as you know, has been on supporting claimants and safeguarding vulnerable people and our focus on processing Universal Credit (UC) claims has allowed us to deal with unprecedented volumes, getting money to those who need it. Our UC systems are standing up to the challenge and we know that our legacy benefits would not have been able to cope with this level of pressure as effectively.

Our public messages, recently updated on 6 July, have been clear that all face-to-face assessments for sickness and disability benefits continue to be suspended, in line with public health guidance.

Telephony-based assessments were introduced nationally across Personal Independence Payment (PIP) contracts initially and are now in place for Work Capability Assessments (WCA). It is important to note that claimants are already in receipt of benefit at the point they are called for a WCA and the service has been designed with this in mind.

Early anecdotal evidence suggests telephone assessments are working well and we are keeping this under review. However, and especially with respect to Mind's concerns about face-to-face assessments, it is important to recognise that the assessment for PIP was designed to be able to measure the impact of a person's health condition or impairment on their ability rather than focusing solely on the health condition or impairment itself. Three activities were specifically designed to better reflect the barriers that those with mental health conditions face: engaging with other people face to face; making budgeting decisions; and planning and following journeys. This makes the assessment for PIP wider-ranging than the assessment used for Disability Living Allowance (DLA) which was weighted heavily towards physical disabilities. As a consequence of this approach, there are more people with mental health conditions receiving the higher rates of both PIP components than the DLA equivalents. For example, overall, 64 per cent of recipients with a mental health condition get the enhanced rate daily living component, compared to 22 per cent receiving highest rate DLA care and 40 per cent of recipients with a mental health condition get the enhanced rate mobility component, compared to 10 per cent receiving the higher rate DLA mobility component.

Turning now to your specific concerns on messaging, let me reassure you that we continue to process UC claims as quickly as possible. It was brought to our attention by stakeholders that the information in the UC claimant Frequently Asked Questions was inaccurate and indicated that *all* assessments were on hold. This was corrected on 10 June to reflect that for now, all *face-to-face* assessments are on hold, in line with public health guidance. I can assure you that communications issued to staff have also clarified the correct approach and so I hope this issue is now resolved.

We are monitoring all new assessment processes and are working with our providers to increase their capacity, ensuring we complete assessments as efficiently as possible.

Our aim is to ensure that those who are entitled to a benefit continue to receive support, and that new claimants are able to access the welfare safety net when they need to.

Our assessment providers continue to be monitored against a range of measures, including through independent audit. This applies to all types of health assessments, not just face-to-face.

Mind recently wrote to me directly with their concerns and I will respond directly. I will also continue my regular meetings with them. Senior Departmental officials met representatives from Mind on 24 June to discuss their concerns. We are reviewing all our current processes in the light of the latest public health advice.

We are keen to understand and learn from claimant experiences. We will continue to work closely with all stakeholders, including Mind, as we go forward.

I hope you find this reply useful.

Kind regards,



Justin Tomlinson MP
Minister for Disabled People, Health & Work



Work and Pensions Committee

House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA
Tel 020 7219 8976 Email workpencom@parliament.uk

From the Chair

Justin Tomlinson MP
Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work
Department for Work and Pensions

1 July 2020

Dear Justin,

I am writing to ask you about the operation of health assessments for benefits during the coronavirus pandemic.

As you may be aware, Mind has reported that people seeking health assessments for benefits are not being offered assessments, or are being told that they will have to wait for a face-to-face assessment to be available. They have seen cases of Universal Credit claimants receiving a message in their journal which says that “All health assessments are on hold, for now”.

In the course of our inquiry into DWP’s response to the coronavirus outbreak, we raised with you reports of delays to PIP and ESA assessments—particularly delays for people who had started their application before the pandemic. In your letter of 15 July, you told us only that:

“There is no suspension or delay on new claim processing, we continue to process claims as quickly as possible.”

You will have seen from our report that we were concerned that the Department was not engaging fully with these reports of delays. In the light of these new reports from Mind, we would be grateful for answers to the following questions:

- 1. Might you please explain to us why there seems to be a difference between the Department’s public statements and the real experiences of people applying for benefits?**
- 2. In particular, can you explain why some Universal Credit claimants have been told that all assessments have been put on hold?**

3. **What discussions have you had with the Department's contractors about delays in the assessment process?**
4. **What action do you now plan to take to address the problems being reported by Mind?**

We would be grateful for a response to these questions by **Tuesday 14 July**.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Stephen Timms', with a horizontal line above the name.

Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP
Chair, Work and Pensions Committee