

Women and Equalities Committee

Oral evidence: One-off session: Covid reports follow-up, HC 536

Wednesday 7 July 2021

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Members present: Caroline Nokes (Chair); Lee Anderson; Elliot Colburn; Philip Davies; Kate Osborne; Bell Ribeiro-Addy.

Questions 1 - 51

Witnesses

I: Kemi Badenoch MP, Minister for Equalities, Government Equalities Office; Baroness Elizabeth Berridge, Minister for Women, Government Equalities Office; Mims Davies MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Employment, Department for Work and Pensions; Justin Tomlinson MP, Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, Department for Work and Pensions; Marcus Bell, Director, Equality Hub; Paul Trenell, Deputy Director, Gender and Analysis, Equality Hub; Kerstin Parker, Deputy Director, Universal Credit Policy, Department for Work and Pensions.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Kemi Badenoch, Baroness Elizabeth Berridge, Mims Davies, Justin Tomlinson, Marcus Bell, Paul Trenell and Kerstin Parker.

Chair: Good afternoon and welcome to this evidence session. This is a follow-up, one-off session with Ministers in response to our Covid inquiries, which were conducted last year and at the start of this year. We have this afternoon with us Kemi Badenoch, Mims Davies, Justin Tomlinson, and a number of officials who are coming to give us evidence. It is very much appreciated.

Q1 **Lee Anderson:** This question is to Baroness Berridge and Mims Davies. A survey of 50,000 working mothers found that 71% of those who had applied for furlough because of school closures had been turned down. Some 78% had not been offered furlough and 40% were not aware that furlough was available to them. Why were steps not taken to better promote furlough as a right for working parents affected by school and childcare closures?

Baroness Berridge: You are right that we had to make changes to the furlough programme so that we made it available to working parents and they could claim for those reasons. I will defer to others in terms of technicalities of the procedure itself. We also made sure, particularly in the third lockdown, that early years were in fact open so that we could alleviate some of those pressures for parents as well. Overall, it is fair to say that, until recently, the majority of people claiming furlough were in fact women. Many women and working parents were able to access furlough for those reasons.

Mims Davies: I really do sympathise with working parents, and particularly lone parents, particularly mums. I have been that person and I know how these last few months and weeks have felt. It has been pretty challenging.

We have kept our jobcentres open for the whole of the time. We have been able to help anyone with vulnerabilities and anybody who has needed support. We created a new JobHelp website with different information: a digital toolkit, the "Find a job" support, and all different directions to help people through what was an unprecedented time. This was a handbrake on the economy, and then there was the challenge of childcare and schooling. My youngest would run in going, "I need to print now," in the middle of a Zoom. It is really difficult, but we have seen many people in the public sector who have been able to continue to work. Most employers have been brilliantly flexible and understanding about what might be going on at home.

The other point is that you might not have only been caring for young people. Covid may have brought you into a broader caring or community support role in helping neighbours and friends as well. People have stood up to this brilliantly in terms of helping people. I know that many women



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have remained in the public sector and been supported through that. Employers, with the flexible opportunities that they have given people, have been brilliant. It has been a great way of busting through presenteeism and really helping to understand that you can be productive while working from home.

I am very mindful that not everyone had such a pleasant experience. If you are working from your dining table, it is a nice view. If you are in your nice new garden room, it is really pleasant. Lots of people have been juggling being in a flat and having to try to stay at work or find out what support is out there. We have done everything we can to try to make it clear, through the plan for jobs, which is a £33 billion package, what support is out there, working with the Treasury and other Departments.

Q2 Lee Anderson: Wow. That is a great answer. The next question is to Kemi and Baroness Berridge. What lessons have the Government learned to ensure more equal outcomes from any future furlough and self-employment support schemes?

Kemi Badenoch: It is an interesting question because Covid has been a real learning experience across society. It is probably best to start by saying that you can never get fully equal outcomes. We need to work towards better outcomes. We put CJRS, which is furlough, and SEISS, which is the self-employment scheme, into place because we went into lockdown. If you look at the economic outcomes for lockdown through the lens of age, for example, which is a protected characteristic, trying to get more equal outcomes for young people versus older people would have led to a looser lockdown policy. That would not have been the right thing to do.

We look at this from the context that the pandemic was the greatest peacetime shock the world has seen. We have been honest that we have not been able to help everyone in exactly the way they would have liked, but we have provided a very significant package. It is one of the best examples that the IMF could point to in terms of co-ordinated action globally.

In terms of doing things better, as a Treasury Minister, one of the things that I have learned is around certainty around planning for business. We got better at that as we went on through lockdown and furlough, understanding that we needed to provide flexibility. Where there was evidence that barriers or problems were in existence, we did things like introducing flexible furlough agreements. We extended the furlough scheme through to September for those people who were struggling with childcare, for example. Those are some of the ways that we could do it better, but equal outcomes are a much more complex thing.

Baroness Berridge: When you look at how the schemes operated and the effect, you can look at the effect on women in two halves. One is that, as the Resolution Foundation has said, it has surprisingly been



broadly equal across the genders. However, what has not clearly been equal is the amount of unpaid care that has been done by women in the home. The gap between male and female there, perhaps surprisingly, has changed. Pre-lockdown, up to two hours per day more were done by women. Now, it is just under an hour.

I agree in terms of trying to ensure that all of these big sums of money that we talk about are accessed by people. I remember doing some roundtables with women in hard-to-reach groups and asking them "Have you heard about the level 3 entitlement? Have you heard about this?" There is a challenge there about communications. When I have met certain companies through the Women's Business Council, it has been about how we get our communications out, for instance, through those sectors that are still open, such as certain retailers. You will find a Co-op, a Greggs or whatever. How do we get to some of the hardest-to-reach young women who do not have qualifications or skills so that these offers are there for them to take that up?

Broadly, the economic effect has been equal, but it is disparate between different sectors. We saw for the first time that the majority of people on furlough were male as of 31 May because of the different sectors that were opening up. Like the virus itself, it has hit in a more shrapnel-type way. Women who are in sectors such as retail and hospitality have slightly dropped off the furlough scheme as those sectors have opened up. We are continually evaluating the evidence. One of the things that is of particular concern to me at the moment is the early research showing that women are more likely to suffer from long Covid than men.

Q3 Lee Anderson: My next question is to Kemi first, and then I want to ask Mims and Justin the same question. The Government will not commit to publishing equality impact assessments of the furlough or self-employment income support schemes. Why will you not publish EIAs? What aspects of EIAs need to remain secret?

Kemi Badenoch: Nothing needs to remain secret. There is just no legal requirement to publish equality impact assessments. The legal requirement is to consider equalities impacts and to have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination under the Act.

Departments do not routinely publish this. It is important that officials can draft them with openness and candour. We do see a chilling effect. If people think that everything is going to be published, they are not always as clear as they need to be in terms of what we as Ministers need to know. We see the equality impact assessment. We do have due regard. We did carry them out on the Coronavirus Act as part of the public sector equality duty and they are used to assess everything from social distancing regulations to decision-making.

Mims Davies: We published on gov.uk the Kickstart EIA at the beginning of this week. When we are completing the assessment, policymakers consider the overall impact of the policy. Over those first few months of



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the pandemic in particular, an equality assessment was carried out around the Coronavirus Act as part of the public sector equality duty.

Advice to Ministers includes assessments on how policies, including fiscal policies, will affect different individuals and protected characteristics. I agree with Kemi about the importance of having that candour in those assessments. To be honest, we have been focused on the plan for jobs and everything that we have done at DWP to help and support people to get back into work and help them to progress that. It has not been the top of our priorities to get out there, but where we can, we will share that. As Kemi says, there is nothing to hide in regard to this.

Justin Tomlinson: I do not have too much to add. Kemi summed that up very well. It is primarily a decision-making tool. There is a legal requirement that all Ministers, the decision-makers, have taken that fully into account. As Kemi said, openness and candour are absolutely crucial from officials so that, when we ultimately put that pen to paper, we know of all the implications of what we are intending to do.

Q4 **Lee Anderson:** Finally, my last question is just to Kemi, just to wrap this one up. If equality assessments identify unequal effects, but the Government believe they are unavoidable or justified, do the affected groups have a right to know?

Kemi Badenoch: It depends on what you mean by “the affected groups” and how the information is presented. For instance, I gave the example earlier about lockdown policy. If you were on a pension, it did not really make much difference. If you were working in the public sector, you probably continued to work. That might have had a negative impact on your health. If you were young, you were not able to work, you lost your job and you were impacted from an age perspective.

Many of these things are sometimes very obvious. We talk about many of these things anyway, even if we have not put them in an equality impact assessment. For example, in the Treasury, the finance Bills that we put through always have a tax information and impact notice. Most people do not pay attention to them and even the ones who do tend to almost make it a squabble, when actually the policy in its entirety is working well. It may benefit some groups more than others.

If you are asking whether we can design a policy that is going to benefit every single person perfectly in exactly the same way, that is not possible. We should not encourage a narrative that we are pitting groups against each other, which can occasionally happen. I have seen that happen in a finance Bill. The important thing is that we as Ministers are making sure that we are getting to the right decision and the best decision for everybody in the round.

Q5 **Kate Osborne:** Good afternoon to everybody. My first question is to Baroness Berridge, please. Your response to our report says that you will not conduct a growth assessment of more gender-inclusive alternatives



to the build back better approach such as the care-led recovery proposed by the Women's Budget Group. Can you tell us why not, please?

Baroness Berridge: We have first of all looked at the underlying analysis of that report. Treasury is looking at whether its assertion of the greater growth that you would have by investing in care jobs rather than construction would be correct. As I am sure you are aware, there was a manifesto promise in relation to £1 billion being invested in affordable childcare. Part of that is now the holiday activities fund and programme. Every local authority from Easter and the summer is running holiday activities, particularly for disadvantaged children. We are looking at the data underlying that report, but there is positive action at the moment as well.

Q6 **Kate Osborne:** Baroness Berridge, how will you ensure that focusing on male-dominated sectors such as construction and transport will not exacerbate gender-based employment and pay inequalities?

Baroness Berridge: One of the things we need to look at in terms of the gender pay gap is that, although it is at a record low, one of the factors underlying the disparity is that women tend to be overrepresented in lower-income jobs that also have less progression to higher-quality employment. I have been doing lots of events around women in construction and engineering, trying to increase the pipeline. We have seen more young people. I am in DfE as well. There has been a 31% increase in the number of entries at A-level for girls taking STEM subjects. We are really trying to emphasise that. I am also involved with the specialist maths sixth form colleges, and a particular part of them is that outreach. We have to crack into those sectors where women are underrepresented at the moment.

We are making progress. Sometimes the initiatives that we start reflect the existing inequalities, but sometimes they do not, like the digital skills bootcamps. The one run in Blackburn had a 70% first cohort and an 80% second cohort input of women when the workforce is only 17% women. We are working hard on that. We know, having met a number of the construction companies as well, that they are keen to equip themselves with the best workforce, which includes, of course, women.

Q7 **Kate Osborne:** I am going to touch on the STEM sector in a minute. Before I do that, can I move to Kemi Badenoch, please? Can you tell us, how are the Government ensuring that the economic recovery reduces disparities in unemployment and insecure work for ethnic minority workers and employees?

Kemi Badenoch: Thank you for the question. We do not pick groups and say, "This is what we are going to do specifically for those groups". We look at where people are represented, and in particular overrepresented, and we make sure that we target sectors and geographic areas so that there are inclusive economic recovery policies.



You mentioned unemployment, for example. The plan for jobs package provides support to people who have lost their jobs. I am sure the Ministers online could talk more about DWP, but they will ensure that support from jobcentres and the jobcentre partners will deliver outcomes for those who are underrepresented in the labour market. We know that ethnic minority groups are overrepresented within that cohort. The plan for jobs package does that. We also know that ethnic minorities are overrepresented within the young cohort.

The Kickstart scheme, which is worth £2 billion, will disproportionately benefit ethnic minorities. That looks at the areas that you mentioned: unemployment and unstable or insecure work. Those sorts of measures and packages will help ethnic minorities.

Q8 Kate Osborne: Are you saying that, although it is not specifically targeted, the way in which you know that it is made up means that these areas are targeted?

Kemi Badenoch: Yes. How would you target?

Kate Osborne: I do not know. You tell me. You are the Minister.

Kemi Badenoch: You are asking me the question. We do not have a national ID database where we know the names of every single person and which ethnic minority group they come from. It would also be illegal to do recruitment based on ethnicity. That would violate the Equality Act, so that is definitely not what we do. The way we do it is how I just described.

Kate Osborne: You know that there are disparities in unemployment and insecure work for ethnic minority workers. You do not feel that there is a need to particularly target areas.

Kemi Badenoch: I have just described how you do that. If you have a specific option that you think we are not taking, I would like to hear it. What option should we do that we are not doing that is legal?

Q9 Chair: I was just going to ask a question on not targeting specific groups. Does Kickstart not target young people?

Kemi Badenoch: It does target young people, but the Equality Act specifically talks about the difference between positive discrimination and positive action. That description that you have given would be positive discrimination. Kickstart, for example, is a scheme for young people. Age is a protected characteristic, but it is not something that you cannot move out of. You are a particular minority; that is what you are going to be forever. If you are a woman, you are a woman. If you are 18, you are going to be 25. Tax and national insurance laws change as you move through, so it is different. It is not the same for age as it is for race.

Q10 Chair: Baroness Berridge indicated that, particularly when it came to STEM subjects at A-level, there was a real focus on targeting how you got



more girls into STEM subjects. I am sure we all support and agree with that. Following on from that, is there any merit in policies that encourage those same girls who have been encouraged into STEM A-levels into STEM employment? That is not necessarily a question for you, Kemi; that could be a question for Mims. Does DWP see that there might be merit in making sure that high-quality engineering jobs or jobs in construction are set aside for women?

Mims Davies: In regard to the way that we help women into the sectors that you have just described, which also supports the message that Baroness Berridge was giving, employers very often have the same type of recruitment that screens people out when they are trying to be more diverse. It is quite often looking at their recruitment policies, which is very helpful, and also the way they set up shifts and support more women into the sector.

We use our sector-based work academy programmes. They work brilliantly because they give people of all backgrounds and all ages the opportunity to go in and try a sector. There is a guaranteed interview at the end of the job placement. It also gives you training along that journey. That is really helpful.

I have seen them, for example, in rail and viticulture. In fact, we have managed to get more women coming into rail in Kim Johnson's patch through doing the sector-based work academy with rail track recruitment. They have had 100% of the people going into that sector going into jobs, including women, because they have been able to learn on the job. Those work academies work really well.

Q11 **Chair:** Can I just follow up on that? If it is okay to target girls into STEM subjects at school and college, is it not also okay to target women, who are going to remain women, into STEM roles through employment—yes or no?

Mims Davies: It is right for us to focus on the individual opportunity. Very often, it comes down to confidence and network. You can be really keen to go into a sector but you may not have your way of breaking in. That is why sector-based work academies, Kickstart and other interventions work really well.

The way we do it at DWP is to link into the local opportunities in the local labour market and the local economy and link into the employers, so that the right person gets the right opportunity for them. Through work experience, Kickstart and our 50 PLUS: Choices, where we have mentoring groups that bring people together, we are able to really break down those barriers and stereotypes. It is really helpful when employers look at their recruitment and working practices.

Q12 **Chair:** It is okay to target people who are 50-plus, who are always going to be 50-plus—sadly, we do not go backwards—but it is not okay to have a specific target for women or BAME.



Mims Davies: It is not targeting as such. We are creating programmes and schemes that support those people. It means that whatever background, postcode or gender you are, that individualised approach works for you. I have been talking to people who are in their 50s and 60s who have always wanted to be teachers, some of them men, who are going on TA training programmes through sector-based work academies. They spent most of their careers working nightclubs and doing other things and felt that they did not have a way into that sector. It can work both ways.

I know a particular bus company near Southampton, near your patch, changed its mix of drivers and increased its workforce by splitting shifts. It offered evenings and weekends and worked around people's caring and schooling responsibilities. It got more drivers and filled shifts. They had very happy customers because they had a mixture of people driving. It is a mixture of interventions, but for us it is about the right schemes and the right individual approach and help.

Q13 **Kate Osborne:** We have probably covered my next question around STEM. I am going to ask a question on behalf of Anne McLaughlin, a member of the Committee who cannot be with us today. Working-class women use public transport more than men and are less likely to be car owners. They take frequent and complex public transport journeys. Especially when masks are not mandatory, exposure to the virus is more likely on public transport than in a private car. As part of your strategy to get people returning to work, is it not vital to undertake an equality impact assessment around the need to travel to work?

Kemi Badenoch: Are you asking why we are not carrying out an equality impact assessment, or whether we are carrying out an equality impact assessment on travel to work?

Kate Osborne: Yes, as part of your strategy to get people back to work.

Kemi Badenoch: That would not be within a Treasury or even an equalities competency. That would be something for BEIS, DHSC or DfT. None of them is on this call.

On the point you are making, we look at the impact assessments for all sorts of groups and policies. Again, an equality impact assessment is not a panacea. It is not going to solve everything. If people need to go to work via public transport, that is going to affect men as well as women. Looking at it specifically from the perspective that more women are doing this is not particularly helpful. It is about what the impact is of going to work and taking public transport. What should public transport policies be? It is not about whether this is going to be better or worse for women. That is just not how you make effective policy.

The ins and outs of the particular policy would be for a Department to do. If you are a man getting on the bus or a women getting on the bus, your risk is the same. Overall, there may be slightly more women or men.



That also depends on geography. Do you live in a rural area? Do you live in a city? There are lots of things that will come into play when designing that type of policy, but simply looking at it and saying, "Is this individual policy going to be better for men or for women?" is not a good way to make a policy. It is not an effective way. Given the data that you have, you probably would not get the right answer just looking at it through one lens.

Justin Tomlinson: I can add a little to that from the perspective of those whose characteristics could make them more likely to be at a health risk, which would include some people with disabilities or long-term health conditions. First of all, at each stage of the roadmap, there is equality analysis that is looking at the broader picture. In the case of people with disabilities and long-term health conditions, we have adapted the access to work scheme, which is funding provided by the Government that goes beyond what an employer would expect to do as a reasonable adjustment. During the pandemic, when public transport has been deemed not to be the appropriate way for some to travel into work, we have provided funding for alternative transport. Where the characteristics are identifying somebody to be at greater risk, there is that case of provision.

Kemi Badenoch: That is a really great example of looking at the policy in detail in terms of who is at risk and what risk their protected characteristic is bringing into play rather than just counting men versus women, which is not necessarily bringing in any particular risk if you look at them as individuals versus someone who is able-bodied or disabled.

Q14 **Kate Osborne:** Is it not an equality issue if it impacts women more disproportionately than men? Justin, going forward, is that provision still in place? This is talking about when restrictions are lifted.

Justin Tomlinson: First of all, we have made quite a lot of changes to the access to work scheme during Covid, many of which we will keep in place. Prior to Covid, there was a presumption that you would be working in a traditional workplace. The funding was provided to make reasonable adjustments within that workplace. As part of Covid, we immediately made funding available for working from home and working from multiple locations. That will remain the case as part of the new normality. It is very clear that the way that we work day to day has fundamentally changed, so we will keep those things in place.

Access to work has always provided; around a third of our money is spent on travel. Again, that will look at each individual's case, because it all comes down to what goes beyond what is reasonably expected of an employer. We would then step in to make sure we were removing those barriers within society. It is a key part of how we have delivered record disability employment.

Mims Davies: Just to add to that quickly if I may, we have something called the flexible support fund, which has an extra £150 million in it. We



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are helping people, whether it is a wheel on their car, Wheels to Work, or their First Bus fare, because they have got into work. We are able to help people. Exactly as Justin says, whatever the barrier for you getting into work and staying in work, at DWP we do everything we can to make sure that that happens. With the changes because of Covid and the busting through presenteeism, there is a really strong understanding from employers about the need to be flexible. Those are some of the really positive outcomes of the pandemic that we can take forward.

Q15 Chair: The whole Committee was really pleased to hear the commitment from the Minister for Women and Equalities around flexible working and the importance as we build back to give that greater flexibility to workforce. Baroness Berridge, are you concerned that the messaging around flexible working has got a little bit muddled this week?

Baroness Berridge: No. Flexible working is a complex issue. With the pandemic, it could in some people's minds just be synonymous with working at home. It is very important, and that is why the flexible working taskforce through BEIS has been reconvened. It includes working from home, obviously, but there are dangers to that becoming the default and that being all that people think about flexible working. Minister Tomlinson pointed out making sure that it does not excuse employers from making reasonable adjustments in the workplace.

For some people, thinking that it is about just working from home could actually not be best for them. Somebody else mentioned the garden rooms. For many people, their actual accommodation or who they are living with means that working from home is not best for them. It is more than working from home. It is about what hours are set and the flexibility of that as well as the location.

We want to make sure that flexible working retains its full meaning. It includes working from home remotely, but it is about which days and hours. There will be a response to the consultation that BEIS put out shortly. Obviously here, looking at the stage we were at as Government, there has been a whole additional lot of evidence in a way we could never have expected around flexible working.

Most workplaces I know in the civil service and many employers have kept their offices open for welfare reasons. I know your Committee is always concerned about those who are domestically abused, who are mainly women. Getting out and into work, or if you are living in a refuge, is vital. We want to consider the whole evidence piece that we now unexpectedly, and in lots of respects unfortunately, have around flexible working. It is a broad concept, and we want to retain it as that.

Q16 Chair: I just want to follow up on that. You are absolutely right, and it must not just be very narrowly seen as working from home. Do you envisage a situation in which the Government are going to take legislative steps to encourage employers to offer more flexible working practices?



Baroness Berridge: There was a commitment to look at legislation. There will be a response to the consultation, but we have this other bank of evidence to look at. We are serious about this. As we have said, although legislation is always what we look at in Parliament and Government, many employers have been fantastic at being flexible with people anyway. That enhances the work relationship both ways. We want to see how behaviour has changed before thinking about whether legislation is needed.

Q17 **Chair:** Would the GEO be supportive of an employment Bill coming forward?

Baroness Berridge: There are plans, as far as I understand it. I am sure officials will correct me if I am wrong. There are plans to have an employment Bill. We are now in the process of that, and Covid has obviously delayed that. It is essential that we do not act pre-emptively here, until we have looked at the evidence base and the behaviours that have changed as a result of the pandemic.

Q18 **Chair:** Were you disappointed that one did not come forward in the Queen's Speech?

Baroness Berridge: I was not disappointed. If you are going to legislate, you need to legislate well while looking at all the evidence that you have. A pandemic has just given us so much more evidence that will be helpful in terms of making the changes, both in policy and otherwise, that we need to make.

Justin Tomlinson: There is some exciting potential here. It has clearly opened up a new way of thinking for employers that will benefit some disabled people who perhaps previously have not been able to have a realistic opportunity of working in a traditional workplace.

On the point about needing to legislate well, we need to be careful that we do not then allow employers to, in effect, get out of doing reasonable adjustments within the workplace because they find it easier to say to that individual, "You work from home", or "You work at these particular times".

We cannot allow this to inadvertently undermine the equal status within the workplace. There is exciting potential, but we need to look very closely at the consultation and make sure we legislate this well. I have certainly spoken to some people who have seen this as a real opportunity for them to fulfil their potential.

Q19 **Chair:** I will ask the same question to you, Justin. If you want to see it legislated well and employers not using it as a mechanism via which to get around the reasonable adjustments requirements, is that not the right place to bring forward an employment Bill relatively soon, so that we do not slip back into the bad old ways and lose all the lessons that we have learned from the pandemic?



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Justin Tomlinson: Yes and no. I understand the thrust of your point, but no in the sense that sometimes some things seem so good that they cannot be true. That is why you cannot rush this. We do not want to try to fix something badly. The ultimate endgame is that we need to formalise the best way to take advantage of the benefits that are brought forward by flexible working. Most employers get it.

Covid turbo-charged quite a lot of changes within society. The shift to online shopping was probably seven to 10 years quicker. There is increased use of flexible working. Also, other drivers of that will be as particular sectors find it harder to recruit people as the economy returns to normality. Again, flexibility is a way to attract people. If we can then sensibly and pragmatically take those best bits, ultimately you would want to formalise that into legislation as a future employment Bill.

Q20 **Chair:** Mims, I will ask a separate question to you, and you can add in a bit on this. As a Committee, we saw a real reliance on, or perhaps promotion of, flexible working among managerial and professional roles, and a real concern that those who were working on the front line of Covid did not have that option open to them. Do you see a mechanism that DWP can use to make sure that flexible working works for all types of jobs or the majority of types of jobs?

Mims Davies: Yes. I completely agree. Our own workforce at DWP has had to pivot, change and work very long hours. I think 27,000 hours were additionally worked over the Easter weekend of the first wave. People were just doing everything they could to process UC claims. A lot of people on different front lines have been working non-stop. We need to be very mindful of the opportunity for flexible working and working from home, which as you heard from Baroness Berridge are two different things.

We have an In-Work Progression Commission report that has just landed. It covers things like transport. It covers progression very widely, of course. I am very mindful of some of the points that Justin picked up on. If you are not in the room, you can be overlooked. Your progression opportunities, your learning opportunities, and being able to be mentored and supported are really important, particularly for younger people in the workforce. I am quite worried about older people feeling that they need to "get out the way" and let young people come through, and not be planning for their own future and pensions.

We need to learn a lot of things from this. There is a lot in this that the pandemic has exacerbated, as Justin described. At DWP, we are just very grateful that the employers understand that offering more flexible working arrangements helps them recruit and retain people in many sectors. That is as crucial as anything else.

Q21 **Chair:** You made a really important point about career progression and how those who might not be in the room could get overlooked. We have heard the Minister for Women and Equalities repeatedly talk about



presenteeism and how that is not necessarily an asset to productivity. How do you overcome, as the Department for Work and Pensions, the challenge between presenteeism and people being overlooked?

Mims Davies: I thought that when people worked at home, they sat at home watching "Home and Away", raiding the fridge and having a great time. Many people's experiences have been living at work. That is a totally different experience. There have been really long hours. It has been quite difficult. They are feeling disconnected. We are very human. We need to see our bosses and colleagues. We need to have that chat in the tearoom. All of those things make you be a happier employee and they help you with those connections and that creativity. I know that some of my local life science companies have moved back very quickly to being in the workplace because they have lost that spark and ingenuity that is so important.

This is a team game for Government, employers, DWP and everybody to get right, so that we get the positives out of the pandemic and we continue to get that flexible, agile, dynamic workforce going forward and progressing, which is what we want out of this.

Q22 **Chair:** Should flexible working be a day 1 right?

Kemi Badenoch: In a sense, many employers already offer that. It depends again on what you mean by flexible working and what the particular business or work you are doing is. I have heard from medical staff about flexible working not necessarily being something they can offer because it depends on patient needs, for example. Is it compressed hours? Is it part-time hours? There should be a presumption in favour of it where possible, but simply creating a right without looking at the circumstances would be difficult.

Justin Tomlinson: We should be very open-minded on this but wait for the consultation to be brought together. I am not deliberately hedging my bets. I am a former employer; we are all still employers with our parliamentary offices, but I ran a business before coming here. There is a lot of potential but let us just make sure we get this right.

Baroness Berridge: I would say, along with Justin, that we are waiting for the consultation. However, it is important that you do not start at day 1. We have done behavioural insights work with the job site Indeed and with employers such as Zurich. It was one of the biggest social policy experiments that we have done. We saw overall that employers who put in a job advertisement that there were flexible hours had a 30% increase in the number of applicants and a 20% increase in the number of women who applied¹.

¹ Baroness Berridge referenced a Gender and Behavioural Insights trial about putting flexible working in job ads and said that it had seen 30% more applicants, and 20% more applications from women. The stats should be "20% more roles advertised as flexible, and 30% more applicants'."



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I do not just want to look at it at day 1; I want to look at it way down the track. That was a really positive policy that we did. Employers such as Zurich and others are changing their advertisement practices as a result of even putting it in the advertisement.

Q23 Chair: Mims, following on from that, I know that Openreach has also done some brilliant work around how it writes its job adverts to make them more inclusive. What is DWP doing to encourage all employers to write inclusive job adverts?

Mims Davies: I totally agree with having flexibility on the job description. We know that women quite often rule themselves out rather than ruling themselves in. It is something that men do not do. Confidence can be at the heart of that.

We work really strongly with employers to make sure that we are getting the right opportunities for the right people. It is not a cop-out. If you are happy at work and it is working for you and an employer, that is absolutely great. It is all about outcomes for us at DWP, and that has to be linked into the local labour market as well.

The most important thing that we can do right now is explain the breadth of opportunities within sectors. Quite often, people rule themselves out of care or construction, for example, two of our key areas for immediate and near-term jobs to get people into, because they do not understand the breadth of the opportunities within them. They think, "I am not someone who is going to be on the front line, caring." They do not realise it is maintenance, IT, accounts, cooking, entertainment and other things that you can support in the care sector.

That has been one of the best things about Kickstart. It has been really helping employers to open up wider and showcase the breadth of opportunities that they have. If we can do that more in construction and other areas, once people get through the door, they are going to find more opportunities. Putting flexible working on that job application, meaning people are going to rule themselves in, is very appealing to me.

Q24 Elliot Colburn: Justin, all my questions are to you. It is a hefty set of a questions. If I can begin, Justin, by talking about the experience of disabled people throughout the course of this pandemic, we have heard about the disproportionate impact that it has had on disabled people compared to the wider population. I am thinking particularly about the higher death rates, the difficulties in accessing essentials, and also the very worrying cases of the inappropriate use of do-not-resuscitate forms.

Notwithstanding the fact that the Government have committed to an independent inquiry into the pandemic, would you not agree that there is a compelling case for a separate independent inquiry into the causes and outcomes for disabled people throughout the course of the pandemic?

Justin Tomlinson: We are expecting the full and comprehensive independent inquiry terms of reference to be set out and agreed ahead of



spring next year. I have had mixed messages from stakeholders about whether you would want to have a separate path. My instinct is, "Why would we separate it out?" Disabled people are part of society, the same as everyone else. One in five people in this country has a disability or a long-term health condition. It clearly needs to be an important, integral part. It should be embedded into the heart of the main inquiry, not as some sideshow afterthought. That would be my instinct.

Q25 Elliot Colburn: Can I take from that that it is your ambition, as it were, to ensure that disabled people's experiences are indeed included in that terms of reference?

Justin Tomlinson: Yes. I am happy to say that. Nobody knows yet because they have to set out the terms of reference and that has to be consulted on. If we look at the evidence, we have the Covid-O committee that meets two to three times a week. Disability issues that impact on disabled people are at the very centre of a lot of that work that has been done during the Covid pandemic. You would expect it, and I certainly would expect it as the Minister for Disabled People, to be an integral part embedded into this independent inquiry. The key part is to identify issues and learn from them so that collectively, as a Government and as society, we are better prepared for future shocks.

Q26 Elliot Colburn: I will come on to future shocks in a bit. If I can perhaps pivot to the public sector equality duty, the Government have stated that they do not believe that there is a compelling case for strengthening this by putting it as a statutory code of practice. If you think about disabled people's experiences throughout the pandemic, again thinking in particular of the discriminatory practice of inappropriate use of DNR forms, is that not sufficiently compelling in itself to look at moving this on to a more statutory footing?

Justin Tomlinson: I understand why you would raise that. You could broaden it out to the principle of the Equality Act in its entirety about the protections within society. It is an area that has pinged my interest. I have discussed this again with some stakeholders.

We will reflect on some of this as part of the forthcoming national disability strategy. At the very heart of this is that, in its purest form, the law is the law, and there are protections for disabled people within society. However, a lot of that presumes that, first of all, public sector bodies and, looking more widely at the Equality Act, businesses day to day are fully up to speed with what they should do. If we work on the assumption that the vast majority of people do not get up in the morning and set out to do bad by other people, can we hand on heart say that everybody is fully up to speed with that? That is the first issue.

The second issue is, where the system does not work, it is predicated on that individual, in this case a disabled person, taking forward action on their own. With the best will in the world, would anybody be in a position to go and take that fight on against a big public sector body or business?



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That is the area that needs to be focused on, rather than that principle about putting on a statutory footing. The law is the law, and the Equality Act already exists.

The lesson we can learn from this is about how the Health and Safety Executive works. It is a body that looks at safety in this country. It provides incredibly clear, constructive, proactive guidelines for businesses so that they know what they need to do to have safe workplaces. They enforce it proactively. If Elliot Colburn's business is inspected and it has some issues, it will help you address those. If you then ignore that, you will face enforcement, but the enforcement is only once you decide not to engage with that system. We are world-beating on safety. Those are the lessons that we need to look to.

I have raised this with EHRC. I met with them recently on this specific issue. There are parallels and lessons that can be learned so that we as a society can be more proactive in increasing awareness and support and be more proactive around enforcement. That will be the key area.

Q27 **Elliot Colburn:** You mentioned future emergency situations or future pandemics earlier. Quite simply, how can we ensure that disabled people are better protected from discriminatory practices in future emergency situations? We have spoken about the fact that the law is the law, but it is clear from your last answer that there is an issue in both its application and its enforcement in places. What can DWP do to ensure that the application and enforcement of said laws are optimal?

Justin Tomlinson: To be fair, this is me with my Disability Unit hat on rather than my DWP one. It is that broad principle of, "Can we, in the same way that the HSE operates around safety, have a more proactive way to raise awareness? As a last resort where, for whatever reason, either a public body or a business is not complying, can we take enforcement on their behalf?"

I personally think that it is an ask too much at the moment to rely on individuals. Most people do not set out to do wrong, but society would not always know what the right thing to do was. That is where we have to be more proactive. I have raised that with EHRC to go and look at. They are the experts in this area. I would be very interested to work with them and support any potential ways to, in my opinion, replicate the good work of HSE.

Q28 **Elliot Colburn:** In cases where enforcement or application of the existing laws is a problem, anyone, regardless of characteristic, can be not quite sure where to go in terms of when to raise issues and when not to. Would it be your instinct that, particularly when we are talking about disabled people in this context, that concern could be exacerbated, insofar as they are less likely to want to bring forward those complaints? Therefore, from an equalities perspective, that is something that needs to be addressed.



Justin Tomlinson: Yes. I am not quite sure on your wording there about them being less willing. I suspect they are as willing as anybody else, but they could in some cases have many other things that they have to address to then not drop everything and suddenly lead that fight as an individual. That is why I keep talking about the parallels of HSE with its proactive way of raising awareness and guidance by, in effect, holding the hands of public bodies and businesses to make sure they are doing the right things. For those who choose not to for whatever reason, it steps in and takes action to make sure we are world-leading on safety. Other countries and international businesses pay us a lot of money to replicate what HSE has done in this country. Twenty years ago, HSE had a terrible brand name, but it went and became more proactive and supportive. It really worked on its comms and engagement. Where we have something right, let us just utilise that and go that bit further.

Just a few weeks ago, I met with EHRC. You are absolutely right to raise this. It is something that I think there is real potential for us to explore.

Q29 Elliot Colburn: We certainly look forward to hearing more about the outcome of those conversations in the future. Perhaps I can pivot now to talking about social care. Obviously, the dominant debate in this sphere is about the management of unsustainable costs in caring for the elderly, which is incredibly important. How will the Government's social care reform package also address working-age disabled people's issues across a wide range of social care settings?

Justin Tomlinson: That is obviously in the realm of Minister Helen Whately from DHSC, so I will do my best to step into her shoes in my response. We will all welcome the forthcoming Government proposals on adult social care reform, which are coming this year.

It is fair to say, with my extensive stakeholder engagement, that the majority of those meetings do not have an agenda and we allow those. I am predominantly meeting disability charities, disabled people's organisations and disabled individuals. They will often raise cross-Government issues that are not directly to do with my DWP day-to-day work, though I am also responsible for the Disability Unit in the Equality Hub.

Often adult social care-related issues are flagged. We share those with DHSC. Minister Whately joined our Disability Charities Consortium to specifically talk around these sorts of issues. We link our regional stakeholder network through those issues, whether that is with me or the Disability Unit officials. We will take a very keen interest when those reforms come forward. We will be a key part to co-ordinate stakeholder engagement around that area, including disabled people of working age and how any potential reforms will help.

Q30 Elliot Colburn: In that stakeholder engagement that you have been undertaking, are there emerging common themes that you have been putting to DHSC that stakeholders are saying quite clearly need to be



included in said reforms?

Justin Tomlinson: They are generally the same. There is a real appetite to see reform. That does not just apply to our Government but pretty much all of the recent Governments of all political persuasions that have been wrestling with this. We all know as individual MPs that it is not going to be a simple shuffling of the pack. These are very big questions that, as a Government, as a Parliament, and as a society, we have to answer. We have an ageing population. One in five people has a disability or long-term health condition, of which the vast majority will get them through working age. All of the statistics are pointing at greater costs.

We are a more transient population. Families do not necessarily live close together to provide immediate family care. Traditionally, all members of the household are working, so there is not that available care support within a house. Everything points towards greater costs. We all want dignity and fairness in society, so we have to wrestle what we are doing with that.

Until we see what those details are, it is very difficult to comment. I do not want to speculate because I am not Minister Helen Whately or a DHSC Minister. We will, as we have done through the Covid pandemic, feed the stakeholder feedback directly in. We will host events where the relevant Ministers and officials will come and meet those with real lived experience. That is probably one of the best part of the Disability Unit. We are the eyes and ears of those with real lived experience, to share concerns and suggestions and bring together real insight that can help shape better policy going forward. We will be very active as soon as those reforms are brought forward.

Q31 **Elliot Colburn:** You mentioned earlier your forthcoming national strategy. Again, reflecting on the experience of disabled people throughout the pandemic, which aspects of those experiences are you hoping will be addressed as part of that strategy?

Justin Tomlinson: We have three documents coming forward that I am responsible for. Health is Everyone's Business is looking around in-work support and progression. The DWP health and disability Green Paper will look at disability benefits and support, on which we spend £26 billion a year, and also disability employment. We are very proud to have delivered record disability employment but we are ambitious to have 1 million more disabled people in work by 2027. To do that we will have to do more.

The overarching strategy, the national disability strategy that was launched by the Prime Minister, has given me a huge amount of extra sway. We have ministerial disability champions in every single Government Department, who hold the accountability for how they will collectively help, across Government, remove barriers within society to create a fully inclusive society.



This document will be setting out the current and medium-term priorities. It will then have ownership from each Government Department, and it will be refreshed annually, shaped by those with real lived experience. It will reflect some of the lessons and some of the changes in society that have come about because of Covid. We touched on some of those earlier on around flexible working. You have talked about care. Those with real lived experience have set the main issues, around education, housing and employment. It will be a comprehensive document that will allow real, genuine, cross-Government focus and accountability. Crucially for me, it empowers stakeholders who can provide the insight and expertise to individual Ministers and Departments to help create better, inclusive policies going forward. I am very excited by this.

Q32 Elliot Colburn: It sounds incredibly exciting. I am sure you would expect me to ask you when we can expect to see it.

Justin Tomlinson: Very soon. We should have launched the Green Paper and the national strategy last summer, but for Covid. We had to delay, and understandably the Government's comms have been focused on the response to Covid. In a way, although I wish we could have done, it has given us a lot longer to engage with those with real lived experiences, which has brought a lot of changes to the things we have been able to focus on. It has also changed how we brought in those ministerial disability champions, so that there is a Minister personally responsible in each Department for how their Departments are or are not performing, and those, as it is published, will be able to pass judgments.

It has also allowed us to develop this idea with stakeholders to make it not a one-off document but an annual document that can then be held to account. I would very much hope that you, as a Select Committee, would take a particular interest in this document, and I would welcome an opportunity for you to look at it and feed in about which bits you welcome and where you think respective Government Departments can go further.

I think am the longest-serving Disability Minister. I have never been more empowered to raise cross-Government issues. As I said, I do a lot of stakeholder engagement, and often there are issues that are raised that are not within my realm as a DWP Minister day to day. It does not half focus minds when it is the Prime Minister's personal [inaudible], so we have made a lot of progress ahead of the national disability strategy being brought forward. It will be very soon.

Q33 Elliot Colburn: We absolutely will be taking a very keen interest in that. If I can move on now to talk about communication during the course of the pandemic, were you frustrated or disappointed about the decision to contest the judicial review about the lack of BSL interpretation at the televised Covid briefings?

Justin Tomlinson: As you would expect, as a Minister I cannot comment directly on an ongoing legal JR. That said, I do pay tribute to you as a Select Committee. I was a witness at the first hearing of this, where you



rightly raised challenges around accessible communications, which also included parts to do with BSL. At the time I certainly was frustrated, as somebody who was engaging with stakeholders, that this broader point about accessible communications kept being brought up.

Through the Covid-O group, the high-level senior decision-makers that meets two to three times a week to look at the immediate, urgent issues, I was able to flag that and get everybody's attention. What has then happened is, first of all, on the specific issue of BSL, that is now available at Government press briefings. The feed is provided by the BBC. That is made available to all broadcasters. It is on the BBC News channel. It is on the BBC online channel.

We went further than that. For the first time, we now have a named senior official, Claire Pimm, in the Cabinet Office, who has a huge amount of expertise in this area from her personal career background and doing it as a role. She works and meets monthly with organisations such as the National Autistic Society, Mencap, Mind, Scope, RNID and RNIB to make sure, collectively, all Government Departments and the Government are getting it right. Normally, we do not like centralising things as politicians. We all talk about devolution, but in this case we are centralising, making sure that any Government Department's comms is being audited and checked.

The key bit is that I want this—I would strongly recommend this in your recommendations—which was set up for Covid, to become a permanent feature of the Government's work. A monthly meeting with those stakeholders around accessible communications will make for better Government communications. Feel free to help me push on that.

Q34 **Elliot Colburn:** I should have said for the purpose of the broadcast, of course, that "BSL" stands for "British Sign Language"; apologies for using the abbreviation. Justin, we have heard, and I am sure you have heard through your stakeholder engagement, that many disability organisations feel that disabled voices were largely excluded during the pandemic. This was something that has been levelled to us at this Committee. However, it has also been described by the Government as a very positive, inclusive approach, with open lines of communication. Can you give us some explanation as to why there is that divergence of opinion?

Justin Tomlinson: Yes, absolutely. The best way to describe this is through what I was doing. As the Minister for Disabled People, I would lead that work, either with my DWP hat on or in my cross-Government efforts, being responsible for the Disability Unit.

First of all, my immediate task on behalf of disabled people was to make sure the disability benefits did not trip over. That was a major challenge at the beginning, because we had to suspend face-to-face assessments and engagement for obvious reasons. The majority of our frontline workers were health professionals who were being rapidly seconded to go and help the NHS, Test and Trace and the vaccine rollout, so I have had a



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significantly depleted workforce. If we had not acted quickly, people who rely on disability benefits would have had serious consequences.

We managed to auto-extend awards, leaving our limited capacity to concentrate solely on new claimants, so nobody missed out—those whose condition had significantly changed, which was predominantly those getting worse, which accesses a higher level of support, and, rightly, those who are deemed to be terminally ill. That £26 billion of annual expenditure has worked. Part of that was introducing telephone and video assessments. Again, as part of the disability Green Paper we are looking at how we can keep those, post Covid, as part of the menu of support. That was the immediate thing, and you would have heard a lot more from disability stakeholders if we had got that wrong.

The second part is primarily my Disability Unit stakeholder engagement. I have the Disability Charities Consortium, so that is your leading health and disability charities who regularly meet with us. Again, they will raise the issues. We then brought in relevant Ministers, so unsurprisingly we had Minister Zahawi, who then talked about the vaccination priority list and the take-up levels, and then there were offers of support around the comms and around things they felt were not quite right, which then led to changes. Minister Whately spoke around the social care provision during Covid. We had DCMS there talking about the loneliness agenda and also how the charity sector, which many of the health and disability stakeholder groups are from, was able to access the various pots of Government funding.

We have our regional stakeholder network. The country is split into nine areas. They meet monthly, and I attend each of those regions once a year, plus you have senior officials at all of them. They set their own agendas. I then meet with the regional stakeholder network chairs twice a year, plus other meetings with members.

I then have my individual meetings and, as many of you will know, I have been doing quite a lot of meetings with MPs who choose their own constituency representatives to come and raise issues. Anything and everything that is raised is noted down and fed into the relevant Ministers. Again, it helps shape those priorities. Crucially, where we think they can bring expertise, or where the other Departments think there is expertise, we will introduce them. It was covered in that first hearing, where Minister Victoria Prentis benefited from some of the health and disability charities, such as RNIB, which helped shape the response, to make sure supermarkets were able to prioritise access to food and medicine to those that were most in need.

Finally, the cross-Government work specifically to do with the pandemic as part of Covid-O is where, as we have just discussed, there were genuine understandable frustrations around accessible communications. I was able to quickly raise it to the most senior people. From that, we then got that centralised report in the Cabinet Office. Again, I was able to



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make sure that health and disability charities were part of the solution, not just raising the concern. Understandably, that has made for better outcomes.

You will say, “Why do some say it has worked well and some say it has not?” There are thousands and thousands of disability charities and organisations. One in five people in this country has a disability or health condition. We cannot collectively—either me or officials—meet every single one of them all of the time, but genuinely we have done our very best to get a diverse range of views, knowledge and expertise, not just London-centric but across the whole of the country, and diligently fed that into the relevant Departments, officials and Ministers. We have helped shape some better outcomes.

Chair: I am going to hand over to Bell Ribeiro-Addy in a minute, but I am also going to hand over chairing the meeting to Kate Osborne. Kate, it is over to you now, please.

Kate Osborne took the Chair

Q35 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** My questions are mostly for Kemi. I am going to start off by talking about health and vaccination. Your Department’s third quarterly report on Covid-19 health disparities stated quite a few disparities. Bangladeshi men were 6.1 times more likely and women 6.3 times more likely to die from Covid. Pakistani men and women were 4.4 and 3.8 times more likely to die from Covid, respectively, and black African men and women were 2.2 and 1.6 times more likely to die from Covid, respectively. I wanted to ask what work the Government were doing to reduce these health inequalities experienced right throughout the pandemic by these different ethnic minority groups.

Kemi Badenoch: We have a strategy now for tackling Covid, and it is all around vaccines and making sure that people get their vaccinations. The numbers you have described have been moving up and down between different groups since we first started looking at the data. We have some reasons that we have identified that have an outsized effect on what is going on with these groups.

The largest one is multigenerational households. The Government advisers that we have in the Equality Hub have been talking about how that makes a huge difference in terms of the impact that they will have from Covid. As well as issuing guidance, for example, on how to prevent the spread of the virus—that has been translated into 30 languages—we have also encouraged the use of family vaccines. That was something that came out of the Equality Hub. Where there is hesitation, you may want different generations of a family living in the same household to be vaccinated at the same time. That has been quite successful.

Those are some examples of things that we have put in place to deal with the underlying causes. Most importantly, it is improving the vaccine confidence. That has been our communications strategy not just for ethnic minority groups but across the whole population.



Q36 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: You touched on multigenerational and overcrowded housing, or rather just multigenerational housing. That has definitely been identified as a cause of increased Covid death in ethnic minority groups, and notably in the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities. Your Department also stated that you did not accept our Committee's recommendation to produce a strategy on reducing overcrowding, due to its poor health impacts, by this summer, 2021. Your response went on to outline Government initiatives and reviews, which included a two-year comprehensive review of the housing health and safety rating system, which is due by autumn next year, a decent homes standard review, which is due by autumn this year, and other initiatives that may not see tangible change on the ground for minority communities by this summer, given the urgency of the situation. What ongoing steps have the Government taken to reduce overcrowding specifically during the period of the pandemic?

Kemi Badenoch: Overcrowding and multigenerational households are related but two separate instances. We need to remember that some of this is a choice. I do not mean specifically in terms of overcrowding, but when we look at the multigenerational homes, many people choose this because they want grandparents to help look after grandchildren.

One of the things that the advisers have posited to us is that we saw the increase in Pakistani and Bangladeshi incidents of Covid in the second wave due to the fact that this time schools were open, in a way that they were not during the first wave. If you are looking after children and children are going to school, you are much more likely to contract the virus. The things I mentioned earlier around the guidance and how people can manage this sort of situation are very important.

On overcrowding specifically, which I think you are asking about, we have put in measures around minimum room sizes, making it illegal to let out a bedroom. We have the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act, which empowers tenants to take a landlord to court if their home is not fit to live in.

What we cannot do is suddenly snap our fingers and build homes for everyone within a few months. You can see the challenges we have over planning reform. Just building in line with what we have done previously is very difficult. It is not an easy problem to address, and that is why we gave the answers we did about the decent homes standard and the housing health and safety rating system. Those are the things that we can do, and we are doing them.

Q37 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Do you have plans to establish an office for health disparities, as was actually recommended in the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities report? If so, when do you plan to do this?

Kemi Badenoch: Yes, you are right; the commission did recommend the Government establish an office for health disparities. The reason why they recommended it was to provide expertise in how the health of



different ethnic groups can be affected by many of those underlying conditions: the geography, occupation, et cetera. That would be a DHSE remit, so it is not a question that I can answer.

It would be wholly within their remit, but there are many ways one could fulfil that recommendation. They may come out and say, "Yes, we are going to launch an office for health disparities". They could talk about how it would interact with the Office for Health Promotion instead. There are many different options, which would be subject to spending review, and we are not yet at the point of spending review. It is a recommendation that is being seriously considered.

Q38 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Our Committee actually recommended that, for the next two years, the NHS health check should be extended to people from BME backgrounds from the age of 25 years, rather than for those between 40 and 70. The Government did not address this directly. Would you be able to clarify now if that is a recommendation that you will be planning to implement in the future?

Kemi Badenoch: We were looking at this report specifically around Covid. For young people in particular, when you look at their Covid outcomes, they are not the ones who are most impacted by this disease, so that is not something that the Government will be doing at this stage.

Q39 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: I want to ask further questions on vaccination and discrimination. We know that vaccine hesitancy is greater among certain ethnic groups who are disproportionately more likely to work in the health and social care sector. What work has been done to address the potential impact of mandatory vaccinations on vaccine-hesitant individuals working in this sector? Will mandatory vaccination inspire further resistance against getting the Covid vaccine for hesitant groups?

Kemi Badenoch: Do I think that mandatory vaccination will increase hesitancy? No, I do not. It will increase people taking up the vaccine. There might be some hesitancy that remains from certain groups, but if people are not willing to take the vaccine, mandatory vaccination is not going to change that necessarily. It is not going to make people who were going to take the vaccine decide not to take it.

We should also remember that mandatory vaccination is something that happens already in the NHS. Hepatitis C or V—I cannot remember which one—is compulsory for NHS workers. This is not a new type of thing that we are doing. What is different is that it is now being extended to people working in the social care sector, as you mentioned.

This touches on the point we were making about equality impact assessments. There is no perfect outcome that you are going to get that is going to generate perfect equality of outcomes. In Government, when you are making policy and making decisions, you have to make trade-offs. One of the factors that came out in the report was that, if you are 80 years old—that is the care home age category—you are 70 times more



likely to contract the virus than a younger person. If you are an ethnic minority it is between 1.5 to two times more likely, or possibly three, depending on which specific groups you are looking at.

You have to look at that seriously. There is no hierarchy of protected characteristics. Should we seriously say that somebody who is 1.5 more likely to contract the virus should put somebody 70 times more likely to contract the virus at risk? I do not think anyone on this Committee would agree with that. We have to look at the decisions in the round. We have seen from what has happened in care homes that this is the most vulnerable group, and we have to do everything that we can to protect them.

The majority of care home workers have now been vaccinated. Only 65% of older care homes are currently meeting the minimum level of staff uptake. That falls to 44% of care homes in London. We want to bring those regulations in just to help people look after their staff and patients better.

Q40 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Campaigners have also reported that they feel the concerns for black, Asian, and minority ethnic communities about the Covid-19 vaccine have not been addressed by the Government, such as structural inequalities and historical medical racism. We see that there are repeated examples of poorer health outcomes—I am talking about mental health, cancer and maternal mortality—for BAME communities. Although there has been greater uptake in these groups being vaccinated, there is still a lot of hesitancy that needs to be addressed. Do the Government plan to take any further steps to address hesitancy within BAME communities, other than the community champions scheme and the communications strategy? What might these further measures be, if there are any?

Kemi Badenoch: We have to be very careful to avoid over-stigmatising a particular group of people. Yes, we know that there is hesitancy within some minority groups, but we also need to remember that vaccine confidence has increased in three consecutive research periods. The vast majority of people say they have either already been vaccinated or would be likely to accept a vaccine. The numbers, even within ethnic groups, have significantly increased. In fact, they have increased across all groups.

That means that what we are doing is working. If you look at the international comparisons, even for black groups, who are the lowest in terms of their desire to take up the vaccine, it is still higher than white people in Italy, France, the US or even Germany. We are doing well internationally. Vaccine hesitancy is not, strictly speaking, an ethnic minority issue. We need to be really careful about saying so much that it looks like it is ethnic minorities who are not taking the vaccine and everybody else is fine.

Q41 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Just on that, how are the Government ensuring that



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these groups are not discriminated against or stigmatised on the basis of media reports about the disparities in vaccine take-up?

Kemi Badenoch: We cannot control what the media say or write. How many times would I love to be able to do that and restrict the way a certain story is portrayed? The media can actually do a lot better with its own self-regulation, in terms of how it talks about minority groups. A lot of stuff out there is written because it is clickbait and not because it is providing useful information or is educating people about what is going on.

What we can do in Government is set an example, in terms of how we talk about minorities. Again, we try not to use terms like "BAME", which lump people together. We try to make sure that the language we use is sensitive. We try not to over-represent certain groups with imagery in a way that would cause additional stigmatisation.

Also, this is where the communication campaign comes in. Who are we talking to? How are we using media channels effectively? Using faith groups, church groups and press partnerships with media, where we know that their readership is from a particular group, is quite helpful, as is having influencers and social media campaigns. Those are the ways that you can address hesitancy and also the likelihood of people being discriminated against. It is really critical. If you do too much general broadcasting, that can create the problem that you have just described.

Q42 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Finally, how have the Government monitored the health and economic impact of Covid-19 on people without recourse to public funds? In what ways have they been supported specifically?

Kemi Badenoch: No recourse to public funds is something that does not apply. We deliberately made sure it did not apply to things like the coronavirus job retention scheme and the self-employment income support scheme. There are other support allowances that are not classed as public funds—things like free school meals, which were not originally available to people who were within that cohort. We temporarily extended free school meals to them. Those are the ways that we are looking after those groups.

Q43 **Lee Anderson:** This question is to Kemi and Mims. What has the pandemic demonstrated about the adequacy of our social security system?

Mims Davies: Thank you for giving me an opportunity to highlight just how incredible our Department and our response has been. I have been so incredibly proud of our jobcentres and the way that we pivoted. We barely had a computer to rub together for people to work at home at the start of this. We were all doing dial-in and things were very different at the start of this pandemic, but we were able, with that exponential increase of universal credit claimants, to always stay ahead of the curve. Working with Treasury and across Government, our response has been phenomenal.



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I am very proud of the team. They have been non-stop. We have kept our jobcentres open for the most vulnerable. At all stages there has been support for people. Our Secretary of State described it as the Wallace and Gromit experience, where you are building the track as it is all happening. I think she was absolutely right.

Alongside that, we have been working with the Treasury. It is one year tomorrow since we launched the plan for jobs. That is a £33 billion intervention that includes the Kickstart scheme, which is a £2 billion intervention. Restart, which has just commenced, is for people that are one year unemployed. Our work coaches are just getting to grips with that, and that is going to last for three years, supporting people. That is an intervention of just under £3 billion.

We have doubled the number of our work coaches. I have been in charge of our rapid estate expansion programme. We have been opening more jobcentres, and it has been a real pleasure to go and join our bigger and wider team. What has been really interesting is that many of our claimants have come to join us. Many of the people who have been working with DWP are now part of our work coaches. Many people who have joined us have had the same experience as the claimants have had.

Our pandemic measures, alongside furlough, SEISS and the relaxation of the MIF, have been brilliant. I could not be prouder of DWP. Whether it has been our service centres, our management or our work coaches, they have been absolutely phenomenal. I know that many people listening and watching, and indeed MPs, have had amazing experiences by working with the local jobcentres to get help to people quickly and to make sure that their constituency casework and support has been there. I am very proud of it.

We have absolutely learned a lot. As Justin said earlier, in all different parts of our portfolio, some of the things we have wanted to be doing or trialled or tested we have brought in quickly, and we will need that breathing space as we get more people back into work in the recovery, and as the roadmap starts to unwind, to really try to take the best of what we have learned from the pandemic.

Q44 **Lee Anderson:** Do you have anything to add to that, Kemi?

Kemi Badenoch: No, not very much. In terms of the system, one of the things that we were worried about right at the beginning of the pandemic was that the universal credit system would fall over with so many people claiming. Mims will know the exact figure, but it was the largest number of people ever to go on to the system at the same time, and it was resilient. In terms of how well we were set up to handle the pandemic from a social security aspect, I think that we in Government and officials across Departments have a lot to be proud of.

Q45 **Lee Anderson:** Ethnic minority workers are more likely to be in insecure work or to have been made unemployed during the pandemic. How has



their restricted access to statutory sick pay, if there is any, affected their ability to follow Covid rules?

Kemi Badenoch: These are some of the things that we looked at, in terms of supporting people. Again, we look at the cohort in its entirety, so we are not going to make a special rule on statutory sick pay or isolation payments just for ethnic minorities. It is for everybody who would fall into that category. We have always been clear that businesses should support staff who are self-isolating to work at home. Not everyone is able to access support through the furlough scheme, where statutory sick pay has been universal. Within that, we made statutory sick pay payable from day 1. Where people could not work from home they could receive the £500 one-off payment for those on low incomes, with the Test and Trace support payment scheme. There was a lot that we did to try to minimise the impact on those who were most vulnerable.

Q46 **Lee Anderson:** I will ask Mims the same question, but I would just add at this stage that you do not have to be an ethnic minority to be in insecure work or be made unemployed during the pandemic. I represent Ashfield, and that has happened a lot to many of my constituents.

Mims Davies: You will be really pleased to know that on Friday we are working with one of our local providers, Futures, which is specifically working with the logistics and construction sector to bring particularly women into construction, engineering, security, production and distribution, and really challenging the opportunities that perhaps some of your constituents feel are out there. It is called Choose to Challenge. It is the sort of thing that our jobcentres do, day in, day out, and I know that many of our colleagues have visited and supported them and met many of their new teams.

You are absolutely right. We have really tailored and been able to develop our interventions to reflect every constituency need. One of the particular products of the plan for jobs that I am really pleased that we are seeing landing is our new youth hubs. They are in football clubs. They are working with the Prince's Trust. They are in jobcentres. They are in local councils. You can see one in Rotherham United Football Club, you can see one in Winsford JCP, and I have had virtual or physical visits to both. They are one-stop shops for the under-25s.

We know the danger of the pandemic and the impact of people not being able to graduate and leave into work in the way that they would hope to when leaving school; perhaps they had things lined up or seasonal work that they were expecting to be part of. Many people have spent a year and a half in their bedrooms, just wondering what on earth the next stage comes to. Of course, they will not have that network and that confidence that many people across their careers will have had.

We have over 50 youth hubs open now physically, which can give housing support, mental health support, budgeting advice and, crucially, all of the advice about where you can start your career, whether it is traineeships,



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apprenticeships, Kickstart or the roles that are open there. If there is any training, skills or support needs that you have, you can use the flexible support fund. The plan for jobs has interventions at all ages and stages. Whatever stage of your career you are at or wherever your postcode is, you should be getting those opportunities.

I am really pleased that so much good stuff is happening in Ashfield. I know we are working with Trackwork and the SIA sector as well, getting more people in there. We are working with Amazon and Whitemeadow Furniture. We are also getting more people going into machinist and traditional production and operative roles from different backgrounds as well. I would definitely say to people, "Don't be sniffy about Jobcentre Plus and what DWP can offer". We have an amazing array of claimants because of what has happened with the pandemic, but we also have an amazing array of jobs, because of Kickstart and employers wanting to open up and give local people those opportunities. In fact, as a reminder, we are almost back to pre-pandemic level in terms of vacancies, with around 800,000 opportunities out there.

Justin Tomlinson: You were specifically asking about statutory sick pay, which I am responsible for. As Mims has set out, we have this comprehensive job support as we return back to normality. On the point you were making around SSP, Kemi has set out very well how we changed the access to it from day 1 instead of day 4, as well as the self-isolation payments. Statutory sick pay cannot be seen in isolation, because, depending on individual household circumstances, they could also get additional support through universal credit or new-style ESA.

I think what you were really trying to get at is that point that there is the lower earning limit within statutory sick pay, so some of those in predominantly, for example, gig economies may not be eligible for that SSP support and protection. That is something we are very mindful of. As part of our Health is Everyone's Business work, we are looking at this, on the principle that surely every employee and every employer should have a connection in those sorts of circumstances. We are minded to explore what you were raising there.

Q47 **Lee Anderson:** That makes perfect sense. My next question is to Justin and then to Mims. The Government rejected our recommendation to match the £20 universal credit uplift in legacy benefits. Many of the claimants are disabled people or carers. The Government have previously said they could not replicate the £20 uplift in legacy benefits for administrative reasons, but in your response to our report, your rationale was that the legacy benefit claimants' incomes had not been affected by the pandemic. Can you clarify your reasoning on that, please?

Justin Tomlinson: All areas of support provided by the Government and through Treasury were kept under review during the Covid pandemic. The initial reason for the £20 uplift in UC was to reflect the sudden changes in circumstances for many people right at the beginning of Covid. Out of nowhere, people could not knowingly prepare for what was coming, and it



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was a way to get additional income available, for which furlough then followed shortly afterwards, which then helped to protect something like 11.2 million jobs.

It was raised by the Committee and some stakeholders about extending that to legacy. From a technical perspective, UC was an overnight update to the systems. It is a credit to the UC system that it stood up to that huge surge and allowed us to make those changes. That is not a simple process within legacy. Bear in mind it was a temporary uplift to UC that has been, like furlough, extended throughout that process.

Again, it cannot be seen in isolation. We made changes to the housing benefit rates, which will have significantly benefited many people on legacy benefits. There was local welfare assistance, with significant amounts of money provided to local authorities to then use discretion. As a former councillor, I am always supportive of devolving welfare assistance to then look at the individual challenges that households may face. Then there were other Government packages that provided support. That is why the legacy benefits on their own were not changed, but as a temporary uplift UC did get that extra £20 a week.

Mims Davies: I would point out that the plan for jobs interventions were also as a response to Covid. That is the extra 13,500 work coaches. That is the Kickstart scheme that has created a fantastic number of jobs and opportunities for young people. We have over 230,000 jobs approved as of 16 June. We have some more data imminent. We have over 36,000 jobs started as of 3 June. We have 138,000 jobs available across our JCP network. Our intervention for the plan for jobs is wider than the UC intervention. I think 4 million claimants have benefited from this additional six-month extension, to line it up with the MIF being relaxed and also the end of furlough, et cetera, as we move into recovery.

We should always see the UC uplift as an important and temporary measure but part of broader pandemic measures and the quickest way to support those newly unemployed going into UC. Of course, for me the big priority is helping people get back into work. In the immediate and near term, we have many vacancies and great opportunities for people to go into, and it is very important that people know and understand that. We are on our way to bouncing back, and DWP is equipped wholly to help them.

Q48 **Lee Anderson:** Justin, have you analysed the additional costs disabled legacy benefit claimants may have faced during the pandemic—for example, heating, transport or food costs?

Justin Tomlinson: We continue, as do all Government Departments, to review the appropriate levels of support to be provided. As a Government, we are now spending record amounts of money on disability benefits. If you look at PIP, DLA and AA, there has been a real-terms increase of £4 billion since 2010. Supporting those with disabilities and long-term health conditions across Government is £55 billion a year, up



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£10 billion. The Government put something like £7.2 billion extra into welfare support during the first year of Covid. There have been various different Government schemes that, depending on circumstances, people can access. As I have said, I have personally very much welcomed where we have devolved welfare additional support to look at often unique individual circumstances to navigate people through. This Government have stood shoulder to shoulder with people as we have navigated these unprecedented challenges.

As with all things, we continue to keep under review the support. I am particularly keen, in the national disability strategy, to explore the role of advocacy. We know on legacy benefits, which were all too often far too complicated, that £2.7 billion of support that we have all agreed and put into law went unclaimed by an estimated 700,000 families a year, an average of £270 per month. For many of those people, that is a real, significant part of their income.

I am looking to explore how we can strengthen the role of advocacy for claimants who, for a variety of reasons, could be unable to navigate the system. That could be those who already have advocate support—friends, family or local or national charity—just to be more consistent about how they can support the claimant through any of the processes that we are responsible for and to get better at identifying those who are vulnerable but may not have connections, such as an ex-offender coming into a new community or a care leaver, to identify them and give them trusted third-party independent support.

It is not a completely new concept. We already pay Citizens Advice and Citizens Advice Scotland around £42 million a year to provide digital support across our jobcentre network. It is an evolution of this, and we will be exploring this in the Green Paper, because it has proved to be very popular with stakeholders. I know from my own casework, and I am sure all of the other MPs here will know from the casework, that often some of the most vulnerable people in society are overwhelmed, and we must be much better at making sure they have that extra layer of support so they get that financial assistance that they are entitled to.

Q49 Chair: Earlier today, the Government confirmed that the £20 universal uplift will be phased out in the autumn. How will this decision impact on the 5.5 million households that currently receive it and rely on it, when we still have a way to go before we are out of the pandemic and we see people struggling back into work? Is this not too early? Is there not a case for extending it on a more permanent basis? Mims, I will ask you to respond to that first, please.

Mims Davies: I will just remind people that UC was brought into line with SSP levels and, as Justin says, there has been an array of ways of helping people, including hardship grants at local council level as well. Do not forget the one-off £500 payment for working tax credit people as well. We have tried to be as supportive as possible.



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Bringing in the work coaches and face-to-face support is really key. As Justin said earlier, getting to know our claimants, supporting them with their needs and what is going on and being able to help them with the flexible support fund in terms of getting into work. Do not forget, of course, that UC is more generous than legacy benefits when it comes to childcare.

We have 800,000 vacancies. We have sectors massively keen to get people in. I have had regular meetings and engagement with the haulage and hospitality sectors in particular. In hospitality and other areas, you can move into that sector and be earning really well and going great guns pretty quickly. We have some priority sectors at DWP—care, manufacturing, logistics, construction and digital—and we are working with BEIS on hospitality and retail strategies as well. We have our Green Jobs Taskforce as well. You will have seen announcements over the last couple of days of fantastic new investment into us, as a country, with a huge amount of jobs linked to that. There are some great opportunities out there.

Our work coaches are best placed, and we have double the number. It is important to spend that time with claimants. Many of them have probably not had to engage with DWP before. Many of them have had that economic shock. We have various job interventions that have really helped people get back into work quickly. We have seen that with positive moves, with people getting back on to RTI.

Yes, it is a concerning time and we are not out of the woods yet, but if you are unemployed for three months, we have job-finding support, extra and over to the work coach help. We have our JETS programme, which has been really brilliant, working with partners such as Reed for people six months unemployed, really helping them with mentoring, digital skills and getting ready for interviews, some of which are like this, which could be quite a surprise for people. Some people have been in sectors for a really long time and are not expecting to be looking for work. Of course, we know some sectors, because of the pandemic, have a longer tail, so it is harder to get back into that sector.

We have interventions at any stage and any age of your career. I would say to people to please use the JobHelp website. You can use the digital skills toolkit there from DfE, which can help you. It links into our Find a Job service and to the benefits calculator, because you may be better off moving on to universal credit as well, so do get that advice there and talk to your work coach.

Of course, we have been through a pandemic. We are still getting through the tail end of it. It is going to be difficult for people. That is why at DWP we have that real link into the local labour market. We have a national employer partnership team as well, linking in to employers. There are huge opportunities out there, particularly in the digital and



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green sectors—if I had a penny for every time somebody said they want to move into those sectors!

Whether it is sector-based work academy programmes or the interventions I have mentioned in the plan for jobs, I feel very strongly that people who have been involved with DWP for the first time because of the pandemic should have a really positive experience in our jobcentres. Please do use our services.

Q50 Chair: Justin, I promise I will bring you in. Maybe you want to help with my next question, which is very closely connected with my first. I appreciate what you are saying, Mims, regarding availability of jobs and people who may be dealing with benefits agencies for the first time. What about the many people who are claiming universal credit and are already in work? Are you suggesting that they find new or different employment? Justin, feel free to come in.

Justin Tomlinson: Just to add a little context around the UC decision, it was made clear from the beginning and throughout that this, like furlough, was temporary support as we navigated the unprecedented challenges of Covid. As it stands today—I am conscious that we have had many bumps in the road along the way—we are on a positive roadmap stage at the moment. We are expecting to return to normality. Therefore, we expect furlough and the temporary uplift in UC to then be wound down. Like all Government support, it is subject to that positive roadmap continuing but, as it stands today, we are looking at returning to normality and therefore those temporary areas of support will come to an end. That said, those on UC will not be left in isolation. There will be a lot of work from their individual job coaches to talk to them, to prepare them, to look at those options.

Moving on to that point you made, you have highlighted probably the biggest strength of universal credit as a principle, because on legacy benefits you had the 16-hour, 24-hour and 30-hour cliff edges, where you could slightly increase your hours and lose all of your benefits, trapping you into poverty. It is clear as we return to normality that the number of vacancies and demand in some of the sectors is beginning to be strong, so there are increasing options available. UC has the taper rate, so you are able to move out of poverty. You may still be in relative poverty at the beginning of that journey but then, as you progress towards full-time employment, your opportunity and your household income is increased. As a Government, we have rightly incentivised that taper rate. I think we put £2 billion extra into universal credit a few years back to make that taper rate even more generous.

There will be a lot of work done with claimants ahead of the ending of any of the temporary uplifts and all review is kept under review. As I have said, you want to target support to those most in need. With that £6 billion of temporary support through universal credit, has that always targeted the support at those most in need? You would have to look very carefully at those figures. Where you provide it through local welfare



assistance schemes, those with the local knowledge and connections can do co-ordinated support that is bespoke to those individual households. There is a lot of work still to be done around there, but as it stands at the moment we are on a positive roadmap to returning, thankfully, to normality.

Q51 Chair: You talk about the positive things around universal credit and the flexibility. Just to remind you, the legacy benefits did not receive the £20 uplift.

Justin Tomlinson: That is right, but you had an opportunity, depending on household circumstances, to transfer over. The way it is working means that you cannot enter legacy benefits now as a new claimant. By default, you would go on to universal credit. Based on your own circumstances, you may wish to move on to universal credit. With changes of circumstances, you move on to universal credit. As we return to normality, there will be a managed migration of claimants on there.

If you talk to our experienced work coaches in any of the jobcentres, they have been empowered and equipped with universal credit to help people, not just in terms of removing those cliff edges by putting in the taper rate but also being able to explore a menu of options. Look at childcare. We have gone from spending £2 billion in 2010 to £4 billion. That is making a transformational difference to the opportunities that are opening up to households across the country.

There is a myriad of support. That is why it is very important that between now and the ending of the temporary support there will be a lot of work done with individual claimants and households to explore the right level of support and options. Mims has given in great detail the wealth of job support that we are providing through the plan for jobs—£30 billion—rightly targeting those as the economy readjusts and returns to normality.

Mims Davies: On the point around leaving people on legacy benefits behind, that is absolutely not the case, as Justin has just described. There are two particular areas, and I am really conscious that the people who were left behind before the pandemic cannot be left behind again. I think that is what you are saying, Kate, and that is front and centre of what I have in my mindset, alongside the plan for jobs.

We have partnered at DWP with Google. We have a training course developed by Google for 9,000 jobseekers. Even if you have no relevant experience, you can get up to a level 3 qualification, which gives you really great job-ready skills in high-grade fields. You can do it at your own pace at home. I had the pleasure of being in Toxteth jobcentre and meeting the first three guys going on to that, and they could not believe that they had such a unique opportunity to get that kind of training. As Justin says, the work coaches will find the right training and opportunities for people, because of that face-to-face work.



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The other side of it is something that, working with the Treasury, I am very excited about. It is called DWP Train and Progress. This is linking into DfE's bootcamps and skills camps. It is allowing people to stay on universal credit and progress and train into the right sectors that they want to go into and where there is need and opportunity. These are really important in terms of filling the vacancies that employers, trade bodies and providers are all coming to us with.

One thing that is really important for me when meeting employers is to make sure that each local labour market is reaching out to employers to make sure that those people have the skills and abilities. It is not about sweeping away what somebody has done before in their career. It really is defining what your career is and how it shapes you, but it is a life of jobs. It is about being agile and giving people the tools and the ability to thrive. That is why our In-Work Progression Commission is really important. That is why DWP Train and Progress is important.

It is important for people to come to DWP not only in times of peril but when they want to be earning more money and they want to progress, because we have those tools and links to help people. It is really important that those people listening and engaging with DWP know that. The plan for jobs and everything we have done around the pandemic builds on that.

There is more to do across Government, across all sectors and employers, and absolutely we are focused on that, but we have an amazing platform and our links with DfE have really grown. In fact, I am speaking to Gillian Keegan next on apprenticeships and traineeships and how we are linking in to Kickstart. I hope that people looking for work right now, engaging with their work coach in DWP, should feel positive that, where there are opportunities or training opportunities, they will reach them. We are determined to help them break down those barriers.

Chair: That concludes our evidence. Can I thank you all very much for coming forward and giving your evidence today?