

# *PIP and ESA assessments are working as intended*

**By Bernadette Meaden**

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If a food product is found to be contaminated, it is immediately withdrawn from sale. If a vehicle is found to be unsafe it is taken off the road. So why have disability assessments which a former assessor has described as 'institutional abuse' been allowed to continue for years?

Why have millions of sick and disabled people been forced through a process which is known to cause distress and anxiety, meaning that some, like [Jeffrey Elwell](#), spend their last months of life in entirely avoidable government-imposed anguish?

The [report](#) published today by the Work and Pensions Committee is useful in that it compiles and endorses the experience of thousands of claimants. "The response to the inquiry was unprecedented - in sheer volume, by an order of magnitude – and composed of accounts that were shocking and moving, credible and consistent." Yet again the scandal of a system in which a 'disability assessor' can ask a person when they caught Down's Syndrome is exposed.

But in another sense, the report misses the point. Despite his evident wish to be thorough, the Committee Chairman Frank Field seems to be hampered by one fundamental misapprehension. He seems to believe that the overarching aim of these assessments is to arrive at a fair and supportive outcome for claimants.

Mr Field says, "Recording the face-to-face assessment would go so far toward increasing transparency and restoring trust it beggars belief that this is not already a routine element of the process. The resistance from the Department to instituting this is equally bewildering."

But place these assessments in their political context, and the Department's resistance is not bewildering at all.

The Personal Independence Payment (PIP) was introduced to replace Disability Living Allowance. But it was not a straightforward replacement, it had a very specific purpose – to reduce the numbers in receipt of benefit dramatically. Before it was introduced the government clearly [stated](#), "In 2018 we estimate that the number of 16-64 year olds receiving PIP will be 1,575,000. Without introducing PIP, we would expect 2,182,000 16-64 year olds to be receiving DLA." So there we have it. PIP was expected to reduce the claimant count by more than half a million.

To operate a system which will, on such a large scale, either refuse a benefit to new claimants, or remove it from claimants being reassessed, is no small undertaking, and

certainly not a task for the soft-hearted. If the system was open and transparent, the nature of it would become all too clear, rendering it, one would hope, politically untenable. Perhaps Mr Field is bewildered by the DWP's attitude because he does not understand that.

This morning on television, a whistleblowing PIP assessor explained ([video](#)) how she was made to change her report on a woman with a learning disability by an auditor who had never met the claimant. She went on to describe the system as "institutional abuse". If the assessment she spoke about had been recorded, the auditor would have found it very difficult to justify overruling the assessor. If all assessments were recorded it would probably prove impossible for the government to achieve the reduction in claimant count PIP was designed to achieve.

These assessments were not established with the aim of providing a fair, objective and humane assessment of a person's need for support, but with an ideological aim to reduce the claimant count to an arbitrary number based in politics not reality. The lack of trust in the assessment system which the DWP Committee found is a natural consequence of this, and entirely logical.

And of course, as with PIP, so with ESA. In December 2010 Steve Griffiths, in his [paper](#) *Dark Times for Those Who cannot Work: No Competence, No Compassion in Incapacity Benefits Reform* pointed out that according to NHS figures there were, "1.96 million people aged 16-44 with a long-term limiting illness; and 3.15 million aged 45-64. The existence of 2 million people unfit for work...should be seen in this context. But the connection seems never to have been made between two major Government workstreams serving the same people...People on Incapacity Benefit die early, that is acknowledged by Government. But it is as if in benefit terms, they were just expected to drop off their perches rather than suffer chronic illness..."

Because politicians ignored the evidence and pursued their own agenda, Griffiths says, "The health needs of people who are the subject of huge investment by the Department of Health have been treated counterproductively as invisible, or worse, as malingering, by the DWP and successive Work and Pensions ministers driven by a compulsion to judge and to privatise." He called this, "a failure of compassion, unacknowledged incompetence and injustice on a massive scale: a social policy tragedy."

It is ten years since ESA assessments began, five years since PIP assessments began. We've had reviews, consultations, reports, court cases, even condemnation by the United Nations – and still the government persists in defending the indefensible. How many more people will be forced through an abusive system before politicians admit they got this wrong?

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