

## Social Security Advisory Committee

### CONSULTATION ON HOW SHOULD DWP INVOLVE DISABLED PEOPLE IN CHANGING HOW IT WORKS?

Response by

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#### Executive Summary

- It is noted in the call for evidence that the Committee advise that they are “...*not looking for views about social security benefits, but about how you think DWP listens to feedback from disabled people or involves disabled people, and any ways in which this might be improved.*”
- Any involvement of disabled people with the DWP involves trust, which has been totally demolished. The Committee need to be alert to the vast negative human impact created due to the reforms of social security benefits since 2010, the preventable harm created by the punitive and excessive use of conditionality, and that the chronically ill and disabled community who are unable to work now live in fear of the DWP.
- The DWP resist feedback, and disregard published research regarding benefit access.
- As an independent disability studies researcher I can confirm there has been no positive engagement with the DWP. They are defensive, hostile and totally dismissive of published research that demonstrates the preventable harm created by the adoption of a fatally flawed assessment model, which was always destined to negatively impact on the welfare and the survival of chronically ill and disabled people in greatest need.
- The hostility of letter content from the DWP, with intimidation and a constant threat of sanctions in every written communication, has created fear within the disabled community which has negative implications for public mental health and the stress adversely impacts on physical health and wellbeing. This intimidation should end.
- Any possible improvement between the DWP and the involvement of the disabled community would require a significant change in department attitude and rhetoric, in the implied intimidation in all written communications, and a willingness to accept published research evidence that is not commissioned by the DWP. This may well be a goal that is unlikely to be achieved.
- Any changes of how the DWP works needs to consider the influence of Ministers, their well reported hostile rhetoric regarding disabled people who rely on the social security benefits system for physical and financial survival, and it will take a great deal of effort to reverse the damage created in the recent past by Ministers whose terminology when referring to disabled claimants as “skivers” and “scroungers” influenced public opinion.

## Introduction

1. Prior to illness I was a healthcare professional, originally trained in the NHS, and I then had a career in the medical branch of the (W)RAF until my medical discharge. Identified as the Preventable Harm Project, for the past ten years I have conducted independent disability studies research regarding the preventable harm created by the DWP ‘welfare reforms’, which has had a negative health impact for many of those in greatest need. All research evidence is available via my website at [www.mostewartresearch.co.uk](http://www.mostewartresearch.co.uk), with a selection of reports available on the Centre for Welfare Reform website at: <https://www.centreforwelfarereform.org/about-us/mo-stewart.html>. Given the wording of this call for evidence, it remains unclear if the Committee are fully aware of the fear imposed on the chronically ill and disabled community by administrations in the recent past, who used welfare reforms as justification to move the UK towards the [removal of the welfare state](#), to be eventually replaced by private health insurance, which has been the goal of successive UK administrations since 1982.

### How should the DWP involve disabled people in changing how it works?

2. For the DWP to ‘*involve disabled people in changing how it works*’ may be an unobtainable goal given the identified preventable harm knowingly created by the DWP over the past ten years. I have had various communications with Ministers and wrote to the [Permanent Secretary](#) for the DWP in October 2019, which has yet to receive any acknowledgement or reply.

3. For the DWP to ‘*involve disabled people in changing how it works*’ the DWP would need to be much better informed as [to the reality](#) of the lives of the disabled community who are dependent upon the DWP for their physical and financial survival. The evidence by Peter Schofield to the [Work and Pensions Select Committee](#) (WPSC) last October, for example, was cause for concern, demonstrating he was poorly informed regarding the disturbing human consequences of the ongoing ‘welfare reforms’. \*\*I believe it is significant that the Parliament TV archives no longer offer access to that WPSC meeting, which included an appearance by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, who claimed there was no causal link between poverty and policy. (Q 265, 266)

*“The overwhelming confidence demonstrated during the evidence regarding the benefit claims “processes”, that for many people are demonstrably unworkable, seems to be unknown to you. The claims that Jobcentre staff are ‘skilled and supportive people’ is not confirmed by the personal experience of countless numbers of those in greatest need and, with the greatest respect, DWP official reports remain a long way away from the lived experience of those in greatest need in this country. Regardless of your demonstrated confidence in Universal Credit (UC), which has failed all academic scrutiny and is demonstrably fatally flawed, I believe attention needs to be drawn to the preventable harm created by the adoption of the dangerous and discredited Waddell and Aylward biopsychosocial (BPS) assessment model, adopted for the Work Capability Assessment (WCA) to limit access to the Employment Support Allowance (ESA) for anyone whose unfit to work”.*

Extract from the letter from MS to the Permanent Secretary to the DWP  
[Peter Schofield](#) 29<sup>th</sup> October, 2019

4. During the past ten years of the Preventable Harm Project a large number of research papers and reports have been published by academics and other experts. As the lead researcher on the project, this submission will concentrate on the relationship between the DWP and the chronically ill and disabled social security benefit claimants, how this relationship was damaged due to the wholly unsubstantiated claims by DWP Ministers, which were reported by the tabloid press and successfully created a “[thinly veiled character assassination of people who are receiving sickness-related benefits](#)”. This coincided with [a 213% increase](#) of prosecuted disability hate crimes during the coalition government’s term in office, when Iain Duncan Smith MP served as the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions.

*“A recent policy White Paper Universal Credit: Welfare that works (Department for Work and Pensions 2010) outlines plans to create a simplified and demystified benefits system. The introduction of Universal Credit, an integrated working age credit that will replace a range of benefits including Employment Support Allowance, means that once again sickness related benefits and those who receive them are back in the spotlight. Although simplification of the benefits system has been long awaited, the likely impacts of ill and disabled people have not been piloted nor consulted on. When discussing the latest proposals, Department for Work and Pensions secretary Iain Duncan Smith recently claimed that ‘most people in Britain are honest, straight and hardworking’. Therefore, the underlying suggestion is that there are people receiving benefits who are in fact the opposite: dishonest, dodgy and workshy. Indeed, David Cameron stated that if people ‘really cannot work’, then they will be looked after.*

*“However, it is the insertion of ‘really’ that belies scepticism about the truth of whether people really can or cannot work... Terms such as ‘culture of worklessness’, ‘dependency’, ‘workshy’ and ‘unwilling’ are often used without question when talking about sickness benefits and those who receive them. Yet unfortunately this thinly veiled character assassination of people who are receiving sickness-related benefits is not a new phenomenon. For example, it can be linked to the distinctions made between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor going back over a hundred years or more... The separation of disabled people receiving Employment Support Allowance (ESA) into either a ‘support’ or ‘employment’ group could create further distinctions, creating a distinct danger that certain types of illness or disability will be perceived as less deserving of unconditional public support than others, creating a problem uniquely framed by work rather than health... Just as they found then, today many newspaper headlines continue to vilify the ‘workshy’, ‘cheats’, ‘scroungers’, and ‘lazy’ benefit recipients, creating crude cartoon characterisations of the sick and disabled people who receive them... These headlines are amongst many others that depict benefit recipients as the enemy in a battle about fairness and responsibility – a battle that the government say was not won in the past by previous governments but is being tackled now by the coalition with the claim that ‘we are all in this together’”.*

Extract from ‘The language of shirkers and scroungers?’ Talking about illness, disability and coalition welfare reform’. [Kayleigh Garthwaite](#)  
*Disability & Society* Vol 26, No.3, May 2011, 369-372



75% on sick are skiving, 26/1/11  
 Workshy to lose benefits, 18/2/11  
 Blitz on Britain's benefits madness, 21/4/11  
 Blitz on benefits: 887,000 fiddlers exposed, 28/4/11

*Banner headlines  
 Courtesy of Express Newspapers/N&S syndication*

\*\*Disability hate crimes increased by 213% during the coalition administration

## PREVENTABLE HARM

5. Whilst this submission does not offer an *opinion* on social security benefits, it does identify the [influences and consequences](#) created by the reforms to social security benefits, and the difficulty the disabled community will have with the suggestion that the DWP would be willing to change or to improve how it works; with or without their involvement. Given the call for evidence, it remains unclear if the Committee is familiar with the levels of imposed suffering, stress, distress and preventable harm endured by long-term chronically ill and disabled social security benefit claimants, as [created by various administrations](#) since 2010 which negatively influenced public opinion. It is also unclear why the Committee assume any improvement between the DWP and the disabled community is remotely possible following ten years of relentless persecution and [preventable harm](#) created by the department, with at least [90 people per month dying](#) after being found 'fit for work' following a fatally flawed WCA?

6. Every possible effort should be employed to acknowledge the preventable harm created by the department in the past ten years. Aided by banner headlines in the tabloid press, together with reports that supported the administration's demonisation of the disabled community by influential [right-leaning](#) think-tanks, the DWP cannot hope to begin to successfully include disabled people given that rhetoric and policy has demonstrated that claiming long-term disability benefit is [something to be ashamed of](#), regardless of diagnosis or prognosis which is disregarded by the WCA. *"Future changes to government welfare systems should be evaluated not only on a fiscal basis but on their [potential to affect health and wellbeing](#)."*

7. In order to 'involve disabled people in changing how it works' the DWP would need to acknowledge [the social abuse](#) created by the excessive use of sanctions and conditionality, which is a direct result of importing [American social and labour market policies](#) which have influenced UK government labour policies since 1997.

8. In order to 'involve disabled people in changing how it works' the DWP would need to acknowledge the unnecessary moral panic it willingly created "[over the amount and calibre of people receiving sickness benefits](#)" and confirm that, contrary to claims by previous administrations, "fraud levels are, in fact, very low. The latest available figures from the DWP state that the [fraud rate for sickness benefits is just 0.5 per cent](#), meaning that 99.5 per cent of claimants are not fraudulent, with figures for official error actually higher than the level of fraud at 1.7 per cent."

9. In order to 'involve disabled people in changing how it works' the DWP would need to relate to the fact that a [2016 BMJ research article](#) identified the fact that the WCA was associated with adverse trends in mental health and that "[reassessing people on disability benefits...was independently associated with an increase in suicides, self-reported mental health problems and antidepressant prescribing](#)." These adverse trends have continued.

10. In order to 'involve disabled people in changing how it works' the DWP would need to acknowledge [independent academic research](#) such as just published by *The Lancet* and not commissioned by the DWP and, for example, acknowledge this latest evidence which identifies the negative mental health implications for able-bodied claimants of their flagship policy, Universal Credit. "[Our findings suggest that the introduction of Universal Credit led to an increase in psychological distress, a measure of mental health difficulties, among those affected by the policy. Future changes to government welfare systems should be evaluated not only on a fiscal basis but on their potential to affect health and wellbeing](#)."

11. In order to 'involve disabled people in changing how it works' the Committee would need to consider how this suggestion is at all possible, given the above evidence of the preventable harm knowingly adopted by the DWP over the last ten years and why, given the above evidence, the Committee seem to think that a positive involvement of disabled people with the DWP is possible?



## **SUMMARY OF RESPONSES TO THE CALL FOR EVIDENCE QUESTIONS**

For convenience, a summary response is given below to each of the questions posed by the SSAC call for evidence, drawing out the implications of the above evidence and argument.

**If DWP have engaged with you in the past, please answer the following questions:**

### **1. Can you tell us about the process?**

My initial involvement with the DWP was in a private capacity as I am a disabled veteran and in receipt of a war pension, which is not a benefit. In the past any medical review of my war pension was conducted by a retired military doctor who asked relevant questions regarding my health, conducted a detailed medical examination, and provided an accurate medical report that I never felt the need to challenge.

This changed in December 2008 when what should have been a review medical of my war pension was conducted by a staff member from Atos Healthcare, who presumed to conduct a WCA, not a medical assessment. The visiting Atos staff member refused to offer any ID when he arrived at my home, resisted eye contact to successfully create tension, dismissed my attempts to ask questions with an offensive wave of his hand to silence me, and produced a report that was a work of fiction. Consequently, the Veterans Agency (VA) decision was hostile and the decision letter was offensive warning me to never again invite a review of my war pension. This disturbing experience was unacceptable and, in my capacity as a former healthcare professional, I not only challenged the VA and won my case, which took two years, I decided to devote myself to independent research to expose the preventable harm the WCA was always destined to create.

I am now the lead independent disability studies researcher on this subject, and evidence from the research has been quoted during welfare reform debates in the House of Lords, the House of Commons and in Westminster Hall.

### **2. To what degree have there been benefits from engagement with DWP?**

There have been no benefits and no *'tangible improvements'* to policies or practices for disabled people following my subsequent engagement with the DWP in my capacity as a researcher.

The DWP refuses to accept published research evidence, regardless of source, and stakeholders do not identify with any 'improvements' the department claims to have made. By refusing access to independent research, and disregarding the fact that research adopted by the DWP [failed all academic scrutiny](#), the DWP Ministers and Civil Servants can claim all is well.

### **3. Based on your experiences, would you wish to engage with the DWP in the future?**

Given their disturbing attitude and extreme and dangerous social policies, I do not wish to

engage with the DWP in the future but this is something I am duty bound to continue to do in my capacity as the lead disability studies researcher for the Preventable Harm Project.

There are no positives when engaging with the DWP or offering them published research they refuse to access, with ‘welfare reforms’ based on extreme ideology and influenced by corporate America, with successive administrations who felt the need to humiliate anyone whose too ill to work. The process with the department won’t improve until and unless the DWP reverse the preventable harm adopted for fiscal reasons, whilst disregarding the preventable harm such policies were destined to create when DWP social policies were influenced by the [second worst insurance company in America since 1992](#).

**4. Please tell us about other engagement you have had on disability issues with public sector or other organisations outside of the DWP?**

The process of engagement is that I share all new published research with social policy academics and with disabled people’s organisations. My research is welcomed, is often reproduced on various websites and is cited in academic papers.

There is no comparison with the way in which the department engages with me as they disregard all published research evidence offered to them, and they are defensive, hostile and can be offensive.

**5. In your view, can the DWP’s process of engagement be improved and, if so, why and how?**

I refer you to the detailed evidence and argument already provided in this submission.

**6. Is there anything else you wish to add to this subject?**

If the committee accesses the [detailed evidence](#) provided with this submission, I believe they will be much better informed regarding the realities of the preventable harm created by the DWP and negatively impacting on the chronically ill and disabled people of this nation. Any improvement in the involvement of the DWP with disabled people is unlikely due to policies which were guaranteed to cause preventable harm, and the fact that the disabled community whose financial survival is via social security benefits live in fear of the DWP.

**PUBLISHED RESEARCH EVIDENCE PROVIDED TO COMMITTEE:**

Stewart, Mo (2019) Final project report: Influences and Consequences, the Conclusion to the Preventable Harm Project 2009 – 2019, published by the Centre for Welfare Reform <https://www.centreforwelfarereform.org/library/influences-and-consequences.html>

Stewart, Mo (2019) Preventable harm: creating a mental health crisis  
Journal of Public Mental Health, Vol. 18, No. 4, pp. 224 – 230  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/JPMH-07-2019-0070>