

Mo Stewart

Fellow, The Centre for Welfare Reform
Research Lead, Preventable Harm Project

Phone:

Email:

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ORCID: 0000-0001-7018-6101

[The Preventable Harm Project](#)

The Baroness Falkner of Margravine
Chair and Chief Executive Officer
Equality and Human Rights Commission
House of Lords
Room 4:19, 2 Millbank
London, SW1P 3JU

Private & Confidential

via email

Dear Madam Chair

Re: The public health crisis created by UK social policy reforms

[Justice, Power and Resistance](#)¹

I write in my capacity as the research lead for the Preventable Harm Project (2009-19)² to alert your good self and the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) to the identified and increasing public health crisis created by successive social policy reforms, which have negatively impacted on the health, wellbeing and on the survival of members of the chronically ill and disabled community who are unfit to work.^{3,4,5}

The adoption of the fatally flawed Work Capability Assessment (WCA),¹⁻⁵ as introduced in 2008 by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to limit access to the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) disability benefit, included the adoption of negative political rhetoric of disability denial by successive administrations in the New Labour (2007-10) and the Liberal Democrat and Conservative Coalition (2010-15), which has impeded the wellbeing of those in greatest need who were viewed as being '*burdensome*'⁵ during the years of 'welfare reform'.

Yet perceptions of welfare claimants, and perhaps especially those who are disabled, have mental health conditions, and are out of work, as an economic burden and a drain on the economy is actively crafted by governmental and media anti-welfare rhetoric. Claiming welfare is cast as a form of 'welfare dependance', which is compared to the 'fetishised' independence and imagined autonomy of paid employment. ... this 'powerful "scrounger" narrative and rhetoric' is the major 'framing consensus on welfare' in the UK, and creates an environment where claimants are demonised and stigmatised... In doing this, it highlights the systemic, intersectional and cumulative production of suicidality by... 'welfare reform'...⁵

¹ [The public health crisis created by UK social policy reforms. Justice, Power and Resistance - early view](#)

² [The Preventable Harm Project](#)

³ [Preventable harm: creating a mental health crisis. Journal of Public Mental Health Vol. 18 No. 4, pp. 224-230](#)

⁴ ['First, do no harm': are disability assessments associated with adverse trends in mental health? A longitudinal ecological study. Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health, vol 70, no 4, pp. 339-345](#)

⁵ [Burden and benefits-related suicides: "misperception" or state crafted reality? Journal of Public Mental Health, 21\(1\), pp. 46-56](#)

Having established what is an identified public health crisis for those in greatest need when required to endure the WCA,^{1,2,3} the political resistance to what are now volumes of published peer-reviewed academic papers demonstrating the preventable harm created by the WCA negatively impacting on the wellbeing of chronically ill and disabled benefit claimants remains cause for serious concern.^{4,5} Many more chronically ill and disabled people will suffer, and many more are destined to die when covertly 'killed by the state',⁶ as long as the DWP continue to use this 'non-medical functional assessment'⁶ to limit access to long-term disability benefit whilst disregarding clinical need.

Yet, all evidence of this preventable harm is resisted by Ministers whose social policies were adopted using a fiscal priority whilst disregarding health and wellbeing, which always was a very dangerous precedent to set as they work towards dismantling what once was the UK's social safety net.^{1-6,7}

From the start of its implementation, the WCA process was reported to represent difficulties for those being assessed. The Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) reported that the assessment was not effectively measuring fitness for work, often ignored clinical evidence and was producing inappropriate outcomes... Many people report the process to be anxiety-provoking and a cause of deterioration in their health. The WCA remains widely condemned and seen in need of a review. Official Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) reviews of the WCA have questioned whether descriptors are fit for purpose and whether the assessment is sufficiently fair and effective...

Perhaps the most serious outcome of the WCA process is its relationship to suicide. It is known that the occurrence of completed suicide increases during recessions, but there is also good evidence that the government's programme of reassessing for ESA is independently associated with increases in suicides. There are also several case reports of the deaths of people by suicide or neglect whose benefits had been removed, including the death of Errol Graham, a man with long-term mental health problems...

Not only do people with disabilities associated with physical and mental conditions experience prejudice and discrimination linked to their conditions, they may also experience the stigma associated with claiming benefits and the shame associated with poverty. Overall, the UK public have low levels of understanding of the benefits system and people see the bulk of what the welfare state does as providing handouts to those who do not work...

Traditionally, for the poor the division is between the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving' poor. In contemporary government policy, the rhetoric has been one of 'a culture of dependency', 'scroungers', 'benefit cheats' and the 'hard-working majority', which has been reinforced by newspaper headlines and television programmes such as *Benefits Street*. It appears that in the 21st century we have shifted our gaze from the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' to 'strivers' and 'shirkers'.⁷

During the years of 'welfare reform' (2010-15) the Coalition government worked very hard to make sure that social re-engineering would remove the past psychological security of the UK welfare state,

1 [The public health crisis created by UK social policy reforms. *Justice, Power and Resistance* - early view](#)

2 [The Preventable Harm Project](#)

3 [Preventable harm: creating a mental health crisis. *Journal of Public Mental Health* Vol. 18 No. 4, pp. 224-230](#)

4 ['First, do no harm': are disability assessments associated with adverse trends in mental health? A longitudinal ecological study. *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health*, vol 70, no 4, pp. 339-345](#)

5 [Burden and benefits-related suicides: "misperception" or state crafted reality? *Journal of Public Mental Health*, 21\(1\), pp. 46-56](#)

6 [Killed By The State? Social Policy Abused](#)

7 [Dismantling the social safety net: social security reforms, disability and mental health conditions. *BJPsych Bulletin*, Volume 44, Issue 5, October 2020, pp. 208-212](#)

when aided by the tabloid press, with the ultimate political ambition being the eventual removal of the UK welfare state to be replaced by the American system of welfare using private income replacement health insurance.⁸ It was no coincidence that prosecuted disability hate crimes, including murder, increased by 213 percent during the years of the Coalition administration.⁹



I was encouraged to read your recent comments in *The House*¹⁰ and, together with many other people, I totally agree that human rights are there to 'help to protect vulnerable groups from abuse'.¹⁰ The difficulty in the UK is that social policy reforms, and the adoption of the fatally flawed WCA to limit access to disability benefit, guaranteed that the most vulnerable group of all are not being protected from abuse, and it's the UK government creating the abuse of those in greatest need. It is therefore hoped that the EHRC will please consider an inquiry into the continued use of the WCA, which was adopted using discredited government commissioned research¹¹ to justify the use of the WCA whilst disregarding clinical need in an effort to discredit the welfare state.¹²

Thank you for your time.

Yours sincerely

Mo Stewart

Fellow, Centre for Welfare Reform
Research Lead, Preventable Harm Project



Author of ['Cash Not Care: the planned demolition of the UK welfare state'](#)

Creator of [The Preventable Harm Project](#)

Consequences [Influences and Consequences](#)

Copied to: Research EHRC, Sir Stephen Timms MP (Work & Pensions Cttee) and Steve Brine MP (Health Cttee)

⁸ [Cash Not Care: the planned demolition of the UK welfare state. New Generation Publishing 2016](#)

⁹ [EXCLUSIVE: Hate crimes on disabled up by 213%](#)

¹⁰ [Equality and human rights watchdog: human rights are not up for debate.](#)

¹¹ [Blaming the victim all over again: Waddell and Aylward's biopsychosocial \(BPS\) model of disability](#)

¹² [The impact of neoliberal politics on the welfare and survival of chronically ill and disabled people](#)