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Dr Stephen Brien
Chair
Social Security Advisory Committee
7th Floor Caxton House
Tothill Street
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via email:
ssac@ssac.gov.uk

Dear Chair

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

[Justice, Power and Resistance 2022](#) ¹

I write in my capacity as the research lead for the Preventable Harm Project² to alert you to the ongoing public health crisis generated by the adoption of the fatally flawed Work Capability Assessment (WCA) by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), as initially created to restrict access to the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) disability benefit.

It is cause for continued concern that published peer-reviewed papers over many years demonstrating the preventable harm created by the WCA have been routinely disregarded.² No doubt this is because UK social policies were influenced by corporate America^{1,3} since 1992 and so any challenge to the validity of the WCA, or evidence of the public health crisis it was destined to create, was seemingly dismissed.

I therefore draw your attention to the above link to a published peer-reviewed research paper,¹ which demonstrates how this identified public health crisis was created, and provides many links to research by various experts in their field which identify the human suffering created by the DWP, and encouraged by the disturbing comments of the Coalition administration (2010-15). They anticipated objections to the adoption of extreme austerity measures and so offered the public someone else to blame as a distraction, which worked very well. The vilification of the chronically ill and disabled community by the Coalition administration was welcomed by the tabloid press, who happily demonised disability benefit claimants in banner headlines, then watched as prosecuted disability hate crimes increased by 213%⁴ during the Coalition administration's term in office, with no-one accepting responsibility for the impact of this relentless threat to the welfare of those in greatest need.



2011 propaganda coincided with a 213% increase in disability hate crimes

Despite repeated false claims by Ministers, there was no evidence of vast amounts of disability benefit fraud. At the same time as this political rhetoric was making banner headlines, the DWP's own published figures identified benefit fraud as being only 0.5%,⁵ and so this brutal assault on the integrity of all disabled ESA claimants continued as designed in what was the creation of social re-engineering to remove the security of the welfare state.

Time has moved on and the situation for the chronically ill and disabled community has deteriorated significantly by the excessive use of benefit sanctions, which removes all income for a period of time, to the extent that some of those claimants have been, quite literally, starved to death by the callous indifference of DWP social policies.⁶

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has been criticised in an official report for the first time for failings that contributed to the death of a disabled man who starved to death after it wrongly stopped his out-of-work benefits [...] and it is the latest publication over the last decade to link the deaths of claimants to the department's policies and flawed practices, including those relating to the work capability assessment.⁶

I should advise that the British public didn't give any administration permission to starve to death anyone who is too ill to attend an appointment with the Jobcentre, and this relentless intimidation by the DWP is without precedence as the UK government have caused preventable harm with successive social policies when influenced by the extremes of right-leaning ideology. Of possibly greater concern is the negative impact on public mental health^{7,8} created by this fatally flawed assessment model, which failed all academic scrutiny and is directly linked to thousands of deaths, often by suicide. Yet, regardless of the volumes of published peer-reviewed papers exposing the growing public health crisis generated by the WCA,^{1,2,5, 7-10} and the hostility and cruelty of frontline DWP staff⁹ whose written contact with claimants is routinely hostile and intimidating, no concern by DWP Ministers is identified.



As can be seen in the excerpt above, by constructing out-of-work claimants as an undesirable and potentially threatening ‘other’ (e.g. as a ‘fraud’, ‘scrounger’, ‘drain’), staff could efface the humanity of their caseloads and remove them from moral obligation. This provided some workers with a sufficient cause to justify punitive working practices which would likely lead to harmful outcomes: ‘s/he took the view that claimants are lazy, dishonest, not trying to get work and the stick was important’. In this vein, worker three explained how their manager made efforts to discipline workers and achieve sanctioning rates by harnessing ‘stigma power’ as a way of rousing antipathy among frontline staff and establishing distance between workers and claimants.⁹

Various select committees including the Social Security Advisory Committee (SSAC) were given evidence of the preventable harm created by these assessments, so suggestions that committees are ‘independent’ when disregarding identified critical need are open to challenge. Claims that the committees are independent can be difficult to accept, given that in the past at least one SSAC member was very vocal in the extreme rhetoric created relating to benefits for the disabled community. Adopting social policies which disregard clinical need always was dangerous, and the height of political bias which guaranteed thousands of deaths and human suffering on a vast scale for which no-one is held to account.¹⁰⁻¹²

The adoption of the fatally flawed WCA guided successive UK administrations to adopt social policies using a fiscal priority whilst disregarding health and wellbeing, which had fatal human consequences⁷ when demonstrating institutional indifference and this government induced public health crisis is now being exposed in a BBC Radio 4 series identified as ‘Fit For Work’.¹³

Incidentally, the future planned removal of the WCA by 2026 brings little comfort given the totally inadequate replacement, which will continue to intimidate those in greatest need when unfit to work and threatens ‘a “tsunami” impact on sick and disabled people.’¹⁴

It’s surely past time for the SSAC, perhaps in an ‘Occasional Paper’, to alert the administration as to the identified and relentless public health crisis they successfully created, which remains ethically unjustifiable and morally reprehensible, and someone needs to be held to account for the preventable harm that was always guaranteed when clinical need is disregarded.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M Stewart', written in a cursive style.

Mo Stewart

Fellow, Centre for Welfare Reform

Research Lead, Preventable Harm Project

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

Producer: [The Preventable Harm Project](#)

Editor: [Influences and Consequences](#)



Copied to:

The Rt Hon Sir Stephen Timms MP – Chair, Work and Pensions Select Committee
The Baroness Kennedy of The Shaws KC, President of Council for JUSTICE
Joanna Cherry KC MP – Chair, Joint Committee on Human Rights
Steve Brine MP – Chair, Health and Social Care Committee
Nicholas Bowen KC – Doughty Street Chambers
Jamie Burton KC – Doughty Street Chambers
The Baroness Lister of Burtersett CBE, FBA
Dr Jed Boardman, Consultant Psychiatrist
Liz Sayce OBE, SSAC

References

- 1 The public health crisis created by UK social policy reforms. Mo Stewart
[*Justice, Power and Resistance 2022*](#)
- 2 The Preventable Harm Project.
[Mo Stewart Research | Cash Not Care](#)
- 3 Cash Not Care: the planned demolition of the UK welfare state. Mo Stewart
[New Generation Publishing, 2016](#)
- 4 EXCLUSIVE: Hate crimes on disabled up by 213% The Express
<https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/551327/EXCLUSIVE-Hate-crimes-on-disabled-rise-by-213>
- 5 Fear of the Brown Envelope: Exploring Welfare Reform with Long-Term Sickness Benefit Recipients. Kayleigh Garthwaite
[Social & Policy Administration Volume 48, Issue 7, December 2014, Pages 782-798](#)
- 6 Errol Graham: DWP criticised by report into disabled man's starvation death
[Disability News Service, 11th May 2023](#)
- 7 'First, do no harm': are disability assessments associated with adverse trends in mental health? A longitudinal ecological study. Ben Barr et al, 2016
[Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health 2016; 70:339-345.](#)
- 8 A catastrophic indifference to human need: the mental health crisis created by the DWP
Mo Stewart [BJGP LIFE, January 2021](#)
- 9 Violent bureaucracy: A critical analysis of the British public employment service
Jamie Redman & Del Roy Fletcher, 2021 [Critical Social Policy Volume 42, Issue 2, pp 1-21](#)
- 10 Preventable Harm: creating a mental health crisis. Mo Stewart
[Journal of Public Mental Health Vol 18 No 4 2019, pp. 224-230](#)
- 11 Thousands have died after being found fit for work, DWP figures show. The Guardian
[The Guardian, 27th August 2015](#)
- 12 Death has become a part of Britain's benefits system. The Guardian
[The Guardian, 27th August 2015](#)
- 13 'Fit For Work', BBC Radio 4 Series [BBC Radio 4 - Fit for Work](#)
- 14 'Nonsensical' disability benefits white paper sparks return of Spartacus
[Disability News Service, 23rd March 2023](#)