



# Mo Stewart Research

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Date: 21 January 2026

The Rt Hon Pat McFadden MP  
Secretary of State  
Department for Work and Pensions  
Caxton House  
6-12 Tothill Street  
London SW1H 9NA

Private & Confidential

via email

Dear Secretary of State,

Re: [No one held to account](#)<sup>1</sup>

Writing in my capacity as the research lead for the UK Preventable Harm Project,<sup>1</sup> ongoing since 2009, please be alert to the identified government-induced public health crisis<sup>2</sup> directly linked to the relentless hostile political rhetoric negatively impacting on the health, wellbeing and, often, on the survival of the chronically ill and disabled community who are unable to work. This hostile culture is demonstrated by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) in successive administrations, and was identified by the Work and Pensions Committee in their disturbing and revealing May 2025 '*Safeguarding Vulnerable Claimants*' report.<sup>3</sup>

We heard during this inquiry that the challenges DWP experienced with safeguarding stemmed from the culture within the Department. We were told that cost-effectiveness and efforts to move people into work had been perceived to be prioritised over providing genuine care and support to vulnerable people. ... As a result, we heard that deep-rooted, cultural change was necessary to rebuild the trust of claimants, and to drive and embed improvements to how the DWP safeguards vulnerable claimants. In our view, the number one priority arising from our inquiry is for the Department to change its culture. This has been acknowledged and supported by Ministers. However, achieving cultural change is difficult. It will involve changes to processes and a different approach to policy development. It will also require bold action, led by Ministers and senior officials, to deliver a genuine change in the Government's approach to safeguarding. (p.1)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [The UK Preventable Harm Project](#)

<sup>2</sup> [The public health crisis created by successive UK social policy reforms: \*Justice, Power & Resistance 2023\* \(6\)2:217-228](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Safeguarding Vulnerable Claimants, Work and Pensions Committee May 2025](#)



It does appear to many that the much needed cultural change within the DWP does not appear to have been taken onboard especially by DWP Ministers, as demonstrated in your various interviews since your appointment last September, which were guaranteed to cause offence as you continue to adopt false claims regarding disability benefit claimants as reported in September 2025 by the *Disability News Service*:<sup>4</sup>

The anger and frustration only increased when new work and pensions secretary Pat McFadden claimed [in an interview](#) that there were currently “incentives” in the system for people to declare themselves unfit for work so they can “double their money”, and also claimed that people were “declaring themselves long-term sick.”

McFadden will have been aware that claimants cannot declare themselves “long-term sick” but instead must go through the harsh work capability assessment process in order to be found not fit for work, and he should have been aware that this system has [led to countless deaths](#).<sup>4</sup>

Certainly, your speech at the 2025 Labour Party conference was interesting.<sup>5</sup> I have no doubt that the claims you made were what the audience was waiting to hear. However, your claims do not meet reality. You claimed that the system ‘has work at its heart and support when times are tough’. So, why are the chronically ill and disabled community living in fear of the next enforced and fatally flawed work capability assessment (WCA)? Where’s the ‘support’? You claimed that ‘no disabled person should live without dignity,’ so why do you continue to make false claims about those in greatest need who claim long-term disability benefit when unable to work? Where’s the ‘support’? It seems that your idea of providing new ‘pathways to work’ includes intimidating the long-term sick and profoundly disabled community who are unable to work, and many will never be able to work, regardless of relentless DWP intimidation. Secretary of State, where’s the ‘support’?

For those in greatest need, we are living in very dangerous times as successive neoliberal administrations deem that work is a requirement regardless of chronic illness or profound disability. The DWP’s greatest flaw is in their resistance to accepting detailed, published, peer-reviewed evidence from some of our top academics in the UK,<sup>6</sup> who regularly demonstrate the preventable harm the DWP has generated as the Department disregards the thousands of deaths directly linked to the flawed WCA.<sup>7</sup>

As long ago as September 2016 NHS Digital published statistics demonstrating that almost half the people claiming the main out-of-work disability benefit in England had attempted

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<sup>4</sup> [Anger and frustration after DWP’s latest jobcentre announcement and McFadden’s ‘incentives’ comment](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Secretary of State for Work and Pensions Pat McFadden’s speech at Labour Party Conference 2025](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Burden and benefits-related suicides: ‘misperception’ or state crafted reality? Journal of Public Mental Health 2022 21\(1\), pp.46-56](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Preventable harm: creating a mental health crisis Journal of Public Mental Health 2019 18\(4\), pp.224-230](#)



suicide at some point.<sup>8</sup> The NHS report advised that the figures indicate that Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) claimants are '*a population in great need of support*,'<sup>8</sup> but support is in short supply as successive DWP Ministers make relentless hostile claims aimed at those in greatest need. This is ideologically motivated, and was always guaranteed to cause a public health crisis,<sup>2</sup> which is routinely disregarded by the DWP.

As for the relentless DWP claims that these political assaults on the wellbeing of those in greatest need is to ensure disabled people find employment, this is simply another political smokescreen which has been ongoing for a very long time. I suggest it's past time to change the rhetoric. There is no evidence that this relentless hostility towards the long-term chronically ill and disabled community has generated any significant employment for the disabled community, as demonstrated in significant published academic research.<sup>9</sup>

As policy is debated, a fundamental question to answer is whether benefit restrictions are the right mechanism to achieve the stated objectives of reducing costs and moving people into sustainable work, or do they simply deepen poverty and health crises, creating new, unforeseen costs? This study offers vital answers, by looking at the effects of similar policy in the past and drawing lessons useful for current policymakers, before repeating history. ...

These findings are consistent with other studies investigating policies that reduce benefit levels or access to social security benefits, which have reported similar negative effects on mental health. However, these studies generally did not investigate the health impacts of changes to income replacement benefits for disabled people. One exception is a study of the introduction of stricter assessment processes for these benefits in the UK that similarly found adverse mental health outcomes. It is perhaps unsurprising that policies that reduce the payments to social security claimants increase risk of poverty. It could be argued, however, that these income effects are compensated by increased employment incentives, reducing poverty through higher employment. Our results indicated that reducing benefit payments did not improve employment, and instead increased risk of severe poverty. This is also consistent with other evidence that such policies often have no, or small effects on employment of people with disabilities. ...

Our results have important implications for policy. Although there is growing evidence that welfare reforms such as these have major impacts on public health, they are introduced without any plans to monitor these impacts or modify them to minimise these effects.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> [The public health crisis created by successive UK social policy reforms: \*Justice, Power & Resistance\* 2023 \(6\)2:217-228](#)

<sup>8</sup> ['Shocking' NHS stats show nearly half ESA claimants have attempted suicide](#)

<sup>9</sup> [The Health, Poverty and Employment Effects of Cutting Income Replacement Benefits for the Disabled: A Difference-in-Difference Analysis of the 2016 Welfare Reforms](#)



Given that the Work and Pension Select Committee report on *Safeguarding Vulnerable Claimants*<sup>3</sup> recommended the adoption of ‘an independent body to investigate serious harms, to improve scrutiny and ensure appropriate action is taken when cases are mishandled’ (pp.102),<sup>3</sup> I would welcome evidence please of when this ‘independent body’ will be appointed? It is also noted that the report advised that the DWP ‘must ensure that it consults with relevant stakeholders, including Disabled People’s Organisations when setting up this body.’ (pp.102)<sup>3</sup> Considering that a detailed proposal regarding ‘An Independent Advisory Panel on DWP-Related Deaths’ is already available for your consideration,<sup>10</sup> I look forward to being advised when the DWP will be adopting the required and long-overdue ‘independent body’ to give the public confidence that the DWP will be held to account for the public health crisis it has generated.<sup>7</sup>

In keeping with all government correspondence, this letter will be reproduced on the Preventable Harm Project website.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mo Stewart', with a stylized flourish at the end.

**Mo Stewart**

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

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Sian Berry MP, Co-Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty & Inequality  
Debbie Abrahams MP, Chair Work and Pensions Select Committee  
Paulette Hamilton MP, Vice-Chair Health and Social Care Select Committee  
Stephen Barclay MP, Constituency MP for North East Cambridgeshire

<sup>3</sup> [Safeguarding Vulnerable Claimants, Work and Pensions Committee May 2025](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Preventable harm: creating a mental health crisis Journal of Public Mental Health 2019 18\(4\), pp.224-230](#)

<sup>10</sup> [An Independent Advisory Panel on DWP-Related Deaths](#)