**DWP staff admit inflicting ‘psychological harm’ on claimants during coalition years**

Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) staff and managers deliberately inflicted psychological harm on benefit claimants, engaged in unofficial sanctioning targets, and pushed disabled people into work despite the risk to their health, shocking new testimony has revealed.

The evidence comes from new interviews with 10 civil servants who worked for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and its contractors under the coalition government between 2010 and 2015.

They spoke – on the condition of strict anonymity – to academics from Sheffield Hallam University, who have now shown how the introduction of a more punitive social security system, with harsher benefit sanctions and conditionality, inflicted years of “institutional violence” on claimants between 2010 and 2015.

The authors, Dr Jamie Redman and Professor Del Roy Fletcher, believe it is the first time that research has explained how DWP workers have been able to commit such harmful acts on benefit claimants in vulnerable and precarious situations.

The two academics built on the work of the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who described how modern bureaucracies can produce psycho-social factors that enable ordinary people to carry out harmful practices.

They describe how a change in DWP policy through the new Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government elected in May 2010 pressured DWP staff to refer more claimants to have their benefits sanctioned.

The policy changes also saw the performance of jobcentre staff measured by “off-benefit flows” – the number of claimants who stopped receiving an out-of-work benefit – even if those people had not secured a job.

This helped lead to a huge increase in sanctioning rates between 2010 and 2013 – reaching more than one million sanctions in 2013 and rising about 345 per cent above their 2001-08 average level.

For their research, Redman and Fletcher interviewed a JobcentrePlus (JCP) manager; three JCP front-line staff members; one Work Programme front-line worker who had previously worked for JCP; one DWP decision-maker; and four Work Programme front-line staff.

They were told how “top-down” pressure on staff – through sanctioning tables and off-flow targets that were “legitimised” by the government – acted as a “moral anaesthetic” which “made invisible the needs and interests” of the claimants they were sanctioning.

This allowed workers to view their caseloads with what Bauman called “ethical indifference”.

One JCP worker described how staff would often treat claimants with “disrespect” and use psychological harm as a technique to reduce the number of people claiming benefits, “pushing them until they either just cleared off because they couldn’t take the pressure or they got sanctioned”.

An executive officer in another JobcentrePlus office also said that some staff tried to antagonise claimants in the hope that they would drop their claims.

While DWP denied at the time that there were any sanctioning targets, the former DWP staff interviewed for the research said there was increasing expectation “from above” to hand out sanctions, which led to the formation of “local target regimes”.

One JCP executive officer said staff would come into the canteen and say: “Well I’ve got my [sanctions] target for the week.”

Another worker described how non-English speaking claimants would be persuaded to sign “claimant commitments” that meant they had to provide evidence of their work search activities in English.

When they were unable to provide this evidence, because their English was not strong enough, they were sanctioned.

One manager tried to persuade staff to sanction more claimants by telling them: “It’s your money! It’s your taxes that they’re living off! You know, you should be sanctioning them!”

One of those interviewed said that this kind of “stigmatising” language became increasingly common in formal meetings.

But these tactics were not restricted to JCP offices.

Those who worked for outsourced Work Programme providers, who were under financial pressure to find job “outcomes” for claimants, described how managers pressured them to “push” disabled people into work.

One former Work Programme adviser told the research team: “[I had] a lovely guy who I really felt for who had mental health issues and the day after I had to reluctantly mandate him to something – he attempted suicide.

“I also had another lady who we pushed into work and it made her that ill she had a fit in her new job and was admitted to hospital.”

Another Work Programme adviser said that some colleagues seemed to thrive on their ability to inflict harm and “enjoyed the stick”.

In their paper, [Violent Bureaucracy](http://shura.shu.ac.uk/28060/), published last week in Critical Social Policy, Redman and Fletcher describe how the government and media had created and promoted a “hostile” environment for claimants, with the help of frequent “scrounger rhetoric” designed to blame claimants for austerity.

This laid the groundwork for the introduction of a more punitive welfare-to-work system, with harsher sanctions and conditionality, and allowed the institutional violence of the DWP regime to thrive.

Their research, they write, “seeks to explain how ordinary people carrying out their daily duties in employment service offices were able to implement cruel and inhumane social security reforms”.

Redman told Disability News Service (DNS) that he believed the research could also help explain more recent, disturbing interactions between claimants and staff working for DWP and its contractors, including evidence [that emerged in January](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/philippa-day-dwp-phone-agent-ignored-sobbing-claimant-who-later-took-her-own-life/) at the inquest into the death of Philippa Day.

And he pointed to the huge number of claimants who have relied on DWP support during the COVID-19 crisis, mostly through universal credit.

He warned that historical evidence suggests that punitive reforms tend to thrive in the years after periods of economic crisis, as governments attempt to reduce the number of claimants and push them back into work.

After DNS asked DWP to respond to the article, a DWP spokesperson said: “This journal article does not reflect the compassionate support offered by our jobcentres day in, day out.

“Providing the best possible customer service and care is at the heart of what we do.

“We don’t want to sanction anyone and no one is sanctioned unless they fail to meet their agreed claimant commitment without good reason.”

**1 April 2021**

**Government ‘treats disabled people with contempt’ by handing £2.4 million to charities**

The government has been accused of showing “contempt” and “indifference” towards disabled people, after announcing large grants to 13 disability charities but failing to offer a penny to organisations run and controlled by disabled people.

The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) [announced this week](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/disability-charities-benefit-from-24-million-fund) that it was awarding £2.4 million to charities such as Mencap, Leonard Cheshire, Scope, the National Autistic Society, RNIB and RNID.

The money will fund services that provide advice and support for people affected by the pandemic.

But none of the funding will go to disabled people’s organisations (DPOs), many of which have provided vital support to disabled people during the pandemic.

Joe Whittaker, a board member of [The Alliance for Inclusive Education (ALLFIE)](https://www.allfie.org.uk/), said the decision meant it was “business as usual” for the government, which was continuing to fund “the big business charities, rather than listening to the authentic voice of disabled people and their organisations”.

He said the government had yet again failed to engage with disabled people in recent months and continued to “treat disabled people with contempt” by funding “multi-million pound charities”.

He said these charities were managed by non-disabled people on six-figure salaries “telling disabled people what’s good for them”, which “perpetuates practices that lock disabled people into cultures of dependency”.

He added: “From day one of this pandemic, DPOs provided much-valued support and information to disabled people.

“Simultaneously, DPOs, during the pandemic, have gathered much-needed data about the way local and national governments have failed to provide essential services to large numbers of disabled people, resulting in large numbers of unnecessary deaths.

“DPOs are denied basic funding to continue their work.

“This failure to listen to DPOs, who have the experience and expertise gathered over many decades, will result in the same failed policies and systematic disability discrimination, preventing society from gaining from the huge contributions of disabled people from around the UK.”

Mark Harrison, a member of the [Reclaiming Our Futures Alliance](https://www.rofa.org.uk/) steering group, said: “Given that no DPOs who are members of ROFA have received a penny from the government during the pandemic, these grants just confirm their outdated attitudes to disability and disabled people.

“It also shows complete contempt for their duties under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and a human rights-based approach to disability.

“The charities ‘for’ disabled people receiving these grants are like dinosaurs and should be extinct and condemned to the dustbin of history where they belong.

“However, the government is trying to breathe life into institutions that are part of the causes of our oppression.

“They have learnt nothing from the #MeToo, LGBTQI and Black Lives Matter movements and the need to fund DPOs, not organisations or charities led and managed by non-disabled people.

“Our research shows that 25 per cent of DPOs have closed over the last five years and many are on the brink due to lack of financial support from local and national government, which makes these grants even more contemptible.”

Fazilet Hadi, head of policy for [Disability Rights UK](https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/), said: “We always welcome funding that enables disabled people to live active, independent lives.

“However, it is very disappointing that DPOs were not invited to apply for funds and that the vital role they play is regularly overlooked.

“Most DPOs have provided extra support to disabled people during the crisis and would have benefited from additional resource.

“DPOs have so much value, but often so little resource.

“It is vital that the government’s national disability strategy takes action to strengthen DPOs and the voice of disabled people.”

Jumoke Abdullahi, communications and media officer at [Inclusion London](https://www.inclusionlondon.org.uk/), said that DDPOs\* “rarely have enough of anything” and are “always trying to make do with what is already not enough”.

She said: “Funding is the key that opens the door for greater capacity to do the important work that is needed by our communities and ourselves.

“To learn that the Department of Health and Social Care has announced new COVID grants to 13 disability charities, with none of the grants going to any of the already struggling and severely underfunded DDPOs is frustrating to say the least.

“However, this is indicative of the lack of care and attention that the government has paid to disabled people and our organisations for more than a decade.

“It does not come as a surprise that the organisations that rightly critique the constant and consistent failings made by this government are once again ignored.

“The government’s own minister for disabled people, Justin Tomlinson, [failed to carry out meaningful engagement](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/dwp-records-show-tomlinson-is-either-a-liar-or-a-fantasist-over-engagement-claims/) with disabled people’s organisations during the early months of the pandemic.

“Even though this is happening during a time when DDPOs need funding the most, we will press on.

“Rather than feel resigned, we will continue this necessary fight because we are used to disabled people being underestimated and counted out.”

Asked to comment on the concerns, a DHSC spokesperson said: “We are committed to support charities which have provided national support to people impacted by this global pandemic.

“This funding has helped to facilitate specialist national helplines, combat loneliness and provide practical support to improve the physical and mental wellbeing of thousands of disabled people nationally, impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The organisations funded are uniquely placed to provide targeted support at scale to disabled people across the country for needs arising as a direct result of the pandemic ensuring this grant funding will have maximum impact in terms of the numbers of disabled people supported nationally. “

**\****Deaf and disabled people’s organisations*

**1 April 2021**

**Legal threat to PM over lack of BSL interpreter in £2.6 million briefing room**

The government is facing the threat of fresh legal action after it failed to provide a British Sign Language (BSL) interpreter at a televised pandemic briefing by the prime minister, despite spending £2.6 million on a new media room.

Deaf campaigners are now spearheading three separate legal cases against the government in connection with its continuing refusal to provide BSL interpreters at vital televised briefings.

Supporters of the [#WhereIsTheInterpreter](https://www.facebook.com/WhereIsTheInterpreter/) campaign have been trying for the last year to persuade the government that it must provide an interpreter at its pandemic briefings, and not rely on an in-screen interpreter on the BBC News channel.

This week, Boris Johnson held the first coronavirus briefing in his new Downing Street briefing room.

The government has already admitted that the platform for speakers [had no built-in, step-free access for wheelchair-users](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/boris-johnson-spends-2-6-million-on-media-facilities-with-an-inaccessible-stage/), despite the £2.6 million cost.

But this week shocked Deaf viewers realised that Johnson had also not ensured the new facilities would allow an on-platform BSL interpreter.

Lynn Stewart-Taylor, founder of the #WhereIsTheInterpreter campaign, said she felt “emotionally zapped” when she watched the BBC One coverage of Monday’s briefing and realised there was no interpreter alongside the prime minister and two health experts.

Stewart-Taylor, a consultant, writer and researcher, told Disability News Service: “Despite the £2.6 million upgrade to a bigger and bespoke media studio, the UK government has, yet again, shown their lack of regard towards the Deaf community, and our pleas for equal access.

“If Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland can all provide a BSL interpreter in the room of their coronavirus briefings, why can’t the UK government?”

She added: “We didn’t want to have to go to court, to be honest; we were hoping we could solve the issue between us, but this has shown that sign language citizens have been totally and unfairly forgotten and ignored.

“How many more people are there out there who are missing out on COVID information?

“Everyone should be equal and have access to their preferred language.”

She said that she and others were feeling “exhaustion and hopelessness” over the government’s failure to act but were now “even more determined to get justice in the courts”.

She and campaign supporters say the failure to provide an on-platform interpreter – and rely instead on an in-screen interpreter through the BBC News channel – is a breach of the Equality Act, the Human Rights Act and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Vicky Foxcroft, Labour’s shadow minister for disabled people, said yesterday (Wednesday) that she was concerned about both the lack of an on-platform interpreter and the failure to ensure the platform was designed to be step-free.

She said: “The government need to urgently rectify this failure.

“It is unacceptable that £2.6 million of public money has been spent on a new press room that actively excludes disabled people.

“Once again the Conservatives have shown that disabled people are an afterthought for this government.”

There are now three separate legal actions, all being taken through disability discrimination experts [Fry Law](https://www.frylaw.co.uk/).

About 300 Deaf people are taking cases through the county court over the government’s failure to provide any BSL interpreter for a series of televised briefings in the early days of the pandemic.

They are seeking damages from the government for breaching the Equality Act by failing to provide an interpreter for nine separate briefings by Boris Johnson between 3 and 19 March 2020.

These nine briefings took place before the BBC provided an interpreter for COVID-19 briefings on its BBC News channel, and they provided vital information to the public, including informing them that they should avoid pubs and restaurants, that schools were closing, and advising them how to protect themselves from the virus.

A second legal case, being taken by Deaf campaigner Katie Rowley, relates to the failure to provide a BSL interpreter at [two televised briefings](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fGoKsrWw9i0) with health experts in Downing Street on 12 October and 21 September.

Now Rowley is spearheading another legal case, this time over the failure to provide an on-platform interpreter for the prime minister’s briefing on Monday, focusing on the government’s failure to meet its public sector equality duty.

This will argue that, by refusing to provide an on-platform interpreter, the government is continuing to exclude Deaf people from mainstream society.

Deaf campaigners and allies highlight the contrast with other countries, including the devolved Welsh, Scottish and Northern Ireland governments, and Norway, France, Japan, Italy and New Zealand, which have all been able to provide on-platform BSL interpreters for their COVID briefings.

A government spokesperson declined this week to explain how the prime minister justified spending £2.6 million on new inaccessible facilities that do not allow the presence of an on-platform BSL interpreter, or whether the government believed that it had breached its public sector equality duty by spending such a large amount of money on an inaccessible briefing room.

But he said in a statement: “We are committed to supporting disabled people through every stage of this pandemic and have established BSL interpretation at the No 10 press conference via the BBC News channel and iPlayer, available on all TV packages as part of Freeview.”

**1 April 2021**

**Government faces legal action over ‘disrespectful’ strategy consultation**

Four disabled people have launched a legal action against the government over its “disrespectful” and “unlawful” approach to seeking their views on the proposed national disability strategy.

The four claimants say that a controversial survey, carried out by the Disability Unit, did not give them and other disabled people the chance to say what they really felt about what should be in the strategy.

Instead, all but four of the questions in the survey were multiple choice.

Three of the other questions were limited to just 100 words, and the other one to 250 words.

The launch of the legal action came as the Disability Unit denied that the publication of the strategy had been postponed.

Ministers had previously stated that the strategy would be [published this spring](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/tomlinson-faces-third-angry-letter-from-dpos-over-shambolic-national-disability-survey/), but recent ministerial statements have promised only [to publish it “this year”](https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-03-11/167229).

There has been continuing controversy over the strategy and the survey over the last three months, [including why the survey included a question](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/anger-over-disability-surveys-degrading-and-insulting-relationship-question/) that asked non-disabled people if they would be “happy to have a physical relationship with a disabled person”, and concerns about it being rushed, inaccessible, over-long and poorly-planned.

[On 1 February](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/pressure-mounts-on-tomlinson-as-second-dpo-letter-raises-disability-strategy-concerns/), 10 disabled people’s organisations wrote to Justin Tomlinson, the minister for disabled people, to ask him to postpone publication of the strategy until the summer.

A spokesperson for the Disability Unit said this week that the government “remains absolutely committed to delivering an ambitious National Strategy for Disabled People in the coming months”.

When asked whether this meant that it had been delayed, the spokesperson said he was not aware of any postponement and that he was working to a timescale of “within [the] next few months”.

But he has so far been unable to explain why ministers have stopped referring to the strategy being published in the spring.

The legal action is being taken on behalf of four disabled people by law firm [Bindmans](https://www.bindmans.com/).

They argue that the survey is unlawful because it offers only limited information about the strategy and does not allow disabled people to provide a “proper and effective response”.

They want the consultation to be declared unlawful, and for there to be a new, lawful consultation before the government publishes its strategy.

The government has apparently told Bindmans that the survey is not a consultation – even though the Disability Unit’s own website lists the survey as an “Open Consultation” and the survey is [hosted on the unit’s “Consultation Hub”](https://disabilityunit.citizenspace.com/) – and that it is not obliged to consult disabled people about the strategy.

Disabled campaigner [Doug Paulley](https://twitter.com/Doug_Paulley), one of the four claimants, said: “The secretary of state’s approach to consulting disabled people, on a national strategy which aims to ‘transform’ the lives of disabled people, is immensely disrespectful.

“Disabled people are best placed to say what changes would improve their own lives.

“This survey has not given disabled people any meaningful opportunity to do so, and therefore any strategy developed from the survey will be imposed on disabled people without their voices being heard.”

A government spokesperson said he could not comment on ongoing legal proceedings.

**1 April 2021**

**‘Vaccine passport’ scheme is ‘deeply troubling’, say disabled artists**

Disability arts organisations fear that possible government plans to set up a “vaccine passport” scheme could undermine the rights of disabled artists, workers and audiences.

Members of the [#WeShallNotBeRemoved](https://www.weshallnotberemoved.com/) campaign warned this week that any such scheme could infringe disabled people’s rights and threaten their “visibility” within the creative sector.

They believe it could create a “troubling and ableist precedent which potentially undermines existing protections in equality and employment law”.

Among their concerns is that the scheme – which could see admission to venues only for those who can prove they have been vaccinated or have tested negative for COVID-19 – could exclude disabled people who cannot have a vaccine because of a health condition.

They say it could also discriminate against those who do not have a mobile phone, if the passport is provided through an app.

Another fear is that the scheme could “coerce or penalise” disabled people who are homeless, undocumented migrants or cannot share health or personal information.

They also warned that a vaccine passport scheme could create “a false sense of security” among those attending events and make venues and workplaces more unsafe for those who are susceptible to the virus.

The #WeShallNotBeRemoved campaign has called on the government to ensure that any scheme that is introduced obeys [seven key inclusive principles](https://www.weshallnotberemoved.com/2020/09/15/seven-principles-to-an-inclusive-recovery-for-the-arts-creative-sector/), including complying with the Equality Act and making reasonable adjustments to ensure disabled people do not face discrimination.

They also say that it should follow the social model of disability and be co-produced with disabled people.

The campaign was responding to [a short call for evidence](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/covid-status-certification-review-call-for-evidence/covid-status-certification-review-call-for-evidence) from the Cabinet Office, which is reviewing whether so-called “COVID-status certification” could “play a role in reopening our economy, reducing restrictions on social contact and improving safety”.

There were reports this week that the government is considering applying the scheme to workplaces as well as cultural, leisure and arts venues.

[Last month](https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2021-03-15/debates/8D4B8782-7BA5-475B-A48A-370859B78209/VaccinePassports), Penny Mordaunt, the paymaster general and former minister for disabled people, said the review would look at “the ethical, privacy, legal and operational aspects of certification and their implications for those who are unwilling or unable to be vaccinated, the equalities implications… and the impact of certification on groups who are disproportionately affected by the pandemic”.

#WeShallNotBeRemoved members include hundreds of the country’s leading disabled creative practitioners, disability arts organisations and allies, including [Graeae](https://graeae.org/), [Shape Arts](https://www.shapearts.org.uk/), [Disability Arts Online](https://disabilityarts.online/), [Nabil Shaban](https://the-ndaca.org/the-people/nabil-shaban/), [Jamie Beddard](https://www.extraordinarybodies.org.uk/team/jamie-beddard/) and [Kim Tserkezie](https://twitter.com/kimtserkezie?lang=en).

They also include cultural consultant and broadcaster [Andrew Miller](https://twitter.com/AndrewM_Arts), a co-founder of the campaign, who yesterday (Wednesday) ended his stint as the government’s disability champion for the arts and culture sector.

Miller said: “Disabled people are deeply troubled by the integration of health data into cultural participation.

“We feel alarmed by the introduction of additional barriers and any shift in policy away from the social towards the medical model of disability.

“I cannot see how any COVID-status certification system can avoid being discriminatory and ableist.”

[Jenny Sealey](https://twitter.com/graeaejennys?lang=en), Graeae’s artistic director and another co-founder of the campaign, added: “It is vital that the government and our sector understand the ethics of ‘vaccine passports’ and their potential to infringe human rights.

“Deaf, disabled and neurodiverse people have fought hard for the last 40 years to be visible within the creative sector and that progress is now threatened.”

The #WeShallNotBeRemoved campaign was set up last spring as a reaction to the impact of the pandemic on disability arts.

[The government has said](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-asks-for-views-on-covid-19-certification) that the review of the vaccine passport scheme will be finished before the implementation of step four of the four-stage lockdown easing plan, which will happen no earlier than 21 June.

But it is set to produce some initial findings of work on a potential scheme on 5 or 12 April.

The Cabinet Office declined to respond to the campaign’s concerns this week.

Meanwhile, the disability arts commissioning programme Unlimited [has announced funding](https://weareunlimited.org.uk/announcing-the-2021-unlimited-commissions/) of more than £700,000 for 34 disabled artists.

Unlimited is funded by Arts Council England, Arts Council of Wales, Creative Scotland and the British Council, and delivered by the disabled-led arts organisation Shape Arts and the arts-producing organisation Artsadmin.

Among those commissioned are projects by [musician John Kelly](https://weareunlimited.org.uk/commission/john-kelly-creative-music-development-with-technology-access-and-form/) and [artist-activist Dolly Sen](https://weareunlimited.org.uk/commission/dolly-sen-birdsong-from-inobservable-worlds/), and [Do I Look Okay To You?](https://weareunlimited.org.uk/commission/jameisha-prescod-do-i-look-okay-to-you/), a short, poetic moving image piece by Jameisha Prescod that explores the lives of black British people with long-term health conditions.

David Hevey, chief executive of Shape Arts, said the commissions would “push boundaries, challenge expectations and continue Unlimited’s legacy of innovative, exceptional work”.

**1 April 2021**

**DWP decision to resume face-to-face assessments ‘is too soon and too dangerous’**

Disabled campaigners have warned the government that it is too soon, and too dangerous, to resume face-to-face assessments for disability benefit claimants.

They spoke out after the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) [announced this week](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/face-to-face-assessments-to-resume-for-health-and-disability-benefits) that face-to-face work capability assessments (WCAs) and assessments for personal independence payment (PIP) will resume next month (May).

Face-to-face assessments for industrial injuries disablement benefit (IIDB) claimants in England will resume even earlier, on 12 April.

This will initially be for those who DWP has been unable to assess on paper, or by telephone or video assessments.

All face-to-face assessments have been suspended since 17 March 2020 because of the pandemic.

The move came as [DWP announced](https://news.dwp.gov.uk/dwplz/lz.aspx?p1=MvODUyODI0NFM4ODI0OjVBQzNCOTA4MTBCQzk1MURFOENFNThGRUUxQjQwOURC-&CC=&p=0) that it was now rolling out the use of video assessments across England, Scotland and Wales, following trials that began last year.

DWP has published guidance on the resumption of face-to-face assessments for both [claimants](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/attending-a-face-to-face-health-assessment-during-covid-19/attending-your-face-to-face-health-assessment-for-a-work-capability-assessment-industrial-injuries-disablement-benefit-and-personal-independence-paym) and [assessment providers](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/carrying-out-a-face-to-face-health-assessment-during-covid-19-guidance-for-assessment-providers/guidance-for-health-and-disability-assessment-providers-carrying-out-face-to-face-assessments-during-the-covid-19-period).

It makes it clear that even disabled people considered clinically extremely vulnerable to the virus will not be exempt from attending, if asked to do so.

It also says that the healthcare professional carrying out the assessment should stay two metres away from the claimant and not attempt any physical contact for WCAs and PIP assessments.

Some IIDB assessments may involve a physical examination, but in those cases the assessor will wear extra protective equipment.

The guidance says that the room should be cleaned after each assessment.

But disabled campaigners reacted with concern to the DWP announcement.

Paula Peters, a member of the national steering group of [Disabled People Against Cuts](https://dpac.uk.net/), said the resumption of face-to-face assessments “will cause further fear and dread for disabled people”.

She said: “Over four million disabled people have been shielding for over a year during the course of the pandemic and many have not had their full course of coronavirus vaccinations.”

She said they will now be expected by DWP “to travel miles to attend the inhumane and degrading assessments for disability benefits, putting themselves at risk.

“We are still in the middle of a pandemic; yet the DWP demonstrates yet again with the resumption of face-to-face assessments it doesn’t care about the distress this will cause disabled people or the safety and risk implications.”

She said the greatest loss of life during the pandemic had been of disabled people, who account for nearly three-fifths of all deaths.

Fazilet Hadi, head of policy at [Disability Rights UK (DR UK)](https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/), also said it was too soon to resume mandatory face-to-face assessments.

She said: “We are still in the midst of a pandemic with the prime minister urging us to be cautious and with the government setting out gradual steps towards unlocking society.

“This is not the time to re-introduce mandatory face-to-face assessments.

“The DWP should at least again suspend its rule on removing benefit if someone cannot show ‘good cause’ for not attending a medical assessment.

“Phone and video assessments have worked well for many during lockdown, yet the DWP fails to build on this learning.

“People should be able to select their preferred assessment method, in line with the reasonable adjustment provisions of the Equality Act.”

She added: “We would ask that the forthcoming green paper on welfare reform recommends more disability inclusive practice across the benefits system.”

[Vicky Foxcroft](https://twitter.com/vickyfoxcroft), Labour’s shadow minister for disabled people, who herself has shielded during the pandemic, said she also believed it was too soon to resume face-to-face assessments.

She said: “With the COVID-19 pandemic still ongoing, the government need to ensure no disabled person or people with health conditions are forced to attend an unsafe face-to-face assessment.

“The government must learn the lessons of the past year and ensure a variety of assessments methods are made permanent, to give disabled people more choice over how they engage with the department.”

Fran Springfield, co-chair of [Chronic Illness Inclusion](https://inclusionproject.org.uk/), a new disabled people’s organisation, said that restarting face-to-face assessments was “inherently unsafe”.

She said: “Whilst some disabled people will stop shielding shortly, many of us will still continue to take extra precautions and will be remaining at home.

“Travelling on public transport still does not feel safe as nobody is ensuring that masks are still worn and few people will be able to afford a cab to an assessment centre.

“Unless it’s a black cab there is no protection for us or the cabbie.”

She said there was “no obvious reason not to continue the present paper-based assessments”.

Springfield added: “Forcing disabled people, many of whom are clinically extremely vulnerable, to attend a face-to-face assessment is putting us at risk, not only of catching COVID but of being further traumatised by having to undergo these unnecessary interviews.”

**1 April 2021**

**DWP admits number of disability employment advisers plunged during pandemic**

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is facing questions over its commitment to disability equality after new figures revealed the number of disability employment advisers fell sharply during the pandemic, while the number of mainstream work coaches soared.

The figures were finally released – weeks late – by DWP in response to a freedom of information request by Disability News Service (DNS).

They show that at the start of 2021 there were just 447\* disability employment advisers (DEAs) in post across DWP, compared with 661 on 1 February 2020.

But over the same period, the number of work coaches across DWP rose from 12,555\* on 1 February 2020 to more than 19,000 at the start of this year, as part of ministers’ pledge to recruit 13,500 new work coaches to deal with the pandemic unemployment crisis.

This means that the number of DEAs fell by 32 per cent during the pandemic while the number of work coaches was rising by 51 per cent.

[Last September](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/dwp-silent-over-whistle-blowers-disability-job-adviser-claims/), DWP declined to comment on claims by a whistleblower that it was about to move DEAs to new roles as work coaches.

The new figures do not prove that that happened, but they do show that DWP has appointed thousands of new work coaches across the country, while allowing the number of DEAs to fall sharply.

The whistleblower warned in September that DEAs were concerned that the changes would “drastically” reduce the availability of advice and support for disabled people on out-of-work benefits.

According to [a parliamentary briefing published last year](https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7540/CBP-7540.pdf), DEAs are trained to “help disabled people to find suitable jobs, and work alongside work coaches to provide additional professional expertise”.

In March last year, the minister for disabled people, Justin Tomlinson, stressed the importance of the DEA role, [suggesting to MPs](https://bit.ly/2TM1XBW) that they would play a key part in achieving the government’s target of seeing one million more disabled people in work between 2017 and 2027.

Work and pensions secretary Therese Coffey then [announced last July](https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/its-key-for-jobcentres-to-help-people-back-to-their-feet?utm_source=2f2ac1e3-9a09-4350-a5ca-a2b7ea4186ce&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_content=immediate) that the number of mainstream work coaches would be doubled to 27,000 by March this year.

DWP told DNS yesterday (Wednesday) that any suggestion that the department had behaved in a discriminatory way was completely misleading.

The department said that both DEAs and work coaches support disabled jobseekers and those with complex health conditions, and so the figures provided in the freedom of information response should be taken as a combined total of the support the department provides.

A DWP spokesperson said: “Our priority is to support all jobseekers into employment.

“Throughout the pandemic both disability employment advisers and work coaches, alongside work and health services colleagues, have supported jobseekers with complex health conditions and disabilities to move towards, or into, sustainable employment or to remain in work.”

*\*The number of full-time equivalent posts*

**1 April 2021**

**DPOs call on minister to scrap ‘unfair’ SEN coronavirus measures**

Three disabled people’s organisations have asked the education secretary why he is refusing to scrap controversial measures that handed him the power to restrict disabled children’s right to education.

Ministers insist that the powers, which were introduced a year ago through the government’s Coronavirus Act, are still needed as an “important contingency”.

The act [was reviewed by MPs last Thursday](https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2021-03-25/debates/9701394F-FF53-4364-85E1-F017B13CE921/Coronavirus), but the government refused to scrap the education powers, even though it agreed to remove similar measures affecting disabled people’s rights to care and support under the Care Act.

The measures give education secretary Gavin Williamson the power to amend parts of the Children and Families Act (CFA) 2014 so that a local council only has to use “reasonable endeavours” to provide the education, health and care (EHC) needs named in a disabled pupil’s EHC plan.

They also give the education secretary the power to amend the act so that a school would no longer have a duty to admit a disabled child if that school is named in the child’s EHC plan.

Some local authorities and schools took advantage of the CFA “easements” last year when Williamson introduced them, but there are concerns that some local authorities and schools are still acting as though they are in place, even though they have not been switched on since last July.

Labour’s shadow health secretary, Jonathan Ashworth, told MPs last week that Labour remained concerned that the CFA measures were still in the act.

And Caroline Nokes, the Conservative chair of the Commons women and equalities committee, urged the government “to reconsider and to remove these unneeded easements”.

Labour’s shadow women and equalities secretary Marsha de Cordova secured [a response from education minister Vicky Ford](https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-03-23/174260) this week to a written question about the CFA measures.

Ford told her that ministers do not “consider it appropriate at this stage to remove the power to issue notices relating to the law on EHC plans”.

She said: “Use of the power was and remains an important contingency to use swiftly in the event of local authorities, health bodies and education settings again needing flexibility to prioritise their resources in response to the changing demands of the outbreak.”

[The Alliance for Inclusive Education](https://www.allfie.org.uk/), [Disability Rights UK (DR UK)](https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/), [Inclusion London](https://www.inclusionlondon.org.uk/) and the human rights organisation [Liberty](https://www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/) have now written to Williamson to ask him to remove the CFA measures from the Coronavirus Act.

The letter tells Williamson that his government “must leave no child behind in its pandemic response – and that includes disabled children and young people” and that he needs to repeal the CFA measures “in the interests of clarity, fairness, and equity”.

In the letter, they also warn him that neither local authorities nor schools “are consistently complying with their duties to arrange provision for disabled children within either school or home settings”, even though the CFA measures are not currently switched on.

Fazilet Hadi, DR UK’s head of policy, said this week: “There is no consistency in scrapping the Care Act easements and keeping the CFA easements.

“It is just plain wrong that we are putting back the human rights of disabled adults but not those of disabled children.”

**1 April 2021**

**News provided by John Pring at** [www.disabilitynewsservice.com](http://www.disabilitynewsservice.com)