



## Work and Pensions Committee

House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA  
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From the Chair

Rt Hon Dr Thérèse Coffey MP  
Secretary of State  
Department of Work and Pensions

5 March 2020

Dear Thérèse,

I met Peter Schofield, Permanent Secretary, on 13 February to discuss the recent National Audit Office report *Information held by the Department for Work & Pensions on deaths by suicide of benefit claimants*, as well as other matters.

The report exposes significant weaknesses in how the DWP learns lessons from some of the most tragic cases it sees—when the people it serves die by suicide. In the light of the gravity of the NAO’s findings, the Committee has asked me to write to you to seek further information about how the Department plans to respond.

We were particularly concerned by the following matters highlighted by the NAO’s report:

- The DWP has investigated 69 deaths by suicide in the last 6 years. The NAO concluded that it is “highly unlikely” that this represents the number of cases that the Department could have investigated in that period.
- The DWP does not have robust records of contact by coroners. Some contacts from coroners may not have resulted in an investigation being initiated.
- DWP staff have not always had clear guidance on when an investigation should be initiated, and not all staff are aware of the guidance that does exist.
- The DWP does not track the findings and recommendations from its own investigations. As a result, it “does not know whether the suggested improvements are implemented”.
- The DWP does not seek to identify trends or themes in the outcomes of investigations. As a result, the NAO concluded that “systemic issues which might be brought to light through these reviews could be missed”.

It is shocking that DWP does not have suitable processes in place to identify these tragic cases. Even where it does try to learn lessons, the Department has no system in place to check to see whether recommendations from its own investigations have been put in place, or whether there are any trends or systemic issues that could be identified. It is therefore entirely possible that recommendations made after people have died have not



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been implemented, and that DWP is missing opportunities to prevent deaths of the people it serves as a result. This cannot be allowed to continue.

I am pleased that the initial response to the report, including the commitments made by DWP in the report itself, suggests that DWP is taking the NAO's findings seriously. We would, however, be grateful for further information about your plans, and in particular for answers to the following questions:

- 1. What are the main procedural changes the Department has made as a result of its investigation of the 69 deaths by suicide since 2014-15?**
- 2. What information have Ministers received about the outcomes of those investigations and the recommendations arising from them?**
- 3. What specific actions has the DWP already taken in response to the NAO's report?**
- 4. What actions does the DWP still plan to undertake in response to the NAO's report?**
- 5. How long will it take for the remaining actions to be implemented?**
- 6. How will DWP evaluate progress in this area? How regularly will progress be evaluated?**
- 7. Which Director General is ultimately responsible for ensuring that DWP resolves the above issues, and that DWP learns all lessons it should from these tragic cases?**
- 8. How regularly will you, in your capacity as Secretary of State, receive updates on progress in resolving the points raised by the NAO?**

The NAO reports that a new 'serious case panel' has been established in the Department, to consider the most serious systemic issues raised by investigations and to make recommendations to the Department.

- 9. Can you describe in detail what the role of the serious case panel will be, and how it will fulfil this role?**
- 10. What will the membership of that panel be?**
  - a. Will the panel include independent members who are not DWP employees or contractors? Will the panel include anyone with medical expertise?**
  - b. Will the panel membership be published?**
- 11. What information about the panel's work will be made public, and in what form?**



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**a. In particular, will its recommendations and terms of reference be made public? If not, please can you set out the reasons why?**

The NAO also reports that the Department will be carrying out a review, which will focus on strengthening the investigation (Internal Process Review, or IPR) process and the Department's response to serious cases, including suicides.

**12. How long do you expect this review to take? Will the outcome of the review, including any report, be made public?**

**13. Who is conducting the review?**

**14. Will the review consider whether the recommendations from IPRs could be published in a suitably anonymised form?**

**15. As part of its learning, will the Department also review its safeguarding procedures and how staff are made aware of them, in the light of reports of failures to follow safeguarding procedures in some cases?**

We would also be grateful for clarification of how long DWP keeps the records of reviews it has conducted (until October 2015, these were called peer reviews). Will Quince, Minister for Welfare Delivery, told the House on 4 July 2019 that:

“The Department holds the original commission and final report for all peer reviews of disability benefit claimants' deaths up to 2015. All these documents are kept for **six years** from the date of the final report.”<sup>1</sup>

On 21 February 2020, however, a response from the Department to a Freedom of Information (FOI) request seeking access to peer reviews from 2010 onwards explained that:

“Records prior to 2015–16 have been destroyed or are incomplete in line with GDPR/data retention policies.”

The same FOI response also says that “personal data kept for any purpose should not be kept for longer than necessary”, citing the Data Protection Act 2018 and GDPR as the reason for the Department's data retention policies.

**16. How long are the initial commissions and final reports retained from the date investigations are concluded? Why did the Department choose this length of time?**

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<sup>1</sup> HC Deb, 4 July 2019, col 1353. Emphasis ours.



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**17. What steps does the Department take to ensure that learning from reviews is not lost when these records are destroyed?**

- a. Does the Department take any steps to retain redacted records of historic investigations, and their recommendations, without unnecessarily holding personal data? If not, please can you explain why not?**

We would be grateful for a reply by **18 March**. The Committee will then want to examine your response carefully and consider what further work we wish to do on this subject.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Stephen Timms".

**Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP**

Chair, Work and Pensions Committee