

An Independent Advisory Panel on DWP-Related Deaths

A PROPOSAL BY MO STEWART

RESEARCH LEAD – PREVENTABLE HARM PROJECT

FEBRUARY 2025

Endorsements

“The exposure of the harm and loss of life caused by the brutal treatment of disabled people by the DWP warrants major reform of our social security system. The proposal advanced by Mo Stewart for an independent panel with full powers to investigate DWP-related deaths could be a significant step in holding the department and policy makers to account.”

The Rt Hon John McDonnell MP
Parliamentary Champion for Action for ME

"As CEO of Disability Rights UK, I strongly support Mo Stewart’s urgent call for an Independent Advisory Panel on DWP-Related Deaths. The evidence is overwhelming: Disabled people and those with long-term health conditions have been systematically harmed by a welfare system that prioritises cost-cutting over care, suspicion over support, and bureaucracy over basic human dignity.

For years, we have seen the devastating consequences of punitive policies, most notably the Work Capability Assessment (WCA) and the wider benefits system, which have forced people into impossible situations—pushing many into poverty, mental distress, and, tragically, even to their deaths. Reports have repeatedly exposed the failures of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) in safeguarding Disabled people’s lives, yet accountability remains absent, and lessons are not being learned. Instead, we see the same hostile rhetoric and damaging policies being recycled by successive governments, ignoring the real-life consequences for those most in need of support.

The need for an independent, transparent, and robust oversight mechanism is long overdue. A genuinely independent panel—free from government control and influence—must be established to investigate and expose the systemic failures that continue to put Disabled people’s lives at risk. The DWP cannot be left to mark its own homework, especially when the stakes are so high. Disabled people should not have to live in fear of the very system designed to support us. We need a panel that will ensure that every preventable death is acknowledged, that those responsible are held accountable, and that concrete actions are taken to prevent further harm.

At Disability Rights UK, we believe in a society where disabled people are valued, included, and supported to live independent and fulfilling lives. But that vision is undermined by a welfare system that treats Disabled people as burdens rather than as citizens with rights. We cannot stand by while lives are lost due to negligence and systemic cruelty. Establishing an Independent Advisory Panel on DWP-Related Deaths is not just necessary but a moral imperative. We urge policymakers to act now before more lives are lost."

Kamran Mallick
CEO
Disability Rights UK

“The establishment of an Independent Advisory Panel to investigate deaths associated with the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) is a matter of utmost importance. The panel’s mandate should include a thorough examination of the DWP’s policies, procedures, and decision-making processes, with a particular focus on their potential impact on individuals placed within vulnerable circumstances.

The panel’s work should be conducted with complete transparency and independence, ensuring that all findings and recommendations are made public.

The panel’s investigation must be comprehensive, addressing not only individual cases but also systemic issues that may contribute to harm or loss of life. It should seek to identify any implications in the DWP’s approach and propose concrete measures to prevent future tragedies.

It is imperative that government fully cooperate with the panel and commit to implementing its recommendations. Only through such a process can we hope to ensure that the DWP’s operations are conducted with the highest regard for the wellbeing of those it serves.”

Dr Miro Griffiths
Co-Director of the Centre for Disability Studies
University of Leeds

“Mo Stewart brilliantly makes the case for a decent and honest system to investigate the ongoing government-induced benefit-related deaths to replace the current farce of the DWP Serious Case Panel, where senior members of government, in theory, investigate themselves. In addition to this being cruel, and a gross travesty of fair judgement and due process, the existing arrangements demeans those civil servants on the Panel – by making them look ridiculous.”

Professor Danny Dorling
University of Oxford

“Mo Stewart sets out a powerful case for tackling the DWP’s deep-seated dysfunctional culture but goes further in drawing attention to the negative impact of neoliberalism. This political ideology is at the root of many of the country’s problems and is especially bad for health - it kills. The challenge facing the government is how to address neoliberalism and the health problems arising from it. This report offers a fresh approach.”

Professor David Hunter
Population Health Sciences Institute
Newcastle University

“For the sake of openness and justice, Mo Stewart’s proposal of an Independent Advisory Panel on DWP-Related Deaths needs to be taken seriously.”

Dr Jed Boardman PhD FRCPsych
Consultant Psychiatrist/Senior Lecturer in Social Psychiatry

“Mo Stewart once again sheds much-needed critical light on decades of structural violence committed by successive governments against chronically ill and disabled communities in the guise of social policy reforms.

This compelling report highlights the now routinised lack of transparency, honesty and accountability from within the UK Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) vis-à-vis what Mo rightly identifies as an ongoing yet fully preventable public health crisis: destitution, despair and deaths inflicted upon those in greatest need through hostile political rhetoric and policies designed to govern by fear and falsehoods.

In particular, Mo’s critique of the ludicrously biased ‘DWP Serious Case Panel,’ together with her calls for an Independent Advisory Panel on DWP-Related Deaths, require urgent action and I urge policymakers and advocates to give this report the consideration it deserves.”

Joanne Hunt MA
Disabled Scholar and Research Affiliate
Uppsala University, Sweden

“Mo Stewart’s report is a crucial call to action. It highlights the preventable harm caused by the DWP’s approach to disabled benefit claimants, urging the formation of an Independent Advisory Panel on DWP-Related Deaths to scrutinise the deaths which are too often the tragic outcome of DWP benefit assessments. Independent Living endorses her call, which aligns with our commitment to the well-being of these vulnerable communities. It’s time for transparency and accountability to prevent further loss of life.”

Frances Leckie
Editor
Independent Living

“The Black Triangle Campaign fully endorses this report by Mo Stewart and the demonstrated need to remove the inadequate DWP Serious Case Panel to be replaced with a new fully Independent Advisory Panel on DWP-Related Deaths to permit justice to be delivered for DWP victims and their families, which is long overdue.”

Gail Ward
Social Policy Advisor
The Black Triangle Campaign

“Forget opinion. This massively well referenced report is too factual to be ignored. Mo Stewart’s report demonstrating the need for an Independent Advisory Panel on DWP-Related Deaths backs up the tidal wave of opposition to proposed DWP further reforms to benefits for disabled and chronically ill people. Considering the recent report by Z2K highlighting the massive human costs inflicted by the DWP - both mental and physical - the relevant departments of Government would do well to take Mo Stewart’s significant report very seriously.”

Merry Cross
for DPAC Steering Group
Disabled People Against Cuts

An Independent Advisory Panel on DWP-Related Deaths

A Report by Mo Stewart – Research Lead, Preventable Harm Project

‘Safeguarding the lives of those under the care of the state is hugely important and rewarding, but it faces significant challenges. People in custody are some of society’s most vulnerable and require dedicated care and support to meet their underlying – and often unaddressed – mental and physical health needs.

As a Panel, we remain unwavering in our commitment to working with government, agencies, and services to reduce avoidable deaths in state custody.’¹

The above quote is by Lynn Emslie, the Chair of the Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody (IAPDC),¹ who report to the Ministry of Justice regarding the safeguarding of vulnerable people in prison. In the 12 months to June 2024, there were 308 deaths in prison custody identified by the IAPDC.²

The quote could also so easily apply to the chronically ill and disabled community, and this evidence of the number of deaths in custody² compares with the thousands of benefit-related deaths of service-users who are unable to work and need to claim long-term disability benefit; with a disturbing number of deaths by suicide linked to the brutality created by the institutional violence adopted by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).³ The fatally flawed Work Capability Assessment (WCA) conducted by unaccountable corporate giants is the creation of the well planned ‘State Crime by Proxy’.^{4,5} The WCA was initially adopted by the DWP in 2008 to limit access to the new Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) long-term disability benefit and, most recently, to restrict access to the health element of Universal Credit (UC), which has replaced six benefits including the ESA.

Given the introduction of the WCA by the Brown ‘New Labour’ administration, which is the reproduction of the Waddell-Aylward biopsychosocial (BPS) non-medical functional assessment model identified in government commissioned policy-based research⁶ and adopted to resist access to long-term disability benefit, it is long past time for there to be an Independent Advisory Panel on DWP-Related Deaths (IAPDWP). The new Panel could not report to the DWP, who adopted a hostile ideology towards service-users to deter disability benefit applications and to successfully introduce the ‘*politics of fear*’.^{7,8} It has been suggested that the new Panel could report to the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman who scrutinise public service providers.

Preventable harm

There has been a multitude of academic⁹⁻¹² and non-academic published papers,^{13,14} together with books by chronically ill and disabled authors with lived experience of the brutality of the DWP and the negative impact of social policy reforms adopted by successive UK administrations.¹⁵⁻¹⁸ There are also various expert reports,¹⁹⁻²² all identifying the preventable harm created by the introduction of the WCA when influenced by the totally discredited²³

government commissioned policy-based research⁶ and used to justify the adoption of the WCA. More than anything else, this government induced public health crisis is enforced by the impact of the negative and hostile disability ideology demonstrated by the DWP, which many constituency MPs are familiar with.

Originally credited to Joseph Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda for Nazi Germany (1933-45),²⁴ the concept that if a big political lie is told often enough, for long enough, sooner or later people believe it, has worked well in the UK in the recent past. The adoption of extreme social policy reforms by the Conservative-led Coalition administration (2010-15) which were destined to cause death, despair and preventable harm for many of those in greatest need was only possible due to relentless hostile political rhetoric claiming, falsely, that vast numbers of disability benefit claimants were bogus.

‘If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it. This lie can be maintained only for such time as the State can shield the people from the political, economic and/or military consequences of the lie. It thus becomes vitally important for the State to use all of its powers to repress dissent, for the truth is the mortal enemy of the lie, and thus by extension, the truth is the greatest enemy of the State.’(p1)²⁴

This prolonged hostile rhetoric justified the successful social re-engineering of the financial and psychological security once provided by the welfare state. Disability benefit claimants learned to live in fear of the DWP, whose intimidation of those in greatest need was continued unabated by successive Conservative and Labour neoliberal administrations.¹⁹⁻²²

The well documented negative impact of this fatally flawed non-medical functional assessment model, which disregards all clinical need, is dismissed by the DWP. The deaths, despair and preventable harm linked to the WCA increased following the adoption of increasingly harsh sanctions endorsed by the Coalition administration (2010-15), which successive Conservative administrations disregarded, despite some claimants being starved to death by the DWP.⁷⁻¹⁴ The recently elected Labour government (2024) appear to be following the same path by intimidating those in greatest need, with Liz Kendall appointed as the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions announcing in her first speech²⁵ that she is motivated to continue with the previous administration’s ambitions to reach an 80% employment rate, regardless of human consequences which can be fatal for many.²⁶ In order to support the ultimate political ambition, the DWP were exposed as manipulating investigations, destroying incriminating records and failing to share crucial evidence:²²

‘Documents secured through freedom of information requests, and investigations by bereaved family members show how the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) destroyed incriminating records, failed to share crucial evidence with its own independent reviewers and grieving relatives, and even lied to a coroner. Disabled activists and families of those who have died say it is now time for a statutory public inquiry into the deaths, DWP’s systemic failings, and the years of cover-up.’(p1)²²

DWP Serious Case Panel

Introduced in late 2019 with the first virtual meeting held on 19 March 2020,²⁷ the DWP Serious Case Panel promised a lot but failed to deliver. Belatedly introduced by the DWP following rising public concerns relating to the number of deaths linked to disability benefit assessments since 2010, it was originally claimed that the DWP Serious Case Panel would be independent which, of course, was untrue.²⁸ Its membership consists of senior civil servants, therefore it is clearly not independent, and the stated Terms of Reference²⁹ of the Panel is to *'consider issues arising from serious cases and other insight, impacting DWP customer experience and make recommendations, in order to reduce the risk of these issues reoccurring.'*²⁹ However, the 'DWP customer experience' of disability assessments is to live in fear of the DWP and the identified preventable harm it has created, which negatively impacted on those in greatest need who are the most vulnerable people in society.^{5,7-14,26} Chaired by a DWP Non-Executive Director, the membership of the DWP Serious Case Panel consists of:³⁰

- DWP Permanent Secretary
- DWP Directors General
- the Independent Case Examiner
- DWP Legal Advisors
- DWP Chief Medical Advisor

Whilst it is claimed that the Panel 'will consider themes and trends that are directly informed by serious cases and customer experience insight',²⁹ recent correspondence from Sir Stephen Timms MP, the Minister for Social Security and Disability for the Labour government, advised that the DWP Serious Case Panel *'does not consider evidence from external sources, for example, research projects such as the Preventable Harm Project, which you lead.'*³¹

Clearly, by failing to access published peer-reviewed research by a multitude of academics accessed via the Preventable Harm Project,³² and detailed evidence from significant professional organisations such as Rethink Mental Illness,¹⁹⁻²² the Panel and by extension the DWP are resisting access to detailed evidence demonstrating the government induced public health crisis.^{3,4,5,10-14} This is generated by successive social policy reforms and is negatively impacting on the health, wellbeing and survival of those in greatest need,¹² with a refusal to admit that the WCA is demonstrably dangerous and unfit for purpose when disregarding clinical need.

'In total, across England as a whole, the WCA disability reassessment process during this period was associated with an additional 590 suicides, 279,000 additional cases of self-reported mental health problems and the prescribing of an additional 725,000 antidepressant items. ...

Our study provides evidence that the policy in England of reassessing the eligibility of benefit recipients using the WCA may have unintended but serious consequences for population mental health, and there is a danger that these adverse effects outweigh any benefits that may or may not arise from moving people off disability benefits.'¹²

The same non-medical and totally discredited WCA is used to limit access to the health component of UC, with reported negative implications for claimants as the chaos created by the online application for UC has negatively impacted on public mental health, as identified by the *British Medical Journal* in 2019.³³

Conclusion

Neoliberal politics is the politics of power, profit and greed. Initially adopted in the UK by Thatcher (1979-90), this right-leaning ideology has swept the western world with all evidence of a past moral code removed as those in greatest need became the enemy of the State due to their financial need.

If nothing else, the past fourteen years has demonstrated how easy it is to manipulate the British public and the British Parliament. At the same time as Iain Duncan Smith MP successfully created his brutal 'character assassination'¹¹ of disability benefit claimants when Secretary of State for Work and Pensions for the Coalition administration (2010-15), with his fiction regarding bogus benefit claimants,²⁴ DWP official reports were claiming the opposite. Indeed, in 2011 the DWP identified that disability benefit fraud was only 0.5 percent, meaning that 99.5 percent of claims were genuine. The biggest threat to the welfare budget was the high level of DWP errors, not fraudulent claims.¹¹

Years later, in 2024, the DWP identified that disability benefit fraud had fallen to zero³⁴ just days before Rishi Sunak, the outgoing Conservative Prime Minister, launched the latest attack on benefit claimants with new political powers for the DWP to access private bank accounts when claiming that access to disability benefit was being abused, which was untrue.

This relentless political threat to the health, wellbeing and survival of those in greatest need by successive UK neoliberal administrations is ideologically motivated, as more and more efforts are made to encourage the purchase of private healthcare insurance. As this political manipulation of the public continues, the deaths of those in greatest need linked to the fatally flawed WCA is seemingly disregarded by the DWP; who go through the motions of investigating one DWP-related death at a time whilst disregarding the thousands who have been, covertly, '*killed by the State*','²⁶ demonstrating the overwhelming need for an Independent Advisory Panel for DWP-Related Deaths to replace the totally inadequate DWP Serious Case Panel.

Given that the Chief Coroner has been alerted to the fact that the DWP disregarded successive Prevention of Future Death reports by various coroners,³⁵ it is clear that if there isn't much greater scrutiny of the DWP the chronically ill and disabled community will continue to live in fear, and the death tolls of those in greatest need will continue to rise when, relentlessly, '*killed by the State*.'²⁶

It is now up to politicians to demand the adoption of an Independent Advisory Panel on DWP-Related Deaths and the removal of the DWP Serious Case Panel.

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