

Justin Tomlinson MP
Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work
Caxton House
Tothill Street
London
SW1H 9NA

1 March 2021

Dear Minister,

The Social Security (Claims and Payments, Employment and Support Allowance, Personal Independence Payment, and Universal Credit) (Amendment) Regulations 2021

The Social Security Advisory Committee scrutinised the above regulations at its meeting on 27 January. These regulations provide immediate legislative comfort for the Department who, in responding to the challenges arising from social distancing requirements that were introduced at the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic, has suspended face-to-face health assessments and is relying on telephony to maintain service delivery. Over the longer-term, the regulations also provide a legislative framework that will enable the Department and its providers to introduce a richer mix of assessment channels, providing a choice between face-to-face, telephone and video assessments. The intention is that this will help to improve customer service by enabling the Department to tailor the assessment channel to meet the needs of different claimants and help to ensure the most appropriate channel is used to enable an appropriate outcome for the claimant.

The Committee welcomes the Department's immediate and pragmatic response to the challenges arising from the Covid-19 pandemic, ensuring that health assessments were able to continue and that the impact on claimants were minimised as far as practicable. We also support the Department's longer-term strategic ambition to operate a number of different channels to conduct health assessments.

We understand that the Department has already undertaken some consultation on the introduction of the new channels, and that it intends to consult more widely on the proposals as part of the forthcoming Health and Disability Green Paper. As you might expect given our recent report on engaging disabled people,¹ we very much welcome the Department's plans to seek views and evidence direct from those who will be affected by the proposals.

While the Committee is supportive of the Department's longer-term ambition, and its arrangements for consultation, we are concerned that the timing of the legislation removes our opportunity for statutory scrutiny of the Department's full strategic proposals that will be introduced later in the year. With that in mind, I am writing to ask that the Department commits to consulting the Committee of draft guidance that will be brought forward once final policy decisions on the channels strategy have been made. The opportunity for transparent scrutiny of the Department's new assessment channels would complement DWP's existing plans for consultation, and provide an opportunity for us to offer further support to you in ensuring the policy intent is delivered effectively.

Finally, we understand that the Department has conducted research with claimants about their experience of telephone assessments and that the findings are due to be published in Spring 2021. It would help our ability to provide effective and constructive support to the Department on these regulations if you could agree to share this research, and the Proof of Concept evaluation when available, with us in confidence.

I would, of course, be very happy to discuss any of the issues raised in this letter if you would find that helpful.

I am copying this note to Baroness Stedman-Scott, Jonathan Mills, James Wolfe and Vikki Knight. I am particularly grateful to James and Vikki for their support during the scrutiny of these regulations.



Dr Stephen Brien
SSAC Chair

¹ SSAC Occasional Paper 25: [How DWP involves disabled people when developing or evaluating programmes that affect them](#)