Call to end outsourcing of benefit assessments supported by Work and Pensions Committee

Recommendations from the House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee’s inquiry into PIP and ESA assessments support Inclusion London’s call for benefit assessments to be brought back in-house. The inquiry report published on 14 February 2018 highlights multiple problems with benefit assessments being conducted by private providers and concludes that market failings mean the government must consider bringing benefit assessments back in-house when the contracts with Atos, Capita and Maximus end in 2019.

The inquiry saw an unprecedented number of evidence submission to a select committee. The online forum received more than 2,800 submissions compared to the usual 50 to 100 posts and the committee also received 450 pieces of written evidence compared to the usual 100 or so. As a result, the Committee decided to publish an additional separate report summarising the many claimant experiences they heard.

The findings of the inquiry are no surprise to Disabled people: high levels of inaccuracy in assessment reports, poorly trained assessors, high levels of decisions being over-turned at appeal, experiences of anxiety and distress suffered by Disabled people and what the Committee describes as a “pervasive lack of trust”. Nevertheless, recommendations to record all assessments, for the DWP to introduce new requirements on contractors to use additional evidence supplied, the issuing of clearer guidance on the role of claimants’ companions during assessments and for the DWP to ensure that contractors communicate with claimants in preferred accessible formats are all welcome.

The report also concludes that, given none of the assessment providers have ever met their quality performance targets, the DWP “will need to consider whether the market is capable of delivering assessments at the required level and of rebuilding claimant trust. If it cannot – as floundering market interest may suggest – the Department may well conclude assessments are better delivered in-house.”

The report and its findings add to pressures mounting on the government to accept its so-called “reform” of the benefit system has failed and an urgent overhaul is needed. Five independent reviews of the Work Capability Assessment and two of the PIP assessment process have failed to deliver adequate improvements. The Committee may report that the “belief among some claimants and their advisers that assessors are encouraged to misrepresent assessments deliberately in a way that leads to claimants being denied benefits” is “unsubstantiated” but disabled campaigners continue to argue that all evidence points to a system deliberately designed to deny disability. Bringing assessments in-house will aid transparency and end profiting at the expense of Disabled people but beyond that what is needed is a fundamental redesign to develop a social security system based on a social model of disability to guarantee an adequate standard of living in response to need.

Inquiry and Report Links

Work and Pensions Committee inquiry page: <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/work-and-pensions-committee/news-parliament-2017/pip-esa-full-report-17-19/>

PIP and ESA Assessments report: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmworpen/829/829.pdf>

Claimants’ experiences: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmworpen/355/355.pdf>

Media coverage

We were delighted to help with the following features and thanks to those campaigners who shared their personal experiences in order to ensure this issue receives the attention it needs:

Victoria Derbyshire: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b09rmxh7/victoria-derbyshire-14022018>

Radio 4 Today programme: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09r3nsb>

RT UK 9pm news [footage to be embedded]

Facts and stats

* Since 2013, [290,000 claimants of PIP and ESA – 6% of all those assessed – only received the correct award after challenging the DWP’s initial decision.](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmworpen/829/829.pdf)
* Of the [170,000 appeals for personal independence payments (PIP) claims that have been taken to the Tribunal in the past five years, since 2013, claimants won in 63 per cent of cases. In the same period, there have been 53,000 employment support allowance (ESA) appeals, of which claimants won in 60 per cent of cases.](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/benefits-uk-disability-assessment-company-report-finds-government-cuts-a8208271.html)
* The latest stats show 68% of PIP decisions overturned on appeal [(for July – September 2017, published December 2018)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/667449/tribunal-and-GRC-statistics-Q2-201718.pdf)
* At one stage, [nearly 60 per cent of assessment reports being completed by Capita healthcare professionals and sent to DWP were judged to be of an “unacceptable” standard.](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/pip-assessment-companies-admit-unacceptable-failings-on-quality-of-reports/) Neither Capita nor Atos have ever met the DWP contractual target that no more than 3% should be found “unacceptable”.
* Last year Atos and Capita [received nearly £255 each to carry out PIP assessments](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/benefits-uk-disability-assessment-company-report-finds-government-cuts-a8208271.html) – the highest amount spent on the scheme since its launch in 2013 and a 19% increase on the previous year.
* During June 2016, [Capita sought further evidence for just 380 of the 21,554 PIP assessments](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/the-pip-files-dwp-documents-show-absolutely-shocking-failure-on-further-evidence/) it dealt with.
* [161 assessors working for Atos had more than three complaints made against them in a three-month period, and 19 Capita assessors were also subjected to at least four complaints in a three-month period in 2016.](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/the-pip-files-data-shows-multiple-complaints-made-against-scores-of-atos-assessors/)
* [Nearly one in three Capita PIP reports](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/the-pip-files-nearly-one-in-three-capita-assessments-were-flawed-reports-reveal/) were significantly flawed from April to December 2016.