

Witness name: Will Quince

Statement No.:

Exhibits: WQ/01 – WQ/XX

Dated: 20 October 2025

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**UK COVID-19 PUBLIC INQUIRY**  
**MODULE 9**  
**WITNESS STATEMENT OF WILL QUINCE**

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I, **WILL QUINCE**, will say as follows:

**SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION**

1. I make this witness statement to Module 9 of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry (**'the Inquiry'**) in response to the Request for Evidence dated 4 September 2025 and marked with reference 'M9/R9R/WQ' (**'Rule 9 Request'**).
2. I am providing this witness statement to explain my role as the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery during the period 4 April 2019 and 16 September 2021 within the Department for Work and Pensions.
3. I make this statement from information and documents within my personal knowledge and information provided to me by former colleagues within the DWP. The content of this statement is true to the best of my knowledge and belief. Within the very restricted time I have had to access the documents and using the resources made available to me, I have endeavoured to give an accurate account of the key aspects of my involvement at DWP. I recognise that further documents and emails might be brought to my attention at a later date and I would, therefore, welcome the opportunity to supplement, clarify and/or to amend my evidence (if necessary) in the light of any such documents.
4. This statement will address the following topics:
  - a. Section 2: Role and Responsibilities.
  - b. Section 3: Changes to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit.

- c. Section 4: Economic Hardship and Long Covid
  - d. Section 5: request for documents
5. As Minister for Welfare Delivery, my main area of involvement in the Covid-related economic interventions were in relation to the Universal Credit ('UC') uplift, raising the Local Housing Allowance to the 30<sup>th</sup> percentile [WQ/001 - INQ000549236] my weekly note to the Secretary of State, 6 January 2020), the Covid Winter Grant Scheme and the Household Support Fund. I was not involved, directly or indirectly, with the uplift to Working Tax Credits as these were delivered by HM Treasury ('HMT'). Although Working Tax Credit is linked with the Universal Credit uplift, any decision relating to Working Tax Credit was taken by HMT ministers. I do not recall receiving submissions on Working Tax Credits specifically, other than the interaction with Universal Credit, nor do I think I would have been sighted on them.
6. I have had the benefit of reading the DWP corporate statement which sets out the Department's response at the outset of the pandemic as well as economic measures that were adopted in response. The factual information laid out in the corporate statement in relation to the Universal Credit uplift provides a detailed account and I refer the Inquiry to Section 6 of DWP's Corporate Witness Statement for Module 9 [WQ/002 - INQ000661268].
7. I received a Rule 9 Request on 4 September 2025 and had to submit the statement on 26 September 2025. I also had very late access to my Ministerial email inbox (less than 48 hours before the first submission deadline). This restricted my ability to review and identify relevant diary entries and emails to complete my statement. I have exhibited the relevant submissions, emails and documents in my statement.

## **SECTION 2: ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

### **Responsibilities**

8. During my time in government, I held the following Ministerial positions in His Majesty's Government ('HMG'):
- a. From 4 April 2019 - 16 September 2021: Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Work and Pensions ('DWP').
  - b. From 16 September 2021 - 6 July 2022: Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department of Education ('DfE').

- c. From 7 July 2022 - 7 September 2022: Minister of State (Education), Department of Education.
- d. From 7 September 2022 to 13 November 2023: Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care ('DHSC').

9. My overall responsibilities as Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare

Delivery included WQ/003 - INQ000655311

- a. Overall management and delivery of Universal Credit
  - b. Support for disadvantaged groups in Universal Credit including care leavers, prison leavers, survivors of domestic abuse, people with drug or alcohol dependency, rough sleepers and those who are facing homelessness
  - c. Housing policy and Housing Benefit delivery
  - d. 'Help to Claim' – this was a service within job centres that was commissioned by the Department and run by Citizens Advice Bureaus to assist claimants in submitting their claims and also provide ongoing support with claims. When I was the Minister, I had responsibility for commissioning this service, with input from the Minister for Disabled People and held the ongoing relationship with Citizens Advice Bureau nationally
  - e. Poverty
  - f. Benefit uprating
  - g. Military covenant
  - h. Fraud, Error and debt.
10. During the pandemic my primary area of work was the management and delivery of Universal Credit, as a whole and not just the uplift. At the outset of the pandemic, much of our time and attention was focused on ensuring that DWP had the personnel and system capacity to deliver the service effectively. We had to consider what operational and logistical changes would be required to ensure rapid and efficient service delivery due to the sharp rise in the number of claimants. I recall the number of people on Universal Credit had doubled within a 6-week period which meant the Department had to act swiftly given the sheer number of people who lost their employment or faced a sudden and significant reduction in their income. I worked closely with Neil Couling, the Senior Responsible Officer for Universal Credit, on this aspect as well as Universal Credit generally. Neil Couling is a very experienced senior official and one of the architects of Universal Credit. In my opinion, his knowledge and experience on Universal Credit is unsurpassed and I relied on his advice and judgment on what could and could not be done operationally and logistically. These, in turn, informed the type

of easements (discussed below) that were considered necessary and, subsequently introduced. I enjoyed an excellent working relationship with Neil Couling and Katie Farrington on Universal Credit delivery.

11. The Secretary of State was responsible for decisions made by Ministers and officials within the Department. At the start of the pandemic, the Secretary of State held daily Covid catch-up calls with junior ministers and officials; this later changed to three times weekly and then weekly [WQ/004 - INQ000588230]. I cannot recall whether these replaced the weekly all-Ministers meetings, which were also attended by senior DWP officials or whether these continued during the pandemic. To my knowledge the Secretary of State attended all Cabinet meetings with the Prime Minister's Office and the Treasury. To my knowledge, I sat in for the Secretary of State at one Covid O meeting on 15 July 2021 when she was unable to attend [WQ/005 - INQ000655313]. I do not recall any other meetings with the Treasury or the Cabinet.

### **SECTION 3: CHANGES TO UNIVERSAL CREDIT AND WORKING TAX CREDIT**

12. I have had the benefit of reading the DWP corporate statement which sets out the Department's response at the outset of the pandemic as well as the economic interventions that were adopted in response. The statement provides a comprehensive and detailed account of the key decisions and actions taken by DWP in relation to the Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit.
13. I have been asked to address the following in relation to the Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit uplift:
  - a. Key decisions that I made, or was involved included the introduction, extension and removal of the uplift to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit, the introduction of temporary easements, not to introduce an equivalent uplift for people on legacy benefits, suspend and later reintroduce the Minimum Floor Income.
  - b. Policy design
  - c. Implementation and delivery of the Universal Credit uplift and Working Tax Credit
  - d. Monitoring and evaluation
  - e. Personal reflections

#### **Decision to make changes to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credits**

14. Before I turn to the policy design of the scheme, I will set out my involvement in the following decisions:
- a. Decision to introduce, extend and later remove the uplift to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit
  - b. Decision on the introduction of temporary easements
  - c. Decision not to introduce an equivalent uplift for people on legacy benefits
  - d. Decision suspend and later reintroduce the Minimum Floor Income.
15. I will aim to assist the Inquiry as far as possible with my understanding in respect of each one of these decisions. I must emphasise that the decisions during this initial design phase were made under severe time constraints given the economic situation and the urgent need to address the adverse impact on wider society. Many people were facing significant economic shock and required financial support quickly. A support mechanism was needed without further delay. Given the speed of response required and the significant fiscal costs involved, the Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer, understandably, had ultimate responsibility for all economic interventions.

*Decision to introduce, extend and later remove the uplift to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit*

16. The decision to introduce the changes to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit were made in March 2020 and were announced by the Chancellor on 20 March 2020.
17. I am aware that a commission came from the Chancellor of the Exchequer on or around 17 March 2020 to the DWP [WQ/006 - INQ000655314]. The commission was to explore an increase in the Universal Credit standard allowance rate. I have been asked to explain whether I thought an uplift was necessary. I cannot recall my detailed thinking at the time, but I can say for certain that I generally considered the Universal Credit standard allowance rate to be challenging especially for those not in receipt of other Universal Credit elements. I formed this view from speaking with those with lived experience of Universal Credit and the charities that advocate for vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. I do not know whether the Universal Credit standard allowance rate uplift idea came from No.10, HMT or the DWP. However, an email from the Secretary of State's private office to HMT on 17 March 2020 [WQ/006 - INQ000655314] suggests that it was an 'ask' of the Chancellor. The standard process on receipt of commissions

from No 10 or HMT was that either the Secretary of State or my Private Office teams would then commission the Universal Credit Policy team to draw up a number of options. I would then be consulted on these various options before sending a submission to the Secretary of State for a decision. I do not recall this happening on this occasion as it was a fast-moving situation around 17 March 2020. I believe that the Secretary of State's private office would have commissioned the Universal Credit policy team directly (as they held the direct relationship with HMT) and my private office team would have been sighted. Given the pace of events, submissions (discussed and exhibited, where relevant in this statement) were then presented to both the Secretary of State and me in parallel, when necessary. As I recall, this was more often than not the case and I believe was the case before the introduction of the Universal Credit uplift.

18. On 20 March 2020, the Government announced the range of measures it was proposing to introduce in response to the economic impacts of the pandemic WQ/007 - INQ000654454 On 25 March 2020, just before the first national lockdown, I was aware of written advice that was sent to the Secretary of State seeking her approval to lay a set of regulations before Parliament, including the introduction of the £20 Universal Credit uplift for the tax year 2020/2021 and to disapply the Minimum Income Floor for self-employed Universal Credit claimants in response to the Covid pandemic WQ/008 - INQ000592915 The submission also included a range of other changes, for example, to the rate of Local Housing Allowance. The proposal was to introduce equivalent regulations for Northern Ireland. The regulations were due to come into force on 26 March 2020. The need to introduce the regulations by the first lockdown was the key imperative in the decision to introduce the Universal Credit uplift from April 2020 for the tax year 2020/2021 (12 months). The period of 12 months of uplift was based on the same process as the annual uprating. Based on the submission, the Secretary of State decided to introduce the Universal Credit uplift in conjunction with HMT as they would need to approve the funding and to ensure alignment with Working Tax Credit ('WTC').
19. I do not recall being a party to the discussions with HMT on whether a flat rate or a tiered rate should be introduced and neither can I recall my exact views at the time on this issue. I am aware of the submission that was sent to the Secretary of State along with the impact a flat rate would have on the different groups WQ/008 - INQ000592915 Although I do not recall the submission, I do vaguely recall discussing the options and system limitations with Neil Couling. I do not recall advising the Secretary of State to

adopt a flat rate. However, I recognise that the decision was primarily driven by the need for rapid implementation, the constraints of the Department's IT systems, and to avoid delays, system failures, or financial detriment to individuals.

20. The decision to introduce the Universal Credit uplift was essentially to provide additional financial support for new and existing claimants in response to the economic situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. I cannot assist on whether the Universal Credit uplift was intended to assist those on Universal Credit who faced increased costs due to the pandemic or who faced a loss of income. This decision was made by No. 10 and HMT Ministers and may be better addressed to them. I am not aware, nor do I recall the policy intent being to assist those already on Universal Credit who faced increased costs due to the pandemic. As I recall those already on Universal Credit who had not seen a sudden loss of employment or drop in income benefitting from the uplift was a positive secondary effect of the original policy intent. The Department sought to bring the Social Security (Coronavirus) (Further Measures) Amendment Regulations 2020 into force as soon as possible to ensure as many people experiencing economic shock caused by Covid-19 received the extra financial support.

21. In July 2020 the Secretary of State and I received a submission WQ/009 - INQ000655315 setting out various Universal Credit budget options, one of which included maintaining the £20 uplift. As I have said elsewhere in this statement, my preference was for the Universal Credit uplift to remain in perpetuity WQ/010 - INQ000549297 my weekly note to the Secretary of State) but failing that, for it to be extended. I set out detailed reasons for my views in the email exchange WQ/011 - INQ000655316 of 6 August 2020 between my private office and the Secretary of State's private office as I was informed that the Secretary of State was unconvinced by some of the options, notably maintaining the standard allowance increase. A further email WQ/012 - INQ000655317 on the same day from my Private Office made it clear how I felt, *'As you can see, he feels quite passionately about these measures and would be happy to meet Secretary of State to discuss further if needed. I understand that Secretary of State has changed her view and is now considering keeping the standard allowance increase for another year after it was supposed to end.* I do not recall a specific meeting with the Secretary of State following this email exchange. However, my private office received an email WQ/013 - INQ000655318 on the same day from the Secretary of State's private office confirming that my views would be brought to the attention of the Secretary of State. I met with the Secretary of State regularly and my views on the permanent retention of the Universal Credit uplift were well known by the Secretary of State, the ministerial team and senior DWP officials.

22. On 11 March 2021, I was one of the Ministers who received a submission WQ/014 - INQ000592924 from the Universal Credit Policy team to consider an amendment to the regulations to extend the Universal Credit uplift for a further 6 months to *'give economic reassurance and financial support to those likely to experience the most financial disruption due to the pandemic'*. The decision to extend the Universal Credit uplift was made by the Secretary of State as she wished to retain it and I strongly agreed with that position for the reasons set out in my email exchange of 6 August 2020 (set out above). I have been asked to clarify whether the decision to extend the Universal Credit uplift was made by the Secretary of State on her own or whether the Prime Minister and Chancellor played a role in that decision. I am afraid I am unable to answer this question as I was not present or privy to any discussions between the Secretary of State, the Chancellor and the Prime Minister. My understanding of the position, from a DWP and budget perspective is that the final decision would have been taken by the Prime Minister and Chancellor given that the cost ran into the billions of pounds and sat outside the DWP budget. I also recall personal frustration towards the end of 2020 and early 2021 that the Chancellor and No 10 had not made a decision, wanting to delay any decision to a spring fiscal event. The Secretary of State is best placed to assist the Inquiry on the discussions between her, the Prime Minister and the Chancellor.
23. I am unable to assist the Inquiry on the decision not to extend the Universal Credit uplift further as I had left the DWP on 16 September 2021. I would, therefore, not have been involved in making the decision to remove the Universal Credit uplift on 6 October 2021. I do not know when the decision not to extend the uplift was taken. This is a question better directed to the Secretary of State, Chancellor and Prime Minister. However, on 17 May 2021, along with the Secretary of State I received a submission WQ/015 - INQ000655319 asking for preparatory work to begin to consider options to mitigate the removal of the Universal Credit uplift. It was a routine submission and required no substantive decision on the removal of the Universal Credit uplift. I responded to the submission by email WQ/016 - INQ000549289 to the Secretary of State on 18 May 2021 setting out my views in the following terms, *'Given poverty rates we would ideally see the UC uplift be made permanent but HMT is unlikely to agree to this. A further extension would make it quasi-permanent and likely to be very difficult politically to remove. Phasing out over time is worth exploring further and at the same time reducing the taper rate in UC to incentivise work. If the taper rate was a HMT policy, it would be 50% like tax credits. In any event I firmly believe that there is a need for an*

*ongoing annual Local Welfare Assistance programme worth at least £250m. If the uplift is removed entirely in October I would advocate for a £500m-£1bn LWA programme to support those struggling.* The Secretary of State responded on 25 May 2021

WQ/017 - INQ000549290

. After this lapse of time, I cannot recall my exact and detailed thinking at the time other than to say that I was always mindful of the impact of withdrawing any financial support, in particular, from vulnerable and disadvantaged people. It is for this reason that I pushed for significant additional Local Welfare Assistance funding. The Inquiry has asked if I think the Universal Credit uplift ended at the appropriate time. I do not feel qualified to answer this question as I was no longer at the Department and would not be privy to the discussions or considerations that went into making that decision. As I have said in earlier paragraphs, it was my firm view that the uplift should have been made permanent and that view is independent of the prevailing financial and epidemiological circumstances. I cannot take this further other than giving my view.

*Decision on the introduction of temporary easements*

24. One of the main issues that concerned the Department was the operational aspect of Universal Credit claims. The usual process is for a claimant to attend a JobCentre for an assessment. However, the public health guidance at the time meant that practical measures had to be taken to address the need to remove all face-to-face contact. It was this that led to the Department's decision to introduce temporary easements. In a nutshell, the main easements introduced were as follows:
- a. Removal of requirement to attend Jobcentre appointments.
  - b. Suspension of all face-to-face assessments and most reassessments for health and disability benefits. A face-to-face assessment would only be held if it was absolutely necessary.
  - c. Where possible, assessments were to be made on a paper-based review system and supplemented with a telephone call, if necessary.
  - d. The 'Don't call us, we'll call you' campaign began. The front-line team would proactively call customers to verify the information they had provided in their Universal Credit claim and/or send them a message on their online journal (a tool which belongs to the claimant and is used by both claimants and DWP staff to communicate with each other).
  - e. The "Trust and Protect" regime which allowed information from claimants to be accepted by telephone but would be verified later via case reviews. This

allowed the Department to process the payments quickly whilst ensuring verification checks would follow.

25. The temporary easements were recommended by the officials based on their operational knowledge and experience. I was conscious, and raised concern that the temporary easements could expose the Department to risks, such as fraud. However, this risk had to be weighed against the wider need to support the public and ensure they were not penalised for following Government advice. A balance had to be struck between the competing challenges whilst also being mindful of the Department's overarching duty to safeguard public money. I must emphasise that the decisions were made after careful thought and to strike a balance between competing risks. I do not recall the decision regarding temporary easements but do recall discussing the operational challenges and risks with Neil Couling. I suspect the decision would ultimately have been taken by the Secretary of State.

*Decision not to introduce an equivalent uplift for people on legacy benefits*

26. Due to the need for rapid implementation, one of the factors that we needed to consider was the technical capability of DWP computer systems. Changes to Universal Credit could be introduced quickly without any complexities. However, for other benefit lines, including legacy benefits, changes take time as the normal annual benefit uprating process begins in late November and requires several months to code benefit rate changes into each of the different benefit lines. It was, therefore, considered operationally impracticable to deliver an uplift in legacy benefits. By legacy benefits, I mean the benefits that would in time be replaced by Universal Credit such as Income Based Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA IB) and Income Based Employment and Support Allowance (ESA IB).
27. This concern was set out in the submission of 25 March 2020: WQ/008 - INQ000592915 The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions was advised by Universal Credit Policy officials that it was not operationally feasible to include legacy benefits in the uplift as the rates for April 2020 had already been entered into the system for all the legacy benefits. As a Minister, I would not be in a position to test and assess operational systems and their capability. We relied on our senior officials to advise us on what was or was not possible. I am, therefore, not qualified to answer the Inquiry's question as to the exact reason why officials came to the conclusions on the limitations of the legacy IT systems. I did not provide the advice but received it. Furthermore, Working

Tax Credit was, as I understand, a HMT administered benefit. Due to the age of the DWP IT systems, it would not be possible to make any changes to legacy benefits until the following year. If a change was introduced out-of-cycle, it would carry major delivery risks, namely, a high level of risk of incorrect payments being made to customers. Based on this advice, I believe the Secretary of State made the decision not to introduce an equivalent uplift for those on legacy benefit.

28. When the decision to extend the Universal Credit uplift was made, it was agreed by all and ultimately decided by the Secretary of State that an uplift to legacy benefits would not have been deliverable via the existing legacy payment systems and neither would it possible to adjust the rate of legacy benefits for 2021 to 2022 (for the reasons set out above). The recommendation was set out in the submission of 11 March 2021 WQ/014 - INQ000592924 that I received along with the Secretary of State and the Minister for Employment. The Inquiry has asked me whether I think it would have been possible to make the necessary operational changes for the legacy benefits given the time between the introduction and extension of the Universal Credit uplift. As I have set out earlier, I am not qualified to assist the Inquiry with the technical aspects of the DWP IT systems and coding. However, I understand that the decision to extend the Universal Credit uplift would have needed to have been made several months in advance in order to introduce changes to the systems. In reality and as I recall the decision to extend the uplift was not made several months in advance and, therefore, it would not have been possible to overcome the operational challenges in relation to the legacy benefits system.
29. On 1 May 2020, I received two submissions: WQ/018 - INQ000655320 and WQ/019 - INQ000655321. The first submission was in relation to the natural migration ('NM') to Universal Credit and tax credit claimants moving to Universal Credit during the pandemic. Given the sharp rise in the number of Universal Credit claims since the beginning of the crisis, the submission sought approval to retain the numbers migrating to Universal Credit. The recommendation was to pause the 'Move to Universal Credit migration' pilot as the Department's priority was to process new claims and not move people from legacy benefits to Universal Credit at pace. I do not recall now what I thought at the time (in 2020) but I believe I would have agreed with the recommendation as it was a practical consideration in the circumstances at the time. To do otherwise would simply transfer the pressure to the team dealing with legacy benefits and would offer no real advantage. The second submission related to tax credit claimants moving to Universal Credit. The officials advised that no changes should be made at that stage to legacy

benefits, for instance, the capital limit. I agreed that no changes were necessary in the circumstances.

Decision to suspend and later reintroduce the Minimum Income Floor.

30. The decision to suspend the Minimum Income Floor (MIF) was made at the same time as the Universal Credit uplift on 25 March 2020. Although the Minimum Income Floor was linked to Universal Credit, it fell under the office of the Minister for Employment. Any policy decisions relating to self-employment and the Minimum Income Floor would be taken by the Secretary of State and the Minister for Employment. I do not recall being involved in the policy design or decisions on the Minimum Income Floor. It is likely that submissions may have been brought to my attention, but this would have been for information or comment rather than making the decision. I am, therefore, unable to assist the Inquiry on the decisions relating to the suspension and subsequent reintroduction of Minimum Income Floor.

Decision making and personal reflections

31. I have been asked by the Inquiry if I was involved in each of the decisions set out above. Where I was involved in making or contributing to the decisions, I have made that clear within the relevant paragraphs.
32. My understanding is that the decisions on the Universal Credit uplift were made jointly by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and the Chancellor of the Exchequer. DWP needs HMT approval for its expenditure and the Universal Credit uplift represented significant expenditure. The Universal Credit uplift and Working Tax Credit cost a total of £6 billion in the first 12 months. The Universal Credit uplift was extended at Spring Budget 2021 for a further six months (to 6 October 2021), bringing the total cost to £8.2 billion. HMT provided the funding for these measures in the Spring Budget 2021 (see, [WQ/008 - INQ000592915](#) and [WQ/014 - INQ000592924](#)). Any extension to the Universal Credit uplift [WQ/021 - INQ000655322](#) or other initiatives such as Local Housing Allowance rate, the Covid Winter Grant Scheme and Household Support Fund all required HMT approval [WQ/022 - INQ000655323](#).
33. I have been asked if there were any decisions made by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions or the Chancellor with which I disagreed in relation to the Universal Credit uplift and Working Tax Credit. I supported the initial uplift to Universal Credit

and its extension. Personally, I would have liked to have seen the Universal Credit uplift made permanent. I recall that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions shared my view on retaining the Universal Credit uplift permanently. I should stress that my view on the initial Universal Credit uplift and its subsequent extension was based on the Universal Credit uplift being a necessary economic intervention in response to the pandemic to support those facing sudden and unexpected financial distress. However, my view on the uplift being made permanent was on different grounds. It was informed by the numerous discussions I had with stakeholders supporting those with lived experience of Universal Credit and stakeholders who supported vulnerable groups and the impact of the Universal Credit uplift on families that were struggling financially. This view was further fortified by modelling WQ/020 - INQ000592925: Distributional impacts of removing the £20 uplift from UC and Working Tax Credit in 2021/22) carried out by DWP which suggested that over 950,000 people were lifted out of poverty in 2020/21 as a result of the Universal Credit uplift. In addition, the jobs market was still recovering. These for me were persuasive reasons to make the uplift permanent. Notwithstanding this, I cannot say that I disagreed with the final decision that was made, I assume by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, at the time, not to provide the funding to extend the Universal Credit uplift further or to make it permanent. I say this as I was not aware, nor am I aware today, of the competing fiscal priorities and complex trade-offs that the Chancellor will no doubt have had to make in managing the nation's finances at a difficult time.

34. I have been asked to comment on whether HMT consulted DWP adequately in advance of decisions being made. I am unable to recall, and neither am I aware of the extent of any consultation with DWP officials ahead of the initial decision to introduce the uplift. I am also not aware of any formal initiative by HMT for a joint policy partnership with DWP. However, it is my view that the consultation ahead of decisions to extend the uplift was appropriate given the time constraints and fast evolving situation. I have also been asked to comment on whether the DWP had sufficient autonomy in relation to decision making. My view is that, as much as the DWP would have liked more autonomy, it would have been unrealistic, and I would suggest unprecedented, for any government department to have full autonomy over such significant expenditure, especially if it sat outside a department's budget. For example, my weekly note to the Secretary of State on 30 December WQ/021 - INQ000655322 points out the need for DWP to get approval from No.10/HMT for an extension of the Universal Credit uplift. Any decision relating to billions of pounds would inevitably have been made by, led by or at the very least heavily influenced by HMT. The Secretary of

State held the relationship so will be better placed to comment on the DWP's relationship with HMT.

### **Policy design of the Universal Credit uplift and Working Tax Credit**

#### *The initial uplift and extension of the uplift*

35. Right at the outset of the pandemic and prior to the first lockdown in March 2020, I vaguely recall HMT seeking DWP views on what was possible and the options that could be considered. At the time HMT was working on a package to respond immediately to the economic impacts of the pandemic. The focus was on what could be done quickly to provide financial assistance to those who were going to see a dramatic reduction in their income, lose their employment as a result of the pandemic and would be submitting a claim for Universal Credit, which is DWP's main unemployment benefit.
36. As set out above, Policy advisers sent written advice to DWP Ministers on 25 March 2020 WQ/008-INQ000592915 setting out a series of regulations to respond to the pandemic. The advice asked for Ministerial approval to lay regulations, for a range of measures, including an increase to the Universal Credit Standard Allowance by £20 a week (uplift) and disapply the Minimum Income Floor for self-employed Universal Credit claimants.
37. As explained in the corporate statement, the purpose of the uplift to Universal Credit was not to cover all the income that claimants were likely to lose because of the pandemic, but rather to achieve three fiscal and social policy objectives as follows:
  - a. To provide financial assistance for those likely to face the most significant financial disruption due to the pandemic. These would include individuals, for example, who had lost or were at risk of losing employment or significant income and would be making a claim for social security benefits for the first time having previously been financially self-sufficient.
  - b. To provide this financial assistance quickly without risking the stability of the social security system or causing delays in payments. The Universal Credit system had been designed to allow it to adapt rapidly to changes and was, therefore, capable of supporting this objective. This was in contrast to the

system that operated, for instance, for the legacy benefit systems, which would not permit an immediate change.

- c. To provide a clear and easy to understand policy which would help to send a reassuring message to the public that the Government intended to protect the stability of the economy and would invest significantly to achieve that aim.

38. The pace of events meant that the Universal Credit uplift had to be made with urgency. To illustrate the urgency of the situation, we received over 2 million claims from mid-March and by 9 April, we had 4.2 million people on Universal Credit. This was an increase of 1.2 million claimants in one month with over 2 million claims that were still working their way through the system (WQ/023 - INQ000657883 Universal Credit quarterly stats to July 2020; WQ/024 - INQ000549259 Labour Market story.pptx). It is my view that the decision to introduce the uplift in Spring 2020 was correct given the imminent lockdown and the impact it would have on the economy. As discussed above, the Secretary of State and Chancellor of the Exchequer decided that an uplift was necessary, including the level of £20. I understand that it was not possible to undertake detailed research or modelling to set the level but instead to assess the situation as best as possible and arrive at an appropriate level. As set out above, I understand that the period of 12 months was largely dictated by the annual uprating process and would, therefore, be the appropriate period. Overall, I believe the policy design of the Universal Credit uplift was correct and was adequate to meet the specific needs of individuals at the time, in that, the Universal Credit uplift provided immediate financial support to those who lost employment or saw a dramatic reduction in their income as a result of the pandemic.

39. Although a question the Secretary of State is better placed to answer as she would have been in the meetings with the Chancellor, I understand that the £20 per week uplift to the Universal Credit standard allowance was selected as it represented a balanced approach between fiscal cost, operational feasibility, and the need to deliver meaningful support. I am unable to recall the modelling that was used at the time to determine the uplift level but it is my understanding that this amount also aligned the Universal Credit standard allowance more closely with the weekly rate of Statutory Sick Pay, which helped ensure consistency across different benefits (WQ/025 - INQ000653740 **email chain outlining the considerations of aligning the Universal Credit uplift with SSP**). I consider that the uplift of £20 was therefore an appropriate rate and the most sensible model available at the time. An alternative of a percentage uplift would not have been possible as it would have required complex calculations to be made for

each individual claimant (new and existing) which would have caused significant delay along with a risk of incorrect payments. Equally, a one-off grant payment carried similar operational and system challenges alongside a high fraud risk. Overall, it is my view that the Universal Credit uplift policy design took into account sensible factors (logistical, operational, budgetary and legislative) and was appropriate to meet the specific needs of individuals at the time who had lost their employment as a result of the pandemic. I am unable to recall the analysis at the time and, therefore, I cannot comment on whether the analysis was adequate or not.

40. The £20 weekly increase applied to all recipients, not just those who began receiving Universal Credit during the pandemic. I have been asked if the uplift should have been more targeted. It is not clear to me what the Inquiry means by targeted. If it is meant to suggest that the uplift should only have been given to a specific category of individuals, or just for new claimants, then in my view, this fails to appreciate the pace of events, the complexity of benefit systems and the really high risk of inequity this could create. Furthermore, criteria for eligibility would need to be set so as not to cause further financial harm to individuals. A decision was taken to apply the £20 uplift to everyone receiving Universal Credit, including both new and existing claimants. As far as I am aware those already on Universal Credit may not have been the direct intended beneficiaries of HMT's original policy intent. The policy intent was to provide support for those who were facing significant financial shock or distress as a result of the pandemic. The financial distress could either be through loss of employment or a significant drop of income. It is important to understand that the Universal Credit benefit is a means tested benefit and seeks to encourage people to look for gainful employment. The effect of the pandemic was that even existing claimants had their ability to seek work significantly curtailed or reduced. Therefore, even existing claimants could have faced a sudden and unexpected drop in their income and would, in effect, be in a similar situation to those who were new claimants. There were also Universal Credit claimants who were not in work and therefore had not experienced an unexpected drop in their income. This in effect created a secondary benefit because of the universal nature of the uplift. I have been asked by the Inquiry whether this was 'overinclusive'. However, the Inquiry question frames this as a deliberate choice and does not take into account the operational limitations, the capacity of the DWP system and the time constraints we were under. A targeted approach ( WQ/026 - INQ000592916 )
- Equality Analysis for The Social Security (Coronavirus) (Further Measures) Regulations 2020; ( WQ/027 - INQ000592914 ) Equality Analysis for The Employment and Support Allowance and Universal Credit (Coronavirus) Regulations 2020 and

Submission to lay further Covid regs FINAL.DOCX) was considered when the department worked up policy options in advance of the extension of the Universal Credit uplift, particularly in relation to the child element (discussed below).

41. Any policy decisions in relation to the benefit cap fell under the remit of the Minister for Employment and the Secretary of State. Whilst it is linked to Universal Credit, it did not have a direct impact on the uplift decision. I do not recall having considered the benefit cap when considering the Universal Credit uplift. I understand that any changes to the benefit cap would have required a more extensive legislative process as the rules are laid out in primary legislation, the *Welfare Act 2012*. It would, therefore, have not been feasible within the timeframe. I have been asked to comment on whether it would be helpful in any future pandemic to have the ability to make such changes to the benefit cap more quickly. As set out above, the policy decisions on benefit cap did not fall into my ministerial brief and neither am I an expert on benefit cap issues. I, therefore, do not feel qualified to express any views as to future actions.
42. As explained above, I did not have responsibility for the benefit cap. However, I am aware DWP was due to review the cap in line with the Secretary of State's obligations. The existing circumstances meant that even if we wanted to and had the funding secured from HMT to make that change, we would not have been able to do it operationally or do it quickly. I think what we therefore looked to do during the pandemic was to provide as much support for the welfare system as we could quickly provide. We introduced £6.5 billion of additional support through the welfare system via Tax Credits, Universal Credit uplift and the Local Housing Allowance rate. This also meant that existing and new claimants could benefit from a nine-month "grace period" from the benefit cap in any event where their Universal Credit would not be capped if they had a sustained work record, which was the case for the vast majority of claimants who required financial assistance.
43. Operational and logistical delivery played a significant role in shaping the policy design. Both HMT and DWP were keen to understand what could be implemented quickly and effectively to deliver the intended support at pace. The Universal Credit system was designed to be responsive and adaptable which enabled the rapid development of a clear, easily understood and easily implemented intervention. This would not have been possible with the other benefit lines (legacy benefits) as they are processed through older IT systems. It would not have been possible to replace or update the IT systems or introduce the changes within the older system quickly.

44. The £20 uplift was paid to everyone receiving Universal Credit, new and existing claimants. It was introduced for each claimant and did not take into account additional factors for specific groups, including families with children. However, a targeted approach was proactively being considered when the Department worked through various options ahead of a 2020 Autumn fiscal event. On 24 June 2020 I sent an email WQ/028 - INQ000655324 to say that I wanted to begin preparation for the October fiscal event in terms of costing and to present the Secretary of State with a suite of options. I had expressed interest in the following options:

- a. Adjusting the taper rate
- b. Extending the work allowance to other groups
- c. Transferring the increase in standard allowance into child element
- d. An exemption for 6 or 9 months from the 2-child policy
- e. Maintaining the standard allowance increase for 6 months before removing or tapering off.

45. On 6 July I sent my weekly note to the Secretary of State WQ/030- INQ000655325 in preparation for the autumn fiscal event. In a meeting on 5 July with the Secretary of State we discussed that with DWP officials, I would explore 3 options. These included: (1) retaining the uplift, (2) increasing the child element of Universal Credit and (3) reducing the taper rate (the taper rate is the rate at which a Universal Credit payment tapers off as a claimant's earnings increase) In my email of 9 July 2020 WQ/031- INQ000549266 to DWP officials, I informed them that the Secretary of State had agreed in our 1:1 session to explore the three options set out above. On 20 November 2020, the Secretary of State and I received a submission from Universal Credit Policy advisers WQ/029 - INQ000592919. The officials advised that, overall, it would be better to retain the existing standard allowance £20 uplift as it helps to avoid those without children receiving a reduced uplift. The proposal was to lower the £20 uplift to £10 but increase the child element of Universal Credit. Therefore, those without children who were previously receiving the full £20 uplift would have seen a reduction. The proposal was not implemented. A further submission of 11 March 2021 WQ/014 - INQ000592924 also provided an option for a more targeted approach given the concern of the Ministers on the child element. It was suggested that the uplift be set at £10 with an additional increase of £10 to the child element of the Universal Credit. However, this was dismissed in favour of the extension of the existing £20 uplift to avoid people losing out during the pandemic. There were already Universal Credit elements (additional payments) for children, housing and disability in the Universal Credit design. It was

recognised that families with children often face distinct or additional financial pressures, however, the primary aim of the uplift was to provide swift support to those who had seen their income fall due to job loss or reduced earnings, rather than to address broader issues of poverty. The initial package of measures announced by the Chancellor, including the Universal Credit uplift was welcomed by the Trussell Trust in an email to me from their CEO on 24 March 2020 [WQ/032 - INQ000655326].

46. The Government did provide additional support to families and households in other ways, including changes to the Local Housing Allowance or through targeted support such as Discretionary Housing Payments, the COVID Winter Grant Scheme ('CWGS') and the Household Support Fund. The CWGS and Household Support Fund were paid via DWP and administered at a local level by top tier Local Authorities. The first iteration the COVID Winter Grant Scheme launched in December 2020. I was part of a cross government junior ministerial taskforce which pushed our respective Secretaries of State and HMT for the creation of these schemes as an additional safety net for vulnerable groups, families, children, older people, disabled people, those with no recourse to public funds and those receiving certain benefits [WQ/033 - INQ000549288] my weekly note to the Secretary of State, w/c 25 January).

47. I was the DWP representative on the Food and Essential Supplies to the Vulnerable Ministerial Task Force, which was initially led by the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs ('DEFRA') as the immediate focus was on food and essential items. The Task Force included representatives from cross-government departments and the Scottish and Welsh government. I led the cross-government Ministerial meeting on the Covid-19 Winter Support Package on behalf of the DWP which was held on 14 January 2021 [WQ/034 - INQ000655327]. The meeting was set up to review the progress that was being made in relation to the various schemes which included the Holiday Activities & Food Programme, Healthy Start Vouchers, FareShare and Covid-19 Winter Grant Scheme. The Task Force met at regular intervals to discuss progress. The discussions are set out in the following Taskforce minutes:

- a. Taskforce minutes, 15 April 2020 [WQ/035 - INQ000655328]
- b. Taskforce minutes, 17 April 2020 [WQ/036 - INQ000655329]
- c. Taskforce minutes, 29 April 2020 [WQ/037 - INQ000655330]
- d. Taskforce minutes, 7 May 2020 [WQ/038 - INQ000655331]

48. The £20 flat-rate Universal Credit uplift was introduced after careful consideration based on the Equality Impact Assessments. The submission of 25 March 2020

WQ/039 - INQ000654463 included an Equality Analysis which expressly considered the impact of the Universal Credit uplift on persons with a disability, including that *"Disabled people with existing legacy benefit claims are significantly more likely to qualify for a SDP, and thus would be barred from claiming UC for the duration of these regulations. Since the standard allowance is not being increased for IS/JSA/ESA, disabled people are therefore more likely not to benefit from the increase."* While the Department considered that the policy may have a different impact on disabled people, it concluded that no claimant with a protected characteristic would be adversely affected by the proposed changes. Any differential impact was justified due to the aims and importance of the measures.

49. A further Equality Analysis dated 24 February 2021, WQ/040 - INQ000474825 was included in the submission sent to the Secretary of State on 11 March 2021, WQ/014 - INQ000592924 seeking approval to make and lay the Universal Credit (Extension of Coronavirus Measures) Regulations 2021 which extended the uplift. That analysis again considered the impact of the policy on persons with a disability, including that *"a higher proportion of UC claimants benefitting from the standard allowance increase have a disability compared with the GB population so the policy benefits a high % of disabled people. That is because a relatively high proportion of disabled claimants are on a means-tested benefit as compared to the general population because many have limited capability for work- or work-related activity."*
50. In addition to the Equality Impact Assessments, the Department engaged and consulted with disability advocacy groups to consider the impact of decisions on disabled people. The Minister for Disabled People led on this area and as Minister of State he was the senior minister and for all intents and purposes the defacto Deputy to the Secretary of State. As I recall, the Minister for Disabled People led on all engagement with charities that represented and advocated on behalf of disabled people.
51. As discussed above, the speed at which events moved and situations changed at the start of the pandemic and later, meant that it was not possible for DWP to carry out detailed economic modelling when designing the policy in the early stages of the pandemic. I consider that the modelling was appropriate under the circumstances and adequate to support the speed of decision-making at that time. For instance, DWP compiled a presentation, WQ/041 - INQ000655332 **Financial Vulnerability in light of COVID, undated**) which drew information from a number of sources and analysed the

information as part of its submissions to HMT and the Prime Minister. The Department's general approach to using economic modelling and statistical analysis is set out in the corporate witness statement.

52. In March 2021, the Universal Credit uplift was extended for a further 6 months. As far as I recall the policy objective for the extension and intended beneficiaries were the same as the initial policy intent. Those already on Universal Credit who benefitted from the uplift to the standard rate was a positive secondary effect of the original policy intent. As set out above, I was one of the Ministers who received a submission WQ/014 - INQ000592924 on 11 March 2021 from the Universal Credit Policy team to consider an amendment to the regulations to extend the Universal Credit uplift for a further 6 months. The policy objective for the extension was to give economic reassurance and financial support to those likely to experience the most financial disruption due to the pandemic. Although the impact on poverty influenced my view I do not know whether it influenced the decision making in relation to the extension of the uplift. My understanding is that DWP provided both No10 and HMT with the impact analysis of the uplift on poverty. However, I cannot say this for certain as the information flow was directly from the private office of the Secretary of State to No.10 and HMT. The decision to extend the Universal Credit uplift, from a DWP perspective, was made by the Secretary of State as she wished to retain it and I supported that position.
53. I met with officials on 8 October 2020; WQ/042 - INQ000549276 to better understand the concerns if there was to be an uplift to the Universal Credit Standard Allowance ('SA') by £10pw and an uplift to the child element by £10pw rather than maintaining the Universal Credit Standard Allowance £20 uplift. I was aware that the Secretary of State was keen on this option, but she also understood the operational risk if HMT did not fund this proposal. I understand that the Secretary of State sent a letter to the Prime Minister setting out her proposal, but I believe it was rejected WQ/043 - INQ000653841 (letter dated 9 October 2020). I agreed with the Secretary of State that the £20 uplift should be retained permanently and reflected my thinking in my weekly note of 21 September to her saying that I considered it to be a policy priority WQ/010 - INQ000549297, 9 November WQ/044 - INQ000549281 and 18 January WQ/045 - INQ000549286.
54. I was made aware of a meeting between the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions WQ/029 - INQ000592919. To the best of my knowledge, I was not invited and neither did I attend any meetings between the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in January

2021 to discuss the extension of the Universal Credit uplift. Meetings with the Prime Minister and Chancellor are more routinely attended by the Secretary of State and not Parliamentary Under Secretaries of State.

Uplift for those on legacy benefits

55. I have set out in some detail above that the clear reasoning for not introducing an uplift for those on legacy benefits was driven by the logistical and IT challenges as discussed in the email chain [WQ/046 - INQ000549256]. The Deputy Director made it clear that *'it is not digitally possible to up-rate JSA etc in-year, so we will never have plans to do that unless the Dept invests in new IT systems'*. This was also discussed in a meeting on 7 May 2020 to consider uprating legacy benefits [WQ/047 - INQ000549254]. I was advised that the Universal Credit and legacy systems were entirely different. The legacy benefit system did *'not have the capacity to uplift benefits mid-year without a risk that a claimant's benefits would stop altogether. Officials have made the judgement that the risk of system failure is too great to go ahead with a change'*. I accepted that advice. As stated earlier, I was confident of the assessment of the DWP systems by DWP officials. I agreed that it would not have been operationally feasible to provide an equivalent increase to those on legacy benefits either at the start or when the extension was considered. I had also commissioned a paper from Universal Credit Policy advisers on how Universal Credit entitlement compared to legacy benefits. I received the submission of 5 May 2020 [WQ/048 - INQ000655618] which found that those on Universal Credit had a higher entitlement compared to those on legacy benefits. I found this useful to understand the key differences. I felt assured as there were other supportive measures that the Government had already introduced such as the Local Housing Allowance uplift, which would assist many people on legacy benefits. The position of those on legacy benefits is also set out in the relevant submissions including the logistic challenges to introduce an uplift for legacy benefits [WQ/008 - INQ000592915] and [WQ/014 - INQ000592924]. Legacy benefits were increased (annual uprating) by £600m from April 2020 and a further £100m from April 2021 whilst the Local Housing Allowance increased by £1billion in 2020 raising it to the 30th percentile and maintained in 2021. These, in my view, were measures taken to ensure those on legacy benefits were not overlooked.
56. On 25 March 2020, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions was sent a submission [WQ/008 - INQ000592915] by Universal Credit Policy advisers which set out clearly the challenges in relation to the legacy benefits; it was not operationally deliverable as

the rates for April 2020 had already been input for all of the legacy benefit systems and could not be changed until the following year due to the ageing nature of the legacy IT systems. Policy advisers confirmed that any changes made as part of an out-of-cycle exercise would carry major delivery risks and could have posed a risk to the entire system. It was also not considered possible to provide an equivalent to the Universal Credit uplift to individuals on legacy benefits outside the existing legacy IT systems.

57. When a decision was made to extend the Universal Credit uplift until October 2021, it was again clear that an uplift to legacy benefits could not be delivered through the existing systems. The IT system was the same which meant that it would not be operationally possible to adjust the rate of legacy benefits for 2021 to 2022 for the same reasons as outlined above [WQ/014 - INQ000592924]. I was advised by the Senior Responsible Officer for Universal Credit, Neil Couling, and other experienced senior officials and advisers and that it would not be operationally feasible to deliver an equivalent increase to those on legacy benefits. As mentioned above, I valued their expertise and had no hesitation in accepting their advice on the capability of the DWP systems to deliver an uplift for those on legacy benefits both at the time of the initial decision to introduce the uplift and when an extension was considered.
58. I have been asked if I had discussions with the Secretary of State regarding legacy benefits. The submissions were discussed with the Secretary of State and I recall that we all agreed, based on the advice provided by DWP officials, that it would not be possible to include legacy benefits within the uplift. Ultimately, however, any decision on this would have been taken by the Secretary of State.
59. I have been asked if any consideration was given to a one-off payment for those on legacy benefit. This was discussed at a meeting on 7 May 2020 [WQ/047 - INQ000549254] and I was advised that the DWP had capability to make a one-off payment for 'certain' groups. I am unable to recall or provide any further information on the reference to 'certain' groups in the meeting notes. Previously, it had only been possible to deliver the one-off payment to pensioners through Winter Fuel Payments. At the meeting I was informed that it was possible for legacy benefit claimants to receive a one-off payment. This is the relevant excerpt from the meeting summary: *Legacy benefit claimants could therefore receive a one-off uprated amount of benefits if Ministers wished to pursue this. This would likely require primary legislation and likely put a strain on the system operationally.* I concluded that no further action should be taken in relation to the one-off payment and this advice would have gone to the Secretary of

State to make the decision. The only reason for excluding legacy benefits was the obvious IT challenges which made it impossible to introduce any changes in the process.

60. In my view, the position of disabled people in receipt of legacy benefits was carefully and adequately considered by all concerned. The Department's decision to not provide the uplift or an equivalent uplift was the subject to legal challenge by way of judicial review (heard in November 2021) in **R. (on the application of T) v Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (2022) EWHC 351 (Admin)** and, the subsequent appeal, **T & Ors v Secretary of State for Work & Pensions (2023) EWCA Civ 24**. The corporate statement discusses the case in detail and I refer the Inquiry to Section 6 of DWP's Corporate Witness Statement for Module 9.

61. I have been asked to provide my view on whether the decision not to provide an equivalent uplift for those on legacy benefits was influenced by a desire to create a potential incentive to encourage people to transfer to Universal Credit. I do not believe so, no. I recall the 'Move to Universal Credit' or managed migration pilot was paused during the pandemic because the priority at the time was to ensure the Department was able to handle the huge influx of claims and provide support as quickly as possible to those in desperate need. I do not recall the potential incentive to encourage people to move to Universal Credit from legacy benefits being a factor in the decision-making process to introduce the Universal Credit uplift. However, I do recall when making the case to the Secretary of State for the Universal Credit uplift to be extended and made permanent that approximately 70% of claimants on legacy benefits would have a higher entitlement if they moved to Universal Credit. In that case, it would act as a potential incentive for them to consider moving to Universal Credit when appropriate for them to do so based on their personal circumstances which was in line with the wider and long-standing Departmental policy. We were mindful of how this would impact on groups who may lose out by migrating to Universal Credit WQ/049 - INQ000549239 – my weekly note to the Secretary of State, 2 March).

62. I have been asked if I considered that the correct decision was made by not introducing an equivalent uplift to individuals on legacy benefits. As I recall, the decision not to provide an equivalent uplift to legacy benefits, which I have covered in greater detail elsewhere in this statement, was down to system capacity and capability and the risk of system failure. I wanted to see an equivalent uplift for those on legacy benefits and recall having discussions on this issue with the Minister for Disabled People and the

Secretary of State. However, I was persuaded, as was ultimately the Secretary of State who will have made the decision, that the system constraints combined with the risk of system failure and the potential adverse impact this would have on those who relied on the support was too great a risk. I do, therefore, on balance, under the circumstances, consider that it was the right decision not to provide an equivalent uplift to individuals on legacy benefits.

Engagement and consultation in relation to the uplift

63. I have been asked to set out the engagement and consultation we had with external stakeholders when developing and designing the Universal Credit uplift, in particular, with the following:
- a. Ministers in the devolved administrations
  - b. Stakeholders representing businesses
  - c. Stakeholders representing employees, such as trade unions
  - d. Stakeholders representing socially or economically vulnerable groups, including people with a disability or health condition.

*Engagement with devolved administrations*

64. As Universal Credit is a UK-wide benefit reserved to the UK Government, it is implemented nationally. Whilst there may be local arrangements on the frequency of payments, Universal Credit remains within DWP. In Northern Ireland, the Department for Communities (the Department) administers most benefits. The 2020 Universal Credit related Regulations included equivalent regulations for Northern Ireland. Although I do not recall specific occasions, I recall virtual meetings with my counterparts in the devolved administrations and exchanging correspondence. The corporate statement provides a detailed account of the engagement with the devolved administration throughout the period and I refer the Inquiry to Section 8 of DWP's Corporate Witness Statement for Module 9 WQ/050 - INQ000661270.
65. I recall having positive engagement with my counterparts and representatives from the Scottish and Welsh governments. The email from my office of 26 March 2020 shows a positive working relationship with the Welsh Government WQ/051 - INQ000549242. On 7 May 2020, I received a submission (along with the Secretary of State and Minister for Disabled People) suggesting five changes to Universal Credit. This also provides context of the devolution settlement with Wales WQ/052 - INQ000549253. Communication between the UK, the Scottish Government and the Welsh Government was kept up-

to-date by officials to help spot issues to inform dialogue between Ministers and the Devolved Administrations [WQ/053 - INQ000549264]. As part of Cabinet Office's review of intergovernmental relations ('IGR') between UK government departments and the devolved administrations, we recommended a series of four quadrilateral meetings chaired by the relevant lead Minister to the Secretary of State [WQ/054 - INQ000549287]. I cannot now recall if these were implemented. Where matters concerned my area of Universal Credit work, I would write directly to the relevant Scottish or Welsh Minister [WQ/055 - INQ000549249] and [WQ/056 - INQ000549255] - letters to Aileen Campbell, [WQ/057 - INQ000549261] letter to Richard Lochhead)

*Stakeholders representing businesses/trade unions*

66. Unlike other economic interventions, for example, Kickstart, the Universal Credit uplift did not require engagement with businesses or trade unions.

*Stakeholders representing vulnerable groups*

67. As set out in the earlier paragraphs, the Minister for Disabled People was actively engaged with external stakeholders such as charities representing and advocating for disabled people. I recall expressing my frustration at not being able to track vulnerable groups on the Universal Credit system to the Secretary of State in my weekly update to her [WQ/058 - INQ000549296] despite the work being carried out by DWP officials. At a meeting with officials "on 7 October 2020 [WQ/059 - INQ000549278] I expressed my disappointment with the progress of this work. I would ideally want the ability to track all vulnerable groups but as a compromise, I was content to look at just four groups, Care Leaver, Ex-offender/offender, Armed Forces and Homelessness but wanted clear timelines for the work progress and completion. I wanted this functionality as I took the view that data on vulnerable groups would be helpful for both data analysis and evaluation for us to target support as necessary. I had been pushing for this functionality before the pandemic and continued to push for it during the pandemic. This issue had also been raised by stakeholders supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged groups who knew that I was trying to progress matters. They were, however, aware that it would take some time for these changes to be made to the Universal Credit system.
68. We did make progress, and I informed the Secretary of State of this in my weekly Note of 19 October [WQ/060 - INQ000549295]. At this stage we were also obtaining information for care leavers and veterans on Universal Credit. I also pushed for information in relation to ex-offenders and those experiencing homelessness. I was also responsible

for laying two Statutory Instruments, one of which was to extend the regulations for 6 months to assist prisoners on temporary licence on compassionate grounds to obtain welfare services.

69. I had regular meetings and contact with charities and organisations representing vulnerable people. The stakeholders included:

- a. 4 May 2020: Macmillan (meeting also with Minister for Disabled People) [WQ/061-INQ000549251] – Note of conference call with Lynda Thomas 4 May 2020; [WQ/062 - INQ000549250] Email, 4 May 2020 of readout of call with Lynda Thomas, Macmillan; [WQ/063 - INQ000549247] briefing for the call with Macmillan, 4 May 2020; [WQ/064 - INQ000549248] briefing note, 4 May 2020)
- b. 4 March 2020; [WQ/065 - INQ000549241] meeting readout with Trussell Trust); 9 March 2020 [WQ/066 - INQ000549240] readout of meeting with Trussell Trust); 19 March 2020 [WQ/067 - INQ000655617], 30 April 2020 ([WQ/068 - INQ000549252] readout of meeting); 5 June 2020 [WQ/069 - INQ000549262] Email dated 8 June 2020 - Readout from meeting with the Trussell Trust), 16th Sept 2020: The Trussell Trust ([WQ/070 - INQ000549270] – Email dated 17 Sept 2020 - readout from 16 Sept meeting with Trussell Trust)
- c. 11 March 2020 – calls with various stakeholders on budget day ([WQ/071 - INQ000549246] readout from calls)
- d. w/c 21 Sept 2020: Become Charity (care leavers) ([WQ/072 - INQ000549275] email chain between Become Charity and DWP regarding roundtable discussions; [WQ/073 - INQ000549271] – email from intern to check accuracy of record)
- e. w/c 28 Sept 2020: The Children's Society, CPAG (Child Poverty Action Group) [WQ/074 - INQ000549273] readout meeting of 1 October 2020 with AfC, CPAG and CS; [WQ/075 - INQ000549272] my weekly note of w/c 28.09.20 setting out discussions with Action for Children, CPAG, Children's Society and Red Cross re the uplift.), British Red Cross [WQ/076 - INQ000549274] email dated 5 October 2020, readout of meeting of 30.09.20 with the British Red Cross).
- f. 9 Nov 2020: Care Leavers Round Table [WQ/077 - INQ000549279] and [WQ/078 - INQ000549280] DWP – Become-Care Leavers readout from roundtable of 3 Nov 20).
- g. Nov 2020: Homeless Link [WQ/079 - INQ000549282] 'thank you' email from Homeless Link following the meeting on the 17 Nov 2020), The Children's Commissioner.
- h. w/c 23 Nov 2020: Local Government Association Chair and Citizens Advice ([WQ/080 - INQ000549283] readout from introductory meeting; [WQ/081 - INQ000549284] my weekly update to the Secretary of State, 30 December)

- i. w/c 22nd Feb: Refuge and the Refugee Council Week ( WQ/082-INQ000549238 readout of meeting with Refuge; WQ/083-INQ000549237 my weekly note mentions a meeting with Refuge on split payments.).
  - j. 3 March 2021: Citizens Advice, CPAG, JRF, Trussell Trust, Centrepoint, Homeless Link, Crisis, St Mungo's and Shelter.
  - k. 14 Apr 2021: joint meeting with Minister for Disabled People with Turn2Us.
70. I also recall attending the Disadvantaged Groups Roundtable which included representatives from the Salvation Army, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Gingerbread, Communities that Work, Employment Related Services Foundation.
71. I laid a lot of importance on engagement with charities and organisations supporting vulnerable claimants and I had given specific instructions to my Private Office to accept stakeholder meetings with charities and/or organisations supporting disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. To the best of my knowledge, I do not recall ever turning down a meeting unless there were pressing operational needs identified by the Secretary of State or where another minister was more appropriate given ministerial briefs. I believe I had a good working relationship with charities and organisations supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged groups and remained approachable throughout the pandemic.
72. On 9 February 2021 the Work and Pensions Committee published its report on the temporary increase in Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit. The Work & Pensions Committee heard from several external stakeholders, including representatives from Citizens Advice, Rethink Mental Illness, StepChange, Centre for Policy Studies, and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
73. The report recommended that the uplift should be maintained and be extended by 12 months. This mirrored the conclusion of a Joseph Rowntree Foundation report published on 2 February 2021: *Extending the uplift for the next financial year would provide certainty for families and policymakers now and support the economy through another very difficult year. It will allow decisions about the future of support beyond that to be made at a more appropriate time, such as the autumn fiscal events where the Government can set out tax and benefit rates for the following April with reasonable notice.'*

74. On 11 March 2021, along with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and Minister for Employment, we received a submission WQ/014-INQ000592924 asking for approval to extend the Universal Credit uplift by 6 months and for Minimum Income Floor (MIF) not to be applied for an additional three months. As mentioned earlier, the Universal Credit uplift was extended for a further 6 months.
75. As set out above, I had laid a lot of importance on consultation with stakeholders, particularly those representing vulnerable groups. Overall, I think there was more than adequate consultation with all stakeholders. Although I cannot recall specific examples of where engagement with the various stakeholders led to changes in the design of the Universal Credit uplift, I can say that the engagement I had with stakeholders did have a direct impact on the following:
- a. Universal Credit deductions policy
  - b. identification of and support for vulnerable groups on Universal Credit
  - c. changes / exemptions to the Shared Accommodation Rate
  - d. the increase in the Local Housing Allowance rate to the 30th percentile and its subsequent maintenance
  - e. the introduction, and subsequent extensions of the Covid Winter Grant Scheme and the Household Support Fund.
76. Stakeholders understandably requested further changes and additional support and lobbied for the Universal Credit uplift to be made permanent. As I have previously set out, I agreed with them and wanted the Universal Credit uplift to be made permanent. Stakeholders were aware of my personal view and that I was feeding this into the Secretary of State. They were also aware that any decision would be taken by the Chancellor of the Exchequer and that is why they sent letters on this issue directly to the Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer.

#### **Easements to Universal Credit assessments**

77. As set out above, a number of operational, logistical and legislative easements were put in place to allow the Department to deliver its benefit services, including Universal Credit. The easements were introduced in March 2020 and included:

##### *Operational and logistical easements*

- a. Removal of requirement to attend Jobcentre appointments. This was introduced on 19 March 2020.

- b. Suspension of all face-to-face assessments and most reassessments for health and disability benefits. A face-to-face assessment would only be held if it was absolutely necessary. This was introduced on 17 March 2020.
- c. Where possible, assessments were to be made on a paper-based review system and supplemented with a telephone call, if necessary.
- d. The 'Don't call us, we'll call you' campaign began. The front-line team would proactively call customers to verify the information they had provided in their Universal Credit claim and/or send them a message on their online journal (a tool which belongs to the claimant and is used by both claimants and DWP staff to communicate with each other).
- e. The "Trust and Protect" regime which allowed information from claimants to be accepted by telephone but would be verified later via case reviews. This allowed the Department to process the payments quickly whilst ensuring verification checks would follow.
- f. The redeployment of nearly 11,000 staff to meet the surge in claims in order to ensure delivery of benefit services remained unaffected.
- g. The rollout of IT equipment to enable staff to have greater home working capabilities.

*Legislative changes*

- h. the suspension of the Minimum Income Floor for self-employed Universal Credit claimants.

78. The primary policy objective of the easements was to allow for DWP delivery services to be provided safely for DWP staff and members of the public and minimise health risks following wider government advice. Our intention was for the service to continue as smoothly as possible during the pandemic and support the rapid delivery of the DWP economic interventions, including the uplift, to ensure people received the urgent financial support they needed. The rationale and policy objective of the easements is set out in Section 5 of *Annex: Further Information on Operational Easements* WQ/084-INQ000549265. The Department had received approximately 2.7million Universal Credit claims as a result of COVID 19 which represented an increase of 85% in our caseload. On some days the claim rate reached 500% over normal activity. The Department was regularly receiving approximately double the normal claim rate each day. In order to respond to this high volume of demand and make payments on time, the Department agreed with HMT to put in place a number of easements to its processes and controls. This helped the Department to achieve its aim of paying more than 90% of claimants on time and in full. This was the key policy objective of the

easements. The easements met the objectives as the significant number of new Universal Credit claims could be processed quickly and provide financial support to those who were losing their employment as a result of the pandemic.

### Fraud & error risk

79. Along with colleagues, we all recognised that the easements did increase the fraud and error risk and potentially made the Department more vulnerable. Section 5 of **Annex: Further Information on Operational Easements** WQ/084-INQ000549265 expressly acknowledges the fraud and error risk, *These easements, key to allowing claimants to get their payment as quickly as possible, have also led to an increase in the risk of fraud and error.* However, there was an equal recognition that the 'no contact' public health guidance meant there was little, or no option for the Department other than to introduce the easements, in particular, those relating to the identity and verification of claimants. The risk was assessed as high but thought to be essential to respond to the national emergency.
80. At a meeting with Neil Couling on 18 May 2020 WQ/085-INQ000549257, I raised my concern of the potential of heightened fraud risk as a result of the easements. I pointed out that I was increasingly worried about the level of fraud the Department would have to deal with as a result of the easements and wanted to know what mitigation measures were being put in place. Neil Couling explained that the Department had learnt lessons from the Universal Credit advances fraud from the previous year and measures were being considered. I then asked for a meeting to be arranged with the Counter Fraud, Compliance & Debt ('CFCD') lead to go through the fraud mitigation/handling strategy on 21 May 2020.
81. At the meeting on 21 May 2020 WQ/086-INQ000549258 with Counter Fraud, Compliance & Debt lead, I repeated my concern about the increase in fraud and the cost to the Department and emphasised there was a need to act sooner rather than later. I was informed that the Department was taking measures to minimise fraud, defend against organised crime and improve the ability to retrieve the money when possible. I made it clear that Ministers had known there would be an increased risk of fraud as a result of taking measures to speed up Universal Credit claims, but the Department needed to consider next steps to address fraud.

82. The DWP fraud risk assessment was communicated widely within Government, and the Department kept a full record of all its modifications or easements so that the Department could remove or adapt the easements once the emergency had passed WQ/087-INQ000114224. DWP rescinded or adapted many of the easements at the earliest opportunity by building in new steps like the Enhanced Checking Service and ensuring that the Integrated Risk and Intelligence Service ('IRIS') had an increased role in coordinating the monitoring of, and response to, fraud risks from both individuals and organised crime groups. The Department also tagged every benefit claim awarded under the easements which allowed the Department to go back and review the entitlement after the crisis had passed. I have been asked to clarify if more could have been done to minimise fraud and error risk at the outset. One of the practical challenges was that additional functionality would have had to be built into the Universal Credit application process to remind claimants that fraud checks would be made retrospectively. However, I do not believe that this would have been possible to integrate into the process nor a priority at the time given other pressures on the system. Equally a general media campaign advising the public that fraud checks would be made retrospectively to Universal Credit claims may not have deterred fraudulent activity. I question whether a reminder not to commit fraud would have had the deterrent effect suggested. In any event I do not recall a media campaign on retrospective fraud checks being considered. I recall there was nervousness within the Department about highlighting the vulnerability of the system to fraud as it could have led to more sophisticated fraudulent activity once the system weakness was in the public domain. As I recall, the Department's main concern was fraud by serious and organised crime groups rather than individual claimants as there would be an opportunity to review and recover (as appropriate) from claimants at a later date.
83. The easements did not come to an end on a specific date but rather removed or adapted gradually. For example, Section 5 of the **Annex: Further Information on Operational Easements** WQ/084-INQ000549265 sets out the changes that were being introduced to mitigate the fraud and error risk as we moved into the next phase of the pandemic. These included, strengthening the gateway checks and to identify fraud and error and close engagement with experts and stakeholders outside of Government to continually inform and improve our approach to fraud. The Department provided regular updates to HMT and Cabinet Office officials on this work. I provided updates on our fraud and risk to the Secretary of State in my weekly updates WQ/088 INQ000549299 **weekly update for 13 May**).

84. I have been asked to reflect on whether in my view, it was right to make the easements to Universal Credit. It is matter I had considered at length as I recognised that it would make the Department vulnerable to fraud. It is also true to say that the Universal Credit Policy advisers and Neil Couling as the Senior Responsible Officer for Universal Credit were equally aware and concerned. However, the Department was in a difficult, if not impossible situation. On the one hand we had people and their families in need as a direct result of the pandemic whilst there was a competing fraud risk that needed to be thought through. For example, on 30th and 31st March 2020, the Department took 2.2m and 1.8m calls respectively. On a single day we received 110,000 claims and had to deploy 10,000 DWP staff to process the claims so that they could receive the financial assistance as soon as possible. There were 1.5m new claims in a 6-week period. I have now additionally been asked to explain whether DWP could or should have done more to address the fraud risk. As I have set out earlier, there were competing and pressing circumstances that necessitated the introduction of easements. The measures to adopt to minimise the fraud risk are operational issues that I do not feel qualified to answer. The Senior Responsible Officer for Universal Credit, Neil Couling, would be better placed to assist on the issue of fraud and risk. However, it goes without saying that my view was, and remains, that any government department should take all reasonable and proportionate steps to prevent fraud and safeguard taxpayer's money (WQ/089 - INQ000549263 my weekly note to the Secretary of State, 8 June). It was in fact one of the priorities for 2021 (WQ/033 - INQ000549288 my weekly note to the Secretary of State, 25 January)

85. Although ultimately the decision was taken by the Secretary of State, she canvassed views from Ministers and officials. I sent my views to Secretary of State by email on 28 March 2020 (WQ/090-INQ000549243) in relation to the verification easement expressly recognising the increased fraud and error risks and that this will require HMT approval, but it was my view that *these recommendations are sensible under the circumstances as we need to do all we can to get people the funds they need as quickly as possible*. On 17 July 2020 (WQ/091-INQ000549267) stressing my concern when we were considering the suspension of face-to-face appointments. I cannot recall who I expressed my concern to regarding the suspension but given that this was a response to a submission, it would likely have been a comment to the Secretary of State as she was the decision maker. I emphasised that *fraud remains one of my biggest concerns hence why we are meeting weekly for updates. The measures already taken will see fraud significantly reduce and we do need time to allow this to bed in and then keep it under review. As soon as we are able to, I am keen for us to prioritise more face to*

face ID Verification but I am also concerned about a second spike as the furlough scheme tapers off so we have to remain agile as an organisation to be in a position to respond and quickly. In terms of which option to pursue, I am minded to be led by the operational team as to what they believe to be most sensible given what we fear may be coming down the track. It was my view then, and now, that the risk of fraud, as unacceptable and unpalatable as it was, was less than the very real risk of hundreds of thousands of people in economic distress not receiving the support they desperately needed in a timely manner. The Department had also seen what was occurring globally and wished to avoid a similar situation in the UK. For example, in countries that relied on paper forms, they saw long queues of people outside the job centres which increased the health risk to the individual. Given the medical guidance from the World Health Organisation ('WHO') and UK, the need to avoid such a situation was very much in our minds. The decisions on easements were not easy to make, and they were certainly not made lightly.

86. In June 2020 we considered the position regarding the extension to keep the current HMT permitted identity easement in place. I agreed to the continuation of the easement in my email of 5 June 2020 [WQ/092-INQ000549260](#).
87. Addressing fraud remained a key concern for me. This is reflected in a number of submissions and emails that were sent from me to the Secretary of State. For ease of reference, I have listed them below:
- a. As part of the Covid-19 response, criminal investigations of potential fraud were suspended, with the exception of serious and organised cases. Investigation work was to restart, and it was suggested that a financial threshold of £10,000 be set for commencing a criminal investigation. In my email of 29 July 2020, I queried the proposed financial threshold of £10,000 for commencing criminal investigations [WQ/093-INQ000549268](#). I received a response from the Department on 29 July 2020 [WQ/094-INQ000655621](#) setting out their reasons for the proposed threshold.
  - b. On 7 August 2020, I received a submission on partially fraudulent Universal Credit claims [WQ/095-INQ000655622](#) setting out various options for me to review and get a decision from the Secretary of State. Having considered the options, I was dissatisfied with the level of detail for one of the options. On 10 August 2020, my office sent an email [WQ/096-INQ000549269](#) asking for clarity on how the various options would operate in practice and their impact on vulnerable claimants before sending any recommendations to the Secretary of State. I

received a response on 2 September 2020 ( WQ/097-INQ000655623 ) from Strategy Policy and Change for Fraud Error and Debt.

- c. In early April 2020 ( WQ/098-INQ000549293 ) a 3-month suspension was set on the use of civil and administrative penalties for minor matters so that the Department could focus on the most serious fraud. I supported the re-introduction of the penalties and sent my recommendation to the Secretary of State for her to make a decision.
- d. I attended the cross departmental Fraud Board which I seem to recall was chaired by Lord Agnew. The Board met regularly, I believe on a monthly basis. I would inform the Secretary of State of the discussions. For example, my weekly note of 19 October 2020 ( WQ/060-INQ000549295 ) to the Secretary of State informed her of the discussion and agreement on better data sharing across the departments.
- e. I raised the issue of writing to Lord Agnew in my weekly Note of 9 November ( WQ/099-INQ000549294 ) on the Spending Review bid to reduce fraud levels. However, Secretary of State decided that this would need to be considered in the next budget.
- f. Email of 8 June 2020 from my Private Office ( WQ/100-INQ000655619 ) discussing fraud communication strategy.
- g. Email of 3 July 2020 from my Private Office ( WQ/101-INQ000655620 ) confirming that I had commissioned for an update on actions being taken against Fraud and Error. I suggested that I would bring this to the attention of the Secretary of State and ascertain if she wished to receive updates
- h. Email of 8 January 2021 from my Private Office ( WQ/102-INQ000655624 ) expressing frustration at the lack of urgency in addressing fraud and asking for an update.
- i. Email of 11 January 2021 from my Private Office ( WQ/103-INQ000549285 ) saying I wanted to discuss the fraud risk and an ongoing operation with the Secretary of State.

### **Implementation and Delivery of Universal Credit uplift and Working Tax Credit**

- 88. The Universal Credit uplift and Working Tax Credit were delivered automatically to all recipients without a need to apply. The Universal Credit/HMRC systems generated automatic payments to claimants and were issued through the existing benefit systems. Universal Credit advances were paid same day or next day and 93% of Universal Credit claims were paid in full and on time. The rapid implementation of the Universal Credit uplift by the Department was acknowledged as a success and

received praise. In my view this shows the uplift was implemented effectively by the Department.

89. It might assist the Inquiry if I explain how the Universal Credit process works. The Universal Credit assessment period starts on the day a claim is made and runs for one full calendar month. At the end of an assessment period, the Department calculates the claimant's entitlement based on their circumstances during that month. The payment is then made 7 days later. The Universal Credit uplift regulations were intended to apply to assessment periods beginning on or after 6 April 2020. When implemented, the uplift was coded into the Universal Credit system which meant it was applied to assessment periods ending on or after 6 April 2020. Consequently, all claimants received the uplift up to a month earlier than planned. A submission was sent on 2 April 2020 (WQ/104-INQ000549244) to approve urgent amendments to the regulations to ensure they matched the implementation date of the uplift. The amendments were laid in Parliament on 3 April 2020 and came into force on 6 April.

90. As a result of the change to the implementation dates of the uplift, it meant that for one month the standard allowance rate would be based on the 2019-20 rates, then change to the 2020-21 rates for the following month. On 20 November 2020, I received a submission which highlighted the issue to the Secretary of State and the likely confusion it may cause for claimants and communication. (WQ/029 - INQ000592919) which is a submission highlighting the modification of the implementation date)

91. I did not work directly with HMT during the implementation phase of the Universal Credit uplift or subsequent extension. Once funding and expenditure has been agreed with HMT, they would generally leave DWP to progress the delivery and implementation of welfare and labour market policies, including the Covid economic interventions for which DWP was responsible. I have been asked if had encountered any challenge in working with other government departments in respect of the Universal Credit uplift. I did not. In my view, the communication and collaboration between DWP and HMT was always present given the inextricable relationship between the two departments. This remained the case during the pandemic. I was, however frustrated by the time it took HMT to make a decision on the funding relating to extensions of the Universal Credit uplift. Although I understood the reasoning, my weekly notes demonstrate my impatience for a decision (WQ/033-INQ000549288; WQ/105-INQ000549277; WQ/081-INQ000549284) as I was aware of the need to communicate to

Universal Credit recipients as soon as possible whether the uplift would be extended so they could budget accordingly and we could explore mitigation measures.

92. I was involved in the public communications on the uplift. A series of social media releases with animated explainers [WQ/106-INQ000549245] were to be released incrementally over the week and would deal with one issue each day: Minimum Income Floor, State Pension, Universal Credit and Local Housing Allowance. The Universal Credit uplift was announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and I vaguely recall it being widely covered in the media and on Government social media channels. I do not recall other steps taken to increase awareness of the uplift. Whilst I was involved with public communications, it must be understood that there is a long-standing DWP policy to ensure information is accessible to all claimants, but I cannot recall the exact steps to ensure that information about the uplift was accessible. I do not feel qualified to comment on the adequacy, or otherwise, of the communications strategy on the uplift. It is important to appreciate that the uplift cannot be detached from the Universal Credit system. As explained earlier, the uplift was integrated into the amount that would be payable and claimants, new or existing, did not have to do anything more than submit a claim and the system was accessible for these purposes. Although Universal Credit is an online system, I understand claims were also made over the telephone and, where appropriate or necessary, in person via a JobCentre. Any new claimant would receive the information they required from DWP staff (see below on the text and telephone communications with claimants). Additionally, the Help to Claim service via Citizens Advice was also available.
93. I was also responsible for the communications plan when the Universal Credit uplift came to an end. I wrote to the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee [WQ/107 INQ000549298] on 22 July 2021 setting out the steps we were intending to take to notify claimants that the uplift was due to end in the Autumn. This was to be achieved through the Universal Credit journal and website statements rather than writing to individual claimants. When the Universal Credit uplift was due to be removed, I was engaged in developing the communications strategy and approach. I had a meeting with Neil Couling on 24 May 2021 [WQ/108-INQ000549291] in which we discussed the need for a communications package to ensure claimants understood the forthcoming change. I agreed to raise this with the Secretary of State to make her aware of the need to begin work on the uplift removal and a communications campaign.

94. Overall, the rapid implementation and delivery of the Universal Credit uplift did not, in my view, have any adverse impact on the communication with the wider public as the government had made public announcements of the measures it was going to introduce, including the uplift. Furthermore, claimants were informed of the uplift through the Universal Credit statement, journal message (which is tool for communication between DWP and the claimant) and information from frontline DWP staff.
95. However, it is fair to say that a surge in new Universal Credit claims around the time the uplift was implemented in April 2020 meant that new claimants (in other words, those who had never claimed any benefits) may not have been aware that their standard allowance calculation contained the uplift. This concern was raised and considered in a submission on 28 July 2021 (ID: WQ/109-INQ000592920) - **plan to communicate the end of the Universal Credit Uplift**) outlined the proposed communications strategy to inform claimants when the uplift ended. There was extensive media coverage and engagement with stakeholders surrounding the uncertainty of whether the Universal Credit uplift would be extended. Throughout this period, communications consistently reminded the public of the uplift's temporary nature, both at its introduction and during discussions about its potential extension.
96. I have addressed the fraud and error risk above. As stated above, there was an imperative on speedy design, implementation and delivery of the Universal Credit uplift with a view to dealing with fraud as part of the Department's general response once things had settled.

#### **Monitoring and Evaluation of the Universal Credit uplift and Working Tax Credit**

97. As set out above, the introduction and extension of the Universal Credit uplift aimed to achieve three fiscal and social policy objectives, introducing a clear, easy to understand policy that provided financial assistance for those facing the most significant financial disruption due to the pandemic and providing this financial assistance quickly without risking the stability of the social security system or causing delays in payments. Against these fiscal and social policy objectives the Department did, in my view, effectively monitor and evaluate on an ongoing basis the effectiveness of the Universal Credit uplift policy. The Department reported to Ministers daily on new claimants, payment timeliness, system performance and other metrics which enabled Ministers, on the advice of officials to make changes. For example, at the operational

meeting on 20 August, [WQ/110-INQ000549292](#) Universal Credit Uplift Operational delivery note), Neil Couling, the Senior Responsible Officer for Universal Credit, explained the challenges the Department had faced in one night of 19 August when the Department had sent 2.6 million text messages to claimants. DWP was sending approximately a million text messages a day to keep claimants informed. This created a strain on the telephone service and we needed to identify a solution to this problem. Neil Couling informed the meeting said that the high volume of calls being received and expected meant that the current supplier would be unlikely to cope with the demand. It was anticipated that there would be a further surge in telephone calls once the Universal Credit uplift is removed. I expressed my biggest concern was to get the message to the claimants in good time so that they understood what was to happen. The meeting then discussed how this challenge could be mitigated and managed. It was agreed that DWP would look into engaging a second supplier. The Secretary of State agreed with me that automated messages ('we will call you') would help along with posters in JobCentres. I have been asked to explain the success measures DWP identified for the Universal Credit uplift, the adequacy of DWP monitoring and evaluation, the assessment of the economic impact of the uplift and analysis DWP carried out on the impact of the uplift on the intended beneficiary group of the policy. Unfortunately, I am unable to assist the Inquiry on these matters as I do not recall the measures that were put in place in respect of each of them.

98. The changes were more to operational issues rather than policy design. This was to ensure that policy intent was achieved.
99. As the Universal Credit uplift was of universal application by design, all claimants received the uplift without the need to apply for it. I do not recall specific gaps being identified but that does not mean that there were no gaps. As I have mentioned earlier, I had been working on support for vulnerable groups and there were difficulties in identifying and tracking them on the Universal Credit system. I raised this with the Secretary of State in my weekly update to her ([WQ/058-INQ000549296](#)); [WQ/049-INQ000549239](#). Once the gap was identified, DWP officials continued to work on it during the pandemic and progress was made. I informed the Secretary of State of the progress my weekly Note of 5 October [WQ/105-INQ000549277](#) and 19 October [WQ/060-INQ000549295](#).
100. Other issues were also identified, for example, a number of claimants moving from Working Tax Credit to Universal Credit found that they were not eligible as it breached the capital limit (£16,000) which existed for Universal Credit but not Working Tax

Credit. However, I am unable to recall exactly when this arose. As I recall we explored a mechanism for claimants to move back to Working Tax Credit, but this was considered operationally impracticable. I worked with Neil Couling to have a check box on the Universal Credit application so that people were made aware of the capital limit and that if they wished to continue and were found to be ineligible, they would not be able to move back to Working Tax Credit. We were also alive to the fact that there were groups of people who would not benefit from the Universal Credit uplift or Local Housing Allowance increase but were nevertheless vulnerable and potentially struggling. For this group, I pushed for additional support that was discretionary via local authorities (The Covid Winter Grant Scheme and Household Support Fund) on the basis that they had an existing mechanism via local welfare assistance and were well placed to identify people who did not qualify for Universal Credit, for example pensioners and those with no recourse to public funds. I also recall an issue with the early release of prisoners and the DWP acted to remove restrictions for prisoners which would have prevented them from accessing means tested benefits.

101. As set out earlier, Universal Credit is a UK-wide benefit reserved to the UK Government to implement nationally. I am not aware of what, if any monitoring or evaluation was in place in the devolved nations on the impact of the Universal Credit uplift. I do not recall whether the uplift had a differential impact across the four nations.

102. I do not recall any specific monitoring or evaluation of the economic impact, coverage and effectiveness of the uplift across economically and socially vulnerable groups other than the ongoing poverty evaluation and monitoring which was carried out by the Poverty, Families and Disadvantage team and included claimants on Universal Credit by local authority area. I was aware of this overarching monitoring and evaluation.

103. However, I am aware that Income, Families, and Disadvantage Analysis' monitoring WQ/111-INQ000592922 used the July 2020 Universal Credit data to model a distributional analysis of removing the £20 uplift. This analysis included assessing the impact on those most likely to move into very low income if the uplift was removed. The analysis also took into account the family type, region, housing type, employment status and disability status.

104. In January 2022, the Income Families and Disadvantage Analysis (IFDA) examined the short-term indicators of poverty. This analysis was partly undertaken to monitor the impact of the removal of the Universal Credit uplift. The analysis showed

[WQ/112-INQ000592923](#) – Poverty Monitoring Dashboard) that the percentage of Universal Credit claims by those on very low income declined during the uplift but rose following the removal of the uplift. Regardless of the initial policy intent, the Universal Credit uplift had a broader positive impact on reducing poverty and was, therefore, correctly considered. As I recall, monitoring poverty and poverty drivers is a longstanding function of the Department and is taken into account in such analysis.

105. I was made aware of a trilateral meeting between the DWP Secretary of State, Prime Minister and Chancellor [WQ/029 - INQ000592919](#). In preparation of the meeting a paper was commissioned by the Prime Minister and was to be taken forward by HMT, DWP and the No. 10 Policy Unit. A number of policy options were considered, and modelling was carried out for each option: making the uplift permanent, an extension of the uplift to 2021-22, a 3-month extension of the uplift, a 6-month extension of the uplift, and the phased withdrawal of the uplift over 12 months. The modelling for each option included the costings and the impact on published poverty measures [WQ/113-INQ000592918](#), [WQ/114-INQ000653780](#), and [WQ/115-INQ000653779](#).

106. I understand that the Department also undertook further analysis and modelling of the specific impact on poverty rates at the end of the uplift [WQ/115-INQ000653779](#) Annex A: Distributional impacts of removing the £20 uplift from Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit in 2021/22). The analysis examined the impact on the number of claimants who would move into absolute poverty; the impact on rates of child poverty; and the differential impact on poverty rates based on family type, employment status, housing type, age, region, and disability. The Department produced an analysis paper on the consequences of ending the uplift and the various options for the future of the uplift. The analysis outlined the costings for each of the policy proposals for the years 2021 to 2026 [WQ/116-INQ000654461](#) and [WQ/020-INQ000592925](#). DWP would have conducted the analysis to make a case to No.10 and HMT for a further extension of the uplift or making the uplift permanent.

### **Cessation of the Universal Credit uplift and Working Tax Credit**

107. I have been asked by the Inquiry whether in my view the Universal Credit uplift was removed at the right time. It is perhaps worth highlighting the slight difference in terminology between DWP and HMT. The Universal Credit uplift was always intended to come to an end on a certain date as the Universal Credit uplift was introduced as an economic intervention for the pandemic and not as a measure under a broader

poverty alleviation public policy. DWP saw this as a 'removal' of the uplift as it would need to be removed from the system. HMT, on the other hand, I believe, took the view was that it was not a removal of the uplift but rather it was an economic intervention that was not being extended. Notwithstanding I had left the Department on 16 September 2021 (see paragraphs above), I have been asked to explain what further consideration was given to extending the Universal Credit uplift. As I was no longer in the Department I would not have been involved or engaged in any discussions or considerations on any further extension to the uplift. All I can say is that any questions on a further extension would need to be presented to No10 and HMT.

108. As set out above, I left the Department on 16 September 2021 and, as I recall, I was not involved with the decision on the cessation of the Universal Credit uplift or Working Tax Credit. I am, therefore, unable to assist the Inquiry with the cessation of the Universal Credit uplift.

109. Notwithstanding my response above, my view at the time and my view today is that the uplift should have been made permanent. However, my view is based on the positive impact of the uplift on individuals, families and vulnerable and disadvantaged groups on Universal Credit generally and not specifically related to the pandemic.

#### **Reflections on the Universal Credit uplift**

110. I am grateful to the Chair for seeking my reflections generally on the uplift to Universal Credit and I comment, notwithstanding the convention on collective responsibility and with the benefit of hindsight. On balance, I consider that the uplift achieved its objectives in that it provided additional support for those facing unexpected financial distress due to a reduction in income or loss of employment. It is important to remember that the Universal Credit uplift was introduced at a time of great uncertainty, time constraints and DWP system limitations. Not having up to date information on the DWP and HMT's system capabilities, it is difficult to say if a similar uplift should be implemented in any future pandemic or civil emergency. With regards to the approach to managing financial risk, although the need to implement the uplift at speed was a factor, so too was the risk of the system and DWP officials being unable to cope with the sheer number of new Universal Credit claims and there being a risk of system failure and therefore claimants not getting the support they needed in a timely manner.

111. DWP officials are best placed to advise the Chair on system capabilities now and likely capabilities in the future which would no doubt determine what would be within the art of the possible in the event of a future pandemic or civil emergency. Those with lived experience of Universal Credit and the charities and organisations that support them would be best placed to advise the Chair on whether an uplift would be the right intervention in the event of a future pandemic or civil emergency.
112. The design and delivery of the uplift was based around the fiscal and social policy objectives that I have already set out. As I recall, it was not designed specifically to address inequalities and economically vulnerable groups. The Universal Credit uplift was designed for those who were facing significant economic shock as a result of a dramatic loss in income or losing their employment. The advantage of the Universal Credit uplift policy was that those already in receipt of Universal Credit also benefited from the increased support as the uplift was applied to every claimant, new or existing. It is important to remember that the Universal Credit uplift intervention should not be viewed in isolation as it was supported by other measures that were specifically designed with vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in mind, for example, the Covid Winter Grant Scheme and Household Support Fund, discussed above.
113. I have addressed the fraud and error risk on the Universal Credit uplift above, including the risk that was recognised in its design and implementation, in particular, the easements that were necessary for effective implementation. I refer the Inquiry to the relevant paragraphs in my statement.
114. Although I have been asked to consider whether the uplift was value for money, I do not feel qualified to answer this question other than to suggest that I suspect those in receipt of Universal Credit during that period would have considered it to have been. I cannot recall if an analysis was carried out in order to determine the level of the Universal Credit uplift. As far as I can recall, the £20 was set in discussions between the Secretary of State, No. 10 and HMT. As explained earlier, I was not privy to those discussions.
115. I have been asked to set out the main challenges that were encountered in relation to the Universal Credit uplift during the pandemic and whether things could have been done differently. The Universal Credit uplift was relatively simple to introduce, implement, deliver and extend. It was chosen as a Covid 19 economic intervention specifically for these reasons. Overall, it presented few operational challenges during the pandemic. Under the same unique circumstances (which included the global

situation, rapidly changing economic situation, health risk, medical guidance by the World Health Organisation and UK), I cannot think of anything that I would have done differently in the design, implementation or delivery of the uplift. If we had the benefit of more time and without DWP system capability constraints, a more targeted economic intervention may have been considered. It is not possible to simply transpose an economic intervention between different national crisis, even if it is another pandemic as each has its own dynamics, impact on the economic situation and impact on the labour market. The more viable options policy makers have available to them the better. The ability to target support to those who would face the most severe impact in any future pandemic would inevitably be helpful.

116. I am not able to give a steer on any particular recommendations that the Chair to the Inquiry should consider or make as each pandemic may well differ in its nature, extent and impact. However, I will highlight some factors that the Chair may wish to take into account. The pandemic demonstrated the capability of the Universal Credit system to deliver an economic intervention at scale and speed. However, it also showed the vulnerability and considerable constraints of the legacy benefits systems due to the outdated infrastructure that was in place; this needs to be resolved. There is a clear need for a back-up plan for any legacy systems so that they, or a suitable alternative, can be deployed at scale and speed; this would be beneficial. Equally, it may well be that Universal Credit becomes the only benefit, but this will take time. I am of the view that any decisions relating to benefits should, wherever feasible, be taken as far in advance as possible to give claimants sufficient notice to budget and plan accordingly. I appreciate this may not have been feasible during the pandemic as HMT were trying to balance a number of issues with multiple government departments at the same time.

117. The Department relied heavily on online systems to enable people to submit claims which in the case of COVID 19 was hugely helpful. However, it is vital that there is a backup plan in the event of an IT outage or cyber-attack which may paralyse the system and deny access to claimants or the processing of payments. It would be sensible to start, if the Department hasn't already, considering such options. Finally, it would help to identify 'off the shelf' options for economic interventions for different eventualities based on the Government's risk register. Although the Department had well-rehearsed business continuity plans, my understanding and sense I had when in the Department was that these were largely based on an economic downturn and specifically on the Department's response during the last economic downturn. Greater scenario planning and contingency and business continuity planning can only help the

Department be more prepared for future pandemics or civil emergencies. These would be sensible along with periodic cross government planning exercises to test how each measure could be deployed, what would be required to deliver them, identify any limitations and see how quickly they could be operationalised.

#### **SECTION 4: ECONOMIC HARDSHIP AND LONG COVID**

118. The Inquiry has asked me when I first became aware of Long Covid. I cannot recall exactly when I first became aware of Long Covid.

119. I have been asked if I consider the Long Covid risk had been adequately considered in the decision-making process for each of the economic interventions. I am unable to assist with all economic interventions as I did not have any direct or indirect involvement with all of them. I am only able to address the issue of Long Covid in relation to the UC uplift. Long Covid was not known or fully understood at the outset of the pandemic. In March 2020 no-one in the Department including me knew of the existence or prevalence of Long Covid. At the same time, the medical understanding of Long Covid was also in its infancy and there was little understanding of Long Covid and how it interacted with other health conditions. In the absence of such information or guidance, neither the Department nor I were in a position to consider Long Covid when designing the Universal Credit uplift. However, it is fair to say that individuals who developed Long Covid were able to claim disability-related benefits, subject to them meeting the eligibility criteria.

120. I have also been asked to clarify how my appreciation of the risk of increased economic hardship due to Long Covid evolved during my time at DWP. I do not think I had any specific appreciation of Long Covid as part of Universal Credit policy or operation. As set out above, any disability elements were largely covered by the Minister for Disabled People and not me. I regret that I cannot assist any further on this.

#### **SECTION 5: REQUEST FOR DOCUMENTS**

121. Between 1 January 2020 and 16 September 2021 (when I left DWP), I relied on my Parliamentary email, DWP work email and Teams account to communicate with colleagues on the economic response to the pandemic (Universal Credit uplift). I do

not recall the format of submissions but suspect these were a mixture of both hard copy and email.

122. I did use messaging services such as WhatsApp to maintain informal contact and provide informal support to colleagues, particularly when we were working from home and unable to see each other. However, informal communication channels, including WhatsApp, were not authorised for conducting official DWP business and we did not use them to make policy decisions during the pandemic. As requested, I have included WhatsApp messages to colleagues which relate to the uplift to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit.

123. I have included all key emails between 1 January 2020 and 16 September 2021.

124. I do not hold any relevant diary or notebook records.

#### STATEMENT OF TRUTH

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Signed:

**Personal Data**

Name: Will Quince

Date:

20<sup>th</sup> October 2025