Baroness Meacher
House of Lords
London
SW1A 0PW

15 March 2016

Dear Molly,

Welfare Reform and Work Bill

Thank you for your work in scrutinising the Welfare Reform and Work Bill during its passage through the House of Lords. I promised to write to you about the concerns you raised during the final session of Lords Consideration of Commons Reasons on 7 March regarding claimant suicide and whether we could report on any future changes to the level of claimant suicide in the work related activity group.

I stated during the debate that the Department has published analysis related to this issue and the published data I referred to can be found here: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/459106/mortality-statistics-esa-ib-sda.pdf. I must stress that DWP statisticians made clear in this publication that no causal link can be made between the likelihood of dying and the fact that someone is claiming benefits. The independent fact checking organisation, Full Fact, have supported this and stated the following: "It was widely reported that thousands of people died within weeks of being found "fit for work" and losing their benefits. This is wrong."

The analysis released does not look specifically at suicide as the Department does not collect cause of death information. Collecting cause of death information, such as suicide, would involve considerable additional data collection from individuals, the Office for National Statistics and the Department of Health, incurring additional resource expense and imposing additional burdens on registrars and coroners. Given the widely acknowledged difficulty in identifying the causes of suicide it is not clear that attempting to collect this data would be justifiable or proportionate.

A recent British Medical Journal report did attempt to look at suicide and the Work Capability Assessment (WCA). The authors of this report stated explicitly that they had not been able to establish a causal link between the WCA and increases in suicide, self-harm and adverse mental health. It is therefore unfortunate that this is not what was reported.

The Department takes the death of any claimant seriously. Where the Department is made aware that a person has died and it is suggested that this may be associated with DWP activity, a review is undertaken to identify if any lessons can be learned. However, trying to assess who might be at risk of suicide is not an exact science. The Royal College of Psychiatrists states "Accurate prediction is never possible for individual patients ... because of the multiplicity of, and complex interrelation of, factors underlying a person's behaviour."

With regard to claimants in vulnerable situations, guidance is kept under constant review. Individuals who express suicidal ideation during the WCA are taken very seriously, and healthcare professionals must seek further evidence from a suitable source where there is reference to suicidal ideation, self-harm or previous suicide attempts in the WCA (ESA50) questionnaire or during a WCA.

This Government is committed to protecting the most vulnerable and that is why, building on the findings of five independent reviews, we have introduced a number of improvements to the WCA process in recent years. This includes increasing the number of healthcare professionals who specialise in mental health, improving training for decision makers to ensure they have sufficient knowledge and understanding of mental health conditions, and the introduction of a telephone support service to help claimants complete their ESA50 health questionnaire. Improvements such as these have made it easier for people with mental health conditions to receive appropriate support through the welfare system.

I hope this answers your concerns on this issue. I will place a copy of this letter in the House Library.

Yours sincerely,

Lord Freud

Minister of State for Welfare Reform