



Department
for Work &
Pensions

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Wendy Chamberlain MP

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Dear Wendy,

Thank you for your letter following last week's Westminster Hall debate, and for raising the concerns you and your caseworkers have encountered about the prioritisation of Work Capability Assessments (WCAs). I appreciate the impact that delays can have on claimants, particularly those who are vulnerable, and I am grateful for the opportunity to provide clarity.

First of all, I would like to notify you of an error in my speech. I said that "After the pandemic, there was a very slow return to face to face: in 2024, only 13% of work capability assessments were face to face." The correct figure is 12%. I apologise for the error, and I am placing a copy of the letter in the House Library so that the correction can be on the record. The rest of this letter addresses your questions.

Prioritisation of assessments

As a matter of principle, the Department has always prioritised new claims ahead of routine reassessments. This ensures that people entering the benefit system receive support as quickly as possible.

However, there were exceptional circumstances in late 2024. A surge in new WCA referrals occurred as large numbers of Income Support and Tax Credit claimants migrated to Universal Credit. In order to protect journey times for these new claimants, the Department made the decision to temporarily pause routine reassessment referrals.

Nevertheless, this influx of new claims had the unintended consequence of creating a backlog of customer-led reassessments, where individuals had reported a deterioration in their health and were awaiting a review. I fully recognise the effect this had on those affected.

Action taken to address the backlog

Once it became clear that this backlog had built up, I instructed officials to make a temporary exception to the usual prioritisation rules and to expedite these customer-led reassessments, in some cases even ahead of new claims, so that we could bring waiting times back into a reasonable position.

This instruction has since been communicated to all Functional Assessment Service (FAS) providers, including Maximus, and all are acting on it. As a result, we expect the vast

majority of cases that built up between September 2024 and May 2025 to be cleared by the end of this month.

We will of course continue to monitor the status of claimant-led reassessments to ensure that appropriate action is taken in the unlikely event that such a backlog recurs.

Use of discretion in individual cases

Outside these exceptional circumstances, providers are expected to follow the Department's standard prioritisation rules so that all claimants receive a consistent and fair service.

The Department does, however, retain discretion to prioritise an assessment where there is a compelling and demonstrable need, such as:

- where a significant delay has arisen due to departmental error, or;
- where there is evidence of a serious risk to the claimant's life or health if the case were to progress in the usual way.

This discretion rests with the Department alone. Providers cannot independently decide to expedite cases.

It is important that expedition is reserved for genuinely exceptional cases, to ensure journey times are protected for the wider claimant base, including many vulnerable claimants who are themselves awaiting assessment.

Thank you again for raising these issues and for your continued engagement on behalf of your constituents.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Stephen Timms". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line above the name.

Rt Hon. Sir Stephen Timms MP
Minister for Social Security and Disability