# Commons committee urges statutory duty to protect vulnerable benefit claimants after rise in deaths



A pressing call for reform has emerged from the Commons Work and Pensions Committee, urging the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to establish a legal duty to safeguard vulnerable benefit claimants. The inquiry follows alarming reports linking DWP practices to numerous tragic deaths among those depending on welfare support. The MPs' recommendations are underscored by harrowing cases such as that of Errol Graham, who starved after his disability payments were erroneously halted, and Laura Winham, who was not found for three years after her benefits were cut, illustrating systemic failures within the DWP.

Between July 2019 and July 2022, the DWP's own internal process reviews into cases of harm and death nearly doubled, highlighting an escalating crisis within its safeguarding policies. The committee noted that current measures are inadequate, stating, “The existing approach is not working.” This lack of oversight has raised concerns about the scale of the issue, with many more vulnerable claimants at risk. Debbie Abrahams, the committee's chair, pointed to an “unhelpful media narrative” that further compounds distrust towards the DWP, suggesting that the government's focus on cost-cutting has taken precedence over genuine care for those most in need.

The report also mentions Philippa Day, a 27-year-old who took her own life amid ongoing struggles with mental health exacerbated by a reduction in her benefits. This dreadful incident mirrors a broader pattern of distress among claimants, including a recent case where a coroner condemned the DWP for failing to act on clear indicators of a claimant’s vulnerabilities, which ultimately contributed to tragedy. Evidence suggests that the DWP's policies may have played a role in hundreds, if not thousands, of deaths over the years, prompting calls from MPs, disabled activists, and families for a public inquiry to hold the department accountable.

Advocates argue that the need for a statutory duty of care is paramount. Such a mandate would require the DWP to proactively safeguard vulnerable individuals, in stark contrast to the current voluntary guidelines that have proven insufficient. Currently, the DWP claims it is reforming its approach to improve protectiveness towards vulnerable users; however, critics argue that the reforms lack the substantive changes needed to genuinely support those in distress.

As the inquiry unfolds, concerns about transparency remain prevalent. MPs have urged the DWP to provide regular reports detailing the number of deaths linked to disability assessments, aiming for increased accountability in its operations. With criticism mounting over the DWP's handling of vulnerable claimants and the disturbing legacy of unaddressed deaths, the urgent matter of ensuring safety and support within the welfare system has never been clearer. The potential implementation of a statutory duty could be a pivotal step towards rectifying the DWP’s longstanding issues, fostering a more compassionate approach for those reliant on its services.

As the nation watches, it remains crucial that the voices of those advocating for reform lead to meaningful change, ensuring that the most vulnerable are not left to navigate the system alone.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1-2, 4, 5
2. Paragraphs 1, 3, 4
3. Paragraphs 1, 3, 4
4. Paragraphs 1, 3
5. Paragraphs 1, 3, 4
6. Paragraph 3
7. Paragraph 3

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/dwp-benefit-claimant-death-disability-b2750871.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/7866/safeguarding-vulnerable-claimants/> - In July 2023, the UK Parliament's Work and Pensions Committee initiated an inquiry into safeguarding vulnerable claimants to assess how the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) supports these individuals and whether its safeguarding approach requires change. The inquiry highlights that, despite DWP implementing various safeguarding processes, it currently lacks a statutory duty to protect the wellbeing of vulnerable claimants. Between July 2019 and July 2022, the number of Internal Process Reviews (IPRs)—DWP's internal investigations into cases where its actions have led to death or harm—more than doubled, indicating systemic issues within the department.
3. <https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/mps-launch-inquiry-into-dwp-safeguarding-after-decade-of-deaths/> - In response to a decade of deaths linked to the DWP's actions, MPs have launched an inquiry into the department's safeguarding practices. The inquiry aims to examine how the DWP supports vulnerable benefit claimants and whether its approach to safeguarding needs to change. Evidence suggests that DWP's policies and practices may have contributed to hundreds, possibly thousands, of deaths among disabled benefit claimants, prompting calls for a public inquiry into the department's role in these tragedies.
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/mar/10/coroner-criticises-benefits-rules-after-vulnerable-claimants-death> - A coroner criticized the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) after a woman died from an overdose following a six-month official investigation that left her with soaring universal credit debts. The coroner's report highlighted multiple missed opportunities by the DWP to record information about the woman's vulnerability, despite her expressing distress and advising the department of her mental health issues. The DWP's failure to act on these indicators contributed to the claimant's mental health decline and eventual death.
5. <https://wecil.org.uk/mps-activists-and-families-unite-in-call-for-public-inquiry-into-dwp-linked-deaths/> - MPs, disabled activists, and bereaved families have united in calling for a public inquiry into the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) following years of deaths linked to its actions. Investigations have uncovered evidence suggesting that DWP's policies and practices may have contributed to hundreds, possibly thousands, of deaths among disabled benefit claimants. The call for an independent public inquiry aims to examine the roles of ministers, civil servants, and advisers in these tragedies and to hold the department accountable for its actions.
6. <https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/mps-call-on-dwp-to-report-on-deaths-linked-to-benefit-assessments/> - A committee of MPs has called on the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to publish regular reports detailing how many deaths of disabled people are linked to the disability benefits assessment system. The MPs express deep concern that claimants continue to experience psychological distress due to the assessment process, nearly five years after the committee's last investigation into the system. The report emphasizes the need for transparency and accountability in the DWP's handling of benefit assessments and their impact on claimants' health and wellbeing.
7. <https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/the-department-for-work-and-pensions-deaths-cover-up-and-a-toxic-30-year-legacy/> - Evidence spanning over a decade reveals that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has repeatedly ignored recommendations to improve the safety of its disability benefits assessment system, leading to numerous avoidable deaths of disabled claimants. The DWP has also been found to withhold key evidence linking its actions to these deaths from independent reviews and grieving families. This pattern of systemic negligence and a culture of cover-up within the DWP highlights the need for significant reforms to protect vulnerable claimants.