

Our civil servants have risen to the occasion of the pandemic

Last week, there was a significant moment in our fight against this terrible virus, as the alert level was lowered by our chief medical officers.

As they have said, this does not mean the pandemic is over – far from it. But it is a welcome sign and shows that the collective sacrifice you, the British people, have made and are continuing to make is turning the tide on this assailant.

As such, this milestone lends itself to reflection – and I want to take the opportunity to pay tribute to the fine work of my Department in supporting those in need through these arduous times, something that has been overlooked by many who have criticised the Government's, and in particular Civil Servants', response to Coronavirus.

Because it's all too easy to fall into the trap of being constantly critical, throwing stones from the outside and casting aspersions on Civil Servants who cannot publicly answer you back.

So let's examine DWP's response to the current pandemic. No welfare system in the world is designed to cope with such a seismic public health emergency, requiring the government to introduce extensive restrictions in order to protect life.

A rapid response on a huge scale was required and the team delivered. We continue to do so.

A crisis contingency plan – drawn up in anticipation of an almost unimaginable scenario such as this – was swiftly enacted. Systems were streamlined. Staff were redeployed. Ways of working were overhauled. IT was dispatched. All within the space of a few days. And thanks to dedicated civil servants working day and night to make it possible.

So effective were the changes that, despite unprecedented volumes, we were able to improve the service we were offering; moving to a 'don't call us, we'll call you' model if we needed further information to process a claim. We even increased the number of claims we paid in full and on time – setting a new record rate.

Thousands of my civil servants switched seamlessly from their day jobs to entirely unfamiliar roles in order to make this happen. Overwhelmingly, they did so without fuss, but with the same solemn sense of duty that led them into public service in the first place.

Their selfless, positive attitude has helped extend the welfare safety net to many families since the start of lockdown, as over 2.4 million households claimed benefits – many for the first time. Almost a million advance payments have arrived in the bank accounts of those in most urgent need within days of a request, due to this dedication.

I know these Herculean efforts are far from unique to my Department, but instead are a recognisable trait across Whitehall. Look at the extraordinary effort to get the Nightingale hospitals up and running in next to no time. Or take HMRC designing an entirely new infrastructure to implement the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme and the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme – thought up and stood up in a matter of weeks.

With the alert level moving in the right direction and lockdown carefully, gradually easing, we are starting to think about the next phase – about the invigorating challenge of getting Britain back into work. Of helping those who have lost jobs or hours to resume or revive their employment, and levelling up across the country.

Like every other country experiencing this emergency, we will look to learn from this experience. Our exceptional civil servants however have stepped up to and met the challenges of this unprecedented time head on, and I know we can all rely on them to deliver as we rebuild and renew Britain.

Thérèse Coffey, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions

This article was published in the Daily Telegraph on 22 June 2020.

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