

Press release: Changes to Personal Independence Payment regulations

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The government is committed to ensuring the welfare system is a strong safety net for those who need it.

The government spends around £50 billion a year to support people with disabilities and health conditions.

Part of that support comes through Personal Independence Payment (PIP). This was introduced to replace the outdated Disability Living Allowance and helps with the extra costs that can often come with being disabled, such as added transport costs or assistance with cooking.

The PIP assessment is designed to focus more support on those who are likely to have a higher level of need, and higher costs associated with their disability. For example, claimants who require therapy at home, like dialysis or oxygen, are likely to need more support than someone who needs help to take medication. Similarly, people who cannot carry out a journey because of a visual or cognitive impairment are likely to need more support than someone who experiences psychological distress when they undertake a journey, for example as a result of social phobia or anxiety.

Recent legal judgments have interpreted the assessment criteria for PIP in ways that are different to what was originally intended. The government is now making amendments to clarify the criteria, to restore the original aim of the policy and ensure support goes to those most in need.

This is not a policy change and will not result in any claimants seeing a reduction in the amount of PIP previously awarded by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). The purpose is to restore the original intention of the benefit which has been expanded by the legal judgments.

Spending on disability benefits has risen by more than £3 billion in real terms since 2010, and will remain higher in each year to 2020, than in 2010. Failing to reinstate the original intention of the policy would have led to substantial unplanned increases to public expenditure totalling £3.7 billion (between 2016 to 2017 and 2021 to 2022).

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Press release: 5,000 refugees arrive since Syrian scheme expanded

Over 1,200 refugees arrived in the final 3 months of 2016, meaning 5,454 people have been given refuge since the government pledged to resettle 20,000 refugees by 2020.

Within this total, approximately half of those who arrived under the scheme were children.

Today's figures also show Syrian refugees are now being housed by more than 200 local authorities across the United Kingdom. The government continues to work with councils and devolved administrations to ensure placements are available as more vulnerable people arrive.

Immigration Minister Robert Goodwill said:

The humanitarian crisis in Syria is unprecedented, which is why this government is undertaking one of the largest resettlement schemes in the UK's history.

I'm delighted with the significant progress we have made with the VPR scheme so far and vulnerable refugees are arriving here every month.

The hard work will continue throughout this Parliament, as we work with local authorities to provide those who have been displaced by conflict with a safe environment and the opportunity to rebuild their lives.

In September 2015, the government pledged to resettle 20,000 vulnerable Syrians by the end of this Parliament in 2020. Additionally 3,000 children and adults will be resettled from the Middle East and North Africa through our Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme.

And in 2016, a total of more than 8,000 children were granted refuge or other forms of leave. This included more than 900 unaccompanied children from Europe.

The government has already pledged an additional £10 million in English language funding in order to help the Syrian families improve their English language skills, which are vital to help them in finding work, gain independence and give back to the communities that have welcomed them.

These resettlement schemes are only one of the ways the government is supporting vulnerable children and adults who have fled danger and conflict.

The UK government remains the second largest donor in humanitarian assistance and has pledged £2.3 billion in aid to Syria and the neighbouring countries, which has provided:

- over 21 million food rations that feed a person for a month
- over 6.5 million relief packages
- over 6.2 million vaccines
- over 4.8 million medical consultations

The UK has also provided humanitarian support in response to the Mediterranean migration crisis of more than £100 million since October 2015. This includes providing winter clothing, hygiene kits and emergency medical care for those rescued at sea as well as protection for women and girls at risk of being trafficked.

Statement to Parliament: Debate on the armed forces and investigation and prosecution of historical cases

Mr Speaker, I am grateful to the Right Honourable Member for North Belfast and his colleagues for bringing this motion to the House today and for initiating this very important debate.

So can I be clear from the outset.

Operation Banner, as the House is aware, lasted for nearly 30 years.

It was the longest single continuous deployment of the Armed Forces in British military history. During that period over 250,000 people served.

The Armed Forces and the RUC combined lost over 1,000 men and women to terrorism. There were over 7,000 awards for bravery. And the Royal Ulster Constabulary was rightly awarded the George Cross.

So as this Government's Northern Ireland manifesto at the last election made clear, "we salute the remarkable dedication and courage of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and our Armed Forces in defending the rule of law and in ensuring that the future of Northern Ireland would only ever be determined by democracy and consent."

Quite simply without their contribution what we know today as the Northern Ireland peace process would never have happened.

All of us, across this House and throughout our United Kingdom, owe them a huge debt of gratitude. Just as we owe them an enormous debt for the work and

sacrifice they have made in other parts of the world referred to in the motion before us, in Kosovo, in Iraq and in Afghanistan.

Wherever they operate we quite rightly regard our Armed Forces as the best in the world.

The Government asks them to put their lives on the line in order to defend us and our way of life. In return they rightly expect the fullest possible support from the Government.

And that is something that this Government, through my RHF the Defence Secretary and his colleagues, is determined to provide.

We will never accept any kind of spurious moral equivalence between those who sought to uphold the rule of law and the terrorists who sought to destroy it.

For us, politically motivated violence in Northern Ireland was never justified, whether it was carried out by republicans or loyalists.

We will continue to reject attempts to place the state at the heart of every atrocity or somehow to displace responsibility away from those who carried out terrorist attacks, namely the terrorists themselves.

And we will not accept attempts to denigrate the contribution of the security forces and seek to give any kind of legitimacy to violence.

But being the best in the world does mean operating to the very highest of standards. We expect nothing less and I know that our Armed Forces would not have it any other way.

As the Noble Lord Stirrup put it in a recent debate in the Other Place, "The need to act lawfully is not a side consideration for the Armed Forces; it is an integral part of the ethos and training."

We believe in the rule of law and the police and Armed Forces are charged with upholding the law. They cannot operate above it or outside of it. Where there is evidence of criminality it should be investigated without fear or favour.

But in our view what characterised the overwhelming majority of those who served was discipline, integrity, restraint, professionalism and bravery.

And we should be proud of them.

Mr Speaker, as my Right Honourable Friend the Prime Minister also made clear in the House yesterday, it is also appalling when people try to make a business of dragging our brave troops through the courts.

In that context the motion before the House welcomes the Government's decision to wind up the Iraq Historic Allegations Team following the Solicitors' Disciplinary Tribunal hearing, and the consequent decision to strike off Phil Shiner.

This called into question the credibility of a large number of the IHAT's remaining caseload ... which will now revert to the Royal Navy Police.

To be clear, the Government has a legal obligation to ensure that criminal allegations against the Armed Forces are investigated.

But we also remain determined to ensure that our legal system is not abused ... as it clearly was by Mr Shiner ... falsely to impugn the reputation of our Armed Forces.

And we should all support the decisive action taken by my Right Honourable Friend the Defence Secretary in this case.

Mr Speaker, as many RH and HMs are well aware, addressing the legacy of the past has been one of the most difficult issues since the Belfast Agreement nearly 19 years ago.

What is clear today, as today's debate highlights, is the current structures in place are simply not delivering for anyone, including victims and survivors on all sides who suffered most during the Troubles.

The rawness of the continuing pain and emotion of families and survivors is stark.

And yet the need to make progress in this area is clear.

The legacy of the past continues to cast a shadow over society in Northern Ireland. It retains the ability to destabilise politics.

And it has the capacity to be used by those who wish to fuel division promote terrorism to achieve their objectives. Of course people are always going to retain their own views on the past, which will be shaped by their own experiences of it.

I acknowledge that that the Government's view of the troubles will not be shared by everyone and vice versa. But where we should strive to reach consensus is on the structures needed to address it, and in a way that helps move Northern Ireland forward.

The inquest system was not designed to deal with highly-complex often linked cases involving large amounts of highly-sensitive material.

The Office of Police Ombudsman has to deal with historical allegations of misconduct rather than focusing on cases today.

The PSNI has to devote substantial resources to dealing with legacy cases when I know that they would prefer that it be spent on policing the present.

And taken as a whole, I recognise concerns that the current mechanisms focus disproportionately on cases involving, or allegedly involving, the state.

As a result leaving many victims of terrorism feeling ignored.

None of this is to criticise any individuals, not least the police and prosecuting authorities, all of whom uphold the law independently of government.

I support them in their difficult work.

Rather it is a recognition, which is widely accepted, that we need new and better structures for addressing these issues.

The status quo is not sustainable.

The Government has a duty to seek better outcomes for victims and survivors.

And we need legally robust mechanisms that enable us to comply with our international obligations to investigate criminal allegations.

The [Stormont House Agreement] was arrived at in December 2014 following eleven weeks of intensive cross party talks with the UK Government, the five largest parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Irish Government on matters falling within their responsibility.

The Agreement contained the most far reaching set of proposals yet for addressing the legacy of Northern Ireland's troubled past ... the Historical Investigations Unit, the Independent Commission for Information Retrieval, the Implementation and Reconciliation Group, and an Oral History Archive.

A number of different options were discussed during those talks.

Amnesties were quickly dismissed by all the participants and are not the policy of this Government. We believe that the so called legacy bodies set out in the Stormont House Agreement continue to provide the most effective way to make progress on this hugely sensitive but hugely important issue.

Delivering the Stormont House Agreement, including the legacy bodies, and also reforming legacy inquests was a key Northern Ireland manifesto pledge for the Conservative Government at the last election. And we remain committed to this.

But in doing that I am also committed to the need to ensure that former soldiers and police officers are not unfairly treated or disproportionately investigated.

That is why any legislation we bring forward will explicitly set out that all of these bodies, including the Historical Investigations Unit (HIU), will be under legal obligations to operate in ways that are fair, balanced and crucially proportionate.

Terrorists were responsible for 90 per cent of all deaths in the troubles and any investigative processes have to reflect that.

Its caseload will also contain some of the most notorious atrocities resulting in the deaths of our Armed Forces, such as at Warrenpoint in 1979 and Ballygawley in 1988.

The HIU will look at cases in chronological order, meaning that it will be unable to prioritise cases involving the state above those involving terrorists.

Any legislation establishing the HIU would include specific tests which must be met in order that a previously completed case is reopened for investigation.

This will mean specifically that new and credible evidence that was not previously available to the authorities is needed before the HIU will re-open any closed case.

We are looking at ways of ensuring that where prosecutions do take place terrorists are not treated more favourably than former soldiers and police officers.

And the bodies will be time limited to five years, ensuring that this process will not be open ended thereby helping Northern Ireland to move forward.

Mr Speaker, turning the Stormont House Agreement into detailed legislation has been and continues to be a long and necessarily complex process.

But a great deal of progress has been made in building the consensus necessary to bring legislation before this House.

And I believe that with hard work on all sides the outstanding areas of disagreement are bridgeable. In September, I signalled my intention to move the process to a more public phase.

I had hoped that this would have taken place by now, but a continuing lack of consensus and then the political situation at Stormont have delayed that from happening.

But I remain committed to giving the public a say on these proposed bodies – and to building confidence in them from across the community.

So I want to take that forward as soon as possible after the Northern Ireland Assembly election a week today, so that we can make progress quickly.

But any approach to the past must be fair, balanced and proportionate.

It must have victims and survivors at its heart.

And it must be consistent with our obligations to those who served and in too many cases sacrificed so much to bring about the relative peace and stability that Northern Ireland enjoys today.

[News story: Tail rota footage from MCA helicopter crew on training flight](#)

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Footage taken by MCA crew during a training flight

Here's something a little bit different for all our aviation buffs out there! We're all a wee bit impressed with these epic cloud surfing views taken from a tail rotor cam on the UK Coastguard search and rescue helicopter based at Inverness during a recent training exercise. Enjoy the new view from one of the best offices in the world!

[Inverness crew on training flight](#)

[Press release: Housing starts hit 9-year high](#)

The number of new build homes that have started to be built continued to rise last year to the highest level since 2007, figures released today (23 February 2017) show.

The [latest house building data](#) shows that 153,370 new homes were started in the year to December, up 5% on the previous year.

More than 140,500 homes were completed in the year to December 2016.

Meanwhile, figures from the Council of Mortgage Lenders show first-time buyer lending totalled 338,900 loans in 2016, up 8% on last year.

Housing and Planning Minister Gavin Barwell said:

We've got the country building again with the highest number of housing starts for 9 years. However, we know there's more to be done to build more homes in the places that people want to live.

Our housing white paper sets out an ambitious set of proposals to

deliver more land, speed up build out, diversify the housing market, and support people who need help now.

The figures also show strong growth across the country with Islington and Manchester experiencing high levels of starts in the year to December 2016, with an annual increase of 296% and 323% respectively.

Reforms in the recently published [housing white paper](#) set out the government's bold new plans to fix the broken housing market and build more homes across England.

The 4 key aspects of the paper set out new measures to ensure the housing market works for everyone, and help local authorities, developers and SME builders get building.

Building more homes is an absolute priority, which is why the government plans to invest £25 billion in housing over the Spending Review.

£1.4 billion of funding has been released for Affordable Housing, and restrictions on funding have been relaxed so providers can build a range of homes including for Affordable Rent and Rent to Buy which help people save for a deposit before they buy.

The [House building: December quarter 2016 England statistics](#) record the number of new build homes completed and started during the quarter October to December. It uses data sourced from building control officers at local authorities, the National House Building Council and independent inspectors.

According to the [Council of Mortgage Lenders](#), the number of first-time buyers in December 2016 is up 8% year on year.