Q9           Chris Stephens: Minister, I think you said you would look at different groups. Would that include, for example, a claimant who has suffered domestic abuse? You will be aware that the Committee has held a previous inquiry. Would you look at the effects on certain individuals?

Alok Sharma: Yes. I emphasised that the key thing is to ensure we can identify people with vulnerabilities. A piece of work is going on and will accelerate in the Department, where we use our internal data to identify the particular vulnerabilities someone may have. That is on one side. In certain cases we may well have to engage with stakeholders too when we do not know whether someone is vulnerable.

The other side is how we then interact with different types of claimants. Very many people will hopefully have a smooth journey. For someone who is vulnerable, there may be no response to the initial contacts. The question will be of working with stakeholders to come up with what to do. Do we eventually go together with the trusted stakeholder and knock on someone’s door, to ensure that we can get them on to the system and they do not suddenly fall out of it? All the feedback I have got from stakeholders is that making sure we get it right for vulnerable claimants will be really important in the process.

[...]

Q14         Steve McCabe: I agree with you, Minister. I think that identifying vulnerable people will be crucial. I just wondered what is going to be acceptable. Will a councillor be able to phone up the Department and say, “I know this person”? What about a social worker, an MP, or someone from Mind? What are you going to accept as “I know this person is vulnerable and they won’t be able to comply with your conventional processes”?

Alok Sharma: That is exactly what we plan to work out during the test and learn phase. We are open to suggestions; we have started the dialogue. I have met Mind and various other people from these groups in the past couple of weeks, and that is precisely what we will try to establish: who is it? Who is the trusted party who can make a judgment, based on the interaction they have had with the individual, that somebody is vulnerable, and what that vulnerability may be?

Q15         Steve McCabe: When do you hope to have clarified that, Minister? What is the deadline for knowing? Obviously, we all want to know so that we give the right advice to people. When do you expect the deadline for having clarified that to be?

Alok Sharma: I would like to think that we will have made some pretty good progress by the time we start the process of testing people in that very low volume in the system. I don’t want to upset Neil here, but I would hope in the first half of 2019. That is exactly the sort of thing that we will be establishing.

Steve McCabe: The first half of 2019. Thank you.

Q16         Ruth George: I think a huge number of voluntary organisations will be very pleased to hear that you are looking again at assumed consent, because that has been a very big issue in the whole of universal credit, so it is good to hear you are aware of that.

[...]

Q19         Chair: Thank you. Before we move on to the migration process, I just want to nail down a bit more about these criteria we have been talking about. In my head, as a businessperson, I would expect to see a whole list of KPIs, criteria—whatever you want to call it—for internal measures, such as how long calls are taking, work coach workload, number of vulnerable claimants per work coach. There could be a whole host of things. There would also be external ones, which is more what we have been talking about so far this morning, in terms of showing the system’s preparedness for big volumes coming on—so the customer experience and percentage of claims paid on time, for example. The NAO, as we have touched on, has not done it for you, but has given some indications of what sort of criteria they would be looking for.

Do you accept that those two levels of KPIs or criteria would be useful? Do you plan to work on them? The NAO has pushed quite hard on that around transparency. Would bodies like this Select Committee, SSAC and the NAO, for example, get to see them before they are finally agreed?

Alok Sharma: You are absolutely right that we will have to have some metrics. Particularly in terms of decision to expand, we will have to make sure that, operationally, we can tick the box for operational readiness, efficiency of the service and being able to support vulnerable claimants and making sure that the functionality is in place.

[...]

Q22         Chair: You need to work out your plan, don’t you?

Neil Couling: We need to work that out, because we need to work out the support that claimants are going to need. I want to try to judge that in the test phase before I go hard and fast on it.

In terms of the areas we have explored, yes—we have talked about this already today—there will be costs. There will be things like, are you dealing with vulnerable claimants successfully? I think that will probably not be the case for payment timeliness, because the way that managed migration will work is that we have got to get the payment in place, so we need to 100% on that one.

Chair: Would you both commit to coming back to us with what sorts of things you are considering as criteria? Essentially, it is about us and claimants and the stakeholders that work with them having a comfort blanket where we can say, “Yes, they’ve done this and they’ve done this; the system can handle big migration.” I don’t think anybody feels that yet.

Alok Sharma: Of course, we are happy to do that.

[…]

Q31            **Rosie Duffield:** Can I just come in on managed migration? You talk a lot about the stakeholders that you work with. Is one of them the Disability Benefits Consortium?

***Neil Couling:*** Yes.

Q32            **Rosie Duffield:** For those who do not know, that is a collection of around 80 different disability and mental health charities—Leonard Cheshire, the Royal British Legion, the Trussell Trust—and one point in the briefing they sent us says, “Managed migration is an extremely misleading phrase. Under draft regulations, claimants will receive a letter saying that their current benefits will cease after a month and during that time they will then need to make a new universal credit online application.” That is exactly what we have just been talking about. They are saying that because of people’s disabilities, they may not have any way of doing that, so they say that managed migration is a misleading phrase. How would you square that circle?

***Alok Sharma:*** Let me start and then Neil can address it in more detail. I don’t think the intention is to mislead. Managed migration is a phrase that we have chosen. In terms of how it will work, for everyone, what is obviously not going to happen is that suddenly the first thing they hear about having to move to universal credit is a letter that comes through the door. There is a four to six month period of effectively warming people up, either through the media or some sort of orientation literature that is sent to them. The intention is not that suddenly you start the process and within a month it is all done and dusted. There will clearly be a process.

What we have said is that, obviously, when you send them the letter saying, “Please now make your claim,” they will get reminders after that. It could be that, where we have people’s contact details, we send them an SMS message to their phone. Let me just assure you, on this point about people with vulnerabilities, that precisely what we want to ensure is that if somebody has not responded to us, we have hopefully already identified them, based on the information we have internally but also on the conversations that we have, going back to the point that Chris and Steve were making about who is a party who can identify somebody as having a vulnerability. Having identified those individuals, that is the point at which we have another set of exercises that we have to do.

I want to be absolutely clear about this: what the regs do not say is, “You have a month and then that’s it, it’s all turned off.” What it says is “a minimum of a month”. We can extend the period that somebody has before they make their claim. Is there anything I have said that is inaccurate?

***Neil Couling:*** Echoing the explanation I tried to give earlier, groups out there such as the Disability Benefits Consortium are assuming that, when we get to the end of a process, we switch off people’s benefits. We have not said we will do that. The work we are doing at the moment is what you do at that crisis point where the claimant has not responded to various attempts. What do we know about that claimant at that point? What do other people know about that claimant? What should we then do? It does not follow—

**Chair:** It sounds wonderful, but you cannot tailor that to individual people.

Q33            **Rosie Duffield:** We were talking yesterday about carers who may not be in the system—long-term carers who may not have reclaimed for a long time. How do they pick up that they even need to contact you?

***Neil Couling:*** Exactly. We are mixing up a number of things here. How do we orientate people and get to those who can self-serve and work their way through the process and proceed through that, mainly fine or maybe with a little bit of support, and how will we get to those who ignore the letters or stick them behind the metaphorical clock on the mantelpiece and just don’t respond? What we are not in the market for doing is just switching off people’s entitlement after three goes—two letters and that’s it. That is what we are talking to various groups such as the Disability Benefits Consortium about. What is the best thing to do then? What is the best way to act? I think people have read the regulations and not realised that, with the regulations, there are a bunch of processes and there is something about how we develop the wider environment that is supporting people here. For example, one of the things that I am exploring with some of the housing associations is that they know their tenants, so could they help in this process with the orientation and making sure that people know, when the letter comes, to start to engage with us and work it through, and support them along the way?

A number of housing associations already do this. If you have ever talked to Curo, they already have a team that supports their tenants through the journey on universal credit. That is the kind of thing we are exploring, but the mistake to make in reading the regulations is that somehow, at this point in time, it is all switched off.

That would be a disaster for the claimant, and it would also be a disaster for the DWP, because those claimants will all appear two weeks later saying, “I have not had my money. I am in terrible distress.” The hardest thing to do in benefits administration—that is where I started my professional life—is to put people’s money back in payment. It is labour intensive, they are a bit traumatised, and you are dashing around trying to fix everything. That is not the world that we are trying to build into.

Q34            **Chair:** I suppose the difficulty is, because it is such a vast task—you do not need us to tell you that—and there are so many vulnerable people involved, the fact that the regs are currently very stark and light on detail leads people like us to have a million and one “What if?” questions.

[…]

Q41            **Nigel Mills:** The risk is that you say, “We will never actually stop someone’s legacy benefit,” and they say, “Great, I will just never apply for the new one then,” and then you end up in a strange stand-off of people being advised or choosing not to engage.

***Neil Couling:*** That is to paraphrase what I said, but it is not exactly what I said. We are trying to get to a point where before you make that decision, you are absolutely certain that this is not a vulnerable person and so forth. The other thing is that there will be a very small number of people who will not want to claim. They may have a very small entitlement to tax credits and they may not want to come across. We cannot make people claim. The reason we have a claiming process is to fulfil the requirement under law that people make a claim. In general, we have said to some of the lobby groups that we are open to suggestions around this issue.

Q42            **Chair:** You almost need a logic gate plan for every type of claimant—if this happens after three weeks or if that happens after four weeks, do this or do that. Presumably that is the sort of detail you will pull together.

***Neil Couling:*** I agree with you in a planning sense. I would be nervous about putting that into an organisation, because I worry that you will build a “computer says no” approach, which says, “If you fail to do x, y and z, this is what I will do.”

**Chair:** But discretion does not always work either.

***Neil Couling:*** No, but I would rather have the reassurance that there was some discretion and thought going into what is quite a big decision in that space than a checklist approach. I agree that in the planning sense you need those decision trees, but you have to be very careful, especially with big organisations. It is the equivalent of saying, “The operation was perfect, but the patient died.” We have to avoid building that mentality.

Q43            **Chair:** But it is a balance of both, isn’t it?

***Neil Couling:*** I agree.