

UK: Government report describes appalling official treatment of seriously disabled Philippa Day who took her own life

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Philippa Day, a 27-year old single mother of two from Nottingham, is one of a growing number of benefit claimants whose death was due to a callous, indifferent and unaccountable system run by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

The DWP made repeated errors in her claim to benefit. Philippa was found dead at home after taking an overdose in October 2019 following her Personal Independence Payment (PIP) benefit being stopped.

A draft internal process review (IPR) of her case has been published after it was obtained by the Disability News Service (DNS), which mounted a legal challenge following government lawyers attempts to block its release during the inquest into the Philippa's death.

The DNS released the review to the coroner on January 15 and they include conclusions drawn by senior DWP staff into how Philippa's claim for Personal Independence Payment (PIP) had been dealt with from late 2018 till her death in October 2019.

The DWP's investigation exposed repeated failings in both procedure and policy and detailed six serious errors that had been made by three civil servants, leading up to her death.

The report raised serious concerns about the way in which Capita, one of the two private contractors used to carry out PIP assessments, had made changes to its procedures following Philippa's death.

The inquest coroner, Gordon Clow outlined 28 specific instances where "systematic errors" had led to failures by benefits officials and said Philippa Day's long struggle with the benefits system had been a "stressor" in her decision to take the overdose in August 2019. Philippa went into a coma and died several months later on October 15.

Philippa had struggled with her mental health for years, with a history of self-harm, suicide attempts and numerous stays in psychiatric hospital.

She had been claiming Disability Living Allowance initially for her type 1 diabetes since she was 16 and had been asked to claim PIP in November 2018 in the hope that she would receive additional help for her mental health needs.

Just months before her death she had her benefits cut from £228 to £60 a week, a decision that was wrong, leading to her having to put up a gruelling fight to get them reinstated. This led to her becoming increasingly anxious and worried about having to attend future benefits assessment.

Philippa was then asked to attend a PIP assessment but was unable to do so because of agoraphobia and the anxiety she experienced.

The psychiatric nurse who had been working with her, Tessa Rand, contacted an official from Capita, and pleaded with them to reassess her at home, saying her patient was "terrified" and in "immense" distress at having to attend an assessment at a centre. The person Rand spoke to refused the request and asked her to provide written evidence as to why a home visit was necessary.

Days after this conversation, Philippa received a letter from the DWP warning that she would lose her benefits if she did not attend a face to face assessment.

When Philippa's unconscious body was found, she had the letter from the DWP next to her. Notes were later found on her computer saying that her dealings with the DWP made her feel "trapped" and "isolated from the world".

The court heard a recording of a telephone call

Philippa had made to the DWP in June 2019 where she is pleading with an official to reinstate her benefits “to give her something to live for” because she was hungry, penniless and in increasing despair.

Philippa's sister Imogen told the inquest that Philippa had discussed the continued problems she had experienced with the benefits agency, and how these problems had made her suicidal thoughts a lot worse.

Capita, who carried out the PIP assessment, had been repeatedly informed about the difficulties Philippa faced and were aware that she had a long history of significant mental distress, inpatient admissions to psychiatric hospital and that she experienced agoraphobia.

Capita's own internal incident report carried out a year after Philippa died acknowledged that mistakes were made by three members of staff, including an assessor who had completed the initial review wrongly suggesting that she should attend a PIP assessment centre. Two call centre staff had failed to take steps that would have prevented her having to attend a centre.

Dr Shah Faisal, Capita's chief medical officer, admitted that “with the benefit of hindsight” there had been “sufficient medical evidence available” to decide Philippa Day's claim through a paper-based review, without having to put her through a face to face assessment.

The coroner said that Philippa had been eligible for PIP throughout the 11 months, at both enhanced rates for this benefit, that the DWP could have obtained the information it needed to ensure she received those benefits, and she should not have been told she would have to attend a face to face assessment.

There have been long standing criticisms of the PIP assessment process by claimants and campaign groups, yet in July 2019 Capita were awarded a two-year extension on its contract worth £112 million.

Last year a report by the National Audit Office found that at least 69 suicides could be linked to problems with benefit claims since 2014 and raised that the DWP had failed to investigate many of the cases properly.

The family of Errol Graham, who starved to death in June 2018 following his benefits being wrongly stopped, have been shown a summary of the DWP's IPR examining the circumstances surrounding his death. Leigh Day solicitors acting for Errol's family recently obtained the IPR as part of their High Court judicial

review claim against the DWP.

The DWP have carried out 69 internal process reviews in the last five years following the suicide of a benefit claimant. However, analysis carried out by DNS of data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and DWP suggests there could have been as many as 750 benefit claimants of working age who took their lives in 2018 alone.

Personal Independence Payment was introduced in 2013 to replace Disability Living Allowance primarily as a cost-cutting measure. At the time the government expected that 600,000 fewer people would receive PIP when fully operational, with overall expenditure being £2.5 billion a year lower than it would otherwise have been.

Fully 75 percent of PIP assessments taken to tribunal are successfully overturned.

The tragic case of Philippa Day highlights the way in which many vulnerable benefit claimants are treated by a sadistic system. In December, an inquest heard that a 28 year old man, Roy Curtis, had his benefits stopped when he did not to attend a fit-to-work assessment in September 2018. Roy was anxious about visiting a job centre due to agoraphobia. Following the withdrawal of benefits, his body was found in a “mummified” state at his home after lying dead for nine months.

As far as the government are concerned, Philippa Day, Errol Graham, Roy Curtis and many others who have died at the hands of this brutal system do not matter. The Conservative government has so far resisted calls to extend the £20-a-week boost to the Universal Credit (UC) benefit, saying only that will outline its plans in March. The Treasury, under pressure, brought in the measure at the start of the pandemic, and opposes making the £6 billion-a-year payment permanent. It is estimated that the removal of the £20 week UC uplift will affect some of the poorest in society, with an estimated 730,000 children thrown into poverty.



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