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Critical Social Policy

Original Research Article

Weaponising time in the war on welfare: Slow violence and deaths of disabled people within the UK's social security system

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Abstract
In 2014, a long continuing battle began to find out more about Government record-keeping on the deaths of disabled people claiming benefits. Drawing on a timeline of evidence co-produced with disabled people, we analyse how deaths related to the benefits system are an outcome of slow violence, where both the delay between policies and their harmful effects, as well as the more active use of delay tactics, are central to how the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) weaponise time as a strategy to avoid accountability and deny justice. DWP reviews into deaths are an under-researched yet significant focus because they are (supposedly) tools through which the DWP investigates the harms of its own policies, and yet, they are designed and carried out in a way that systemically invisibilise state accountability.

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Introduction

From 2010, disabled people in the UK started to warn of the harmful impacts of major social security reforms and how they were already contributing to, and likely to cause further, people's deaths (Mad Pride, 2010; Disability News Service, 2010). The focus of this campaigning were the Welfare Reform Acts of 2007, 2012, and 2016 – which were based on intersecting punitive policies rooted in conditionality. Coverage of people's deaths linked to these reforms started to be reported in local newspapers, from 2012, often including inquests and accounts from families of how their relatives had died after being left destitute, had starved to death, or had taken their own lives after encounters with the UK welfare system. When it comes to the deaths of people who claim benefits, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) (the UK government department in charge of administering 'welfare' policy) have a stock public response, often repeated by their press office, stating that: 'We take the death of any claimant seriously. Where it is appropriate, we undertake reviews into individual cases but we do not accept the argument of those who seek to politicise people's deaths by linking them inaccurately to welfare policy' (Pring, 2014c).

In the summer of 2014, Disability News Service (the UK's only news agency specialising in disability issues), began to question what the government knew about these deaths, and whether the DWP had a system for recording deaths linked to the benefits system. This began a long continuing battle to find out more of what the Government knows about the deaths of people who claim benefits, involving submission of 25 FOIs from Disability News Service alone (alongside many others from other individuals and groups); and several complaints to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). Sustained FOIs would reveal that between 2014–2022, the DWP carried out approximately 220 reviews – previously called Peer Reviews, and since October 2015 called Internal Process Reviews (IPRs) – into the deaths of people who claim benefits (NAO, 2020; and UK Parliament, 2022).

DWP has been collecting these reviews centrally for more than a decade yet refuses to publish them in full. The release of redacted versions of some of these reviews show persistent and systemic issues across social security policy, and evidence how the actions of DWP ministers, civil servants and contractors continue to be linked to people's deaths, making the disability benefits system deeply harmful and unsafe. The reviews also contain hundreds of recommendations (see Pring, 2023), including repeated warnings that policies to assess people for out-of-work disability benefits were putting the lives of "vulnerable" claimants (likely to be mostly people with mental health conditions or learning difficulties) at risk and evidencing that the DWP's own investigations were identifying policies as potentially life-threatening and showing a recurring pattern of staff failure to follow DWP's suicide guidance (which was introduced in 2009).

Yet as we shall see, it would later emerge that the DWP had no system for tracking what, if any, actions were made in response to these recommendations (NAO, 2020). Overlooking recommendations to improve the safety of the disability benefits assessment system has led to countless avoidable deaths of disabled claimants. Furthermore, despite multiple FOI requests, the DWP have never made public any information about whose deaths have been investigated, and most families of those who have died do not see the reviews and many don't even know that an IPR had been carried out in relation to their family member's death (Hansard, 2019).

The story of IPRs and the labour that has gone into exposing what is publicly known about them is rarely told (for exceptions, see Pring, 2022a and 2017). In this article, we trace this labour, and through this, the strategies used by DWP to distance their policies from being linked to people's deaths. We do this through the co-creation of a timeline of evidence, designed in collaboration with disabled people with lived experience of the social security system. Focusing on this timeline, this article shows how delay between policies and their harmful effects, as well as the more active use of delay as a governmental strategy, is used by the government to obscure the harm caused by welfare policies. We analyse this as a form of slow violence, which we argue is foundational to DWP strategies in denying accountability for people's deaths. What makes DWP reviews into deaths a significant focus for this discussion is that they are (supposedly) tools through which the DWP investigates the harms of its own policies, and yet, they are designed and carried out in a way that systematically invisibilise state accountability.

In the following, we first situate our work within scholarship on systemic, bureaucratic and slow violence, focusing specifically on the role played by time and temporality in the slow violence and weaponisation of social security (welfare) reform. Time continues to be a focus as we then detail the process of creating a timeline of slow violence, on which this article is based. We go on to document how the creation of the timeline helped make visible intersecting temporal strategies used by the DWP in denying accountability for benefits-related deaths.

Welfare violence

A growing scholarship documents the violence of the UK welfare system, and especially of 'welfare reform'. Austerity driven post-2010 UK welfare reforms have been conceptualised as violence that is ‘cruel, inhuman and degrading’ (Adler, 2018, title page); ‘institutional’ ‘ordinary’, ‘mundane’ (Cooper and Whyte, 2017:23); ‘bureaucratised’ (Redman and Fletcher, 2022); and banal (Kiely and Warnock, 2023). More than an unfortunate policy side-effect, fear is directly and indirectly designed into social security, constituting what some see as a ‘war on welfare’ (WOW Campaign) and a ‘war on disabled people’ (Clifford, 2020). Fear is central to welfare (Garthwaite, 2014), where fear of destitution (Redman, 2020) and stigmatization (Tyler, 2020) become weapons to deter and punish people who claim benefits.

As well as documenting multiple harms resulting from the weaponization of welfare, people with lived experience of the benefits system, and especially disabled people, have been central in showing how the system kills people (Clifford, 2020; Mills, 2018). Many disabled people’s activist groups, including Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC), the Mental Health Resistance Network, WOW Campaign, Pat’s Petition, and the Spartacus Network, have documented the fatal impact of welfare reform, and campaigned to end benefits related deaths. Some groups, such as Calum’s List and the Black Triangle Campaign, created lists online as a memorial to those who have died. Mehta et al. (2018) conceptualise welfare conditionality and sanctions as ‘life threatening’ for disabled people; while Grover (2019) sees this as a form of social murder. Data on suicide more specifically shows links between the Work Capability Assessment (WCA) and suicide (Barr et al., 2015; Spartacus Network, 2012). Benefits related deaths form part of the wider death toll of austerity measures (Cooper and Whyte, 2017).

Welfare as slow violence

Time is an important weapon in the war on welfare, making it relevant to briefly discuss scholarship on slow violence to analyse how it leads to benefits-related deaths. Cooper and Whyte (2017:24) suggest the normalised mundane ‘slow deteriorative process’ of austerity’s violence is usefully understood as ‘slow violence’. Rob Nixon (2011) writes about slow violence in relation to the often-slow unfolding of environmental catastrophes: ‘violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all’ (Nixon, 2011:2). Key to slow violence is the temporal scale at which it unfolds – the lag between policy and its violent consequences working to weaponize time and dissociate effects from causes (Tofighian and Boochani, 2021). The ‘delayed effects’ of chemical toxicity (Carson, 2000[1962]:169–170) has been key to understanding slow violence. The ‘slow brutalities of toxicity’ (in relation to petrochemical pollution), where damage is incremental and harm is witnessed slowly (Davies, 2018: 1538), seems especially relevant to understanding the cumulative effects of social security reform – which are described by many as 'toxic' (Pring, 2022a). 'Slow death' is useful here as an analytical strategy to describe 'the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people' (Berlant, 2007: 754) under contemporary global/national regimes of capitalist subordination. Temporality is also at play in the 'slow burn' of health inequalities (Marmot et al., 2020).

Slow temporalities are also theorized within de/and postcolonial analysis of colonial violence as constitutive of necropolitics or deathworlds, made up of 'gradual wounding' and 'letting die' (Mbembé and Meintjes, 2003: 21). Coddington (2019) analyses the weaponization of financial tactics to enact slow violence for refused asylum seekers and Aboriginal people who claim benefits; Mayblin et al. (2020) show the everyday slow violence of asylum seekers' encounters with the UK (welfare) state; and Povinelli (2011: 145) documents the cumulative and corrosive lethalities and slow deaths endured by Indigenous and First Nations peoples in Australia.

The unfolding of slow violence over time means there is (often, although not always) a lag between the introduction of policies and the harms they inflict (Cooper and Whyte, 2017). We argue that this time lag is significant in understanding how UK benefits reform kills people. Yet focusing on government investigations into benefits related deaths – or what the DWP calls the 'death of a customer' – shows that as well as delayed destruction (Nixon, 2011) and delayed effects (Carson, 2000[1962]), time, and specifically delay, is weaponised by the Government to deny accountability. This 'manipulation of time' is key to 'forms of delay, deferral, attrition, and accumulation' that make up slow violence (Ahmann, 2018: 144).

While grappling with slow violence across the UK social security system, this article more specifically focuses on the ways delay is used as a 'distancing strategy' (Nixon, 2011: 60) to avoid accountability and deny justice. The time lag of policies and people's deaths, the build-up of incremental harms, and the weaponization of delay, make slow violence hard to apprehend and represent. Thus, key to our work of tracking the gradual causalities of welfare reform has been the co-production of a timeline that makes slow violence visible. Next, we detail the process of creating the timeline, and how this process made visible specific 'distancing strategies' used by DWP, especially in relation to delay tactics.

Creating a timeline of welfare violence: distancing strategies and temporal tactics

Proceeding at 'a speed that decouples suffering from its original causes' (Ahmann, 2018:144) slow violence poses a representational challenge with which our research grapples. To do this, we created a timeline – available online at www.deathsbywelfare.org – documenting evidence of the links between welfare reform and people's deaths, and more widely tracking the slow violence of the social security system, as experienced by many disabled people. The timeline is made up of approx. 500 entries dating from the 1970s to 2022. It consists of largely publicly available documents that relate to the deaths of disabled people claiming benefits, including FOI requests and responses, parliamentary debates (in Hansard), safeguarding reports, Prevention of Future Death reports, DWP reports, briefings, and internal guidelines, as well as media coverage of some (though far from all) people's deaths. Piecing together these disparate documents, with a focus for this article on FOI requests and DWP responses, enabled us to identify patterns and strategies used over time by the DWP to deny accountability for people's deaths.

The timeline represents over a decade of research, and involvement in disabled people's anti-austerity campaigning, by each of the co-authors. The first author, China Mills, leads The Deaths by Welfare Project, at Healing Justice Ldn – a project, co-produced with disabled people, researching welfare state violence and people's deaths. She has experience of mental distress and learned experience of disability benefits through family members. The second author, John Pring, is a disabled journalist with over a decade of experience researching the impact of state austerity on disabled people, including playing a central role in the freedom of information battle with the DWP over release of IPRs (the focus of this article), including submission of 25 FOIs about people's deaths related to benefits, and several complaints to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) (discussed below).

A first draft of the timeline was co-created in February 2021 by both authors. The creation of the timeline reflects those who have made it, who ultimately held power to define, include, and exclude. To acknowledge and be accountable to this power, the two authors drew on their existing research/investigations to create a draft timeline, which was shared with four timeline co-creators. Three of the co-creators are disabled activists and artists involved in significant campaigning around benefits related deaths – Ellen Clifford, Dolly Sen, and Rick Burgess. The fourth co-creator was Nick Dilworth, who had decades of experience as a welfare advisor. Nick passed away before publication of this article, and we dedicate this work to his brilliance. The team were paid to input into the timeline, including its design, format and content. These discussions took place over email and/or in online meetings. The reworked timeline was then made available online as part of a public consultation (from May -August 2022)-where approx. 30 submissions of feedback were made – most of which came from disabled people. This feedback was collated and the timeline reworked by the two authors of this article – this included editing existing, and adding new, entries. Currently, working with Access Power Visibility collective, the timeline is being made into an accessible online resource, including a mechanism for people to submit entries, making the timeline a 'living document' (Hunter, 2008).

Informed by literature on user-controlled research (Beresford and Croft, 2012), which highlights the challenges disabled people face in their 'involvement' in research initiated by others, the team were encouraged to, and did, question the idea of the project as a whole. This led us to question the parameters of what might be defined as benefits-related deaths, given that such deaths are part of a much wider context, which includes deaths of people who are denied benefits due to immigration status; of disabled people who are incarcerated (and those disabled by incarceration); and the disproportionate deaths of disabled people during the Covid 19 pandemic, including those in the social 'care' system. These deaths are often not understood as benefits–related deaths, and yet they are deeply connected by the intersections of systemic ableism and disablism, racism, classism, and patriarchy, and the State dehumanisation of disabled people. This is a context that has produced conditions of hostility towards disabled people that make life, for some, unliveable – inciting and eliciting suicidality and death (Mills, 2022).

Creating the timeline and piecing together what is known about records into the deaths of people claiming benefits, makes visible the government's weaponization of delay. Key to the unfolding of slow violence is a 'battery of attritional, dissociative mechanisms' (Nixon, 2011: 60) and 'distancing strategies (temporal, legalistic, geographical, scientific and euphemistic') (Nixon, 2011: 60), which produce a 'protracted, convoluted vapor trail of blame' (2011: 136). Our timeline makes visible multiple forms of distancing strategies used by the DWP across these different spheres. For example, the outsourcing of the Work Capability Assessment to private companies, could be seen as a tactic which allows the government to distance themselves from accountability. Such 'dissociative rituals' are also used to 'disown, across time and space, the toxic repercussions innate' to state and corporate practices (Nixon, 2011: 55) and to 'wear down' those fighting for justice (2011: 60) by 'exploiting time to defuse the claims of the afflicted' (Nixon, 2011: 51). While they intersect with other distancing strategies, temporality and time are key to slow violence, and thus the focus of this article.

The following two sections piece together evidence from the timeline to analyse the ways interrelated temporal strategies are used by the DWP and whose repetition becomes visible through the creation of the timeline. We draw on the timeline to create a narrative of both the slow accumulation of harms and of interrelated temporal tactics used by the DWP over time.

'Slowly accumulating' harms and evidence

Reading the timeline in chronological order makes evident a slow bureaucratic accumulation of harm and the deaths of those who make up the 'gradual causalities' (Nixon, 2011:41) of the benefits system. The timeline makes it possible to follow the introduction of a specific policy or practice through to its delayed effects – it is thus a tool to make visible slow violence. Yet while the timeline is linear, it can be navigated in non-linear ways, to represent experiences and analyses of temporality informed by disability and illness – the 'time travel' of 'crip time' – a non-linear 'backward and forward acceleration' of long intervals and 'abrupt endings' (Samuels, 2017: n.p.).

Co-creating the timeline has provided a method to piece together seemingly unconnected singular events, along with key evidence that only came to light years after it occurred, allowing us to track patterns across time which would remain hidden by focusing only on individual FOIs. This has helped us to see that time is foundational to DWP strategies in denying accountability for deaths. Thus, the timeline represents a strategy to counter the representational challenges posed by slow violence (Nixon, 2011). The timeline takes 'slow violence seriously as a methodological, analytical, representational and political challenge' (Vorbrugg, 2019: 3), working as a method for connecting phenomena across time and to histories that 'bear on the present' but often escape scrutiny (Stoler, 2016: 5).

The timeline begins before what has come to be known as 'welfare reform' (i.e., before the Welfare Reform Bill was given Royal Assent in 2007) – tracing the crafting of conditions that laid the foundations for social security reform to appear politically inevitable and commonsensical (Wikeley, 1995) through the long-term governmental project of systematically dehumanising disabled people who claim or are trying to claim benefits. This forms part of the long-term systematic demolition of the welfare state, spanning multiple political parties across decades (Stewart, 2016).

Temporality is key to the unfolding of welfare state violence (predicting harms ahead of time, and piecing together harms in retrospect). There are multiple instances where people's deaths, coroner's reports, and DWP's own investigations into deaths of people claiming benefits, have only come to be made public much later, and often as a result of intensive FOI battles (Pring, 2022a). But slow violence isn't only visible in retrospect. In creating the timeline, we found many prophetic early warnings of the harms to come – from disabled people and from the DWP itself. Hidden in innocuously titled documents, such as the DWP's 'Research Report 278' – the second report on Incapacity Benefit reforms and Personal Advisers, published in 2005 – are findings of unmanageable workloads affecting advisers' ability to identify risk and resulting in less compassionate support to people in distress (Knight et al., 2005).

In 2006, two years *before* what is usually narrated as the beginnings of welfare reform, Professor Alison Ravetz, wrote a critique of the government's *New Deal for Welfare* warning of incalculable stress for those forced into work and predicting future harms. In a prophetic warning, which emphasises temporality and feels almost eerie when read in retrospect, Ravetz (2006) concludes that:

> what might be expected is a slowly accumulating number of bad decisions and blatantly scandalous cases, eventually giving rise to a groundswell of unease… the cost, in stress, to those people and their families will be incalculable (2006: 25).

We know now that disabled people would come to pay the cost with their lives. And we now know that people were dying in 2010. One of these people was Stephen Carré, who died by suicide in 2010, after finding that DWP had confirmed its decision to find him ineligible for Employment and Support Allowance, following a Work Capability Assessment. In the Prevention of future deaths (PFD) report (made when, in the opinion of the coroner, there are actions that an individual or organisation should take to prevent future deaths), and at Stephen's inquest, a coroner ruled that his death was linked to flaws in the Work Capability Assessment system, and that the rejection of his appeal that he was not fit for work was a 'trigger' in Stephen's death. This is clear evidence of the potentially fatal impact of the assessment process, yet the report, available but buried in the recesses of the Ministry of Justice website, would only come to be publicly known about in 2015, and was never shown to either of the independent teams reviewing the Work Capability Assessment (Pring, 2015b).

Disabled people started to warn of the harms of the punitive 'welfare reform' regime and how it was already contributing to, and likely to cause, people's deaths, from 2010. In October 2010, the grassroots mental health group Mad Pride protested in Hyde Park against the coalition government's 'savage' welfare cuts (Mad Pride, 2010). Many disabled people's resistance and activist groups formed in 2010 (building on a foundation of longstanding disabled people's activism and resistance), including Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC), Black Activists Rising Against Cuts, The Mental Health Resistance Network, and Black Triangle Campaign. These groups, working closely with others, have played a central role in evidencing the links between the benefits system and deaths, and in campaigning for change.

Disability News Service began to question, in 2014, what the government knew about these deaths, what records it kept, how it responded, and particularly, whether DWP had a system for recording deaths linked the benefits system. An initial FOI response from DWP saying that such information is not held by the department, was contradicted a month later by the claim that that while there 'may not be a systematic approach' within the department 'when cases come up, clearly when the department becomes aware of cases through the media, they do get looked at' (Pring, 2014b).

It was the DWP press office, who admitted, on 13 October 2014, for the first time, that the department does carry out investigations into some deaths of claimants saying: ‘Where it is appropriate, we undertake reviews into individual cases but we do not accept the argument of those who seek to politicise people’s deaths by linking them inaccurately to welfare policy’ (Pring, 2014a). Thus, written into the design of DWP reviews is the apolitical assumption that people’s deaths are not linked to social security, despite these being a key government mechanism to investigate deaths and harms linked to government policy. In response, Pat Onions (founder of Pat’s Petition, which played a key role in campaigning for the end of cuts to benefits disproportionately impacting disabled people) told DNS, that ‘We are very disappointed that the DWP would suggest that such a query ‘politicises people’s deaths’, especially for those cases where those people have left clear notes or evidence that imply that welfare reform itself is specifically a root cause of their ongoing worries and mental health problems’ (Pring, 2014a).

And so began a long FOI battle (Pring, 2022a), with Disability News Service requesting the records kept by DWP (ICO, 2015), and DWP refusing to provide the information, while admitting that the department had carried out ‘60 Peer Reviews following the death of a customer’ since February 2012 [this was later amended to 49 deaths and another 11 serious incidents] (FoI 4584; McVeigh, 2014). By this time, Disability News Service was not the only one using FOI to find out more about the DWP’s Peer Review process. In response to a FOI asking about the recommendations of departmental reviews into deaths, the DWP finally, after saying they needed more time, responded (on February 19, 2015), saying that 33 out of the 49 cases ‘contained recommendations for consideration at either national or local level’ (FOI, VTR 18). This single sentence, in a very brief overall response, shows that significant issues with the system were being exposed by the Peer Review process, and yet not being made public. It would later come to light, after a sustained (and continuing) FOI battle, with 25 FOI requests about benefits related deaths made by Disability News Service alone, that between 2014–2022, the DWP carried out approximately 220 Internal Process Reviews (IPRs) (formally called Peer Reviews) into the deaths of people who claim benefits (NAO, 2020, and Parliamentary Question 29 June 2022).

What has come to be publicly known about DWP reviews into deaths (Peer Reviews and Internal Process Reviews) has been learned slowly, largely through a mixture of FOIs, Parliamentary questions, questions to DWP press office, documents released through court cases/inquests, and a resulting investigation by the National Audit Office on the information the DWP holds on benefit claimants who ended their lives by suicide (NAO, 2020). This means that explaining what these reviews are involves piecing together a (partial) narrative across time and multiple documents. DWP internal guidance made public through FOIs made two years apart (VTR2073 and FOI2020/06951 – dated May 23, 2018 and March 27, 2020) describes the IPR as a: 'continuous improvement tool' whose 'purpose is to scrutinise DWP processes and if appropriate, identify recommendations for changes to the Customer Journey' (FOI2020/06951).

According to DWP internal guidance, an IPR should be commissioned 'in any case where it is considered that objective scrutiny would be beneficial', for example, an alleged or attempted suicide of a claimant, when customers are identified as vulnerable, when there are 'complex issues', or with 'unusually persistent or vexatious customers' to ensure DWP procedures have not exacerbated this behaviour (FOI2020/06951). Newer guidance, from 2020, shows widened criteria where 'IPRs will be conducted in all cases where there is a suggestion or allegation that the Department's actions or omissions may have negatively contributed to the customer's circumstances AND a customer has suffered serious harm, has died (including by suicide), or where we have reason to believe there has been attempted suicide' (FOI2022/54419; UK Parliament, 2021). The DWP is made aware of cases to investigate through a number of routes, including via coroners, claimants' families, the media, doctors and the police (NAO, 2020).

The IPR is a tool through which to investigate if DWP activity may have contributed to a claimant's death. Yet, DWP internal guidance (made available through a Freedom of Information (FOI) request – FOI2020/06951) states that the IPR is a 'factual account of events without opinion or judgement', and is therefore not 'a mechanism to be used to seek out or apportion blame'. In relation to deaths by suicide of claimants, IPRs 'do not come to a judgment as to whether benefits related issues were the cause of the suicide, but instead scrutinise departmental processes' (NAO, 2020:9). IPRs aim to build a 'culture of learning and not blame', meaning 'policy is outside scope' and findings 'should not be shared outside of the Department' (FOI2020/06951). The DWP 'does not categorise IPR outputs to identify larger trends or themes', meaning that 'systemic issues which might be brought to light through these reviews could be missed' (NAO, 2020:9). Despite being 'the main mechanism through which the Department would share any lessons from individual cases and seek to make improvement' (NAO, 2020: 9), the National Audit Office found that access to the IPR reports is restricted to the team handling IPRs; and the recommendations made from IPRs are not tracked or monitored, meaning the DWP 'does not know whether the suggested improvements are implemented' (2020: 9). In a recent FOI to release IPRs conducted between 1 September 2020 and 28 April 2022, the DWP 'explained that the IPR team is a small specialist team' of less than 30 members, and that access to this sensitive data is restricted to this team (ICO, 2022). DWP also said it established a serious case panel, in late 2019, to consider 'thematic issues' identified from serious cases.

Of the 133 IPRs carried out by the DWP between 2014–2015 and the publication of the National Audit Office's investigation in 2020, 69 were carried out in relation to suicides of benefit claimants. The National Audit Office's report concludes that 'it is highly unlikely that the 69 cases [of suicide] the Department has investigated represents the number of cases it could have investigated in the past six years' (NAO, 2020: 8). Documentation of deaths linked to benefits by those with lived experience and/or disabled people's campaigning (Mills, 2021), as well as epidemiological research (Barr et al., 2015), would suggest this is true.

Weaponising delay

Time plays a part in DWP responses to FOIs into the IPR process. The UK's Freedom of Information Act (2000) states that public authorities are required to respond to FOI requests within 20 working days from when they were made. However, requests can be refused under some circumstances, including if it is considered that a response would take too much staff time and/or cost too much (ICO, website), or that more time is needed to respond. In one FOI response received by Disability News Service (FOI2020/49577), the DWP say they need more time to consider where the 'balance of the public interest lies in relation to the information that you have requested'.

Another reason given by the DWP for many unsuccessful FOIs is that 'the information requested is not held centrally and is therefore unavailable without incurring a disproportionate cost' and that the time required to find the information 'is not possible within the costs laid out in Parliamentary guidance' (NAO, 2020: 5). In relation to one of the first known Prevention of Future Deaths (PFD) reports to name the WCA as a trigger for suicide (in relation to the death of Michael O'Sullivan, see PFDR, 2014) a FOI was submitted asking for the names of senior civil servants and ministers who had read the report and the actions they took. While the DWP confirmed 'that we hold information falling within the description specified in your request' (Pring, 2015a), they also said it would be too expensive to comply with the request, because it would take the equivalent of one civil servant more than three-and-a-half days to produce the necessary information (Ibid). It is worth noting that there is evidence of the FOI process generally being marked by delays (Bourke, Worthy and Hazell, 2012), lack of resources, non-compliance, and obstruction of lawful requests (Pegg, 2022).

That time equals money was also mobilised by DWP in 2019, when a Parliamentary question was tabled, asking Thérèse Coffey (then Secretary of State for DWP) 'how many inquests relating to benefits claimants who have ended their life by suicide her Department has submitted evidence to since 2013; and in how many inquests it was ruled that the policies of her

Department were partly responsible for the deceased person's state of mind' (UK Parliament, 2019). On September 30th, Justin Tomlinson (then minister for disabled people) answered saying that: 'Unfortunately, the information requested is not held centrally and is therefore unavailable without incurring a disproportionate cost' (Ibid). Concerns were raised about this response with the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG), leading to an investigation by the National Audit Office, in 2020, of the DWP on the information it holds on benefit claimants who ended their lives by suicide (Ibid). Here we see examples of time being explicitly cited by the DWP as justification not to provide information in relation to deaths. Time and related cost allow the DWP to deny access to information, while never remedying the underlying fact that the reason for 'disproportionate cost' (as conceived of by the DWP) is the lack of centralised and robust records.

An important tool used by the DWP to enable delay, and key to ensuring deaths are investigated individually, and thus, preventing patterns from being seen, has been the DWP's argument that IPRs contain private information. After admitting (in November 2014) that 60 Peer Reviews (this was before the name change to IPRs in 2015) had been carried out, the DWP said it would not release these reviews, claiming that the data is exempt under the "effective conduct of public affairs", and under section 123 of the Social Security Administration Act (SSSA) 1992 (Pring, 2014c). While these exemptions could have been bypassed by securing the permission of the secretary of state to release anonymised versions of the Peer Reviews, the DWP did not choose this path. This led DNS to complain to the Information Commissioners Office (ICO) (the UK's independent authority set up to uphold information rights in the public interest), in February 2015.

On September 17, 2015, the ICO produced a Decision Notice of its findings that under section 44 of the FOI Act the DWP is entitled to refuse the request (ICO, 2015). This is justified by the ICO because according to the FOI Act, for information to be justifiably withheld, it need only 'relate' to a particular person, meaning that even if names are redacted, 'the remaining information contained in the documents will nevertheless relate to a deceased claimant because that is the purpose of the review' (ICO, 2015:5). The ICO saw these reviews as being 'entirely specific to the circumstances of each claimant' and as reviews solely into 'individual cases' (ICO, 2015: 5) – showing one of many ways that such reviews, by design, systemically invisibilise patterns of deaths and the role played by policy in killing people. A year and a half after the initial FOI, and following an appeal, the ICO were found by the Information Rights Tribunal to have made an error in law, and the DWP were told they must release redacted versions of Peer Reviews (on 11 April 2016).

In May 2016, the redacted versions of 49 Peer Reviews (22 from 2012–2013; 16 between 2013–2014; and 11 between 2014–2015) were published on DWP's website. In 13 of the reviews, concerns are raised that policies to assess people for out-of-work disability benefits were putting the lives of "vulnerable" claimants at risk – evidencing that the DWP's own investigations were identifying policies as potentially life-threatening. A further nine redacted Peer Reviews and IPRs (carried out between August 2014 and April 2016) were then released in August 2016, showing that staff failure to follow DWP's six-point plan suicide guidance (introduced in 2009) was "a recurring theme" across the reviews (FOI, VTR 2633). It would take further FOIs and pressure from the ICO for DWP to release the next, significantly larger, batch of redacted IPRs (carried out between April 2016 to June 2018, and released in September 2018) – made up of 50 IPRs, 33 of which involved the death of a benefit claimant (FOI2897 and FOI2018 04816).

These numbers showed that IPRs into deaths of people claiming benefits doubled between 2016–2018. On November 30, 2018, the DWP responded to a FOI requesting the release of recommendations from IPRs into the deaths of benefit claimants completed between April 2019 and November 2020, by claiming to be exempt from its duty to release the documents because they link to the development of new government policy. Yet their response revealed that 82 separate investigations into deaths and other serious incidents had been carried out by the DWP between January 2016 and March 2019 (and they provided these in redacted form) (FOI 49577 Response; IPRs 2016 to 2019).

Despite the ICO being found by the Information Rights Tribunal to have made an error in law in saying DWP didn't have to release redacted reviews, when Disability News Service submitted FOIs for the release of 99 reviews carried out between September 1, 2020 and April 28, 2022, the Information commissioner agreed with DWP – that preparing and releasing the reviews would place a 'grossly oppressive burden' on the department (Pring, 2022b). This argument is largely based on the fact that each IPR needs to be redacted before it can be released, with the DWP arguing it would take a total of 25 working days to prepare the 99 documents for release.

That IPRs contain personal information has been repeatedly used by the DWP to attempt to block the public release of the documents. Families of those who died by suicide and whose family member is the subject of an IPR have been told that the reviews can't be shared 'due to the personal customer data they contain' (Pring, 2017). This extends beyond public sharing. For example, when questioned over whether IPRs and Prevention of Future Deaths reports showing links between the Work Capability Assessment and people's deaths were shown to the independent team commissioned by the DWP to review the WCA, the DWP replied:

> We take the death of any disability benefits claimant very seriously and always conduct an investigation into the circumstances where we are informed that

> the claimant committed [sic] suicide. As the reviews contain extremely personal information, it would not be appropriate to declare which individual cases were shared with the reviewers on this occasion (Hansard, 2019).

It would transpire that the review team were not shown documents linking the WCA to deaths (FOI FS50776575). By treating deaths as private, analysed on a case-by-case basis, and where findings are seen as relevant only to a specific individual, the DWP invisibilise patterns between deaths, likely created by their own policies and the wider dehumanisation of disabled people.

This keeps the temporal parameters of analysis within an individual's life – missing patterns between deaths that occurred before and after. Patterns are also thus obscured through delay and destruction. For example, Therese Coffey (work and pensions secretary between September 2019 and September 2022), repeatedly used delay tactics and refused to publish DWP research reports related to claimants' deaths (Pring, 2020b). In 2020, the DWP's destruction of records, due to data management policies that determine for how long a document is deemed worth keeping and when it can be destroyed, hit the news, with headlines such as, 'DWP in 'cover-up' storm after destroying dozens of secret benefit death reports' (Bloom, 2020).

In 2023, after months of delay – seemingly because the Government wanted to wait until after the publication of the Transforming Support White Paper in March – the DWP released the reviews completed between September 2020 and November 2022. Containing almost 100 recommendations, the reviews showed that DWP actions continued to be linked to people's deaths. DWP also finally released another batch of recommendations, after preventing their release since September 2020, finally admitting defeat following a ruling by the Information Commissioner. Although it lodged an appeal, DWP eventually withdrew that appeal. In March 2023, the Information Commissioner ruled, in a practice recommendation, that DWP had a pattern of 'consistently poor level of performance' on handling requests for information under the Freedom of Information Act (ICO, 2023).

At least 10 of the IPRs from 2020–2022, relate to deaths and harm linked to Universal Credit (UC), including the transition between employment and support allowance and UC, and the operation of the online UC system. In relation to UC, there is the suggestion to 'consider if front line colleagues are sufficiently trained to identify customers reporting changes in their health conditions' (Pring, 2023). There are repeated recommendations about DWP's complaints system, including at least two that suggest deaths or serious harm have been linked to a failure to correct 'factual inaccuracies' in responses to concerns raised by claimants; another suggesting a link to a failure to provide a 'comprehensive and factually accurate' response to a complaint; and a third relating to the handling of a PIP (personal independence payment) complaint. Another IPR, from January 2021, suggests there were still flaws in the system for visiting claimants in their own homes, despite such failings being closely linked to people's deaths, such as Errol Graham, who starved to death in 2018 after DWP wrongly stopped his out-of-work benefits (Pring, 2020a).

Suicide also features multiple times in the IPRs most recently released, covering the period 2020–2022. One suggests a new marker should be placed on DWP systems to highlight claimants with suicidal ideation or those who have made suicide attempts 'as an alert to show more compassion, dig deeper and look at all of the information available'. Another called for 'clear guidance and well managed processes' to ensure claimants who disclosed suicidal ideation were identified and 'risk assessed', with steps taken to 'reduce the distress and provide a satisfactory outcome for the customer' (Pring, 2023). Issues are also raised with the quality of reports carried out by the private sector contractors that carry out PIP assessments, especially that the reports should but often do not 'fully explore customer's medical conditions and meet the quality standards to support an accurate PIP award'. Issues with lack of robust evidence, not seeking evidence from healthcare professionals, and decision-makers failing to use 'all available sources of evidence' – all also emerge in relation to PIP.

'Diffused and de-fused by time': slow welfare state violence and accountability

This article argues that time is key to understanding the everyday, bureaucratic, and institutional violence of welfare reform, and how this violence kills people. Drawing on a co-produced timeline of evidence, we have shown that not only are benefits-related harms often delayed but also that delay tactics are central to how the DWP weaponise time as a strategy to avoid accountability and deny justice. These delay tactics include the framing of reviews into the deaths of people who claim benefits as private and the time taken to redact them as too burdensome; the limiting of the review to an individual's life, excluding from analysis links to other deaths that occurred earlier or later in time; and that the time required to collect data, due to lack of centralised record-keeping, is framed as too costly.

The temporal tactics detailed throughout show how time plays a part both in the production of harm –cumulative, attritional suffering that disproportionately impacts certain groups of people, including disabled people – as well as being used as a strategy by the DWP – where time is exploited 'to defuse the claims of the afflicted', to delink and dissociate cause and effect, and to deny accountability (Nixon, 2011: 51). Here 'time camouflages violence' and also functions as a form of violence (Nixon, 2022), showing evidence of how time is weaponized by the DWP against those seeking justice for deaths linked to and caused by the social security system. Nixon (2011) helps us to see 'the temporal distance' between short-lived policies and 'long-lived consequences, as gradual causalities are spread across a protracted aftermath, during which the memory and the body count of slow violence are diffused-and defused-by time' – making cause and effect much 'harder to track' and state 'answerability harder to impose' (2011: 41). Thus, slow violence is of particular significance to understanding lack of governmental accountability in relation to welfare-related deaths. Many disabled people know that to analyse welfare state violence we need to be to attuned to the ways that harms accumulate slowly, over time. Hence, a number of disabled people's campaigning groups demand a cumulative impact assessment of welfare reform.

Temporal tactics are part of a wider set of distancing strategies built into the very design of the DWP's investigations and record-keeping into deaths. In relation to the evidence explored in this article, we argue that despite being one of the main governmental tools to investigate deaths linked to the social security system, reviews into people's deaths (IPRs and Peer Reviews) systematically, and by design, rule out governmental accountability from the start. The timeline itself and our process in co-producing it with people who have experiential knowledge of welfare harms is an experiment in both documenting slow violence and countering the strategies through which it operates. Where the DWP delink deaths from policy by analysing deaths out of context and as individual events, weaponizing time to deny accountability, we put forward and experiment with a very different approach, bringing together evidence of dispersed harms and deaths, and analysing them together for patterns.

Despite delays and huge redaction, DWP reviews show evidence of persistent and systemic issues in the way benefits are managed, with recommendations that have widescale policy impact for potentially preventing further deaths, with some reviews calling for 'systemic actions' (Pring, 2023). These reviews should be publicly available by default, and the DWP should be held publicly accountable to making the changes required. Yet it may be that the IPR process is by design unable to apprehend government accountability in people's deaths. IPR findings and recommendations come from within the system that kills people, and therefore may never be enough for full accountability or justice. While some may ascribe people's deaths to flaws in a system that needs reform, others may see them as endemic to a system that needs dismantling and creating anew, with disabled people, and the analysis developed through lived experience, at the core.

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