Deaths by Welfare – Timeline Excerpt

This is a short sample of the longer timeline (which spans mainly from the 1970s to present day).

Healing Justice London’s Deaths by Welfare Project, led by China Mills, is investigating the links between welfare reform and people’s deaths, including suicides. A core part of our project is the co-construction of a timeline that will document evidence of cumulative harm and create counter histories to the official narrative, helping to understand how policies designed in the name of ‘welfare’ can create the conditions for people’s deaths.

The timeline also shows the expertise, knowledge, and leadership of people with lived experience of the welfare, including disabled people and bereaved families fighting fatal reforms, and visioning justice both within and beyond the state. Our hope is that the timeline will ultimately be useful as a tool for disability justice, to get public attention, and to build cross movement solidarity and coalition for a people’s assembly on benefits-related deaths and distress (in 2023).

What is the timeline and who has created it?

The timeline has been co-created by John Pring (Disability News Service) and China Mills (Healing Justice London and City, University of London), with essential input from Ellen Clifford (Disabled People Against Cuts [DPAC], and author of the War on Disabled People), Dolly Sen (artist and activist working on section136), Rick Burgess (Co-founder of the WOW petition), and Nick Dilworth (welfare rights advisor).

The timeline is one key output of a wider project, guided by the following research questions:

1. How does the UK Government, and particularly the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) talk about, frame and respond to deaths said to be linked to welfare policy (i.e. benefits-related deaths)?
2. How do those who have publicly emphasised the political nature of, and linked Government policy to, benefits-related deaths (including coroners, researchers, professionals, bereaved families and disability justice activists) talk about and frame the relationship between welfare policy and related deaths?

Timeline remit:

What we have included so far:

- Key policy and legislation
- Political speeches and media coverage key in crafting the dehumanisation and stigmatisation of (disabled) welfare claimants
- Key reports and investigations (National Audit Office, United Nations etc)
- Parliamentary debates
- Evidence hearings
- Key Freedom of Information (FOI) requests and DWP responses
- Findings from inquests
- Prevention of Future Deaths (PFD) reports and responses
- DWP reports, briefings, and internal guidelines etc
- Key research publications and reports that speak directly to benefits-related distress and deaths

Why we have included some but not all people’s deaths

In the timeline, we have included details about a number of people’s deaths (though no detailed accounts of methods of suicide) because while all deaths are a tragedy, some people’s deaths have led to prevention of future deaths reports, inquests, and large scale campaigns. Currently the timelines entries about people’s deaths are much longer than the other entries as a mark of respect in contextualising people’s lives and deaths. By including some and not others, we recognise that many people’s deaths are missing from the timeline. This does not mean to imply that anyone’s life or death mattered more than others.

As part of our ongoing project, we are keen to create a memorial of welfare-related deaths, to honour those who have died, while recognising that we may never know the true extent of people harmed by this brutal system.
Sample of Timeline

1 January 2010

**Title:** The death of Stephen Carré

**What:** Stephen Carré takes his own life after finding that DWP had confirmed its decision to find him ineligible for ESA, following a work capability assessment. He had not worked since the summer of 2007, after becoming severely ill with depression and anxiety.

**Why significant:** The coroner at his inquest would later rule that his death was linked to flaws in the WCA system (see 30 March 2010).

**Link:** [https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/wca-death-scandal-dwp-and-atos-killed-my-son/](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/wca-death-scandal-dwp-and-atos-killed-my-son/)

30 March 2010

**Title:** First prevention of future deaths (PFD) report related to the WCA.

**What:** Coroner Tom Osborne sends a PFD report (known at the time as a Rule 43 letter) regarding the death of Stephen Carré to the Department for Work and Pensions. In the letter, Osborne says the “trigger” that led Stephen to his decision to take his own life had been “the rejection of his appeal that he was not fit for work”, and he adds: “I feel the decision not to seek medical advice from the claimant’s own GP or psychiatrist if they are suffering a mental illness should be reviewed.”

**Why significant:** Although there was no publicity at the time, the existence of the PFD warning would emerge later, and would show that ministers had been warned that changes to the WCA system needed to be made to prevent further deaths, but that those changes had never been made. The reference to the failure to seek further medical evidence would prove hugely important in future years. At this stage WCA outcomes were in their early stages, with only 33,500 claimants having been assessed, of which 3,300 (10 per cent) were in the support group, 8,700 (26 per cent) were in the work related activity group, and 33,500 (64 per cent) were declared fit for work, showing a very strict testing regime.

**Link:** [https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/wca-death-scandal-dwp-and-atos-killed-my-son/](https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/wca-death-scandal-dwp-and-atos-killed-my-son/)
4 May 2010  
Title: Coroner Tom Osborne receives initial response to the Stephen Carré PFD from DWP permanent secretary Sir Leigh Lewis.  

What: Sir Leigh (who was appointed DWP permanent secretary in 2005 and would retire from the Civil Service in 2010) outlines departmental procedures on the WCA, provides brief details from Stephen Carré’s assessment, and asks the coroner for medical information about the case so DWP can “complete our investigation and review our existing procedures, as you have asked, to determine the need for any changes to our current medical evidence gathering process”.  
Why significant: Recognition by DWP of the concerns around the WCA raised by Tom Osborne.  

Link: https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/wca-death-scandal-dwp-and-atos-killed-my-son/  
https://www.civilserviceworld.com/in-depth/article/interview-sir-leigh-lewis  

6 May 2010  
Title: Labour government voted out in general election  

What: Labour loses the election, which leads to the formation of a coalition by the Conservatives and their junior Liberal Democrat partners  

Why significant: The coalition’s aggressive welfare reform agenda (foreshadowed in the Conservative’s election manifesto) will play a significant part in the government’s programme over the next five years.  

Link: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/election2010/results/  

12 May 2010  
Title: Coroner Tom Osborne replies to Sir Leigh Lewis.  

What: Osborne says DWP does not need to investigate the circumstances surrounding Stephen Carré’s death, as that has already taken place at the inquest, and that DWP needs instead to look at the “use of medical evidence when determining entitlement of benefit of those patients who are suffering from
a psychiatric illness”. He offers to send Sir Leigh a transcript of the inquest evidence.

Why significant: Further clarification of the coroner’s concerns about the WCA.

Link: https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/100654/response/291298/attach/2/ESA%20Filework%20Guidelines%20V6%20Final.pdf?cookie_passthrough=1

10 June 2010
Title: The death of Paul Reekie

What: Paul Reekie, who took his own life, left no suicide note but had laid out two letters from the Department for Work and Pensions that had notified him that his housing benefit and incapacity benefit were being stopped.

Why significant: His death was one of the first to spark concerns from disabled activists about the harm being caused by the WCA and the move to ESA, and it led to the formation of the influential grassroots campaign of disabled activists, the Black Triangle campaign.

#:~:text=Mr%20Reekie%20%E2%80%93%20a%20contemporary%20of%20Trainspotting%20author,set%20up%20to%20fight%20the%20Government%E2%80%99s%20welfare%20reforms.

Summer/autumn 2010
Title: Formation of Black Triangle Campaign

What: The grassroots Black Triangle Campaign is formed to “galvanise opposition to the current vicious attack on the fundamental human rights of disabled people by the Government of the United Kingdom utilising ‘work capability assessments’ (as administered by ‘Atos Healthcare Ltd’ on behalf of the Department of Work and Pensions ‘DWP’) to re-classify sick and disabled individuals as “fit for work” – in flagrant violation of all accepted medical, and human, ethical standards.” The website is dedicated to the memory of Paul Reekie.
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Why significant: Black Triangle Campaign will play a key part in campaigning against welfare reform, and in highlighting the link between welfare reform and the deaths of disabled people.

Link: https://blacktrianglecampaign.org/

Summer/autumn 2010
Title: Formation of The Mental Health Resistance Network

What: The Mental Health Resistance Network was set up “by people who live with mental distress in order to defend ourselves from the assault on us by a cruel government”.

Why significant: Like Black Triangle, the group will play a key part in campaigning against welfare reform, particularly around benefit-related deaths. The grassroots group will play an important part in bringing a judicial review claim against Iain Duncan Smith over the harm caused by the WCA and the failure to seek further medical evidence (see July 2012, and 22 May 2013).

Link: https://www.facebook.com/MHResist/