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Correcting disability benefit errors to cost taxpayer £1bn

Francis Elliott Political Editor

The Department for Work and Pensions has tripled the number of staff correcting a serious administrative error that led to the underpayment of disability benefits and is set to cost the taxpayer more than £1 billion.

The government has taken on an extra 400 staff and redeployed another 400, meaning that 1,200 people will be working to check 600,000 Employment and Support Allowance (Esa) cases. A report last year by the independent spending watchdog blamed “shoddy administration” for the underpayments, which average £5,000 per claimant.

In February ministers admitted that an initial “sampling exercise” had found that the problem was worse than thought and that 210,000 arrears payments could have to be made, 30,000 more than estimated.

Frank Field, chairman of the Commons welfare committee, said that the cost of rectifying the mistake would probably exceed £1 billion. The independent MP for Birkenhead, said: “The department has been forced to admit that just the admin of fixing its own catastrophic incompetence is going to add another £40 million to the cost of this serially botched operation.”

Mr Field criticised the “awful, pain-

ful, error-ridden” assessment process and “miserable and lengthy” appeals, which has meant tens of thousands of disabled people have not been given money they were owed.

He said that the department was heading for another billion-pound scandal as staff continued wrongly to refuse disabled people the support they need.

A letter from a top civil servant at the department confirmed that the latest expected cost for administering payments to 310,000 underpaid claimants would be £21 million in 2018-19 and £19 million in 2019-20.

The letter states that 400 extra staff were recruited in 2018-19 “directly to support the Esa underpayment exercise”.

The DWP said: “We have allocated the staffing and resources needed to complete this as soon as possible.”

● American citizens seeking to travel to Britain to work and study are facing delays after being turned away from the centres which take the fingerprints and photographs. The Home Office blamed a “technical issue” for the temporary suspension of the service provided by the US Department of Homeland Security’s application support centre. The service was suspended by the US because the British government missed a payment, according to *The Guardian*.