Welfare Reform Advisers Forum -

I think there are some very good people on the Forum, the panel, and I am looking forward to getting those people together. It is self-evident, I think, to everyone that coming into a big department like this I have got a very great deal to learn and not much time to do it, so people like those independent experts, who have been brought together to form this panel, I think are going to be very important to help me with this very substantial agenda that I am trying to deal with ... I am just looking at these very eminent people who will add value, as I am sure they will, to the process of discussion and debate that needs to go on.

Benefit simplification -

I think is one of the most complex issues that we have to face in our benefits system, which is the need for a straightforward, easily comprehensible system which people obviously can understand and navigate their way around. We need to have within the rules a system of properly targeting support for people who most need it and sometimes those two general operating principles collide and we know that to be the case. Am I content with the current situation? No. I do not think anyone is. I think we need to continue to explore ways of simplifying the benefit system but also, at the same time, not opening up other opportunities for abuse and misdirection of resources. They are two very difficult horses to ride.

Efficiency savings -

We are going to hit those targets. That is definitely what we are going to do. One of my principal responsibilities as Secretary of State is to make sure that the Department for Work and Pensions continuously looks to provide efficiency in the way that we deliver our services and value for money for the taxpayer. I think it would be right under any circumstances for a department of state to be pursuing that agenda aggressively and certainly I intend to do that. I think in the case of the DWP that is made even more important in the light of the Spending Review settlement that we received last year. I am confident that we will meet those targets. We are beginning to make some very substantial cuts in the numbers employed, for example, in the Pension Service and in Jobcentre Plus. We have been able to negotiate, I think, a much better deal with EDS on the supply of IT systems across the DWP, which I hope will generate significant savings. We are getting towards the end of very significant estate rationalisation in Jobcentre Plus and in the Pension Service which is going to see a very substantial reduction in the number of our offices and premises around the country.

Jobcentre Plus and the Customer Management System -

JcP is absolutely central to our vision of a modern, active, enabling welfare state ... (With) its estate rationalisation programme, the difficulties it has had with its IT systems, and so on, it has got a shed-load of difficulties to deal with ... (but has given) a very creditable performance at a time when it is going through a very major restructuring exercise.
... I am assured by JcP managers that, certainly with CMS release 3, we are now beginning to get on top of these problems. The problem has been that the system has been dogged by issues to do with speed and access and reliability. I am informed that the reliability now is up to about 99 per cent and that has got to be good news. Has every glitch in the IT system been solved, I suspect probably not ... but this is something that obviously all of us, me in particular as Secretary of State, are going to have to pay very close attention to in the years ahead as well.

New Deal –

My priority has been to preserve core New Deal programmes and we will see this fully and properly protected, and that, I think, has got to be the right approach. Overall ... we have terminated 194 contracts and not extended another 800-odd contracts ... We are trying to manage down expenditure, yes, that is true, and get better value for money and I hope, certainly as we go through the next few months, we will have much greater clarity for the training providers, particularly on the labour market side, about what the future will hold for them.

... I very much hope that the new system will reward the good providers better for the service that they are doing, so they in turn can continue to improve the service they provide for their clients. I think that is a virtual circle here, but we have got to be clear about what we want from this process of change ... I want to see a broad range of providers, some in the private sector maybe, some in the voluntary sector, some may be local authorities and some more traditional public sector, providing a range of services that can meet the needs of the people we are here to serve.

Official error -

The problem that you have referred to in terms of error is a problem for us, it is about £1.7 billion and that is a shed-load of money and I would like to get that down and I think everyone around this table would. The Department will need to look very carefully at how we can improve systems and their accuracy. Some of it is down to IT, quite clearly so, and improving the delivery of IT is going to help, I think, with those targets, but I think overall ... I would say that we are moving again in the right direction but we have got a significant amount of work still to do to try to get that, particularly the error rate, down.

Local Housing Allowance -

I think it is true to say that the scheme that was piloted from these Pathfinder areas was a very generous scheme and there is an issue there for us too about whether we can take that forward in that way.