

# A MACHINE BUILT TO FAIL US

*Tinkering will not fix what is broken by design. Britain's public systems — from the DWP to Parliament, from energy companies to the NHS — do not need reform at the edges. They need to be rebuilt from a foundation of social justice, accountability, and genuine human dignity. These are the stories of what happens when they are not.*

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Every week I sit across from people who have done nothing wrong. They are not criminals. They are not cheats. They are lone parents, elderly residents, people living with serious mental illness, people for whom English is not their first language — and people who are simply, unforgivably in the eyes of the state, poor. And they are being ground to dust.

Not by one system. Not by one bad decision. By a vast, interlocking architecture of process, enforcement, and bureaucratic indifference that spans every corner of public life in this country. Transport enforcement. Benefit administration. Energy billing. Immigration. Healthcare. Housing. Local government. Parliament itself. The machinery is everywhere. And it does not work for the people it was built to serve. It works against them.

What follows are not hypothetical scenarios. They are real cases from our own files. Every name has been reduced to an initial to protect privacy. Everything else is real. The fear is real. The debt is real. The sleepless nights are real. The children watching their parents break are real.

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***“The system no longer serves people. People are made to serve the system.”***

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## **The Human Cost: Four Cases, Four Systems, One Pattern**

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We begin with people, because that is where every failure begins and ends — with a human being on the receiving end of something they did not choose and cannot escape alone.

**CASE ONE · TRANSPORT ENFORCEMENT****F — The Conviction She Never Knew About**

F received a penalty from a transport authority for a fare irregularity. The penalty notice was sent to her former address — the home she had left, where her ex-partner still lived. He contacted the authority in writing to explain she no longer lived there. The authority did nothing. The case rolled on.

A Single Justice Procedure conviction was obtained entirely in her absence. No hearing. No opportunity to speak. No verification that she had ever received a single piece of correspondence. She learned she had been convicted of a criminal offence via a WhatsApp message from her daughter — who had seen a court letter mentioning the possibility of imprisonment.

She came to us immediately. We filed a Statutory Declaration and wrote to the enforcement agents to suspend action while the court considered the matter. We were told — in writing — that they could not discuss her case without a third-party authority form. A form they had never mentioned. Meanwhile their agents continued sending threatening letters to her home, stating they would attend and remove her belongings.

*F is a mother. Her child is in school. Council workers visit her home regularly for appointments. She told us she cannot hear a knock at the door without her heart stopping. She cannot see a white envelope on the mat without her hands shaking. She has not slept through a night since the letters started. She said: 'I feel like a criminal and I have done nothing wrong. I am scared in my own home. I am scared to open my own door.'*

She sought help the moment she found out. She has co-operated every step of the way. She has done everything asked of her. At the time of writing, she has been seeking resolution for close to a year. The machine has not stopped.

Is the transport authority proud of this? Are the enforcement agents proud that their letters continue to arrive at a home where a child lives — for a debt the defendant did not know existed? Are the courts proud that their bulk procedure convicted a woman who was never told she was being prosecuted?

**CASE TWO · DWP / BENEFITS****M — The Letter That Caused a Crisis**

M has significant mental health conditions. She is not always able to manage correspondence. She does not always understand what is being asked of her, particularly when written in the dense, procedural language that public bodies seem to favour. She is, by any measure, a vulnerable person — the kind of person the system is supposed to protect with additional care.

The DWP wrote to inform her she had been overpaid benefits and was required to repay a substantial sum. There was no prior phone call. No visit. No assessment of whether she was in a position to engage with the letter. No recognition that the communication itself might cause harm. There was only the demand: you owe us money, pay it back.

*The letter arrived and caused a crisis. M did not open her post for days because she knew something bad was inside. When she finally did, she could not understand it fully, could not process what was being asked, and had no one to help her. She described feeling 'like the walls were closing in.' She stopped eating properly. She stopped sleeping. She told a support worker she felt she was being hunted — that the state had decided she had done something wrong and would not stop until she paid.*

By the time she reached us, the deadline for Mandatory Reconsideration had passed. The one formal route to challenge the decision had closed around her while she was still trying to understand that a decision had been made. We worked to reopen the matter and to hold the DWP to its own vulnerability obligations. The fight continues. M continues to live under the weight of it.

A system that sends enforcement correspondence to a person in mental health crisis, with no human contact, no adjusted communication, and no compassion, is not malfunctioning. It is functioning exactly as designed. That is the problem.

**CASE THREE · ENERGY COMPANY****R — Three Thousand Pounds for Energy He Disputes Using**

R is an older man who lives alone. He disputes an energy debt exceeding three thousand pounds in its entirety. The bills were based on estimated readings. The figures provided by the company do not match his own records. The readings, he contends, were never taken correctly. The debt, as presented, is simply not right. He has said so, in writing, repeatedly, and at length.

The energy company's position is that the debt stands. Their letters are formal, their tone impassive, their process mechanical. The path to formally disputing the figure requires navigating an internal complaints process, then waiting months, then potentially escalating to an Ombudsman service — a journey that demands stamina, literacy, and persistence that many people simply cannot sustain alone.

*R described sitting at his kitchen table with the letters spread in front of him, not knowing where to start. He said he felt 'small' — that a big company with lawyers and systems and processes had decided he owed them money, and that no one was going to listen to an old man saying they were wrong. He said: 'I know I'm right. But I can't prove it on my own. And they know that.' The threat of disconnection remains live. He worries every time he turns on his heating.*

R had been trying to resolve this alone for months before he came to us. He had written letters. He had called. He had been given reference numbers and told the matter was under review. No review produced a resolution. We continue to work with him. The company continues to pursue the debt.

Estimated billing as the basis for a demand of thousands of pounds, pursued through enforcement without independent verification, is not a billing error. It is a structural failure — one repeated across the energy sector with predictable regularity and predictable victims: people who are older, less confident, and less able to fight back.

**CASE FOUR · IMMIGRATION / HOME OFFICE****K — Months of Silence While a Family Waits**

K submitted a visa application. He provided the documentation required. He paid the fee required. He followed the process as set out. Then he waited. Weeks became months. There was no substantive communication from the Home Office. No indication of what, if anything, was outstanding. No named caseworker. No direct point of contact. No route to any kind of answer.

K cannot work while his application is outstanding. He is the primary support for his family. Every week of silence is a week of financial strain and psychological uncertainty stretching across an entire household.

*He told us he checks his email first thing every morning and last thing every night. Every day without an answer is another day his family does not know what their future looks like. His children ask him questions he cannot answer. His wife watches him carry a weight he cannot put down. He said: 'I feel like I don't exist to them. Like I submitted my papers into a black hole and no one on the other side even knows I am a person waiting.'*

When we made enquiries on his behalf, the responses we received did not engage with the specifics of his case. The application exists, it seems, in a system designed for volume, not for people. K's life is on hold. The Home Office's process is not.

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***“These are not anomalies. They are Tuesday. This is what we see, in some form, almost every single working day.”***

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Four cases. Four systems. Four organisations with their own processes, their own complaint procedures, their own commitments to customer care and public service. And in every single case, a person with a legitimate need encountered a machine that treated process as more important than the human being inside it.

## **The Architecture of Institutional Failure**

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The cases above are symptoms. What follows is the diagnosis. Each of the systems described below shares the same fundamental flaw: it was designed with institutional interests at its centre, not the people it was created to serve. And when you design a system that way, the same outcomes follow with mathematical reliability.

### **Benefits & the DWP**

The Mandatory Reconsideration process — the formal mechanism for challenging a DWP decision before it reaches a tribunal — functions almost entirely as a gatekeeping mechanism. It rarely changes the original outcome. Its purpose, in practice, is to exhaust and deter. People give up. That

giving up is counted as case closure, not institutional failure. Appeals take months. Sanctions are applied without warning to people who may not have understood what was required. The system was built to administer entitlements. It has become a machine for denying them.

### **Transport Enforcement**

The Single Justice Procedure has become a bulk conviction engine. Cases move through a magistrate's decision without hearing, without the defendant present, without meaningful scrutiny. By the time the defendant finds out, bailiffs may already have been instructed. Enforcement agents are financially incentivised to collect, not to resolve. Vulnerability protocols exist on paper. In our experience, they are rarely applied with genuine human care. The letter threatening to remove someone's belongings should never be the first contact a family receives.

### **Energy and Water Companies**

Essential services carry an essential obligation of care. They do not honour it. Billing errors, disputed accounts, estimated readings applied for years, enforcement threats to vulnerable households without human review — these are routine. The complaints procedure is layered and exhausting. Even something small becomes a reference number, a wait, a form, a further wait, a response that does not address what was asked. For someone managing mental illness, disability, language barriers, or poverty, the small thing becomes a crisis.

### **The NHS, GPs, and Mental Health Services**

The mental health referral pathway requires someone in crisis to wait months, re-explain their history at every stage, and then be told they do not meet the threshold — with no support in the interim. The person who cannot use an online booking system. The elderly patient who cannot get through by phone. The referral that has sat in a queue until the condition has deteriorated significantly. These are not exceptional situations. They are the system working as designed.

### **Local Councils, Councillors, MPs, and Parliament**

Council services are frequently experienced as adversarial. Councillors, in theory the democratic link between residents and institutions, are too often powerless to cut through the same machinery affecting their own ward members. The MP's letter — once a reliable tool — now too often receives a form response saying the matter is being handled through normal channels. The normal channels are broken. That is the whole point. Parliament makes the law. Parliament allocates the resources. Parliament has watched these failures accumulate for decades and treated them as an administrative matter rather than a political emergency.

### **The Ombudsman Problem**

Every system has a complaints procedure. Every complaints procedure has a tier. Every tier has a reference number, an automated acknowledgement, and then — too often — silence. Ombudsman services exist to hold institutions to account, but the route to them is itself a barrier: exhausting the internal process first, over many months, with no guarantee the Ombudsman will accept the case, and no interim support while you wait. We have made the complaint procedure itself into an

instrument of attrition. People who survive it are not the ones who received justice. They are the ones who had the stamina to keep going.

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***“No one picks up the phone. No one takes responsibility.  
The system produces paper and the paper produces fear.”***

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## Doing the Same Thing and Expecting Different Results

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There is a well-known definition of a particular kind of futility: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. It is the most accurate description of British social policy I know.

For decades, the response to failures like those described above has followed the same pattern. A high-profile case. Public concern. A ministerial statement. A review. Guidance is issued. A working group is established. A strategy is published. A commissioner is appointed. A consultation is run. A response is published. And then the same systems produce the same outcomes, the same people suffer the same harms, the same organisations issue the same apologies, and the same commitments to improvement are made. And nothing structurally changes.

We have had welfare reform after welfare reform. NHS reorganisation after NHS reorganisation. Energy market regulation, consumer protection legislation, housing strategy after housing strategy. Ombudsman reports, select committee inquiries, independent reviews with statutory teeth and those without. Commitments to ‘putting people at the heart of services’ from every government in living memory.

And still F cannot answer her own front door without fear. Still M receives a debt demand during a mental health crisis without a single human being making contact first. Still R faces disconnection over a bill that was never right. Still K waits in silence while his family’s life is suspended.

The problem is not that we lack good intentions. The problem is that good intentions have been layered on top of structures that were not built to serve the people who most need serving. And those structures have never been fundamentally changed. Until they are, the outcomes will not change either. You cannot patch justice onto a system built for compliance. You have to build the system for justice from the beginning.

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***“You cannot keep doing the same things, through the same structures, and expect the people at the bottom to stop paying the price.”***

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## Social Justice Is Not a Slogan. It Is a Demand.

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Social justice is a framework for understanding power — who has it, who is denied it, and how institutions either distribute it fairly or entrench its concentration in the hands of those who already hold it. When we apply that framework honestly to the systems described in this article, what we see is not a series of unfortunate individual failures. We see a consistent pattern.

The people with the least power, the fewest resources, and the greatest need are the ones most systematically failed. The people most likely to give up before they receive what they are owed. The people most likely to suffer harm from the process of trying to access help. The people whose suffering is least visible, least reported, and least acted upon.

A system that makes it harder to claim what you are entitled to than to simply give up is not a neutral system. It has chosen, implicitly or explicitly, whose interests to protect. A Mandatory Reconsideration that almost never reconsiders does not serve the claimant. It serves the department. A complaints procedure designed to exhaust rather than remedy does not serve the complainant. It serves the institution.

Social justice demands that we stop accepting this as the natural order of things. It demands that we recognise the suffering produced by these systems as a political choice — one that can be unmade. It demands that we rebuild not at the margins, not with a new strategy and a refreshed set of performance targets, but at the foundations. Because tinkering with systems built on the wrong values produces, reliably and repeatedly, wrong outcomes.

## **The Psychological Harm Is Real**

We talk about the mental health crisis. We talk about food bank dependency. We talk about homelessness. But we rarely speak honestly about the degree to which the systems themselves are generating that crisis. F did not develop anxiety because of a clinical condition. She developed it because a machine decided she was guilty of something she knew nothing about, and kept sending threats to her home. M was not in crisis because of her diagnosis alone. She was in crisis because the state sent her a demand she could not understand or contest, with a deadline she could not meet, with no human being willing to pick up the phone.

These are not abstract policy failures. They are causes of real suffering in real homes. They are the reason people stop opening their post. They are the reason parents cry in front of their children. They are the reason people tell us they have considered not going on. That is what these systems produce. And that must be said plainly.

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***“We have made officialdom into a kind of sustained psychological harm. That is not an accident of design. It is a consequence of it.”***

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## **What We Are Demanding**

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We are not making polite recommendations. We are making demands. Because the scale of harm is too great, the pattern of failure is too consistent, and the gap between what these systems promise and what they deliver is too wide for anything less than directness. Social justice does not wait. The

people inside these systems cannot wait.

### **From Government**

- An independent commission on systemic access to public services, with statutory powers to compel evidence, published findings within 12 months, and a legislative response within 24.
- Abolition of the Mandatory Reconsideration process as currently constituted, replaced by genuine independent first-tier review with real discretion and binding outcomes.
- Reform of the Single Justice Procedure so that no person can be convicted in their absence without verified evidence that they received actual notice of the proceedings, with automatic right of appeal at no cost.
- A statutory Duty of Candour for public bodies in complaints processes — requiring genuine engagement with the evidence presented, not form responses.
- Proper resourcing of Ombudsman services to enable early intervention, not only end-stage review after months of internal process.

### **From Regulators and Essential Services**

- Mandatory human review before any enforcement correspondence is sent to a household flagged as vulnerable, with that review documented and auditable.
- An end to estimated billing as the basis for enforcement action. Disputed bills must be paused pending independent, verified evidence.
- A genuine accessible complaints pathway that does not require literacy, digital access, or professional assistance to navigate.

### **From Local Government and Elected Representatives**

- A statutory duty to assist — not a power, a duty — for residents who cannot navigate services without support, regardless of narrow eligibility criteria.
- Councillors to be given real authority to intervene in stalled cases on behalf of constituents, with officers required to respond substantively within defined timelines.
- MPs to treat systemic casework failures as evidence of national legislative failure, not individual constituency matters, and to escalate accordingly.

### **From Parliament**

- Recognition that the accumulated harm produced by failing public systems is a political emergency, not an administrative inconvenience.
- Legislation within this Parliament that embeds the right of every person to access what they are entitled to, to have a genuine dispute heard, and to receive a response from an institution that treats them as a human being.

- A cross-party commitment that social justice — the fair distribution of power, access, and dignity — is a governing principle, not a political position.

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***“We built these systems. We can rebuild them. But only if we are honest about what they have become — and only if we have the courage to demand something different.”***

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## **The Standard We Are Holding To**

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The standard is not complicated. Every person — regardless of their income, their health, their language, their literacy, or their capacity to fight — should be able to access what they are entitled to, dispute what they believe is wrong, and receive a genuine response from an institution that treats them as a human being. Not a case number. Not a reference. A human being.

That standard is not being met. It is not even being seriously pursued. And the people paying the price are the people who can least afford to pay it.

F should be able to hear a knock at her own door without her heart stopping. M should receive a phone call, not a demand, when the state believes she owes money and she is known to be in mental health crisis. R should not spend years fighting a bill that was never right, alone at a kitchen table with letters he does not know how to answer. K should not wake up every morning and check his email in the hope that the silence has finally broken — while his children watch and his wife waits and his life remains on hold.

These are not extraordinary asks. They are the minimum that a just society owes its members. A floor, not a ceiling. And we are not meeting it.

Social justice is not an abstract principle reserved for political speeches and manifesto pledges. It is the difference between F being afraid in her own home and F being safe. It is the difference between M being supported through a crisis and M being pushed further into one. It is the difference between a system that works for everyone and a machine that grinds the most vulnerable into the ground.

We have built the machine. We can dismantle it. But only if we stop pretending that doing the same things, through the same structures, with the same indifference at their centre, will somehow produce a different result for the people trapped inside.

It will not. It never has. And people cannot afford to wait any longer.

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*Shahid Mahmood is an adviser and director at Blossom Group Community Box, providing free specialist advice and advocacy to individuals navigating public, quasi-public, and regulatory systems. All cases are drawn from Blossom Group's own caseload. Names have been reduced to initials to protect client confidentiality.*

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