

FOREWORD

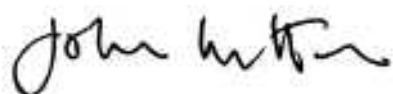
Building a fair society which promotes opportunity and independence for all lies at the heart of our vision for Britain. This is a high aspiration, and the targets which we are working towards are rightly some of the most demanding that any Government has ever set itself.

This report sets out our progress towards these long-term goals. It shows how our reforms of welfare and pensions are making a difference in tackling poverty and worklessness, and in enabling people to take control of their retirement planning. It also highlights the practical improvements we are making now to offer a better quality of service to the seventeen million customers who rely on us. We are redesigning our system of child support in Britain, and in the interim period we are streamlining processes in the Child Support Agency to deliver more money for more children. This year the number of integrated Jobcentre Plus offices in operation has risen above seven hundred, and the number of people who have entered employment through the Pathways to Work programme has topped seventeen thousand. We are making it easier for pensioners to claim the benefits they are entitled to; we are ahead of our target to cut the processing time for a claim for Housing Benefit; overpayments in Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance have almost halved since 1997-98; and fraud is at its lowest ever.

These changes have driven significant progress. We've made the biggest improvement of any EU country in tackling child poverty. There are more people in jobs than ever before – 2.4 million more than in 1997. And we've lifted two million pensioners out of absolute poverty. Last year's Disability Discrimination Act set a new standard in disability rights, and with the establishment of the Office for Disability Issues we're now focused on improving outcomes for disabled people.

We have achieved a great deal in the past year, but we will need to redouble our efforts to meet the challenging targets that are outlined in this report. This year's Welfare Reform Green Paper *A New Deal for Welfare; Empowering People to Work* set out our vision of an enabling and empowering welfare state. Meanwhile our National Pensions Debate engaged and challenged the public on the crucial issue of retirement provision, and now we are preparing to publish a White Paper on our plans for fundamental reform of the pensions system in the UK.

We could not have made the progress set out in this document – and we could not expect to build on and to exceed these achievements in coming years – without the continued hard work of all of our staff. I'd like to thank them on behalf of my ministerial team for their commitment and professionalism.



John Hutton

Secretary of State for Work and Pensions