

Jobcentre Plus and DWP

DWP Switchboard Project

Equality impact assessment for DWP Switchboard Project

Introduction

1. Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has carried out an equality impact assessment (EIA) on the DWP switchboard project to meet the requirements of the:
 - Race Equality Duty.
 - Disability Equality Duty.
 - Gender Equality Duty.
2. This process will help to make sure:
 - The Department's strategies, policies and services are free from discrimination.
 - Due regard is given to equality (specifically disability, gender and race) in decision making and subsequent processes.
 - Opportunities for promoting equality are identified.

Background

Balfour Beatty WorkPlace (BBW) was awarded the contract to deliver DWP office services from March 2007 following an open tender exercise. The office service contract includes delivering switchboard services for jobcentres (part of Jobcentre Plus [JCP]), Disability Benefit Centres and Carers Allowance Unit (part of Pensions and Disability and Carers Services [PDCS]), a number of Regional and district JCP locations and a number of DWP Head Office locations. As part of the requirement to transform the way switchboard services are delivered BBW proposed to transfer switchboard services into service centres sited in Watford, Cardiff, Blackpool and Glasgow. Between November 2007 and December 2007 switchboard services for 19 jobcentres across London and East of England moved into Watford Service Centre. An equality impact assessment was undertaken by DWP Commercial Directorate at that time and concluded that there was no adverse impact on DWP staff or customers as a result of changes to service delivery.

In Summer 2008 a further 6 London local switchboard services supporting jobcentre sites moved to Watford service centre and 7 sites in Scotland moved to Glasgow Service Centre. Customers continue to dial the same telephone number as before and calls are answered by operators supporting specific local jobcentre offices. The only difference is switchboard operators are in a central location rather than sited in individual jobcentres.

Since May 2008 the Blackpool service centre provides switchboard services for some DWP Head office buildings and PDCS business. Again telephone numbers remain the same for staff and customers.

The Change

The DWP Switchboard Project supports optimisation of the DWP Office Service contract to promote better customer service and simplify how customers contact the specific areas of DWP business currently supported by switchboard services. This will be achieved through:

- Reducing the number of locations from which switchboard services are delivered.
- Rationalising the number of telephone numbers publicised for jobcentres from over 800 to a small number of 0845 numbers. Direct dial (DDI) numbers are not affected so customers will still be able to dial direct to the appropriate office when they know the extension number.
- Creating a virtual telephony network for switchboard services.

Who will benefit from it and how?

DWP, BBW and ultimately DWP customers will benefit from the aims of the Project. However setting up a centralised/virtual network across the service centres will provide a more effective service because:

- Calls will be routed to the first available operator across the service centre network which will reduce call waiting time as there will be an increase in advisers who are able to deal with calls.
- Disruption to services will be minimised in the event of telephony failure in a service centre.

The DWP Switchboard project will introduce a single telephone number which will be used to contact all Jobcentres. This will help customers as it will mean that they will be able to call one number and access any Jobcentre nationwide and the Welsh Language line. At the moment there are numerous numbers for customers to ring and this will remove customer confusion.

Consultation, involvement and evidence

The TU side were kept informed of progress during the setting up the Office Service contract and were advised of the contract being awarded to BBW.

It is estimated that BBW will handle approximately 19.25 million calls for DWP during 2009/2010. This figure takes into account an estimated 2 million calls that currently go direct into jobcentres (approximately 10% of total jobcentre calls). National data provided on jobcentre customer service performance shows all targets are being exceeded for speed of answering calls, professionalism and the quality of information provided. Since approximately 90% of jobcentre calls are already managed through BBW switchboard operations and have been since March 2007 contracting out switchboard operations is already tried and tested and no equality issues have been identified for either customers or jobcentre staff during that time.

Jobcentre business equates to approximately 94% of all telephony business managed by BBW switchboard operations with the remaining 6% relating to Disability and Carers Services. The customer should not be impacted by the centralisation of switchboard services – calls will be directed to the right place as they are now.

In planning for centralisation/virtualisation of switchboard services and the rationalisation of jobcentre telephone numbers consideration has been given to impacts on:

- The customer service that will be delivered.
- Customers with communication barriers and how these will be managed.
- Customers in a vulnerable group.
- Meeting the requirements of the Welsh Language Act.
- Costs of using 0845 numbers.
- DWP staff (in particular those staff in the 315 jobcentres currently not supported by BBW switchboard services).

Impact

Customer Service

For jobcentre customers, centralisation of switchboard services and the move to a single number means BBW switchboard operators will not be able to identify the site which the customer has dialled. This could be construed as providing a lesser customer service. A process has been put in place to support training switchboard operators to identify the correct jobcentre to direct the call efficiently and without inconvenience to the customer.

This should not be an issue for PDCS because PDCS is not planning on moving its 8 non-publicised geographic numbers to a single number. PDCS switchboard operators should be able to continue to identify the number dialled enabling them to identify the site dialled.

Jobcentre Plus monitors quality of customer service being provided. Since September 2008, BBW has been provided with the national results on a quarterly basis. BBW Performance managers are now able to identify any 'hotspots' where performance issues may need to be addressed, for example because the correct corporate greeting is not given. Centralising switchboard services will assist BBW managers to identify customer service issues as they arise – managers will be on site rather than working remotely. BBW will also continue to receive the quarterly performance results.

Customers with Communication Barriers

DWP currently uses 'The Big Word' interpreting service to support customers whose first language is not English or Welsh and who require an interpreter service to be able to conduct their business.

Switchboard operators do not access to 'The Big Word'. Customers who require the interpreter service are put through to a DWP member of staff who then accesses the interpreting service.

Centralisation of switchboard services will not change the process for contacting 'The Big Word'. However, centralisation of switchboard services and rationalisation of telephone numbers for jobcentres may make it difficult for switchboard operators to identify which jobcentre the customer needs to be put through to. This is because the switchboard operator will have to ask the customer which jobcentre they want to be put through to or at least establish the area where they live. A process is currently being developed to ensure that switchboard operators will be able to place the call to a Departmental location who will then contact 'The Big Word'.

DWP provides Textphone facility for customers with speech/hearing impairment. Textphones are located in DWP sites and are outside the Office Service contract. Centralisation of switchboard services does not change the process for Textphones. Customers using Textphone facility will continue to dial the Textphone number and calls will be handled within the DWP site.

Calls from customers using Type Talk will continue to be handled by switchboard operators as they are now. Centralisation of switchboard services for jobcentres should not adversely impact these customers because the operator will be able to identify the jobcentre they want to be put through to by asking the Type Talk intermediary.

PDCS is not rationalising its telephone numbers and will have, as part of its requirement, console recognition of the number dialled. As such, there is no issue for PDCS customers who have communication difficulties. PDCS calls are estimated at 1.25 million calls for 2009/10.

Vulnerable Customers

Centralisation of switchboard services will remove local knowledge currently available to switchboard operators, for example telephone information relating to local voluntary organisations. An analysis of call types identified that this type of call made up less than one percent of the total calls received. The types of requests received included-

- Loc
- Local Authority
- HMRC/Tax Credit
- Civic Centre
- Employment Agency
- Post Office
- ACAS
- Shaw Trust
- Healthy Start
- The Courts

DWP developed a 'Signposting Directory' providing national numbers for a wide range of other government departments; voluntary organisations and other useful numbers. This directory is currently available to all DWP staff and the assumption/intention is that it will also be made available to switchboard operators.

The Welsh Language Act

DWP is committed to ensuring its processes do not contravene the requirements of the Welsh Language Act. Data provided by the Welsh Language Board shows 21% of the population in Wales speak Welsh. Data provided through DWP IT systems for the 4 month period October 08 – 6 February 09 indicated that 2038 customers preferred to conduct their jobcentre business in Welsh. This represents approximately 4% of jobcentre customers in Wales for whom a preference was recorded.

Jobcentre Plus has considered how rationalisation of jobcentre numbers will impact on its legal requirement to provide a service that meets the Welsh Language Act and identified 2 options:

- Single number for Wales – customers in Wales would be offered a bilingual greeting and transferred to a Welsh speaking person in the jobcentre should the customer wish to continue their business in Welsh.
- Welsh number – customers wishing to conduct their business in Welsh would ring a dedicated number answered by a Welsh speaking operator.

Jobcentre Plus has taken the decision that a Welsh number should be offered for jobcentre customers. This decision is in line with other parts of Jobcentre Plus, i.e. Contact Centre and Benefit Delivery Centre networks.

PDCS will continue to deliver its business as now and will continue to meet the requirements of the Welsh Language Act as it does now. All customers calling from Wales will receive a bilingual greeting. Customers wishing to conduct their business in Welsh will be transferred to a Welsh speaker in Cardiff Disability Benefit Centre.

Costs of 0845

It is recognised that using 0845 rather than a geographic number may come at an increased cost for some jobcentre customers. In particular those ringing from mobile phones. Rationalising jobcentre numbers into 0845 is in line with Jobcentre Plus Strategy – 0845 is now used generally across Jobcentre Plus business. Any potential risk to customers will be mitigated with the option for jobcentre staff to call the customer back.

Staff

There are 315 jobcentres not currently supported by BBW switchboard services. Customers calling these sites go directly through to a jobcentre member of staff. These calls may/may not be dealt with by the person answering the call resulting in jobcentre staff taking on the role of switchboard operators. Jobcentres are not resourced to provide switchboard services. As such, there is an assumption that 'switchboard' duty is an additional task attached to an individual's main job role. Bringing the 315 jobcentre sites into the Office Service contract will enable jobcentre staff to focus on their key job roles. We do not know what the diversity characteristics of staff who may answer these calls and it would be at a disproportionate cost to obtain this information. However, exceptionally, should there be anyone working solely on switchboard duties there is an assumption that they will be assigned to other duties. In the event that a change of duties is identified the Department will address any access/capability issues that had previously been identified.

There is no impact on PDCS staff.

Lessons Learned

There have been 3 phases in advance of the full centralisation roll out programme. Processes have been reviewed and Lessons Learned identified for each phase. In particular, the need to:

- Trial the enhanced service;
- Build in periods to review progress;
- Issue guidance and communications across the business so that managers and staff are aware of the changes and take any appropriate action to ensure smooth implementation of the change over;
- Ensure that data displayed in DWP Staff Directory is in a standard format compatible with the Console directory.
- PDCS business directory requirements will be addressed in parallel and relevant PDCS offices will **not** be included in a virtual service unless or until a 'like for like' service can be guaranteed.

Name and contact details of the officer responsible for the assessment:

Sue Martin
DWP Switchboard Project
Steel City House
Sheffield