

DWP Annual Forum 2010 – Questions and Answers

Victoria Park Plaza Hotel, London

7 July 2010

Executive summary

The DWP Annual Forum for organisations that work with DWP customers took place at the Victoria Park Plaza, in London on Wednesday 7th July 2010.

The event attracted an attendance of 196 representatives from organisations who work with, advise and represent our customers, mainly from the adviser world, disability lobby, and other intermediary organisations.

The format of the day included:

- an address from Lord Freud, Minister for Welfare Reform
- a plenary session that included short presentations from senior representatives of Jobcentre Plus and Pension, Disability & Carers Service followed by a question and answer session
- workshops on a variety of topical subjects
- exhibition stands

Responses to the issues raised at the event are published in the DWP Annual Forum report [DWP Annual Forum 2010](#). Questions subsequently received from individual delegates (who were unable to ask their questions on the day) have been referred to the appropriate business areas and their responses are now published in this Question & Answer report.

These events give us the opportunity to hear from you about how our services are working. Your feedback is helping to improve our service in each of the key areas that are important to our customers – Right Treatment, Right Result, On Time and Easy Access. You can find out more from the DWP Customer Charter at www.direct.gov.uk/DWPcharter.

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The new monthly Touchbase e-zine is available on the DWP Adviser and Intermediaries website. Touchbase e-zine is aimed at external frontline advisers, intermediaries and other professionals who work with our customers and replaces the quarterly hard copy Touchbase magazine.

[Touchbase e-zine \(DWP website\)](#)

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DWP Annual Forum

Summary of Questions & Answers

1. Welfare Reform

For those chronically sick and disabled who cannot sustain work for more than 7 or 8 hours per week, what incentive is there to engage in work if it means loss of benefit entitlement?

The Government's overriding goal for welfare reform is to ensure that work pays and people should receive a financial gain if they increase the number of hours they work and not be penalised by benefit rules if they do.

We want to ensure that as many customers as possible are encouraged to participate in activities, including permitted work, which can act as a stepping stone to return to full-time work where their condition makes this possible.

The permitted work rules strike an important balance between, on the one hand, encouraging customers to build their confidence, undertake some part-time paid work, and plan a gradual move to sustained employment, while continuing to receive benefit, and, on the other, providing the incentive for them to move off benefit entirely and into full-time work, in line with the Government's overall approach.

There are also special supported permitted work rules for people whose disability has stable and established effects with a significant impact on their ability to learn or sustain a traditional job which will always, or for a number of years, prevent them from working more than a few hours each week.

Since April 2010, the Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit earnings limit was increased to £93.00 a week for contributory ESA, IB and SDA customers undertaking permitted work. This will encourage more people to try part-time work as a stepping stone to full-time work, without fear of their benefits being disrupted.

Disability Living Allowance may also be payable to disabled people and this benefit is available to those both in and out of work.

We continue to keep the permitted work rules under review, looking for more flexible ways of helping people take up opportunities and increase their options without fear of their benefits being removed straight away.

You talk a lot about incentivising work through the benefit system. What are you doing to ensure Government policy as a whole moves towards pay?

The Government has had to take urgent action to address the fiscal deficit which inevitably affects the levels of support that can be provided to working families. However, the Government has also made clear its determination to tackle the problem of poor work incentives in the current benefits system. It is vital that people see a clear link between work and reward. Currently people are sometimes only slightly better off in work because their benefits are withdrawn too early and too steeply. When considering new policies we need to deliver a system that clearly offers a hand-up for those in need, rather than trapping them in an expensive web of benefit dependency. We want to ensure that people keep more of their earnings when they move off benefits and into work and provide a simpler system that makes it easier for people to see for themselves how much better off they will be in work.'

Can Benefit Reform take account of the availability of work as well as the capability of the claimant?

Reform will be designed to ensure benefits go to those who need them and ensure that people get the right help to get into work. We intend to maximise work incentives while continuing to protect those in need. An option is to have a more tailored, personalised system in which there is more scope to vary the conditionality regime for people within groups. This would support the aim of moving everyone who can into work.

2. Jobcentre Plus

There needs to be a national structure of local Jobcentre Plus stakeholder events as it seems to depend on local regional management culture.

Each region and district has a team of external relations managers who lead on liaison with a variety of customer groups. National good practice guidelines recommend that this liaison takes place no less than once every six months but does not recommend a format for this liaison. Examples of liaison not involving large scale events include newsletters, regular telephone calls and telephone conferences.

In terms of assessment for IB, can you provide more detail on exemptions concerning terminal conditions and having to take medical examinations?

We recognise that requiring people to attend assessments unnecessarily is in no-one's interests, and where possible we try to avoid this. People who are diagnosed with a progressive disease, where death is a likely consequence of that disease, where this is reasonably expected within 6 months, will be treated as having limited capability for work and will not need to undergo the face to face work capability assessment.

Would you be protecting vulnerable claimants during reassessment from IB to ESA? Current ESA implies WCA to most of the client's for example, with DS1500 or terminal illness unless being challenged.

What will be done to stop the situation where terminally ill cancer patients are put on JSA?

People who are diagnosed with a progressive disease, where death is a likely consequence of that disease, where this is reasonably expected within 6 months, will be placed in the support group of Employment and Support Allowance where they will not be expected to undertake work related activity.

The migration of 12,000 Incapacity Benefit claims per week will cause havoc with claims. Will they retain their long term status and associated rates of benefit? How will this be achieved or will they actually be worse off financially?

No-one moving from their existing benefit to ESA will see a reduction in the level of their benefit entitlement at the point of change.

Matthew Nicholas mentioned mental health co-ordinators in each district. What is their role?

Each district external relations team has a mental health co-ordinator whose role is to build practical links between local health and employment services, looking to encourage an employment focus in locally commissioned working age health and mental health services, and providing mental health and well-being service intelligence to advisers.

Customers still experience significant delays in the issuing of National Insurance numbers which delays the payment of benefits. This can take up to 20 weeks for some young people and families. Is any work being done to improve this?

The latest figures show that on average, it takes 15 days to allocate a National Insurance number. We are not aware of any significant delays although individual circumstances may make the application process longer for some.

Matthew Nicholas mentioned the telephone system in favourable terms. Is this service monitored? The feedback amongst colleagues is that it is hopeless, passed from pillar to post, cut off, disinterested staff etc.

Jobcentre Plus carries out internal monitoring of its telephony services, and recent changes to the telephony network, introducing a virtual network, have made improvements to the service.

Will you do more to tailor the JSA regime to meet the needs of single parents and people with disabilities?

The Government will be implementing the new Work Programme which will be far more personalised than existing programmes, with the support supplied being determined by front line providers based on the needs of individuals.

Until the Work Programme is implemented, the Government will ensure support is in place, but in order to ensure that as many people benefit from the Work Programme as quickly as possible the Government will be phasing out many of our existing programmes and folding them into the Work Programme.

We will give providers the freedom to support customers based on their individual need. DWP will offer stronger incentives for providers to work with the harder to help and for the first time, pay providers out of the additional benefits they realise as a result of placing people into work.

More information on the Work Programme is available on the DWP website, where further updates will be placed - [Work Programme](#)

Are you renewing ATOS Standard and Performance?

DWP Medical Services contract was awarded to Atos Healthcare in 2005 following a competitive tender exercise. Capita, Vertex and Atos Origin (trading as Atos Healthcare) were invited to tender for the services. Atos Healthcare's bid was evaluated as providing best value for money to DWP and the award was approved by Secretary of State.

The contract was for seven years, with the option to extend for a further three and then for a further two (while a competition is being held). The subsequent changes to take account of the introduction of Employment Support Allowance (ESA) were made through variations and did not affect the tenure of the original contract.

The Department has negotiated an extension to the contract to 2017 in order to allow for the completion of Incapacity Benefit (IB) to ESA migration.

Volunteering is a way that people can gain valuable work experience.

Volunteer work can help people gain valuable skills and experience, which can lead to finding work. Work Together is the new volunteering initiative, one of a number of measures under the banner of Get Britain Working. Through Work Together, we will help unemployed people who are interested in volunteering so that they can find suitable opportunities.

3. Work Capability Assessment

How will the Government ensure that the doctors assessing IB claimants will be adequately trained? Previous experience shows that these assessments can be cursory and inaccurate, especially in relation to mental health.

Strict requirements govern the recruitment of Healthcare Professionals to carry out the Work Capability Assessment (WCA). The contract between DWP and Atos Healthcare specifies minimum recruitment standards that all approved Health Care Professionals must be fully registered with the General Medical Council or Nursing and Midwifery Council without restrictions or conditions. They must also complete a course of training in disability assessment medicine approved by the DWP Chief Medical Adviser. In addition they must have a minimum of three years post registration experience and must be approved by the Chief Medical Adviser to the DWP.

The healthcare professionals carrying out the assessments are trained in disability assessment medicine and receive ongoing medical education in order to remain up to speed with developments in the field of disability medicine. They are subject to stringent ongoing quality checks. The work of all Health Care Professionals is subjected to random quality audit by a system agreed with the DWP and which is conducted by experienced medical auditors within Atos Healthcare. Any reports found to be deficient in the audit are corrected prior to them being returned to the Departments' decision makers. The quality of Atos Healthcare's audit is validated by senior medical auditors from Atos Healthcare and doctors working for the Chief Medical Adviser to the DWP.

As part of a recent Department-led review of the WCA, experts in medicine, occupational health and other fields, alongside representatives from specialist disability groups, conducted close analysis of a wide range of ESA cases and concluded that the WCA is generally accurately identifying individuals for the right support.

How will medical examinations guarantee a proper assessment for those with mental health or neurological problems?

The Work Capability Assessment (WCA) was designed, in close consultation with specialist disability groups including those representing people with mental health and neurological problems, to be a better assessment of mental health conditions than its predecessor, the Personal Capability Assessment.

All Health Care Professionals carrying out the WCA receive ongoing training in assessing people with mental health conditions.

It is also important to remember that Appeal Tribunals consider all the evidence afresh, as well as any additional evidence that has since been submitted by the customer, and which was not available originally to the decision maker. Consequently, when a Tribunal overturns a decision it is not necessarily due to a lack

in the validity or accuracy of the examination report used in the decision making process.

Why do you not consider the individual's doctor report?

The DWP decision-makers have to consider all the available information before making a decision on benefit entitlement. Any evidence provided by a customer's GP or consultant is very important and fully considered. Processes are in place to ensure it can be requested when it will help provide advice on benefit entitlement. However, GPs are unlikely to have the knowledge of the benefit system or disability analysis to provide the decision-maker with comprehensive information about the functional effects in relation to work capability. Furthermore, as an advocate of the patient, the individual's GP is not in a position to provide independent advice to the decision maker on benefit entitlement. The Work Capability Assessment is carried out by specifically trained healthcare professionals who are able to provide independent and robust advice to decision makers regarding the claimant's functional capability.

4. Housing Benefit

How will the Govt ensure that the 10% cut in HB will not cause massive problems for people who do not get a job after 12 months on JSA, through no fault of their own?

What is the rationale for penalising those who are found fit for work and claim JSA but cannot find a job despite their best efforts? They will lose 10% of their HB after a year even if employer discrimination is the main reason they cannot find work.

What is the rationale for the proposed 10% reduction in HB for people who have been on JSA for more than a year? As well as hitting the 'work shy', it seems likely to also hit people with health and behaviour issues and lone parents who will find it difficult to get jobs because employers see them as risky.

The Prime Minister has subsequently announced that the 10% Housing Benefit cut will not go ahead.

When are we going to hear of transitional arrangements for existing benefit recipients with proposals on welfare reform/budget announcements on Housing Benefit?

The changes we are making to Local Housing Allowance rates in 2011 will affect existing customers on the anniversary of their claim which falls on or following the date the changes come into effect. The overall caps, restriction to the four bedroom rate and removal of the £15 excess will take effect from 1 April. The reduction in rates to the 30th percentile will take effect from 1 October. So, for example, someone

who has an anniversary date of 5 September will be affected by the April changes in September 2011 and the October changes in September 2012.

We will be working with local authorities to ensure that customers get information well in advance of the changes. In addition, local authorities can make Discretionary Housing Payments to customers whose Housing Benefit falls short of their rent. We are trebling the government contribution to local authorities' Discretionary Housing Payments budgets to allow them to give additional support where they consider it is needed. For example, local authorities might provide help to give customers time to find alternative accommodation, or provide longer-term support for customers who are less able to move.

5. Ageing Society

How is the Government going to move forward 'Building a Society for all Ages'?

The issues raised by an unprecedented number of people living longer, healthier lives, has been a matter of interest to all parties and one on which there has been a fairly broad consensus. DWP will retain its cross government responsibility to ensure that these wider issues, and the needs of older people, are at the forefront of policy development, particularly as the Government considers its ideas for the Big Society.

Ageing Well is a programme to help local authorities improve their services for older people. It aims to encourage local authorities to think more widely about how they can help older people live independently for longer, increase their well being and decrease social isolation. This is part of the Government's initiative to shift power from Westminster into the hands of local communities and people.

We are also developing a number of other projects: The 'one stop shop' is intended to bring together a range of holistic information about planning ahead for later life in one place. Active at 60 is looking at how smart card technology can improve the lives of older people for example, through encouraging participation in leisure activities, libraries, and travel, as well as helping reduce social isolation.

What is the structure and recommendations around engaging communities to support the growing number of older people?

DWP has led on involving older people in the design and delivery of services by helping to establish 9 Regional Ageing Forums to reflect the voice of older people within each locality, and link to local forums.

Ageing Well is a new programme designed to support local authorities to improve their services for older people. Its key aim is to improve the lives of older people by providing services that are designed to meet their needs and recognise the huge contribution that people in later life make to their local communities.

As well as encouraging local authorities to include older people in service design and delivery, the Ageing Well programme also includes an older people's sounding board, with representatives from Age UK, Regional Forums and a number of other organisations to ensure the Programme reflects the ideas and concerns of older people.

DWP will ensure that these wider issues, and the needs of older people, are at the forefront of cross government policy development, particularly as the Government considers its ideas for the Big Society.

What incentives will be used to increase the number of older people engaged in meaningful activity and volunteering?

The Generations Together programme will showcase intergenerational practice and increase the number of volunteers, including older people and is:

- providing young people with positive role models who will encourage, support and advise them;
- improving the negative perception of young people, by giving older people the opportunity to see that the vast majority of young people are law abiding, respectful and talented individuals;
- giving older people the chance to keep their minds and bodies active and therefore improve their general health and well-being and
- help create cohesive, empowered and active communities through enabling mutually supportive relationships.

How will Government support older people to volunteer and contribute to their own health and well being and that of their peers?

An independent Commission will be established to consider how to ensure responsible and sustainable funding for care and support. The principles which underpin the reform of social care are:

- Personalisation: greater use of personal budgets and direct payments, to give people direct control over how their care needs are met.
- Prevention: supporting people at an early stage to help them maintain their independence and confidence and reduce their reliance on formal services.
- Partnership: encouraging local authorities to work with service users, communities, voluntary organisations, and the NHS to design and deliver better and more cost-effective care.
- Safeguarding: Older people should be involved in shaping safeguarding services. Safeguarding services should be preventive, supportive and empowering. Carers should be involved in supporting older people to make choices about risks and quality and inclusion.

6. Pensions Policy

The full basic State Pension (for which a million women do not qualify) is £70 a week below the official poverty level of £165. Why doesn't the Govt use the £44 billion surplus in the NI fund to lift the basic State Pension to at least the poverty line?

Around 80% of the National Insurance Fund (NIF) is spent on State Pension (both basic State Pension and Additional Pension) with around 65% on just basic State Pension. Raising the basic State Pension to £165 per week now would cost in the region of £35 billion per year in the early years. The overall NIF surplus would be run down and begin to fall into deficit within 5 years which is unsustainable. To keep the NIF in balance would require an increase in National Insurance, which is an additional burden on today's contributors.

7. Pension, Disability & Carers Service (PDCS)

On renewal of a DLA claim, why do you need the person concerned to fill out the book claim form? Could it not be done by process of updating?

PDCS have introduced a much shorter DLA renewal form in the Manchester, Newcastle and Leeds regions. This asks customers if their needs have changed and prompts them to tell us about changes only. We have improved this form and will introduce it in these regions. We will monitor the affect the form has on customers and the business before deciding to make the form available nationally.

If The Pension Service is targeting resources on those of greatest need, many people who currently benefit from face to face visits may miss out. It is likely that 3rd sector groups will have to help more with form filling. What support and training will be available and how do we know which point of contact to use?

Following a strategic review of the PDCS Local Service, a number of design principles are being taken forward to ensure that the future visiting service is more directly targeted on vulnerable customers with particular needs that cannot be met through quicker more cost effective channels. In addition the remit of the visiting service will also be expanded to support all of the Departments vulnerable customers in these circumstances, which will widen the customer base and align the service offering across the Department.

PDCS is committed to working closely with partners, through forums such as the PDCS Advisory Forum, to look jointly at the impact of this change in approach and to develop productive dialogue with partners and stakeholders.

As more customer channel options become available, such as electronic and self service options, it is expected that there will also be a move of some of the current customer base to these facilities.

Part of the work programme for Local Service Partnership Managers going forward will be to discuss openly with key partners and 3rd Sector Groups how we might work together to help customers access services through the channel which best meets their needs. This could include provision of support and training to help partners support customers in doing this along with clear guidance on points of contact.

When supporting a non fluent English speaking homeless client to apply for DLA, I was informed by the helpline I would have to wait 2 to 3 weeks for support with translation. How is this acceptable and what is being done to reduce the wait and to reach this vulnerable group?

The DWP has a contract with TheBigWord to enable staff to communicate professionally with members of the public who do not speak English as their first language. If support is requested for a telephone conversation, the interpretation service can usually be accessed immediately. It seems reasonable to assume from this example that assistance has been requested on completing a DLA claim pack. This would be done one of two ways, either by telephone call or visit from a DWP officer with a translator. Both of these types of assistance take time to organise, and our advisors would most likely inform the caller that they could expect a wait of two or three weeks before their request is fulfilled. This has nothing to do with the translation service - it is purely the administration that takes the time. It is also quite likely that the advisor would give the worst case scenario to avoid encouraging progress chasing calls should the timescale not be met.

The representative who raised the issue has been invited to provide specific examples for further investigation.

What are the limits/parameters of the new bereavement procedures? The main focus seems to be notifying and stopping benefits promptly. If there is no guarantee that all benefits will be checked on bereavement, it is misleading to suggest they only have to make one contact.

With the introduction of the DWP Bereavement Service all telephony contacts (either via DWP phone lines or through the Tell Us Once (TUO) service) notifying bereavement will be dealt with by the Bereavement Service. The DWP Bereavement Service will act upon the notification of death immediately by providing all the relevant areas of DWP with the details of the death. This notification is sent via secure email to the appropriate owning benefit office and will be issued automatically at the end of the call.

DWP Bereavement Team staff will offer both Pensions and non-Pensions customers' next of kin a service that can check their eligibility to 12 different benefits, including the Bereavement Payment (and other Bereavement Benefits). As part of the eligibility check the next of kin will be signposted to appropriate benefits, for example, claiming pension credit as a single person. Where the eligibility check shows that the caller may be entitled to Social Fund Funeral Payments or Bereavement Benefits, the tool helps staff to:

- gather all the information needed for the claims; and
- produce a pre-populated claim form.

As a result there will be more identification of customers who are potentially eligible for appropriate benefits, including the Bereavement Payment, and a reduction in nugatory claims.

The eligibility check is based on the customer answering a series of questions. The information they provide will enable the DWP Bereavement Service to identify which benefits the surviving spouse/ next of kin is potentially eligible to claim.

What does self service mean regarding PDCS services?

Self service enables customers and potential customers to use an additional, modern, effective channel to interact with the Department.

This means that:

- for some benefits, pensions and credits, customers can currently get an estimate of the amount they may be entitled to via the online Benefits Adviser.
- customers can also input potential new circumstances and see if they can still receive a number of benefits and pensions, for example, if they start work or increase their hours at work, with appropriate sign-posting for what to do next on-line. It can be accessed via the following link www.direct.gov.uk/benefitsadviser
- customers wanting to claim their State Pension can do so online.
- in future, many customers will be able to track the progress of their claim, check their payments and input changes of circumstances on-line.

Why are renewal packs for DLA issued 3 months before the end of the award when decisions take 16 weeks plus? Claims for Pension Credit take 11 to 12 weeks and this is too long for elderly people with small incomes. When will this improve?

PDCS currently issues DLA Renewal packs 20 weeks before the end of the award. The Clearance Time target for DLA renewals is 32 days.

If 50% of DLA claims fail on first assessment how many claim packs sent/given out are not even returned?

In the period 1st April 2009 to 31st March 2010, a total of 963,810 DLA Adult claim packs were issued. In the same period, a total of 483,000 DLA Adult claims were received. We have no evidence to suggest the reasons that people choose not to make a claim after having received a form.

If 50% of DLA claims were disallowed on first time claim, how many of those refused applied for reconsideration?

Of the total 483,000 DLA Adult claims received between 1st April 2009 to 31st March 2010, 267,000 were disallowed at first application. It is difficult to say how many of these disallowed decisions resulted in a request for reconsideration. This is because of the way PDCS management information is gathered. We can therefore only show that overall there were 138,000 reconsideration requests received in this period. Please note that this figure includes reconsiderations against both award and disallowance decisions.

Pension Credit new claims have a processing target of 10 working days. All of my residents who have claimed this so far have been waiting between 9 – 15 weeks. These cases cover different pension centres and all verification has been provided.

- we have a target to clear Pension Credit new claims in an average of 15 working days and we achieve or exceed this target consistently.
- the remaining cases usually take longer because of the evidence required to enable an assessment to be made. For example, if a person has several private pensions and needs to obtain documentary evidence of those it may take them several weeks to do so; or if they have been self-employed and we need to see their accounts that may involve extra enquiries.
- cases that are not cleared within the target period are subject to regular management scrutiny and are closely monitored.
- the representative who raised this issue has been invited to bring specific examples for further investigation. We accept that, even in the best of organisations, things occasionally go wrong and we are always keen to learn from experience.

Does PDCS have a view on providing a DLA/AA style helpline for their pension customers?

Although we do not have a central team in pension centres like the DLA/AA helpline, customers can ring a single number and be put through to a Contact Centre Agent who will deal with their query. Going forward, the current model for DWP is to move to a DWP level Contact Centre layer so all calls from customers can be dealt with more "virtually". In addition, the strategy is to move customers away from the telephony channel and to on-line service.

Why can pension centre advisers no longer transfer calls between other pension centres?

There is no reason why pension centre advisers cannot transfer calls between other pension centres. A detailed bulletin has been produced to help staff to follow the correct procedures to enable calls to be transferred.

8. DWP Change Programme

The DWP and other benefit agencies are not connected and do not share information. Is there any move to join information systems?

Tell Us Once (TUO) is an initiative for the registration of births and deaths across Government Departments, for example DVLA, Local Government, DWP, and HMRC. If a customer's death is registered at any of these departments, this information will be automatically shared. There is scope in the longer term that Change of Address notifications will be captured under TUO but there is no date for when this will be.

Currently within DWP – Jobcentre Plus and Pensions & Disability Carers Services (PDCS) are using a product called Information Capture Tool (ICT), which allows customers' details to be captured on a single system. If the customer is on more than one benefit, this information will be shared across Departments via e-mail (Jobcentre Plus and PDCS only).

This will be replaced by the on-line services of Benefit Enquiry Service (BES) and Benefit Updates Service (BUS), which will be online services for customers to access via the DirectGov website. These are being trialled within DWP before being made available for customers to 'self serve'. BES will answer the top 80% of customer's queries that we receive, whilst BUS will allow Change of Address and Method of Payment changes to be made by customers via the Self Serve route.

Allowing customers to 'self serve' provides opportunity for our staff to deal with more complex or complicated queries.

9. Working with Representatives

Can the DWP set up a list of approved representatives? Maybe a security code could be given and placed on a global list.

Our legal advice is that we should not use any kind of password or list to regulate the disclosure of customer information. The legal view is that passwords can be overheard and can easily get into the wrong hands, and that staff should not simply refer to a list to make decisions on disclosure. All cases must be dealt with on an individual basis, using judgement to decide whether disclosure is appropriate. This is why we introduced the implicit consent principle.

10. Maternity/Paternity Legislation

What consideration has the coalition government given to reforming maternity and paternity legislation to make it equally flexible for small businesses and their employees?

[The Coalition: Our Programme for Government](#) sets out the Government's commitment to encourage shared parenting from the earliest stages of pregnancy – including the promotion of a system of flexible parental leave. The Government will consult fully with business on any changes to maternity or paternity legislation.