

# Merseyside Customer Feedback Handling Pathfinder

Equality impact assessment  
October 2011

# Equality impact assessment for Merseyside Customer Feedback Handling Pathfinder

## Introduction

The Department for Work and Pensions has carried out an equality impact assessment on the proposal to introduce the Merseyside Customer Feedback Handling Pathfinder, assessing the proposal in line with the current public sector equality duties.

This process will help to ensure that the Department has paid due regard to the need to:

- eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Equality Act 2010;
- advance equality of opportunity between people from different groups; and
- foster good relations between people from different groups.

The equality impact assessment will show how the Department has demonstrated it has paid due regard when developing new services or processes to on the grounds of the protected characteristics. These are; race, disability, gender, age, gender reassignment, sexual orientation, pregnancy and maternity, religion or belief and marriage and civil partnerships (in terms of eliminating unlawful discrimination only).

## Brief outline of the policy or service

DWP is committed to improving the way it handles feedback from customers. Based on the Department's Standard Complaint Resolution Model, we are changing the way in which we approach handling customer feedback in order to:

- improve customer service
- improve recording of customer feedback; and
- learn from feedback to adapt and improve the services we deliver.

Feedback is any compliment, suggestion or complaint made by our customers about the service we provide. The Merseyside Customer Feedback Pathfinder will build on and compliment current arrangements for complaints resolution. Whilst responsibility for all customer feedback remains with staff at the first point of contact, where the feedback includes a complaint and it is not possible to resolve the complaint at source, the customer feedback will be escalated to a new team of expert Feedback

Advisers. Any feedback that does not require escalation will still be referred to the team to be recorded.

The Feedback Adviser will be responsible for proactively managing escalated complaints. They will contact the customer by telephone where possible to establish/clarify the issues the customer wishes to resolve; understand the customer's expectations in terms of a remedy; and agree future contact arrangements, including a reasonable deadline for responding in full. The Feedback Adviser will investigate the issues raised, working with colleagues across the Department to establish the facts and resolve the issue(s). Where maladministration has occurred, they will consider financial redress for the customer. They will contact the customer by phone to explain the resolution and provide details of the escalation process should the customer not be satisfied with the resolution.

The Feedback Handling Team will use an IT system called Feedback Handler to record all feedback, including complaints, compliments and suggestions. The system is currently used by the Pensions Disability and Carers Service (PDCS) and may be adopted by other parts of DWP as systems are aligned in the future. The Team will analyse the feedback received to identify where we can do things better, and ensure that work is taken forward at the appropriate level to make improvements.

The Merseyside Pathfinder covers customers living and claiming in the Merseyside area, who contact a Merseyside office with feedback. It will run for three months from 1 November 2011 and will be fully evaluated to inform national roll out of the new model.

## Consultation and involvement

The new complaints resolution process to be tested in Jobcentre Plus Merseyside District mirrors the system currently being rolled out in the PDCS. PDCS tested the process in nine of their units between October 2010 to May 2011, and are currently rolling it out nationally. The process they developed followed recommendations in a National Audit Office report that DWP should seek staff, customer and intermediary opinions on the existing complaints process, and use the findings to consider improvements. Following extensive research with customers and intermediaries, and a number of workshops with DWP operational staff, the findings were used to develop the new complaints resolution process. A Lean expert was involved in the development, ensuring that the new process eliminated unnecessary waste and was the optimum process for the Department and our customers.

A Jobcentre Plus Customer Feedback pilot that began in June 2010 in Scotland found that by using the phone as the primary contact method with customers, customers felt they were being listened to and complaints were handled in a more personal and professional way. This continues to date.

The Merseyside Pathfinder has built on this consultation through involvement of a range of internal stakeholders, including policy and strategy officers, operational staff currently dealing with complaints in different parts of the business and IT officers.

Feedback has also been sought from operational managers who will be supporting staff to implement the new process – further work will be carried out to evaluate staff views as the Pathfinder is implemented.

We will also seek views of our external stakeholders within Merseyside, including MPs and the District Customer Representative Group e.g. CAB, Welfare Rights etc., to explain the new process and invite them to discuss the Pathfinder with us. A letter will be issued to these organisations when the Pathfinder goes live to inform them of the changes, and we will continue to seek feedback for the duration of the Pathfinder as part of the evaluation process.

We have shared information about our intention to introduce the Pathfinder with the Department's Trade Unions at national and group level and have agreed to share information on a regular basis at District level about Pathfinder plans and progress. The Pathfinder does not impact on staff numbers, and any impact on job roles are expected to be minimal. First point of contact staff will not see any changes to their procedures, so the impact will largely be on their awareness. All of the changes are happening 'behind the scenes'

## Impact of the Merseyside Customer Feedback handling Pathfinder

It is not envisaged that the Merseyside Customer Feedback Handling Pathfinder will have an adverse affect on either staff or customers, or that the proposed change could discriminate unlawfully (either directly or indirectly) on the grounds of race, disability, gender, age, sexual orientation and/or religious belief.

### **Staff**

The centralised team including a Feedback Team Manager, seven Feedback Advisers, and a Feedback Administrative Officer will be based at Edge Hill Jobcentre in Liverpool on the first floor. The model predominantly involves interaction with customers over the telephone, as previously described, as well as using existing Jobcentre Plus IT applications and the IT programme, Feedback Handler. The team will also provide written responses where appropriate.

Volunteers were sought from existing staff across the Jobcentres, Benefit Centres and Contact Centres in Merseyside. The opportunities were open to staff, regardless of disability, gender, age, working pattern, sexual orientation or religious belief. The team members will receive a two week training and awareness package to support them in their new role. Job descriptions outlining key responsibilities and Pathfinder guidance have also been produced to provide clarity for the team. These products will be evaluated during the course of the Pathfinder.

As Edge Hill Jobcentre does have some mobility limitations due to the absence of a lift between the ground and first floor, reasonable adjustments will be considered for any team member with a disability, where the location poses a barrier and/or the individual feels they need a reasonable adjustment to help them to do their job. If

required, the team could be based in split locations. A Display Screen Equipment Work Station Risk Assessment will take place for each team member and any appropriate additional equipment e.g. headphones will be supplied.

## Customers

Contact by telephone may not always be the best method of contact for some customers, and it may be more difficult for some than others. The Pathfinder will therefore offer customers a range of contact methods, taking account of any health condition, disability or language problems, in line with the current service standards outlined in the Jobcentre Plus leaflet – Our Service Standards.

[Download Jobcentre Plus leaflet - Our Service Standards](#) from the *Tell Jobcentre Plus* what you think section of the Directgov website.

We recognise that some customers who contact us will be particularly vulnerable. We will take into account the circumstances of the complaint, to ensure we prioritise our response where appropriate. We also recognise that some customers may not respond to telephone or written contact e.g. if a customer is experiencing mental health problems, or has learning difficulties. Where the customer has an advocate or representative, we will liaise with them where the customer gives consent, or where implicit consent can be established. We will take into account individual needs and circumstances, and work closely with customers representative groups to develop best practice in this area.

Where a customer simply prefers not to be contacted by telephone, the Feedback Adviser will continue to communicate with the customer by their preferred method.

The Pathfinder aims to provide the same outcome for all customers – improved customer service through the introduction of dedicated Advisers to manage customer feedback. Some customers currently find our processes difficult to navigate, or may find it difficult to articulate their complaint in writing – the new process addresses this by providing customers with a single point of contact who will proactively deal with their complaint, until resolution is achieved, or where the complaint cannot be upheld, we have provided a clear explanation and an escalation route.

The proposal does not affect relations between different groups, or favour a particular group or deny opportunities to another. It does not discriminate unlawfully against people from different groups.

## Monitoring and evaluation

An evaluation strategy has been developed for the Pathfinder. Evidence will be gathered from staff and customers to measure the effectiveness of the new process in terms of improving customer service and the impact on business processes.

We will use data from the Feedback Handler system to analyse feedback received by gender, disability, and race (we do not record sexual orientation or religious belief). This will enable us to identify if we have higher levels of complaints from disadvantaged groups and implement any necessary improvements.

## Next steps

The Pathfinder will commence on 1 November 2011, initially for a period of three months. The Equality Impact Assessment will be reviewed monthly and revised as necessary. The Pathfinder will inform national roll out of the new Feedback Handling model – a separate EIA will be carried out for this project.

## Contact details

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