

Equality impact assessment

Name of strategy/project/policy/process/function:

Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)
Out of Hours Service

Name and contact details of the officer(s) responsible for the assessment:

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Background

1. The Department for work and Pensions (DWP) Out of Hours Service has existed in a similar form for many years dating from arrangements set up in the Benefits Agency. Direct Payment (DP), the Social Fund Standard Operating Model (SF SOM) and the Emergency Payment (EP) Standard Operating Model have significantly reduced the requirement for an emergency service particularly following the improvements in access to Crisis Loans.
2. The Out of Hours Service has operated to provide a service in exceptional circumstances where customers require a cash payment for a financial emergency. Jobcentre Plus is responsible for providing this service for working age and pension age customers.
3. The Out of Hours Service guidance covers the legal and procedural requirements when an officer acting on behalf of the Secretary of State makes an interim payment, or Social Fund Crisis Loan payment
4. The Out of Hours Service is not intended as an extension of normal office hours. The Out of Hours Service should only respond when there is a serious risk to health or welfare of the customer or a member of the family. It does not provide routine benefit payments or advice, nor is it intended as an extension of day time services for Crisis Loans in particular.
5. A broad operating framework sets out the minimum standards but local managers have had some discretion on the operation of the service.
6. At present there is no standard delivery arrangement for the Out of Hours Service. In general the service is accessed by phone. The voicemail number has routinely been provided to Local Authorities (LA), the police and other services who would deal with customers in emergency situations. Practices vary from region to region but this could include probation officers, hostels and women's refuges. The third parties have been asked to contact the Out of Hours Service by leaving the customers details and contact numbers on the Out of Hours Service voicemail service
7. The current process involves a Central Emergency Officer accessing a voicemail number to check referral messages left on behalf of customers, gathering information on the case and deciding if a Local Emergency Officer (visiting officer) should be sent to the customer. If the Local Emergency Officer agrees it is safe to visit, he meets the customer at their home (or a police station if the address is unsafe) and decides if a

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payment (Social Fund Crisis Loan or interim payment of benefit) should be made. A cash payment is made in over 95% of cases visited. Arrangements are then made to recover these payments.

8. The voicemail numbers for each area are listed on the Jobcentre Plus and The Pension Service internal websites and have been shared with external (third party) agencies that may refer people locally. Although third parties have been requested to make the referral on behalf of customers, they have on occasions provided the number direct to customers. DWP staff have also given the number direct to customers. Direct contact from customers now accounts for 45% of the referrals to the service, and many are repeat callers. Referrals from third parties are more likely to result in a visit and payment than referrals coming direct from customers.
9. This service is currently available weekday evenings, weekends and bank holidays. Access to the service on those days also varies between regions. In some regions, Central Emergency Officers work out of an office on a Saturday.

Context and data gathering

10. In the quarter ending September 2007, an average of 242 visits were made each week, out of 556 calls to the service. All effective visits resulted in a cash payment averaging £30. The total value of payments made had reduced from previous recorded payments. Crisis Loans accounted for 90% of the payments, the remainder being interim payments of benefit. By November weekly activity had dropped to 215 visits out of 391 calls.
11. On average approximately 15% of the weekly referrals are received between Monday and Thursday resulting in around 40 visits nationally. Almost 50% of referrals are handled on Saturdays. Fridays and Sundays account for 20% and 15% of activity respectively.
12. Around 300 staff from across DWP are involved in delivering the Out of Hours Service. The standard weekly deployment on Out of Hours Service is 17 Central Emergency Officers and 64 Local Emergency Officers (81 staff) from Sunday to Thursday and 21 Central Emergency Officers and 90 Local Emergency Officers (111 staff) on Fridays and Saturdays. This means we are rostering 627 "units" of staff to handle 556 calls and 242 visits each week.
13. Records show that payments to customers have reduced from around £1million per year to £365,000 per year over the last few years. We do not have accurate information on the cost of administering the service as only a few regions have recorded costs. If we look at the data from the 3 regions which have recorded administrative costs, it would indicate the service costs in excess of £2.4 million pounds. Because of the variation in delivery arrangements, this is likely to be an overstatement. It is likely however that the service costs well in excess of £1 million to administer.
14. We do not have any data on the customers who use the service, for example by disability, gender or ethnicity. We do have data on the numbers of customers in each government office region who are referred to the service or who contact it direct and the numbers who are actually visited and given a cash payment. The changes we propose are designed to ensure that all customers have equal access to the service.

15. We do not have any data on the staff who currently volunteer to administer the service, for example by gender, disability or ethnicity. We believe that the changes we are proposing will give more staff the opportunity to volunteer for the service as we are removing the requirement to be routinely on call mid week and in the evenings. We believe this will open up opportunities to a wider range of staff than at present.

Purpose of change

16. Since the Out of Hours Service was introduced the delivery of benefits has changed. As a result the need for the Out of Hours Service has declined.

17. Jobcentre Plus is now bringing the Out of Hours Service into the modern environment by standardising it across regions and making it a weekend and holiday service to reflect customer need and business efficiency. The previous guidance on Out of Hours Service gave managers discretion over the organisation and deployment of resources and the length of time the service was available each day. The data gathered during the review indicates the service is over-resourced compared to current demand and need.

18. In broad terms, Local Authorities have a statutory requirement to act where children or vulnerable adults in specific categories (usually those with care requirements) are at risk. They have no statutory requirement to provide financial help in emergency situations outside office hours. They operate a 24-hour emergency helpline and their intervention usually results in the provision of care, respite or accommodation and more rarely, food hampers. Cash payments are only made in exceptional circumstances reflecting our view that the evenings of week days, when our services are available the next morning, there is no risk serious risk to health and safety.

Intended action

19. The revised service will still provide access to financial assistance in emergency situations on days when DWP offices are closed. This will support the overall aim of providing an emergency service. The Out of Hours Service will be standardised nationally to run between 10am and 4pm on weekends, statutory holidays and on other days where there is no service availability. Referral will now also be via local third parties, most typically Social Services. Customers will still receive a home visit where appropriate.

20. Benefit Delivery Managers will identify other third parties such as the Police who will continue to be able to refer customers. Our role will be to support other agencies in the community who have responsibilities for vulnerable people in emergency situations. Out of Hours Service will be available on days where DWP offices are closed and there is a need for financial support to prevent serious risk to the health and safety of the customer or a member of the family.

21. The main change is that the service will not be available during the normal working week.

22. There is detailed guidance and a risk assessment process associated with this review which will be communicated to the Out of Hours Service teams to ensure consistency and compliance with DWP policy and Jobcentre Plus procedures. There will be some

changes to the working arrangements to support this. For example, we will better equip Central Emergency Officers to undertake their role by providing laptops and broadband connections so that where necessary they can access Legacy systems, Potentially Violent lists and other critical customer information from home. This will allow Central Emergency Officers to make more informed decisions. We will also be standardising management information and administration which may also introduce minor changes for central teams and Central Emergency Officers. The Out of Hours Service guidance has also been updated to ensure compliance with existing DWP staff policies and Jobcentre Plus procedures.

23. The changes are also aimed at standardising access to the service for all customers, simplifying access for vulnerable customers and standardising the delivery model to remove inconsistencies, improve compliance and achieve efficiencies.

Implementation

24. An action plan has been developed for Regional business managers with a view to introducing the new arrangements from April 2008. This will include a communications plan, a notification to all Jobcentre Plus Regional Operational Delivery Network (ODN) chairs and a question and answer briefing for staff. ODNs will be responsible for ensuring that the revised Out of Hours Service is available to all customers in emergency situations on those days when DWP offices are closed. ODNs will also be responsible for communicating the new arrangements to local authorities (LAs), MPs and other stakeholder groups. LAs in particular will be asked to support the new arrangements by referring vulnerable customers to the service.

25. The new delivery model from April 2008 is as follows:

- **Service availability:** The emergency service for DWP customers will operate at weekends, on statutory holidays and, exceptionally, on other days where no service is available. It will operate for 6 hours daily, from 10.00 to 16.00 hours.
- **Access to the Out Of Hours Service:** Access to the Out of Hours Service will be by referral from a third party to a Vodafone Voicemail service. Contact will usually be made through the LA Social Services (Social Work Department in Scotland), the police, probation officers and hostels. Local knowledge will identify other appropriate third parties who need to be notified. This is a change to current arrangements. We estimate some 45% of referrals come direct from customers who are often repeat applications. This is a practice we need to change.
- **Delivery arrangements:** Appropriate levels of Central Emergency Officers will be on call at home with broadband enabled access to Legacy systems (to check customer details), to the Staff Protection list and other local information. Central Emergency Officers will screen all referrals and decide if access to the emergency provision is appropriate in accordance with guidance. Where a case is referred for a visit the Local Emergency Officer will decide if an interim payment of benefit or Crisis Loan is payable. Cash payments will be made in accordance with guidance and properly accounted for. The Local Emergency Officer will initiate action to recover the interim payment or Crisis Loan in all cases.

- **Management Information (MI):** New MI requirements will be introduced to record and report on Out of Hours Service activity including staffing, volume of applications, costs, and customer details.

Who is affected?

Customers

26. Access will now be via organisations who deal with people in genuine emergencies to better ensure that those in real and urgent need know about and are given access to the service. This will mean one point of contact for customers in emergency situations. Access to Out of Hours Service will now be restricted to those days when our offices are closed. Where emergencies arise in the evening, customers will be expected to seek financial help the next morning via the normal DWP service channel (or the Out of Hours Service for non working days).
27. District Managers and External Relations Managers will engage with Local Authorities and other referring agencies to explain the provision of the Out of Hours Service, the changes and their role in the new arrangements. Details of the existing service have never been communicated to customers so there will be no general communication to customers about the changes.

Staff

28. The main change is that the service will not be delivered during the week unless our offices are closed. Staff will no longer normally need to volunteer to be on call in the evenings mid week. For many of the Out of Hours Service staff this will result in a reduction in the allowances paid to them.
29. The job roles, procedural guidance for making the payments and DWP pay and allowances policy are not changing. The Out of Hours Service guidance has only been amended to reflect the new delivery arrangements.
30. Whilst DWP staff policies on pay and allowances is not changing, further clarity has been provided on the allowances payable to Out of Hours Service staff as the review identified inconsistencies in the amounts claimed, often to the disadvantage of staff. The arrangement whereby some Central Emergency Officers routinely work overtime at weekends is not compliant with current HR policy and this has been withdrawn.

Impact on customers and staff

31. Payment of DWP benefits is contingent on national rules for eligibility so the changes will therefore not discriminate against any group in particular.
32. Some customers had been given the Out of Hours Service number so that a small proportion of Jobcentre Plus customers had unequal access while some in real need are unaware of the service.
33. As a result of some anecdotal evidence of uneven service, DWP are reviewing the deployment of Central Emergency Officers/Local Emergency Officers to ensure there is full access across the country/region.

34. There is no evidence that this change will discriminate against any particular group, minority or otherwise. It will put in place a standardised service for the relatively small number of customers in need of this service.
35. There is no intention to reduce the number of staff involved in providing this service. A number of Central Emergency Officers/Local Emergency Officers might be rostered less frequently due to removal of the mid-week service. There may be a reduction in calls from applying a third party referral process but this may be balanced by the withdrawal of the Friday night service. However the number of Central Emergency Officers/Local Emergency Officers available on Saturdays to take account of this.
36. Although the removal of mid week service may have a financial impact on Central Emergency Officers and Local Emergency Officers, it should be highlighted that there is no automatic right to these allowances. It is operated on a volunteer basis and staff are deployed to meet anticipated demand.
37. There may be a positive impact on staff as removal of the mid week evening service may encourage a wider pool of volunteers. The routine on-call requirement will be during the daytime on weekends and holidays when DWP offices are closed.
38. Out of Hours Service is a volunteer service, subject to need, which deploys only 300 staff from over 116,000 across DWP and therefore affects a very small percentage of total staffing. There will be no other changes for the staff e.g. any change duty or location.

Conclusion

39. There is no significant negative impact of this change and no evidence of discrimination to any groups of customers or staff. There is no expectation of a need for any further Assessment or Monitoring at this time.

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