

DWP Scottish Annual Forum

23rd November 2006

Executive Summary

Opening address

Jim Murphy, Minister for Welfare Reform & Employment, spoke about the challenges for the Department, including:

- improving customer service, referring to increased expectations, and improving benefit processing times and developments in devolving funding, for example, the City Strategy.
- the welfare reform agenda, and about how the Employment & Support Allowance (ESA), from 2008, will provide support for those wanting and able to work
- eradicating child poverty by 2020, which was 'the most challenging target facing the government', requiring a multi-agency approach, including changes to the Child Support Agency, assisting those on benefits into work, as well as improvements within education, transport, housing and tackling crime.

The Minister was asked questions by delegates, including about:

- the link of pensions to earnings being restored in 2012, but doing nothing for today's pensioners, many of whom refuse to apply for the means-tested Pension Credit
- Jobcentre Plus offices not providing customer care to vulnerable customers, for example, those with mental health problems having to use the telephone
- people who will not reach 65, let alone the proposed higher pension age, particularly those from ethnic minorities who have a high incidence of heart disease and diabetes
- the unemployment rate for disabled people

HMRC

The HMRC Tax Credits Communications Manager, Christine Fox, gave an update on Tax Credits, including:

- measures taken since PBR 2005 to improve the administration of Tax Credits and to reduce the number of overpayments, including the increase in income before it affects entitlement
- the shorter renewal deadline, to increase the number of circumstances where claimants must report a change
- on recovery of overpayments, where there are measures to tackle the problem where customers over-estimate their drop in income.

Christine acknowledged the need for more extensive and locally based communication with intermediaries and this is being explored. A framework for working together will be produced in the New Year. Findings from the research about the communication needs of the voluntary sector, will feed into this.

Open Forum

Panel: Graham Heard – DCS; Jim Boyd – TPS; Jim Donnelly – Jobcentre Plus; Christine Fox - HMRC

Issues raised included:

- customers waiting 6-8 weeks before Jobseeker's Allowance is awarded
- customers, and sometimes the staff, not knowing which offices deal with which benefits
- difficulties with the Tax Credit system where child moves between responsible adults for temporary periods
- idea of a one stop shop for people re-entering the labour market to let them know any entitlement to benefits or Tax Credits
- at the time of drafting of the Welfare Reform Bill, the Minister's target was reported as wanting to reduce IB claims by one million, which would be **to** 30% rather than **by** 30% as Jim Murphy had said – which was right
- concern that where someone with literacy problems completes the online DLA/AA applications themselves, they are more likely to be rejected, but then overturned at appeal
- deaf people have difficulty getting through to Jobcentre Plus on the published text phone number, which just rings or is engaged

Workshops – main issues raised by delegates

Workshop 1 – Jobcentre Plus Service Delivery

- as the service is telephony based, what is Jobcentre Plus doing in respect of its Disability Equality Duty?
- what specialist help will be available for more disadvantaged customers?
- customers being refused paper claims forms
- there is no ongoing support for customers moving into employment
- the introduction of an 0800 number does not meet the needs of mobile phone users
- how partnership working be used to improve service delivery?
- continuing problems with Crisis Loan telephone system

Workshop 2 – The Pension Service involvement in Housing Benefit & Council Tax benefit take-up

- has the Department engaged with Ministers from the devolved parliaments about HB/CTB claims without signatures?

- how is the Department going to be assured about Data Protection security?
- issues about the effectiveness and relevance of SLAs in Scotland.

Workshop 3 – Service Delivery to Access to Work Customers

- the majority of delegates had some previous knowledge of Access to Work, but felt it should be promoted more widely
- discussion around the decision-making process and how consistency was achieved
- discussion about level of support for disabled students not perceived as compatible with Access to Work
- possible better link to ATW on DWP website

Workshop 4 – DWP Leaflet Review

- preferred words to describe the desired tone included empathetic, sensitive, informative and helpful
- products should look like they are from the same department, be eye catching, and should use a questions and answer format
- products should contain contact numbers and have details of legal differences for customers in Scotland
- images should be positive, for example, for pensioner claims, but for subject matters such as divorce, safer metaphor images may be more appropriate
- preference for 'real people' rather than images, but depending on subject matter, cartoon illustrations can be engaging

Workshop 5 – Employment & Support Allowance

- concerns that this will mean the end of Income Support
- discussion on the Support Group; its make-up, whether specific medical conditions will be included and whether there will be rights of appeal on non-inclusion
- will there be on-line claims?
- what will happen to customers currently undertaking Permitted Work?
- role of employers – will there be sanctions on them?
- what will happen about migration of IB customers to ESA
- concerns about adequacy of staff training

Workshop 6 – Carer's Allowance

- underlying entitlement letter wording could be improved
- can issue of entitlement letter trigger a notification to TPS to consider award of Pension Credit?
- when two pensioners are in receipt of AA, could a trigger instigate automatic underlying claim to Carers Allowance
- could there be a two tier rate of CA, as with DLA/AA, based on the hours of caring?
- can the signature requirements on the claim form be simplified

- on-line claims – how does disabled person complete the statement acknowledging that a claim is being made for them?

Workshop 7 – Service Delivery to Ethnic Minority Customers

- why does TPS continue to make requests to partners to interpret for customers?
- there are inconsistencies across the organisation about the choice of claiming pension by telephone or claim form
- what is the impact of the EU and the provision of services to ethnic minority customers – will resources be squeezed?

Workshop 8 – Customer Care

How can we achieve a step change in customer care?

- Department to train staff who deal with customers over the 'phone
- smarter use of data
- knowing the customer better

How can we engage more effectively with citizens?

- consult before taking decisions
- go to where people feel comfortable – use voluntary organisations
- consult after the process has been implemented