

DWP Welsh Annual Forum

Cardiff - 8th February 2007

Opening Address – Lord McKenzie of Luton

Lord McKenzie opened the event by thanking the delegates for the valuable work that their organisations did in supporting DWP customers. He said that one of the greatest challenges facing the department was the Welfare Reform agenda. During the 1980's and 1990's, there had been no meaningful welfare reform and millions of people had been written off, with no expectation of a return to work. Whilst on benefit, they received no help towards becoming self-supporting, and many were better off on benefits, than in work.

Ten years later the situation has improved significantly with the success of Welfare to Work. Long term unemployment is down by over 70%, and long term youth unemployment is virtually eradicated. The success of Welfare to Work has been a direct result of carefully targeted public investment in Agencies, like Jobcentre Plus, and the Third Sector.

In 2005, the Government published a paper; "Health, Work and Well-being; Caring for the Future", which outlined the support to employers, employees and health practitioners, to help people who fall sick to remain in employment. A national Director for Health and Work has been appointed to lead this work. The Government believes that work is good for individuals and their families, by lifting people out of poverty; and it also benefits their communities, increases prosperity and reduces inequalities.

The Minister mentioned several initiatives that help people into work and reduce poverty:

- Pathways to Work pilots, which will be nationally rolled out by April 2008
- the review of employment services for disabled people to ensure mainstream services are more accessible to them
- the Introduction of Employment & Support Allowance from 2008, which replaces Incapacity Benefit
- reforms to the benefits and Tax Credit system to support families

The Minister set out the importance of child maintenance payments to separated families and how, decent recent improvements in its performance, the child maintenance system could make a much greater contribution to the eradication of child poverty. He outlined the Government's intention to reform the policy and delivery framework as set out in the White Paper of December 2006.

He concluded by mentioning the Pensions White Paper; the aim to produce a fairer, simpler system, that would encourage more people to make private provision for their retirement, while remaining sustainable in the long term. The main elements of the Pensions Bill, introduced to Parliament in November were:

- from 2012, linking the state pension to earnings rather than prices
- reducing the number of years needed to receive a full basic pension to 30 and improving the system of credits to better recognise caring responsibilities

- gradually raising the state pension age from 65 to 68, to reflect the increase in life expectancy and ensure financial sustainability
- the introduction of Personal Accounts from 2012, to encourage people to save for their retirement.

Delegates raised the following issues with the Minister:

- the need for welfare reform to better take into account the needs of people with mental health problems, as the current system favours those with physical conditions
- when we are encouraging lone parents into work, the correlation between more parents working and the rise in anti-social behaviour
- the length of time it has taken for the Government to provide more support to encourage people to save for their retirement
- since the link between pensions and average earnings was lost, a single person is now £32 a week worse off, with the effect that a poorer class of person has been created; the very poor pensioner receives Pension Credit, but those whose income is just above that are worse off than they would have been if the link had remained
- advisers were concerned that due to resource implications, Jobcentre Plus will be unable to deliver on quality once the Pathfinder pilots have rolled out
- the reform of the Social Fund, in terms of access to it and also budgets, and whether investment in Credit Unions and similar organisations will have any effect on future Social Fund budgets
- school holidays, collection times from school and children's' illnesses make it difficult for lone parents to remain in work; those on income-based Jobseeker's Allowance should be allowed to keep more than £10 of maintenance received
- people whose first language is not English have difficulty accessing Jobcentre Plus services over the phone

External Address – Fran Targett, Citizens Advice Wales

Fran Targett gave a Citizens advice perspective about what DWP does well and where improvements could be made. She acknowledged that people contacted Citizens Advice when they had had a poor service, and had not been able to resolve issues themselves. CABx in Wales dealt 256,000 enquiries in 2005/6, with benefits and Tax Credit issues accounting for about 90,000 of these.

Fran emphasised that the advice sector should be treated as key stakeholders of DWP and should be consulted about the policy changes and their impact on customers. She went on to say that DWP was very good at organising consultation events and meetings, and including Citizens Advice and others. This gave them frequent opportunities to raise issues and gain good access senior officials when they wanted to raise issues that affected their clients. Local liaison was also very important and Fran gave examples where this had worked well, for example, the Jobcentre Plus regional group in North Wales.

Fran also acknowledged that the Disability & Carers Service had shown willingness to recognise issues such as accessibility and decision-making, and had taken steps to address them. They had greatly improved their Helpline service for advisers, which enabled more people to get through. The Pension Service had also been particularly

active in local initiatives, for example, in Caerphilly working with commitment on local projects alongside Local Authorities and the advice sector.

Fran also reported that the experience from CABx who dealt with clients, whose preferred language was Welsh, had been that DWP had done very well in its approach to Welsh language delivery.

Areas of concern included the effects of the new Jobcentre Plus Operating Model. Fran felt that these changes had, in some areas, been introduced too quickly and without enough preparation or consultation. Staff had been moved around and some of the moves had led to a loss of expertise, which had not been fully picked up by the new training. In September and October 2006, Bureau staff were surveyed to assess the impact of the changes in Jobcentre Plus, and 75% reported that the service had got worse. There were serious delays in receiving benefits and difficulty telephoning contact and benefit processing centres.

Social Fund was another area of serious concern, in particular, around Crisis Loans for people in urgent need. Moving the process to a telephone based service caused some customers extreme difficulties in getting through to Crisis Loan staff. Fran welcomed the new 0800 freephone number, but would welcome a move back to face to face applications for vulnerable customers.

Less than a quarter of advisers in bureaux reported that they had effective direct lines to Jobcentre Plus, as, during the changes, the telephone numbers had changed so much. Fran thought it was essential that advisers should be able to contact Jobcentre Plus staff to help resolve processing problems.

Benefit Simplification

Roger Pugh gave an update on the work of the Benefit Simplification Unit. The Unit had been set up following a critical report from the National Audit Office. So far a good practice guide has been published, and the Unit acts as a gatekeeper to the rest of the Department, to ensure that new policies and procedures do not introduce more complexity.

Delegates raised the following issues:

- an update was requested on last year's pilot in Glasgow, involving simplification of the DLA application form
- the simplification agenda should be delivered from the customer's perspective, not just from the Department wanting to reduce costs
- front line staff should be involved in simplification initiatives
- consultation on simplification should also involve Local Authority staff who deliver DWP benefits, in particular, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit
- unacceptable delays in the DLA application process before a satisfactory conclusion for the customer

Open forum

The Open Forum officials were:

David Bailey, Child Maintenance Redesign Programme

Christine Fox, HM Revenue & Customs

Graham Heard, Disability & Carer's Service
Paul Lewis, The Pension Service
Linda Badman, Jobcentre Plus

Each gave a brief update on improvement and developments in their business units since last year's Forum. Delegates raised the following issues:

- it should be possible to communicate by post, rather than by telephone if the customer or their representative so wish; it was noted that a customer has a legal right to use a clerical claim form (Reg 4 of the 1987 Claims & Payments Regs)
- deaf people can put their views across much better in writing than by using a text phone and should not have to use a third party if they do not want to; the telephone based service discriminates against people who are deaf and hard of hearing
- Plain English or Plain Welsh should be used in written communications to deaf customers, because for some, British Sign Language is their first language and English/Welsh is their second language
- there appears to be a constant focus on fraud and not enough emphasis on under-claiming
- people are still having difficulty accessing the telephone system to claim crisis loans
- staff need to be trained to consider Interim Payments, which would reduce the pressure on the crisis loan system

Workshop 1 – Jobcentre Plus; working for customers

Led by Tony Powell, Ian Williams & Andrea Owen

Tony, Ian and Andrea gave a presentation on the work of Jobcentre Plus in Wales. They provided information on the Jobcentre Plus contact centre operations in Wales, as well as its local offices, and stressed the importance they placed on engaging in dialogue with stakeholder organisations.

In discussion, a number of points were made by delegates, focusing mainly on the accessibility of Jobcentre Plus' benefit payment operations:

- Jobcentre Plus' clearance targets varied from benefit to benefit, but for most the clearance time began when Jobcentre Plus had the necessary information to process the claim. For many customers, it may have taken weeks to understand the claim process and provide the necessary information.
- Problems for customers struggling to access the crisis loan service.
- Jobcentre Plus contact centre numbers are not free to people using 'Pay as you go' mobile phones. As many customers only have mobile phones, this is a vital concern. Although Jobcentre Plus often arrange to phone a customer back, a customer's credit may be used up before they actually get to speak to a person.
- Often Jobcentre Plus staff refuse to discuss claims with representatives, and are unaware of 'implicit consent' procedures being followed. DWP guidance should be re-issued to staff in Wales.
- Non-English speakers find Jobcentre Plus difficult to access. Jobcentre Plus does have a contract with an interpreting service but it is not always used.

Workshop 2 – Employment & Support Allowance

Led by Tony Meehan

Tony Meehan gave a presentation about the Employment & Support Allowance (ESA). Subject to the agreement of Parliament, ESA, a new, integrated contributory and income-related allowance, will replace incapacity benefit and income support on grounds of incapacity for customers making new claims from 2008. Tony explained the high level design of ESA, including proposals for improving the level of service offered to customers claiming benefit because of illness or disability.

In discussion, the following points were made:

- A third of new IB customers cite mental health as the primary cause of their incapacity. Partly due to this, we are examining the Personal Capability Assessment and looking at whether the descriptors currently used reflect changing patterns of health, including mental health. We are looking to ensure that the scoring system is not weighted unfairly against mental health conditions, as it is sometimes perceived to be.

- We will retain the many of the positive elements of IB, for example:
 - linking rules will still apply, so that customers whose claim links back to an earlier IB claim, will go back on to IB
 - Permitted Work will be a feature of ESA
 - customers will have access to a range of channels through which they can contact and work with us
 - ESA will be available to young people aged 16-18
- Customers will have the right to appeal against decisions about their ESA entitlement. Current proposals are that while awaiting the outcome of an appeal, customers will continue to claim ESA and, subject to entitlement, receive an allowance equivalent to the Jobseekers Allowance basic rate.
- The Condition Management Programmes currently delivered as part of Pathways to Work are funded by Jobcentre Plus, but delivered in partnership with local primary Care Trusts and Health Boards. These are typically staffed by health professionals including occupational therapists and physiotherapists and have access to a range of support, including help for customers with mental health issues.

Workshop 3 – Child Maintenance Reform

Led by David Bailey

David gave a presentation on the proposals for reforming the child maintenance system – a copy of the presentation is appended. There are four main themes:

- encouraging parents to make their own arrangements;
- delivering child maintenance in a new way;
- simplifying and improving the child maintenance assessment process; and
- tougher enforcement

The formal consultation period for the White Paper ended on 13 March and the Government will produce a summary of the comments that it received.

In discussion, delegates asked David about:

- what provision will be made in the new system for taking into account payments in kind;
- how the maintenance disregard will be treated with respect to benefit and tax credits; and
- the proposal to charge for C-MEC services and appeal procedures.

Workshop 4 – Carers Allowance **Led by Hilary Jackson & Helen McDougall**

Hilary and Helen gave update on improvements made over the last 12 months including: an improved Underlying entitlement letter

- disabled person acknowledgement

- removal of the need to claim twice to secure maximum backdating
- the new CA leaflet
- movement of DCS benefit information to the Directgov website
- improvements to the CA online service
- improvements in support given to customers requiring alternative communication formats and for those whose first language is not English.

They also provided an update on the progress of the CAU Contact Centre (now known as the Model Office).

In discussion, the following points were made:

- CA customers are still facing work focused interviews because they are in receipt of IB/IS - this is not considered appropriate
- carers feel unvalued when they lose CA on reaching 65
- underlying entitlement decision notifications are still causing difficulties
- why do we insist on sending out bilingual notifications to all Welsh customers? *[note: this is a Welsh Language Act requirement for customers living in Wales]*

Workshop 5 – Pensions Transformation

Led by Andy Levitt

The purpose of the workshop was to:

- provide an update on the transformed State Pension claim and Pension Credit application process.
- give feedback on customer views of the new service being provided
- inform delegates of the planned improvements for customers reporting a change in circumstances from September 2007.

Key issues raised by delegates were:

- the need for vulnerable customers to be able to contact DWP using paper channels in the future
- telephone accessibility for customers with hearing problems
- benefit take-up and underpayments to the most needy customers

Attendees List

<i>Name</i>	<i>Organisation</i>
Eid Ali Ahmed	Welsh Refugee Council
Jim Barber	Monmouthshire County Council
Liz Bettles	Cardiff County Council
Sue Bird	Ceredigion Social Services
Annie Cadman	Newport Citizens Advice Bureau
John Colegate	Ty George Thomas Hospice Care
Celia Davies	Bro Ddyfi Advice Centre
Sandra Davies	Neath Port Talbot Welfare Rights Unit
Lisa Edwards	Vale of Glamorgan Council
Carly Evans	Neath Port Talbot Welfare Rights Unit
Mike Ford	Torfaen Peoples Centre
Ann Guise	Careers Wales
Gillian Hadfield	National Association of Deafened People
Stuart Hales	Torfaen Citizens Advice
Audrey Hirst	Ty George Thomas Hospice Care
Rick Jones Abbas	Welfare Rights Unit
Jamie Jones	Pembrokeshire County Council
Paul Kempton	Cardiff County Council
Lisa Kenniford	Cardiff Leaving Care Services
Damian Keogh	Wrexham County Borough Council
Emlyn Langford	Shaw Trust
Beverley Lewis	Cardiff County Council
Martyn Lyddon	Institute of Welfare
Monica Mahoney	RNID Cymru
Lynda Meakin	Rhondda Cynon Taff County Borough Council
Tom Messere	Swansea Social Inclusion Unit
Richard Morgan	Neath Port Talbot Welfare Rights Unit
Julian Morgans	City & Council of Swansea
Arthur North	TGWU Retired Members Association
Barrie Pearson	Monmouthshire County Council
Uma Ray	Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council
Viv Rees	Bridgend Citizens Advice Bureau
Byron Richards	Royal British Legion
Tarek Samad	Welsh Refugee Council
Patricia Smailes	Social Security Advisory Committee
Fran Targett	Citizens Advice
Richard Taylor	Vale of Glamorgan Council
Ceri Thomas	Pembrokeshire County Council
Jane Thomas	Cardiff County Council
Colin Towler	The Eyeless Trust
Keith Wheeler	Torfaen Social Services
Debra White	Neath Port Talbot Welfare Rights Unit
Saz Willey	Vale of Glamorgan CAB
 Officials	
Linda Badman	Jobcentre Plus
David Bailey	Child Maintenance Redesign Programme, DWP
Sian Bendle	The Pension Service
Phill Cottam	Disability & Carers Service

Jayne Dingle	Jobcentre Plus
Christine Fox, OBE	HM Revenue & Customs
Jill Gillatt	DWP Corporate Customer Affairs
Graham Heard	Disability & Carers Service
Karen Helyer	The Pension Service
Mike Hodge	DWP Communications
Glyn Hughes	Child Support Agency
Hilary Jackson	Disability & Carers Service
Wendy Jones	Disability & Carers Service
Andy Levitt	The Pension Service
Paul Lewis	The Pension Service
Helen McDougall	Disability & Carers Service
Tony Meehan	Jobcentre Plus
Phil Miller	Jobcentre Plus
Carol Morgan	The Pension Service
Jo Morrigan	DWP Corporate Customer Affairs
Andrea Owen	Jobcentre Plus
Anne Pettifor	The Pension Service
Tony Powell	Jobcentre Plus
Roger Pugh	DWP Corporate Customer Affairs
Tracy Ravenscroft	Child Support Agency
Sian Robinson	Child Support Agency
Eirys Sadler	Child Support Agency
Sue Salisbury	The Pension Service
Ciarrai Samson	DWP Communications
Owen Sloman	DWP Better Regulation & Customer Service Division
Lynn Tarp	DWP Better Regulation & Customer Service Division
Gillian Treseder	DWP Legal, General & Special Policy Group
Debbie Vials	Child Maintenance Redesign Programme, DWP
Pauline Wardman	DWP Corporate Customer Affairs
Avril Westren	Disability & Carers Service
Ian Williams	Jobcentre Plus
Sue Williams	Disability & Carers Service
Paula Young	DWP Corporate Customer Affairs