

Social Fund community care grants

DWP Customer Insight
Research Report 2

Community care grants: A qualitative view of attitudes and behaviours

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Executive summary

This report details the findings generated by a small-scale piece of qualitative research undertaken by the Customer Insight team to gain an understanding of the motivations and experience of customers applying for a **Social Fund community care grant**. It was jointly commissioned by the DWP Social Fund Reform Team as part of their on-going work on Social Fund reform, and by Jobcentre Plus.

This report presents evidence on the views of customers applying for Social Fund community care grants, the staff administering the process, and representatives from the Independent Review Service (IRS) and third party organisations. The evidence was gathered through a series of telephone interviews and focus groups in December 2010 and January 2011.

Key findings are as follows:

- Customers are supported by a wide variety of public and voluntary services, including support and outreach workers, who play a vital role
- However, a lack of communication and join-up between all interested parties can lead to misinformation and delay
- Customers generally thought the application process was straightforward but that the application form was long and repetitive and the decision letter confusing
- While customers found the application process straightforward, staff and IRS felt that the majority of applications were of poor quality and required further contact to complete the evidence
- On average customers received a decision within 2-3 weeks and this was considered acceptable. However, a number of customers had to wait between 4 – 8 weeks and this was considered to be too long
- The Social Fund is distributed by a system of regional allocations and all parties interviewed believed this led to regional inconsistencies in priorities and awards
- Most customers said they would be content with vouchers or goods supplied as an alternative to cash, providing they retained an element of choice of make / supplier
- There were mixed views about alternatives to the existing Social Fund delivery mechanism
- Customers do not understand they can ask for a review of the decision they receive, or know how to go about initiating a review
- There appeared to be opportunities for better communication between JCP and IRS to improve both application and review process
- Staff said that pensioners are particularly reluctant to claim community care grants, and this is reflected in management information and datasets.

Due to the small-scale nature of the project and the relatively low number of interviews conducted, the views of individuals included within the research can not be assumed to be representative of all customers, staff or representatives of the IRS/third party organisations.

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Ruth White of the DWP Customer Insight Team was responsible for writing this report.

Abbreviations

BDC	Benefit Delivery Centre
BL	Budgeting Loan
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
ESA	Employment and Support Allowance
FCO	First Contact Officers
FEP	Fast Electronic Payments
JCP	Jobcentre Plus
NAO	National Audit Office
PTD	Product & Transformation Division
SF	Social Fund

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The Social Fund (SF) is a Jobcentre Plus (JCP) administered scheme to help people with financial needs which are difficult to meet from regular income. It is made up of two distinct parts:

- a **regulated** scheme which provides entitlement to maternity, funeral, cold weather and winter fuel payments for people who satisfy certain qualifying conditions
- a **discretionary** scheme under which people may be eligible in certain circumstances for a:
 - Community care grant - to meet, or help to meet, a need for community care. A community care grant does not have to be repaid
 - Budgeting loan (BL) - to meet, or help to meet, an intermittent expense
 - Crisis loan (CL) - to meet, or help to meet, an immediate short term financial need

This report focuses on **community care grants**.

Community care grants are administered by a postal application process. Staff who process community care grants do not meet applicants face-to-face although they may speak to customers or their representatives on the phone if further information is required.

Under the current system the majority of recipients receive their award as money into their bank account rather than goods or services.

1.2 Context of research

The Social Fund community care grant scheme has been criticised by, amongst others, the National Audit Office (NAO) and the Independent Review Service (IRS) for not meeting the needs of some vulnerable people.

The 2010 NAO Report* on community care grants recommended that DWP should 'Develop a strategy to promote the (Social Fund community care grant) scheme through third parties who work with vulnerable people at risk of needing state care, or coming out of state care or those working with families under exceptional pressure'.

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* National Audit Office Report on Social Fund community care grants for Department of Work and Pensions dated 22 July 2010

In response to this NAO recommendation, JCP Products and Transformation Division (PTD) commissioned Customer Insight to carry out a small-scale piece of research to inform policy and develop a strategy for increasing awareness and take-up of community care grants.

In addition, the DWP Social Fund Reform team were looking to gather greater customer understanding on the use of community care grants to inform future social fund options. The March 2010 Social Fund Green Paper had sought views on delivering community care grants as 'goods and services' rather than money but the majority of responses were from organisations so there was little evidence on the views of customers and staff.

1.3 Research objectives

The research objectives were to:

Establish how vulnerable customers orientate to an application for a community care grant and:

- The third party/trusted organisations that support them on that journey
- Their views on whether this was the most effective way of supporting them
- How easy it was for them to get information/help
- Who provided them with guidance and information
- Their views on:
 - The application process
 - The way the grant is provided (money versus goods)
 - Possible improvements

Interview third party organisations to:

- Understand the crucial points at which they inter-act with customers
- Determine what advice and guidance they are able to give customers about the Social Fund and community care grants specifically
- Seek their views on why customers who may be eligible for community care grants do not apply

2 Methodology

2.1 Secondary data

This research complements a number of detailed social research studies on various aspects of the Social Fund that can be found on the [DWP website](#).

2.2 Primary research

2.2.1 Methodology

The research was carried out during December 2010 and January 2011. It comprised in-depth telephone interviews with customers and focus groups with staff, the Independent Review Service and a number of third party organisations.

2.2.2 Research sample

JCP provided a list of 120 customers who had applied for community care grants between September and November 2010. The list included customers from a cross section of JCP regions representing Scotland, England and Wales. In-depth telephone interviews were carried out with 28 customers; 21 who had received a full or partial community care grant award, and seven who had a nil award. The interviews provided a good cross section of customer views but may not be representative of all customers.

Telephone interviews were carried out with nine JCP staff (decision makers or first tier review officers) from different regions, three JCP advisors who worked in prisons as advisors and five Independent Review Service (IRS) staff. IRS carries out an independent second tier review on behalf of customers who have been disallowed or partially awarded a community care grant.

Additionally, two focus groups took place with representatives of two third party organisations which provide help and support to people with complex needs, for example; homelessness, debt, family breakdown, addiction and disabilities.

3 Main findings

Key Findings:

- Customers are supported by a wide variety of public and voluntary services, including support and outreach workers, who play a vital role
- However, a lack of communication and join-up between all interested parties can lead to misinformation and delay
- Customers generally thought the application process was straightforward but that the application form was long and repetitive and the decision letter confusing
- While customers found the application process straightforward, staff and IRS felt that the majority of applications were of poor quality and required further contact to complete the evidence
- On average customers received a decision within 2-3 weeks and this was considered acceptable. However, a number of customers had to wait between 4 – 8 weeks and this was considered to be too long
- The Social Fund is distributed by a system of regional allocations and all parties interviewed believed this led to regional inconsistencies in priorities and awards
- Most customers said they would be content with vouchers or goods supplied as an alternative to cash, providing they retained an element of choice of make / supplier
- There were mixed views about alternatives to the existing Social Fund delivery mechanism
- Customers do not generally understand that they can ask for a review of the decision they receive, or know how to go about initiating a review
- There appeared to be opportunities for better communication between JCP and IRS to improve both application and review process
- Staff said that pensioners are particularly reluctant to claim community care grants, and this is reflected in management information and datasets

3.1 Customer background information

The majority of customers interviewed lived on their own or with dependent children in rented accommodation (either council or private).

Many had disabilities or health problems and more than half received support from third party organisations, which were predominantly:

- Social workers
- Disability support organisations
- Housing support workers
- JCP advisors (in both jobcentres and prisons)

There was a strong correlation between those with health problems / disabilities and those who received support, and for this group the signposting to community care grants occurred as part of their regular support arrangements.

3.2 General feelings about Social Fund community care grants

3.2.1 Help and support

Customers are supported by a wide variety of public and voluntary services, including support and outreach workers, who play a vital role. However, a lack of communication and join-up between all interested parties can lead to misinformation and delay.

Customers do not always know what has been applied for on their behalf by their support workers. This especially caused problems when JCP decision makers contacted customers direct for further evidence and means that customers do not always understand the decision letters.

“The lady from the blind society completed the form, I signed it and she sent it in.”

(Community care grant customer)

JCP decision makers (DMs) often only contact the customer to clarify gaps in evidence and do not consult the support worker who may have completed the application form.

Support workers do not always have up-to-date information about community care grants, resulting in ‘myths’ (e.g. certain regions will only pay for certain items).

3.2.2 Application process

Customers generally thought the application process was straightforward but that the application form was long and repetitive and in many cases the decision letter was confusing.

Most customers would have preferred to apply face-to-face (this was mainly so they could demonstrate their level of need, then (in order of preference) by phone, post or online. Customers who made their own applications:

- made a close connection between community care grants and being in receipt of benefits, and were generally aware of the difference between community care grants (a grant that didn't need to be paid back) and other SF loans (that did need to be paid back)
- phoned the jobcentre to get an application form

The decision letter is system-generated and cannot show a full breakdown of the award(s) if an application is for more than ten items. Some customers therefore did not understand which items they had been awarded and which had been rejected. In some cases the letter arrived after the money had been paid into their bank account so they did not know what the money was for, and why it had been awarded.

"I didn't understand what items the money was for, and how much I had been awarded for each item."

(Community care grant customer)

Customers and stakeholders felt there was a lack of clarity about the logic behind decisions, especially relating to partial awards and a lack of visibility around priorities.

While the customers found the application process straightforward, staff and the Independent Review Service (IRS) felt that the majority of applications required further contact to complete the evidence.

Applications listed the items requested but not the reasons why they were needed. This seemed to be an issue particularly with forms completed by support workers, as the customer did not know what was on the form if they were contacted by JCP for further evidence.

Staff felt that some support workers use 'templates' and therefore there was insufficient relevant information about a customer's circumstance.

"Some support organisations have a template and the support worker just changes the customer name; they don't really know the customer's circumstances – sometimes they haven't even visited them at home."

(JCP decision maker)

On average customers received a decision within 2-3 weeks and this was considered acceptable. However, some customers interviewed experienced a wait of between 4 – 8 weeks and this was thought to be too long.

This was a particular problem when customers were applying for a community care grant to furnish rented accommodation. Local Authorities (LAs) are increasingly unwilling to wait for rent on unoccupied properties so either the customer has to pay rent before they move in, or move into empty accommodation.

“... it took a long time. Probably between 4 and 8 weeks. This was too long. I thought I would have got something sooner. I was waiting to move into my place but couldn't until I got the money. I had to stay in the hostel until it was sorted.”

(Community care grant customer)

IRS trend reports indicate that community care grants are generally being processed more quickly but there is evidence of a corresponding reduction in quality, with more cases disallowed without all the evidence checks being carried out.

“Cases are being dealt with more quickly but if there is a backlog customer contact is reduced.”

(IRS SF Inspector)

3.2.3 CCG budgets and priority system

The Social Fund is distributed by a system of regional allocations and all parties interviewed believed this led to regional inconsistencies in priorities and awards.

Budget allocations are based on historical JCP caseload information and take no account of the relative 'pockets of deprivation' within regions.

This was a particular concern when customers in the same circumstances (eg. prisoners) appear to be being treated differently. The community care grant award is determined by the JCP covering the region where they will be living on release, so offenders in the same prison may experience differences in the amount of community care grants and when they are paid (prior or post release).

“This is a real problem; when they can make an application, and when and how much money they get depends on the region they will live in when they are released - they talk amongst themselves and realise they are being treated differently.”

(JCP prison advisor)

A number of third party organisations raised concerns about promoting community care grants when some regional budgets were already very tight.

“There is no point promoting community care grants – there isn't enough money to meet current applications.”

(Third party organisation representative)

3.2.4 How community care grants are delivered

Most customers said they would be content with vouchers or goods supplied as an alternative to cash, providing they retained an element of choice of make and / or supplier.

Just over half of customers said they would be content to be supplied with goods instead of cash, especially white goods. Of those who preferred cash, they cited choice and being able to 'shop around' as the main reasons. Vouchers would be acceptable providing they allowed an element of choice in supplier and manufacturer.

"I like to be able to choose myself and shop around as you can get things cheaper. I used the money to shop around to get things from shops and car boot sales. It meant that I could make the money pay for more things."

(Community care grant customer)

Most customers said they would accept re-conditioned white goods (drawing a clear distinction between re-conditioned and second-hand), providing they had a guarantee and proved reliable. Second-hand beds, bedding and clothes were considered unacceptable.

The exception to this was ex-offenders who mainly wanted cash for clothes. The cash was seen as an important part of their resettlement package.

There were mixed views about an alternative to the existing Social Fund delivery mechanism.

When asked about a different way of administering community care grants some customers thought they could be better delivered by a 'local' provider but this was mostly linked to their preference for a face to face application process, and when questioned about 'local' they said they meant local jobcentres.

Customers associate community care grants with claiming benefits so there is a strong link to JCP that may act as a barrier to an alternative provider (although many customers are orientated to community care grants through their support workers).

Many third party organisations already provide customers with goods and services. If third party organisations administered the budget there may be similar concerns around the equality of budget allocations.

"The most important thing for me is that you know who to go to and that it is easy to access."

(Community care grant customer)

3.2.5 The review process

Customers do not generally understand that they can ask for a review of the decision they receive, or know how to go about initiating a review.

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The majority of customers said they did not know how to request a review, although some of them had support workers who had done it on their behalf.

Some customers said they would be worried about asking for a review in case it meant their benefit was stopped, or a partial award was withdrawn.

The fact that legislation stipulates a review by IRS must be requested in writing is seen to be a real barrier for vulnerable customers.

“Customers often ring our Freephone number rather than apply in writing – it is sometimes a real issue for them and if they don’t have help they don’t bother”.
(IRS SF Inspector)

3.2.6 Quality of decision making

There appeared to be opportunities for better communication between JCP and IRS to improve both the application and review process.

IRS highlighted the number of cases where there is insufficient evidence to make a decision and that this information should have been obtained by the original or reviewing decision maker.

JCP staff believed IRS had less pressure and more time to review cases when in fact they have the same procedures and their own targets to achieve.

“JCP Decision Makers don’t think we have targets, but we do – we aim to clear cases in 12 days and achieve this in 99% of cases.”
(IRS SF Inspector)

IRS feedback is provided at individual, region and national level but a period of more targeted support resulted in improved quality for the duration of the exercise (but dropped back once it had finished).

3.2.7 Community care grant take up

Staff said that pensioners are particularly reluctant to claim community care grants, and this is reflected in management information and datasets.

JCP and IRS staff felt that this may be due to the fact that community care grants are administered by JCP and therefore pensioners may think they are only for customers of working age.

There is reluctance from some pensioners to claim means tested benefits; this may be linked to Pension Credit take-up issues.

“When there was a proper campaign to get pensioners to claim CCGs [community care grants], applications went up, but they dropped off again as soon as the campaign stopped.”
(JCP DM)

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4 Conclusion

This section presents conclusions based on the key findings outlined in the earlier sections of the report. The conclusions draw on the experience of customers applying for a Social Fund community care grant, the staff who administer the various parts of the process, the Independent Review Service and third party organisations.

There was a clear consensus for:

- Improved guidance and communications for third party organisations to improve their understanding of the community care grant process and evidence requirements.
- Greater involvement of third party organisations (with customer permission) throughout the process
- Review of the way customers are notified of the outcome of the application.
- Improved guidance for customers about how to ask for a review at each stage of their application.

The research also raised some issues about the use of community care grants to support prisoners on release that may benefit from further consideration.

Appendix A: Topic Guides

Community Care Grants – customers

To understand in depth the customer experience of the CCG application & review process, including what makes customers apply for a CCG in the first instance

This will involve exploring all aspects how customers are orientated to community care grants and the process they go through in order to apply for that grant.

- understanding how customers become aware of Community Care Grant
- understanding the process customers go through in order to apply for a grant;
- understanding at which crucial points in their journey do they seek help and advice from community organisations
- understanding their experience of the review process ; and
- understanding their views on alternative delivery methods, both in terms of organisations and goods/vouchers versus cash.

1. Introduction

Introduce self, explain we are conducting this study on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions. We are currently conducting work to improve the services we offer and want to hear first hand the views of people who have recently used these services. Your views will be fed back to the project after they have been made anonymous so the project can decide on how the service will be developed for the future. Taking part does not affect your benefit entitlements in any way.

Explain the:

- Purpose of the interview is to gain an understanding of your experiences of applying for a Community Care Grant
- Length of the interview – this should take about 15 minutes

Do you have any questions before we start?

2. Background

Firstly, I just want to ask you some background information.

2.1 Do you live on your own, with friends or family?

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2.2 What kind of accommodation you live in? Prompt - rented accommodation, sheltered housing, owner occupier with a mortgage, residential care, hostel.

2.3 Would you consider yourself to have any health problems or disabilities?

2.4 Have you been in regular contact with any other organisations in the last six months? Prompt – (Social Services, District nurses, Probation services, Homeless organisations, Health care agencies, CAB etc)

If yes, what was the reason?

3. Orientation & CCG Application Process

3.1 Have you ever heard of the term ‘the Social Fund’?

- If yes, tell me about what you’ve heard?
- If no, move to next question?

3.2 I understand you recently applied for a Community Care Grant - is that correct?

3.3 Describe to me in your own words the situation you were in at the time you applied for a Community Care Grant?

3.4 Can you tell me what you know or have heard about Community Care Grants?

3.5 Before you applied for the community care grant did you consider any other way of paying for what you needed? What did you consider? Prompt – (loan/credit card/savings/friends or family)

3.6 How did you know that a Community Care Grant was the right application for you to make in your circumstances? (Prompt: Did someone advise you about this? Who/what did they tell you? / Prior knowledge - had applied before)

3.7 Tell me about how you applied for your CCG? Prompts:

- Phone
- Post
- Other

(Probe: Did someone help you to apply? If yes, who? What help did they give you?)

4. Other Social Fund Applications (Budgeting Loans / Crisis Loans + Other)

4.1 Did you or someone else on your behalf fill in any other Social Fund forms at the same time? If yes, which ones/what for?

- Budgeting Loan – record what for
- Crisis Loan – record what for
- Other – record what for

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If no, go to Question 5.

4.2 Why did you fill these in, in addition to your Community Care Grant form?

Prompts:

- *Phoned central number and advised by JCP to complete other forms*
 - *What did the advisor tell them?*
 - *Ask what they knew about each loan/grant*
 - *What did they think each was for and;*
 - *What items did they apply for in each one?*
- *Applied before – knew what to do*
- *Unsure, tried all three hoping to get at least one*
- *Advised to fill them by third party – find out who/what did they say?*
- *Other – record response*

(Note to interviewer: answers may come out in 4.1)

5. What to ask for and alternatives to cash

5.1 How did you know what amount to ask for? (Probe: did someone advise you on this / who/what did they say?)

5.2 Did you expect this/these application (s) to be successful? If yes, why - what made you think this?

5.3 What was the result of these applications? (Prompt: refused / paid) How did you feel about the decision?

5.4 Did you get the full amount that you asked for? If no, how did you manage? How did you feel about this?

5.5 Was it clear from the decision how much you had been awarded for each item? Did you spend that amount on the purchases? If there was any money left over, what did you do with it?

5.6 How would you feel if you were provided goods by a supplier rather than cash to purchase the item/s yourself? (i.e. you've be given cookers/beds etc and not the cash)

5.7 Would you have preferred a voucher scheme instead of being given cash money? Why/why not?

5.8 From your experience, would you have been prepared to receive recycled goods or second hand goods? If so, which goods would they be – prompt – white goods, furniture, beds etc

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5.9 If you were provided with second hand or recycled goods, would you expect to have conditions attached to the goods received – e.g. the need for a guarantee?

6. Form completion

6.1 Where did you get the application form(s). Where did you send it to?

6.2 Did you understand what was required to complete the form? If not, why not?

6.3 Did someone help you to fill out the form? Who?

6.4 How did they support you?

6.5 Did you find their support effective? If yes, what did they do? If no, what else could have been done for you?

6.6 A large number of our customers don't include their telephone number on CCG claim forms which means it takes longer for staff to get the information needed to deal with the claim – do you have any views on why you think customers don't include their telephone numbers on the forms?

6.7 Is there anything we could do to persuade people to put their number on the form? What would have persuaded you to give us your number?

6.8 How long did the process take from when you sent in the form, to you having received the decision? Would you consider this a reasonable amount of time, if not, how long is reasonable, in your opinion?

6.9 How would you describe the process you went through (if customer says it was difficult then ask what was difficult about it)

6.10 Would you have preferred to apply online/ by phone or face to face somewhere locally? What difference would this have made to the process and to your experience?

7. Knowledge of the review process

7.1 Did you know that you could ask for a review of the decision if your application is turned down or partially awarded? If yes, who told you about it?

7.2 Did you know that first decisions in Jobcentre Plus could be reviewed by them and then also by the Independent Review Service?

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7.3 Have you ever applied for a review of the Jobcentre Plus decision? If yes, who to? (Prompt – internal JCP review or Independent Review Service) Tell me about the process you went through.

8. Administration of the Grant

8.1 Are you aware that the Social Fund is administered from a central location? Do you have any views on how well this works?

8.2 Do you have any views on whether the service would be better if it was delivered by local organisations? PROMPT – Local authority, CAB etc

Or, - Could it be linked to other local service provision e.g. charities, LA provision

8.3 If at all, who would be best placed to deliver the service? Why them?

8.4 What difference would this make to the service and to you personally?

And Finally

9. Improving Community Care Grants

9.1 Do you have anything else to add on how the existing service could be improved?

Thank you for your time.

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Community Care Grants – staff

To understand in depth the stakeholder role in raising awareness, and supporting the application for a Community Care Grant.

This will involve exploring:

- how customers are made aware of Community Care Grants
- what support customers need in order to apply for community care Grants
- how the current process works to support vulnerable customers and any problem areas.

Introduction

We are conducting this study on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions. We are currently conducting work to improve the services we offer and want to hear first hand the views of people who support vulnerable customers by determining their eligibility to Community Care Grants.

Your views will be fed back to the project after they have been made anonymous and these will help determine how Community Care Grants are developed for the future.

We are going to record this focus group to assist us with note taking is everyone ok with this?

This focus group should take approximately an hour although we have allowed a little longer.

Do you have any questions before we start?

Can I first just check who we have on the line?

In order to manage the focus group I am going to address each question to one individual in turn and then give you all a chance to comment.

Can I ask that you all treat the views that are shared today in confidence and remind you that any comments made will be made anonymous before being passed on by us.

There are no right or wrong answers we simply want you to share your views with us please be frank and open.

1. Can you tell me briefly the process you follow when you receive an application for a Community Care Grant?

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2. Can an assessment of entitlement usually be made without further enquiries being made to the customer?

If no

Why is this? (prompt standard of completion, questions aren't clear, customer doesn't understand what Community Care Grants are for)

3. How do you usually make further enquiries made? (by phone or letter) why is this?

4. And when the response comes back can you then usually make a decision?

5. Do you think there is any particular customer group who make more applications than others?

6. Are there any groups you don't think make applications?

7. What do you think of the application form? (good, bad, too long etc)

8. Which part of the application form do you think is the least likely to be correctly completed?

9. Is there any part of the process that you would change? What? Why? How?

10. Do you think that the Community Care Grant can be applied for at the right time? (prompt: before leaving prison, before setting up home etc)

11. Do you think that an online or telephone application process would work?/ Would better support customers?

12. Why, why not?

13. We know that certain customers for example prisoners get a lot of additional support to apply for Community Care Grants do you think this makes a difference to the standard of completion of the form and the likelihood that you will be able to make a decision based on the claim form only?

14. Which other groups of customers do you think are well supported?

Payment

15. Do you think it is essential that the Community Care Grant is a cash payment?

16. What would you think of a voucher system?

17. What would you think if customers were supplied with the goods?

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18. Would you anticipate any problems with this?
19. And do you think these would have to be new items or would good quality 2nd hand/recycled items suffice?
20. Would goods have to come with guarantees?
21. Do you think there are any items which customers would not accept 2nd hand?
22. Do you think it would help the application process if customer were offered more support to complete the forms for example like that offered to prisoners?
23. Who do you think would be best placed to offer this? (prompt CAB, visiting officers other)

If yes

24. Why do you think this would/wouldn't be better?

And finally

25. Do you think that Community Care Grants are adequately promoted by DWP with customers?

If no

26. How would you suggest we could raise awareness?

Thanks for your time