

# Customers' experiences of contact with the Pension, Disability and Carers Service

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## Background

This research was commissioned by the Pension, Disability and Carers Service (PDCS). Its aims were to explore the factors most likely to trigger contacts with the service; the role of networks and professionals in this process and people's needs; and preferences and expectations of service delivery.

The research involved in-depth interviews with 30 men and women in their 60s, 70s and 80s and three discussion groups: two with people over State Pension Age (SPA) and one with carers.

## Barriers and triggers

The research highlighted a number of barriers to PDCS achieving its aim of ensuring that those older people who are entitled to PDCS benefits are aware of and receive the full financial assistance, services and support that are available to them.

Overall, there was a general lack of awareness of the availability of financial assistance from PDCS. There was also considerable sensitivity around issues of eligibility and claiming. Many people felt that they had to 'jump through hoops' to demonstrate their entitlement.

Many people simply 'did not know where to start' in the process of claiming their benefit entitlements. Complex application forms, difficulties contacting the correct staff within PDCS and little understanding of interactions between benefits resulted in confusion and frustration.

Contact with PDCS was rarely the result of a single 'trigger' event, but rather a result of a combination of events over time. As such, people commonly contacted PDCS some time after the onset of a

health condition or disability. Some did so after taking on caring responsibilities, meaning people did not know about or receive assistance at a time when they may have needed it.

## Networks and partners

The research highlighted a number of ways in which older people themselves became aware of PDCS. The findings provide insight into how the service might raise awareness for those who are entitled to claim at a local level.

Family, friends and neighbours were often critical in helping older people become aware of, and claim, their entitlements. For some, this involved the provision of support, assistance and encouragement. For others, it involved taking on the role of advocate or representative. However, the ability to help was often constrained by insufficient awareness, knowledge or expertise.

The assistance of staff in community-based organisations was a key factor in helping some older people to make contact with PDCS and claiming their entitlement. Initial contact with such organisations was often for reasons other than benefit entitlement, and staff provided advice and support with the added benefit of local knowledge.

For some older people, retirement had led to loss of contacts, which in turn increased their risk of not gaining access to relevant information. However, it was often the case that 'chance' discussions with people prompted older people to contact PDCS or other local organisations to discuss benefit entitlement.

## Communication and contact

The research highlighted older people's views on the different channels of communication through which PDCS delivers its services. It also indicated how people felt the service might improve its communications with them.

There was strong support for face-to-face contact, particularly for people with complex circumstances or certain health conditions or impairments. There was, however, little expectation that this should be generally available.

Written communication was valued, especially as it provided older people with a record of contact and a point of reference. However, significant concerns were raised about written communication not always being accessible or understandable.

Telephone contact was viewed positively for simple transactions. However, difficulty getting through to the right person and having to provide and repeat information over the telephone proved problematic for many people.

There was little appetite for internet-based services. This was mainly due to the cost of equipment and connection, the ability to use computers (for reasons relating to impairments) and concerns about data security and privacy.

## Experiences of contact

The research highlighted the experiences of people with complex circumstances and with particular needs, including those of carers (including mutual carers). In-so-doing, it raises some specific issues that might assist PDCS in thinking about meeting the needs of some of its most vulnerable customers.

In respect of straightforward transactions, most people's expectations of PDCS were met and the perception of the service was positive.

However, less straightforward transactions commonly resulted in confusion, frustration and disengagement due to complex forms, 'technical' letters, and providing the same information to

different PDCS staff. More complex interactions often occurred during times of significant change and distress.

For some older people, the complexity of their everyday lives made engaging with the service more difficult. In this respect, people thought PDCS staff needed to have a better understanding of the nature of their lives and the impact of long-standing health conditions. It was also felt that staff having greater empathy with their situation would improve their interaction with the service.

The experience of carers (particularly mutual carers and people caring for more than one person) was often stressful and frustrating. This was sometimes exacerbated by the lack of joined-up service delivery and staff not always being aware of, nor sensitive to, their needs.

## Conclusions

The main findings of this research indicate that older people would like to see PDCS services delivered in a way that ensures it:

- makes its customers aware of how the organisation is structured;
- provides clear, accurate and timely explanations (both written and spoken);
- minimises the administrative burden on customers, in particular extensive completion of complex, repetitive forms;
- ensures continuity in service delivery by effectively sharing information in the form of details of earlier contacts and customer circumstances between the relevant agencies; and
- where appropriate, makes a single point of contact, such as a complex case worker available.

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You can download the full report free from: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>

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