

# Understanding the experiences of PDCS customers engaged with the formal complaints process: Final report

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## Introduction

In July 2008 the National Audit Office (NAO) published a report entitled *Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) – Handling Customer Complaints*. This recommended that in order for the DWP to respond more effectively to complaints it should seek to gain a better understanding of customers' complaints through learning from their experiences and satisfaction with the complaints handling process, and whether it meets their needs. The purpose of this research is to undertake a piece of in-depth qualitative research with a sample of customers of the Pension, Disability and Carers Service, in order to identify customer experiences of the complaints process and make recommendations to address identified barriers and challenges.

## The complaints process of the Pension Disability and Carers Service (PDCS)

The Pension Service (TPS) and the Disability and Carers Service (DCS) were brought together to form the PDCS, a new Executive Agency of the DWP in April 2008. Customers comprise current and future pensioners, disabled people of all ages and carers. Both TPS and DCS have clearly defined complaints handling processes in place with comprehensive guidance to support this. The overall processes are publicised in customer literature and are available on the TPS and DCS websites respectively and on the Directgov website. They comprise a number of stages:

- **Tier 1:** Involves customers with a complaint making initial contact with front line member of staff who attempts to resolve this (usually via a letter signed by the Team Leader). If the customer is not satisfied with the response then they are referred to;
- **Tier 2:** The complaint is dealt with again by front line operations but signed by Unit/District manager. If the complaint is still not resolved then the customer is referred to;
- **Tier 3:** The complaint is dealt with by the PDCS Parliamentary Business Unit (signed by Chief Executive or delegated Director). If the customer remains dissatisfied then they are signposted to the:
- **Independent Case Examiner (ICE) tier:** The ICE office provides a free and impartial complaints service for DWP customers.
- In addition, the **Parliamentary & Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO)** provides MPs with the means to refer complaints by members of the public about alleged maladministration for a free and independent investigation by the PHSO.

## Aims and objectives of the research

The aim of this research project is to understand:

- what drives PDCS customers to complain;
- the levels of satisfaction/dissatisfaction of PDCS customers with existing complaints processes and systems;
- what drives these levels of satisfaction/dissatisfaction;
- what prevents customers from proceeding through the complaints process where they remain dissatisfied after their complaint has been answered, at whichever tier.

## Project methodology

This research involved the completion of 50 qualitative telephone interviews in October 2010 with PDCS customers who have been engaged with the complaints process. The sample comprised customers from both TPS (25) and DCS (25), and covered the first three tiers of the complaint process; Tier 1 (interviews with 18 customers from each service; Tier 2 (interviews with five customers from each service) and Tier 3 (interviews with two customers from each service).

The customers included in the sample were those who had their complaint registered and cleared in the calendar month of August 2010 prior to the sample being drawn in September 2010. Customers were offered the opportunity to opt out of the survey when they were sent an advance letter informing them of the research. Telephone interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes, taking the customer through their entire engagement with the complaints process from the start to their current situation.

The interview was structured around a topic guide that covered the following issues: the cause of complaint; awareness of the complaints process; expectations from the complaints process; experience of the complaints process; and reasons for not proceeding with the complaints process even when customers were still dissatisfied. The qualitative data collected from the interviews was analysed through a process of coding and content analysis.

## Key findings of the research

### *What drives PDCS customers to complain?*

- The main causes of complaints in relation to PDCS services are already well recognised and relate to the length of time taken and mistakes made in the provision of services, as well as the inability to provide the correct information to customers, and the attitudes of staff. This research identifies a similar range of factors but demonstrates how, in practice, a number of these **causes of complaints are interrelated in a complex manner**, often compounding the original source of complaint. Conversely, a positive response to an initial complaint can contribute to the development of a more positive perception of the service provider and prevent the development of complex complaints and deeply felt dissatisfaction.
- The majority of customers were not aware of the complaints process beforehand but most found out about it relatively easily, often by telephoning the DWP direct or through an advice centre. **This way of gaining information through some degree of people interaction contrasts with the relatively low use of web sources.**
- The research revealed a relatively low level of expectation of positive outcomes from engaging with the complaints process evident in many customers. Generally, expectations were limited to just getting some level of simple response relatively quickly, and for an acknowledgement that a mistake had been made, and that their complaint would be dealt with fairly.

## ***What is the customer experience of the complaints process?***

- About half of customers indicated that making a complaint was relatively straightforward. However, **the majority reported some degree of difficulty. Principally this was related to being passed between staff and actually getting to speak to the correct person**, either because they were unavailable or calls were not returned.
- **Telephone and letter** were predominantly used as the main way to complain, with a notable lack of the use of email as a means of communication.
- Respondents were frequently **unsure who to direct their complaint to, and when their complaint was being dealt with, were often confused as to who exactly was dealing with their complaint.**
- An overwhelming theme of customer experience was **frustration over the length of time that dealing with complaints took**, and the consequences of this for customers in terms of stress and other practical difficulties.
- The attitudes of staff were rarely singled out as the major source of complaint, but were widely commented upon either **negatively, in terms of not being overly helpful, or positively, in terms of taking a decisive role in resolving a complaint.**
- Not surprisingly, **the nature of the customer experience of the complaints handling process is closely bound up with the outcome of the process** (i.e. whether the complaint is successfully resolved or not).

## ***What are the key factors driving levels of satisfaction/dissatisfaction?***

A number of factors can be identified as driving levels of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, however it is important to stress that these elements are in all cases **interrelated in a variety of ways**. Key factors include:

- gaining access to the correct person who is in a position to resolve the complaint;
- the length of time taken to deal with the complaint;
- the attitudes of staff throughout the process;
- the acknowledgement of mistakes and appropriate compensation where applicable;
- the overall outcome of the process.

These link very closely to the key drivers of customer satisfaction as identified in DWP's Customer Charter.

## ***Why do customers not proceed through the complaints process when they remain dissatisfied?***

- Customers frequently gave up on the complaints process despite not having their complaint satisfactorily resolved. This reflected a strong sense that **they did not think it would achieve anything and continuing with a complaint would cost too much time, effort and stress in relation to the likely outcome.**
- These attitudes were particularly evident at **relatively early stages of the complaints process**. In contrast, where customers had already invested considerable time and effort into the complaint, they were more likely to continue with it.

## Recommendations

- There should be a focus upon dealing as efficiently and effectively as possible with initial queries and complaints to stop these escalating into more complex and costly to resolve complaints.
- To improve the quality of dealing with customer complaints requires an approach that considers the overall customer experience in an holistic manner, whereby responses to different causes of complaints are pursued in a co-ordinated and integrated way.
- Greater clarity is needed over exactly who particular complaints should be directed to in order for these to be resolved to the satisfaction of customers.
- The advantage of having one clear contact point for complaints was identified by a number of customers.
- Given individual cases are complex and require the involvement of different offices, there is a need for better information sharing between staff and offices.
- There is a need for staff training focused upon resolving complaints quickly and accurately and staff involvement in the development of effective complaints procedures.
- Whilst there is the potential for the greater use of electronic means of communications, this needs to be pursued within a clear understanding that many customers still do not either have access to, or appear to feel comfortable with, dealing with complaints electronically.

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The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 908523 17 4. Research Report 770. August 2011).

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

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