

**From:** Richard West  
Benefit Services Director

**To:** Paul Gray  
SSAC

**Date:** 4 November 2016

**Social Security Advisory Committee – Telephony in DWP and HMRC**

**Issue Summary:**

To provide you with an update on the Departments stance on the recommendations made in the latest Social Security Advisory Committee report regarding telephony in DWP.

**Background:**

In 2007 and again in 2009, the Social Security Advisory Committee (SSAC) produced a report about the cost for customers to call the Department. A number of recommendations were made within those reports, which DWP met.

The SSAC then produced a follow up report in July 2016. This was to understand whether DWP, and HMRC, had made any progress since their previous report. The committee felt that progress had been made, but that we still needed to do more to ensure that DWP telephony services are cost-effective and customers with specific needs are fully supported.

The SSAC has made seven recommendations in its latest report and this paper provides an update in relation to these recommendations.

**Recommendations made by SSAC:**

The Department has provided an updated response to the recommendations that were made below.

**1. 0800 numbers should be introduced for helplines used by vulnerable or low income customers.**

The Department's current telephony numbering policy is that calls to claim benefit should be free, so it uses 0800 telephone numbers for these calls. The Department uses 0345 telephone numbers where customers call for other reasons, and these are calls that typically take less time to resolve. If a customer raises concern over the cost of the call then we will offer to call them back.

At the moment, extending 0800 telephone numbers to other lines, such as benefit enquiry lines, would be expensive. The Department has undertaken some investigatory work to ascertain the estimated difference in costs should we move our

0345 services to 0800. Based on current call minutes, the Department estimates that the migration of costs could increase by circa £7m per annum.

That being said, DWP recognises that our numbering policy has been in place for some time and will be conducting a review. The Department will also be considering alternative contact channels for customers to transact with us.

**2. A call-back system be reviewed as a short-term aid for customers.**

**3. The introduction of an information system that advises customers of potential wait times.**

DWP is in the process of upgrading its telephony system and this work should be completed by autumn 2017. This will include the option of advising potential wait times to customers.

In the meantime, DWP agents will continue to offer a call-back to a customer if there are concerns about the cost of a call to one of our enquiry lines or if the customer requests this course of action.

**4. Gov.uk should take a lead in centralising and rationalising telephony information, particularly to assist those people with disabilities.**

DWP recognises the need to support customers with disabilities and is driving forward a programme of work to improve accessibility. This is led by the DWP Alternative Formats Taskforce; see recommendation five for more information.

One of the activities we are taking forward is working with Government Digital Service (GDS) to update Gov.uk with a specific page for each benefit for customers requiring alternative formats or support accessing the telephony channel.

**5. A working group consisting of HMRC, DWP, Gov.uk and disability charities should review telephony/communication services for those with disabilities provided by their Departments.**

The Department currently has an Alternative Formats Taskforce in place, which is headed up by the Minister for Disabled People. This brings together representatives from a number of disability charities, who support the Department to develop and deploy their improvement activities.

The Taskforce meets quarterly and the next meeting is scheduled for 24 October 2016. HMRC have been invited to attend and become part of the Taskforce going forward.

DWP also tests its written communications and agent call scripts with disabled charities, including those representing people with Learning Disabilities, to ensure that they meet their needs.

**6. HMRC and DWP should use the experience of the voluntary advice sector to reduce failure demand.**

DWP is working closely with a range of voluntary organisations to test its communications and digital services, to ensure that they are clear, meet customer needs and avoid failure demand. We ask these organisations to gather information from their end users to add value to the decision making process. This activity is critical to allow us to test and learn in a measured way for our customers.

The Department also holds the Operational Stakeholder Engagement Forum on a quarterly basis. This is with a range of voluntary organisations and gives us the opportunity to discuss issues and change initiatives.

## **7. HMRC and DWP should join with their stakeholders in understanding the role of telephony in the transition to digital under Universal Credit.**

Universal Credit is designed to enable the majority of our claimants to interact with us online. A high proportion of our claimants are already successfully submitting their claim and changes in circumstances via their computer, smartphone or tablet. In the full service over 99% of claimants successfully submit online all the information required for them to make a claim.

As part of the delivery of Universal Credit we are helping claimants to be more confident online, supporting their labour market activity, as evidence shows most job searches and job applications are managed online. Because the 'pre-UC' DWP experience of some claimants is on the telephone, we are finding that we need to prioritise and incentivise use of digital channels. Accordingly our policy on telephony is to seek to downgrade its role in delivery and redirect people to digital channels through cost incentives and other initiatives.

The Universal Credit Channel Strategy proposes which channels will be available to claimants through a range of devices. There will also be extra assistance available for those who need it, either via telephony, webchat or face-to-face, allowing agents to input data on the claimant's behalf. Services are tailored to the customer; some may need a small amount of assistance and some will need more support. Universal Credit will ensure that the appropriate support is available as part of our wider commitment to building a mature and supportive approach to the assisted digital and digital inclusion needs of our customers.

We are currently developing the top 20 customer journeys that have the biggest operational impact, looking at the assumptions underlying the design of Universal Credit, how channels are used, and what improvements can be made to those customer journeys. The programme undertakes regular research with end users to ensure we understand what drives customer behaviour between channels, and this research, along with the journey mapping, will continue to inform service design as part of our data-driven approach.

Understanding user needs, both claimants and staff, and the involvement of delivery partners and stakeholders is critical to this work.

If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

**Clearance:**

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Derek Hobbs, Head of Operational Digital Services

**Copy list:**

Ministers  
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