

Research report

Understanding the experiences of PDCS customers engaged with the formal complaints process

Final report

by Stephen Syrett, David Etherington, Ignatius Ekanem and Pamela Macaulay

Department for Work and Pensions

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A report of research carried out by the Centre for Enterprise and Economic Development Research (CEEDR), Middlesex University behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions

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Abbreviations

AA	Attendance Allowance
DCS	Disability and Carers Service
DLA	Disability Living Allowance
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
ICE	Independent Case Examiner
JSA	Jobseeker's Allowance
NAO	National Audit Office
PDCS	Pension Disability and Carers Service
PHSO	Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman
TPS	The Pension Service

Summary

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 (PDCS), in order to identify customer experiences of the complaints process and make recommendations to address identified barriers and challenges.

The complaints process of the 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 One:** 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 Two:** The complaint is dealt with again by front line operations but signed by the Unit/District manager. If the complaint is still not resolved then the customer is referred to;
- **Tier Three:** The complaint is dealt with by the PDCS Parliamentary Business Unit (signed by the 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 and Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO)** provides Member of Parliament (MPs) with the means to refer complaints of alleged maladministration by members of the public 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 the TPS (25) and the DCS (25), and covered the first three tiers of the complaint process; Tier One (interviews with 18 customers from each service; Tier Two (interviews with five customers from each service) and Tier Three (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 frequently were **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 a 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**.
- While 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.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

In July 2008, the NAO published a report entitled *Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) – Handling Customer Complaints*. This study found that while improvements had been made to the way the DWP responded to customer complaints, it was considered that there was scope to make further improvements. The NAO report recommended that the DWP could learn from customers with respect to their experiences and satisfaction about the complaints handling process and whether it met their needs. The report specifically recommended that more ‘in-depth’ qualitative research be undertaken to investigate the barriers that customers experience when making a complaint (NAO 2008:8). The purpose of this project is to undertake such research with customers of the PDCS with a view to identifying customer experiences of the complaints process and make recommendations to address identified barriers and challenges.

1.2 The Pension Disability and Carers Service

TPS and the 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. Services delivered include: State Pension; Additional State Pension; Pension Credit; Over 80 Pension; Winter Fuel Payments; Christmas Bonus Payments; Pensions Forecasts; Pension Traces; Disability Living Allowance (DLA); Attendance Allowance (AA); Carer’s Allowance; and Vaccine Damage Payments.

The operation of an effective complaints service is central to the work of the service and fundamental to meeting two key strategic objectives of the DWP: to pay customers the right benefits at the right time; and to make DWP an exemplar of effective service delivery to individuals and employers.

1.3 The Pension Disability and Carers Service complaints process

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.

The complaints process involves a number of stages:

- **Tier One:** Involves customers with a complaint making initial contact with a front line member of staff who attempts to resolve this (usually signed by the team leader). If the customer is not satisfied with the response then they are signposted to;
- **Tier Two:** The complaint is dealt with again by front line operations, but signed by the Unit/District manager. If the complaint is still not resolved then the customer is signposted to;
- **Tier Three:** The complaint is dealt with by the PDCS Parliamentary Business Unit (signed by the Chief Executive or delegated Director). If the customer remains dissatisfied then they are signposted to the:
 - **ICE tier:** The ICE office provides a free and impartial complaints service for DWP customers. The Independent Case Examiner hears both sides of the complaint, and, if necessary, makes recommendations about putting matters right.

- In addition, the PHSO provides MPs with the means to refer complaints of alleged maladministration by members of the public for a free and independent investigation by the PHSO.

1.4 Context for research

The NAO report (NAO 2008) highlights that less than one per cent of customers who have contact with the DWP make a complaint. In addition, this research identified a number of issues with respect to the complaints process. First is the **nature of complaints**. Customer service surveys reveal that nine per cent of service users were dissatisfied, but only a relatively small proportion of these dissatisfied customers made a complaint¹. Complaints were varied in their nature, ranging from delay in paying benefit, decisions made about benefits, staff not addressing all complaints made by customers, incorrect and confusing information provided by the DWP leading to a loss of benefits, and error due to failure of the DWP to act on information provided by customers.

With respect to the **experience of the complaints process** there exists a wide variety of channels for making a complaint, including by telephone, face to face, letter and email, as well as through advisory organisations and MP representation. However, the NAO report found that up to half of customers who made a complaint against DWP agencies remained dissatisfied.

Analyses of dissatisfaction with the complaints process revealed problems with communication and response by staff with customers through delays, conflicting and incorrect information and in a number of cases, no response at all. The 2008 Customer Services Survey of the Disability Carers Service (Byrom *et al.* 2009) revealed similar problems in terms of making a complaint and the problems experienced with communications and information. In their submission to the House of Commons Select Committee on the PDCS (HoC 2008:ev28), Age Concern raised a number of issues that provided some insights into the causes of some problems in dealing with complaints. They suggested that TPS staff did not always have sufficient knowledge in dealing with complicated cases and this may lead to delays in dealing with claims, and, where problems occur, it may take time to rectify them.

The NAO report concluded that ‘the Department is not capturing all information on complaints which may allow it to learn from customers’ experiences and make adjustments to service delivery as appropriate’, and recommended ‘more in depth qualitative research with a sample of customers’ (NAO 2008:8). The NAO report also pointed out that improving the adequacy and quality of responses to complaints could increase the economy and efficiency of complaints handling by reducing the number of complaints that escalated to higher and more costly tiers.

1.5 Aims and objectives of the research

The aim of this research project is to increase the knowledge of the PDCS with respect to:

- 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.

¹ NAO (2008: 5) Department for Work and Pensions Handling Customers Complaints.

2 Project methodology

2.1 Scope and sample

The research team undertook telephone interviews with a total of 50 PDCS customers who had been engaged with the complaints process described above. The sample was stratified to include customers from both the TPS (25) and the DCS (25), and to cover the first three tiers of the complaint process; Tier One (interviews with 18 customers from each service; Tier Two (interviews with five customers from each service) and Tier Three (interviews with 2 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. This letter made it clear to customers that participation in the research was voluntary, that confidentiality would be respected, and that any information gathered would be used strictly for the purpose of the research and would not impact on any other dealings they may have with a government department.

Interviews with customers were conducted over the telephone and lasted approximately 20 minutes. The interviewer took the customer through their entire complaints process from the start, progressing across Tiers One, Two and Three as relevant, in order to hear their story. The interview was structured around a topic guide (see Appendix A) which was designed in conjunction with PDCS staff to cover the following issues:

- Cause of complaint: questions here explored the original cause of the complaint;
- Awareness of the complaints process: which focused on exploring awareness of how to complain and the ease or difficulty of making a complaint;
- Expectations from the complaints process: this explored what the customer expected to happen as part of this process;
- Experience of the complaints process: which considered the mode of contact (i.e. phone, email, advocate etc), who the complaint was made to, outcome of the process, and the degree of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the outcome;
- Reasons for not proceeding with the complaints process even when customers were still dissatisfied.

2.2 Other data sources

As part of the research design other data and information sources were drawn upon for comparative and contextual purposes where available. This included the data produced in the NAO report *Handling Customer Complaints* (NAO 2008). The NAO research used a mixed methods approach including semi-structured interviews of key personnel involved with the complaints process, consultation with key stakeholders and interest groups, analysis of Departmental data, site visits to local offices and semi-structured interviews with operational staff and interviews were undertaken with welfare advisors. Data from TPS Customer Survey 2007 (Howat *et al.* 2007) and the DCS Customer Service Survey 2008 (Byrom *et al.* 2008), largely based on self-completed questionnaires, provided some insights into the causes of complaints and experiences of the complaints process. The DWP also provided some internal Management Information on the complaints process.

2.3 Data analysis and presentation

The qualitative data collected from the telephone interviews was analysed through a process of coding and content analysis to develop a frame of relationships across the complaints process. The data collected also provided some basic quantitative contextual data, but given the small size of the sample it was not appropriate to develop any quantitative analysis. When presenting qualitative data, quotations indicate the tier of the complaints process that the customer was involved in, and which service they were a customer of, as these were the two variables used in constructing the sample.

2.4 Reflections on research methodology

2.4.1 Customers' understanding of the structure of the complaints process

Although the PDCS operates a complaints process that is organised across a number of distinct tiers, customers were, not surprisingly, largely unaware of this. Although the sample was provided on the basis of these distinct tiers, in the interview process it sometimes became unclear as to precisely what stage in the process the customer had progressed to. Consequently, there were a small number of instances where customers were interviewed on the basis of being classified as a Tier One complaint, but it was apparent from their response that they had moved further through the complaints process. In these circumstances, the customer was categorised to the tier that appeared most appropriate on the basis of the information provided. This blurring, which was most evident between Tier One and Tier Two, might account for the relatively small number of Tier Two cases within the overall number of registered complaints.

2.4.2 The use of telephone interviews

The use of telephone interviews provided the opportunity to cover a sample of interviewees nationally and thus overcome geographical and distance barriers at relatively low cost. Response rates were extremely high, with customers generally very keen to engage with the research. Using telephone interviews ensured that customers could be interviewed in their own home at a time convenient to them. It was apparent that respondents were generally very happy to talk about their experiences over the phone. It appeared that in most respects the quality of the information was in line with that which would have been obtained from a face-to-face interview.

As some elderly people and people with disabilities can experience difficulties in concentration, the structuring of the interview, so that it lasted for 20 minutes, was important in getting respondents to participate. One of the challenges of the telephone interview was to control the pace of the interview and obtain views and information in a structured manner. Customers were prepared for the interview and had a story to tell, and the interview presented an opportunity to do this.

2.4.3 Identifying timescales and order of events

The timescale of the complaints process is a key part of the overall customer experience. Obtaining data on the length of the process at different stages is clearly important in evaluating the effectiveness of the service provided, particularly given that 'taking too long' is a major source of complaint. However, one disadvantage of the interview process undertaken was that it was often difficult to obtain accurate timings across the complaints process. This reflected the problems of recalling precise timings, normally in the absence of documentation, sometimes over quite long time periods. While some customers were able to provide very accurate timelines, in the majority of cases responses related to timing were only approximate.

3 The drivers of customer complaints

3.1. Areas of service activity

The sample comprised customer complaints related to a variety of PDCS services. For customers of the DCS, the majority of the complaints related to the DLA. Only one complaint related to AA and another related to Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA). For TPS customers, complaints related to various aspects of pension services including disagreement with a decision, making a new claim for a pension, switching from a benefit (such as JSA) to a pension, and undertaking adjustments to an existing claim (for example due to changed circumstances) and dealing with the benefit and implications of this and the problems associated with losing information supplied by the customer.

3.2 Causes of complaints

From existing information collected by the DWP, there is already a good understanding of the main causes of complaints of customers (see Box 3.1). While there are common reasons for customer complaints across the two services there are also differences in terms of the ranking of the different complaints categories (see Table 3.1).

Box 3.1 Top five reasons why customers complained (NAO Study), 2007/08	
<i>The Pension Service</i>	<i>Disability and Carers Service</i>
Decision taken too long	Payment not received
Payment not received	Delay in payment
Information provided not used	Process delays
Promised telephone call back but failed to call	Decision (based on process)
Information incorrectly given	Failed to reply

Source: Adapted from NAO (2008:12)

Table 3.1 Top five reasons for complaints about DCS and TPS, 2009/10

Cause of complaints	DCS (%)	TPS (%)
You take too long	31	68
You've got it wrong	29	19
You haven't given the information that suits my needs	20	9
DWP staff don't treat me with respect	15	1
I can't access the system	4	2

Source: DWP, Complaints Centre of Excellence.

As Table 3.1 demonstrates the major cause of customer complaints relates to the length of time taken over the provision of services for both TPS and DCS. This relates to issues such as delays in processing claims and benefits, and replying to correspondence, and the need for customers to keep contacting the service provider. For TPS customers this is the overriding cause of complaints (68 per cent) compared to the lower figure of 31 per cent for DCS customer complaints.

The second commonest cause of complaints for both TPS and DCS relates to mistakes made in the provision of services for example in relation to benefit entitlement, incorrect personal details, failure to record changes in circumstances etc.). However, this is a larger source of complaints for DCS customers (29 per cent) than for TPS customers (19 per cent). The third major category of complaints relates to the services not being able to give the customer the information that suits their needs (i.e. it is either wrong, insufficient, contradictory, or confusing), again this is slightly higher for DCS customers (20 per cent) than TPS ones (nine per cent). Other complaint areas relate to a lack of respect shown to customers – more important for DCS customers – and problems in accessing the system.

In the sample for this study, while these categories are reflected in the causes of complaints, the picture that emerges is more complex. For many complainants there was a combination of causes for complaints. While some respondents complained about the time taken to process a claim as well as the accuracy of information, others complained about the time it took and the type of customer service received.

3.2.1 Causes of complaints for DCS customers

In total, 11 out of 25 complainants complained about the time taken to process their claims. One respondent said, *'I tried to apply for disability allowance. It has taken six to seven months and still doesn't come out'* (T1/DCS). A number made their complaint because of the poor customer service or the standard of service they received.

Some of the complaints about customer service or the standard of service related to medical reports and the attitude of doctors who were supposed to examine them:

'The complaint was about the attitude of a doctor from ATOS medical. He took everything out of context. He basically asked all the questions without listening to the answers.'

(T3/DCS)

'I had to go for my disability benefit and the doctor came in here to examine me. My carer suggested that we get a medical report. We phoned up the medical services three times and in the end we spoke to somebody and instead they sent a letter which was nonsense.'

(T2/DCS)

Another major cause of complaint related to unfair policy.

A lady whose AA was turned down because of a negative report from a doctor whom she had not seen in the previous ten months also complained about an unfair policy. When asked why she made the complaint she replied:

'I was turned down for my AA [Attendance Allowance] because I got a negative doctor's report regarding my health. I suffer from Anaphylaxis and Angina. I thought this was undemocratic and prejudiced to be quite honest; that one doctor without consultation with any other person could do this, considering the fact I hadn't seen him in the last ten months. I have written to the DWP up to a dozen times and phoned up to a dozen times as well. I have been ignored and I think they are prejudiced.'

(T3/DCS)

Similarly, when an appointee from the Citizen Advice Bureau was asked why she had to make the complaint on behalf of her client, she explained:

'It was an appeal against a decision to disqualify my client from her Disability Living Allowance. It was an unfair policy.'

(T1/DCS)

Over a quarter of respondents complained because of the lack of accuracy of handling 'personal and confidential issues'. When asked about the cause of the complaint, one respondent replied:

'I have a genetic disability which I have to contend with. I have received less favourable treatment as a result of this condition. The DWP branded me a liar. I don't expect them to call me a liar. The complaint was as a result of a lack of accuracy of handling personal and confidential issues and making ill-advised decisions.'

(T2/DCS)

In addition, a smaller number of respondents made their complaint in relation to wrong or insufficient information provision. As one respondent stated:

'It was about false information which we were given by the DWP. My mother who is 75-years-old suffered stroke and when she was first admitted in hospital she lost her allowances. She was claiming lower rate, but we were told that she should have applied for the higher rate. Then she was given the middle rate, which couldn't even be backdated to June 2009.'

(T1/DCS)

Another respondent who complained about insufficient information commented:

'They just messed up everything. It is still being sorted. They did not provide enough information.'

(T1/DCS)

3.2.2 Causes of complaints for TPS customers

For TPS customers, the major causes of complaints related to the provision of information, customer service, the accuracy of information, and the time it took to provide pension services.

The issues of information provision, its accuracy and how long it took to be provided and acted upon, were recurrent themes in the interviews with TPS customers. In one case, a customer had problems in trying to adjust his Pension Credit to take account of existing savings, even though he had claimed that he had regularly updated the DWP on this:

'On 6 April 2010, I received a letter demanding to know when my savings increased to £36,000, information they already had and would have seen if they had paid attention to the information and documentation I had been regularly sending them, and which they consistently chose to ignore.'

(T3/TPS)

Other complaints arose from a lack of clarity about the information required from the DWP:

'I applied for Pension Credit in 2006. I sent all the forms, they wanted a P45 and then they said it was not sufficient and they sent off another form and there was confusion over what they wanted. I received two letters on the same day one saying that she would receive and another saying that she wouldn't. I was told it would take ten days to sort out and after three weeks did not hear from anybody.'

(T2/TPS)

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A number of customers had made complaints relating to overpayments being made, and once this had occurred, the difficulties in making appropriate financial adjustments to the satisfaction of the customer:

'I applied for JSA and was advised to apply for Pension Credit which was paid when claiming Pension. When I told DWP that there was an overpayment I was informed not to worry...my complaint related to the lack of information provided to clarify what the overpayment comprised.'

(T2/TPS)

With respect to customer service, a major source of complaints arose in relation to confusion over which offices were dealing with different aspects of a claim and the extent of liaison between different offices:

'I got in touch with Swansea about my Pension Credit claim and they sent me forms which I sent back to Swansea and one to mortgage people. I then got a letter from Walsall about my mortgage and they sent me a form which I sent back to them. They sent me another form because they said I re mortgaged my house although I have not done this as I have an endowment mortgage. I sent the forms back to them 6 weeks ago and I have not heard from them.'

(T1/TPS)

'I had various paper work and different office phone numbers and then when I initially rang I was asked if I was using the right number and someone then gave me a freephone number and it was quite confusing...I didn't know which office I was ringing.'

(T1/TPS)

'In relation to all of these problems, the time taken to deal with queries was either a major source of complaint of itself, or an important component element.

As I say I have had my husband in hospital. It's quite upsetting when you have a problem and you feel you have a problem and you cannot get it sorted. It took ages and ages to sort it – over six months.'

(T1/TPS)

3.3 Awareness of the complaints process

The majority of respondents were initially unaware of the complaints process, which was particularly the case for TPS customers.

In terms of where customers gained awareness of the complaints service, a number of different sources, either individually or in combination, were used. The most commonly used source of information on the complaints process, used by customers, was through simply telephoning the DWP. In addition, a quarter indicated that they asked for advice from an advice centre or other organisation, while only a small number of respondents accessed websites to find out about the complaints process. Other sources of information included DCS customers asking family and friends, from a leaflet or from previous experience.

3.4 Ease of complaints process

3.4.1 Customers finding it easy to use the complaints process

About half of customers interviewed reported that it was easy to make a complaint. The majority of these found it easy because the process they encountered was straightforward (i.e. just making a telephone call). Typical responses included:

'It was easy. The lady who answered the phone was helpful and said they were sorry.'

(T2/DCS)

'It was a straightforward letter. It was just a question of sending a letter. It wasn't difficult.'

(T1/DCS)

Others found it easy because it was done on their behalf, or they knew the system and therefore knew what to do. As one respondent commented:

'I didn't find it difficult because I'm good at writing and I know the system a little. But for disability people that would be difficult, especially people with mental disability.'

(T1/DCS).

3.4.2 Customers encountering difficulties in using the complaints process

Just over half of customers indicated that they had experienced some difficulties with the complaints process. The biggest issue reported was being passed between staff. Other prominent difficulties related to accessing staff by telephone, staff not being available and a failure to call back when promised by a member of staff. One customer who experienced difficulty because of being passed between staff and a failure to call back commented:

'It wasn't easy because when you phone them up you would be told that it is a wrong department. They would pass you between staff and in the end they would tell you to ring back or sometimes they would tell you that they will ring back but they won't. At another time, they would tell you to put it in writing. What if you can't write as myself?'

(T1/DCS)

A significant number of respondents had difficulties locating the right person and office and had to make numerous phone calls to take forward their complaint:

'I had to keep ringing them up. I must have made 60 phone calls and I was passed from pillar to post. They never returned my calls when they said they would. They said someone would ring back in 14 days and they never did. It was absolutely dreadful.'

(T2/TPS)

'I was being fobbed off from one department to the other and they told me it was all sorted when it wasn't.'

(T2/DCS)

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'I had various paperwork and different office phone numbers and then when I initially rang I was asked if I was using the right number and someone then gave me freephone number and it was quite confusing and I didn't know which office I was ringing.'

(T1/TPS)

Another commented on the difficulties of accessing the right person:

'I didn't find it easy because I didn't know the actual person to talk to. I ended up phoning 12 different people'

(T1/TPS)

In addition there were also problems related to the provision of incorrect information. As one respondent explained:

'On the DWP website there is a longwinded account of how to complain, spread over several web pages, but in essence it says clearly that complaints should always be sent in the first instance to the Pensions Centre Manager. However, this never worked. Whether correspondence was addressed to the Pensions Centre Manager by name or by title, I am convinced that it never reached its desk. Indeed, I once telephoned to ask if there was a person of that name working at the Centre by that name, but the operator told me quite clearly that she knew of no such person.'

(T3/TPS)

3.5 Expectations of the complaints process

Respondents were asked to talk about what they expected to happen when they made their complaint. Expectations were frequently modest or in some cases non-existent. Half of customers expected to just get a response, whereas others expected to obtain an apology, be treated fairly or to have their claims or benefits being granted or re-instated

3.5.1 Low levels of expectation

Overall, customer expectations of a positive outcome from making a complaint were quite low. Significantly a number of complainants stated they did not expect much, or indeed anything, to come from the complaints process:

'Nothing really - only to put my voice forward why one medical practitioner who I haven't seen for ten months could do this.'

(T3/DCS)

'I wasn't expecting anything that's how bad I thought the service was.'

(T1/TPS),

Furthermore, the expectation that claims or benefits be granted or re-instated was only mentioned in a small number of cases:

'I expected to get my fortnightly money for my housing, council tax, etc, but they didn't contact me until a year later.'

(T1/DCS)

'My expectation was for my benefit to be re-instated. Once re-instated, I didn't expect anything else. I did get an apology and £10 towards extra bank charges, which I had to prove that I had incurred.'

(T2/DCS)

3.5.2 Types of expectations

Over half of the customers indicated that their principal expectation was just to get some form of response from the DWP within a reasonable timescale and without complication, and rectify their mistake. A DCS Tier One customer said, "I expected them to sort it out, but they didn't. They just pass you round to different people. Other respondents explained:

'I wanted a copy of the report to prevent other people being put through all this. I just wanted a copy of a report which should be simple, but it got quite complicated. It is additional stress or agro when you are not up to dealing with these things'

(T2/DCS)

'When I sent my letter I assumed that they could pick up my file and say yes or no whether I am entitled or not to what I was asking.'

(T1/TPS)

And for some it was about trying to speed up a slow moving system:

'I expected my claim to be hurried up a bit and the problem is dealing with different offices.'

(T2/TPS)

A number of customers indicated that they expected some form of explanation and apology, either for the delay in processing their complaints or for the way they have been treated by the staff of the DWP, which had, in most cases, not been forthcoming:

'I expected maybe a phone call to say sorry we are investigating your case, but that didn't happen. I made phone calls but still no satisfactory outcome.'

(T1/DCS)

'I expected them to realise that it was their mistake; that they have made a mistake.'

(T1/DCS)

This acknowledgement of mistakes and related compensation for them was seen as important by some customers:

'I expected a response but the damage was already done although I received an apology and possibly some financial compensation.'

(T2/TPS)

'I think that they could have acknowledged the mistakes they made and looked into the case in more depth which they never did.'

(T2/TPS)

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Other customers indicated that fairness of policy was their main expectation. This related to DWP taking their complaint seriously and dealing with it on a fair and impartial basis, re-interviewing or re-examining customers where this was necessary.

'I expected to be treated fairly. I expected them to treat my case as legitimate, lawful and genuine. To be honest, I didn't expect to be awarded disability allowance because I was fobbed off before, but all the same I was shocked about their award decision. I expected to be considered eligible for some form of support and not being locked out of the benefit division.'

(T2/DCS)

'I was expecting that they would treat me impartially, but far from it. In actual fact, they behaved very much like the visiting doctor, taking everything out of context.'

(T3/DCS)

'The hope was that we will be re-interviewed by another person because the person we spoke to seemed to start the interview with the result already on her mind which is quite unfair. We also hoped that I would be examined by a doctor.'

(T1/DCS)

Yet, for others fairness was to be demonstrated in recognising, sympathising with and helping people with genuine problems and disabilities. This was illustrated in the quote below:

'I expected them to help people that have got a problem because I know people who have no problem but they don't want to work. It was so frustrating that in the end I thought, 'Have I got any problem since nobody wants to believe me?'

(T1/DCS)

As is apparent, expectations of how the complaint would be dealt with varied significantly. In part this seemed to be influenced by prior experience of customers of engaging with public service organisations. One respondent who had worked in a large public organisation explained how his expectations were borne out from this experience:

'Prior to making the complaint I thought it would take some time to resolve. Realistically the complaint process is a lengthy one.'

(T1/TPS)

4 The customer experience of the complaints process

In this chapter we examine how different aspects of the complaints process contributed to the overall customer experience. As the customer experience is the result of the interaction of these different components, we also include a number of short profiles of particular customer cases which give some flavour of the overall experience of individual customers in the final section (Section 4.6).

4.1 How customers complained

Across all three tiers complaints were made predominantly by telephone and letter or a combination of the two. Only three respondents made their complaint by email and there was no face-to-face contact. A number of the respondents (six cases) made their complaint through a family member, while three made their complaint through an organisation such as the Citizens Advice Bureau and another one through their carer.

The use of these different modes of complaint varied across the complaints process in response to how effective it was in achieving results. In the latter tiers (Tiers Two and Three) of the complaints process there was a greater propensity to complain via the use of letters. This appeared to reflect customer recognition of the need to have clear written documentation of their complaints as the process became more complex and extended over a longer time period. For example, one Tier Three complainant did not just post the letter but sent it by recorded delivery stating:

'I found out the correct address and made another complaint by letter and recorded delivery.'

(T3/DCS)

Another complainant in addition to writing himself and getting no reply, also involved his local MP, but to no avail:

'I have written letters at least one a week with no replies. I have contacted my local MP and he is getting no reply either.'

(T3/DCS)

4.2 Who customers complained to

At Tier One, the majority of customers complained to the office paying the benefit. A number of customers complained to the Office Manager and only a small number to the Chief Executive. At Tier Two of the complaint process, customers were more certain of whom to complain to than at Tier One of the process. A greater proportion here indicated that they made their complaint to the office manager and the Chief Executive reflecting the workings of the tiered complaints system. The one Tier One respondent who complained to the Chief Executive was the result of a clear strategy:

'I directed my complaint to the most senior person in the organisation – the Chief Executive, yes.'

(T1/DCS)

A significant finding was that many respondents were not sure who to direct their complaint to and some did not know to whom exactly the complaint was made. In some cases this was because another party had made the complaint (e.g. *'My husband did it. He wrote to the DWP. I don't know to whom it was addressed'* (T1/DCS). In others, respondents remained unclear stating that they thought that they complained to the Office responsible for paying their benefit, but were not exactly sure. This type of confusion is well exemplified by the following response:

'Well I don't really know. The letter came from Blackpool – it is very hard to tell from the correspondence which office is paying. On the Pension statement the Pension is paid from Warrington but the letter relating to the overpayment came from Blackpool. When I sent a letter I got a reply from a different office in Chester. On the 14th September I got another letter from a different department in Bradford telling me what I owed them. It took that long to advise me of the overpayment.'

(T1/TPS)

4.3 Length of process

As discussed previously (see Section 2.4.3) it was difficult to record in a rigorous and precise way the length of time it took to respond to complaints. The nature of the telephone interview was that respondents rarely had records to hand and therefore responses generally relied to a great extent on approximations. In addition, customers were normally unaware that there were different tiers in the system, and therefore for those who progressed through the different tiers, considered this all part of just one process.

Across all tiers the length of the process varied significantly between an immediate response, to being a long drawn out process. The reported range for Tier One was from one week to over a year and for Tier Two and Tier Three from two weeks to over two years. Some of the complaints had been resolved while others are still ongoing. The length of the process, and the frustrations that complainants experienced as a result of this, were a dominant theme in customers' responses (see Box 4.1).

Box 4.1: Length of the complaints process

Tier One

'It went on and on and in the end we got the report. It took months. I made the enquiries on 13 March 2010 and didn't receive any response. The doctor came on the 11 March. We got the report on the 7 July. It took four months.'

(T1/DCS)

'When making the telephone call I was getting all the right response and they said they would get back to me when the fault was resolved and nobody got back to me and it just got worse and worse...it just got more ridiculous it was going on for months.'

(T1/TPS)

'It started actually in 2006 as an enquiry and then in 2009 as a complaint'

(T1/TPS)

(Continued)

Tier Two

'It took several weeks. The complaint was made towards the end of November until about January when the third complaint was made. I would say it took three months in total.'

(T2/DCS)

'I wrote on the 6th July after I had previously phoned up, but the letter must have crossed in the post because I received a letter from them on 7 July. It took four months to have a response.'

(T2/DCS)

Tier Three

'I made this complaint last month and they say they will say nothing till they receive the judge's report. It was supposed to take 28 days! I'm still waiting!'

(T3/DCS)

'As far as I am concerned this is still not resolved and it has now been going on for nearly two years.'

(T3/TPS)

4.4 Responsiveness of Department for Work and Pensions

Less than a quarter of Tier One respondents said that they heard from the DWP while they were waiting to get a response to their complaint. Of those who proceeded to Tier Two with their complaint only very few received a response from the DWP, and at Tier Three, only one respondent had received a response.

In general, the attitudes of respondents to the extent of responsiveness of DWP across all tiers were strongly bound up with the length of time that it took to deal with the complaint.

'Often when I sent in my bundle of documents [in response to the customary printed form] I would receive them back as usual, but then about a week later another printed form would arrive, a reminder from the DWP to send my documents and asking if I had received the original letter or if I needed more time etc.'

(T3/TPS)

In addition, a number of respondents commented negatively upon the poor attitude of staff towards their complaints:

'When you get somebody doesn't appear to care. I put in the letter that I thought they needed some training about how to speak to people and deal with people. There was one young girl and she did not care a monkeys. As I say I have had my husband in hospital. It's quite upsetting when you have a problem and you feel you have a problem and you cannot get it sorted. It took ages and ages to sort it – over six months.'

(T2/TPS)

4.5 Outcomes

The reported outcome of Tier One complainants ranged widely. In a number of cases the complaints were ongoing. In some cases complainants had received an apology and sometimes compensation too:

'We received a letter and a phone call from the manager. The letter was to acknowledge the receipt of our letter and to apologise and to emphasise that they are there to provide a good service. The phone call was to clarify part of the request which was to have a different person for the interview and not a different department. Instead of having a second interview a doctor was sent to examine me which was OK by me.'

(T1/DCS)

'They offered me £50 compensation and apologies and benefit backdated to three months instead of the nine months which what it should have been.'

(T1/TPS)

In other cases complainants were told that they needed to put it in writing or that the claim had been mislaid:

'Yes, I heard from the DWP that they have lost the claim.'

(T1/DCS)

For Tier Two and Tier Three complainants, the outcomes were equally varied and arguably became even more important, given the time and effort they had invested into the process. For Tier Three respondents, when their complaint finally reached the appropriate person to deal with it, and the outcome was successful, this generated considerable relief:

'The Deputy Pensions Centre Manager took up my case and things were, at long last resolved. At least there will be no more unnecessary queries from the DWP.'

(T3/TPS)

However, where the outcome was not favourable, then this was particularly difficult for the complainants to take. In this situation three of the four Tier Three respondents had proceeded to take their complaints to the ICE.

'I learned that you could make your complaint to DLA Blackpool who would then forward it to Leeds for action. They then forwarded the complaint to ATOS and ATOS responded saying it was already dealt with in their previous correspondence. They said they were not going to deal with it.'

(T3/DCS)

'I have received a letter that there is no benefit for me. It is tough.'

(T3/DCS)

Overall, the attitudes of respondents to the outcomes of the process tended to directly reflect the nature of the outcome. Where the outcome was deemed to be inconclusive or resulting in further delay in resolution, then this was a source of dissatisfaction. Unsurprisingly, this dissatisfaction was even more evident where the final outcome was not what the respondent wanted.

'My experience of them is that I don't think they are bothered. They don't seem to be bothered about you or your individual circumstances.'

(T3/TPS)

In contrast, where outcomes were in line with what the customer was looking for, then this coloured the whole complaints experience, and for the customer to varying degrees justified the time spent and the worries generated by the process.

4.6 Customer experiences: individual profiles

Customer profile 1: Mrs A (Tier One/TPS)

The complaint

Mrs A was acting on behalf of her mother and her complaint arose when she had difficulties sorting her financial affairs when she went into a home: *'Mum went into a care home and the complaint was about the financial aspects of sorting the pension etc. Her State Pension was frozen whilst her financial situation was being looked at. Information provision was an issue as well as time to sort it out. She moved to another area and it was difficult finding out who and which department was dealing with it.'*

'I was not aware of the complaints process and I just used the number from the letter and correspondence from the DWP...Prior to making the complaint I thought it would take some time to resolve. Realistically the complaint process is a lengthy one. I spoke to a very nice gentleman who gave me a direct line to talk to.'

Experience of the complaints process

Part of the problem of dealing with her complaint related to identifying the appropriate office: *'I think my complaint was to the office dealing with benefit but I was a little confused about which office was dealing with it. Somebody did phone me back and they were very good but the frustration was actually finding someone who would deal with the issue.'*

The process seemed to be long winded; *'I first made a query in May and follow up call in early June but this was considered as a query and it took a couple of months before another call in August. When I made contact to threaten making a complaint and contacting MP they responded quite quickly and in fact it took only 48 hours for a response.'*

Level of satisfaction

Once she had made a complaint the outcome was relatively quick; *'This was quick after I started talking in terms of making a complaint and threatening to write to the MP. They arranged a cheque of back pay and I was satisfied with the final outcome, when somebody took ownership - but it was a long rocky path to that.'*

Customer profile 2: Mr B (Tier One/DCS)

The complaint

Mr B made the complaint because his DLA was turned down. The issue was that the person who conducted an interview with his wife on the phone (on his behalf) was very rude.

Because of Mr B's condition and the drugs he takes, he frequently falls and ends up in the A&E in the hospital. When his wife was asked about this she explained that he had fallen several times that week. However the person conducting the interview did not believe her.

Mr B emphasised, *'The complaint was firstly about the lady's manner. On the phone she was quite rude and her manner was quite rude, but the most important thing was that the answers were the opposite to what we gave and the opposite of the doctor's report – where the answer was "no" she recorded "yes".'*

Experience of the complaint process

Mr B's complaint was made on his behalf by his wife who according to the respondent was aware of the DWP complaint process before she made the complaint. *'My wife knew about the process. She knew that it is quite likely that you would be rejected the first time round and you would have to go through it again before you succeed.'*

Mr B indicated that although his wife was aware of the complaint process, it was not easy to make the complaint. When asked to explain the difficulties he had encountered in making the complaint he replied, *'The struggle we had was that my wife was the person who handled everything on my behalf; she was complaining on my behalf and I would have to provide some of the information given my state of health and speech impediment. We are very close as a couple and she knows much about me, anyway.'*

Levels of satisfaction

Mr B's expectation of the complaint was to be re-interviewed by another person because he felt the interviewer was prejudiced and unfair. When asked about what he expected to happen from the complaint he responded, *'The hope was that we would be re-interviewed by another person because the person we spoke to seemed to start the interview with the result already on her mind which is quite unfair. She did not have an open mind. We also hoped that I would be examined by a doctor. I am very open to be examined because I have nothing to hide.'*

While Mr B was waiting to hear from the DWP, he received a letter and a phone call from the manager to acknowledge the receipt his letter as well as to apologise and clarify that a different person would be provided for the interview. However, *'instead of having a second interview a doctor was sent to examine me which was OK by me.'*

As a result of the medical examination Mr. B's DLA has been approved within the last month to his satisfaction.

Customer profile 3: Mrs C (Tier Two/TPS)

The complaint

Mrs C found she had to make a complaint when an overpayment of AA was not sorted so that the debt was cleared without adverse impacts on the household. 'The change in financial circumstances occurred because the AA ceased when her husband moved into a care home.

'The problem arose because the DWP continued to pay the Allowance and therefore an overpayment of Attendance Allowance occurred...and it was difficult to resolve this with the DWP in terms of making the necessary financial adjustments.'

Experience of the complaints process

Mrs C complained both by letter and telephone call although there was confusion about which office she was complaining to. *'The letter came from Blackpool – it is very hard to tell from the correspondence which office is paying. On the Pension statement the Pension is paid from Warrington but the letter relating to the overpayment came from Blackpool. When I sent a letter I got a reply from a different office in Chester. On 14 September I got another letter from a different department in Bradford telling me what I owed them. It took that long to advise me of the overpayment.'*

The length of time taken to deal with the complaint was also a source of frustration:

'I rang the number on the letter and when I asked why the allowance wasn't stopped she told me that was a different department. It has taken them from the 3 March to the 14 September to sort this out. They make you feel that you are diddling them or something which completely incenses me.'

Level of satisfaction

'I got a notice of an overpayment that did not have any figures. It was a standard three page garbled letter basically saying that it is an overpayment. On 26 August I got a letter saying that they are very sorry. I was, however, really frustrated about the whole experience.'

Customer profile 4: Mr D (Tier Two/DCS)

The complaint

Mr D was to apply for his disability benefit which required a doctor's examination and a medical report. However when Mr D tried to get hold of the medical report he experienced difficulties; *'I just wanted a copy of the report. My carer phoned up, my friend phoned and I phoned up and each time I had a promise that it would be sent in three days but they didn't.'*

As a result of these unsuccessful phone calls an internal email was apparently sent to the appropriate person, but they denied seeing such an email to which Mr. D commented, *'I can't understand why they wouldn't see an internal email. They can ignore it, but they can't say they didn't see it.'*

Experience of the complaint process

Mr D was not aware of the complaint process before he made the complaint to the DWP. He found out about the telephone number from correspondence between him and the DWP.

He found it easy to make the complaint: *'Yes it was easy to complain. The lady I spoke to on the third occasion was very apologetic and put me through to the person who was supposed to deal with it. She was a Caribbean lady who was very pleasant and said the chap who was supposed to deal with it was on holiday. She said they were sorry.'*

Level of satisfaction

When Mr D was asked about his expectation when he made the complaint he responded, *'I just wanted a copy of the report. I wrote a letter to say that we have phoned up to three times. I wanted a copy of the report to prevent other people being put through all this. I just wanted a copy of a report which should be simple, but it got quite complicated. It is an additional stress or agro when you are not up to dealing with these things.'*

Mr D was definitely not satisfied with the complaint process. When asked whether he was satisfied with the response he received from the DWP, he replied, *'It was nonsense saying that they didn't receive the internal email which was part of the delay. I didn't find that credible at all. I just did not believe it. I was just being fobbed off which has caused me a lot of stress and I'm diabetic as well which actually got worse. The agro kicked off the diabetes.'*

After two attempts at the complaint, Mr D has decided not to proceed with the complaint to Tier Three. He reflected, *'It is not worth the stress. The wear and tear on me is simply not worth it.'*

Customer profile 5: Mr E (Tier Three/TPS)

The complaint

Mr E had savings and shares and this impacted on his pension entitlement. The problem related to calculating his pension entitlement and the fact that the DWP did not seem to take account of this: *'Roughly every seven months a demand in the shape of a printed form letter came in from the DWP for all original documentation to be sent to them to prove what savings and investment I had...I supplied the relevant information. However the Pension Credit I received was more than I calculated and whilst it is an advantage to receive too much money I did not want to get the blame for a DWP error!'*

Experience of the complaints process

Attempting to get the matter cleared up or even clarified was a long drawn out and frustrating experience: *'Now it was quite obvious that I was working hard and long to provide accurate figures but the people at the DWP were ignoring them!'* and...*'Often when I sent in my bundle of documents (in response to the customary printed form) I would receive them back as usual, but then about a week later another printed form would arrive, a reminder from the DWP to send my documents.'*

And the process of contacting the DWP was equally frustrating: *'On two separate occasions I was informed that they would telephone me to take savings details and so I should be at home and at certain times and I should have all the documents at hand. I stayed by the telephone for several hours on those two occasions but no telephone call came.'*

The problem of making a complaint was clearly identified by the customer: *'On the DWP website it stated clearly that complaints should always be sent to the Pensions Centre Manager. However this never worked.'*

Matters came to a head when Mr E realised that despite his regular submission of information the Pension Credit continued to be paid although he had previously requested that this should be stopped: *'So I wrote to Mr X my MP to complain, I told him that although I had regularly reported that my shares had increased in value the DWP never took any notice.'*

Level of satisfaction

It seemed that this intervention led to a positive outcome; *'The Deputy Pensions Centre Manager took up my case and things were, at long last resolved. At least there will be no more unnecessary queries from the DWP.'*

Customer profile 6: Mrs F (Tier Three/DCS)

The complaint

Mrs F was turned down for AA because she had a negative report regarding her state of health. She emphasised, *'My application was totally destroyed by a doctor's report.'* This was a doctor she had not seen recently and who according to Mrs F knew nothing about her medical history. Mrs F reflected, *'Doctor X sent in a very, very negative report regarding my health. Although I hadn't seen him in the previous ten months.'*

Because of the negative medical report her application for AA was turned down. Mrs F considered this decision to be unfair bearing in mind that they did not request a second opinion, such as a medical report, from the consultant who sees her regularly every few months. She commented, *'I thought this was undemocratic and prejudiced to be quite honest; that one doctor without consultation with any other person could do this, considering the fact I hadn't seen him in the last ten months.'*

She has written to the DWP *'a dozen times and phoned them up a dozen times'* as well and has been ignored each time. She considered the DWP to be prejudiced.

Experience of the complaint process

Mrs F had no awareness of the DWP complaint process before she made the complaint. When asked about how she found out how to complain, she replied, *'Well, actually I rang up and asked who the manager was or the top officer. I asked one of the assistants. I didn't know who the correct person was.'* However, they told her the name of the manager to write to, which she did. However she did not find it easy to make her complaint. She complained that the letter was intercepted and it didn't get to the correct address. She had to write again, which took three weeks before she had a response.

Level of satisfaction

Although Mrs F did not expect much from the DWP, she however wanted to register her complaint that the DWP should never have relied on the medical report of one practitioner whom she alleged had not known much about her medical condition. When asked about her expectation she replied, *'Only to put my voice forward why one medical practitioner whom I haven't seen for ten months could do this!'*

She was not satisfied with the whole process or with the response she got from the DWP: *'I heard from her [the manager] and it was a fob off. They had decided that I wasn't going to get it. So I didn't think that it was a level playing field.'*

5 Key factors affecting levels of satisfaction

There were a number of factors that were significant in accounting for the levels of dissatisfaction/satisfaction that customers experienced within the complaints process and these were frequently strongly interrelated.

5.1 Gaining access to those who can respond to the complaint

A dominant source of dissatisfaction across all tiers related to the complainant feeling unable to gain access to an appropriate person capable of understanding and dealing with their complaint. This led to feelings that their complaint was not being taken notice of and dealt with appropriately. As one respondent stated:

'They should listen to what I was saying but they didn't. If they had listened it wouldn't have taken three months without result.'

(T2/DCS)

In contrast when customers felt they had (finally) accessed the right person, this was a source of satisfaction:

'This gentleman I can't really remember his name who must have been in charge of a particular department sorted the problem in quarter of an hour and it has been going on for some weeks. All the problems have been sorted.'

(T1/TPS)

'They arranged a cheque of back pay and I was satisfied with the final outcome when somebody at last took ownership, but it was a long rocky path to that.'

(T2/TPS)

'I received a letter from the manager. The letter said that it is being dealt with. The man was actually very good. He left me with his phone number so we can contact him because it will take some time.'

(T1/DCS)

5.2 Length of time taken to deal with the complaint

The length of time taken to deal with complaints was the cause of considerable frustration, stress, and in some cases financial pressures:

'What they do not appreciate is that people are financially strangled, extremely stressed as I am paying top up fees for my husband and I am paying the money to a different address. It beggars belief how long it has taken'

(T1/TPS)

Another respondent demonstrated the high level of stress that resulted from the length of time it had taken to deal with his complaint:

'...you must be joking! When I phone up the first time to check up they told me that it would take 3-4 weeks. When I phoned up the second time they told me 4-5 weeks, and 5-8 weeks the third time. It takes too long and I have contemplated suicide. I am in debt to the tune of £15,000. I have borrowed money from the Jobcentre and repaying £105 every month out of my benefits. My wife is not getting any help.'

(T2/DCS)

5.3 Staff attitudes

The perception that staff were sometimes unhelpful and uncaring was a major source of dissatisfaction. Given that complainants starting point was that they felt they had been mistreated and given also that many felt vulnerable, they were sensitive to how they were treated by staff within the complaints process:

'When you get somebody who doesn't appear to care. I put in the letter that I thought they needed some training about how to speak to people and deal with people. There was one young girl and she did not care a monkeys.'

(T1/TPS)

Another respondent who was dissatisfied because of staff attitude said,

'One of the staff was rude to me when I phoned up. I was totally dissatisfied because they never admitted that the lady was rude.'

(T1/DCS)

One complainant who was still very angry at the time of the interview because of staff attitude and rudeness emphasised:

'Attitude! Their attitude is terrible. I phoned up quite regularly. With them communication is a joke.'

(T1/DCS)

Conversely where complainants encountered a caring attitude and a willingness to sort issues out, this made a major difference to their overall experience. For example, one complainant reflected:

'The man I spoke to was actually very good. He left me with his telephone number so we can contact him. He was very good but the system is slow.'

(T1/DCS)

5.4 Acknowledgement of mistakes and compensation

The admission of mistakes and the offering of compensation payments were generally positively received by customers.

'It did get resolved and I was offered a compensation payment for all the calls I made.'

(T2/TPS)

'I got a £50 compensation for constantly ringing and getting nowhere.'

(T2/TPS)

'They apologised. They said despite looking into it they can't find out who gave me a wrong advice. They gave me a name to phone if there was a problem. They also promised to pay compensation if I incur bank charges and if I can prove them.'

(T2/DCS)

Yet in some cases, there remained a sense of injustice about the process and the nature of the decision made, and in these cases compensation payments were sometimes considered 'insulting' and fed into the complainant contemplating pursuing the case further.

'They gave me £100 compensation which was honestly like a slap in the face.'

(T1/TPS)

'They offered me £50 compensation and apologies and benefit backdated to three months instead of the nine months. I am not satisfied with this and going to write to appeal court and MP.'

(T1/TPS)

5.5 Resolution of the complaint

Where complaints remained unresolved or were, in the customers view, inadequately dealt with, then this, perhaps unsurprisingly, remained a major source of dissatisfaction. The consequences of this type of deep-seated dissatisfaction have important implications for customer attitudes in any future dealings with the DWP:

'But the thing is I am also dreading, my house is up for sale as I can't afford to keep it and I have to go into rented accommodation through the Housing Association. Obviously when the house is sold I will have to get back in touch with the Department of Work and Pensions to tell them my change in circumstances and I am absolutely dreading it.'

(T1/TPS)

In contrast, where the customer achieved what they considered a successful outcome to the process, they felt far more positive about the whole process:

'I was happy because the Appeal Tribunal upheld my appeal.'

(T2/TPS)

'They recognised that there was an error. I was pleased with the apology and in the end they sent a doctor to examine me and the case was resolved. I was satisfied because people hardly say sorry these days. I hope the lady who did it was not sacked because it wasn't her fault. They should have given her the proper training. People from above always pass the buck.'

(T1/DCS)

6 Reasons for not proceeding with the complaints process although still dissatisfied

6.1 At Tier One

Respondents did not proceed through the complaint process even when they were still dissatisfied with the outcome, for a variety of reasons. Around a quarter did not proceed because they felt that continuing the complaint would not get them anywhere. When asked why he did not complain again, one respondent replied:

'I don't think they will do anything. There is no point continuing with it.'

(T1/DCS)

Another explained:

'I cannot go ahead with another complaint when they don't listen. I don't think it would get me anywhere. It is a total waste of time.'

(T1/DCS)

One customer who was trying to make adjustments to her Pension summed up her reason for not continuing making a complaint:

'I'm just fed up of the whole process. Maybe I am looking for too much from them. I imagined when I wrote surely the Pension people will be able to find my details.'

(T1/TPS)

This type of frustration and the result of giving up on the process was explained by another customer:

'I couldn't really get through to anyone. I felt I have told them what I wanted them to know. The main thing is that I don't really have faith in the Pension Service because at some point previously when they failed to pay my pension and I complained, they sent me a giro but without any apology whatsoever.'

(T1/TPS)

Another quarter of complainants indicated that they were waiting to see what happens. They were actually planning to take the matter further as illustrated in the following quotes:

'I'm still waiting. I'm actually planning to see a solicitor next week. I am going to wait to see whether anything is going to be done within 11 weeks.'

(T1/DCS)

'I'm still waiting at this stage. We will probably complain further if it takes much longer.'

(T1/DCS)

Around a fifth of respondents did not proceed through the complaint process because it took too long and cost too much time, effort and stress. One respondent in this category stressed:

'It is not worth the stress. The wear and tear on me is simply not worth it.'

(T1/DCS)

Another commented:

'We didn't want to prolong the matter. I thought it would be better to sort it out with the tribunal.'

(T1/DCS)

6.2 At Tier Two

The dominant reason for respondents still dissatisfied with the outcome of the complaints process at Tier Two but who did not continue with the process, was that they felt that continuing the complaint would not get them anywhere. In addition, complainants felt the complaint process was too much in terms of time, effort and stress. One respondent commented:

'They have got the time with many people in the office to answer calls, but I have got other things to do. I didn't have the time to carry on with it.'

(T2/DCS)

6.3 At Tier Three:

At Tier Three it was notable that in three out of the four cases respondents had taken their complaints on to the Independent Case Examiner, reflecting that having taken it this far, they may as well continue to the end of the process. One respondent indicated that she was not successful with the appeal:

'I have complained to them, but I have received a letter back from them and I didn't get it.'

(T3/DCS)

Another complainant stated:

'I have gone to complain to the tribunal and they told me they can't do anything until the appeal is dealt with. I complained to the tribunal out of frustration. I didn't know what else to do.'

(T3/DCS)

A customer who had been through the ICE process and involved his Member of Parliament and still felt dissatisfied, is considering taking it the Ombudsman:

'Throughout this whole sorry case they are making decisions based on information which they don't have as they have lost the documentation.'

(T3/TPS)

Another customer managed finally to access a senior manager in the DWP: *'...who took up the case and things were, at long last, resolved. I received a comprehensive letter of apology from him.'*

7 Conclusions and recommendations

7.1 Context

The report was produced to provide insights into the experience of PDCS customers when making a complaint. Previous research had indicated that an improved understanding of customer experiences in making a complaint, and the barriers and challenges they encounter within this process, was essential to improving the quality of complaints handling to ensure it was better aligned to customer needs. The aim of this research was to provide a better understanding of what drives PDCS customers to complain, their experience of the complaints process, the key factors driving levels of satisfaction/dissatisfaction, and why customers who remained dissatisfied, did not continue with their complaints.

The delivery of an effective complaints process can only be achieved if it is built upon a sound understanding of the customer experience. Furthermore, improved handling of customer complaints at an early stage (Tier One) will, as the NAO (2008) report pointed out, lead to cost savings through reducing the much higher costs of handling complaints that progress to the later tiers of the process.

7.2 Key findings of the research

7.2.1 What drives PDCS customers to complain?

The main causes of complaints in relation to PDCS services are well recognised from previous research. These particularly 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. However, it demonstrates that in practice, for customers, a number of these **causes of complaints are often interrelated in a more complex manner** than the collected secondary statistics might suggest. While an initial query or complaint may be driven by one factor (e.g. over a delay in the payment of a benefit), the manner in which this is responded to can bring in other sources of complaint, relating to factors such as customer service, staff attitudes and accuracy of information. Conversely, a positive response to an initial query or response 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.

Although the majority of customers were not aware of the complaints process beforehand, 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.** This appears to reflect that many PDCS customers continue to feel less comfortable with, or have restricted access to, electronic sources of information.

An important finding of the research was the **relatively low level of expectation** of positive outcomes from engaging with the complaints process evident in many customers. Indeed, a number commented that they had no expectation of their complaint having any effect at all. More generally, expectations were limited to just getting some level of simple response relatively quickly. In particular, customers who often felt vulnerable and mistreated, were looking for acknowledgement that a mistake had been made, and that their complaint would be dealt with fairly.

7.2.2 What is the customer experience of the complaints process?

At the outset of the process, almost half of respondents 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 then actually getting to speak to the correct person, either because they were unavailable or their calls were not returned.

Modes of contact were dominated by the use of telephone and letter, the latter particularly as complaints progressed and there was a need to 'put things in writing'. There was a notable lack of the use of email as a means of communication despite the fact that this provides a written record and is a quick means of communication.

A major finding of the research was that **respondents frequently were 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**. This reflects that PDCS services are operated from a number of different offices and that individual complaints may relate to complex personal circumstances that require communication between different service providers.

Although this research was unable to collect accurate data on the precise length of time responses took, an **overwhelming theme of customer experience was frustration over the length of time that dealing with complaints took, and the consequences this had** in terms of the worry this caused for customers over a protracted period and how this reinforced other pressures in the period when claims were being clarified.

This issue was strongly bound up with customer assessments of the overall responsiveness of service providers. The attitudes of staff were only singled out as a major source of complaint in their own right in a small number of cases, however, much **more common were experiences where staff did not appear overly helpful or available in resolving the complaint**. Interestingly, where staff were helpful and played a decisive role in sorting out a complaint, respondents were grateful and keen to point this out in the interviews.

Overall, not surprisingly, **the nature of the customer experience of the complaints handling process is closely bound up with the outcome**. A positive outcome produces a much more positive assessment of their engagement in the process. A negative outcome, particularly where this has progressed through a number of tiers in the complaints process, can lead to considerable dissatisfaction and deep anger and frustration. This is then taken into any future dealings with the DWP, and indeed other government departments more generally.

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

On the basis of the above findings on the nature of the customer experience of the complaints process, a number of factors can be identified as driving levels of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. These comprise:

- 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.

However, it is important to stress that these elements are, in all individual cases, interrelated in a variety of ways. Therefore, any response to these factors needs to be pursued in a holistic and co-ordinate, manner.

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

That customers frequently gave up on the complaints process despite not having their complaint satisfactorily resolved, reflected a strong sense that **they saw no point in continuing with the process as they did not think it would achieve anything**. Related to this was a strong sense that 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, for example among those who had reached Tier Three of the process, then there was a sense of continuing with the process until they finally received satisfaction.

7.3 Recommendations

The findings of this study suggest a number of recommendations for the improvement of the complaints process in the PDCS:

- In a period when there is likely to be considerable pressure on the complaints handling process both from customers and in terms of available resources, **the importance of an effective complaints process is ever more important**. Dissatisfaction over the way complaints are dealt with is carried forward in the form of negative attitudes taken into subsequent dealings with the DWP and other government departments. Any reduction in the effective operation of the complaints service is likely to reinforce the very high rate of dissatisfied customer, who do not bother to complain at all (NAO, 2008), contributing to customer disengagement and the loss of a major stimulus to improve service provision.
- There should be a **focus upon dealing as effectively as possible with initial queries and complaints** to stop these escalating into more complex and costly to resolve complaints. Many initial complaints start out focused upon one issue, but then turn into more complex complaints as the manner in which the issue is dealt with lead to further dissatisfaction and grounds for complaint.
- To improve the quality of dealing with customer complaints requires an approach that considers the **overall customer experience in a holistic manner**. The different challenges and difficulties customers encounter are interrelated, so responses to individual factors (e.g. length of time, contacting the right person, staff attitudes, etc.) must be pursued in a co-ordinated and integrated manner.
- 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 passing of customers from one office or staff member to another leads to frustration and time delays for customers as well as wasting the time of staff. The advantage of having one clear contact point for complaints was identified by a number of customers.
- It is recognised that many individual cases are complex and therefore require the involvement of different offices. However, in these situations there is a need for **better information sharing between staff** in order to resolve complaints to the customers satisfaction.

- Given that staff members are the key to the operation of a successful complaints process, there is a need for **staff training** that emphasises the need to resolve complaints quickly and accurately, as well as **to involve staff in the development of complaints procedures**, building upon their knowledge of where existing systems can be improved to address the causes of customer dissatisfaction;
- The use of more electronic means of communications (websites; email etc) to communicate with customers may produce benefits in terms of reducing some costs and potentially improving response times, however, any shift in this direction needs to be approached **within a clear understanding that many customers still do not either have access to, or feel comfortable with, dealing with complaints electronically.**

Appendix A

Interview topic guide

PDCS complaints survey

Topic guide

Hello my name is [] from Middlesex University and we have been given your name by the Department for Work and Pensions as someone who has agreed to talk to us about your experience of the complaints process. First of all, thank you for your cooperation with this survey. [I would like to ask you whether you mind having the interview recorded – where appropriate]. Everything you say will be treated in the strictest confidence and no information that can identify you will be passed on to the Department of Work and Pensions or anybody else. The interview will take about 15 minutes.

A. Cause of complaint

1. Can you tell me what the complaint related to?

(Obtain a short synopsis of the complaint in the customers own words)

Possible prompts

- time
- accuracy
- information provision
- customer service
- access
- unfair policy

B. Awareness of complaints process

2. Please can you tell me were you aware of the DWP complaints process before you made your complaint?

Yes/No

2a. If yes, how did you find out about the complaints process?

- Used website
- Used leaflet
- Used telephone number on form/leaflet
- Asked advice centre/other organisation
- Complained before
- Rang DWP
- Asked family/friends

2b. If no, can you tell me how you found out how to complain?

- Used website
- Use leaflet
- Used telephone number on form/leaflet
- Asked advice centre/other organisation
- Asked family/friends
- Rang DWP

3. Overall was it easy to make a complaint?

Yes/No

3a. If yes, please explain why

3b. If no, please explain why

Possible prompts

- Telephone/textphone accessibility
- Staff not available
- Appointments not kept
- Passed between staff
- Promised telephone call was not returned
- Not given correct information on how to make a complaint
- Did not understand the information provided
- Still don't know what to do

C. Expectations from complaints process

4. When you made your complaint what did you expect to happen?

5. Have you made a formal complaint about any other service in the last 12 months? (can relate to government and/or non-government services)

Yes/No If yes, please provide brief details of the complaint and whether you felt it was dealt with effectively.

D. Experience of complaints process

Tier One

6. How did you make your complaint?

- By telephone
- By letter
- Face-to-face
- Email
- Through a family member
- Through an appointee
- Through a representative
- Through an organisation please specify

7. Who did you make your complaint to?

- Office paying your benefit
- Office manager
- Chief Executive

8. How long did it take for you to get a response to the complaint?

When was complaint made?

When was it answered?

9. Did you hear from the DWP while you were waiting to get a response?

10. What was the outcome of the response?

11. Were you satisfied with the response?

Yes/No

12a If yes, explain why

12b If no, explain why

Possible prompts

- Disagreed with decision made
- Took too long to respond
- Staff attitudes
- Clarity/complexity of process
- Did not understand response
- Response poorly worded/written
- Did not answer all aspects of the complaint

13. Did you complain again?

Yes (go to Tier Two)

If no, why not?

- Complaint resolved
- Felt that continuing the complaint would not get me anywhere
- Too much, time, effort and stress
- Health reasons
- Others

14. What one thing would have improved your overall experience of the complaints process?

Tier Two Not satisfied with Tier One and continuing to complain

(Repeat questions from Tier One)

15. How did you make your complaint?

- By telephone
- By letter
- Face-to-face
- Email
- Through a family member
- Through an appointee
- Through a representative
- Through an organisation please specify

16. Who did you make your complaint to?

- Office paying your benefit
- Office manager
- Chief Executive

17. How long did it take for you to get a response to the complaint?

When was complaint made?

When was it answered?

18. Did you hear from the DWP while you were waiting to get a response?

19. What was the outcome of the response?

20. Were you satisfied with the response?

Yes/no

20a. If yes, explain why

20b. If no, explain why

Possible prompts

- Disagreed with decision made
- Took too long to respond
- Staff attitudes
- Clarity/complexity of process
- Did not understand response
- Response poorly worded/written
- Did not answer all aspects of the complaint

21. Did you complain again?

Yes (go to Tier Three)

If no, why not?

- Complaint resolved
- Felt that continuing the complaint would not get me anywhere
- Too much, time, effort and stress
- Health reasons
- Others

22. What one thing would have improved your overall experience of the complaints process?

Tier Three Not satisfied with Tier Two and continuing to complain

(Repeat of questions from Tiers One/Two)

23. How did you make your complaint?

- By telephone
- By letter
- Face-to-face
- Email
- Through a family member
- Through an appointee
- Through a representative
- Through an organisation please specify

24. How long did it take for you to get a response to the complaint?

When was complaint made?

When was it answered?

25. Did you hear from the DWP while you were waiting to get a response?

26. What was the outcome of the response?

27. Were you satisfied with the response?

Yes/no

27a If yes, explain why

27b If no, explain why

Possible prompts

- Disagreed with decision made
- Took too long to respond
- Staff attitudes
- Clarity/complexity of process
- Did not understand response
- Response poorly worded/written
- Did not answer all aspects of the complaint

28. Did you know that you could take your complaint to the Independent Case Examiner (ICE) if you remained dissatisfied?

Yes/No

28a If yes did you go on to make a complaint to ICE?

Yes/No If no, can you explain why

28b If no (and after providing brief explanation about ICE). Had you known about ICE, would you have gone on to make a further complaint?

Yes/No. If no, can you explain why

- Explanation of ICE “The Independent Case Examiner (ICE) provides a free, effective and impartial complaints review and resolution service for DWP customers”

29. What one thing would have improved your overall experience of the complaints process?

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Middlesex University Centre for Enterprise and Economic Development Research was commissioned to undertake a piece of in-depth qualitative research with a sample of customers of the Pension, Disability and Carers Service (PDCS) in order to identify customer experiences of the PDCS complaints process and make recommendations to address identified barriers and challenges.

This report presents the findings from the qualitative research.

PDCS customers taking part in the research had their complaints registered and cleared in the calendar month of August 2010.

A total of 50 interviews with PDCS customers was achieved.

If you would like to know more about DWP research, please contact:
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