SOCIAL SECURITY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Communications in the benefits system

**A study by the Social Security Advisory Committee
Occasional Paper No. 11**

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About this report

This project was conducted as part of the Social Security Advisory Committee's independent work programme under which the Committee investigates pertinent issues relating to the operation of the benefits system.

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Foreword

Effective communication is essential for any organisation. Given the share of public spending for which it is responsible, and the millions of claimants it serves, it is of critical importance to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). The Social Security Advisory Committee (SSAC) has long recognised this. In previous reports we have drawn attention to weaknesses and deficiencies in DWP literature, including guidance to staff and stakeholders, advice given to claimants and information made available to the general public. This report explores and builds upon these issues.

Good communication is at the heart of any policy process. Without it, the delivery of public services would inevitably deteriorate. Communication should flow in all directions and not just top down; it is important that the 'voice' of stakeholders, customers and claimants is also heard and understood. Equally, to be effective, communication must relate to a diversity of needs and circumstances. This is especially true in the field of social security.

For many, the language associated with the benefits system has been an area lending itself to passionate debate and contention. The term 'social security' was first coined towards the end of the nineteenth century. Earlier, Poor Law principles and practices drew the distinction between the deserving and the undeserving, carrying clear messages about moral worth and personal responsibility. In the decades since, and to varying degrees internationally, other terms have emerged (such as welfare, assistance and social protection among others) to reflect the ebb and flow of political debate and intent. We make no judgement about the debate other than to note that when language moves beyond that which is essentially required to describe the basis of entitlement and the related responsibilities of claimants, there is a risk that the 'message' becomes diluted, pejorative and counter-productive.

Our aim in this report is therefore to support DWP and its key partners to strengthen structures and systems that enhance the quality and effectiveness of communication to, and engagement with, claimants. This is an enormously challenging task. There is a need to deploy an increasingly diverse spectrum of media and channels, including new technologies, at a time of profound change across all areas of the Department's responsibilities. There has never been a more important time, or a better opportunity, to raise awareness of the need for good claimant-focused communication.

We have been pleased to identify some areas of good practice that are already in place. But our study points to the scope for substantial further improvement. We hope that our conclusions and recommendations will provide a helpful focus for this and a basis for action.

Paul Gray
Chair, SSAC

Summary

Introduction - the communication challenge for DWP

The unprecedented scale of change to the social security system introduced by the Welfare Reform Act 2012 underlines the need for the Department for Work and Pensions (henceforth, DWP or the Department) and other organisations managing benefits or providing welfare advice to deliver outstanding communications. Through the provision of clear and timely information to claimants and potential claimants, DWP and others can minimise the risk of confusion arising and facilitate understanding of when changes are occurring, why they are being made and how individuals will be affected. More broadly, and beyond the immediate priority of providing clear information about welfare reform, communicating well is integral to efficient and effective public service delivery.

The challenge to deliver the best possible communications is underlined by the large number of people the Department provides services for. The Department serves 22 million customers in total each year.[1] There are a phenomenal number of interactions between the Department and others through an array of channels. For example, the Department took 100 million phone calls in 2012/13.[2]

Delivering high quality communications is a long standing challenge for DWP. Earlier reviews by the National Audit Office[3] and the House of Commons[4] noted the complexity of communicating clearly about benefits and recommended that DWP improved the clarity of communications to claimants and made better use of internal expertise in delivering them. Separate from these reviews, the Social Security Advisory Committee (SSAC) has long taken an interest in the quality of communications between DWP and claimants. In March 2013 the Committee expressed its concern to the Department's Permanent Secretary about the quality of customer communications, and in its last report, recommended that the Department gives higher priority to identifying and taking forward actions to strengthen its customer communications.[5]

This report is intended to support the Department to deliver the best possible communications to claimants and other organisations working with claimants. The findings, conclusions and nine recommendations are based on evidence collected by a short and focused qualitative research project undertaken by the Committee between May and August 2013.

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[1] DWP digital strategy, December 2012; GCN capability review, 2013
[2] National Audit Office (2013) Charges for customer telephone lines
[3] National Audit Office (2006) Department for Work and Pensions, Using leaflets to communicate with the public about services and entitlements; National Audit Office (2009) Department for Work and Pensions, Communicating with customers
[4] House of Commons Committee on Public Accounts, Department for Work and Pensions, Using leaflets to communicate with the public about services and entitlements, seventh report of session 2006-07, 2007
[5] SSAC (2013) The implementation of Universal Credit and the support needs of claimants, Occasional Paper No. 10

Key findings and recommendations

The quality of claimant communications can be directed in part by overarching government policy on communications. The UK Government Communications Plan[6] is aimed at communications staff and sets out the principles that government communications are expected to follow. In addition, the Government Digital Service provides a comprehensive style guide for content prepared for the gov.uk website.

There are lessons to learn from other countries. In Canada, for example, it is Government policy to provide clear information about its policies and services. In the US, there is legislation in place requiring Federal employees to use clear communication and comprehensive guidance on how to do this. There is also a requirement for agencies to provide an annual report to Congress to show how communications have been improved as a result of meeting the requirements of the Act.

A communications policy aimed at all staff that establishes overall ambition and is accompanied by guidelines could help to improve standards. It would build on the strong example provided by the gov.uk guidelines to provide for consistent standards across government departments and across channels. It would allow for flexibility in the application of guidelines where this is helpful to providing clear communications. It would also be a tool to improve standards where necessary, including among contracted providers of government services, and could be a cost-efficient alternative to individual departments producing and maintaining their own guidance.

Recommendation 1

We welcome the comprehensive guidelines for content prepared for the gov.uk website. In addition, the Government should introduce a communications policy and guidelines aimed at all government employees and contracted providers of public services to ensure all communications to citizens meet the standards of the very best.

Strategic documents set out the direction of the Department's work and a vision for how it will achieve its objectives. However, the DWP Business Plan and the DWP Operations Business Plan place little emphasis on claimant or stakeholder communications as intrinsic elements of meeting the Department's objectives. The importance of strong communications should be outlined in these documents. This would help to provide reassurance that communications are at the heart of efforts to improve service delivery. It would also send a clear message across the Department that all communications must meet a high standard.

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[6] HM Government, Government Communications Plan 2013-14

Recommendation 2
The role of quality communications as an integral element of service delivery should be emphasised in relevant business plans. The Department should provide more explicit reference to communications, including those for Universal Credit, in the next iteration of the DWP Business Plan and stress the importance of quality communications to service delivery in the next DWP Operations Business Plan.

The Department is addressing the lack of central oversight and coordination of claimant communications. Responsibility for claimant communications is often remote from the central Strategic Communications Directorate with specific products being developed through input from programme, policy, operational and legal teams. It is an arrangement that creates the risk of communications that are poorly written, uncoordinated and potentially inconsistent. This has been recognised by the Department and will be tackled by the proposed introduction of a new Claimant Communications Unit. Its responsibilities would include providing clear guidance, offering training, considering how best to reduce overall volumes of communications and enhancing the capacity of teams to undertake user-testing.

Recommendation 3
The proposed DWP Claimant Communications Unit should be established as a matter of urgency. It should forge links with other DWP teams currently developing communications and identify opportunities to improve existing communications. This should include building strong working relationships with teams taking forward work to deliver improvements to the claimant journey.

The Department does not have an overarching strategy for claimant communications. Such a strategy could underpin the work of the Claimant Communications Unit by establishing a Departmental policy to consistently deliver clear claimant communications. It would centre on the claimant to provide an integrated view of how different communication channels will in future be used to meet the diverse needs of users.

Recommendation 4
The Department should develop a claimant communications strategy. This would establish Departmental policy on how to deliver clear and co-ordinated claimant communications. It would set out how the Department will use different channels in a co-ordinated way to meet the needs of claimants and potential claimants. It should be in place by January 2014 to support future phases of Universal Credit roll-out and cover the period until roll-out is due to be completed i.e. October 2017.

A critical aspect of personalised communications is ensuring that people receive information from the Department using their preferred channel or format. However, evidence provided by stakeholders and the literature shows that this is not happening consistently because communications preferences are not routinely recorded by the Department. This is in part an issue to do with legacy computer systems that require cumbersome clerical updating. The importance of recording communication preferences is underlined by the Department's progressive move to digital service delivery and the need to ensure people can communicate with the Department until they are confident with, and have reliable access to, digital channels.

Recommendation 5
The Department must ensure both that its staff routinely record the communication preferences of its customers and that communications are then provided through the requested channel or by using the appropriate format.

Customer letters issued by DWP need to strike a balance between being clear and engaging and providing information that is complete and legally accurate. Stakeholders and Jobcentre Plus staff were critical of customer letters for being confusing and difficult to understand, especially for people with lower levels of literacy.

We understand the Department's legacy IT systems provide limited flexibility to tailor or personalise computer-generated letters. The Committee would ideally like to see investment made to improve this capability, however we recognise that expenditure on upgrades to legacy systems may not be cost-effective. We therefore believe it is important that new systems, such as those for Universal Credit, are designed with a strong emphasis on the production of high quality claimant letters and other communications.

Recommendation 6
New IT systems, such as those for Universal Credit, should be designed with the flexibility to tailor, change and enhance claimant communications quickly and efficiently.

Jobcentre Plus staff, stakeholders and local authorities have a strong need for more information on some aspects of Universal Credit. It was acknowledged that given Universal Credit will be rolled out over a four year period until 2017 it would not apply to many of the people they work with for some time. However, those involved in providing advice were being asked questions and felt unable to provide answers on some key issues. These included when claimants will be affected by the introduction of Universal Credit and the support that will be available to people who cannot complete the standard claim process. Stakeholders also said they required more detailed information to help them plan their service provision.

Providing information on roll-out and other aspects of implementing Universal Credit is dependent on the Department making decisions on these issues, and that information then being communicated quickly and clearly to others. At the time of writing, the Department had announced its plans to extend Universal Credit to six further Jobcentres in October 2013.[7]

Recommendation 7
Stakeholders have a clear need for further information about the roll-out of Universal Credit. This information is important for planning their own service provision and also for providing advice to people to enable them to prepare for the future. The Department should make a decision on the timetable for the incremental roll-out of Universal Credit for the period from October 2013 to 2017 and communicate this to its staff, local authorities and stakeholders at the earliest opportunity.

It will be a delicate task to strike a balance between providing practical information and presenting messages that outline the intended outcomes of a new benefit. Stakeholders commented specifically on the partner toolkits that provide information about welfare reform and Universal Credit to organisations that support DWP customers. Whilst the toolkits have generally been well received, the wording of messages that explain why changes have been introduced requires careful articulation in order to ensure that the intended audience fully engages with the information provided. If wording is perceived as inappropriate there is a risk that advisers in the welfare advice sector may be put off using the toolkits or not refer their clients to information included in the toolkits. This would arguably be counter-productive.

The Committee believes DWP has a role to play in helping people to understand why it is introducing Universal Credit and other aspects of welfare reform. However, policy messages to support desired changes in claimant behaviours and attitudes must be appropriate to the audience, clearly worded and objectively presented.

Recommendation 8
The Department must use appropriate tone and language when explaining the aims of its policies in documents aimed at claimants and stakeholders. It should use wording that is suitable to the audience, explanatory and objective and that is appropriately integrated with practical information.

The Department uses a range of techniques to deliver effective claimant communications. A core element of techniques such as customer journey mapping, user-testing, segmentation and behavioural science is to place the claimant at the centre when developing communication products. The Committee is particularly supportive of the involvement of the Cabinet Office behavioural insights team on a number of current communications issues.

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[7] Written Ministerial Statement, Universal Credit Update, 10.7.13

We believe there is great potential to explore further how the wording and presentation of messages influences the behaviour of individuals regarding social security issues. The Welfare Reform Act allows the Department to trial policy options to improve simplification and behavioural impacts, and the Universal Credit Evaluation Framework suggests a possible area for experimentation could be to test out different forms of communication.[8] We believe the Department must take forward this option. It should also, through its research programme, identify options in other policy areas to compare the effectiveness of different approaches to claimant communications. Robust research in this area would improve understanding of how communications influence attitudes and behaviours with respect to social security issues, and would inform best practice.

Recommendation 9

The Department should identify opportunities within its current research programme, and in its plans for next year's research programme, to undertake research to improve understanding of how communications influence the attitudes and behaviours of claimants. This research should include experimental tests to compare the success of different approaches in a given policy area. The Department should also take forward the option to conduct experiments to test out different communications as part of the evaluation of Universal Credit.

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[8] DWP, Universal Credit Evaluation Framework, December 2012

1   Introduction

This report presents the findings of a study by the Social Security Advisory Committee (SSAC) to examine the quality of claimant-focused communications in the benefits system. It is published at a significant time. The unprecedented scale of change to the social security system introduced by the Welfare Reform Act 2012 underlines the need for the Department for Work and Pensions (henceforth, DWP or the Department) and other organisations managing benefits or providing welfare advice to deliver outstanding communications. Through the provision of clear and timely information to claimants and potential claimants, DWP and others can minimise confusion arising and facilitate understanding of when changes are occurring, why they are being made and how individuals will be affected.

Beyond the immediate priority of providing clear information about welfare reform, communication is integral to effective service delivery. Good communications raise awareness of entitlement to benefits and support eligible individuals to make and manage a claim so that they receive their correct entitlement. The Department can build the public's trust in its policies and secure a reputation for strong customer service by keeping people informed, by using plain English and by adopting an appropriate tone in its communications. If it makes information readily accessible and reduces unnecessary contact with customers, the Department can also maintain and increase the efficiency with which it delivers its services. Messages that are well presented and adapted to their intended audience can also support the delivery of policy outcomes.

This report is intended to support the Department to deliver the best possible communications to claimants and other organisations working with claimants.

To do this we:

- explain the characteristics of good communications to claimants
- underline the priority given to high-quality claimant communications in strategic documents such as the DWP Business Plan and the Department's service standards
- describe how communications to claimants and the organisations working with them are currently organised by DWP, and indicate our understanding of the future plans the Department has in this area
- present examples of good practice that already exist in the Department and reference good examples from overseas
- summarise the views of stakeholders, claimants and DWP staff on the quality of communications about benefits
- examine communications made in areas where DWP does not have lead responsibility, including those related to passported benefits and tax credits and those made by contracted providers of employment services

In conclusion we present nine recommendations to further improve the quality of communications to claimants.

In the remainder of this chapter we provide further context by describing the extent of the challenge facing DWP in order to communicate well with claimants. We also explain the approach we took to gathering evidence for this study and set out the structure of the rest of this report.

1.1   The challenge for DWP

Delivering high quality communications is a long standing challenge for DWP. Earlier reviews by the National Audit Office[9] and the House of Commons[10] noted the complexity of this task and made recommendations to DWP to improve the clarity of communications to claimants and to make better use of internal expertise in delivering them.

Separate to these reviews, SSAC has long taken an interest in the quality of communications between DWP and benefit claimants. The Committee has a continuing role in considering information products produced by the Department and, occasionally, those produced by HMRC. In March 2013 the Committee expressed its concern to the Department's Permanent Secretary about the quality of customer communications. The Committee highlighted the inadequacy of communications that aim to give claimants, local authorities and advice sector organisations information about the current changes to social security provision. In its last report, SSAC recommended that the Department gives higher priority to ensuring that actions required to strengthen customer communications are identified and taken forward.[11] The conclusions in this report will help the Department to meet this recommendation.

The challenge for DWP to deliver good customer-focused communications is underlined by:

- the size of its customer base
- the diversity of its communication channels
- the transition to Universal Credit and an accompanying shift in the characteristics of its customers
- the need to provide concise and easy to understand information that is legally accurate
- the fact that DWP is not responsible for and does not control all communications about social security issues

Each aspect is discussed in turn below.

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[9] National Audit Office (2006) Department for Work and Pensions, Using leaflets to communicate with the public about services and entitlements; National Audit Office (2009) Department for Work and Pensions, Communicating with customers

[10] House of Commons Committee on Public Accounts, Department for Work and Pensions, Using leaflets to communicate with the public about services and entitlements, seventh report of session 2006-07, 2007

[11] SSAC (2013) The implementation of Universal Credit and the support needs of claimants, Occasional Paper No. 10

1. DWP has a substantial number of customers

The Department takes around five million claims for benefit and serves 22 million customers in total each year.[12] There are a phenomenal number of interactions between the Department and others. For example, the Department took 100 million phone calls in 2012/13.[13]

The Department's customer base is also diverse. Table 1 below shows how the caseload of DWP's 5.6 million working age claimants is split across the main benefit groups. As of November 2012 there were also 12.8 million claimants of the State Pension and 2.5 million claimants of Pension Credit.[14] Aside from benefit claimants, the Department also communicates with prospective claimants, organisations and individuals that support claimants, employers, local authorities and the wider public.

Table 1: DWP working age client group caseload

Total	Group						
	Job Seeker	**ESA and incapacity benefits**	**Lone Parent**	**Carer**	**Others on income related benefit**	**Disabled**	**Bereaved**
	Jobseeker's Allowance	Employment and Support Allowance, Incapacity Benefit or Severe Disablement Allowance	Income Support with a child under 16 and no partner	Carer's Allowance	Other Income Support (including IS Disability Premium) or Pension Credit	Disability Living Allowance, Attendance Allowance or Industrial Injuries benefits	Widow's Benefit, Bereavement Benefit or Industrial Death Benefit
(thousands)	(thousands)	(thousands)	(thousands)	(thousands)	(thousands)	(thousands)	(thousands)
5,637	1,444	2,500	510	504	156	442	81

Notes:
- data for November 2012
- caseload (Thousands) figures for AA, CA and DLA include cases with entitlement but where payment is currently suspended
- A person who fits into more than one category will only appear in the top-most one for which they are eligible. For example a claimant of Disability Living Allowance and Jobseekers Allowance would appear in "Job Seeker", not in "Disabled".

Source: DWP Tabulation Tool, accessed 23.7.13

2. DWP communicates via a range of channels

The Department uses a number of methods to communicate with claimants. These include information provided in face-to-face meetings, by telephone, in printed leaflets, online and via letters. Figure 1 below shows how individuals currently make contact with the Department. It shows that the most common modes of contact for claimants of unemployment benefits are in person at a Jobcentre Plus office, by telephone and by post. For claimants of disability, carer or pension-related benefits, the most common forms of contact are by telephone and by post. There is some level of contact online to search for information or to make an application or update details. There is rather less contact currently by email or text message.

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[12] DWP, Digital Strategy, December 2012; GCN capability review, 2013
[13] National Audit Office (2013) Charges for customer telephone lines
[14] DWP Quarterly Statistical Summary, 15.5.13

The Department also communicates to people via marketing and advertising campaigns and works with media outlets to provide information about benefits. The Department is also increasing its use of digital methods of communication.

The range of communication channels used by the Department underlines that while diversity is likely to be beneficial in meeting people's communication preferences, providing consistent information and uniformly high service levels across channels is an enormous challenge.

Figure 1: Methods of contact between DWP and claimants
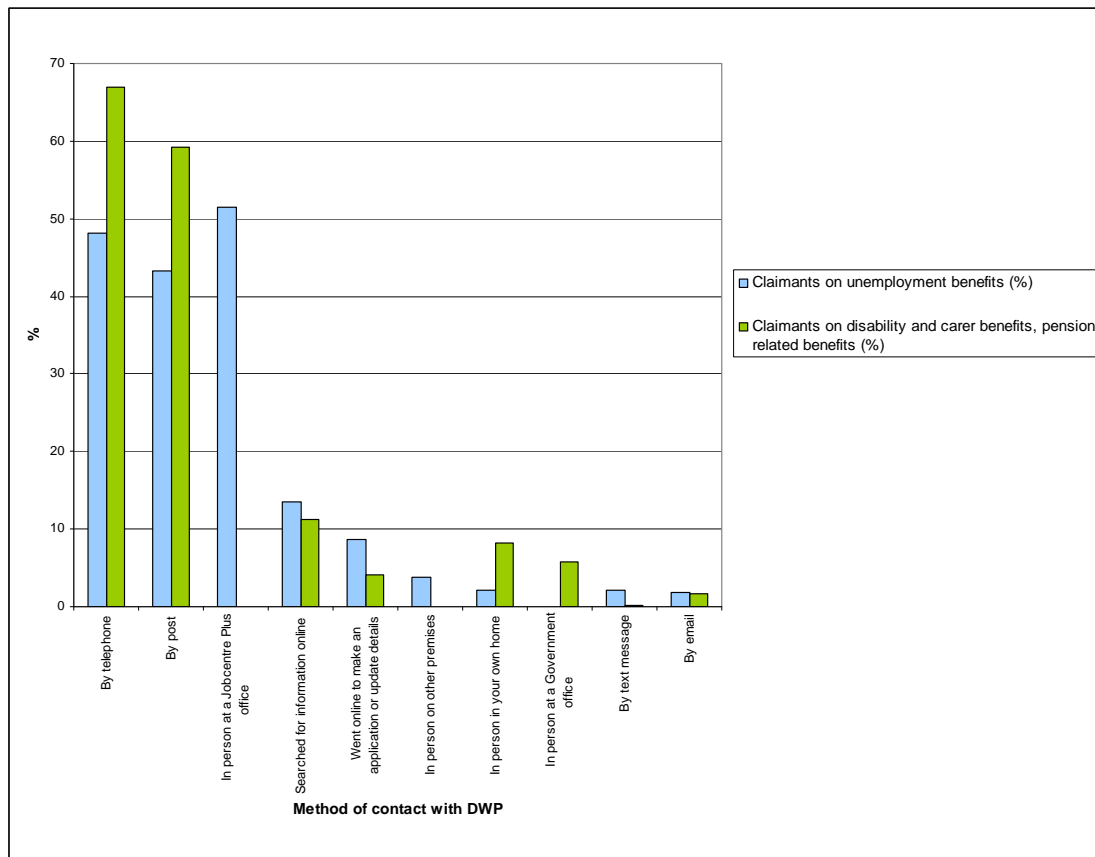
Notes: contact relates to six months prior to May-July 2012 when fieldwork was conducted; respondents were able to give more than one response to this question and therefore the sum of percentages adds to more than 100; where data is shown for only one benefit group (e.g. 'in person at a Jobcentre Plus office') this response option was only available to people in that benefit group; data for this chart available in Table 1, Annex C.
Source: DWP claimant service and experience survey 2012.

3. *DWP faces a difficult challenge to communicate clearly about complex issues*

DWP needs to provide practical information that is easy to understand, engaging and also meets legal requirements. On occasion, there may also be a need to explain policy aims in communications aimed at claimants and stakeholders. It takes highly skilled people to distil the intent of legislation and provide people with what they need to know in an accessible way without overwhelming them. Communications that succeed at this reduce the risk of

confusion arising, helping DWP to build trust and confidence in the services it provides.

4. The characteristics of DWP's customer base are changing with the introduction of Universal Credit

As Universal Credit is progressively rolled out DWP will increasingly interact with people who may not have previously been in regular contact with the Department. This group will include former HMRC tax credit customers who make new claims to Universal Credit. It will also include people who are in employment and whom the Department is supporting to increase the number of hours they work. This is a group the Department has not traditionally catered for and with whom the Department is likely to need to take a fresh approach to communication.

5. DWP is not responsible for all communications about social security

Communications about social security are dispersed. Various other parts of the public sector are involved. In England, this includes HMRC in the case of tax credits, other government departments in the case of passported benefits, and local authorities in the case of Housing Benefit, Council Tax Reduction and the local arrangements to replace community care grants and crisis loans. Whilst social security is not devolved in Scotland or Wales, certain elements are managed by the devolved administrations. For example, the Scottish Government is responsible for a number of passported benefits, and in Wales the contracted provider Northgate administers the Welsh Social Fund. In Northern Ireland the Social Security Agency is responsible for paying benefits and giving advice and information about benefits.

More broadly welfare advice organisations also play an important role in providing their clients with accurate information about benefits. In addition, appointees, friends and family and the media play roles in communicating information about benefits and shaping broader views about the role of social security.

This dispersed nature of communications creates a risk that information provided by different parties may be inconsistent or inaccurate.

These five challenges permeate the discussion throughout this report. They provide our acknowledgement of the scale of the challenge to communicate effectively about benefits, and a starting point from which to consider where any improvements can be made.

1.2   Our approach

The findings, conclusions and recommendations are based on evidence collected by a short and focused qualitative research project undertaken by the Committee between May and August 2013. The aims of the research were developed by the Committee and then refined following discussions with 40 stakeholders who took part in the Committee's stakeholder event in May 2013.

The key aspects of the primary research completed for the study are shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Primary research conducted for this study

- Interviews with 13 DWP officials including senior leaders from the DWP Strategic Communications Directorate and DWP Operations.
- Discussions with 40 stakeholders at the SSAC Stakeholder Event in May 2013, including written contributions provided by participants following the event.
- Interviews and focus group discussions with 20 key stakeholders including representatives of welfare rights and stakeholder organisations.
- An online forum discussion with five representatives of welfare rights and stakeholder organisations.
- Interviews with officials from the Scottish Government and the Department for Social Development (Northern Ireland).
- Four focus groups with claimants - we involved 15 claimants in total.
- Three focus groups with frontline Jobcentre Plus staff - we involved 18 staff in total.

We interviewed DWP officials responsible for communications and the operational delivery of DWP services. These interviews enhanced our understanding of how communications are currently approached by the Department. In addition we were pleased to receive a written submission prepared by the Strategic Communications Directorate.

We also involved stakeholders from the welfare advice sector. A full list of organisations who participated is presented at Annex A. We did this to understand their views on DWP communications that support them to provide advice to claimants. These interviews also captured views on the quality of communications from DWP to the claimant groups they represent. We were also grateful to Advice NI and the Scottish Government for leading discussions with their key stakeholders on our behalf and for providing written feedback as input to the study. We also thank Equality 2025 for providing written input.

We also obtained the views of the Employment Related Services Association. This enabled us to look at the role of Work Programme Prime Providers and their subcontractors in the provision of information and advice regarding benefits.

We conducted four focus groups with claimants to gain additional first-hand perspective to complement the views of stakeholder organisations. Three focus groups took place with claimants in one Jobcentre Plus office in the south-east and the fourth was with claimants who are also St Mungo's service users. We included St Mungo's service users in order to include one group of claimants who may be especially vulnerable and have particular requirements with respect to communications.

We also completed three focus groups with Jobcentre Plus staff. We gathered their views on their role in providing information to, and communicating with, claimants.

We reviewed DWP research publications to identify any issues with the quality of DWP communications. We also reviewed the national and international literature to identify good practice in delivering effective claimant communications in the social security system, and to find useful examples from similar contexts.

This report also includes information provided by the 2012 DWP Claimant Service and Experience Survey, including data not previously published. The survey provides valuable information on the preferred communication channels of customers and the barriers to effective communication. We refer to relevant results throughout the report and provide the full data in a set of tables in Annex C.

Following the analysis of all information collated for the study, the findings were discussed by the full Committee in order to develop recommendations to present to the Department.

The primarily qualitative methodology we adopted allowed us to explore issues in depth in a short space of time. It means the findings may not necessarily be representative of the views of other stakeholder organisations or the wider claimant population. However, we have validated our findings to the extent possible by identifying other research that has found similar issues, including survey data.

1.3 The structure of this report

In the remainder of this report we:

- describe overarching approaches to government communication and the characteristics of good communication (Chapter 2)
- present our understanding of the emphasis placed on claimant and stakeholder communications in strategic documents, and consider further the Department's digital strategy (Chapter 3)
- set out our understanding of how communications to claimants are organised by DWP (Chapter 4)
- highlight some of the positive approaches used by DWP to provide effective claimant communications (Chapter 5)
- examine the views of external organisations, claimants and frontline staff regarding their suggestions for improving communications from DWP (Chapter 6)
- describe how stakeholder organisations obtain information about social security issues and explore views of the 'partner toolkits' designed to support organisations to help their clients understand aspects of welfare reform (Chapter 7)
- discuss the challenges of communicating in languages other than English and providing accurate communications under Universal Credit in the case of passported benefits and tax credit claimants; and explore

the views of stakeholders on the gov.uk website and the perspective of contracted providers of employment services (Chapter 8)

- provide our conclusions and nine recommendations to improve the quality of claimant-focused communications (Chapter 9)

2   The characteristics of good communications

Social Security is a complex, detailed and constantly changing area of social policy. There are 13 Blue Volumes setting out the law related to social security, a further 103 Supplements and many Guidance Manuals including the 14 volumes that make up the Decision Makers' Guide.[15] Given this complexity, it is important to set out what we mean by high quality communications. To do this, we describe strategic approaches to delivering quality communications in the UK, Canada and the US. We then present some key principles on how to produce effective communications. We also describe DWP's communication guidelines, and based on our review of the research literature, summarise aspects of communication that are particularly relevant to the DWP context.

2.1   Overarching government communications guidelines

The quality of communications, including the use of plain English, can be directed in part by overarching government policy on communications. We found examples from the UK, Canada and the US which we briefly summarise here.

The UK Government Communications Plan[16] sets out the role of professional government communicators, their priorities and organisational structure. It highlights six primary functions of government communications. Four of these are particularly relevant to this study, as shown in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Primary functions of government communications in the UK

1. To fulfil a specific legal or statutory requirement. For example, to provide notifications of changes to public services.
2. To help the public understand the Government's programme, including specific activities and priorities.
3. To influence attitudes and behaviours for the benefit of individuals or the wider public. For example, around issues of public health.
4. To enable the effective operation of services to the citizen. For example, communications to increase take-up of a service or programme or encourage compliance with specific requirements of a service.

The plan also highlights the principles that apply to government communications. These are shown in Figure 4 below. Beyond a need to meet these principles, and with the exception of content prepared for gov.uk, there are no quality standards that apply to all Government communication materials. This provides departments with the flexibility to tailor language and terminology to a particular audience. At the same time, and in contrast, all content prepared for the gov.uk website needs to be compliant with a set of style guidelines.

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[15] See 'The Law Relating to Social Security' at http://www.dwp.gov.uk/publications/specialist-guides/law-volumes/the-law-relating-to-social-security/ accessed 29.7.13
[16] HM Government, Government Communications Plan 2013-14

Figure 4: Key principles applied to government communications by professional communicators in the UK civil service

Communications should:
  o be relevant to government responsibilities
  o be objective and explanatory, not biased or polemical
  o not be – or liable to be – misrepresented as being party political
  o be conducted in an economic and appropriate way
  o be able to justify the costs as expenditure of public funds

Publicly funded government communications cannot be used primarily or solely to meet party political objectives. However, it is recognised that the governing party may derive incidental benefit from activities carried out by the Government.

The Government of Canada has a communications policy.[17] This states it is Government policy to "provide the public with timely, accurate, clear, objective and complete information about its policies, programs, services and initiatives" and to "employ a variety of ways and means to communicate, and provide information in multiple formats to accommodate diverse needs." It also states that "plain language and proper grammar must be used in all communication with the public."

In the USA Federal officials are required by law to use plain English in government communications. The Plain Writing Act of 2010 requires federal agencies to "promote clear Government communication that the public can understand and use."[18] The Act requires government agencies to publish each year a report to Congress on compliance with the requirements of the Act. The Social Security Administration's compliance report for 2012 provides examples of how the administration has improved its external communications as a result of the need to comply with the Act.[19] Compliance is assessed by officials and the Administration's Plain Writing Compliance Board leading an annual quality assurance review. A set of Federal Plain Language Guidelines have been published and are accompanied by a website that provides before and after examples of poor writing and how they were improved as a result of officials following the guidelines.[20]

2.2   Key elements of good written communications

In this section we set out some key elements of good written communications. These are based on the US Federal Plain Language guidelines and are applicable to a range of policy contexts, including social security. These guidelines state that written communications need to allow customers to:

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[17] Communications Policy of the Government of Canada, http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pol/doc-eng.aspx?id=12316&section=text, accessed 24.7.13

[18] Plain Writing Act of 2010, available at: http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-111publ274/pdf/PLAW-111publ274.pdf

[19] Social Security Administration, 2012 Plain Writing Act Compliance Report, April 12 2013

[20] http://www.plainlanguage.gov/index.cfm

- find what they need
- understand what they find
- use what they find to meet their needs

In Figure 5 below we extract some key points from the guidelines.

Figure 5: Written communications - excerpts from the Federal Plain English Guidelines[21]

Write for your audience

- *Use language your audience knows and feels comfortable with.* Start out by thinking about what your audience knows about the situation now. Then, think about how to guide them from their current knowledge to what you need them to know.

- *Address separate audiences separately.* Documents that mix material intended for different audiences may confuse readers. By addressing different audiences in the same place, you make it harder for each audience to find the material that applies to them.

Organise

- *Start by stating the document's purpose.* Eliminate filler and unnecessary content. Put the most important information at the beginning and include background information, specialised information or exceptions to the general information toward the end. That way the material that addresses most readers in most situations comes first.

- *Address one person, one group.* Remember that even though your document may affect a thousand or a million people, you are speaking to the one person who is reading it. When your writing reflects this, it's more economical and has a greater impact.

- *Use lots of useful headings.*

- *Write short sections.* Short sections appear easier to comprehend, and help you organise your document more effectively.

Write

- *Choose and place your words carefully.* Be precise and concise.

- *Use active voice.* Active voice makes it clear who is supposed to do what.

- *Use "must" to indicate requirements.* The word "must" is the clearest way to convey to your audience that they have to do something.

- *Minimise abbreviations.* Abbreviations have proliferated so much in current government writing that they constantly require the reader to look back to earlier pages.

- *Don't use jargon or technical terms* when everyday words have the same meaning.

- *Write short sentences.* Express only one idea in each sentence.

- *Write short paragraphs* and include only one topic in each paragraph.

- *Use examples.* Examples help you clarify complex concepts, even in regulations.

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[21] Federal Plain Language Guidelines, March 2011, rev 1, May 2011

- *Use lists*. Vertical lists highlight a series of requirements or other information in a visually clear way.

- *Use tables to make complex material easier to understand*. Tables help your audience see relationships that are often times hidden in dense text. And for most readers, it's not necessary to understand all possibilities and conditions, only those that apply to the reader's situation.

- *Consider using illustrations*.

- Use **bold and italics** to make important concepts stand out.

- *Minimise cross-references*. Cross-references frustrate any attempt to write clearly and simply. Most users consider them a bother, and just skip over them.

Design your document for easy reading

- Documents that appear cluttered and dense create a negative reaction in the minds of our readers.

Test

- Testing your documents should be an integral part of your plain-language planning and writing process, not something you do after the fact to see if your document (or your website) is a success. It's especially important if you're writing to hundreds, thousands, or even millions of people.

Following plain English principles also enhances the accessibility of communications to people with lower levels of literacy, people who are dyslexic and people with certain impairments. In its guidance on delivering inclusive communications the Office for Disability Issues[22] stresses the need to consider how best to make communications accessible to disabled people. It suggests that the Easy Read format may meet the needs of a wide audience because it uses simple sentences and illustrations.

2.3   DWP's communication guidelines

We also reviewed the DWP guidelines for producing good communications. These guidelines provide a set of principles for producing good public facing communications (see Figure 6). The guidelines also provide advice on writing style. This advice encourages the use of plain English and the use of active and personal language. It also provides specific advice on grammar and punctuation and the use of abbreviations and acronyms.

We are aware that the Department is developing a dedicated style guide for Universal Credit. We understand it will establish guidelines on the tone of voice to be adopted with claimants, stakeholders and other audiences. It will also explain the terminology that should be used to ensure consistency. It is set to include specific guidance for communicating face-to-face and by telephony as well as on drafting letters, notifications, online content, emails and text messages. The Department is intending for the style guide to be updated regularly in response to user feedback.

In addition to the DWP guidelines, detailed guidance is available for producing content for digital services provided by Government. The Government Digital

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[22] Office for Disability Issues (2010) Delivering inclusive communications

Service has prepared a 'Digital by Default' service standard that all new and redesigned digital services need to meet from April 2014. This standard requires iterative user-testing and specified design and content principles to be followed. These principles, for instance, state the need to use the active voice, to be concise and to use plain English.[23] They are comprehensive and set a standard that could arguably be applied to other communication channels.

Figure 6: DWP's six benchmark characteristics of good public facing communications[24]

Relevant: Make it clear to the person reading that the information is for them.

Varied and interesting: Don't just rely on words – use a variety of formats and techniques to present information.

In language your audience will understand: Avoid jargon and provide definitions of unfamiliar words.

Logically ordered: Structure the information in a way that makes sense to the audience.

Easy to navigate: Show people a clear route through – for example, with numbered steps or colour coding.

Action focused: Make it clear what needs to be done next with clear action points and simple directions. Interactive tools can also be helpful if the communication is digital.

In addition, everything produced must meet the Department's accessibility standards.

Whilst it is promising that a dedicated set of guidelines are being developed for Universal Credit, the general DWP communication guidelines are less detailed than the US Federal Plain English Guidelines and the standards for digital services in the UK. Our view is that the DWP guidelines should be enhanced by, for example, including more examples of good and poor practice that are relevant to particular aspects of claimant communications, and by stressing the importance of user-testing communications. Enhanced guidelines are likely to be beneficial to operational and policy staff who may not have a grounding in professional communications.

2.4 Other elements of good claimant communication important to the DWP context

We reviewed the literature to identify aspects of communication that are particularly relevant to DWP settings. These points are relevant to different benefits and a wider range of communication channels than just the written word. They are shown in Figure 7.[25]

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[23] Government Service Design Manual, available at: https://www.gov.uk/service-manual
[24] These are available via the DWP Communication Centre: https://communicationcentre.dwp.gov.uk/BrandCentre/OurKeyElements/Words/ProduceGoodCommunications?userRole=NonAccredited3rdParty
[25] See Annex B for full list of publications consulted.

Figure 7: Elements of good communication in DWP settings

- Techniques that place control and responsibility with the claimant can be effective. For example a study that looked at effective practice in communications between claimants and advisers in Work Focused Interviews (WFI) set out the importance of inviting claimants to commit to steps towards work, to approach the WFI as a collaboration with the claimant and to tailor information to a claimant's particular circumstances.[26]
- Communications should treat claimants as individuals.
- Technical language should be avoided.
- People appreciate continuity in dealing with the same person.
- It is important to show empathy about circumstances and to avoid using a language or tone that could be interpreted as patronising.
- Sufficient time should be provided to discuss options and provide explanations.
- It is important to be clear about timescales, including where each individual is in the claims process.
- A variety of methods should be used to keep people updated including by SMS, email or online tracking and DWP pro-actively contacting individuals to inform them of any delay and the reasons.
- Explanation should be provided in advance of what is involved in any face-to-face assessment.
- There is no one size fits all in terms of preferred channels; it is important for support to be available through a range of channels and for the Department to remember channel preferences.
- Communications should include a clear call for action when needed.
- It is important to identify vulnerable customers early on to ensure they do not fall out of the process and so that tailored communications can be provided, if needed.
- Seeding information, when more detail is gradually provided, may be appropriate.
- The inclusion of policy messages needs to be appropriate to the audience e.g. Rotik and Perry (2012) found that the 'better off in work' message in draft Universal Credit materials did not play out well with those already in work.
- Questions should be unambiguous, asked once and not repeated.
- Queries should be answered quickly and issues resolved speedily.
- There are challenges for communicating with older and other more vulnerable people as they become more socially isolated. Family members may be important intermediaries but messages need to be clear and concise as they are liable to interpretation by the intermediary.
- Outreach work is important to reach target audiences.

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[26] Drew, P., Toerien, M., Irvine, A. and Sainsbury, R. (2010) A study of language and communication between advisers and claimants in Work Focused Interviews, DWP research report 633

2.5   Key findings

The key findings are as follows:

- An overarching communications policy sets the tone and ambition for communication products issued by social security administrations. In the UK this is provided by the Government's Communications Plan. There is a strong contrast with the US where legislation requires Federal employees to use plain English in all communications and for Federal agencies to provide annual compliance reports.

- DWP has communication guidelines that are in line with the characteristics of good communication published elsewhere. We believe the DWP guidelines could be of greater benefit to DWP staff who do not have a grounding in professional communications if further detail and examples of good practice were to be added.

- Research literature demonstrates the importance of personalising communications. This means treating each customer as an individual, expressing empathy, identifying vulnerable customers and tailoring communications accordingly. It also means providing a range of communication channels and obliging people by recording and using their preferred channel. Research also shows that policy messages need to be appropriate to the audience.

3   Emphasis on quality communications in strategic documents

In this chapter we examine strategic documents to identify the weight the Department gives to communications in meeting its business objectives. We also provide a brief overview of the Department's service standards and the approach it is taking with regard to digital service delivery.

3.1   The direction set by strategic documents

Strategic documents set out the direction of the Department's work and a vision for how it will achieve its objectives. Two high-level documents include references to communications. These are the DWP Business Plan and the DWP Operations Business Plan. Two other relevant documents have a communications focus and are also referred to here. These are the Government Communications Plan 2013-14 and the DWP Strategic Communications Directorate Communications Plan. In Figure 8 we describe each of these documents.

The DWP Business Plan and the DWP Operations Business Plan do not place emphasis on claimant or stakeholder communications as an intrinsic element of meeting the Department's objectives. It is notable that:

- In a DWP Business Plan that covers the 2013-2015 period there is no objective to raise awareness about the introduction of Universal Credit although the need to do this is referenced elsewhere in the Government Communications Plan 2013-14. We would expect the next iteration of the DWP Business Plan, which is revised annually, to include a relevant commitment. Public facing documents should also be consistent in the objectives they present.
- There is an inconsistency in how the DWP Operations Business Plan and the Strategic Communications Directorate Communications Plan express their working relationship. The former does not acknowledge the Department's Strategic Communications Directorate as one of its key working partners whilst the latter states that the Directorate provides a support and advisory role on operational communications. As this is undoubtedly an important relationship we would expect the links to be strong and for the Operations Business Plan to express this.

The business plans are high level documents. On one level they might not be expected to refer to more specific aspects of operational delivery such as communications. However, good communications are central to delivering the Department's business and their role in strategic documents should not be underplayed. As such, it would be suitable for high level documents to make an explicit reference to quality communications as a core aspect of service delivery. Giving greater attention to communications would also provide reassurance that quality communications are at the heart of efforts to improve service delivery. It would also send a clear message across the Department that all communications need to meet the highest standards.

Figure 8: References to communications in DWP strategic documents

The DWP Business Plan 2013-2015

The DWP Business Plan[27] sets out how the Department will meet its structural reform priorities. There is an objective to "save money by making online services the Department's preferred communication channel." There are three further explicit references to communications. The first is to raise awareness of automatic enrolment via a communications campaign. The second is to put common benefit enquiries online. The third is to communicate changes to employers and educational institutions regarding minimising legislative and insurance barriers to work experience for students.

The DWP Operations Business Plan 2013-14

DWP Operations is responsible for delivering all DWP public services. The DWP Operations Business Plan[28] describes how it will carry out its activities. The plan recognises the need to improve service levels in order to meet customer and claimant expectations.

The Government Communications Plan 2013-14

This sets out each Department's proposed communication plan for 2013-14.[29] The DWP entry states that there are four priority communication activities for DWP in 2013-14 (working with HMRC). These include to "prepare claimants, staff and organisations for the continued delivery of welfare reforms, including the new Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payments, explaining how these benefits will address claimants' needs, the changes they will bring and any actions required." The other priority activities are to increase awareness of pensions and saving for retirement, to encourage engagement of employers and jobseekers with the Work Programme and Youth Contract and to work with the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Education to encourage more parents to pay child maintenance regularly and on time.

The DWP Strategic Communications Directorate Communications Plan

This explains how the Directorate supports the wider business in order to help meet the Department's priorities.[30] There are many objectives relating to welfare reform, the labour market, pensions and disability equality and one higher level objective of particular relevance to this study – to enable the development of a Department which communicates more effectively and efficiently to its audiences. Tasks to achieve this include to "develop clear and accurate forms and information products to support delivery of DWP's priorities, in partnership with policy colleagues" and to "ensure that insight and evidence drives communications development, by advising on and delivering high quality research." The Government Communications Network capability review recommended that the Directorate's communication strategy could be improved by expanding on its objectives to explain how these will be delivered.[31]

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[27] http://transparency.number10.gov.uk/business-plan/16
[28] This is an internal DWP document used for planning purposes that has been shared with the Committee for this project.
[29] HM Government, Government Communications Plan 2013-14
[30] This is an internal DWP document used for planning purposes that has been shared with the Committee for this project.
[31] Government Communication Network (2013) Department for Work and Pensions Communication Capability Review, February 2013

3.2 The Department's service standards

In addition to strategic documents, the Department also publishes service standards.[32] These explain the Department's responsibilities to its customers and the expectations it has of its customers. The standards explain that the Department aims to provide accurate information to help people get the benefits they are entitled to and to understand the conditions of receiving a benefit. The service standards state that the Department will write to people in English (or, if they live in Wales, in Welsh if they prefer) but can contact people in the best way for them if they inform the Department what this is. This includes providing letters in large print, providing a British Sign Language interpreter and an interpreter for people who do not speak English. The standards also include a commitment to provide written communications that are "typed, clear and easy to read". The standards therefore establish what an individual should expect from their interactions with the Department and provide a benchmark against which to assess whether the Department is performing as it intends to.

3.3 The Department's digital strategy

In this section we consider the approach the Department is taking with respect to digital services. We also consider how prepared claimants are to access services through digital channels.

The Department's digital strategy[33] sets out how the Department will become "digital by default" with the aim to provide "high quality digital services that people prefer to use." It emphasises the need for digital services to be built around the needs of users and that are quick and easy to access, integrate smoothly with non-digital channels, work across a range of devices and keep personal data secure. The strategy also stresses the need to increase the digital skills of people who may have difficulty accessing services in this way.

Achieving this channel shift without reducing the ability of people to interact with the Department is a challenge recognised by DWP, as shown by the quote below.

> *"We recognise that a small but significant proportion of claimants are unable to access information through digital channels: our approach will be insight-driven, ensuring that digitalising information enhances, rather than undermines, access to information."*

> *Strategic Communications Directorate, written submission*

There is evidence to suggest that some groups are ready to access and provide information digitally. A DWP survey[34] conducted with benefits and tax credit claimants in 2011 found that 78 per cent use the internet. Whilst the majority (62 per cent) said that they would be willing to make an application for a benefit or tax credit online, 36 per cent reported they would not be

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[32] About the Department for Work and Pensions, Our Service Standards, June 2013
[33] DWP (2012) Digital Strategy, December 2012
[34] Department for Work and Pensions (2012) Work and the welfare system: a survey of benefits and tax credits recipients, DWP Research Report 800

willing. The most common reasons for not wanting to make an application online were that respondents didn't have the skills (32 per cent) or were not interested (27 per cent). Just under half (45 per cent) said that they would need help or support to use online benefits and tax credit services.

Early findings from the local authority led pilots for Universal Credit present a similar picture.[35] Local authorities reported that around 50 to 60 per cent of service users have access difficulties, such as not having internet access at home or an email address. Whilst local authorities were attempting to increase take up of online services they found reluctance among some customer groups. The National Audit Office has recognised the challenge in persuading more people to use online public services.[36] They reported, for example, that of the people they surveyed 17 per cent do not use the internet and of these 72 per cent do not intend to go online in the next year. The National Audit Office also found that whilst people may be aware of an online option some will continue to prefer face-to-face contact.

The research undertaken for this study showed that stakeholders shared a view that an over-reliance on digital communication may be inappropriate for some claimants, whilst being beneficial for others. It was thought that whilst some people may be able to make a channel shift, others may have difficulty doing so. For example older people may have trouble travelling to centres that provide training on how to access online services. The Committee noted in its report on Universal Credit that it may not be a realistic ambition for all claimants to manage a claim online.[37] This is something recognised in the service design manual for government digital services. The manual[38] advises designers of digital services to consider users' needs to understand which users will need support to use digital channels, and which will never be able to use digital channels independently and will always need support.

This evidence supports the view of the Department that a small but significant proportion of claimants are unable to access information through digital channels and may continue to have difficulties doing so despite the provision of support. It will continue to be important to provide alternative channels that meet their needs.

We also note that the Department will as part of its digital strategy pilot the use of social media to support service delivery. This is set to include answering queries through social media and publishing information that would normally trigger a large number of enquiries, such as when there are changes to benefit conditions or at the time of the annual uprating. The Department

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[35] DWP (2013) Local Authority Led Pilots: A summary of early learning from the pilots, DWP Research Report 848
[36] National Audit Office (2013) Digital Britain 2: Putting users at the heart of government's digital services
[37] Social Security Advisory Committee (2013) The implementation of Universal Credit and the support needs of claimants, Occasional Paper No. 10
[38] Government Service Design Manual https://www.gov.uk/service-manual See: 'Assisted digital - getting digital services to people who aren't online'

already has over 500 official Twitter accounts.[39] The need for consistent and co-ordinated messaging on social media, alongside all other channels, is paramount.

Realising the ambition established by the digital strategy is an immense challenge. The need for strong leadership is essential. In this regard we acknowledge that the Government Communication Network has recommended that the Department put in place authoritative leadership to ensure that digital communication plays a strategic role in stakeholder and operational activity to deliver welfare reform.[40]

3.4   Key findings

The key findings are as follows:

- Communications should have greater visibility in the DWP Business Plan and the DWP Operations Business Plan. The former should in particular include a specific objective about communications to raise awareness of Universal Credit.

- The Department's published service standards provide a benchmark against which people can make a judgement as to whether the Department is meeting its standards with regard to claimant-focused communications.

- The Department is aware of the challenges of finding ways to help people who may have ongoing difficulties accessing its services digitally. This is a key area of concern for stakeholders who contributed to this study. Careful management will be required to ensure the Department's services remain easily accessible to all.

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[39] A list of DWP Twitter accounts is available at:
https://mobile.twitter.com/DWPdigital/status/271675942093602816
[40] Government Communication Network (2013) Department for Work and Pensions Communication Capability Review, February 2013

4 Responsibility for claimant communications in DWP

In this chapter we present our understanding of where the responsibility for claimant communications currently sits within the Department. We also outline the plans the Department has for making improvements in this area.

4.1 Responsibility for claimant communications

There is currently no central oversight or responsibility for claimant-focused communications in DWP. The responsibility for claimant communications in DWP currently falls into two broad areas:

1. The Strategic Communications Directorate, which houses the central source of professional communications expertise in the Department. It focuses on marketing and advertising, media handling and PR, as well as stakeholder and digital communications. DWP is regarded as a strong performer in these areas relative to other government departments.[41] Officials from the Directorate informed us that their involvement in delivering claimant communications is *ad-hoc* rather than guaranteed as much of their work is commissioned by other parts of the Department. As such officials stated that the Directorate is only involved in a small proportion of DWP claimant communications.

2. Members of programme, policy, operational and legal teams, who take the lead in or are involved in developing and delivering communication products such as letters and notifications, contact centre scripts and adviser interviews.

The current approach is disparate with the responsibility for delivering communications to claimants dispersed across the Department. The Department lacks a mechanism to ensure communications consistently meet the highest standards and, as a result, risks delivering claimant communications that are uncoordinated, lack consistency and are of variable quality.

4.2 The proposed Claimant Communications Unit

The Strategic Communications Directorate has recognised the risks associated with the current arrangements for claimant communications and, as this study was being conducted, proposed a way to reduce these risks. This would see the creation of a Claimant Communications Unit within the Directorate. According to the written submission we received from the Directorate for this study it would draw on expertise to be found across the Department and aim to "promote consistent standards of well-written, easily accessible content driven by user insight." Its role would include:

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[41] Ibid.

- providing core guidance on written standards, accessibility and layout to be made available through the DWP Communication Centre, and ensuring this best practice is followed across the Department

- training and supporting operational teams developing new claimant letters to ensure that plain English standards are embedded

- playing a key role in guaranteeing high standards across the Department on key new and existing notifications to claimants

- considering whether better joining-up across the Department could reduce overall volumes of communications

- enhancing capacity across the Department to manage research projects to user-test operational claimant communication products

The Committee welcomes this proposal. A centre of excellence approach to enhance the standard of communications across the Department is essential given the scale and complexity of the current changes to the social security system. It should be established as a matter of urgency to increase the Department's capability in this area at a time when the delivery of clear and consistent information is crucial.

We believe a central unit that helps teams to build on the expertise they currently hold should provide a collegiate approach to improving standards. It would be necessary for the respective roles and responsibilities of operational, programme and policy teams and the central unit to be clear so as to avoid both the duplication of activity or inadvertent gaps. The central unit could also perform a quality control role in reviewing selected communication products, at least for an initial period until standards become embedded across the Department. Core guidance should also be presented as advice that can be treated flexibly, including by individual Jobcentre Plus districts, so that specific communications can be adapted to meet local needs. It should also be kept under regular review to ensure it is performing well in meeting needs across the Department and is effective in raising standards. In addition, its remit could be shaped by the development of a claimant communications strategy that provides an integrated view of how different communication channels will be used to meet the needs of claimants.

4.3   Key findings

The key findings are as follows:

- DWP officials informed us that there is currently no central coordination of claimant-focused communications in DWP. This has been recognised by the Department and will be tackled by the proposed introduction of a new Claimant Communications Unit.

- The Committee supports the introduction of this unit. It should be set up as a matter of urgency to increase the Department's capability in this area at a time when the delivery of clear and consistent information is essential.

5 Approaches taken by DWP to provide effective claimant communications

In this chapter, we identify approaches already taken by DWP that are likely to support effective communications to claimants and organisations that support claimants. These include testing communications, analysing the customer journey, customer segmentation, approaches to communicating with harder-to-reach groups and using new technologies.

5.1 Testing communications

Our literature review underlined the importance of testing communication materials before they are put into use. User-testing may involve small scale testing with end users in interviews and focus groups to ensure documents are understood and used as intended. People might be asked to provide views on the layout of letters, leaflets and posters, as well as the language used. Testing should ideally be an iterative process where documents are changed as a result of feedback and then tested again. Testing can also be more experimental when larger scale quantitative studies are used to compare the difference in results by taking two (or more) different approaches.

DWP officials from policy, research and communications professions we spoke to were all supportive of user-testing.

> *"By involving customers at every stage of the design it is a really good way to avoid unintended and unforeseen outcomes, and maximises your chances of actually getting a design that delivers your policy intent."*
>
> ***DWP official, interview***

> *"Iterative testing was really valuable to us."*
>
> ***DWP official, interview***

We found strong examples of user-testing in the development of the Department's campaign to publicise auto-enrolment into a workplace pension and to develop the suite of information products for claimants, partner organisations and internal staff to support the delivery of Personal Independence Payment . In each case user-testing was commissioned to external research organisations with findings published by DWP.[42]

We learned from interviews with DWP officials that user-testing to support the development of information products for the auto-enrolment campaign resulted in the substantial redrafting of employee letters to improve the clarity of information about opting out and the benefits of opting in to a workplace pension. The letters, alongside other products such as intranet copy for

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[42] See for example: IFF Research Ltd (2013) Personal Independence Payment user-centred design, summary of testing, DWP Research Report No 837 and The Futures Company (2011) Automatic enrolment – information for workers qualitative research, DWP Communications Research Report 2

employers to use and reminders on payslips, were tested and refined in successive focus groups. It proved particularly valuable in providing insight into the ideal sequencing of information to individuals:

"…how do you get people engaged initially and give them the right chunks of information at the right time so you are taking them on a bit of a journey, without alienating them at any point by giving them really complex information or information they may believe is not credible."

DWP official, interview

The user-testing process for Personal Independence Payment ran over a 15 month period and involved testing products multiple times with claimants, partner organisations and internal DWP staff. This included the testing of British Sign Language and Easy Read versions. The testing process resulted in removing communication products that would have caused unnecessary confusion and led to the development of a specific product for children who transition to the benefit at age 16. It also demonstrated that the most effective approach to informing applicants about the outcome of a decision was to follow the receipt of a decision letter with a phone call, to allow people time to digest the content of the letter. These phone calls were designed with claimants and decision makers, with actors taking on the role of claimants in mock interviews with staff. This resulted in changes to learning and development tools regarding the handling of difficult calls.

It is clear from these examples that user-testing is extremely valuable in the development of effective communications. However we understand from interviews conducted with DWP officials that user-testing is not routinely carried out for all new communication products introduced by the Department. The proposed Claimant Communications Unit would enhance capacity across the Department to manage research projects to user-test claimant communication products.

We understand that the Department's ability to routinely test communication products is in part limited by budget constraints. There is therefore an understandable focus on commissioning the testing of communications that are intended to reach a large number of people or concern especially sensitive issues. We understand that the Strategic Communications Directorate also tests communications in more informal ways, for example by consulting with selected stakeholders. Nevertheless, a consideration of the improvements and potential savings that could be made as a result of commissioning testing should always be made as part of a decision to conduct a more informal feedback exercise.

Given the resource constraints on testing communications it is important to collate lessons learned and best practice from completed user-testing projects. These should be made available across the Department to ensure that early drafts are as good as possible, therefore potentially reducing the need for further rounds of testing. Developing expertise to undertake user-testing projects in-house could also be valuable and cost-effective.

5.2   Analysing the customer journey

Customer journey mapping supports the development of quality communications by identifying the points at which a customer interacts with an organisation.[43] This builds an understanding of what information needs to be provided to whom, and when it needs to be provided. It also helps to identify when there might be excessive and unnecessary contact being made between an organisation and its customers, providing a way to identify poor communications and for these to be rectified. By pin-pointing interactions it can also help to ensure that information is provided in a consistent way by different parts of the same organisation.

Gaining an improved understanding of customers' benefit journeys is a developing area of work for the Department. DWP officials informed us that work is being undertaken to understand the journeys of claimants of Jobseeker's Allowance, Employment and Support Allowance and Pension Credit. This work is helping to identify points at which customers need to make repeated contacts with the Department and which may result in poor levels of satisfaction. It involves recognising where contacts can be reduced by dealing accurately and quickly with queries, and speeding up processing of claims to reduce inbound queries about the status of a claim.

5.3   Learning from behavioural science

Behavioural science involves understanding what motivates people to carry out a certain action. It applies 'social norms' to understand if telling an individual what others are doing influences them to do the same.[44] Testing is vital to assess what works in practice. For example, one study found that by referring in letters to the fact that most people in the recipient's town had already paid their tax debts gave positive results compared to the standard letter that did not include a reference to a social norm.[45]

The Behavioural Insights Unit at the Cabinet Office has engaged with DWP on the auto-enrolment campaign for workplace pensions and is now involved in the development of communications for Universal Credit. We understand from DWP officials that this includes considering how to influence a claimant's behaviour through, for example, describing to them the activities carried out by successful job seekers.

5.4   Customer segmentation

Segmentation exercises involve dividing a wider population into groups that share common characteristics. These segments may be defined in a variety of ways including by demographics or by attitudes and behaviours. Attitudinal segmentation models are particularly useful as they support the design of communications that are sensitive to the beliefs of particular groups. They help to identify the approach that might influence an individual gradually to change their attitudes or behaviour and realise the desired policy outcome.

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[43] Further information is available on the Government Communications Network website: https://gcn.civilservice.gov.uk/guidance/customer-journey-mapping/

[44] Cabinet Office (2012) Applying behavioural science to reduce fraud, error and debt

[45] Ibid.

DWP has developed, and used, a number of attitudinal segmentations to inform its communication campaigns. There is an established segmentation of people of working age regarding perceptions about planning for retirement.[46] Two of the segments, the unprepared and the daunted, were the focus of activity for DWP's auto-enrolment campaign as they were recognised as likely to include people who would be the most resistant to a workplace pension.

DWP has also developed an attitudinal segmentation of people who are out-of-work.[47] DWP officials told us that this informs a range of communication activity. It provides eight segments. One of these is called the 'thwarted seekers', a group whose motivation and confidence is in decline as they worry about a future without work.

5.5   Communicating with harder-to-reach groups

An effective benefits system is built in part on ensuring that those who are rightfully entitled to make a claim are aware of their entitlement and can manage an ongoing claim successfully. This is a particular challenge for certain groups that may be disengaged from public services. For example, communicating with some people of retirement age may be a challenge if they are socially isolated and take part in few activities or travel infrequently.[48]

We identified positive examples of the Department communicating with harder-to-reach groups through outreach work by Jobcentre Plus advisers, engagement between the DWP partnership team and local organisations and the work of the DWP visiting service to reach vulnerable claimants. We also found creative approaches to reaching target audiences through the media.

Outreach activity

Stakeholders praised DWP for its outreach work in the community. The co-location of Jobcentre Plus advisers in places such as children's centres, hostels for homeless people and prisons was regarded as effective in helping to reach certain groups, reduce any stigma attached to claiming benefit and to ensure individuals fulfilled their obligations related to a claim (for example, amongst groups who were experiencing high rates of sanctions).

Claimants we spoke to who made use of St Mungo's services highlighted that in their experience the Jobcentre Plus outreach worker who visits local centres can resolve issues much more quickly than staff in Jobcentres can. With reference to children's centres, a stakeholder commented:

> *"It seemed that people were more willing to talk to the Jobcentre if they were in the children's centre basically. So the location is actually quite important."*
>
> **Stakeholder, focus group**

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[46] See: Thomas, A., Jones, J., Davies, S. and Chilvers, D. (2009) Individuals' attitudes and behaviours around planning and saving for later life, DWP working paper no 72

[47] See: DWP (2011) Beliefs about work: an attitudinal segmentation of out-of-work people in Great Britain, DWP Customer Insight research report 1

[48] Jenkins, S., Higton, J., and Lane, E. (2010) Communicating with customers of retirement age, DWP research report 703

A DWP study into a pilot where work-focused services were provided in children's centres found that they were "established and trusted environments in which to engage parents, many of whom are not in touch with Jobcentre Plus services."[49] The findings, which are likely to be applicable to other settings, showed that services were effective when advisers took a more personalised and tailored approach and had a range of skills including: flexibility, an openness to a different way of working, excellent interpersonal skills and resilience to work with more vulnerable groups. The research also found it takes time to embed services. In this pilot, it took around a year to develop effective working relationships with partner organisations.

We also note that Jobcentre Plus has introduced dedicated gang advisers in 20 London boroughs. They build links with and receive referrals from the voluntary sector, Youth Offending Teams and other partners.[50] Between June 2012 and March 2013 advisers worked with 650 at-risk or current gang members. By the end of this period 290 were in employment, education or training. [51]

Jobcentre Plus staff who participated in this study supported making more use of outreach work. They felt it allowed for the greater personalisation of communications and that it could improve perceptions of DWP among some groups in the community. Staff also stated outreach with certain groups could be an appropriate way to raise awareness of the changes introduced by welfare reform.

The DWP visiting service

The DWP visiting service provides home visits to customers who are vulnerable and unable to access DWP services through the standard channels of online, by telephone or post.[52] Referrals for visits are taken from trusted parties or directly by DWP if an adviser believes there is a need for a visit – for example if a claimant is believed to be vulnerable and has not been in touch with the Department.

The service can also be used to provide support on other issues. A DWP official gave an example of how the service has been used to help inform vulnerable people about the benefit cap and how welfare reform will affect them. It was also stated that visiting officers are recognised by DWP colleagues for their expertise across a range of benefits.

According to one DWP official we spoke to, the visiting service is among the most expensive services provided by DWP and hence needs to be used appropriately. We have not identified any research about or evaluation of the visiting service but the few stakeholders we spoke to who were aware of the service spoke of it positively.

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[49] Marangozov, R., and Stevens, H. (2011) Work-Focused Services in Children's Centres Pilot: Final Report, DWP research report 772, page 6
[50] HM Government, Ending Gang and Youth Violence Report: One Year On, November 2012
[51] HM Government, Social Justice: transforming lives, One year on, April 2013
[52] DWP, Quick Guide 5 - DWP Face to Face Services, January 2013

The DWP partnership team

DWP works with organisations at a local level to help raise awareness of benefits and relevant policy changes. DWP officials provided an example of how members of the partnership team had visited local organisations to teach their staff about Personal Independence Payment. The intention is that these organisations are then better prepared to support DWP customers. Stakeholders we spoke to were positive about DWP providing training to local advice agencies.

Working with the media to raise awareness

Whilst DWP develops information for distribution through its own channels, it also actively works with the media to help engage different audiences. This activity helps to raise awareness of change and gives the Department the opportunity to provide factual information to sit alongside pieces that may provide a particular slant on the issue being reported.

> *"We can use them [different media outlets] to get our messages out there, but in their style."*
>
> **DWP official, interview**

For example:

- The Department provided Q and A pieces on Universal Credit for news outlets such as BBC News, ITV news online, *The Telegraph* and the *Daily Star*, as well as websites focused on a particular audience such as Mumsnet.[53]

- Longer articles on welfare reform have been prepared for and published by *The Voice* and *The Big Issue*. These articles explain the rationale for change and include graphics to help illustrate how changing employment circumstances affect entitlement to Universal Credit.

- As part of the Department's campaign to promote auto-enrolment and financial planning for retirement, the Department worked with *The Sun* to run the 'Save as you go' challenge. This involved three young people video blogging about their experiences of living off the income they might have after retirement for a week. Their stories were reported online and in the newspaper.[54]

- The Department delivered a weekly show on National Prison Radio to help communicate messages about DWP services to offenders. More information is provided in Figure 9. Jobcentre Plus staff we spoke to also suggested that more use is made of community radio networks to help ensure that key information about benefits is provided locally, including in different languages.

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[53] See: http://www.mumsnet.com/family-money/universal-credit
[54] See for example:
http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/advertisement_feature/feature04/4447639/Sun-reader-Andrew-Darville-challenged-to-live-for-a-week-on-a-pension.html

Figure 9: Using National Prison Radio to communicate about benefits and employment services

Prisoners coming up for release are able to make an advance claim to JSA whilst in prison and access the Work Programme as soon as they are released from prison. The Department recognised that prisoners may not benefit from the support that is available to them in the period before release, including that offered by Jobcentre Plus Employment Benefit Advisers who visit prisons, and that communication channels such as websites and leaflets may not be effective in raising awareness of entitlement and the availability of back-to-work services.

To help overcome these barriers the Department ran a campaign on National Prison Radio for a 13-week period in summer 2013. A show was broadcast at peak listening times once a week to help present key messages about advance claims to Jobseeker's Allowance, the role of Employment Benefit Advisers in Prison and the support the Work Programme provides.

The show also provided advice on disclosing an offence to potential employers, housing issues and increasing confidence, with prisoners encouraged to write in and ask questions to be answered on the show. At least one show was targeted at women prisoners.

It was co-presented by an Employment Benefit Adviser with prisoners involved in the production of the show, underlining an effort to strike a non-officious tone and build a receptive audience.

The campaign carries a small cost and its effectiveness in increasing contact between prisoners and Employment Benefit Advisers and referrals to the Work Programme will be evaluated before a decision is taken to extend it.

5.6 Use of new technologies

Digital technologies present new ways to provide information to people who are able to receive information this way. In this section we describe some of the ways in which DWP is using digital methods to deliver information to claimants. Because this is an emerging area of communication in the context of social security, we also provide some relevant examples from other social security administrations.

In the course of interviews with DWP officials we noted:

- The Department has launched its first app for mobile devices. The 'SaveAsYouGo' app supports the Department's auto-enrolment campaign to encourage people to opt-in to a workplace pension. It provides a calculator to work out how much an employer would pay in to a workplace pension (see Figure 10) and a budgeting tool to analyse spending patterns. Notably this app was developed with support from the telecommunications provider o2. We understand an app is being developed as part of a communications campaign to support Universal Credit.

Figure 10: Screenshot of the DWP 'SaveAsYouGo' app

- The Department launched in November 2012 a web app to provide support to people needing advice following separation. The 'Sorting out separation' web app[55] enables people to obtain personalised advice and directs them to where they can access further support. The app can be added to other websites and is already hosted on the Relate website, Mumsnet and Dad.info, helping to ensure it reaches those who may benefit from it.

- The Department is using infographics and animations hosted on YouTube to help partner organisations explain Universal Credit to their clients.[56] Stakeholders who took part in the research commented positively on these saying they are visually engaging and help to facilitate different learning styles.

- The launch of Universal Jobmatch (UJM) in November 2012 provides the option for claimants and advisers to leave messages for one another. This provides a swifter connection than has traditionally been the case and is a positive step towards stronger digital engagement. However some concerns were raised about the functionality of UJM by claimants we spoke to.

- The Department uses text messages to remind people about appointments and is considering how to address security concerns so that texting can be used to enter into a conversation with a claimant.

- Stakeholders supported including live chat or instant messaging functions on websites as ways to obtain answers to questions swiftly. They were also thought to be appropriate channels for people with mental health conditions who are anxious about talking on the phone or face-to-face.

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[55] See: http://www.sortingoutseparation.org.uk/en/hub.aspx
[56] See 'Explaining Universal Credit' section of this webpage: https://www.gov.uk/universal-credit-toolkit-for-partner-organisations

Examples from other social security administrations

There is a growing use of new technology in the operation of social security systems worldwide.[57] For example, the Mbao pension scheme in Kenya allows contributions to be made via mobile phone money transfer. In Tanzania and Uganda contributions records can be checked on mobile phones. Similarly, in Singapore applications can be made by mobile phone to the country's social security savings plan, the Central Provident Fund.

We examined online benefit adviser tools that are hosted by the US, Canadian and Australian governments.[58] Whilst those for the US and Canada are similar to the UK's in requiring detailed information early in the process, the Australian version makes extensive use of infographics to simplify access to relevant information (see Figure 11).

Figure 11: Screenshot of Australian Government payment finder
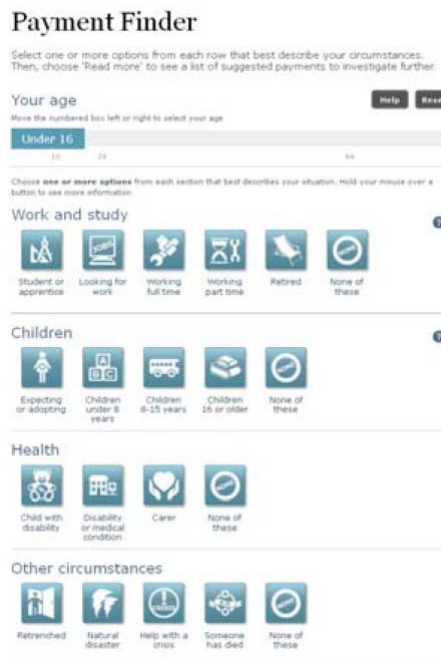
Similarly, in our interviews for this study the website of Manchester City Council was highlighted as a good example of a well designed website that works well across devices and simplifies access to information about benefits and council services (see Figure 12). The design of the website was informed by user-testing, including with groups of blind and visually impaired people.[59]

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[57] The examples here are provided by: International Social Security Organisation, Social Policy Highlight 23, Information and Communication Technology: Facilitating innovative social security, April 2012

[58] England: https://www.gov.uk/benefits-adviser; Australia http://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/payment-finder/?q=150000000000000000000000; Canada: http://www.canadabenefits.gc.ca/f.1.2cw.3zardq.5esti.4ns@.jsp?lang=en; US: http://www.benefits.gov/benefits/benefit-finder/#benefits&qc=cat_2

[59] *How councils can keep up with changing online trends,* The Guardian, 17.5.13.

Figure 12: Screenshot of Manchester City Council website
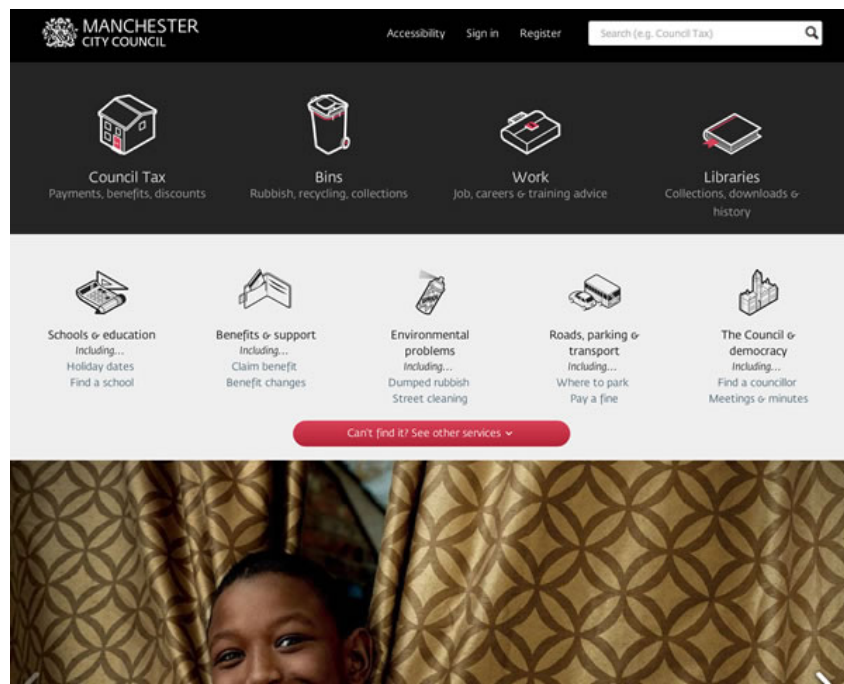
Figure 13: Screenshots of the Australian Government Department of Human Services 'Express Plus' app for job seekers
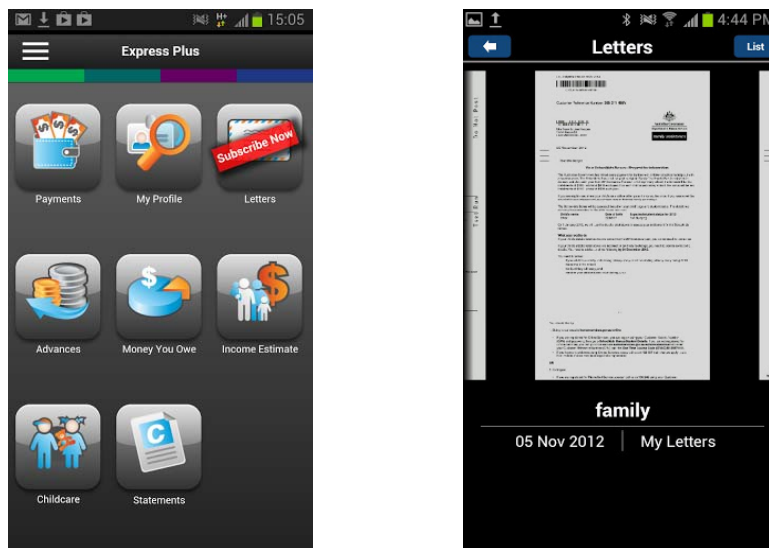
The Australian government has also developed a series of apps for mobile devices.[60] These apps allow people to update contact details, subscribe to and view letters, view payments and transaction history and capture and upload documents (see Figure 13 for screenshots). The Australian Government website describes it as "like having a service centre on your mobile device."[61] Whilst users have noted technical problems related to updates, the app freezing or crashing, personal information not being recorded as updated, other users regarded the app as helpful because it

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[60] See: https://play.google.com/store/apps/developer?id=Australian+Government+Department +of+Human+Services

[61] http://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/services/express-plus-mobile-apps

saves them time and removes the need to report to the payments agency, Centrelink, in person or over the phone.[62]

The Committee welcomes the use of new digital technologies to aid communications about social security. The Manchester City Council and Australian Government websites support people to access information about benefits in a clear, step-by-step way that is unlikely to overburden them. Apps for mobile devices can also streamline contact with social security administrations, but there is a need to ensure the apps are technically flawless to encourage uptake and continued usage.

It will be important for the Department to learn from the experience of other social security administrations as well as good practice from the private sector when developing digital products, including the app for Universal Credit. This is a relatively new area of work for the Department and hence the Department needs to ensure it is equipped with the relevant technical skills to deliver effective digital products. The Department's digital strategy makes it clear that the Department will recruit people to fill any gaps in its digital capability, and the Government Communications Network capability review recommended that the Department put in place authoritative leadership to ensure that digital communication plays a strategic role in stakeholder and operational activity to deliver welfare reform.[63]

It will also be crucial to user-test new digital information products to ensure they work well and deliver the information people require. Whilst people may be encouraged to make use of new digital platforms, others may be less prepared to make the shift and hence other channels will need to be maintained.

5.7   Evaluation of communications

The thorough preparation of communication products, informed by user involvement and techniques such as segmentation, enhances the likelihood that communications will deliver the desired outcome. However, once that product is in active use with a much larger audience it makes sense to have checks in place to ensure the product is working as intended.

Research and evaluation is one way to assess if communications are working well. For example, DWP commissions ongoing tracking research to evaluate the success of its communications campaigns in influencing behaviours towards pensions.[64] In Northern Ireland, the Social Security Agency is planning to review the effectiveness of written communications to older people and disabled people.[65]

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[62] We examined reviews of the app on Google Play in June 2013

[63] Government Communication Network (2013) Department for Work and Pensions Communication Capability Review, February 2013

[64] See for example: DWP (2012) Pensions Portfolio – Communications tracking research, October 2011, Research report 7

[65] Department for Social Development, Maximising Incomes and Outcomes, A 3 Year Plan for Improving the Uptake of Benefits, June 2013

The level of monitoring and evaluation that is desirable depends on a number of factors, including how many people are intended to receive the communication and act upon it, and the sensitivity of the policy change that is being communicated. Whilst there are financial constraints in government that may limit the scope of research and evaluation, the effectiveness of communication products in delivering new areas of policy ought to be considered as part of any formal evaluation. Findings can then be used to provide valuable insight to inform future communications. It will be important, for example, for the evaluations of Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payment to consider the role of communications in delivering the desired policy outcomes.

Research can be complemented by informal contact with a range of organisations in order to receive quick anecdotal feedback. This helps to identify any emerging issues that a more formal research programme should investigate in more detail. Obtaining more informal feedback may also be appropriate for communications about one-off changes, or those affecting a smaller number of people.

5.8   Key findings

The key findings are as follows:

- The end user should be placed at the centre of processes to develop communications. Testing, segmentation and learning from behavioural science help the Department to understand what motivates claimants, and enhance the likelihood that users will be satisfied with communications and understand what is required of them.

- The proposed Claimant Communications Unit should maintain an overview of best practice and support teams across the Department to follow best practice as appropriate. In particular, the Department should undertake user-testing as routine to ensure all claimant-focused communications are easily understood and likely to deliver the desired action.

- It is important to monitor and evaluate communications once in use and to make incremental improvements as needed. Findings can then feed into a growing body of knowledge about what works and can be used to provide valuable insight to inform future communications.

- Outreach activity by the Department, or in conjunction with stakeholders, should be viewed as an ideal vehicle to communicate with harder-to-reach groups about benefit entitlement and welfare reform.

- Social security administrations in other countries have introduced new digital platforms through which to access their services. The Department can learn from the experiences of these administrations, and from best practice in the private sector, to provide the best possible digital service offer.

6 Perspectives on claimant communications

We gathered the views of stakeholders, Jobcentre Plus staff and claimants on aspects of claimant communications they thought could be improved. These views covered the context in which communications are delivered, awareness of entitlement, the clarity of communications, preferred communication channels and perceptions of the capacity of DWP frontline staff consistently to provide accurate information. We discuss each of these aspects in turn in this chapter.

6.1 The context for the delivery of communications

A number of stakeholders suggested that communications from DWP are framed by the perceptions their clients hold of the Department. These stakeholders suggested that the vulnerable customer groups they work with lack trust in the Department, do not have a strong understanding of why changes are being introduced and are anxious about what welfare reform means to them. These views are illustrated by the quotes below.

"For our families there is a lot of disillusionment about what the changes are and a lot of the communications that come is that there is nothing to be worried about, but the families are very worried. There's a lack of trust [which] I think is a main stumbling block in the communications."

Stakeholder, focus group

"The overriding emotion that most of my clients feel is fear and anxiety because they don't really understand what the rationale for these changes is, why they've been bought in, a lot them feel they are being unfairly targeted really."

Local authority, interview

Media coverage of welfare reform also influences perspectives of the Department, and can influence the relationship people have with the Department (and Government more generally). This was raised as a particular issue for disabled people where negative media coverage of disabled benefit claimants was thought to have created apprehension among disabled people. Stakeholders urged DWP to counteract this coverage with more positive messages.

"DWP need to improve their communication in order to be seen as a fair and helpful agent of government in explaining to disabled people about their entitlements."

Stakeholder, written submission

Perspectives such as these underline the need for timely, sensitive and clear communications that are supportive in guiding people through a period of change. Our review of the literature showed that striking the right tone and expressing empathy are important in this regard.

6.2   Awareness of entitlement

Organisations involved in providing support to vulnerable people highlighted that their clients may be unaware of the benefits they are entitled to claim. Stakeholders suggested this may be due to a lack of awareness of whom to contact to find out about eligibility.

Literature shows that this is an issue for people with lower levels of English literacy and who are reliant on friends, family or support workers to offer assistance.[66] It is also an issue for older people. A study by DWP on communicating with customers of retirement age found that three in ten participants did not know who to contact in order to find out about benefits.[67] Similarly a study of eligible non-recipients of Pension Credit found that over a third did not know who they should contact about state pensions or benefits.[68]

Stakeholders felt that guidance that provides an overview of all benefits is helpful in raising awareness of entitlement as it signposts people to all benefits they might be entitled to claim. They contrasted this with the DWP approach of generally providing information that is quite separate for each benefit. Guidance that is tailored to particular groups and founded on an understanding of what level of information is needed was also felt to be beneficial. An example of guidance that is both comprehensive in covering the range of benefits and being tailored to a particular audience is the Age UK 'More money in your pocket' guide to claiming benefits for people of pension age.

Stakeholders felt it would be helpful to provide their guidance in Jobcentre Plus offices so that their guides might be accessed by more vulnerable individuals. Whilst organisations felt the information they provide is correct as it is drafted by people with relevant expertise, there was support for DWP to 'accuracy check' these documents if this was a barrier to disseminating these products through DWP channels.

6.3   Clarity of communications

The quality of letters issued by DWP to claimants was questioned by advice sector agencies and Jobcentre Plus staff. The scope of information provided by DWP staff by telephone was also an area of concern for advice sector agencies and claimants.

Customer letters

The DWP service standards state that letters issued by the Department will be "clear and easy to read".[69] However in its role in providing advice on DWP information products SSAC has previously been critical of the quality of DWP letters, such as the draft benefit cap letters. Independent researchers have

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[66] Aston, J., Bellis, A., Munro, M., Pillai, R. and Willison, R. (2009) Evaluation of Partners Outreach for Ethnic Minorities (POEM): Final report, DWP research report 598

[67] Jenkins, S., Higton, J., and Lane, E. (2010) Communicating with customers of retirement age, DWP research report 703

[68] Radford, K., Taylor, L. and Wilkie, C. (2012) Pension Credit eligible non-recipients: barriers to claiming, DWP research report 819

[69] About the Department for Work and Pensions, Our Service Standards, June 2013

also noted problems in this area. For example, in their evaluation of the arrangements for Support for Mortgage Interest, Ford *et al* [70] found a unanimous view among advisers, Jobcentre Plus staff and lenders that letters to claimants informing them about changes were complex, difficult for some borrowers to understand, inaccurate on some details and sent too late to give borrowers enough time to plan for a significant change to their financial circumstances.

We found mixed views about the quality of letters to claimants. Some stakeholders felt letters were clear, particularly in explaining what should be done if circumstances change, or when clearly stating no action was needed. Other stakeholders who provide welfare advice shared examples of letters they thought to be confusing or difficult to understand, not sufficiently informative or impersonal. The Jobcentre Plus staff we spoke to shared this view. In particular, they felt that the language used in many DWP letters is problematic for claimants with low levels of literacy or whose standard of English is poor.

There was a view that letters should be explicit about the impact on a benefit claim of a certain action, with better signposting of what do next, for example after receiving a sanction. Stakeholders felt that more detailed information should be provided in notifications regarding the reason for a sanction to help a claimant understand better the reason for it. It was thought this would also assist organisations providing welfare advice to decide whether it would be appropriate to appeal a decision. It was also stated that letters do not always provide essential information clearly, such as when a claimant will receive a payment.

Jobcentre Plus staff described how IT systems automatically generate letters that are too long (sometimes six pages or longer) and issued too frequently. This results in claimants often receiving several letters in quick succession. Staff described how this causes confusion with claimants sometimes bringing letters into the Jobcentre office to ask advisers to explain the letters to them. Staff said this impacts on their workloads and also leads to frustration when they find it difficult to make sense of the letters.

Despite the predominantly negative views of stakeholders who took part in this study, survey evidence shows that the majority (around 93 per cent) of claimants find that letters and acknowledgements provided by DWP by post are written in a plain language and easy to understand.[71] Whilst written communications may meet the needs of most customers the evidence provided by stakeholders for this study suggests that some letters are not of the required standard, or that letters to particular groups are not as good as they could be.

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[70] Ford, J., Wallace, A., Munro, M., Sprigings, N. and Smith, S. (2011) An evaluation of the January 2009 and October 2010 arrangements for Support for Mortgage Interest: The role of lenders, money advice services, Jobcentre Plus and policy stakeholders. DWP research report 740

[71] DWP Claimant Service and Experience Survey 2012. Further data are provided by Tables 2 and 4, Annex C.

Among the minority of unemployment benefit claimants who thought written communications from Jobcentre Plus were not easy to understand, the reasons given were that the communication was generally confusing (24 per cent), the terminology was difficult to understand (16 per cent), and that it was too lengthy or long-winded (12 per cent). Among claimants of disability, carer or pension-related benefits who thought that written communications were not written in plain language, the main reason for this was that the terminology was difficult to understand (30 per cent).[72] This evidence suggests that the needs of a minority who may need extra support and clearer letters are not being met.

DWP officials informed us that letters are generated by a legacy computer system. These letters are 'hardwired' into the system meaning they cannot be readily changed without significant expense or within a short timeframe. We understand that the Department is looking at opportunities related to the introduction of Universal Credit, Personal Independence Payment and the single-tier pension to improve letters in the future.

Jobcentre Plus staff also suggested that it would be beneficial, within an overall framework, for them to have more flexibility to generate and personalise letters, to improve the clarity of information provided and potentially to reduce the overall number of letters issued. The staff suggested one way to do this would be by building up a better relationship with the Benefits Centre so that they also receive letters directed to claimants. They suggested they could then support claimants to understand the content of these letters.

Greater face-to-face or telephone contact was seen as particularly important by staff in providing a more personalised service. This is likely to be valuable to more vulnerable claimants. For example, the St Mungo's service users we spoke to said they rely on being given information verbally by Jobcentre Plus staff rather than by letter.

Telephony

Poor experiences with telephone contact centres were raised by stakeholders and claimants. There was a view that responses from call handlers were scripted and not personalised, and that it was often difficult to obtain answers to questions from call handlers. Consequently, claimants needed to make repeated calls, often to numbers that charge high call rates.

Claimants, Jobcentre Plus staff and advice sector stakeholders were all critical of the use of phone lines that charged premium rates. It was thought these particularly impacted on people reliant on more costly pay-as-you-go mobile tariffs.

The National Audit Office[73] has investigated this issue in depth. It notes that whilst the Department provides free calls for new benefit claims or emergency

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[72] Further data are provided by Tables 3 and 5, Annex C.
[73] National Audit Office (2013) Charges for customer telephone lines

funding, there are 48 higher rate lines used for other calls. A total of 70 million calls were made to these lines in 2012/13. Although all DWP lines use automated messages to warn customers of high call costs and some offer a call-back option, we agree that the use of higher rate lines is inappropriate for people with a low income. The NAO recommended that departments should eliminate higher rate numbers for services that support vulnerable households and move to low cost or free alternatives. The SSAC highlighted this issue previously[74] and supports this recommendation.

6.4   Preferred communication channels

It is DWP policy to contact people in the best way for them if they inform the Department what this is.[75] DWP provides alternative formats such as large print, Braille and audio if they are requested.[76] People with a speech or hearing impairment can also contact the Department by textphone and British Sign Language interpreters can also be provided for face-to-face meetings.

Stakeholders representing disabled people were concerned that the method of communication used by DWP was not always appropriate to the individual. Stakeholders underlined the need for preferred communication channels to be routinely recorded by DWP and for the Department to then provide communications in preferred formats. Stakeholders underlined that this should include recording permission from an individual who wants to use another person to communicate on their behalf.

In their research to support the development of the Personal Independence Payment claim process Adams *et al*[77] also found examples of DWP not remembering channel preference. They noted that this is particularly important for people with mental health conditions who have concerns about receiving unsolicited telephone calls. This point is illustrated by the quote below from a stakeholder who took part in this study.

> *"… when I make a claim with a client, I will always try and point out the client's preferred communication method whether it's post, phone, email or whether it's through me, a support worker. On the whole that's not recorded …. I have clients who get phone calls, they have an appointee for the very reason that they can't take phone calls and they still get called, then they go into crisis …. So recording accurately and making sure that everybody checks that method every time any type of communication happens is essential."*
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> **Stakeholder, focus group**

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[74] See: Social Security Advisory Committee (2009) Telephony in DWP and HMRC: Call costs and equality of customer access – SSAC's 2007 recommendations revisited. Occasional paper no. 7

[75] About the Department for Work and Pensions, Our Service Standards, June 2013

[76] DWP and Carers UK, Resource Pack for Carers' Organisations, http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/dwp-carers-resource-pack.pdf

[77] Adams, L., Oldfield, K., Tindle, A., Huckle, C., Taylor, C., Newton, J. and Duncan, B. (2012), Personal Independent Payment user-centred design: Strand 1 report, DWP research report 794

A similar message was presented regarding claimants who find themselves in a vulnerable situation for other reasons, as shown by the quote below.

"Our client group there is a fairly high level of illiteracy, people with drug dependencies, alcohol dependencies, people with particular mental health problems, that I think this kind of one size fits all communication, leaves them out, to a certain extent."

Stakeholder, focus group

There is an implicit challenge for advisers to have the skills to recognise if someone is vulnerable in some way or to encourage people to disclose that they require information provided in an alternative format.

The DWP claimant experience survey tells us about the communication preferences of claimants. The majority of claimants of unemployment benefits are content with the way they currently have contact with the Department (88 per cent). The most commonly preferred alternative methods of contact are in person at a Jobcentre Plus office, by telephone, by post or in person at home. Similarly the majority of claimants of disability, carer and pension-related benefits are happy with the way they currently have contact with the Department (91 per cent). The minority who are not would prefer contact by methods including post, online, in person at a Government office, in person at home or by telephone.[78]

DWP officials informed us that their computer systems allow communication preferences to be recorded. However, additional clerical intervention is required to do this when using legacy computer systems. This may mean that preferences are not always recorded or updated, resulting in the concerns raised by stakeholders in this study. DWP is using more intuitive customer account management systems for the State Pension, Pension Credit and Employment and Support Allowance where it is easier to record communication preferences. Routinely capturing communication preferences will become more important as Universal Credit is introduced and the Department regularly corresponds with people who are in work and who may have specific preferences regarding how they want to be contacted.

It was also suggested by local authorities that DWP and local authorities could, if suitable data sharing arrangements could be established, exchange information about preferred communication channels to ensure user needs are met.

6.5   The expertise of DWP staff

Contact with frontline DWP staff, either face-to-face or by telephone, is a key way many people interact with the Department. The Department's analysis of its claimant service and experience survey shows that DWP staff performance appears to be inconsistent.[79] It shows that claimants indicated the need to

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[78] Please refer to tables 6, 7, 8 and 9 in Annex C for the full data.
[79] Howat, N., Norden, O., and Romanau, E. (2013) *DWP claimant service and experience survey 2012*. DWP research report 831, p2.

expand staff knowledge and skills, and for staff to be more respectful and patient when dealing with them. Others felt that staff are helpful, easy to talk to and are sympathetic.

Our research provides a similar finding. Stakeholders and claimants said they had good relationships with DWP staff who they found to be helpful, supportive and knowledgeable. They also highlighted a lack of knowledge among some staff. For example, different stakeholders gave examples of Jobcentre Plus staff providing incorrect information to claimants.

> *"The worrying issue [..is..] that lots of out clients get misinformation from Jobcentre Plus officials, and they believe them over all else."*
>
> **Stakeholder, online forum discussion**

This problem was attributed in part to a perception that staff lack time to inform claimants properly about benefit entitlement and changes. In addition, some stakeholders stated that their advisers often found it hard to locate a DWP official to talk to in detail about a benefit.

Advice agencies suggested a need for better training of Jobcentre Plus officials. This view was shared by the Jobcentre Plus staff we spoke to. They said they needed information on changes to benefits to be provided in good time, and for more time to be provided so that they can understand benefit changes. In particular they highlighted a need for more information on Universal Credit. Whilst they recognised that Universal Credit may not affect many people they work with for some time, they said it is necessary to provide accurate advice at the present time to answer questions, reassure people and help them to prepare for the future.

Despite these concerns, it was generally recognised by stakeholders that the ability of frontline staff to provide relevant advice is a challenge given the specific needs of some claimants and the complexity of the benefits system. It is unrealistic to expect expertise in every area of benefit provision. Reasonable alternatives could include DWP reviewing training and information on key issues (starting most urgently with Universal Credit) and providing better signposting to more detailed information through a variety of channels including to staff and stakeholders with relevant expertise.

6.6   Communicating with people affected by multiple changes

Stakeholders recognised that some people will be affected by a number of changes arising from welfare reform, potentially a short space of time, as shown by this quote:

> *"Considering there is so much going on this year, so much coming in within 12 months some people who might be affected by more than two aspects of it, affected by the bedroom tax, benefit cap, PIP etc, they find it a bit overwhelming really."*
>
> **Local authority, interview**

There is a unique communication challenge to provide the best possible support and advice to those affected by more than one aspect of welfare reform. Whilst we understand it is not possible for the Department currently to produce a robust estimate of the number of people that will be affected in this way,[80] it is important to recognise that there is potential for anxiety and confusion among claimants who may receive communications about different changes.

It is the Committee's view that all communications relating to welfare reform, from all sources, should be consistent and co-ordinated. To support this, consideration could be given to options that support claimants to understand all changes that may affect them and their families, potentially as part of work to develop a claimant communications strategy. Options include making this a key role of the DWP visiting service, increasing the outreach work of Jobcentre Plus advisers or by working in partnership with local authorities and welfare advice organisations, including potentially through the Local Support Services Framework for Universal Credit.

A further option could be to provide an overall statement to set out all benefits received in a single document. It would extend the approach of My Benefits Online which will enable claimants to check details about claims, awards and payments for Jobseeker's Allowance, Employment and Support Allowance, Income Support, Disability Living Allowance and Attendance Allowance.[81] There is a precedent for this in the US where the Social Security Administration has an extensive and comprehensive online presence. In particular, individual contributors can obtain a 'Social Security Statement' providing detailed information, in no more than four pages, about how benefits are estimated; details of the contributor's earnings record and general background information about social security.[82]

In the longer term, consideration could also be given to the merits of communicating to claimants about all benefits they claim in a co-ordinated way. For example, communications could be centred on a change in circumstances (such as entering employment, having a child or becoming disabled) and what this means for benefit entitlement. This approach is being taken forward by the Social Security Agency in Northern Ireland.[83] It has committed to providing a full benefit entitlement check to people at key transition points and will trial a number of partnership projects to introduce co-ordinated approaches that meet the needs of vulnerable customers.

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[80] DWP, Welfare Reform 2011 assessment of impacts (no date).
[81] DWP (2012) Digital Strategy, December 2012
[82] An example is provided online by the Social Security Administration at: http://www.ssa.gov/myaccount/SSA-7005-OL.pdf
[83] Department for Social Development, Maximising Incomes and Outcomes, A 3 Year Plan for Improving the Uptake of Benefits, June 2013

6.7 Key findings

The key findings are as follows:

- Communications need to be sensitive to the position and perspective of claimants and presented in ways that do not unduly give rise to anxiety or confusion.

- Stakeholders suggested that awareness of entitlement is an issue for certain groups and could be addressed by the provision of guidance that gives a brief overview of all benefits and by DWP signposting people to guidance that is produced by stakeholders and is tailored for particular audiences.

- Survey data shows that customer letters are unclear to a small but important minority of claimants. We also learned that the Department's IT systems that generate letters are inflexible. Opportunities must be sought with the introduction of new benefits to create systems that permit the adjustment and tailoring of letters with greater ease and less expense.

- Telephone contact lines can be an expensive way for claimants to obtain information from the Department. The NAO have recently investigated this issue. We support their recommendation for departments to eliminate higher rate numbers for services that support vulnerable households and move to low cost or free alternatives.

- Stakeholders and the literature indicate that the Department does not routinely record and meet people's communication preferences. This should be done as a matter of course to ensure people are contacted in the way that is most appropriate for them.

- Jobcentre Plus staff and stakeholders stated that frontline staff are not always well placed to either respond to queries about benefits or to signpost to other staff or information sources to provide a response. To address this, DWP could review training and information on key issues (starting most urgently with Universal Credit) and provide better signposting to more detailed information through a variety of channels including to staff and stakeholders with relevant expertise.

- Stakeholders are concerned that many claimants will be affected by more than one aspect of welfare reform and will be anxious as a result. We suggested in chapter 4 that DWP produces a claimant communications strategy. This could set out how best to support claimants to understand all changes that may affect them and their families, including through outreach work by Jobcentre Plus, the DWP visiting service and through working with intermediaries.

7   Perspectives on communications to stakeholders

Organisations from the welfare advice sector play a crucial role in helping claimants to understand their entitlement to benefits and to support them to make a claim. We describe how stakeholder organisations obtain information about the benefits system. In particular we examine stakeholder views of the three online partner toolkits published by DWP. These toolkits package together information about Universal Credit, Personal Independence Payment and welfare reform. We also note the views of local authorities and the devolved administrations regarding DWP communications to them.

7.1   DWP's approach to communicating with stakeholders

The Department recognises that stakeholder organisations can perform a critical intermediary role in providing information to claimants. It recently created a hub for stakeholder engagement in the Strategic Communication Directorate. This hub helps to ensure that messages are presented in a consistent and accurate way by communications, policy and operational teams that may be in contact with stakeholders at the same time. There are likely to be lessons from the establishment of this hub that can be used to develop the proposed Claimant Communications Unit - for example by ensuring all communication channels to claimants developed by different teams present consistent messages.

The Department also has various stakeholder forums to keep key national stakeholders informed of changes. These are complemented by Jobcentre Plus partnership teams who meet with local level stakeholders.

A monthly magazine called Touchbase is published online (and was praised for providing clear and factual information by stakeholders we spoke to), as is a monthly Stakeholder Bulletin which people can subscribe to. The Stakeholder Bulletin[84] is aimed at chief executives and policy leads in national stakeholder organisations and provides news of major announcements as well as changes to legislation and procedures. Touchbase[85] is aimed at external front line advisers, intermediaries and other professionals who work with DWP's customers. It provides up-to-date news about benefits, pensions and other DWP services and relevant news from other government departments and agencies.

The DWP website and the Directgov website, both recently superseded by the gov.uk website, are also key sources of information for stakeholder organisations. We discuss a number of concerns raised about DWP content on the gov.uk website in the next chapter.

The sources provided by DWP complement a variety of information sources that organisations rely upon to provide advice to their clients. This includes

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[84] http://www.dwp.gov.uk/adviser/dwp-stakeholder-bulletin/
[85] http://www.dwp.gov.uk/adviser/touchbase-magazine/

information provided by umbrella organisations and guidance provided by welfare rights organisations, such as the CPAG Welfare Benefits and Tax Credits Handbook, the Disability Rights Handbook published by Disability Rights UK and the Rightsnet website. Organisations with the appropriate specialists also extract information directly from legislation and interpret it for their advisers. Sources such as these will remain important and relevant in the future, both as a source of more detailed information and also for providing an important alternative channel of information to that provided directly by the Department (for example, by providing different interpretations of legislation and case law).

These sources are also used by the local authority representatives we engaged with. We came across selected examples of local authority managers providing their own digests of DWP material in order to keep their staff updated on aspects of welfare reform. Highlighting a potential gap in information provision by DWP, we are aware of one local authority that has established its own welfare reform helpline to provide advice to both the general public and social workers. It has been set up in conjunction with the local Citizen's Advice Bureau. Explaining the reason for establishing this service we were told:

> "*We're worried with the dearth of information out there our residents have very little to go on to try and understand the changes and how they are going to be affected by them.*"
>
> **Local authority, interview**

Local authority representatives suggested DWP providing an email subscription list to inform people of more minor changes to the benefits system, rather than by having to frequently visit the DWP website to check for new information.

DWP also channels information to local authorities via representatives of the national local government associations. One representative we spoke to suggested that there was an absence of one team in DWP with an overview of how all changes will affect local authorities. It was thought that local authorities could manage their services better if DWP provided expert support on all changes affecting local authorities. In particular a need for more information on the phased introduction of Universal Credit was highlighted. This is considered to be vital information to enable local authorities to plan their services.

We were presented with the view from Scottish stakeholder organisations that DWP communications are not sufficiently tailored to the Scottish context. This includes a need for DWP to treat Scottish organisations as individual stakeholders rather than as part of UK bodies. Some stakeholders may appear as if they are part of the same organisation when in fact they are separate entities e.g. Citizen's Advice and Citizen's Advice Scotland. In this context it was suggested it is important for DWP to provide a Scottish dimension to communications as there are distinct policy differences, for example with respect to passported benefits.

A particular challenge exists in Northern Ireland to inform the general public about changes to social security and how they will be affected. This is because it is anticipated there will be a short time between the Executive and Assembly approving the Welfare Reform Bill and the various changes being introduced in Northern Ireland. There is a time lag with introducing changes compared to England. Claimants do not always appreciate this. For example although the 'spare room subsidy' within Housing Benefit has not been introduced in Northern Ireland, we understand claimants nevertheless ask questions about it.

7.2   Views of the DWP 'partner toolkits'

There are currently toolkits for Universal Credit, Personal Independence Payment and an overarching toolkit to explain all the changes introduced by welfare reform (called the 'DWP reform story').[86] The toolkits provide practical information to help prepare organisations to offer advice to claimants. This information covers topics such as eligibility and what to do when personal circumstances change. To a varying extent the toolkits also include statements that set out policy aims.

The toolkits are designed to be flexible so that organisations can extract and tailor information that is most relevant to them and their clients. They have been designed with the involvement of stakeholders to ensure they meet their information needs and that content is readily accessible and easy to understand.

The organisations we spoke to generally found the toolkits to be helpful although two key concerns were raised. The first was about the level of detail provided, and the second regarded the inclusion of text describing policy aims.

Benefits of the toolkits
A range of stakeholders welcomed the toolkits. They felt they provided relevant and practical information which in some cases fed into the development of their own materials. Stakeholders also praised the use of infographics in the Universal Credit toolkit.

> *"I actually think the toolkit is very useful, and I've drawn on it to create my own materials."*
>
> ***Stakeholder, online forum discussion***

The toolkits were regarded as particularly valuable for smaller organisations. Not all organisations have the time or staff resource to develop their own communications. As such the toolkits provided helpful 'off the shelf' information which they could adapt for their own audiences.

Information provided by the DWP Strategic Communications Directorate for this study shows the toolkits are being widely used. For example, the

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[86] DWP Reform Toolkit: http://www.dwp.gov.uk/adviser/updates/dwp-reform-toolkit/; PIP Tooklit: http://www.dwp.gov.uk/publications/specialist-guides/pip-toolkit/; UC Toolkit: https://www.gov.uk/universal-credit-toolkit-for-partner-organisations

Universal Credit toolkit has been viewed over 60,000 times between its launch in March 2013 and the end of June 2013. In addition, we understand that more than 40 organisations are currently using toolkit materials or linking to them on gov.uk on their own websites.

Level of detail

We learned that stakeholders primarily see the toolkits as a source of practical information on subjects such as entitlement and the timetable for implementation. Some stakeholders felt that the toolkits are not sufficiently detailed and are too basic for their needs. This was a view held by organisations that deal with more complex cases, as shown by the quote below.

> *"I think they [the toolkits] are quite clear, they have general information in them but I think they are still a bit basic. I feel that there is bit of detail missing particularly around the more complicated bits of the benefits system which often are the bits that we need to be dealing with because we're working with the clients who have less straightforward claims and more complicated situations."*
>
> *Stakeholder, focus group*

We understand that DWP is responding to the challenge of providing more detailed information in the toolkits by taking on board stakeholder feedback, as described by the quote below. For example, a new fact sheet is being developed for inclusion in the Universal Credit toolkit to explain rates, allowances and tapers.

> *"…there isn't an extra layer of detail in the partner toolkits which we would be expecting at this time if that makes sense. But I do think they [DWP] are trying to improve them and they are fairly open to us saying what's wrong with them. There is more communication around them than I have seen before."*
>
> *Stakeholder, focus group*

The organisations we spoke to explained that they have a particular need for more specific and technical information about Universal Credit, in particular the timetable for roll-out and the exceptions process for non-standard claimants. They said they needed this to help plan their own service provision to support claimants during the transition period to Universal Credit.

Policy messages

The toolkits are designed not only to provide practical information about a particular benefit but also to set out policy aims. Our interviews with officials from the DWP Strategic Communications Directorate underlined the view that the Department has a public duty to explain the aims of policy.

Stakeholders we spoke to, whilst broadly supportive of the toolkits, questioned the inclusion of text or information that set out policy goals. Stakeholders focused in particular on the Universal Credit toolkit and the DWP reform story, stating that such information was unnecessary in a package of information

they thought should primarily retain a practical focus. This was in part because they were already aware of the reasons for the introduction of Universal Credit and other aspects of welfare reform.

There was scepticism of some statements that stakeholders felt were not sufficiently backed up by evidence. For example, one stakeholder provided the example from the 'An introduction to Universal Credit' leaflet (April 2013 version).[87] They supported the inclusion of practical information (such as the section covering 'what it means for you') but questioned the inclusion of statements such as '*Universal Credit will ensure that work is the best choice for individuals or families and provides a route out of poverty and away from benefit dependency for thousands of people*.' This stakeholder commented:

> "It's much more heavy handed than we've seen in the past with regard to these sorts of communications. Advisers told me they found it really off putting, they don't want to refer members of the general public to these documents or we don't want to link to them because they are so heavy with the policy messages. They are not the messages we are there to promote, we are there to promote the 'this is how it works' and 'this is what you need to do'."
>
> **Stakeholder, interview**

In a similar vein, another stakeholder stated:

> "To my mind one of their [DWP's] fundamental problems is that they [DWP] overlay their practical communications (which people need, and which organisations like ours need to be able to disseminate as well) with so much political messaging that it's an immediate turn-off for people – meaning the practical comms don't get through."
>
> **Stakeholder, online forum discussion**

We noted in our literature review that the inclusion of policy messages needs to be appropriate to the audience. For example research to support the design of Universal Credit found that the 'better off in work' message in draft Universal Credit materials did not play out well with those already in work.[88]

To help illustrate different approaches we also looked at the Universal Credit information available on the Money Advice Service website. This information, which was developed with DWP, was regarded highly by the stakeholders we spoke to. It includes much of the same practical and straightforward information as the Universal Credit toolkit but it is noticeable that policy messages are generally absent. In Figure 14 below we look at this difference by comparing the opening statements on Universal Credit from the DWP introductory leaflet and the Money Advice Service website.

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[87] See:
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/209544/introduction-to-universal-credit-toolkit.pdf
[88] Rotik, M. and Perry, L. (2012) Insight to support Universal Credit user-centred design, DWP research report 799

Figure 14: Comparison of the opening statements on Universal Credit from the DWP Universal Credit toolkit and the Money Advice Service website

"An introduction to Universal Credit" : published by DWP[89]	"Universal Credit – an introduction" : Money Advice Service website[90]
"Universal Credit is introducing greater fairness to the welfare system by making work pay. Despite considerable welfare spending in recent years, the benefit system has trapped more people in poverty than ever before. Universal Credit will ensure that work is the best choice for individuals or families and provides a route out of poverty and away from benefit dependency for thousands of people."	"Universal Credit is a new type of financial support for people of working age who are looking for work or on a low income. It's being introduced from April 2013 onwards. Read this guide to find out more about it and how it might affect you."

The stakeholder views acknowledged above, and the comparison with the Money Advice Service website, help to illustrate the central dilemma faced by DWP providing information that can be easily used and adapted by a wide range of stakeholders, whilst delivering key messages regarding the intended outcomes.

The Committee agrees there is a role for the inclusion of messages that explain policy aims and set out desired outcomes. This is a key role of government communications. However, such information must be appropriate to the audience, objective and explanatory. The importance of communicating in this way is set out by the Government's communication principles (refer to Figure 4) and recognised by the style guide for the Government Digital Service which states:

> "We lose trust if we … try to 'convince' a user of something. Give them the facts they need and don't encourage. The facts should speak for themselves – if the information is clear enough, the user will make their own decision."[91]

Whilst the examples here relate explicitly to communications about Universal Credit aimed at stakeholders, we have highlighted the need for the Department to use appropriate language when explaining the aims of its policies in documents aimed at claimants and stakeholders. The Department should re-emphasise that the toolkits can be adapted by stakeholders as they see fit. This will help to ensure they are used by as many stakeholders as

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[89] DWP, An Introduction to Universal Credit, July 2013
[90] https://www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk/en/categories/universal-credit, accessed 15.7.13
[91] 'Writing government services – Tone of voice, writing style, use of headings and more' www.gov.uk/service-manual/user-centered-design/writing-government-services#tone-and-style, accessed 31.7.13

possible. Clearly signposting to the Money Advice Service website could also be welcomed by stakeholders who prefer less policy messaging.

7.3 Key findings

The key findings are as follows:

- A notable innovation of DWP in communicating with stakeholders has been the introduction of three 'partner toolkits' to explain welfare reform, Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payment. The toolkits have generally been well received by stakeholders.

- There is a delicate task to include both practical information and policy messages in communications to stakeholders and claimants. Messages that explain the aims of policy need to be carefully worded to ensure that the intended audience fully engages with the information provided.

8   Other communication challenges

The discussion in this chapter covers communicating about social security matters in languages other than English. We also summarise concerns raised about DWP content on the gov.uk website. We then discuss the challenges related to communicating about eligibility to passported benefits and to communicating to tax credit recipients under Universal Credit. We also discuss the information requirements of providers contracted by DWP to deliver employment services.

8.1   Communications in languages other than English

Poor English (or in Wales, Welsh) language skills may present a barrier to accessing DWP services. The direction of policy is to encourage benefit claimants to improve the standard of their English through the provision of English language lessons, and to reduce benefits for those people who are not prepared to learn English.[92] However, there will continue to be people with lower levels of English who will require support to enable them to access DWP services initially, and others who will require ongoing support until they are proficient in English.

DWP leaflets are available in both English and Welsh. This is in line with the Welsh Language Act 1993 and the Department's Welsh Language Scheme[93] which require the English and Welsh languages to be treated equally. We have found, however, that DWP content provided in English is not consistently mirrored in Welsh on the gov.uk website. We understand that the Department is continuing to raise the issue of Welsh provision with the Government Digital Service (GDS) which is responsible for decisions about Welsh language content on the gov.uk website. The inconsistency between the DWP Welsh Language Scheme and the GDS approach should be resolved urgently.

We found two DWP leaflets that are available in languages other than English or Welsh. These provide information about how to access DWP services if English is not an individual's first language. They are both available in English, Polish, Arabic, Urdu, Punjabi, Gujarati, Mandarin and Bengali.[94]

There is, however, no legal requirement to translate all materials.[95] It is reasonable to suggest that the provision of documents in languages other than English or Welsh is unnecessary if this does not work against access to DWP services and claimants understand what is required of them when

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[92] In the June 2013 Spending Review George Osborne stated "From now on, if claimants do not speak English, they will have to attend language courses until they do. That is a reasonable requirement in this country. It will help people to find work, but if they are not prepared to learn English, their benefits will be cut." Source: Hansard, 26.6.2013, http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmhansrd/cm130626/debtext/130626-0001.htm#13062665001056

[93] DWP Welsh Language Scheme, 25 March 2010

[94] The leaflets are: About Disability and Carers Service: Information if English is not your first language, About Jobcentre Plus: Information if English is not your first language

[95] Commission on Integration and Cohesion (2007) Our Shared Future

receiving a benefit. Translation may be appropriate in selected circumstances, for example so that someone understands their Claimant Commitment in Universal Credit. We also suggest that the Department could signpost people to sources in other languages and are accurate and easy to understand. For example the European Union (EU) website provides a simple guide to the social security system in the UK in all EU languages.[96]

DWP provides an interpreter when its staff needs to communicate with a customer who can't communicate adequately in English (or in Wales, Welsh) and can't, or doesn't want to, provide their own interpreter.[97] Interpretation is provided by the Department's own staff, and by telephone or face-to-face using the Department's contracted provider. There are 400 frontline staff who use a foreign language or British Sign Language regularly when carrying out their duties. In addition, 16,500 to 22,000 calls each month are made to a telephone interpreter and there are 13,000 bookings each year with face-to-face interpreters. It is DWP's preference to use telephone interpreters. This is less expensive than face-to-face interpreters, and offers a swifter service as a telephone interpreter can be provided within 60 seconds for the majority of customers. The Department's policy is to always use face-to-face interpreters for communication using British Sign Language and in certain more sensitive cases, such as when investigating fraud.

There is limited evidence available on the effectiveness of interpretation services in supporting access to DWP services. A report by Alexander *et al*[98] looked at the experiences of people who need interpreters to access different public services. They found that most people prefer family or friends to interpret for them but that professional interpreters were welcome when dealing with medical or legal matters. The best interpreters were regarded as doing more than simply translating words, with people preferring interpreters who could empathise with them, help them to understand procedures and plead their case. People tended to be critical of interpreters provided by the services they were using and felt they represented the interests of service providers rather than themselves as service users. People who require an interpreter may therefore feel that the interpreter's role is partly one of advocacy.

Whilst the offer of interpretation is essential for claimants with low levels of English or who communicate using BSL for managing their interactions with the Department, additional activity is needed to ensure people with low levels of English are aware of the services the Department provides in the first place. We noted the importance of outreach work by Jobcentre Plus and partnership working between Jobcentre Plus and local organisations in chapter 5. The Department previously piloted the Partners Outreach for Ethnic

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[96] See 'Social Security Rights in the UK', available from:
http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=858&langId=en
[97] Information in this paragraph is provided by: DWP (2011) DWP policy on interpreting services for customers, Equality Impact Assessment
[98] Alexander, C., Edwards, R., and Temple, B., with Kanani, U., Zhuang, L', Miah, M. and Sam, A. (2004) Access to services with interpreters, user views, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Minorities (POEM) programme to support people of working age who had no contact with Jobcentre Plus and who were not working or claiming benefits. The programme focused on non-working partners of low income families, primarily Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Somali women. The evaluation of POEM[99] acknowledged that barriers to work were complex, with poor English skills sitting alongside other issues such as lack of confidence, childcare responsibilities and social and cultural barriers to entering the labour market. However the evaluation found that outreach at a local community level was key to accessing harder to reach black and ethnic minority communities and effective when outreach workers were of the same ethnic and linguistic background as the target clients.

Outreach activity can therefore be effective in reaching groups with low levels of English who are not already in contact with DWP services or in work. The key advantage is that once people are in contact with Jobcentre Plus they can take advantage of opportunities to learn English through referrals to providers of lessons for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Maintaining awareness of interpretation services is important in the interim, particularly for claimants who need to deal with more complicated issues such as understanding the conditionality that applies to receipt of a benefit.

8.2   The gov.uk website

DWP information provided over the internet needs to meet the needs of different users. This includes claimants and potential claimants on one level, and welfare advice organisations and stakeholders who require more detailed information.

Gov.uk is a relatively new online platform for hosting information about government services. It provides a standardised approach to presenting and finding information. DWP's online presence began to move from its own website and direct.gov.uk to the gov.uk domain from May 2013. Gov.uk is managed centrally by the Government Digital Service, although DWP provides content.

The Government Digital Service is seeking to ensure that the gov.uk domain provides "better, simpler, more accessible information for citizens that will be cheaper and easier to operate for all Departments."[100] The legacy website dwp.gov.uk performed relatively poorly compared to other government websites on a range of indicators. For example, 29 per cent of people visiting the dwp.gov.uk website got everything or most of what they wanted compared to 58 per cent on average for users of all government websites.[101]

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[99] Aston, J., Bellis, A., Munro, M., Pillai, R. and Willison, R. (2009) Evaluation of Partners Outreach for Ethnic Minorities (POEM): Final report, DWP research report 598
[100] Cabinet Office and Efficiency and Reform Group, Annual Report on Central Government Websites, 11 July 2013
[101] Annex B2 Website Metrics – Central Government Websites 2012-13, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/central-government-websites-reporting-on-progress-2012-2013, accessed 17.7.13

Stakeholders we spoke to thought that information about benefits and DWP services on gov.uk is not sufficiently detailed (compared with previous DWP and Directgov websites) either for organisations working in an advisory role or for the claimants they work with. This may be in part due to people not being clear about when information is being moved from the old websites to gov.uk. These stakeholders also said that information can be hard to find. The Jobcentre Plus staff we spoke to also said that some claimants they work with struggle to navigate the gov.uk website.

We also identified a potential risk that DWP information on gov.uk may be of inconsistent quality as a result of different teams producing content. The DWP Strategic Communications Directorate is responsible for a small number of initial access pages to DWP content, but there are an additional 500 pages authored by different teams in the Department. This risk could be reduced by an editorial team reviewing and quality assuring content.

Given the relatively poor satisfaction of users of the dwp.gov.uk website and the initial concerns raised by stakeholders about the gov.uk website, close and regular monitoring of customer satisfaction of DWP content on gov.uk will help to ensure the objective to provide better and more accessible information will be met.

8.3 Passported benefits and the challenge of consistent communications

Claimants who are currently entitled to out-of-work means-tested benefits or tax credits can also be eligible for a wide range of other support, known as 'passported benefits'. At present these benefits are provided in England by DWP, other government departments, local authorities and utility companies.

The Committee undertook a review of the impact of Universal Credit on passported benefits in 2012 and noted the importance of simplifying the current complex system in order to improve awareness, understanding and take-up.[102] Clear communications about potential entitlement are a fundamental element of this.

We believe there is further work to do here. By way of example we reviewed the list of benefits provided on gov.uk to which people may be entitled if they receive Universal Credit[103], and followed through the links provided. In some cases the linked websites mentioned Universal Credit receipt as an eligibility criteria (for example with respect to healthcare costs, free school meals and Sure Start maternity grants) and others did not (for example, help with prison visiting costs, court fees and Watersure).

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[102] Department for Work and Pensions (2012) Universal Credit: the impact on passported benefits. Report by the Social Security Advisory Committee and response by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions

[103] This page was visited on 22.7.13: https://www.gov.uk/universal-credit/after-youve-made-your-claim. It states you may be eligible for some of the following benefits if you receive UC: help with healthcare costs; Healthy Start; free school meals; Early Learning for 2-year-olds; help with prison visiting costs; court fees; legal aid; WaterSure; Disabled Facilities Grants; Sure Start Maternity Grants; Cold Weather Payments; Funeral Payments; government-funded skills training in England.

Inconsistencies such as these can create confusion and work against increasing awareness and take-up. Whilst these may be ironed out in time, the Department should consider developing a protocol to ensure information about passported benefits is presented in a clear and consistent way by other departments, local authorities and other organisations.

8.4   Tax credits and Universal Credit communications

A new claim for Universal Credit will need to be made to DWP for tax credits customers whose tax credits awards with HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) end at some point during the transition period to Universal Credit. As of December 2012, 4.7 million families were receiving tax credits.[104]

Recent research[105] for HMRC showed only one quarter (24 per cent) of tax credit customers had heard of Universal Credit. Just over one third (35 per cent) said they knew which government department was going to be administering Universal Credit, although only 63 per cent of this group correctly identified this as DWP. Four-fifths (81 per cent) said they would prefer to receive information about Universal Credit by letter, with only 17 per cent indicating that the internet was their preferred communication channel.

This evidence underlines the nature of the challenge of informing tax credit customers about Universal Credit. This includes raising awareness about Universal Credit from a relatively low base and ensuring that communications from HMRC and DWP are consistent in the information they provide. There is also a need to provide clear and timely information about the transition in order to ensure people who are rightly entitled to tax credits are able to continue their claim without interruption. DWP also faces the challenge of establishing how best to communicate with tax credit customers who are coming into a Jobcentre Plus office for the first time under Universal Credit.

8.5   Communications by contracted providers

Advisers who work for contracted providers of work services, such as Work Programme prime providers, are a source of information for claimants about social security matters. We understand from the Employment Related Services Association (ERSA, the trade body for organisations involved in employment services) that advisers find themselves in a position where they sometimes need to provide benefits advice and signpost clients to welfare advice organisations for more detailed enquiries.

Sources of information about welfare reform used by ERSA members have included the DWP reform communications toolkit. This was distributed to providers by ERSA and is thought to be a useful resource for providing top level information about welfare reform. The 18 prime providers are also in dialogue with DWP via the Work Programme Partnership Forum.

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[104] HMRC (2012) Child and Working Tax Credits Statistics, December 2012
[105] NatCen (2013) Panel Study of Tax Credits Customers: Telephone Survey 2012, HMRC research report 251

ERSA highlighted two particular challenges regarding the communication of changes to the benefits system to prime providers. The first is for information to be provided by DWP in good time. An example given was that information about Universal Credit was not provided to prime providers operating in the Greater Manchester Pathfinder area until a month before launch. The second is to consider how best to communicate information about welfare reform to the 800 subcontractors in the supply chains of prime providers. We understand the flow of information from primes to subcontractors about welfare reform is currently variable. Whilst subcontractors may access information about benefits and welfare reform through other channels, a thorough approach to communications could include DWP encouraging an improved flow of information from primes to subcontractors and identifying any role that ERSA could play in supporting this. This information should include not only changes arising as a result of welfare reform but also the support offered by Jobcentre Plus to claimants who complete two years on the Work Programme without finding sustained employment. The proposed DWP Claimant Communications Unit could also build links with external providers to offer them support and advice to deliver communications that meet the standard of the very best.

8.6   Key findings

The key findings are as follows:

- The Department communicates with people with low levels of English through interpreters with limited information available in languages other than English (or, in Wales, Welsh). Outreach activity by Jobcentre Plus can be helpful in engaging people with poor English skills with DWP services. It is particularly important for people with current low levels of English to properly understand the requirements attached to claiming a benefit.

- Early feedback from stakeholders highlighted concerns about the detail of DWP content on the gov.uk website and the ease with which information can be found. Regular monitoring of customer satisfaction with DWP content on gov.uk is needed to ensure it meets user needs.

- Survey data shows HMRC tax credit customers currently have a low level of awareness about Universal Credit. There is a need to provide clear and timely information to HMRC tax credit customers about the transition to Universal Credit to ensure people who are rightly entitled to tax credits are able to continue their claim without interruption.

- The Committee has long held concerns about the clarity of communications regarding passported benefits. The Department should consider developing a protocol to ensure information about passported benefits is presented in a clear and consistent way by other departments, local authorities and other organisations.

- The industry body representing the welfare-to-work industry suggested that there is a need to achieve a better flow of information about welfare reform to Work Programme prime providers and subcontractors so that advisers working with claimants can provide accurate and up-to-date

information. The proposed DWP Claimant Communications Unit could also offer support to external providers to help them deliver timely and accurate communications.

9 Conclusions and recommendations

9.1 Introduction

This report underlines the complexity and scale of the communication challenge facing DWP. This is bought into sharp focus at the present time by the need to provide high quality communications to claimants about the changes arising from welfare reform. Our conclusions focus on the Department's capability to communicate effectively to claimants in the context of welfare reform, although the findings are applicable to communications about social security issues more generally. We make nine recommendations that we believe will further enhance communications about social security.

9.2 Overarching communications guidance

The quality of communications of individual departments can be directed by overarching government policy on clear communications. The UK Government Communications Plan[106] is aimed at communications staff and sets out the principles that government communications are expected to follow. The Government Digital Service provides a comprehensive style guide for content prepared for gov.uk that could arguably be adapted for other communication channels.

There are lessons to be learned from other countries in this regard. In Canada there is a clear statement that it is Government policy to provide the public with "timely, accurate, clear, objectives and complete information" and the US where the Plain Writing Act of 2010 requires federal agencies to "promote clear Government communication that the public can understand and use." The US Social Security Administration provides an annual compliance report to Congress to show how it has improved its communications as a result of meeting the requirements of the Act.

Legislating for plain writing is perhaps unnecessary, but a policy aimed at all staff that establishes overall ambition and is accompanied by guidelines could be beneficial. It would build on the strong example provided by the gov.uk style guidelines to provide for consistent standards across government and across channels. It would allow for flexibility in the application of guidelines where this is helpful to providing clear communications. It would also be a tool to improve standards where necessary, including among contracted providers of government services. It could also be a cost-efficient alternative to individual departments producing and maintaining their own guidance.

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[106] HM Government, Government Communications Plan 2013/14

Recommendation 1

We welcome the comprehensive guidelines for content prepared for the gov.uk website. In addition, the Government should introduce a communications policy and guidelines aimed at all government employees and contracted providers of public services to ensure all communications to citizens meet the standards of the very best.

9.3 Strategic direction and leadership

It is evident that claimant communications are taken seriously by DWP. Its Strategic Communications Directorate is considered a strong performer by the Government Communications Network and is actively exploring ways to make improvements to claimant communications. A proposed Claimant Communications Unit would sit within the Directorate and operate as a centre of expertise to support teams across DWP to deliver high quality communications. Work is also underway by DWP operations teams to improve the overall customer experience by understanding the claimant journey for a number of benefits and identifying when repeated, unnecessary contacts with the Department are made. The findings from this work should be used to inform approaches to make communications more effective and to streamline the overall number of communications.

The positive work within the Department is not adequately reflected in high level strategic documents such as the DWP Business Plan and the DWP Operations Business Plan. We noted that the DWP Business Plan does not include an explicit commitment to raise awareness of Universal Credit as it is rolled out, despite the Department clearly taking forward work on this. Similarly the Operations Business Plan does not explicitly recognise the role of good communications in supporting excellent customer service, or acknowledge the Strategic Communications Directorate among its key working partners, although in practice we believe such a relationship exists. Whilst there is a more detailed DWP communications plan, its direction is informed by overall business priorities as set out by the higher level business plans.

Recommendation 2

The role of quality communications as an integral element of service delivery should be emphasised in relevant business plans. The Department should provide more explicit reference to communications, including those for Universal Credit, in the next iteration of the DWP Business Plan and stress the importance of quality communications to service delivery in the next DWP Operations Business Plan.

The Committee supports the Department's proposal to establish a Claimant Communications Unit. If successful it could help to improve the quality of communications produced by the Department. It would do this by providing clear guidance, offering training to relevant teams, considering how best to join up across the Department to reduce overall volumes of communications and enhancing capacity of teams to undertake user testing. To be successful

roles and responsibilities between the specialist communications unit and other teams must be clear. A flexible approach to the introduction of improved guidelines would also be important to encourage local innovation and creativity, in keeping with the Department's freedom and flexibilities agenda.

Recommendation 3
The proposed DWP Claimant Communications Unit should be established as a matter of urgency. It should forge links with other DWP teams currently developing communications and identify opportunities to improve existing communications. This should include building strong working relationships with teams taking forward work to deliver improvements to the claimant journey.

The remit of the Claimant Communications Unit could be shaped by the Department developing a strategy for claimant communications. A strategy would have value in establishing a departmental policy to consistently deliver clear claimant communications. It would centre on the claimant to provide an integrated view of how different communication channels would be used to meet their needs.

We believe a strategy should:

- inform the Department's day-to-day approach to claimant communications by learning from customer journey mapping work and best practice as established by previous user-testing of DWP communications and other communications research
- explain how the Department will monitor if DWP content on the gov.uk website meets user needs, given the view of stakeholders that information can be hard to find and is not sufficiently detailed
- set out the role of intermediaries, Jobcentre Plus outreach activity and the DWP visiting service in reaching customer groups who may be unaware of the services offered by DWP, their entitlements, or how changes arising from welfare reform might affect them
- plan for the consistent provision of good quality and accurate information by the range of organisations involved in communicating about social security, including:
  - intermediaries such as welfare advice organisations and charities providing information about social security
  - contracted providers of employment services and subcontractors working with claimants
  - other departments, local authorities and utility companies providing information to claimants about passported benefits
  - HMRC and DWP in providing information to tax credit customers to ensure people who are rightly entitled to tax credits are able to continue their claim without interruption during the transition to Universal Credit

Recommendation 4

The Department should develop a claimant communications strategy. This would establish Departmental policy on how to deliver clear and co-ordinated claimant communications. It would set out how the Department will use different channels in a co-ordinated way to meet the needs of claimants and potential claimants. It should be in place by January 2014 to support future phases of Universal Credit roll-out and cover the period until roll-out is due to be completed i.e. October 2017.

9.4 Clarity of communications

A critical aspect of clear communication is ensuring that people receive information from the Department using their preferred channel or format. This is especially important for people who have impairment related access needs. However, evidence provided by stakeholders and the literature shows that communications preferences are not routinely recorded by the Department. This is in part an issue to do with legacy computer systems that require cumbersome clerical updating.

The importance of recording communication preferences will be underlined by the progressive move to digital methods of communications. Digital channels offer the opportunity to deliver cost-effective communications in an engaging, accessible and innovative way. However, the Department recognises that online contact may not be appropriate for all of its customers. To ensure people are not excluded alternative communication channels must continue to be provided until customers are confident with, and have reliable access to, digital channels.

Recommendation 5

The Department must ensure its staff routinely record the communication preferences of its customers, and that communications are then provided through the requested channel or by using the appropriate format.

There is also a challenge for DWP to provide information about benefits that is clear and engaging, and at the same time legally accurate. Customer letters produced by DWP follow standardised templates and are criticised by stakeholders for being confusing and difficult to understand, especially for people with lower levels of literacy.

We understand the Department's legacy IT systems provide limited flexibility to tailor or personalise computer-generated letters. The Committee would ideally like to see investment made to improve this capability, however we recognise that expenditure on upgrades to legacy systems may not be cost-effective. We therefore believe it is important that new systems, such as those for Universal Credit, are designed with a strong emphasis on the production of high quality claimant letters and other communications. These systems should have the flexibility to tailor, change and enhance these communications quickly and efficiently.

Recommendation 6
New IT systems, such as those for Universal Credit, should be designed with the flexibility to tailor, change and enhance claimant communications quickly and efficiently.

A consistent theme of our research regarded the provision of information about Universal Credit to Jobcentre Plus staff, stakeholders and local authorities. It was acknowledged that given Universal Credit will be rolled out over a four year period until 2017 it would not apply to many people they work with for some time. However, those involved in providing advice were being asked questions at the present time and felt unable to provide answers on some key issues. These included when people will become affected by Universal Credit, and the details of the support that will be available to people who cannot complete the standard claim process. This information is also needed by stakeholders to help them plan their service provision over the transition period to Universal Credit.

Providing information on roll-out and other aspects of implementing Universal Credit is dependent on the Department making decisions on these issues, and that information then being communicated quickly and clearly to others. At the time of writing, the Department had announced its plans to extend Universal Credit to six further Jobcentres in October 2013.[107]

Recommendation 7
Stakeholders have a clear need for further information about the roll-out of Universal Credit. This information is important for planning their own service provision and also for providing advice to people to enable them to prepare for the future. The Department should make a decision on the timetable for the incremental roll-out of Universal Credit for the period from October 2013 to 2017 and communicate this to its staff, local authorities and stakeholders at the earliest opportunity.

9.5   Supporting stakeholders

At a time of far-reaching change to the benefits system there is a strong requirement to ensure that accurate information is consistently provided by the range of organisations involved. DWP is supporting this in a range of ways. This includes the provision of online partner toolkits that provide information about welfare reform, Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payment to organisations that support DWP customers.

The partner toolkits have been welcomed by organisations working with claimants. However we have taken note of a view among stakeholders that text that explains policy aims in these documents needs to be carefully worded to encourage people to engage with the material. This is in part because many stakeholders view toolkits as primarily a source of practical information. It is also explained by the independent stance of organisations

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[107] Written Ministerial Statement, Universal Credit Update, 10.7.13

who do not see themselves as conduits for the expression of government policy. The Committee believes DWP has a role to play in helping people to understand why it is introducing Universal Credit and other aspects of welfare reform. However, policy messages to support desired changes in claimant behaviours and attitudes must be appropriate to the audience, clearly worded and objectively presented.

Recommendation 8

The Department must use appropriate tone and language when explaining the aims of its policies in documents aimed at claimants and stakeholders. It should use wording that is suitable to the audience, explanatory and objective and that is appropriately integrated with practical information.

9.6 Understanding what works

The Department already undertakes user-testing of some communications. User-testing is essential as it ensures the perspective of the intended end user is reflected in the design of a product such as a letter or a website. This increases the likelihood that the information product will be effective when in use. The proposed Claimant Communications Unit would provide support to ensure that claimant facing communications are tested as a matter of routine. We wholly support this move toward greater user-testing.

Whilst there are strong examples of the Department conducting user-testing before communications are put into use, we identified less emphasis on examining their performance following roll-out. It is important to ensure feedback can be provided early on in the life of a new information product to ensure it is working as intended with a wider audience. When more formal evaluations of a policy are commissioned, it would also be important for these to consider the role of communications in achieving the desired policy outcome. This would provide valuable learning to inform future communications.

The Committee is particularly supportive of the involvement of the Cabinet Office behavioural insights team on a number of current communications issues. We believe there is great potential to explore further how the wording and presentation of messages influences the behaviour of individuals regarding social security issues. The Welfare Reform Act 2012 allows the Department to trial policy options to improve simplification and behavioural impacts, and the Universal Credit Evaluation Framework suggests a possible area for experimentation could be to test out different forms of communication.[108] We believe the Department must take forward this option. It should also, through its research programme, identify options in other policy areas to compare the effectiveness of different approaches to claimant communications. Robust research in this area would improve understanding of how communications influence attitudes and behaviours with respect to social security issues, and would inform best practice.

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[108] DWP, Universal Credit Evaluation Framework, December 2012

Recommendation 9

The Department should identify opportunities within its current research programme, and in its plans for next year's research programme, to undertake research to improve understanding of how communications influence the attitudes and behaviours of claimants. This research should include experimental tests to compare the success of different approaches in a given policy area. The Department should also take forward the option to conduct experiments to test out different communications as part of the evaluation of Universal Credit.

Annex A   List of respondents

The Committee's thanks and gratitude go the following organisations for giving their time to be consulted during the course of this study:

Advice NI
Age UK
Citizens Advice
Contact a Family
Crisis
Department for Social Development, Northern Ireland
Department for Work and Pensions
Drugscope
Employment Related Services Association
Equality 2025
Gingerbread
Homeless Link
MIND
National Federation of Housing Associations
Passage
Paypoint
RNIB
St Mungo's
Scottish Government
Scope
Shelter
The Children's Society
Welsh Local Government Association
Wolverhampton Council
Working Families

In addition we would like to thank the 40 stakeholders who attended the Committee's stakeholder event in May 2013.

Annex B   Literature consulted

In Figure 7 we set out the elements of communication that are particularly relevant to DWP settings. This literature was heavily focused on DWP research publications. The publications that were particularly relevant and which fed into the elements of good communication are as follows:

Adams, L., Oldfield, K., Tindle, A., Huckle, C., Taylor, C., Newton, J. and Duncan, B. (2012) *Personal Independent Payment user-centred design: Strand 1 report*. DWP Research Report 794.

Aston, J., Bellis, A., Munro, M., Pillai, R. and Willison, R. (2009) *Evaluation of Partners Outreach for Ethnic Minorities (POEM): Final report*. DWP Research Report 598.

Coulter, A., Day, N., Howat, N., Romanou, E., Coleman, N (2012) *The Jobcentre Plus Offer: Findings from the first year of the evaluation*. DWP Research Report 814.

Drew, P., Toerien, M., Irvine, A., and Sainsbury, R. (2010) *A study of language and communication between advisers and claimants in Work Focused Interviews*. DWP Research Report 633.

Howat, N., Norden, O., and Romanau, E. (2013) *DWP claimant service and experience survey 2012*. DWP Research Report 831.

IFF Research Ltd (2013) *Personal Independent Payment user-centred design, summary of testing*. DWP Research Report 837.

Jenkins, S., Higton, J., and Lane, E. (2010) *Communicating with customers of retirement age*. DWP Research Report 703.

Jenkins, S. and Latter, J. (2010) *Communicating with customers approaching retirement*. DWP Research Report 702.

Marangozov, R., and Stevens, H. (2011) *Work-Focused Services in Children's Centres Pilot: Final Report*. DWP Research Report 772.

Rotik, M. and Perry, L. (2012) *Insight to support Universal Credit user-centred design*. DWP Research Report 799.

Whitfield, G., Waring, A., Goode, J., Phung, Viet-Hai, Hill, K. and Sutton, L. (2011) *Customers experiences of contact with the Pension, Disability and Carers Service*. DWP Research Report 722.

Annex C   Data tables

This report refers to findings from the DWP claimant service and experience survey 2012 which have not been previously published. This annex therefore provides data tables for the findings provided by this survey and referred to by this report.

In the notes accompanying the tables benefits are referred to as follows:

JSA   Jobseeker's Allowance
ESA   Employment and Support Allowance
IS   Income Support
IB   Incapacity Benefit
DLA   Disability Living Allowance
AA   Attendance Allowance
CA   Carer's Allowance
SP   State Pension
PC   Pension Credit

Table 1

Data for Figure 1: Methods of contact between DWP and claimants

Method of contact	Claimants on unemployment benefits (%)	Claimants on disability and carer benefits, pension related benefits (%)
By telephone	48.2	67.0
By post	43.3	59.3
In person at a Jobcentre Plus office	51.5	n/a
Searched for information online	13.5	11.2
Went online to make an application or update details	8.7	4.1
In person on other premises	3.8	n/a
In person in your own home	2.1	8.3
In person at a Government office	n/a	5.7
By text message	2.1	0.2
By email	1.8	1.7
Unweighted base	2,922	3,990

Notes: contact relates to six months prior to May-July 2012 when fieldwork was conducted; respondents were able to give more than one response to this question and therefore the sum of percentages adds to more than 100; n/a means response option not available on questionnaire; unemployment benefits refer to JSA, ESA, IS and a small number of claimants who were previously on IB and whose benefit status during the survey's reference period was unknown; disability and carer benefits refer to DLA, AA and CA; pension related benefits refer to SP and PC.
Source: DWP claimant service and experience survey 2012.

Table 2

Views of claimants of unemployment benefits on whether written communications from Jobcentre Plus were written in plain language that was easy to understand

	%
Yes	92.5
No	7.1
Don't know	0.4
Unweighted base	1,250

Notes: figures refer to recipients of JSA, ESA or IS and a small number of claimants who were previously on IB and whose benefit status during the survey's reference period was unknown.
Source: DWP claimant service and experience survey 2012.

Table 3

Reasons claimants of unemployment benefits felt written communications from Jobcentre Plus were difficult to understand

What was difficult to understand	%
Generally confusing or difficult to understand	23.8
Terminology/phrasing used difficult to understand	16.5
Too lengthy or long-winded	12.5
I have learning/ reading difficulties	11.5
Wasn't clear what was needed from me/what I had to	7.8
Internal contradiction, or contradicts information from previous letter	7.2
Explanation provided about benefit change	7.0
Internal repetition, or repeats information from previous letter	6.6
Stock letter too impersonal, doesn't relate to my specific situation	6.2
Wasn't clear how amount was calculated	4.7
Explanation provided about appeal process or decision	4.1
Explanation provided about decision/outcome	3.8
Difficulties with English	3.6
Precise payment I would receive	1.9
Wasn't clear what they were asking	1.2
Other answers	16.4
Unweighted base	91

Notes: figures refer to recipients of JSA, ESA or IS and a small number of claimants who were previously on IB and whose benefit status during the survey's reference period was unknown.
Source: DWP claimant service and experience survey 2012.

Table 4

Views of claimants of disability, carers and pension-related benefits on whether written communications from DWP were written in plain language that was easy to understand

	%
Yes	93.1
No	6.0
Don't know	0.9
Unweighted base	2,167

Notes: figures refer to recipients of DLA, AA, CA, SP or PC.
Source: DWP claimant service and experience survey 2012.

Table 5

Reasons claimants of disability, carers and pension-related benefits felt written communications from DWP were difficult to understand

What was difficult to understand	%
Terminology/phrasing used difficult to understand	30.2
Generally confusing or difficult to understand	12.4
Internal repetition, or repeats information from previous letter	6.5
Wasn't clear what they were asking	6.3
Explanation provided about decision/outcome	6.3
Wasn't clear how amount was calculated	6.2
Stock letter too impersonal, doesn't relate to my specific situation	5.0
I have learning/ reading difficulties	4.2
Too lengthy or long-winded	3.6
Internal contradiction, or contradicts information from previous letter	3.4
Wasn't clear what was needed from me/what I had to	2.0
Difficulties with English	1.4
Precise payment I would receive	1.3
Explanation provided about appeal process or decision	0.9
Other answers	23.8
Don't know	2.4
Unweighted base	133

Notes: figures refer to recipients of DLA, AA, CA, SP or PC.
Source: DWP claimant service and experience survey 2012.

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Table 6

Views of claimants of unemployment benefits on whether they were contacted by Jobcentre Plus in the way that they wanted

	%
Yes	88.2
No	8.6
Don't know	3.3
Unweighted base	2,900

Notes: figures refer to recipients of JSA, ESA or IS and a small number of claimants who were previously on IB and whose benefit status during the survey's reference period was unknown; data relates to a specific transaction.
Source: DWP claimant service and experience survey 2012.

Table 7

Preferred method of contact with Jobcentre Plus for claimants of unemployment benefits

Preferred method of contact with Jobcentre Plus	%
In person at a Jobcentre Plus office	29.2
Telephone	29.0
Post	13.4
In person in your own home	12.0
E-mail	11.7
Online to make an application or update details	6.2
Online to search for information	3.9
Text message	3.2
In person on other premises	2.9
Other	4.3
Don't know	1.9
Unweighted base	260

Notes: figures refer to recipients of JSA, ESA or IS and a small number of claimants who were previously on IB and whose benefit status during the survey's reference period was unknown; data relates to a specific transaction and preferences of customers who did not get their preferred method of contact.
Source: DWP claimant service and experience survey 2012.

Table 8

Views of claimants of disability, carers and pension-related benefits on whether they were contacted by DWP in the way that they wanted

	%
Yes	91.3
No	5.7
Don't know	3.0
Unweighted base	3,990

Notes: figures refer to recipients of DLA, AA, CA, SP or PC; data relates to a specific transaction.

Source: DWP claimant service and experience survey 2012.

Table 9

Preferred method of contact with DWP for claimants of disability, carers and pension-related benefits

Preferred method of contact with DWP	%
Post	37.3
Online to make an application or update details	30.8
In person at a Government office	30.5
In person in your own home	24.8
Telephone	24.5
Online to search for information	15.5
E-mail	15.1
Text message	0.5
Other	5.7
Don't know	2.2
Unweighted base	230

Notes: figures refer to recipients of DLA, AA, CA, SP or PC; data relates to a specific transaction and preferences of customers who did not get their preferred method of contact.

Source: DWP claimant service and experience survey 2012.

Annex D   Membership of the Social Security Advisory Committee

Paul Gray (Chair)
Les Allamby*
John Andrews
Adele Baumgardt
Simon Bartley
John Ditch*
Keith Faulkner
Pamela Fitzpatrick
Colin Godbold
Chris Goulden*
Matthew Oakley *
Nicola Smith*
Janet Walker[109]
Diana Whitworth

* Member of the Independent Work Programme sub-group, chaired by John Ditch.

<u>Secretariat</u>

Denise Whitehead (Secretary)
Martin Farmer (Researcher)
Paul Mackrell (Assistant Secretary)
Matthew Moon (Assistant Secretary)
Dean Walton (Assistant Secretary)

We thank Chris Gunning (DWP) for his assistance with the focus groups.

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[109] Until 30 June 2013.

SOCIAL SECURITY
ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Social Security Advisory Committee
5th Floor Caxton House
Tothill Street
London SW1H 9NA

Telephone: 0207 829 3354
E-mail: ssac@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Follow the Committee on Twitter @The_SSAC