

Communications in the benefits system

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

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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 Office³ and the House of Commons⁴ 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

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

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.

Key findings and recommendations

The quality of claimant communications can be directed in part by overarching government policy on communications. The UK Government Communications Plan⁶ 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.

⁵ SSAC (2013) The implementation of Universal Credit and the support needs of claimants, Occasional Paper No. 10

⁶ HM Government, Government Communications Plan 2013-14

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.

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.

⁷ Written Ministerial Statement, Universal Credit Update, 10.7.13

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. 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.

⁸ DWP, Universal Credit Evaluation Framework, December 2012