



Department
for Work &
Pensions



Additional Support for **DWP Customers**

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Background

In the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) we are committed to providing services where every customer can experience fair access and opportunity, helping to ensure our services support as many people as possible.

We understand that individuals' circumstances and customer needs differ and can change over time, and some customers may find it more difficult to make use of our services.

- We want everyone in DWP to be able to support our customers in a manner appropriate to their needs. For example, our mental health training helps empower our colleagues with the skills to support customers.
- We know that some of our customers may, at times in their lives, still require additional support and we have in place specialist services, roles, and procedures to provide this, such as the DWP Visiting Service and Advanced Customer Support Senior Leaders.
- We are committed to listening to our customers and their representatives to understand their needs, and we use this and other feedback to improve our services for example through the Serious Case Panel and the Customer Experience Survey.

- Building on the work of DWP's Customer Experience teams, this document sets out how DWP is currently supporting customers with additional support needs and explains what we have planned and our future aspirations, considering new technology and modernisation of our services.
- Please note this document does not set out the totality of the services and products DWP deliver, and more information can be found in [The DWP Annual Report and Accounts](#). Due to the differing devolution settlements in Scotland and Wales, some services referenced may not operate Great Britain wide.



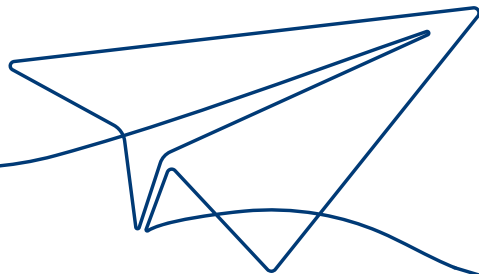
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We are focused on ensuring our customers get the support they need

2.1

Customers experiencing vulnerability are supported when using our services

- We provide additional support for customers at serious risk of harm, neglect, or abuse through our network of frontline operational colleagues and Advanced Customer Support Senior Leaders (ACSSLs). ACSSLs coach and mentor DWP colleagues across our services to support customers experiencing or at risk of vulnerability. ACSSLs supported over 12,000 customer cases in 2022-23.
- We have a departmental network of over **450 national visiting officers** who provide visits for customers requiring additional support to access our benefits and services.
- We know it is important for our colleagues to handle challenging situations effectively and with confidence. We have introduced a mandatory two-day mental health training that every new joiner to service delivery receives as part of their induction programme. As of August 2023, **51,000 operational delivery colleagues** have undertaken this training.
- We have an established **Six Point Plan** for DWP colleagues to follow when they identify a customer who may be at risk of harming themselves. This helps to ensure the customer is given the appropriate support and may involve notifying emergency services in the event where they are at immediate risk. The Six Point Plan is under continuous review to ensure it aligns with current thinking on mental health.



- In response to the Covid-19 pandemic we introduced **telephone and video health assessments**, which we continue to deliver alongside face-to-face and paper-based assessments. To help make health assessments less stressful information is available in advance to help customers understand the process, and customers can bring companions to the consultation and have interpreters to provide support.
- We also provide additional support to help customers manage their money. We work with the **Money and Pension Service** under its brand name **MoneyHelper**, who offer free independent and impartial money and debt advice and indebted customers are routinely offered a referral with the majority of those meeting the criteria taking up the offer.
- We strive to set repayment plans that are affordable and sustainable, encouraging customers to contact us if they are unable to afford the proposed repayment rate, whilst enforcing the obligation to repay where it is appropriate to do so. When a customer makes contact, we may be able to reduce the rate of repayment, or temporarily suspend repayments depending on the customer's financial circumstances. There is also the Debt Respite Scheme **'breathing space'** that allows for a temporary protection from creditors.

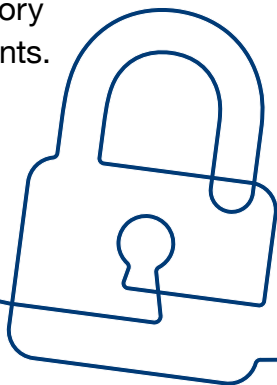
- We deliver a range of benefits and services which strive to meet the needs of our customers effectively. For example, in Universal Credit (UC):



- **'Help to claim'** is an initiative that provides tailored practical support to anyone who needs help making a new claim to UC. This service is provided by Citizens Advice and can help with activities such as online applications or preparing for a first jobcentre appointment. Since its inception in April 2019, it has supported nearly 900,000 people.
- We have designed our process to include support for customers as they transition to UC. For Jobseeker's Allowance customers we've successfully utilised our face-to-face interventions in Jobcentres to help customers understand what they need to do to safely transition to UC. Where we are not in regular contact with customers we can call or arrange a visit to ensure our customers are clear on what they need to do to make a UC claim and how to do it.
- When we review UC claims to ensure they are accurate we talk to our customers to explain the process and to identify those who may need additional support, including support for the digitally excluded. Our colleagues are trained to be aware of, and can recognise the signs of someone who could be at risk of harm or have complex needs.

2.2 Improving customer access to our services

- DWP's **Digital Accessibility Policy** ensures a consistent approach to accessibility across the department. This policy aims to increase education around how to make products and services accessible. We've found that over the past year, the awareness and understanding of accessibility requirements has continued to increase.
 - **Mandatory Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED)** learning has been delivered across all job roles and extended to contractors. The aim of this learning is to upskill all our employees on our equality duties and encourages the learner to consider behaviours about how we work with each other and with our customers. This has been completed by over 95% of colleagues and is mandatory for new joiners and consultants.
 - We have created an internal **Customer Accessibility Hub** which was launched in September 2023. As a result, all colleagues can access training, toolkits, and information on disabilities and how to support our customers in one place.
 - We have worked in partnership with colleagues in Microsoft to develop the **Accessibility Fundamentals** learning which has been delivered to over 25,000 frontline operational colleagues in the jobcentre. This enables our work coaches to understand how Microsoft tools can support jobseekers with disabilities to better use technology helping them gain and retain employment in an increasingly digital workplace.
 - As of January 2024 **Personal Independence Payment (PIP)** customers who require email as a reasonable adjustment have been able to access some letters via the
- GOV.UK Notify online portal giving almost instant access to correspondence.
- The department also has in place a wide range of reasonable adjustments for customers, providing communications in a range of **alternative formats** to ensure that the information is presented in an accessible way. Over the last year a number of necessary refinements have been made to internal guidance and processes to improve delivery of alternative format provision particularly for PIP and Employment and Support Allowance. Enhancements have also been made to debt and complaint systems to ensure customer requirements can be recorded accurately.



- **Video Relay Services (VRS)** is a video telecommunication service that allows deaf or hard of hearing individuals to communicate to people with hearing in real-time using video telephones and a sign language interpreter. We successfully introduced VRS for inbound telephone calls across all benefits and service lines.
- We have created and published more than 100 **British Sign Language** videos on our YouTube sign language channel ([DWP Sign - YouTube](#)) over the last five years.
- Additionally, we have produced bite-size **YouTube explainer videos** ([DWP - YouTube](#)) for several DWP products and services, which educate our customer on their rights and obligations. The videos have received around 400,000 hits.
- We worked with stakeholders and industry experts for visual impairments to redesign our form templates, creating a uniform design with greatly improved accessibility that works with common assistive software such as JAWS (Job Access with Speech), NVDA (NonVisual Desktop Access) and ZoomText.



2.3 Partnerships are used to improve our service offer

- The **Operational Stakeholder Engagement Forum** has been running for several years and is a DWP chaired forum currently made up of over 50 representatives from welfare rights organisations and charities such as Rightsnet, Mencap, Citizens Advice, Disability Rights, Refuge, and Shelter. We use this forum as an opportunity to discuss and gather feedback on our services. This collaboration provides early access to valuable insights about our customers and diverse perspectives. We draw upon our stakeholders' expert knowledge about the needs of our customers.
- The DWP **Reasonable Adjustment Forum (RAF)** enables us to regularly engage with external stakeholders and disability organisations to share insight and to help identify, test, and recommend improvements to services provided for those with accessible communication needs. Through the RAF we have worked collaboratively with forum members representing multiple disability groups to improve the accessibility of several products. For example, we worked with a range of members to strengthen the alternative format screen in Universal Credit (UC) and change the language to make it more accessible. Additionally, we made it easier for claimants to flag their accessibility needs on the UC site via changes to the on-screen options available for selection.
- DWP is a member of the **Institute of Customer Service** which allows access to a wealth of resources covering research, training, and networks. This membership helps inform the service we offer to our customers.
- As well as national partnerships, we have **comprehensive local partnerships** established to support our customers in their locality. For example, the dedicated DWP roles such as Disability Employment Advisors, Prison Work Coaches, Partnership Managers, Visiting Officers and ACSSLs collaborate with local partner organisations. By leveraging the insights gained from these engagements, DWP drives positive change to better meet the needs of our customers and communities.



2.4 Our organisational procedures and actions prioritise customer needs

- The [Serious Case Panel](#) makes recommendations to address themes and issues identified from serious cases to prevent similar cases occurring in the future. It meets quarterly and is made up of the department's most senior leaders, including the Permanent Secretary and all Director-Generals. It is chaired by a non-executive Director and includes the Independent Case Examiner and Chief Medical Advisor.
- **Serious Case Panel** outcomes have included changes to processes around stopping payments and making large payments, which helps to protect customers in vulnerable circumstances. Minutes of Serious Case Panel meetings are published on GOV.UK.
- We use the **Government Debt Management Vulnerability Toolkit**, and have recently introduced a DWP Debt Management Vulnerability Framework to provide guidance for advisers on how to support customers who are or are at risk of becoming vulnerable including sign posting to specialist support. This is being embedded across Debt Management and part of this involves advisers undertaking annual refresher training on identifying and supporting customers experiencing vulnerability.



- We have developed and implemented a **Quality Assurance Framework**, which sets out how the department will evaluate and improve the quality of our services to ensure our customers receive high standards of support. This framework has recently been expanded to include Advanced Customer Support Standards, which sets out how we identify and support customers experiencing vulnerability.
- We are committed to understanding our customers' needs and have driven organisational learning through **Internal Process Reviews (IPR)**. The principal reason for conducting IPRs is to ensure we learn lessons where the customer experience has fallen short of expected standards, and to see what improvements we can make from a review of the case. This has supported work to improve customer journeys within individual service lines right through to cross-cutting changes such as making payments safely and changes to visiting guidance.
- We actively use customer feedback to improve our processes and enhance overall customer experience. DWP carries out a [Customer Experience Survey](#) every quarter. This gives us information directly from customers and helps us to understand their experiences. Along with wider customer and colleague insight, the survey is used to identify areas of improvement.
- [The Independent Case Examiner \(ICE\)](#) provides a complaint resolution and investigation service for DWP customers. As part of their review, they can identify service improvements. A recent change based on feedback from ICE has enabled Debt Management colleagues to more easily identify customers who request a letter in an alternative format.
- We appointed a new **Chief Medical Advisor** in September 2023 and have additionally strengthened our policy team of clinicians. These changes will help to ensure that health related vulnerabilities are carefully assessed to make more informed decisions on eligibility for benefits or support. We further reviewed the internal clinical governance with a plan in place to provide robust assurance to the department to be implemented in 2024.
- We have set up a new requisite dedicated team to provide assurance, share good practice and identify risk relating to accessibility of services across DWP. The team is developing an Accessibility Assurance Framework that will set clear standards for departmental service design and communications.
- Furthermore, the joint **DWP and Department of Health and Social Care, Work and Health Unit** works to improve the health and employment outcomes for disabled people and those with health conditions. We do this through challenging siloed ways of working to deliver evidence-based programmes, trials, and tests. We work with employers, local areas, and wider government to remove the additional barriers these groups face when in and out of work, with a focus on better aligning the work and health systems.
- Our **User Centred Design (UCD)** practices ensure we put the needs of our customers, especially the most vulnerable, at the heart of our design processes by embedding UCD capabilities across DWP.

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We are leveraging our technology and changing the way we do things to improve the customer experience

3.1 Using technology to improve our service offer for the future

- We have established a **Generative AI (Artificial Intelligence) Lighthouse Programme** as part of a commitment by DWP to safely accelerate the use of AI. The Generative AI Lighthouse Programme centres around an evidence-based, ‘test and learn’ approach to the adoption of Generative AI – in a safe, transparent, ethical, and considered way. The programme aims to explore where Generative AI can best add value for colleagues and customers, including using AI for administrative tasks to allow more time for our colleagues to support customers.
- We are always looking to improve the ways in which we can identify customers that need support across our many services, including through telephone services and written correspondence. We are exploring how AI will help us identify customers who need support at the earliest opportunity.
- We use speech analytics software to transcribe and analyse calls providing useful insight including where a customer may be at risk of harm. We plan to further expand the capability to identify customers experiencing vulnerability within the new telephony system we are procuring.
- We recognise that customers may want to contact us in a variety of ways. We are implementing a web portal that will allow customers to self-serve simple information enquiries relating to their benefits and to notify us of changes in their circumstances, in one place. This will relieve the emotional burden many of our customers, especially the vulnerable, feel when having to talk to DWP for simple and routine enquiries.

- In addition, we are introducing a portal for DWP colleagues, which provides a holistic view of the customer and their interactions with DWP across all their benefits. This will make it easier for colleagues to support customers at first contact for all their benefits, and to tailor their support for the customer based on their information and history.
- Our Advanced Customer Support Digital Service is in early stages of development and will support our colleagues as they manage customers requiring additional support with accurate and timely data,

guidance, and digitised processes so they can focus on supporting customers in their time of need.

- We are modernising our service to introduce new digital channels that will make it easier for customers with additional needs to receive support in a manner which better meets their needs and alleviates the pressures a telephone interaction may generate.
- We are working on a new project with Microsoft, exploring an ambition around connecting Assistive Technology to employers. Aimed at complimenting

the [Access to Work](#) programme – our ambition is to ensure employers have better information about fully utilising the technology already in their workplaces and/or technology used for home working to open new possibilities around the recruitment, retention, and job design for those with a disability or health condition.

- Building on the Video Relay Service we are now testing the platform to enable outbound telephone calls. Upon successful completion of the testing phase this will be rolled out across our services.

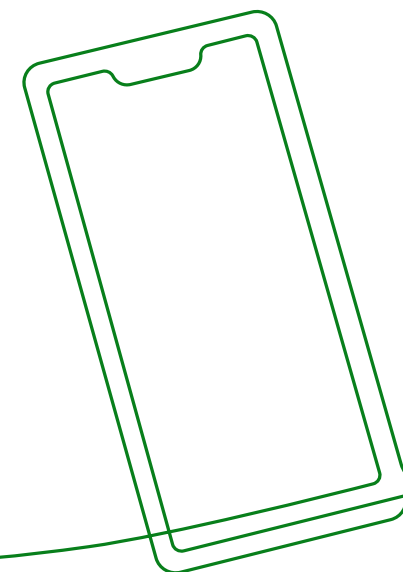


Access to Work
Making work possible

3.2 Strengthening our approach to prioritise customer needs

- The **Customer Proximity Programme** has been created with the aim of bringing the customer experience closer to senior leaders across DWP. We regularly share a random selection of anonymised customer call recordings with Senior Civil Servants. The calls act as a stimulus to Senior Leaders to ask more questions, identify trends, launch related pieces of work, or review the impact of their decisions on customer experience.
- We are exploring ways to integrate a **Trauma Informed Approach** into our service, which recognises that trauma can have a profound impact on a person's physical, emotional, spiritual and psychological wellbeing and that services such as the DWP have a powerful role in creating safe and empowering journeys of support which are compassionate to these experiences.
- The **DWP Visiting Service** is testing opportunities to offer a flexible service that meets the needs of customers when, where and how they require. This includes supporting customers with a face-to-face service in co-located DWP and partner premises, enabling customers to access multiple services in one location. We are also exploring other modes of delivery including testing a video call approach.
- As part of the **British Sign Language (BSL) Act 2022**, we are currently drafting our 5 year action plan that will be published later on in 2024. The plan will advance our BSL strategy ensuring best practice and proven BSL communication standards continue.
- The **modernisation of retirement services**, which includes Attendance Allowance forms a key part of DWP's Service Modernisation Programme. A key objective of the team is to

understand how existing services such as Attendance Allowance should operate in the future and understand the opportunities of how services can be accessed easier and faster for citizens. From November 2022, Attendance Allowance began testing a new online claim form in a controlled phase of development. DWP are currently inviting several citizens per week into the controlled test trial from a variety of sources. We will continue to engage with external partners such as Age UK to inform this approach.



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Our aim is to provide every customer with fair access and opportunity

- We have made good progress on this so far and have plans to go even further. We will achieve this by harnessing technology to modernise our services, delivering customer-led organisational design and procedures, and strengthening our partnership with others including customers, colleagues, and charities.
- We will continue to modernise our services making use of technology to improve the customer experience, through a range of important activities such as the Service Modernisation Programme, and the Health Transformation Programme.
- We will integrate a more trauma informed approach which will support the delivery of better outcomes and bring DWP in line with best practice for customer experience and colleague support.
- We will use our partnership networks to identify the changing needs of our customers, using this insight to inform our service delivery.
- We will go further on transparency and publish additional information regarding the support the department provides to customers experiencing vulnerability through its Advanced Customer Support Teams, and the learning we take from their cases and circumstances. Plans are for this to be published in late 2024.



