



The Future of Social Security in Scotland:

Views from inside the system

About this report

This report was commissioned by the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) Union through the Union Modernisation Fund (UMF).

Paul Spicker, who is Emeritus Professor in Public Policy at Robert Gordon University, is the co-author of this report. His books include *Poverty and social security* (1993), *How social security works* (2011) and *What's wrong with social security benefits?* (2017). He blogs on social security issues at <http://blog.spicker.uk>.

PCS represent around 190,000 members in the civil service and related agencies, bodies and contractors, including over 50,000 in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). In Scotland, PCS has over 24,000 members including staff working for the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament.

Acknowledgements

The research would not have happened without support from the Scottish Trade Union Congress (STUC) Union Modernisation Fund which is funded by the Scottish Government.

The researchers are grateful to the PCS lay representatives who helped organise and facilitate the group interview sessions.

Administrative support from the PCS staff in the Glasgow office was invaluable in analysing the responses.

The biggest thanks must go to the PCS members who participated in the research in their own time. The level of response shows how much PCS members want to see a better, fairer social security system, and we hope that this report can help progress that aim.

Contents

1. Executive Summary	4
2. Introduction	6
3. The research	8
The scope of the research	8
The participants	9
Methodology	9
4. Social Security policy	11
4i. The problems of the current system	11
4ii. The priorities for the Scottish Government: Using devolved powers	14
4iii. The aims of a new system	16
5. Managing benefits	20
5i. Problems with the administration	20
5ii. The role of the benefit officer	28
6. The experience of claimants	33
7. Conclusion	39
Appendix 1: Questionnaire for individuals	43
Appendix 2: Group Interview Schedule	44

1. Executive Summary

The Scottish Government are in the process of setting up a social security agency to take on devolved powers for eleven benefit areas. Although this only represents a relatively small part of the overall UK social security system, it is still a mammoth task for a government with little experience of processing payments of this scale.

PCS recognise the opportunity this presents to radically improve punitive and cruel 'welfare' in Scotland. We believe that the UK social security system has broken from the founding principles of the welfare state, abandoning both universality and the welfare safety net, systematically replacing them with a system in which claimants are blamed for their own poverty. Those in receipt of benefits are mistrusted, scapegoated and suffer from the erosion of levels of payment, conditionality and sanctions.

In April 2017, a PCS Scotland booklet "The Future of Social Security in Scotland"¹, outlined our view, determined by our membership, that the provision of social security for every citizen is a fundamental human and democratic right.

Staff employed by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) have many years of experience in delivering social security under UK governments of different political control and ideological approaches to benefit policies. We, as their union, have unbiased access to this wealth of knowledge which we can use to help build a better social security system in Scotland.

We have amassed evidence, in the form of this research, to support our call for a better social security system across Scotland and the rest of the UK. We will use the evidence we have gathered to directly inform our discussions with Ministers, the Scottish Parliament, and Scottish Government officials.

For the research, we engaged with 228 DWP workers from offices across Scotland to seek their views on the future of social security, in light of newly devolved powers to the Scottish government.

The workers told us of a system in chaos, with welfare policy they do not support, and crucially they do not think works. However, light at the end of the tunnel can be seen, if workers at the heart of social security are listened to. We have summarised their recommendations to the Scottish Government, and DWP, as:

Provide dignity through a decent Living Wage standard of living

Social security, as a component of the welfare state, should ensure a decent standard of living free from poverty. Continuing with just the benefit areas as they are will only act as a sticking plaster, and will not making tangible improvements to the lives of those in receipt of benefits. Mitigating the UK government's policies on the reserved aspects of social security can be managed by the Scottish Government if they are prepared to allocated adequate funding.

¹ PCS, 2017, PCS: The Future of Social Security in Scotland.

Ensure services are publicly delivered through the social security agency

DWP staff have seen the negative consequences of private sector involvement, whether it be a poor health assessment report or an individual who has been ignored by an employability programme provider. Outsourcing of IT, and IT help, has also had a negative impact on the ability of staff to provide a good service, as well as being a huge financial drain on public money. PCS do not believe that privatisation works - there should not be profit in supporting the sick and unemployed.

Design a transparent, easy to understand system with a choice of access

The many different benefits with various, and often counteracting rules, can be a minefield for even those with knowledge of the social security system. Staff feel that the public are at a disadvantage and are sometimes put off from claiming by these barriers. Staff delivering social security now believe that face to face services must be offered, and must be a viable local choice. Not only does this restore respect for the claimants, but helps the staff build up a relationship and empathy with those they serve. Addressing these straightforward issues would immediately improve the contact experience for the public.

Provide staff with comprehensive training to allow them to see issues through to their completion

The fragmented structure in DWP means that different areas of the business do not relate to each other, and creates a system where workers are unable to take ownership of cases. Training on benefit rules, processes and has been radically reduced and is regarded as woefully inadequate by nearly every one of the research participants. Staff based in these different arms have little knowledge or appreciation of what the other does. Autonomy which allows a worker to 'manage' a query or case from a member of the public, from beginning to end, would benefit the employee and the service user.

IT systems that are fully operational and effective from the outset

The areas generating most feedback from participants were poor ICT systems and poor quality training for staff throughout current social security delivery. Archaic IT programmes were criticised, as were new systems designed for new benefits such as Universal Credit. The 'off-the-shelf' packages used by DWP are not built for purpose, they struggle to cope with the capacity needed for the number of users and claimants. For IT to be effective, financial investment, testing and proper training is essential at the outset of the agency.

Avoid replicating DWP management style in future social security delivery

The move to centralised and virtual ways of working in large processing or contact centre sites has changed the nature of social security delivery in DWP. A heavily monitored, digital world which focuses on statistics rather than people has led to dissatisfactory service for many service users, and very low morale for those working there. In that environment, staff feel little attachment to their job or the work they do.

After an introduction and explanation of the research methods used, the report is broken down into three main sections; social security policy, managing benefits and the customer experience. This report will provide analysis of direct quotations from DWP workers on each of the above recommendations.

2. Introduction

Following the Scottish Independence referendum and the Smith Commission in 2014, the UK government announced the devolution of some social security powers to the Scottish Government as part of the Scotland Act 2016. The eleven benefit areas covered are:

- Disability Living Allowance (DLA),
- Personal Independence Payment (PIP),
- Attendance Allowance (AA),
- Severe disablement allowance (SDA),
- Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit (IIDB).
- Carers Allowance (CA)
- Sure Start Maternity Grants (SSMG)
- Funeral Payments,
- Winter Fuel and Cold Weather Payments,
- Discretionary Housing payments,
- Limited powers in relation to Universal Credit in respect of payment options.

These benefits equate to 15% of the UK social security system, though there is an additional power to create completely new or top-up of existing benefits which can be exercised by the Scottish Government to address perceived shortfalls in the UK system.²

Once the new agency is fully operational, around £2.9 billion of social security spend, covering 1.4 million people in Scotland, will come within the responsibility of the Scottish Ministers. This is unprecedented in the Scottish context and will involve processing the Scottish Government processing the same number of payments in a week as is currently makes every year.³

New devolved powers on employability were exercised from 1 April 2017 to replace the UK Government's Work Choice and Work Programme schemes. Initially, these new measures will operate on a one year basis until March 31 2018 in advance of Scottish Government-led procurement for a new employability programme.

The Scottish Government held a public consultation on the future of social security from July to October 2016. Analysis of the 526 group and individual responses were announced in the midst of the research work in February 2017. The Minister for Social Security Jeanne Freeman has launched 'experience panels', which are made up of benefit claimants and those with recent experience of the benefit system.

The purpose of experience panels is to meet the Scottish Government's commitment to the 'co-production' approach, defined by the New Economics Foundation as

² SPICe briefing 16/50, Scotland Act 2016: Discretionary payments and top-up benefits, June 2016 http://www.parliament.scot/ResearchBriefingsAndFactsheets/S5/SB_16-50_Scotland_Act_2016-Discretionary_Payments_and_New_Benefits.pdf

³ Scottish Government, policy memorandum, paragraph 203 [http://www.parliament.scot/Social%20Security%20\(Scotland\)%20Bill/SPBill18PMS052017.pdf](http://www.parliament.scot/Social%20Security%20(Scotland)%20Bill/SPBill18PMS052017.pdf)

delivering public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their neighbours.⁴ PCS is not opposed to the concept of co-production in principle, but to be effective it must include workers involved with social security. As the primary union which represents them, PCS, as we can act as their collective voice in co-design.

At the close of this research, the Minister announced the outline business case to the Scottish Parliament on 27th April, setting out the preferred option of:

“A central agency with enhanced phone and online support, which incorporates face-to-face pre-claims and support services locally in existing public sector locations and with assessments undertaken in a manner that is appropriate for policy choices that will be made as the final business case is progressed.”⁵

The Minister also publicly committed to working with PCS on the consideration of issues such as staff transfers, which is being progressed through partnership discussion.

PCS has welcomed the open approach shown from the Scottish Government so far in establishing meaningful consultation with those affected by social security changes. We have said that key to the effective delivery of social security to those in need will be ensuring that dignity and respect is extended to those employed by the new agency, as well as the recipients.

As the union representing over 50,000 members of staff delivering social security in DWP, we are fully aware of the failings of the current UK welfare policy and the devastating impact it has on those who access services and benefits. Our members have a wealth of knowledge and opinions on social security, which are often constrained in the face of the UK government’s welfare reform agenda.

In April 2017, a PCS Scotland booklet “The Future of Social Security in Scotland”⁶, outlined our view, determined by our membership, that the provision of social security for every citizen is a fundamental human and democratic right.

We decided to build evidence, in the form of this research, to support our public campaigning calls for a better social security system across Scotland and the rest of the UK, and to directly inform our discussions with Scottish Government as part of the consultation and co-production process.

⁴ Co-production Network, <http://coproductionnetwork.com/page/about-coproduction>

⁵ Scottish Government, 2017, Outline Business Case for the Agency for Social Security in Scotland, <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0051/00517239.pdf>

⁶ PCS, 2017, PCS: The Future of Social Security in Scotland.

3. The Research

The aims of this research were to gather and analyse insight from DWP workers on the operation of social security delivery in Scotland. This covered the devolved and reserved benefit areas, with a nod to the potential of further devolution in the future. A further objective was to use the research as an opportunity to raise the profile of the union in DWP workplaces, to engage workers about their jobs, thus giving them a greater say on issues which will affect their lives now or in the future.

The findings of the research will be presented to both the Scottish Government and DWP officials, including MSPs and the Minister for Social Security, and used to influence their future decisions on policy and process. Preliminary findings were presented at a reception in the Scottish Parliament on 18th April, which the Minister attended.

The Scottish Government's Fair Work Convention aspires to make Scotland a world leading nation in fair work; "The Fair Work Framework" published this year states

"We believe that fair work is work that offers effective voice, opportunity, security, fulfilment and respect; that balances the rights and responsibilities of employers and workers and that can generate benefits for individuals, organisations and society."⁷

PCS believe that consulting staff through this research will improve their 'effective voice' in developing policy which affects their working lives but also the lives of all citizens of Scotland.

In the course of this research, we were told: "No-one's listened for years." For too long, DWP workers have had no say in how they administer the welfare state, and have been encouraged not to raise or challenge the political decisions which they are told to implement. By facilitating co-production we can give them back some control over issues affecting them.

The scope of the research

The research was led by a full-time officer working for PCS, working in conjunction with Professor Paul Spicker on research design, methodology and analysis. In terms of democratic accountability within the union, a working party of full and lay time PCS representatives oversaw the work, headed by PCS National President, Janice Godrich.

⁷ Fair Work Convention, 2016, Fair Work Convention Framework, <http://www.fairworkconvention.scot/framework/FairWorkConventionFrameworkFull.pdf>

Engagement was open to all DWP workers, rather than just PCS members. This was done to remove any potential allegations of bias, but also to allow non-members to interact with the union in a positive manner.

At the outset, the aim was to hold small, hour-long engagement sessions for 8-10 people in DWP workplaces across Scotland, including a variation of workplace type and a geographical mix within the sample. However, DWP refused staff any paid time off to participate in the research, meaning that staff would be required to attend in their own time outside of working hours or on breaks. This resulted in more of a drop-in approach in some workplaces, with staff staying for approximately 30 minutes, although some did stay for the full hour.

The participants

Group sessions were arranged in

- Glasgow Atlantic Quay (PIP processing)
- Glasgow Northgate (Universal Credit service centre)
- Glasgow Springburn (PIP processing and jobcentre)
- Clydebank (Working Age benefit processing and jobcentre)
- Paisley Contact Centre (Working age benefit contact centre)
- Motherwell (Pension Centre)
- Kilmarnock (Fraud and Error processing and jobcentre)
- Falkirk (Child Maintenance processing and contact centre)
- Edinburgh Leith (Jobcentre)
- Inverness (Working age benefit processing and debt management)

142 attended group interviews and 86 completed individual questionnaires: 26 of those worked in telephony, 34 in benefits processing and 17 in decision-making roles. There are approximately 5000 staff working in DWP Scotland, so the participants in this study equate to just under 5% of all staff. This is unusually wide-ranging for a qualitative study.

Sessions were arranged across a two-hour lunch period, and in the case of Glasgow Northgate, across two days due to the size of the workplace (over 1000 staff work there).

It was important to reassure participants that their involvement would be anonymous and not personally identifiable. This enabled those responding to be frank, with the confidence that they would not face retribution from their employer for 'speaking out'. Therefore no data was collected on diversity or length of service, and we have not identified the locations from which specific comments were made.

Methodology

The aim of this research was to explore views about a wide range of complex issues. It was also intended to engage workers in their workplaces, to give them a voice and to allow them to identify issues and experiences. This is often associated in the literature with qualitative methods, which are widely used to explore issues in a flexible

and responsive way: but in technical terms the research is better described as abductive research, which seeks to understand the meaning of actions and reasons from the perspective of those involved in the process.⁸ This study was trying to find out what the issues are, and the best way to do that is not to assume that we knew the answers before we started.

The methods which were used to gather views were a combination of individual questionnaires and group interviews. The individual questionnaires used qualitative, open questions. The 'semi-structured' schedules used for group interviews covered the main thematic issues in social security policy and delivery, allowing space for any broader comments. The questions used both for individuals and group sessions are reproduced in an appendix to this report.

The data were processed by open coding, often associated with 'grounded theory'.⁹ This is based on the thematic organisation of responses. Usually, in qualitative research, statements are taken to be meaningful if they are corroborated or cross-confirmed.¹⁰

The responses reported in this report are qualitative, not quantitative. As the sample is not numerically representative, and the answers are not in a standard format, it does not make much sense to quantify the responses together. It does however matter if the issue is raised by several people. For example, we did not ask people specifically to tell us what happened when a service user changes their address: the issue was raised several times by workers concerned about co-ordination, communication, information systems and effective administration. If something is said independently by several people, this is a form of cross-confirmation. Several of the comments in this report were clearly and strongly corroborated by others working in the DWP. Though we cannot provide categorical proof that the statements from participants are factual, the corroboration and the context provided enables us to state with some certainty that they represent the true situation.

⁸ N Blaikie, 2010, *Designing social research*, Brighton: Polity.

⁹ B Glaser, A Strauss, 1967, *The discovery of grounded theory*, Harthorne NY: Aldine de Gruyter.

¹⁰ A Bryman, R Burgess, 1994, *Analysing qualitative data*, London: Routledge, pp 4-6

4. Social Security policy

In “What’s wrong with social security benefits?”¹¹, Paul Spicker identified several core problems with the operation of social security in Britain. It begins with the sheer size of the operation: any system dealing with millions of people is going to be tested to the limits, and it has to be expected that people’s circumstances will not conform to predictions and that mistakes will be made. The test of a system is how well it copes with those issues. People need social security in complex situations, often when they are most vulnerable. Their personal situations are liable to change. Many of the rules governing benefits are presumptuous - they assume that agencies and systems have more capacity to get and process information, or to deal with the issues, than anyone could. Sometimes the benefit system is overcomplicated; conditionality, selecting people and personalisation make massive, and often impossible, demands of the service. Correcting mistakes depends heavily on an adversarial process that puts the burden of straightening things out onto the claimant.

Many of these issues are reflected by workers in their responses. Participants expressed views in respect to how the Scottish Government should use their devolved powers, and where there are problems in current UK welfare policy. This approach from respondents was a common theme throughout the research.

4i. The problems of the current system

Workers were concerned that claimants were stigmatised by politicians and the general public alike.

They’ve changed all the language around benefits. It wasn’t referred to as welfare before. There is a wider political agenda now around calling people strikers or skivers. It should be a system that cares about people.

Benefits are seen as a hand out, they should be a right.

Conditionality, which refers to the rules which claimants must fulfil in order to be given benefits, was thought to be unfair where too much is asked of individuals or they do not understand the rules.

Conditionality also is used to exclude the most vulnerable.

A fundamental overhaul removing the harassment method of getting people in work. Removal of the conditionality sanctions, work programme outsourcing, and job applications.

The barriers to access are quite high for those most vulnerable. Conditionality also is used to exclude the most vulnerable.

¹¹ Paul Spicker, 2017, What’s wrong with social security benefits?, Bristol: Policy Press

No support at all was expressed for the conditionality and sanction regime which covers Jobseekers Allowance, Employment Support Allowance, and Universal Credit. Whilst some were calling for less severe sanctions or a review of the system, most of those referring to sanctions want to see an end to the system all together.

Sanctions now though, are causing problems. The ones with long term issues are getting benefits claims but those who are really wanting to go back to work are getting hit to sanctions.

A fundamental overhaul removing the harassment method of getting people in work. Removal of the conditionality sanctions, work programme outsourcing, and job applications.

SANCTIONS SHOULD GO! Benefits should be about preventing poverty not putting people in it.

The Work Programme, a mandatory employment support scheme for the long-term unemployed managed by private sector companies was viewed with derision by those staff who had come into contact with claimants taking part. The 'cherry picking' of claimants, a practice criticised by the National Audit Office¹² and Work and Pensions Select Committee, who are easier to move into work means that those who more difficult needs are left without assistance.¹³

People who are furthest away from work go on the Work Programme, come back and they're still the furthest away from work.

The problem with the Work Programme ... the Work Programme focus on job-ready people, [but] they're only there because they're long term unemployed.

The system was not helping people to move into work.

A lot of our time is spent with customers who believe they would not be financially better off by working. An improved JSA system which is more supportive would hopefully go some way to resolving this barrier.

People are better off now than people who are working. That shouldn't be the case. There needs to be individual circumstances to be able to be taken in to account though.

Participants felt that the focus on penalising claimants who fail to meet conditionality, and lack of adequate staffing levels, means that those who want to move back into work are not given the support they need.

Support and encourage customers in to work, with caseloads capped at an agreed level.

¹² D Finn, 2011, The design of the Work Programme in international context, NAO: https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/10121701_work_programme_design.pdf

¹³ HoC Work and Pensions Committee, 2013, Can the Work Programme work for all user groups? <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmworpen/162/162.pdf>

Many claimants who have worked all their lives suddenly find themselves claiming UC, have told me on the phone they do not receive enough support to get back into work. This may be due to staff shortages in Jobcentres and unrealistic stats.

People are being shelved.

There was some limited support for the concept of Universal Credit expressed, though not the way it has been introduced.

I love the theory of Universal Credit; it's fantastic, but the implementation is the problem.

A more streamlined service - UC seems to go some way but not enough and under planned.

However, there was far more opposition to UC, both from workplaces which handle UC and those that do not. The design and I.T. systems, the implementation, and the extended waiting period for payments were all criticised by staff.

People wouldn't have to claim benefits if they were people were on decent wages. Now Big Brother is telling us to come in to the office and making us come in till half 6 at night and making us come in at 8 in the morning to answer phone calls to get us geared up, to punish these poor people. The lowest paid people always get punished. I don't agree with Universal Credit, I think it's evil.

I never believed in UC. I think it's a terrible idea. The IT has wasted millions.

There was particular concern expressed about the assessment process for people who are ill. It was far too mechanistic, and claimants found it difficult to relate to their personal circumstances:

They (assessors) concentrate too much on the script. It's a point scoring exercise.

What shocks people most is when they get zero points.

It's like I Daniel Blake - people want to be positive about their illness, to say how they are on a good day, but that's not the point. You should be filling it in as if you were on your worst day. And the system punishes people for trying their best and being positive.

The system was not open to evidence.

They stopped her benefits as she wasn't disabled enough. Paperwork just came in to say she was able to work. Her doctor had to fight for her. ... I just feel that the doctor's statement should be listened to and there shouldn't be anyone able to overturn that. You have people physically incapable of work but the system doesn't reflect that and doctors are ignored.

I think doctors should have a say in this.

Give case managers back ability to contact specialists who know claimants best.

The critical tone of these comments may be surprising to those whose only contact with benefit officials has been shaped by the formal system. Benefit officers have a wide range of personal experience, and not just from their work with claimants. Several DWP officials volunteered their personal experience. They may have close relatives who claim:

My husband is claiming JSA. Absolute nightmare. Never claimed benefits before but he's tarred with the same brush as others

I've had to just fill in a sixty page plus application for my mother and I can't face it. I work in the Department, and even I can't face that.

My sister went to a PIP tribunal ... Luckily, we have welfare officers in the Council. We had to rely very, very heavily on them during the process.

Others had had to claim in their own right.

I've paid in all my life, but then I do need it then it's not been made easy to get a hold of.

People in this workplace are experiencing poverty. Amount of staff in this work who also have UC cause its topping up their income is awful; with UC or with tax credits

4ii. The priorities for the Scottish Government: Using devolved powers

DWP workers identified ways in which the Scottish Government can get beyond simply transferring the payment of the existing benefit areas, by using the full scope of their devolved powers to look at issues such as mitigation of UK welfare policy, housing payments and sanctions. In the first place, the devolution of powers allows the Scottish Government to introduce measures which could mitigate the UK welfare policy which they, on the whole, do not support. Participants suggested, for example, that the priorities of the Scottish Government should be:

To tackle the worst cuts of the Tories. E.g. bedroom tax, top up child benefits to tackle child poverty, bring dignity to those with ill health by making the process easier and straightforward.

To reverse policies on child benefit, child entitlement, PIP and other disability benefits.

Although housing issues have been devolved to the Scottish Government since 1999, staff expressed views in relation to the introduction of Universal Credit which has resulted in a four weekly payments (in arrears) inclusive of the Housing Benefit

element to claimants, rather than directly to landlords every two weeks under previous benefit rules.

Current system leads to rent arrears in many cases as first payment is not received until 5 to 6 weeks after the claim.

End housing discrimination towards under 35s. Do not be wedded to English methods that have failed.

Additionally, there was a call for benefit payments to return to more frequent payments, and for an increase in the speed of new claims.

Move away from a monthly benefit system as nearly all low paid jobs are weekly paid.

Housing calculations quicker as this is stopping claims going into payment – so increasing call volumes and manual payments.

Use of private contractors was criticised partly from the perspective that such companies will prioritise profit over service, but no less because public servants do it better:

Stop using private companies who work for profit in helping people into work

Civil servants will always be better than someone who is looking to make a profit.

We did a better job ... we still do a better job.

Through their experience of the Scottish Welfare Fund, participants expressed some scepticism about the capacity of local authorities to deliver further social security elements.

When you hand things to the council it becomes a postcode lottery, that's what happened with the social fund.

Local authorities already deal with housing and social fund benefits. The problem with it going too much in to local authorities is that it could be less controlled. At least if there is one central authority it should be fairer. If there are three different authorities, there is a chance there would be three different outcomes.

Some concern was reflected that the new agency will add to fragmentation which already exists between UK government departments, and even interdepartmentally.

If there are different benefits being administered between two different governments it's going to get worse. No matter who takes responsibility, how are the systems and people going to talk to each other? At the centre of it you have people, families at the centre of this, with several government departments essentially just doing things to them.

At the moment we can't work together – and if the Scottish Government has some benefits and the national government has others, it won't work.

We've got problems (communicating) with HMRC as DWP, we're both central government!

There were preferences expressed for full devolution of social security policy and delivery by the Scottish Government, but there were fears about teething problems and the potential for failure if the government tried to emulate the DWP.

You don't have to follow what DWP is doing because it's not working, so why follow it?

If they pick up the old systems they're asking for trouble before they start.

Some thought it important to manage changes slowly:

I think because it's such a sensitive issue we need to get it right, which may delay it.

The Scottish government should take their time on this. They shouldn't rush it and get it right first time, so they're not having to sort a mess out afterwards like the DWP has to do now.

4iii. The aims of a new system

The officials expressed hope that the new system could address the failings of the current social security system, and the Scottish Government need to use the opportunity they have to make positive changes.

The current system has major problem of access - there were many calls for simplicity, clarity and the removal of barriers.

Simplified system that can be easily accessed.

It's such a long winded process to fill in forms.

One of the main complaints of services users is the difficulties in accessing the system.

The application form is a massive booklet. The complexity puts people off. Look at the amount of unclaimed benefits there is every year. ... The standard advice now is apply, get knocked back, then appeal as you'll likely get it. Why put people through that process?

Simplifying the process and the rules was flagged by many participants as a policy priority for the new social security system.

If it's a simple system, it's easy to give advice, but the system is so complex, it's not always easy to have people who can actually give proper advice.

It all comes down to simplifying benefits. I know you have to try and personalise it, but the system itself has to be more simple.

I think the best thing they could do is make the system straightforward, simpler and not as complex. ... There needs to be a simpler system and make it more straightforward and easier. Both for claims forms and timescales of getting it through.

To achieve improvement, staff were clear that the Scottish Government must invest properly in staff numbers, training and IT. The agency will not achieve its objectives of dignity and fairness if it is done 'on the cheap'.

Everything needs to be in place from the start – training, staffing, everything, otherwise it will go wrong. They need to spend the money at the start. If they do that, the staff will get behind it and then the customer will get the benefit as well. If it becomes a Scottish thing, it might be able to change things, if they staff it correctly, and it will come down to whether we're given enough time to deal with the cases.

I don't think 300-600 [staff] will touch that across the country. I think they'll get a shock to the system when this gets under way

There's no guarantee that the Scottish government can actually deliver this. There needs to be increased resources given over to this if there is going to be a success.

It doesn't have a proper system in place. Do not go forward without one, like universal credit did.

Designing a fair system, with transparency and just rules which takes into account vulnerable people, is a priority for those who work in DWP.

Ensure system is fair and transparent. Ensure policy is clear and complete prior to implementation. Ensure there is a safety net for claimants who do not fit the standard model or who are more vulnerable.

Respect, transparency, value for money, reasonable, approachable, consistent and understandable decision making.

The right people should be paid their full entitlement, with measures in place to prevent fraudulent activity.

Making sure the right people get the right benefit.

Ensuring the correct people receive the correct benefits. Develop a system which is fair and open and quickly eliminate any fraudulent claims.

Vulnerable people needed to be protected. A more empathetic approach to those with mental health or other problems was highlighted by participants, with resources invested in providing extra support to ensure vulnerable claimants are given the help they need.

Resources need to be directed at the most vulnerable and an increasing uptake of benefit entitlement as a right.

I have friends and family with various levels of mental health issues which are not to all intents and purposes recognised by the UK Government. I would hope a Scottish Government backed social security system would address cases like this.

These are really vulnerable customers. A lot of them can't advocate for themselves.

People need more one on one help - vulnerable customers need to be treated as such – things need to be made clear and simple as possible.

Several participants believe that social security should provide sufficient financial support that would guarantee claimants have enough to live on:

I would like a universal income with extra credits if people are doing more to look for work. It should be set at the real living wage and there should be no sanctions.

To provide financial security for people unfortunate enough to have to depend on benefit handouts.

To make it reflect the actual cost of living.

The establishment of Scottish Social Security Agency will allow a new direction to be taken. It will give the Scottish Government the opportunity, in the words of DWP workers to:

To make the benefit system fairer and to provide a genuine safety net which ensures a level of income allowing claimants to live included and dignified lives

We need to be approachable, fairness, proper advice given, to be treated as individuals.

To provide financial security for people unfortunate enough to have to depend on benefit handouts.

To ensure we have a fair and just social security system where people are not harshly penalised but measures are in place to ensure people comply with reasonable requests.

Unsurprisingly, with the high expectations of what the Scottish Government may be creating, some DWP workers would prefer to work for the Scottish Government

instead, to allow them to part of something which has the potential to be much better than what they can currently offer.

We've got the expertise to do this – we should be transferring to the Scottish Government to do this work.

Should be employed directly by Scottish Government. Experienced benefit staff should be utilised, especially their knowledge

If I'm being honest, I'd rather work for the Scottish Government rather than DWP

Key points

DWP staff, while they understand these are in part reserved issues, expressed a need for changes, an overhaul or end to the conditionality and sanctions system, universal credit, work capability assessments and the use of private sector contractors.

Although the Scottish Government cannot rectify all of the UK social security system's problems, they do have the power to address the following key areas:

- End the use of the private sector in employability and social security
- Take steps to mitigate UK social security policy, providing dignity through a decent living wage standard of living
- Improve fairness, ease and transparency of the new system
- Invest in IT and staffing of the new agency at the outset.

5. Managing benefits

This chapter summarises the principal flaws in current social security administration and delivery, from the staff perspective. Far from being self-focussed or fatalistic complaining, DWP workers were able to spot problems which are strategic in design and can be changed if the political will is there.

The two largest themes in this section are problems with Information Communication Technology (ICT) and staff training. Whilst problems with ICT in areas such as universal credit are of public knowledge¹⁴, little about the length or quality of employee training are considered as problematic. Both issues are not confined to one directorate or benefit area of DWP; they are endemic problems across the department.

Feedback in this chapter also reflects the strong desire of DWP staff to genuinely want to help the public they come into contact with, but also explains what the barriers are that stops them from being able to do so, and the tension that creates.

5i. Problems with the administration

Whilst the Scottish Government have made promising statements in relation to the benefit areas which are being devolved, there are many lessons to learn to avoid the mistakes made by DWP, which go beyond the welfare reform legislation. Key to improving the experience of the service is understanding the administrative issues which support the process.

A key theme in this respect is improving the systems and processes which underpin managerial decisions.

It's all resource cutting. Rather than telephoning and processing, they have it all cut up. They're trying to cut customer contact off. If a customer can do it behind a screen and you don't need someone else there they'll do that cause they want to save money.

Benefit Officers should be making the right benefit is delivered to the right people. To do this we need proper resources, adequate staffing, up-to-date and working IT systems, proper salaries for staff and appropriate terms and conditions.

Complete breakdown in communications between different centres and departments. The standard of service is variable depending on where the claimant lives. The different in quality in different locations is nothing short of disgraceful.

¹⁴ HoC Work and Pensions Committee, 2014, Universal Credit implementation: monitoring DWP's performance in 2012-13, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmworpen/1209/1209.pdf>

The fragmentation of services appears in various forms in this area of the report. There is little relationship or understanding between staff in different job roles and areas of the department. Different parts of the system don't relate to each other.

My only interaction with other DWP departments is whatever contact our computers have. There's very little with actual people. Staff move about between roles but once you're in you're chained to your desk and don't get to know any other parts of the business.

In administration you do have some contact, but lower grades generally have almost no contact with people in other services. The strategic vision is a lot of it should be automated.

You're only doing one bit of the job then someone else does another bit, there's no cohesion.

And on that, the contact between different departments, I have to go through the general enquiry line that customers use, rather than having to go through a system, I should be able to just get the information I need straight away, but the system can't cope with all the benefits.

An illustration of what this means in practice is what it takes to record a change of address.

Systems are awful - takes so long to change anything - ie 5 systems to change an address.

I'm working with staff on systems who have been doing it from 2012 and they don't know how to do basic address changes. It is more complicated than just over-writing; you have several different systems you need to link up just to make a simple change.

Much of this problem can be laid at the door of the IT systems, and IT proved to be one of the most prominent areas of feedback. This related to the older IT framework which underpins the DWP, and newer systems which fail properly to integrate. A recurring complaint was IT failures and slow running, including complete system breakdowns, which result in delays to service delivery.

Creating a more robust IT system will hopefully increase the speed etc for users, resulting in less frustration and increasing production causing less backlog.

If they (Scottish Government) pick up the old system then they're in trouble from the start.

The IT system is definitely a problem too though. It's a massive step backwards. It's very complex and it complicates things. Simple changes like changing an address, phone number or another issue result in three different services requests. You can't just update details on the screen.

With a multitude of different IT programmes for tasks and benefits, fragmentation, where one programme cannot update another relevant one becomes problematic for system users.

They've (DWP) got so many different systems that don't talk to each other.

The IT and phone systems should be tailor made. They've tried to do it on the cheap and it's not worked at all. We need an IT system that's fit for purpose.

Not communicating information from customers/3rd parties re changes to every office holding an interest ie. AA (Attendance Allowance) not passing info to PCs (Pension Credit) etc ... Continuing to pay benefits when known future changes are to occur!

DWP IT programmes are frequently 'updated' to address system flaws. Staff are also moved between job roles bringing them into contact with new systems. Adequate training for both situations is a feature within DWP, with sometimes 'live system' (real customer cases as opposed to simulations) training provided.

A few more comments on ICT

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Computer system able to cope. • A workable robust IT system. • A proper system that works. Scrap Camlite. • A decent and state of the art computer system to administer benefits. • Easy to fund/understand computer systems usable. • Re effectiveness: functional computer systems • Give us IT fit for 21st Century! • IT we provide isn't very good. • The IT we are provided with is abysmal. It's a DOS based system. • (They've) gotta have a system that's robust. There's got to be something that's fit for purpose. For a benefits system you can't have something off the shelf. • An IT system that is robust enough to cope with the volumes of work and also can cope with the non-standard lives a lot of our claimants live. • Better IT systems. • The IT system can't cope. It is too focussed on online and does not focus on the individual's needs. Camlite and portal are inadequate. Task based systems means tasks can be closed and benchmarks met but the work is not done and no service provided. • Due to failing IT system which is not fit for purpose, this is not having major impact on delivering a good customer service. If this is improved we should see a better and more robust system in the future, customer service for our claimants is lacking in UC at the moment! I could go on here but there is not enough paper to list our current issues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the Scottish government has got to do anything it's bring in a new IT system. There have always been problems when you try and do something on the cheap. But it's not even cheap now, cause it's costing so much through all the procurement we have to go through. • Staff are being blocked from doing their job because they can't access info. • Putting money into better IT systems and trained staff. Properly trained, fit for purpose • IT system, less legislation to deal with. • Improve IT, • IT systems – get an up to date system. Lack of communication between different benefits and also between staff in the same office – again better ITIT isn't appropriate. • IT systems – get an up to date system. Lack of communication between different benefits and also between staff in the same office – again better IT. Proper training for each role, with sufficient consultation. • Utilise the vast experience of current DWP staff and implement bespoke IT systems that are fit for purpose. • Better IT. Appropriate training. • IT, it's slow, it's outdated, it's a bit fragmented. • They've (DWP) got so many different systems that don't talk to each other. • The (IT) systems don't talk to each other. • System are awful takes so long to change anything ie 5 systems to change an address • A simpler system with more information more easily to hand. Online resources. More communication
--	---

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They should be given much better IT systems and equipment to work with. • Should not have to work on a system which appears to from the 70s. • I.T. that is fit for purpose. Better training. • We have poor IT systems that are not fit for purpose. • Better IT system, online services. Provide the right equipment that works. • Better IT for staff • System down time. ... State of the art computer systems. • Poor IT systems, systems not fit for purpose. • Poor IT systems • System faults • IT systems not fit for purpose. • It is common knowledge that our computer systems are inadequate. • Creating a more robust IT system will hopefully increase the speed etc for users, resulting in less frustration and increasing production causing less backlog. • KM updated to allow for searches to be completed. Computer systems that are not slow/keep losing connections. 	<p>between departments. A computer programme that actually works.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To control changes to benefits or customers change in circumstances. Not to double/triple entries or recording completed work. • Unreliable IT system, a call book outcome. Helpline/call centre staff seem limited in what they can do to progress the claim, meaning more transfers to other staff. An end to target based culture for staff • Computer system not fit for purpose. • A computer programme that actually works. • I've had a computer that not worked for 3 and a half weeks • There needs to be an IT system that everyone can follow. • Better IT system when processing claims. • Online is just beset with problems. They have a good working model, but then they pour millions in to IT and the systems are never up to speed on this. • If they got a better IT system it might work, but the systems we've got are hopeless.
---	--

Staff training needs to be improved. There was no training whatsoever on how to operate CamLite or WSP.

Staff should be fully trained with the correct IT.

A misconception of the current new forms of IT within DWP is that the process is totally automated. However, in reality, currently the information is simply uploaded and still needs a human being to take some form of processing action.

This is a labour intensive job, but the technology isn't up to scratch.

The online pension system is just a form – they are still needing someone on the other side of the computer to process it. Most customers don't realise that. It's not automatic.

The management of benefits processes emphasises statistics and hitting deadlines or targets, above the need of staff and the public. There were recurring complaints about managers who focused on the wrong things - for example, the focus on answering calls, as there are published targets to meet.

Management need to be customer focussed rather than stat focused.

We need systems that work, good management, realistic stats and for senior management to treat claimants and staff like human beings and not just a stat.

There's a lot of emphasis on ticking boxes rather than resolving the customer's query.

Another major area of criticism for the current DWP structures was the fragmented system and lack of clear responsibilities. A telephony or call centre based approach means that staff are usually unable to take ownership of the customer's case or query. The work is handed on, often electronically to another member of staff. As well as dehumanising the process, it generates errors and creates work.

Too many people can be working the one case without realising it. AD's expected to be able to deal with everything – there are too many variables! The system seems to be set up to create tasks as to check what has been actioned. This creates an overload of tasks that cannot be cleared. Staff generate a task expecting it to be actioned on time but die to the volume of tasks only certain ones are being actioned due to priorities.

If I need to do one task I need to go through 3 or 4 different services. It should all be through one system.

To process benefits, at present all we do is phones and send tasks that never get processed. Nearly every second call is complaining about mail in CAM not being actioned or transferring calls to SP new claims.

During the telephony process, transfer means customer details passed to benefit centre for action and call back. This is double handling.

The workers pointed to serious delays at several points in the system:

Many claimants have fallen in to rent arrears due to the backlog of housing tasks. This results in many of our claimants facing eviction.

There is no staff to process claims, and there is a backlog of claims. We're now at a stage where you're going through your own cases and there's ones going back to 16th March –and they're vulnerable customers – and there's no staff being allocated to deal with it. There are skilled staff who could address that, and process claims, but they're put on the phones. People are put on the wrong jobs. There needs to be proper management.

Ridiculous backlog of cases which have not been looked at for years. Over complicated processes and procedures.

In principle, the division of labour in the DWP and the 'virtual network' mean that any query can be dealt with anywhere in the UK. The concept allows work to be moved much quicker and in theory would reduce wait times. However, this adds to the lack of continuity for a customer. They may call DWP and speak to a different person each time, who in turn will create another piece of work to do from each call. The customer will not be able to return the call to original person they spoke to.

With the virtual network the service now lacks continuity for the customer no ownership of a customer case leads to bad customer service and things being missed this in turn causes overpayment and faults.

Segmentation plays a big part in bad service. Cases bounce about. It's really difficult to embed with it or own it yourself. You can't take ownership of anything.

We used to look after our own areas and we could action things. But now it gets loaded on then goes to a national centre then goes out again to other services.

The contact centre culture in DWP is one of micromanagement and over-monitoring. Using IT systems which are intended to manage work flow, staff can be monitored for all of their working day as their work is linked to their phone.

They (call centre workers) work from a script, which they're not allowed to deviate from.

This morning I was on the phone for one case but I'll get pulled up on my one to one, cause I've not hit my target, but that's what was needed to deal with that and find all the information they needed.

Basically they (management) listen to calls to try to find fault more than to check what you've done right. So you are thinking more about the right words and stressing about whilst on the phone that and not about what the customer needs.

They (managers) just look at whether you are following the script and not if you've helped the person.

Workers commented that they are just not being given enough time to deal with people.

The fact that you have a time frame at all shows they don't have a clue – some might take two minutes, but others take 25 minutes, it takes as long as it takes and sometimes you just need to listen to them.

You find yourself cutting them off, trying to wrap it up so you're under time and they just don't get the service they should.

(On the phones) I was told (by a manager) to get to the point quicker. The woman was bereaved and crying and I wasn't prepared to rush her off the phone.

The use of targets, particularly those relating to work clearance and telephony duties, has played a major part in these problems. Staff believe that this focus on numbers encourages 'perverse' behaviour, where they are view moving on to the next call or activity as more important than solving the issue they are presented with.

It's all targets and benchmarks rather than doing your job well. You're always thinking 'I've got to get so many done today'

Management generally. But really its numbers: having to hit targets - that's totally missing the point.

Delivery at pace – just another way of saying change it not but do not think about processes.

The temptation is there to do it wrong because you are rushing.

You can't get the time to do the work you need to. You're rushed to produce work as you're judged on the stats at the end of the day. So if someone does 8 cases and hits the stats, that's not being compared fairly against someone who maybe only does 2 but who got them the correct outcome.

The systems are not organised to make the best use of staff.

You've got at least 18-20 people who are experienced who could deal with more complex cases, but they're not allowed to take them on, and they're just put in a queue. There's no communication from management how they're going to deal with the queue and backlog.

The priority seems to be telephony but management don't realise that having most ADs and TA on phones prevents tasks from being cleared which then causes more phone calls.

There are not enough staff to do the job properly.

We need more staff – they've been cutting down and expecting more and more from the staff left.

Originally told caseloads would be around 70, currently over 120.

We need more staff, proper training and less pressure.

What this all means, in short, is that there are too few staff, with too little training and too little time, trying to operate a dysfunctional system in order to meet unrealistic standards. The most surprising thing about the DWP is not that things go wrong, but that staff, despite all the odds, so often get things right.

5ii. The role of the benefit officer

Benefit officers clearly want to serve people better, and expressed some frustration at systems and processes that deny them the opportunity to do so. They saw their role in professional terms, it was:

To support and facilitate claims to benefit – to provide explanation and assistance to allow claimants to access their full entitlement. To deal with enquiries and to sort out problems as quickly as possible. To decide impartially on claims to benefit by gathering information and applying rules of entitlement.

To administer the benefit with a system and guidance that are fit for purpose including: systems, training and treated fairly. #

Provide claimants with clear and appropriate levels of help. Appropriate levels of help. Should have up to date changes in policies affecting claimants so that they can assist in their needs.

Supporting claimants was an intrinsic part of the work.

Benefit officers should be there to support claimants, check info and provide advice.

Understanding and sympathetic advisors who take accountability and ownership of peoples' claims.

Benefit Officers should be able to help people and use initiative. The current system is too rigid.

However, the current rules prevent them from doing this.

We have to say 'no, we are not allowed to give you advice' to customers when they are making claims.

I can see something on the system but I can't tell the claimant what it is as that's not within my job remit to tell them. I went to a once and done seminar and they couldn't believe it.

Many benefits officers saw this kind of support in terms of 'customer service'.

Provide customer service. Put customer at heart of what we do.

Provide good customer service having been fully trained

First and foremost good quality customer service – first point of contact either face to face or phone. To achieve this: retraining staff, good IT systems. Proper consultations with experienced staff.

Service users, from their own perspective, want to have their queries dealt with by competent, well trained officers who understand the process and who are capable of dealing with the issue there and then.

Once and done, not being passed from one person to another. Making sure we get it right the first time.

Staff don't have enough knowledge (training need) to signpost the customer in the right direction.

We need to go back to face to face with people with knowledge. So when people are applying they know that someone will deal with it and they know what they're doing.

Get to speak to processors and stop the query getting passed about with no answer given.

Training was a major area of feedback in the research; along with ICT, workers commented on problems in this issue more than any other. This section cannot do justice to the full range of comments: more are listed in a separate table.

There's an expectation that staff will just pick things up.

Six weeks is the standard training. It doesn't even touch on what it needs to though. There's a new system due to kick in on Friday, but nothing has been cascaded to us, so we've not had questions asked about it, no training, and it's serious change. If this is passed for supervisors then we'll possibly be pulled up for not using the system properly - but we've not been told the correct process.

There's no training standard in the DWP now, so it totally depends on who you sit next to. There should be a progression system so you start at a basic level then work your way up once you're able to.

More training. You get 6 weeks training and you're expected to get on the phones straight away.

If it's a complex change (to processes), you are just given a wee presentation and then told to get on with it.

Staff wanted to be treated with more respect, in keeping with the seriousness, competence and commitment that was required of them. Better pay was a part of that - but only a part.

Better equipment. Better pay and conditions to attract higher standards of applicants.

Staff are not just a number. Treat them as individuals. Pay a decent wage..

I am not a suicide counsellor. Why on earth should I be expected to deal with and cope with the stress of such horrific calls for what is basically the minimum wage?

Job satisfaction, for the officers we spoke to, is a matter of doing things better - of doing what they are capable of doing.

Morale is appalling. The deskilling that goes on in this place is appalling.

If you question anything then you are said to be 'negative' in your behaviours.

It's not just about respect for customers, it's your own self-respect. We're not proud to work for DWP anymore. I never tell people where I work now.

Key Points

The stand-out issues highlighted in this chapter are the need for huge improvements made to the ICT systems and job training in social security benefit delivery, as demonstrated through the additional tables of comments from the research participants. The other key themes that are clear are:

- The service model structure of service/contact centres, which creates a focus on targets over solving issues, and leads to micromanagement of staff time and work.
- A fragmented structure, where different areas of the business do not relate to each other, and there is an inability to take ownership of cases.
- Staff feel constrained through rules and processes which prevent them from helping the public, and there is poor morale as a result.

A few more comments on training

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of proper training, meaning customer not given correct advice at times, leading to customer having to call back and get query answered. • Proper training on phones/tasks/ sanctions and viable time to do it and not to be pulled off/on phones/tasks every day. • The training is poor and there's a lack of staff. • They don't train you how to do your job. • You used to go on a 13 week training course and then get 13 weeks consolidation. • Lack of officers training, miscommunication, liaison between staff and management. Lack of expertise on IT issues to help customers. • Give us training in all aspects of the work. • Ensure they are trained to a high standard to give more personal service. • Not all offices are updated or provide up to date information. Often claimants are told the wrong information on policies or help that we no longer provide. • Benefit officers should be trained to a high standard. • Really poor training for UC staff and work coaches. • Poor training delivery – not appropriate to role or position. • More information required. • Better training, more effective way of keeping staff up to date with changes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proper training. Cost of ill-trained staff is costing huge amounts. The DWP doesn't want to admit the real cost of incorrect decisions and poorly trained staff. • Tech now training staff off the street in four weeks does not give them the experience they require, which is only gained by working for a year. • Better training for staff. • Recognised proper training • We need the expertise to deliver the services – there's change all the time which we can't keep up with. • They used to say it would take you a year for you to be competent. • Training issues are huge ... there are problems from all over, and there are lots of people who haven't had sufficient training. This isn't good enough as there are children at the end of this. Most staff have inconsistencies in training. • There a huge lack of training, when people who haven't had the training have to put people on hold then go find the correct answer. • Training is not uniform across the department. • Staff don't get trained properly. If you've not been trained properly then how do you know if you are doing it wrong? • It's second hand training, based on how knowledgeable the person is that you are sitting next to. • We got two weeks induction and then two weeks training for the job, it's very basic. I felt like there
--	---

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proper knowledge of the benefit they are delivering. Proper training. • They should be well trained. ... Should be trained on people skills also customer service. • Adequate training, specific roles without having to change duties part way through the day. • To help and assist people and make them aware of their entitlements, we should be given the relevant training and information to help them. • A fully trained benefit officer with robust knowledge of the benefit. • Proper training for each role, with sufficient consultation. • Lack of proper training, meaning customer not given correct advice at times, leading to customer having to call back and get query answered. • More training to prepare officers (IT, social, dealing with customers). • Internal customer service is appalling eg. tech now training staff off the street in four weeks does not give them the experience they require, which is only gained by working for a year. Better support/consolidation to new starts. • Better training for staff. • Training in benefits and clear contract numbers and advisors able to deal with enquiries as much as possible on calls. 	<p>should be more training on the system.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In training you are told that things are done one way, then you come out and you are told two or three different ways of doing it – but you don't know which one is right. • Training is extremely inadequate. • As soon as you come out of training you are expected to 'go live'. The customers are used as guinea pigs. • More staff. Time to train staff • We need to be properly trained in all aspects of the job we have to cover i.e. telephony and AD roles to provide support and advice. • Proper training. • More training to prepare officers (IT, • Training used to be the most important thing in the department. • Proper training – spend time Resources need to be provided along with training to ensure cases are dealt with accurately and within reasonable timescales. • Current service has provided little training to ensure DWP staff are helping claimants. • No proper training has been given. Fully support customer needs. We are leaving them in distress. • Inadequate staff training • Proper training on required systems.
--	---

6. The experience of claimants

DWP employees, as those who implement 'welfare reform' policy and cut backs to service delivery, are not typically viewed as empathetic towards service users. The increase of telephone based or digital interactions between members of the public and staff could lead to the view that the relationship is minimal and transactional. However, the DWP employees we spoke to believe that the experience that claimants have currently is poor, and requires cultural and structural change in order to improve their treatment.

The suggestions from staff are not just emotional responses: ideas concerning a Freephone number, improved the language used in communications and better guidance for claimants are relatively straightforward steps that any government could implement to improve the experience claimants have when accessing social security services. These echo suggestions made by claimant groups and campaign organisations such as Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) Scotland.¹⁵

Time and again, officials emphasised the need for claimants to have a person to speak to - for there to be face-to-face contact, and to be treated as human beings.

Service users need to be treated with respect and dignity rather than suspicion and contempt.

We've lost that human touch.

I feel like I'm not allowed to be human. We have to treat people like one homogenous groups, like numbers and not people.

The system has to treat people as individuals.

Try and treat people as individuals. How you would want to be treated yourself. 99% of the time we treat people really well, but you're dealing with pensioners who you have to take extra care with.

Hopefully the Scottish Government will come up with someone that's more tailored to the individual.

The rules shouldn't be personalised, but the service should be. We should be asking people about what people's needs are, rather than trying to put them in a box. Ask them what they are. People are complex, and benefits are complex, so we definitely need to tailor it more for people.

¹⁵ CPAG in Scotland, 2016, CPAG in Scotland's full response to the Scottish Government's consultation on social security in Scotland <http://www.cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/CPAG-Scotland-Response-Social-Security-Scotland%28Oct16%29.pdf>

Part of that was the provision of support, especially in times of stress.

It's the exception, rather than the rule when we help them (service users) with forms.

I feel a more personal service would work much better – both for staff and customers.

When you are facing a loss, even if you're of sound mind, you don't take it in. You're given a leaflet but no one is taking that in. They need someone to help take them through the process.

It comes down to offering a supportive service. They've got rid of that from the job centre.

If people are emotional they're losing their train of thought, or they're upset and hanging up and just not getting through.

Support was also needed, more specifically, for vulnerable people.

Having had previous experience of working with vulnerable customers and their support groups, I found that the single point of contact approach worked very well. The current UK wide system appears to make it very difficult to speak to the right people.

[We're there] to assist with enquiries, but it becomes social workers, carer, advisor and anything else they wish to discuss.

DWP officers need, by this argument, to be able and prepared to offer advice.

I'd much rather have the training and knowledge to give advice, rather than just getting people redirected to something online. They're so obsessed with everything online.

We should be able to say 'these are the things that you are entitled to claim for.' You know that they're entitled to something but you're not allowed to tell them.

A clear role was seen for independent welfare advice, which was well respected:

Welfare rights officers are best places to assist customers and closer working WRO benefits staff pays dividends as it did when pension service local service worked closely with 3rd party organisations.

There needs to be independent support for claimants, like the CAB who people can talk to.

The Citizens Advice is great, but they're run by volunteers, and they've cut full time staff there as well.

The CAB deal with the customers that DWP used to help! This should change in Scotland.

There's a lack of debt advice.

Support has to be available where claimants are based.

Accessibility has to be paramount. Localised help for customers. There has to be a human touch.

I think a lot of the work taken away from jobcentres should be returned instead of bits here there and everywhere. Jobcentres should be more in control of provision being run instead of paying all these other agencies for work we and more than capable of doing.

It's too centralised – we're not having any face to face contact.

Retaining job centres. Better support within the community for those most in need.

By not encouraging or helping people to attend jobcentre, people feel alienated.

The workers we spoke to expressed concerns about the quality of the department's communication with claimants.

We do just about everything we can to stop people from contacting us.

We don't explain things when the decision isn't positive. That's our biggest failing.

We're not always in a position to provide support about why the decision has been made and we have to refer them to the benefits centre

(Service users) need to be told exactly what is needed to ensure payments are made. Not a letter being sent saying evidence not provided but no indication of what is needed and then not being paid on time resulting in debt from arrears etc.

The texts are inadequate. You can't explain what the arrears are for in the space you are given to text, so it generates more calls.

In the same way, clearer online guidance was needed for claimants. Online access has its place, but it cannot be used comprehensively. A 'digital by default' agenda from the DWP throws up a number of problems. The workers we interviewed highlighted accessibility in terms of the availability of internet enabled devices, internet speed, IT literacy, and barriers for disabled or vulnerable people.

There's a small percentage of people who don't fit into a digital world

There needs to be more help for people to get internet access. They don't have the awareness or background to get internet access and they can't afford it.

It's all very well if you have good internet access. More remote places up here (Inverness) will struggle.

Our clients are not always good with PCs, need face to face or telephone contact.

Face-to-face services were an important part of the service.

There needs to be more a face to face. DWP have moved away from having a personal touch. There used to be one in every high street. But when they set us up there was no facilities for that. And because of the age range of our customers, they have to phone us up. All these sorts of things, we don't have the ability to see them face to face. If the Scottish Government want to improve the serviced they need to introduce the facilities for that.

There's no face to face, it's all online. Claimants should be able to come in to an office and get help.

Telephony, similarly, had important limitations.

We've got to go back to being more local. Call centres are not the way forward.

Service centres aren't working. Having to phone the helpline is so stressful for them and us.

There is more stress put on staff, because we take calls who are frustrated and have had to phone again, again and again trying to get through. And it all has a knock on effect.

They (claimants) phone up and they've been misinformed so many times and given different numbers to call so they become frustrated and swear. It's not ok for someone to come to work and be shouted at, but you can see why they (claimants) are so wound up when they have to deal with DWP.

Part of the problem with telephony is the fragmentation, lack of responsiveness, and pressure on time management; part, however, is about the limitations of the system. Several participants raised concerns about the cost, the lack of a Freephone number, and the length of time it took to deal with a query over the phone.

In general, officers argued for a choice of different types of contact to improve access.

Access needs to be broadened, so that customers can access by the means of their choosing – face to face, telephony, email, website etc. Service users need to be treated with respect and dignity rather than suspicion and contempt.

Different people need different types of support so this needs to be variable and accessible.

The DWP used to have separate offices and spaces for face to face drop ins and things. But they've done away with all that.

There were particular concerns about the loss of the visiting service:

The visiting service has just been cut back. It's not been utilised the way it should. You can't just phone up and ask for help. We have to direct people out to it.

They get hit with security questions, half of them can't even answer - there would be much better an option if there could be visiting officers who can help them.

We don't visit them (claimants) because visiting costs too much money

Taking together the comments in the previous chapter and the experience of claimants, officers returned frequently to the need for continuity in dealing with people. There needs to be some continuing contact, probably with an identifiable person, taking 'ownership' of the case and able to see queries through from beginning to end.

The most common complaint - after that we just got a decision wrong about a claim - is that you can't actually speak to the caseworker who dealt with your case.

You can't really deal with a client in a proper way. We don't give clients a proper service as the cases keep getting moved on. That's why we get complaints. It's such a shame as they are moved from pillar to post and it's easily avoidable.

When things go wrong, officers should have the knowledge and capacity to set them right. Part of that was about providing adequate rights of appeal:

We should be able to sort out any adverse decisions quickly without the very long appeal process.

Bring back appeal being referred by the DM instead of the client having to send it to a tribunal their self.

However, this is not principally about appeals; it has much more to do with being able to identify a mistake and correct it.

Admit error and fix it.

Be able to sort out any adverse decisions quickly without the very long appeal process.

Key points

Research participants believe that following must be addressed to ensure a good standard of help available to those interacting with the social security system in Scotland:

- A choice of face-to-face access, with additional support available to vulnerable people.
- The ability for staff to offer benefit advice, and to see issues through to completion.
- Freephone telephone numbers, supported by clear guidance and understandable direct communication to claimants.
- Allowing for a quick and effective review of errors.

7. Conclusion

Given the vastness and complexity of the social security system, it is little wonder that there are no easy fixes to improve the lives of those in need of support. The UK Government's political programme in recent years, in the view of those employed by them, has made this problem exponentially worse.

DWP workers express very little support for the UK government's welfare reform programme. In fact, the majority of those participating in the research called for an overhaul or end to the sanctions system, universal credit, and work capability assessments

Whilst reserved policies such as these are no doubt a major cause of discontent for staff and the public, many of the issues highlighted by those working within the system are more general choices made about structure, management and job design. They are not internal staff gripes, but integral issues which impact on the experience for the public who need social security assistance.

These are areas where the Scottish Government can take steps to ensure that their social security department does not follow the route of DWP. In Scotland, they are faced with similar choices about how they design their agency, as well as issues such as the benefit rules and rates. We believe that this comes down to investing the time and money into getting these decisions right.

The combined hundreds of years' experience that our participants have together can advantage those making decisions about the future of Social Security in Scotland now. For this to happen, DWP workers who are insightful, experienced and compassionate about what they do, need to be listened to. As outlined at the beginning of this report, their feedback can be broken down into six recommendations:

Provide dignity through a decent Living Wage standard of living

Whilst the devolved powers are limited in terms of benefit areas, the power to create new, additional benefits should not be forgotten. Social security, as a component of the welfare state, should ensure a decent standard of living free from poverty. Continuing with just the benefit areas as they are will only act as a sticking plaster, and will not make tangible improvements to the lives of those in receipt of benefits. Mitigating the UK government's policies on reserved aspects of social security can be managed by the Scottish Government, if done with the adequate funding allocated to benefit levels.

Ensure services are publicly delivered through the social security agency

DWP staff who see the consequences of private sector involvement, whether it be a poor health assessment report or an individual who has been ignored by an employability programme provider, do not believe the Scottish Government should indulge its continuation.

Outsourcing of IT, and IT help, has also had a negative impact on the ability of staff to provide a good service, as well as being a huge financial drain on public finances. PCS does not believe that privatisation works - there should not be any profit in supporting the sick and unemployed.

Design a transparent, easy to understand system with a choice of access

The many different benefits with various, and often counteracting rules can be a minefield for even those with knowledge of the social security system. Staff feel that the public are at a disadvantage, and are sometimes put off from claiming by these barriers. Those that do apply will not find the process simple, and are not likely to fully understand the decision they do receive. These are problems that can should be avoided with a new system.

DWP have pursued a 'digital by default' and contact centre based delivery model, with a discouragement on attending jobcentres, the only remaining public facing offices. Visiting services have also been drastically cut. Further office closures are now taking place with 1 in 10 jobcentres being closed as part of DWP's cost cutting measures. Staff delivering social security believe that face-to-face services must be offered, and must be a viable local choice. Not only does this restore respect for the claimants, but helps the staff build up a relationship and empathy with those they serve. They recognise too that vulnerable people will need extra help.

Staff recognise that claimants can regularly spend a long time on the phone if they need to make contact with DWP about their case. This can be obviously be costly which employees view as fundamentally unfair. Poor wording of automated letters and unclear brief text messages can generate more calls and more waiting times. Online guidance is also limited. Addressing these straightforward issues would immediately improve the contact experience for the public.

Provide staff with comprehensive training to allow them to see issues through to their completion

The fragmented structure means that different areas of the business do not relate to each other, and there is an inability to take ownership of cases. Training on benefit rules and processes has been radically reduced and is regarded as woefully inadequate by nearly every one of the research participants.

Currently, social security within DWP is split into different delivery arms, this is replicated within each of these divisions based on job role or benefit function. Staff based in these different arms have little knowledge or appreciation of what the other does. Work, i.e. a claim, query or call, is often passed on to the next point with no ownership for the worker or continuity for the claimant. Samples of staff, and most likely claimants, will report multiple calls being made and the inability to speak to the same person twice when they have a query.

Autonomy for staff to be able to help ensure a claimant is getting all the help they are entitled to, without adherence to a script, is desired by those delivering social security benefits now. Benefit take up is no longer addressed by DWP, but could and should be by the Scottish Government. Autonomy should also extend to being able to 'manage' a query or case from a member of the public, including offering quick solutions over long winded processes of mandatory reconsiderations and appeals.

IT systems that are fully operational and effective from the outset

The areas generating most feedback from participants were poor ICT systems and poor quality training for staff. The archaic 'legacy' IT programmes were criticised, as were the new systems designed for new benefits such as Universal Credit.

The 'off-the-shelf' packages used by DWP are not built for purpose, they struggle to cope with the capacity needed for the number of users and claimants. Updates to systems used regularly cause slow-running or even complete crashes. Changes are introduced without explanation or with little training.

For IT to be effective, financial investment, testing and proper training is essential at the outset of the agency.

Avoid replicating DWP management style in future social security delivery

The move to centralised and virtual ways of working in large processing or contact centre sites has changed the nature of social security delivery. A heavily monitored, digital world which focuses on statistics rather than people has led to dissatisfactory service for many service users, and very low morale for those working there. In that environment, staff feel little attachment to their job or the work they do.

The scripting, monitoring of call length or work cleared, or even training and knowledge can be prevent a DWP worker full helping the public they encounter. The poor morale caused as a result has the same level as importance as the reasons why it exists; unhappy staff are less likely to care, and more likely to want to leave their employment which in turn creates high attrition rates and low levels of experienced staff.

Recommendations

- Provide dignity through a decent living wage standard of living
- Ensure services are publicly delivered through the social security agency
- Design a transparent, easy to understand system with a choice of access
- Provide staff with comprehensive training to allow to see issues through to their completion
- IT systems that are fully operational and effective from the outset
- Avoid replicating DWP management style in future social security delivery

Broken down into six recommendations, these seemingly large issues can be addressed by the Scottish Government in creating a new agency, or even by the DWP should there be a change in political will.

These problems are not insurmountable if a different approach was to be adopted by politicians and senior civil servants.

If followed, social security in Scotland could look very different, and work well for those in need of its services and for those delivering it.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Questionnaire for individuals

Social Security in Scotland



Policy for Scotland: What should the Scottish government's priorities be for reforming benefits?
Benefit officers: What should the role of benefit officers be, and what do they need to do it effectively?
Effective service delivery: Where does service delivery go wrong in the current system, and how can it be done better?

Service users: How can the experience of service users be improved?
Support, advice and advocacy: What sort of support do people need, and how should we provide it?
About yourself; <i>The information you give us will be treated as confidential. This question is here to help us identify the range of people answering.</i>
Which area of the benefits system do you work in?
Jobcentre
Telephony
Benefits Processing
Decision Maker
Fraud officer
Other (Please specify)
Any other details about your work which we should refer to:

If you have any other comments, please continue with them on the back of this form. Your comments will be used in the compilation of a research report. You will not, however, be personally identified. Please send this form to Helen Flanagan, PCS, 1st Floor, 145 West Regent Street, G2 2SG or email helenf@pcs.org.uk with your response. Thank you very much for your help.

Appendix 2: Group Interview Schedule

Preamble:

- ! Explain the purpose of the session
- ! Explain the agenda: that this discussion will cover
 - issues in benefits policy
 - views about working with the benefits system
 - thoughts about the experience of service users, and
 - an opportunity to make general comments.
- ! Guarantee confidentiality and anonymity
- ! Ask people to respect the confidentiality and anonymity of others in the room
- ! Assure participants that their contribution is voluntary and that they are not required to say anything
- ! Explain that the comments will be written down to be used in the production of a report, and in further research

Working with the benefits system

Benefit officers

What should the role of benefit officers be, and what do they need to do it?
How can the working conditions be improved?

Effective service delivery

Where does service delivery go wrong in the current system?
How can benefits be delivered rapidly and effectively?

Service delivery

Access

How should the public be able to access devolved social security benefits?
Is Scotland different?
What sort of face to face and visiting services should there be?

Support, advice and advocacy

What sort of support do people need, and how should we provide it?
How can we best protect people's dignity?
How should advice and advocacy work for the public who need extra support?

Benefits policy

Policy for Scotland

What are the problems in the benefits system in Scotland?

General open questions

How can the system be made fairer?

Close

- ! Thank people for participation
- ! Emphasise confidentiality of their own and other people's responses
- ! Invite people to submit individual comments in confidence after the event