

**CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE OF CLAIMING COUNCIL ADMINISTERED
BENEFITS AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT WORKING GROUP**

**MEETING HELD AT THE COMMITTEE ROOM, BOOTLE TOWN HALL
ON TUESDAY 1ST MARCH, 2016**

PRESENT: Councillor Robinson (in the Chair)
Councillor Owens

ALSO PRESENT: Paul Fraser and Margaret Denton, Alan Murphy and
Linda Usher, Job Centre Plus

18. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Cluskey.

19. WITNESS INTERVIEWS

The Lead Member (Councillor Robinson) welcomed the following witnesses to the meeting and thanked them for their co-operation in helping the Working Group to obtain evidence to meet its terms of reference and objectives:-

Alan Murphy (AM), Senior Operations Manager, Job Centre Plus (JCP) along with his colleagues Margaret Denton (MD) and Linda Usher (LU).

Members asked the following questions:-

Q. Could the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) share with the Council information regarding the imposition of sanctions? As an example, the One Stop Shop (OSS) was notified that a resident had been taken off benefits but no reason had been given for the sanction. Could you provide this additional information?

A. We could look at this but it depends on the type of sanction imposed. Furthermore, there were also data protection issues to be taken into account, however, I do think high level numbers were available.

Q. Was there a way to circumnavigate the data protection problem by seeking permission from the claimant to share information? If we had more information it would solve problems in the future, for example, if we were advised that Job Seekers Allowance had been stopped due to a sanction.

A. If data protection issues could be resolved we would like to work closely with Councils to help customers.

Action

DWP to provide the Council, subject to data protection issues, with information regarding:-

- the imposition of sanctions
- high level numbers of imposed sanctions
- timescale for DWP response to Council

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Q. What advice did DWP provide to claimants when their benefit was stopped, for example, signposting to other agencies etc.; and what were the processes especially for long term sanctions greater than 3 months?

A. Sanctions were a last resort and were only introduced when a job seeker did not follow out the steps required to move into employment. When a sanction was imposed, claimants were given further information as to the availability of other benefits, i.e. hardship payments, reconsideration etc. Claimants were advised of the options available to them along with full rationale as to why they were being referred to a decision maker.

Q. Were claimants provided with help regarding Mandatory reconsiderations and was there an appeals process, how could claimants receive advocacy to support them?

A. Yes and this could be provided in writing or verbally.

Action

DWP to provide the Council with information regarding:-

- the appeal process regarding Mandatory reconsiderations
- how claimants receive support and advocacy
- timescale for DWP response to Council

Q. Were staff trained to detect vulnerable claimants, i.e. those with mental health or literacy issues?

A. Staff were trained and would pick up such issues, this would be discussed with customers at the new claims stage. As an example, qualifications could be looked at and this may flag up vulnerability issues.

Q. What training was given to staff?

A. Work Coaches at Job Centres stayed with customers throughout the claims process until they moved into work. This enabled Work Coaches to pick issues up. However, some claimants were good at hiding their vulnerability issues, such as illiteracy, as they had done this for most of their life rather than disclose that they couldn't read or write.

Q. Did Work Coaches have the discretion to refer claimants to a Decision Maker?

A. Yes i.e. in circumstances where mental health maybe an issue.

Q. Was the activity of Work Coaches checked to find out whether they were referring claimants to Decision Makers?

A. Referrals to Decision Makers were minimal. Work Service Managers would quality assess the work of Work Coaches to ensure the best service was provided to the customer. As part of this process a conversation could be had with Work Coaches regarding sanctions or referrals to Decision Makers.

Q. If a claimant was sanctioned, would appeals be considered by the same Decision Maker who made the original decision?

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A. No.

Q. Regarding the Claimant Commitment, if not achievable could this be reassessed?

A. This situation should never arise because the Claimant Commitment was agreed between the Work Coach and the customer based on the customer's capability of looking for work

Q. Could a customer request a Claimant Commitment reassessment?

A. Yes they could. We would look at the customer's experience, qualifications and CV and this would be taken into account as part of the review with the Work Coach. Customers were also provided with a telephone number to call if they felt they could not meet their Claimant Commitment. New Government conditionality requirements were now in place that required customers to have a CV, an email address and a universal jobmatch account. If customers didn't provide a CV or turn up for interview the Work Coach would call the customer in. Issues would always be discussed with the customer before referral to a Decision Maker.

Q. Concern was expressed about the logic of sanctions because what happened after a sanction was imposed? The claimant lost money and became more vulnerable. Reference was made to an anonymous call received from a JCP staff member who stated that if they did not sanction enough claimants then they would be pressurised to do so.

A. This was not the case and there were no targets to be met regarding sanctions. Over 90% of customers who moved off benefits and into work did so without sanctions having ever being imposed.

Q. How confident were you that staff were quality assured and monitored for consistency?

A. A Quality Assessment Framework was in place for this purpose. Staff were aware of literacy and mental health vulnerability issues so that they could support customers in such areas of need. Work psychologists were also available to engage with customers; and homeless claimants could be given leeway easements.

Q. What was the process for claiming hardship payments?

A. A centralised Hardship Team was based at Huyton JCP. All applications were dealt with within 72 hours and applications could be made over the telephone from any JCP.

Q. Do you refer claimants to the Citizens Advice Bureau?

A. This would be dependent on the particular customer needs. Staff would advise of the services of CAB.

Action

DWP to provide the Council with:-

- clarification on the advisory process of referring claimants to CAB
- timescale for DWP response to Council

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Q. Would JCP consider co-locating staff within OSS's, particularly to deal with the number of queries the Council was receiving regarding sanctions, delays in processing etc. A significant number of enquiries relating to Foodbanks and requests for emergency assistance were as a direct consequence of sanctions, delay etc.

A. Yes. This would be considered. A Government requirement currently placed on us was to look at facility planning and this could be investigated as part of this process. In connection with this Sue Riley had made contact with the Council before Christmas regarding co-location of services.

Action

DWP to provide the Council with:-

- an update on progress with the co-location of services
- actions required by the DWP of the Council
- timescale for DWP response to the Council

Q. Were there any targets for moving people onto Universal Credit (UC)?

A. No. A new system was now in place called Gateway and only those customers that met set criteria would be moved onto UC; otherwise customers would remain on their legacy benefit.

Q. If a person lost their job, how long would it be before they received benefit?

A. Four weeks plus 7 days. However, advance payments could be claimed by telephone and this was made clear as part of the interview process.

Q. Tax Credits would be reduced from April and this may affect a claimants benefits. What was the best way the Council could prepare for this?

A. By making Housing Benefit payments direct to the landlord rather than the tenant; and by working with debt management agencies.

Q. Would claimants be surprised by the Tax Credit changes in April?

A. All claimants would be contacted in advance by telephone, SMS text or letter.

Action

DWP to provide the Council with:-

- how they look to provide claimants with alternative payment arrangements (i.e making Housing Benefit payments direct to the landlord rather than the tenant)
- which money advice agencies they are working with given that Government recently announced closure of money advice centres
- timescale for DWP to provide the information to the Council

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Q. How clear was it to tenants that housing costs were contained within Universal Credit and it was the claimant's responsibility?

A. This information was clearly made available to the customer and a copy of the letter explaining the situation could be provided to the Council. Furthermore, other information detailing the processes adopted by the JCP could be provided.

Action

DWP to provide the Council with:-

- a copy of the Universal Credit notification/award letter and other information detailing the processes adopted by the JCP
- timescale for DWP to provide the information to the Council

Q. Regarding Care Leavers, would it be possible to have a flag on the system to highlight vulnerability issues?

A. A Care Leavers protocol was in place, there were single points of contact in each office to liaise with Local Authorities on individual cases, JCP staff attended Working Group meetings with Karen Gray to ensure the processes that were already in place continued to be effective. The next meeting of the Working Group would be held on 16 March 2016.

Q. How could the Council work more collaboratively with DWP to be more people centred?

A. Closer working with OSS staff and co-location of services would definitely help; up-skilling of OSS staff on UC and sanctions would be of benefit; and OSS and JCP staff becoming more familiar with each other's work would also help. This happened already at a higher level and maybe there was a requirement to filter this knowledge down. There had been lots of changes for both staff and customers and working together could lead to improved processes. Some sanctions were through the Work Programme and not via JCP. We would also benefit from the Council continuing to complete Personal Budgeting Support and debt management support/sign posting.

Q. Could we have data on the numbers of sanctions via the Work Programme and Work Coaches?

A. Yes, but it would be dependent on what data could be released. We also may be able to provide information on the categories of sanctions. The aim was to improve services to customers and if that could be achieved by information sharing then we would look favourably to do this.

Actions

DWP to arrange:-

- up-skilling of OSS staff on UC and sanctions
- OSS and JCP staff becoming more familiar with each other's work

Council to provide assistance with:-

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- Personal Budgeting Support
- signposting to debt management support

20. BOOTLE SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

Further to Minute No. 6 of 14 September 2015 and Minute No. 17 of 29 February 2016 the Working Group considered the template of the Bootle One Stop Shop Customer Satisfaction Survey; and whether any changes were required to the survey questionnaire.

RESOLVED:

That the template of the Bootle One Stop Shop Customer Satisfaction Survey be referred to the Public Engagement and Consultation Panel for consideration.