

Not getting through

CAB evidence on the new system for claiming benefits from Jobcentre Plus

Summary

The changes in delivery of welfare benefits by Jobcentre Plus in the past three years have caused significant disruption and hardship for thousands of benefit claimants. Families have been left waiting weeks for their benefits to be processed and telephone systems have been unable to deal with the large call volumes. The most vulnerable claimants, homeless people and those with mental health, learning or other disabilities have suffered the worst as local office support has decreased and alternatives to phone contact have been refused.

Jobcentre Plus are responsible both for delivering key out of work benefits and providing support and help for people to move into work. Jobcentre Plus has around five million working age benefit customers at any one time.¹ The 2004 Government Spending Review announced an efficiency savings programme which would reduce the numbers of Jobcentre Plus staff by around 14 per cent and lead to dramatic changes in the way Jobcentre Plus delivers its services. The new standard operating model for claiming benefits has introduced the telephone as the main route for applying for and contacting Jobcentre Plus about benefit claims. There is a reduced face to face service for claimants in local offices. Benefit processing is being centralised into a smaller number of large processing centres.

The Department for Work and Pensions has judged the rollout of the new Jobcentre Plus model to have been successful, having largely kept to their timetable and met their national customer service targets². This is despite the fact that Jobcentre Plus' own figures show that it failed to process income support or jobseekers allowance within their own target times during most of 2006. In some areas even average processing times hit five weeks – almost double target times. Citizens Advice does not believe the rollout can be deemed successful until Jobcentre Plus can demonstrate that the quality of, and access to, their services has improved for all customers, particularly vulnerable groups.

¹ DWP Quarterly statistical summary, May 2007

² DWP Autumn Performance Report 2006

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CAB clients are most likely to be within the C2DE social economic classes and have a long term health illness or disability.³ We help with three and a half times more income support and incapacity benefit enquiries as jobseeker's allowance enquiries. Bureaux experience of the new model has involved seeing thousands of families having to face weeks without any money. People have been unable to contact benefit processing departments to find out when payments will arrive; sent away from Jobcentre Plus offices without help; made to wait in call boxes for hours trying to claim a crisis loan on a line unable to meet demand; and deaf people have been directed to use a telephone. Last year CAB enquiries about Jobcentre Plus benefits went up by 10 per cent. Claimants seeking help with claiming crisis loans doubled.

In two bureau surveys in autumn 2006 and spring 2007 Citizens Advice found that the majority of bureaux believed Jobcentre Plus services were significantly worse than before reorganisation. The months between the surveys saw only marginal improvements in benefit processing times and a reduced likelihood of claimants being refused the option to make a benefit claim without having to personally use the phone. Access to crisis loans got worse.

Although there are clearly still serious problems, it is important to acknowledge that Jobcentre Plus are already taking measures to address the issues, and we understand that they are finalising a further action plan that reflects the evidence in this report. They have also indicated that they will be happy to work with the Citizens Advice service to monitor progress.

Key findings:

- In autumn 2006, 82 per cent of bureaux surveyed said that Jobcentre Plus services were worse than before reorganisation. In spring 2007, 80 per cent of bureaux said

services were no better or worse still. Nineteen per cent reported improvements since September but only a third of these (11 bureaux) believed that the service was better than before reorganisation.

- In our spring survey, 93 per cent of bureaux reported experiencing serious delays in contacting some parts of Jobcentre Plus.
- Access to crisis loans was the problem reported by the most bureaux. In both surveys around 95 per cent reported their clients experienced problems claiming crisis loans. The main problem was getting through on the phone – a problem reported by 78 per cent of bureaux in the first survey and 88 per cent in the second. In the latest survey, making a claim in person was reported as impossible by almost two thirds of bureaux.
- Most bureaux reported serious delays for their clients in receiving benefit payments. The situation improved between the two surveys with 81 per cent of bureaux reporting serious delays in the first survey, dropping to 67 per cent in the recent survey.
- Although 57 per cent of bureaux reported that Jobcentre Plus advised claimants facing benefit delays to visit a CAB for help, only 26 per cent of bureaux said that they had effective numbers for contacting benefit processing departments.
- More than half of bureaux in both surveys had recent experience of clients being refused alternatives to the telephone. Although the second survey found that fewer clients were being refused alternatives to the phone (a drop from 68 per cent to 55 per cent), it also found that alternatives were still very difficult to access.
- Only half of bureaux in each survey reported that they met regularly with Jobcentre Plus officials.

Key points:

- Jobcentre Plus has failed to roll out its transformation and efficiency savings programmes without causing severe disruption to its customers. The most vulnerable and therefore people most dependent on Jobcentre Plus services have been hit the hardest by these changes. This includes, homeless people, people with mental health problems and other disabilities, people with language and literacy needs.
- In introducing a telephone based system that may suit the majority of people, Jobcentre Plus failed to ensure ready access to benefit services for claimants unable to use the phone or without suitable access to a landline. Jobcentre Plus, who by the nature of its business have a disproportionate number of vulnerable customers, must do more to ensure that alternatives to the phone are readily available. It has already committed to this in its Disability Action Plan⁴ and we hope to see swift improvements.
- For most of 2006, Jobcentre Plus was unable to process income support or jobseeker's allowance within their target processing times of eleven and twelve days. In some areas claimants experienced average processing times more than double the target times. Citizens Advice Bureaux across England and Wales have seen many families in serious financial hardship, waiting weeks for their benefit claims to be processed.
- People who find themselves in real financial crisis can apply for help from the social fund. Benefit processing delays have contributed to increased demand for crisis loans. Applications for crisis loans are now dealt with over the phone but getting through is virtually impossible in many areas of England and Wales. Jobcentre Plus are currently unable to meet the demand for crisis loans.
- Poor communication with Citizens Advice Bureaux during the transformation programme affected the quality of service bureaux were able to offer clients on benefit issues. Bureaux themselves were unable to contact Jobcentre Plus by phone and were frequently left in the dark about changes to where benefits were delivered.
- Jobcentre Plus nationally are now more openly recognising the need for improvements. They plan to improve access to crisis loans via the telephone and encourage CAB advisers to report refusals by local offices to help with making crisis loans in person or on paper. However, we are not confident that services will significantly improve until the needs of those unable to use the phone are fully recognised in the allocation of resources and processes.
- Jobcentre Plus committed publicly to improving partnership working at national and local level, and has been negotiating a new partnership agreement with Citizens Advice to deliver better liaison and consultation mechanisms. Sufficient commitment and resources are needed to make these new arrangements a reality in every part of England and Wales.
- It has now been almost three years since the roll out of the new benefit delivery model. The changes continue to cause disruption to the delivery of benefit services to claimants. Immediate attention and resource must be identified and directed at the areas of greatest individual need.

Introduction

A young mother was left by her partner. The subsequent failure by Jobcentre Plus left her and her child for days without any money at all. She applied immediately for income support but was told that it would take three weeks to process. With only £2.50 and no friends or family locally, they gave her the telephone number to apply for a crisis loan. She tried numerous times but was unable to get through. Though it was an 0800 number she only had a mobile and it cost her £1.50 a minute. The CAB adviser could not get through either on the main number or on their own contact number. They sent her back to the Jobcentre Plus office to request an alternative to the phone, only for her to be told that the phone was the only way she could claim.

Jobcentre Plus sent away a deaf woman with no money with just a telephone number she was unable to use, to apply for a crisis loan.

The 7,000 evidence reports we received from bureaux last year suggest that these experiences are now very common. The CAB service deals with around 1.6 million benefits problems every year, the biggest area of all CAB enquiries. CAB advisers constantly help clients claim benefits, chase up delayed claims, correct mis-advice and challenge errors and poor decisions. In 2006/07 bureaux dealt with around half a million enquiries about Jobcentre Plus benefits. Throughout this period Citizens Advice Bureaux reported increased problems in the areas directly associated with the introduction of the new service delivery model. Advisers were particularly concerned that the changes have had a detrimental effect on the availability of appropriate support for people with disabilities

and other vulnerable or disadvantaged groups. The main problems encountered were:

- serious delays in receiving their benefits
- getting through to Jobcentre Plus to make a claim or to check progress or to claim a crisis loan
- problems accessing alternatives to telephone claiming
- poor liaison and communication from Jobcentre Plus about the changes.

Citizens Advice has undertaken two surveys to closely monitor and assess the prevalence of these problems and whether they are diminishing. The surveys were undertaken in September and October 2006 (autumn 2006), and then in April and May 2007 (spring 2007). In the first survey 152 bureaux participated from every region in England and from Wales, and 172 in the second. One hundred and twelve bureaux took part in both surveys.

This report examines the background rationale for the new service delivery regime, in terms of the Government's wider policy priorities. It presents the evidence of problems with customer service and identifies the most vulnerable and socially excluded groups as suffering the greatest detriment. It also highlights inadequate liaison mechanisms between Jobcentre Plus offices and bureaux, and makes recommendations for urgent service improvements.

Why transform benefit delivery?

The Government has made much of its long term plan to eradicate child poverty and get people back to work, especially lone parents and people claiming incapacity benefit. The aim of reform is to prevent benefit dependency, identify and eliminate fraud, generally make groups work-ready, and reduce spend on benefits. The approach has largely been to bring in greater elements of

compulsion and to focus individual support and incentives on work-readiness and work-related activities. Whilst this approach has its place, much greater emphasis is needed on drastically improving benefit delivery.

There is growing recognition that improving the administration of benefits is key to ensuring people do not remain dependent on them. Work and Pensions Minister Jim Murphy MP has recently expressed an aspiration of halving benefit processing times believing it will allow work focused activity to take place first.⁵ The establishment of a Benefits Simplification Unit within the DWP and projects to improve the interactions between Jobcentre Plus, tax credits and housing benefit for people who move in and out of work are a welcome step towards resolving these issues.⁶

In parallel to reforming welfare, there has been a huge emphasis in modernising and transforming public services as part of far-reaching efficiency drives. The Gershon review of Government efficiency prompted the efficiency savings announced in the 2004 Spending Review and the job cuts resulted in increased focus on delivery by IT systems and the replacing of face-to-face interactions with telephone services. The Modernising Government agenda focuses on how new technologies can improve the quality of services and enable the use of new technologies to enable longer access – i.e. evening and weekends.⁷ The Transformational Government agenda further promotes this model.⁸ It encourages the use of technology to create greater choice and personalisation for the citizen and in doing so generates savings. The use of these technologies will reduce the need for face-to-face services as most customers will choose to access services via the phone.

In some ways this approach can have a number of advantages for both the customer

and the public sector provider. For the provider:

- It enables costs to be cut as contact centres can be located wherever premises and employee costs are cheaper.
- Use of technology means that automated systems can deal with large volumes of calls.
- It enables providers to ensure consistency of service standards.

For the individual contact centres can often work well. They enable people to make contact from the comfort of their own home, at a time that suits them and many problems can be resolved quickly and easily. For people with mobility problems or limited access to transport, being able to make contact from home is a great advantage.

However, there are other people for whom the phone is simply not appropriate. This is true of many people with mental health problems, people with physical and in particular hearing and speaking disabilities. Access to services by phone can be a particular problem for individuals whose infirmity inhibits them from concentrating and following through ideas or thought patterns or explaining themselves. For example, many people with severe mental health problems experience withdrawal and problems with communication.

Telephones are often inappropriate for people in hospital or prisoners about to be released from custody who have no confidential access to a phone. Other people have no access to landlines and have to rely on pay as you go mobile phones which are expensive and may level extra charges on otherwise free or low-cost calls such as benefit lines. One in five individuals in the lowest socio-economic groups and on the lowest incomes only have

5 Net gains – future of benefit delivery speech by Work and Pensions Minister Jim Murphy, 23 January 2007

6 *ibid*

7 Modernising Government, the Cabinet Office, March 1999

8 Transformational Government: Enabled by Technology, Cabinet Office, November 2005

access to a mobile phone, with controlling cost being the main motivating factor.⁹

Citizens Advice has highlighted the problematic nature of moving service delivery to a primarily telephone-based system.¹⁰ Unless organisations provide alternative access routes that are well publicised and easy to access, they will find that they are building discrimination into their service provision.

The standard operating model and Jobcentre Plus reorganisation

Major changes to the delivery of social security benefits have been introduced as part of the reorganisation of Jobcentre Plus following the merger with the Benefits Agency and more significantly the efficiency savings announced in the 2004 Spending Review. Jobcentre Plus staff numbers are expected to drop from around 80,000 in March 2004 to 67,000 by March 2008. A loss of around 12,500 staff, this will account for half of the DWP job reduction target.

In 2004, Jobcentre Plus began to introduce a new standard operating model across England, Wales and Scotland. It was supported by new IT systems which it believed would help them to deliver their services more efficiently and effectively. The standard operating model introduced a network of contact centres for taking initial benefit claims using a new Customer Management System, centralised benefit delivery centres and a smaller network of local offices. By March 2008, benefits will be processed by 77 benefit delivery centres rather than 650 local teams, one of the stated aims of which is to enable the development of expertise within each centre.

Jobcentre Plus has a strategy for reducing 'footfall' in local offices and schemes have

been set up locally which involve encouraging the customer to contact the department via telephone rather than visit an office.¹¹ Their research of footfall found that many visitors could instead contact them by phone, but that others would need to continue to receive face-to-face services.

The telephone is now the main route for claiming income support, jobseeker's allowance and incapacity benefit. If claimants go into their local office to make a claim for any of these benefits they will be advised to make their claim by phone and directed to the customer phones in the office. The local offices have no role in processing benefits. If a claimant comes into the office to query the progress of a claim or a missing payment, they will also be directed to the phones (See figure 1).

There are no specific points in the process when Jobcentre Plus asks claimants whether urgent payments are needed although the customers themselves could request such help at various points.

Crisis loans and interim payments

Crisis loans can be awarded to meet living expenses or to help with the cost of items or services required urgently. Claimants have to demonstrate that there is a risk to their health or safety and that they have no other resources they can call upon. In 2005/06 there were 1.36 million applications for a crisis loan, 74.5 per cent of which resulted in a loan being made.¹²

By April 2008 all social fund processing will be carried out by 20 centralised sites, using the standard operating model. The intention is that people calling the claims line will speak directly to a decision-maker, and receive a go decision after a 20 minute interview.¹³ If the claim succeeds, the person will then have to

⁹ The Consumer experience, Research report, OFCOM, November 2006

¹⁰ Hanging on the telephone; CAB evidence of the effectiveness of call centres, Citizens Advice, September 2004

¹¹ Work and Pensions Committee, The Efficiency savings programme in Jobcentre Plus, HC 834, March 2006

¹² DWP, Annual report on the social fund 2005/06 cm6856

¹³ Work and Pensions Committee, Sixth report, The social fund, HC 464 i, May 2007

Figure 1: Summary of standard operating model for new claims for income support, jobseekers' allowance and incapacity benefit

	Process	Description
Step 1:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Call contact centre to make phone application. ■ Data input into the Customer Management System. ■ Interview date arranged with personal adviser at Jobcentre Plus office. ■ Customers referred to the specialist job broking service, Jobseeker Direct, for immediate help with job search. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Originally an 0845 number. ■ Initial details would be taken and then a callback arranged for within 36 hours to complete the application. ■ 0800 number launched in June 2007 and in most cases all details can be collected in one call. ■ People re-claiming within 12 weeks are identified more quickly and numerous unnecessary questions avoided.
Step 2:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Paperwork sent to claimant to check and take with them to interview along with evidence to support their claim. 	
Step 3:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Claim sent to benefit delivery centres for processing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Where a claim is missing supporting evidence a recent change in process means that instead of holding it at the local off for 30 days the claim will be sent directly to the processing centres for them to chase any missing evidence and complete the claim.

to a Jobcentre Plus office to sign forms and collect payment. The new telephone model has led many staff in Jobcentres to believe incorrectly that the phone service is replacing other application routes. In fact, regulations were made in 2002 so that crisis loan applications "need not be made in writing", adding a means of applying and not replacing written applications, which can still legally be made in person, by faxing in a completed form, or by downloading and completing a form from the internet.

The rollout of new Jobcentre Plus offices introduced a new open plan format to offices. Screened areas were retained specifically for

crisis loan applications and payments. This means that in general, applications for crisis loans cannot be made from Jobcentre phones. Instead, people are told to use payphones or other phones in order to call Crisis Loans Direct. Many people have also been referred to local Citizens Advice Bureaux specifically to use phones at the CAB.

Another feature of the application process is that callers to the social fund are in many cases routed through a menu system with several complicated options, which are not user friendly. Confused clients often hang up too soon.

An interim payment can be made if the claim is delayed for any reason. Interim payments are recovered from subsequent benefit payments. In practice very few requests for interim payments succeed. There is evidence of confusion about when to make an interim payment amongst decision makers, and people have been sent between crisis loan and benefit departments, with each saying that the client should apply for the other.

The Standard Operating Model – problems and responses

Since rollout began all major stakeholders have agreed that in principle the model has the potential to deliver efficiently for the majority of claimants. All have argued that it has failed and continues to fail a significant proportion of disadvantaged people, who suffer disproportionately as a consequence. The transition period has been lengthy, during which time claimants have faced telephone services unable to cope with demand and long waits for their benefits to be processed. The following section outlines some of the critiques of the model since 2004.

2004

- Citizens Advice wrote to Jobcentre Plus warning of the potential effect on a significant minority of under-resourced alternatives to telephone service. We were also warned that job cuts would result in poor customer service. The permanent secretary assured us that “Whilst they [changes] are being implemented, maintaining, if not improving, the quality of service to our customers, will remain at the top of our agenda.”¹⁴
- David Anderson, then Jobcentre Plus Chief Executive advised that telephone operators are trained to recognise when claimants are not coping with the phone and to offer them alternatives.¹⁵ But in reality, CAB experience suggested that claimants were

rarely offered these options and were commonly denied them on request.

- With 20 million calls going unanswered a National Audit Office report on DWP contact centres identified that “the performance of centres was poor in 2004/05 and should not be allowed to deteriorate to that level again”.¹⁶ Even more damning, the report concluded that “for some of the Department’s customers, such as the frail elderly and some disabled people, the telephone is not always appropriate. The Department should examine whether alternative face-to-face services could be provided, where necessary.”

2005

- By September, Jobcentre Plus contact centres were unable to cope with the numbers of people calling to claim benefit, and as a result there was a drop in the number of applications received. Customer service for contact centres fell to 34 per cent against a target of 81 per cent in the second quarter of 2005/06. The average for the year as a whole was 61 per cent.¹⁷
- Public Accounts Committee report on contact centres concluded that “implementation of the customer management system within Jobcentre Plus in 2005 was seriously flawed.”¹⁸ The Department (and Government more widely) should learn from the troubled roll-out of the system which at times badly affected service to the public. In particular, it should not introduce systems which are not fully tested and without enough suitable staff being available and properly trained to use the system.”
- In a letter to Citizens Advice new Jobcentre Plus chief executive, Lesley Strathie confirmed that:

¹⁴ Letter to Citizens Advice from Second Permanent Secretary DWP, 30 March 2004

¹⁵ Letter to Citizens Advice from David Anderson, Chief Executive, Jobcentre Plus, 20 September 2004

¹⁶ National Audit Office, Department for Work and Pensions: Delivering effective services through contact centres HC 941, March 2006

¹⁷ Jobcentre Plus District performance against customer service target 05/06, www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk

¹⁸ Public Accounts Committee, Department for Work and Pensions: Delivering effective services through contact centres, HC1034, November 2006

- customers can arrange for a third party to represent them on the phone
- they can arrange a face-to-face interview at their local Jobcentre Plus office or, if more appropriate, a home-visit
- where the customer cannot make a claim by phone, they can also make a claim on a paper form.

2006

- By April 2006, 90 per cent of calls to contact centres were answered within target times and for those able to use the telephone, the model was no longer presented a barrier to claiming income support, incapacity benefit or jobseeker's allowance.
- In research for their Equalities Scheme Jobcentre Plus research found customers had difficulties with the new model. Although much of the feedback was positive, they found that it was clear that "our disabled customers wanted us to concentrate on how they are able to contact us and how we contact them."¹⁹ One customer commented "referred to a phone to sort out initial claim. Not ideal at all for someone with mental health issues. Would rather sort out face-to-face."
- The Social Fund Commissioner raised concerns both about the overemphasis on telephone claims and the delays in getting through on the telephone.²⁰ Complaints also continue to be received about engaged telephones and "poor advice and information about the relevant processes and the type of application most appropriate for the individual...There is a need to ensure adequate arrangements are in place to facilitate face-to-face applications and payments. I suggest the Department reviews its policy on the use of screened areas to deliver crisis loan

decisions and issue payments. In the meantime, I suggest it sets out clearly the arrangements for those who have difficulty using the telephone and/or travelling to collect payments, and for those who have no money to travel."

- In April and September 2006, Jobcentre Plus managers were reminded in internal newsletters that alternatives to the telephone should be made available to customers when necessary.²¹ New guidance to be read alongside the standard operating model was issued at the end of October. There was no consultation in advance and we believe is still inadequate. It does not include clear reference to mental health, or any examples of people who might struggle to use the phone other than those who are deaf.
- Jobcentre Plus' Disability Action Plan identified the need to ensure their services, specifically through contact centres, does not disadvantage particular customers.²² They have also committed to:
 - evaluating the impact of introducing telephone channels as the primary gateway to their services
 - taking remedial action where services are deficient, and publicise the action being taking on their website
 - undertaking a publicity campaign to publicise alternative methods of contacting Jobcentre Plus
 - analysing the results of their customer satisfaction survey, undertaken every two years, and, where appropriate, take action on the recommendations.

2007

- The DWP Equality Scheme has led to the development of a diversity impact assessment tool which should ensure that Jobcentre Plus assess the impact of change

¹⁹ Jobcentre Plus Disability and gender equality schemes and race equality scheme progress report, December 2006

²⁰ IRS, Social Fund Commissioner's Annual report 2005/2006, 2006

²¹ Jobcentre Plus, Internal managers' update, April and September 2006

²² Jobcentre Plus Disability and gender equality schemes and race equality scheme progress report, December 2006

on different customer groups. The tool, to be launched in 'spring' 2007, aims to ensure that, where appropriate, involvement and consultation take place with customers, their representatives and Jobcentre Plus staff at national, regional and local levels regarding proposed changes.²³

- Many bureaux have found access to the crisis loans virtually impossible by phone. The Independent Review Service also found that only 5 per cent of its calls succeeded in getting through.²⁴ Despite this, Jobcentre Plus claims that more crisis loan applications are being made and are succeeding, resulting in about 25-30 per cent more awards. Neil Couling, Director, Benefit and Fraud Directorate, Jobcentre Plus recently told the Work and Pensions Committee "It is actually getting easier to claim and easier to get an award...we do not think people are not getting paid."²⁵
- Social Security Advisory Committee report highlights problems faced by customers on low incomes having to pay for mobile telephone calls to Jobcentre Plus call centres.²⁶
- Jobcentre Plus rolled out amendments to the Standard Operating Model. This included the introduction of an 0800 number for new claims where in most cases all the information could be taken in one call.
- Jobcentre Plus has issued a Crisis Loans Improvement Plan to improve telephone access. The Plan includes temporary measures which remove the opportunity to receive an instant decision and a commitment to ensure claimants are given interim payments instead where appropriate.²⁷

In the next section we look at the experiences of clients and bureau advisers of the new model of benefit delivery over the last year.

Section two: CAB clients experience of poor service delivery

In this section we will show that:

- overall performance has not improved since September when 82 per cent of bureaux believed services were worse than before reorganisation
- there has been an improvement in CAB contacts for escalating claims but these contacts are not located in the most efficient areas
- there remain serious problems accessing telephone services
- it is still often either difficult or impossible to access alternatives to the phone
- delays in administering and paying benefits continue to cause hardship
- crisis loans have become even more difficult to claim.

2.1 Overall perceptions of Jobcentre Plus performance

When we surveyed bureaux in autumn 2006 we found a widespread frustration with Jobcentre Plus services. Around five in six bureaux (82 per cent) said that they felt service delivery had declined since reorganisation. Instead of seeing an improvement in our second survey we found that 80 per cent thought the service provided by Jobcentre Plus was the same or worse than in September.

- Only 19 per cent reported any improvement and two thirds of these still

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Work and Pensions Committee, Sixth report, The social fund, HC 464 i, May 2007

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Social Security Advisory Committee, Occasional paper no.3, Telephony in DWP and its agencies: Call costs and equality of customer access, July 2006

²⁷ Letter to Citizens Advice from Jobcentre Plus Director of Benefits and Fraud, 12 June 2007

felt the quality of service was no better or worse than before re-organisation.

- 95 per cent reported that their clients faced serious problems in claiming crisis loans.

“Overall, the service to clients is appalling. We as a bureau have been assured, once we involved the local MPs, things are being re-organised. They even gave us direct telephone numbers to contact should we experience difficulty with the public line number. None of them work.” A London CAB, spring 2007

“Time taken to process, losing claims and paperwork, hard to track a claim, unable to speak to person who understands the problem or can do anything about it plus many more difficulties too numerous to mention.” A Surrey CAB, spring 2007

Analysis of the comments from bureaux highlighted four things:

1 Improved escalation routes for advisers

The September survey found advisers were hugely frustrated that they were unable to get through to Jobcentre Plus to resolve problems for clients who had no money and had themselves been unable to get through by telephone. The second survey found that advisers had better access to external relations managers and district managers and that these contacts helped them to resolve client queries when they couldn't get through using the usual routes.

“We have been given contacts in the External Relations Department who are extremely nice. We try not to trouble them except for emergencies, but they really do help when we need them. Therefore, although ‘at the coal face’ there does not seem to be a great improvement yet – at least we can now

get through to real people who understand and help.” A Hampshire bureau, spring 2007

However, advisers also expressed concern that whilst this improved things for claimants getting support from the CAB, reliance on a third party should not be necessary to access benefits.

2 Lack of resources, expertise of staff or systems to manage change

It was clear that bureaux felt the reorganisation had left Jobcentre Plus with insufficient resources to provide a quality service. Many advisers commented on the inexperience of staff, staff shortages and poor training leading to delays and incorrect decisions.

“The staff are under resourced and badly organised.” A bureau in the north east, spring 2007

“Customer service is getting increasing worse. Claims seem to be being processed all over the place to try and clear backlogs. Clients are not getting satisfactory answers to queries. Staff no longer seem to be concerned about the clients having to wait and appear to be under pressure and inexperienced”. A Lincolnshire bureau, spring 2007

3 Particular problems for vulnerable and complex cases

Many felt the new model posed particular problems for claimants whose cases involved a more complex decision or who themselves needed more support. Advisers felt that the centralised model was not leaving enough resources locally to ensure those who needed help with their claim could be supported.

“It appears to be the most vulnerable clients that tend to experience the most intractable problems and this may be because staff are under too much

pressure and are too target driven to take the time needed to advise and help them properly. All too often they are advised to see us so that we can sort things out!" A West Yorkshire bureau, spring 2007

"Lack of confidence to use the phone due to language barriers is a very common problem. Up to 30 per cent of our daily contacts are in a language other than English – this group have to depend heavily on CAB services for even basic enquiries." A South Yorkshire bureau, spring 2007

"Clients, particularly the less able and vulnerable are not finding dealing with remote call centres easy and are not being given the opportunity to complete paper applications or even refused." A Devon bureau, spring 2007

- 4 Very poor access to the social fund crisis loans significantly influenced overall impressions of Jobcentre Plus services

Almost all bureaux in the spring survey who had the telephone model for claiming crisis loans rolled out in their area, reported serious problems in getting through. Even the small number of bureaux (11) that reported both

improvements in service between surveys, and an improved service since reorganisation, still reported serious problems getting through to the Crisis Loans claims line.

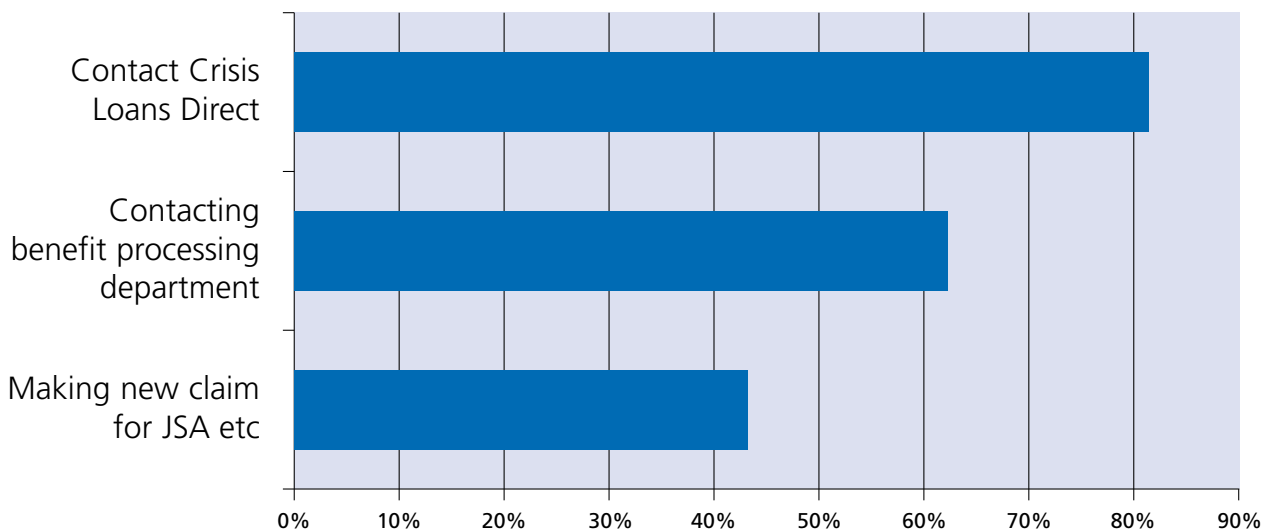
"Our impression is that the new systems are providing a better service for most clients and advisers. Complex cases are subject to problems at claim stage and delays in processing. The Crisis Loan claim line at Norwich continues to be difficult to access." A Hertfordshire bureau, spring 2007

"Less delays in getting through to the various sections – with the exception of crisis loans; where service remains poor." A Yorkshire CAB, spring 2007

2.2 Failings of the telephone services

In the autumn 2006 survey, 67 per cent of bureaux reported serious difficulties experienced in contacting Jobcentre Plus by phone. In the spring 2007 survey we asked specifically about which part of Jobcentre Plus was giving particular problems; the claims line, the benefit processing centre or the crisis loans line (see figure 2). It was evident that clients and advisers experienced the most profound problems in getting through to benefit processing departments and the crisis

Figure 2: Serious delays in contacting Jobcentre Plus



Base: 171 respondents, CAB spring 2007 survey

loans claims line. Forty three per cent still reported problems getting through to make an initial benefit claim. Jobcentre Plus figures show that 80 per cent of calls are answered within 20 seconds. This disparity perhaps reflects the fact that problems are more likely to be reported to bureaux.

For example in April a Nottinghamshire bureaux wrote:

“My biggest issue is the time spent wasted waiting on the phone. Still finding it well nigh impossible to get through to Jobcentre Plus offices and when I have got through, my call has been diverted to the next town, who couldn’t deal with my enquiry. I cannot wait endlessly on the end of a phone line when caseworker time costs the public purse approximately £50 per hour.”

Crisis Loans and telephone problems

The rollout of the telephone model for claiming crisis loans has been followed by an increase in claimants seeking help from a CAB. The proportion of these enquiries relating to difficulties with the claims process over the last year.

In both surveys almost all bureaux said that their clients experienced problems with claiming crisis loans. The two biggest

problems reported were being unable to get through and the cost of the telephone calls (see figure 3). Ninety seven per cent of bureaux with the new crisis loan model operating in their area reported that they had serious problems getting through.

The scale of the problem is reflected in the volume of case evidence sent to us by bureaux. We have received around 900 reports about problems clients have experienced in accessing a crisis loan in the months from September 2006 to May 2007. The following cases show how many clients are going without food and shelter as a result of being unable to get through to Crisis Loans Direct. Bureau advisers are also finding it extremely inaccessible:

A disabled man went without food for six days because he had no money and was unable to get a reply from the crisis loans phone number.

A client and her disabled son visited their local bureau. They had no money and were homeless. The adviser phoned the crisis loans number but continually got the engaged signal. She then tried to get through on five direct line numbers that had been just given to the bureaux by the social fund manager at the benefit delivery centre. The adviser left messages on voicemails but no-one responded that day or since. The clients had to sleep

Figure 3: Problems accessing crisis loans

	Autumn 2006	Spring 2007
Problems in claiming crisis loans overall	96%	95%
Can't get through	78%	88%
Cost of telephone calls	65%	68%
No option to claim in person		50%
No travel expenses		44%
Refused use of Jobcentre Plus phone		40%
Refused paper form		31%
Option to claim in person available but refused		24%

Base: 124 respondents, CAB autumn 2006 survey and 156 respondents, CAB spring 2007 survey.

rough outside that night as the bureaux were unable to find them any emergency accommodation.

A man looking after his week old baby was told by his Jobcentre Plus office that he would have to apply for his crisis loan over the phone. He didn't have a landline, was not offered a clerical form and told to use a phone box. He was unhappy about this as he had to leave his baby outside in her pram. He could not get through and after several attempts sought help from a CAB. They could not get through either and the man was left with no money to support his partner, baby and three other children.

A man was left with no money over the Christmas period as bank charges following unauthorised direct debits by his gas supplier ate up all his JSA. He tried to apply for a crisis loan but was unable to get through despite trying for two hours, freezing in a public phone box.

One bureau reported how the introduction of telephone claiming in their area had resulted in a dramatic increase in requests for help.

"If people can't get through to crisis loans on the phone, they will accept a letter from CAB requesting help to apply. Most of the referrals come from the security guards at the Jobcentre. In March 2006, telephone became the

main method for applying for a crisis loan. Between April and August we've dealt with 159 cases, compared with 14 in the same period in 2005." A Berkshire CAB, autumn 2006

Getting through to benefit processing departments

It was clear from the comments in the first survey that advisers were facing serious difficulties in contacting benefit processing departments on behalf of their claimants. Many reported telephones ringing with no answer, or being engaged throughout the day until just after the office closed, when it just rang. Others complained that they were put on hold for ages with no indication of how long the queue was.

In spring 2007 almost two-thirds of bureaux reported having serious problems in contacting the benefit processing departments (see figure 4). Being able to make contact with benefit processing departments to find out if any further information is required can be vital in progressing a claim.

A disabled woman sought help from a Berkshire bureau when her income support suddenly stopped. She had tried to get through to Canterbury benefit processing centre without success. The bureau also got the 'all our lines are busy, please call back later' message. She was worried that the delay in getting through would affect her ability to

Figure 4: Accessing benefit processing departments

	Autumn 06	Spring 2007
Serious delays in making contact		62%
No delays making contact		7%
Have up to date numbers and they work	22%	26%
Have up to date numbers, but we often can't get through	56%	53%
Have no up to date numbers for processing departments	22%	21%

appeal within the necessary 30 day period.

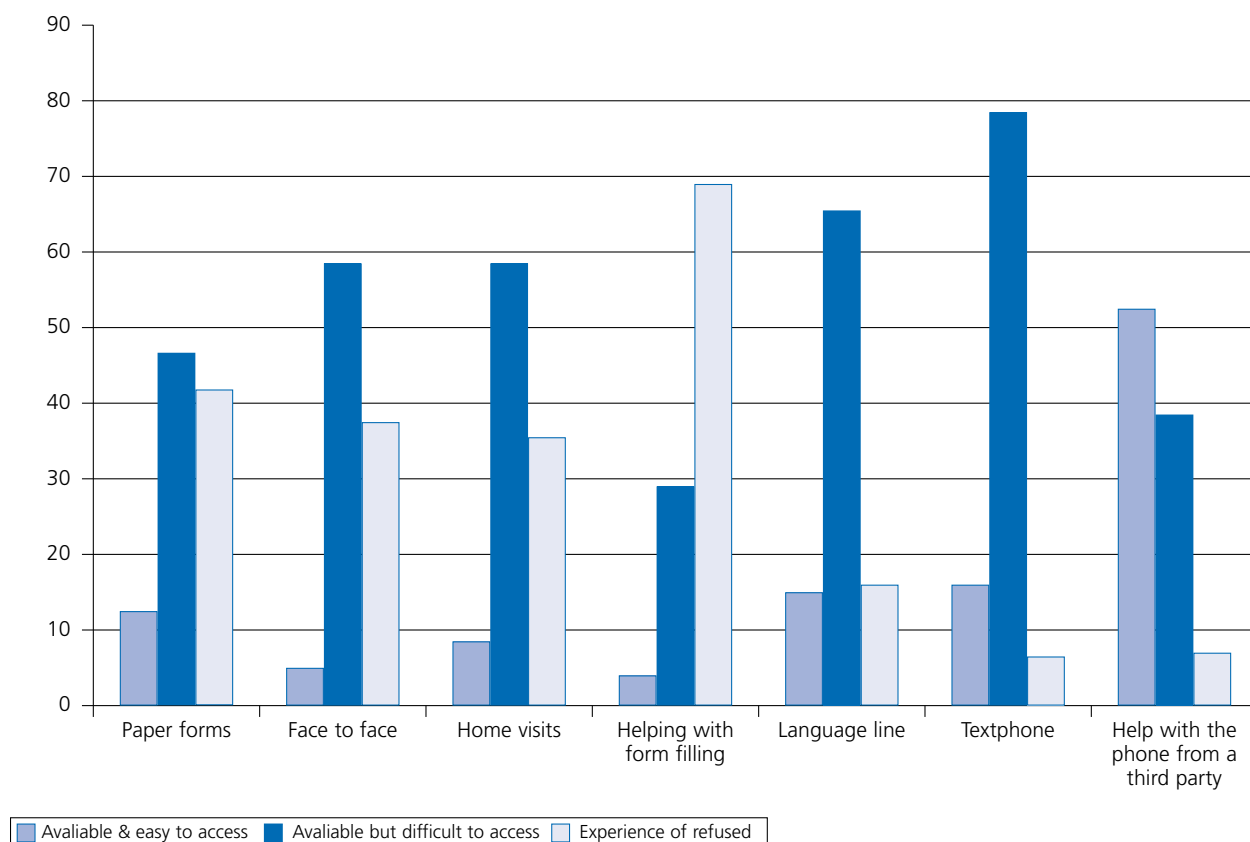
A woman unable to work because of depression had to rely on help from charities and social services because of the delay in processing her income support claim. Her social worker was becoming increasingly concerned that these problems were worsening her mental health. The adviser could not get through to the processing centre on the phone. "The phone rings and eventually a message from BT says the call is not being answered, or the continuous 'number unobtainable' tone starts."

Problems getting through on the phone can cause enormous frustration and hardship. Access is unlikely to improve until the completion of the roll out of benefit delivery centres in April 2008.

2.3 Alternatives to the telephone

Most bureaux reported having recent experience of clients being refused alternatives to the telephone to claim benefits. Jobcentre Plus tell us that they are continually reinforcing to their staff that alternatives to the phone should be made available to claimants. The second survey found that fewer bureaux had recent experience of being refused alternatives – a drop from 68 per cent to 55 per cent. Aware that many vulnerable claimants unable to use the phone find communicating their needs difficult, our second survey asked how easy the alternatives were to access. Only 13 per cent of bureaux reported that making a claim by paper, or in person was available and easy for claimants to access. We have numerous examples of clients being refused an alternative service even when they had a clear presenting need on the grounds of disability, language or the inability to get through by telephone (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Accessing alternatives to the telephone, spring 2007



Base: 134 responses, CAB spring 2007 survey

A client rang a Hertfordshire CAB in tears. She had no money and had been to the Jobcentre Plus for help with a crisis loan. She was told she had to make a claim over the phone and given the freephone number. She tried, and kept trying but was unable to get through. The adviser rang the Jobcentre Plus office and was told that paper claims for crisis loan took 3-4 weeks to process – even if the Jobcentre faxed it through. This was no good for immediate living expenses.

A bureau helped a man with learning disabilities complete a crisis loan application on paper and he went to the Jobcentre Plus office to submit his claim. Only when the bureau found that his claim had been refused did they discover that staff had refused to accept his paper application and instead given him the number of the claims line and told him to go and make his claim in a callbox outside. The refused claim was based on an application he'd struggled to make himself on the phone.

A young man with learning difficulties had had his benefits stopped and had no money. He'd been to his local Jobcentre Plus office but kept being referred to telephone services which he found difficult to handle and wasn't getting anywhere. He was surviving by borrowing from his friends and living on their floors or sofas. The bureau commented that "His problem is accessing a service which is only useful to people who are able to manage their own affairs."

"We have clients sent to us by Jobcentre Plus so we can help fill out forms. When we requested language line for one couple whose English was a second language they said that it was not available." A Somerset CAB, spring 2007

A bureau reported that accessing alternatives on the grounds of the cost of a phone was difficult. "Alternatives are offered for those who cannot use a telephone due to disability but are not offered to those who are unable to afford the phone." A Cambridgeshire CAB, spring 2007

Rationing of alternatives

Although we are aware that Jobcentre Plus does not have an official target to limit the number of claims that are made via routes other than the phone, bureaux have uncovered strong evidence that locally, alternatives to telephone claiming are effectively rationed.

"We were advised that there would be a facility for clerical claims but there would only be a small amount of time devoted to these. Bureaux are advised not to 'abuse' this facility". A Hertfordshire CAB, autumn 2006

In June 2007 a Surrey bureau was told that their clients had to pass a test of 'vulnerability' before they could be allowed to make a claim in person. Their clients had moved into the area and a new flat in order to take up a new job. In the move they had lost a wallet containing £200. As they had failed to get through to Crisis Loans Direct all morning the bureau phoned their local office and requested that the clients be helped to make a claim in person. Whilst able to show that they were vulnerable, the adviser pointed out that regulations permitted clerical claims and vulnerability should not be an issue. The Jobcentre Plus adviser explained that 'they' are very strict about only wanting claims to be made on the phone and that she had been 'ticked off' last time she'd requested a clerical claim.

A Surrey CAB reported that: "Vulnerable clients are supposed to be able to claim

crisis loans by a face-to-face interview if they can't use the phone. Jobcentre Plus have refused to book appointments although they are supposed to offer them. [The] Call Centre has refused to let bureaux initiate claims for clients who do not speak English. They say that an appropriately qualified speaker will be available when a client calls but this does not happen." Autumn 2006

Inadequate resources for alternatives to the telephone

CAB evidence suggests that strategies used to cut footfall have been insufficiently discerning and many claimants in need of support are directed inappropriately to the phone or to their local CAB. Bureaux have always reported failings of benefit offices to help claimants with literacy problems instead sending them to bureaux. CAB evidence and advisers' comments suggest that they now seem even more likely to do this. Ninety six per cent of bureaux reported that getting help with form filling was either difficult to access or that they had had recent experience of clients being refused help.

"The local Jobcentre Plus seem to see us (CAB) as their form filling outlet. They appear not to have any recognition of clients with mental health problems, learning disabilities, etc. There seems to be no provision for people who find using the phone difficult in the system any more. Jobcentre users are told to come to the bureau even when we are closed and often have been given inappropriate forms." A Cumbrian CAB, spring 2007

A bureau in Yorkshire received a letter from their Jobcentre Plus office confirming that staff should be offering face-to-face interviews for crisis loans. Less that a month later the bureau had a client sent to them for help claiming benefit and a crisis loan.

2.4 Delays and administrative problems

Severe delays have continued to affect thousands of claimants. When the new model was rolled out there were widespread delays at all stages of the process – in getting through to make the initial claim; in getting the callback to complete the claim and in getting a date for interview. More recently delays have tended to concentrate at the processing stage. For example:

A Hertfordshire woman was left trying to support herself and her three children on just her child tax credit and child benefit for more than eight months. She was in arrears with her rent and council tax and had other debts accumulating. She was unable to work after injuring her back, and had applied for income support and incapacity benefit. She told the CAB adviser that she had sent Jobcentre Plus all the documents they had requested, and they could not explain the delay. The client was threatened with court action by her landlord and the local authority and was finding the whole situation extremely stressful.

Prevalence of delays

Despite being assured that the rollout of the new Jobcentre Plus network would not result

Figure 6: Delays in receiving benefit payments

	Autumn 2006	Spring 2007
Yes serious	81%	67%
Yes not serious	15%	26%
Delay	5%	7%

Base: 154 respondents, CAB autumn 2006 survey and 161 respondents, CAB spring 2007 survey

in a fall in services to customers, claimants have seen year on year increases in benefit processing times. As a result in April 2006 they introduced a new target for measuring average actual clearance times for processing benefit claims. Targets were:

- incapacity benefit (IB) – 18 days
- income support (IS) – 11 days
- jobseekers allowance (JSA) – 12 days

Jobcentre Plus met the incapacity benefit processing target from the outset, did not meet the income support target until December 2006, and has yet to meet the jobseeker's allowance target. Jobcentre Plus' own figures show that in some areas throughout 2006, districts were taking an average of five weeks to process claims.

The number of bureaux reporting delays in benefit processing is worryingly high, although there has been a small decrease in the proportion of delays which are classed as "serious" (see figure 6). In the first survey a quarter or less told us that benefits were being processed with the target times of 11, 12 or 18 days. Twenty four bureaux told us that processing of income support typically

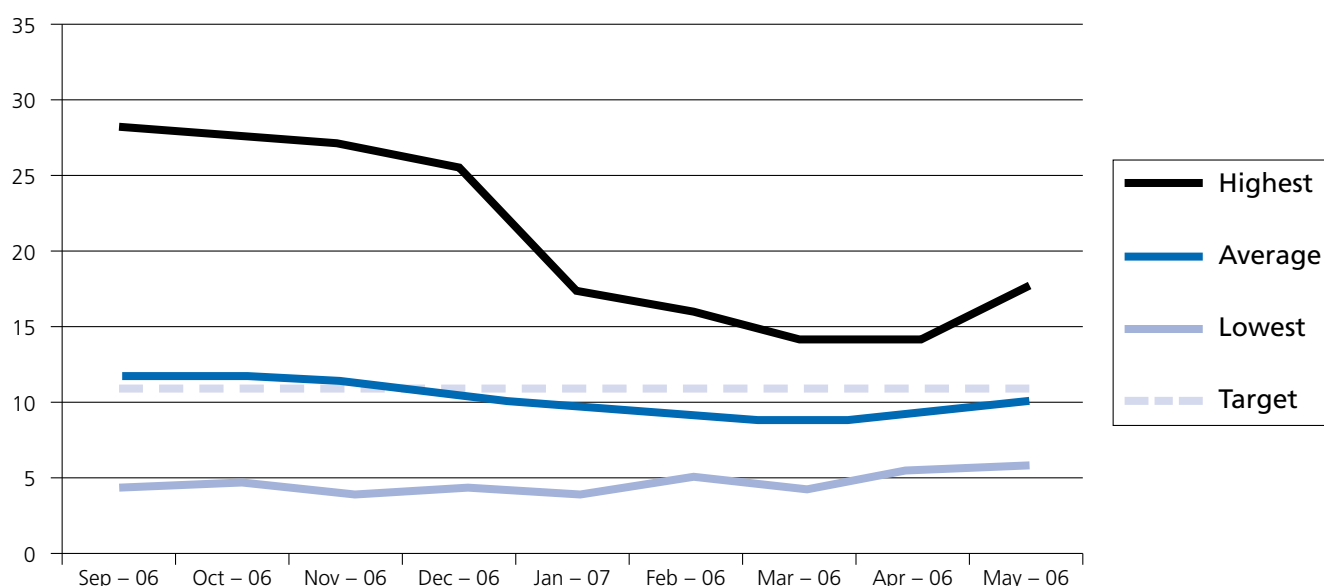
took more than four weeks and most of these reported that six to eight weeks was common.

In September 2006, the average official processing time for income support nationally was 11.9 days but ranged from 9.5 days in Wales to 18.2 days in the east of England. Within the East Region itself, many districts took much longer than 18 days on average to process income support claims. Bury St Edmunds district met the 11 day average processing target in February but prior to that – between April 2006 and January 2007, its average time was 24 days!

National average processing times disguise substantial regional and district variations (see figure 7). Whilst Jobcentre Plus has been meeting its target processing time for income support since December 2006, in April there were still 16 districts who were not meeting this target.

In March 2007, the national average processing time for income support had fallen to 8.9 days but in May had risen again to 9.83 days. In March the East Region met the target average processing time for the first time in the business year but still failed miserably in a

Figure 7: Time taken to process income support by district September – May 2007



Source: Jobcentre Plus average actual clearance time performance against target, Jobcentre Plus website

number of their districts, which have consistently been the worst performing areas.

The official processing times may not reflect the time claimants have been waiting to receive benefit following their initial claim. For income support the clock doesn't start ticking until all the necessary evidence has been received from the claimant.

The major causes of delay

Evidence and comments in our Autumn 2006 survey suggested that some of the long delays experienced by CAB clients result from missing information clients were unaware that Jobcentre Plus was waiting for. Our second survey gave us the opportunity to ask further details about the causes of delays (see figure 8).

The most common other causes of delay mentioned were:

- communication problems between departments
- telephone difficulties
- processing backlogs
- short-staffing and short opening hours
- conflicting and inconsistent advice.

A woman suffering from severe mobility problems had to wait fourteen weeks for her benefits to be paid. She had to use her disability living allowance for every day expenses but began to run into debt. Jobcentre Plus had helped her complete the application at home but then she'd heard nothing. The bureau

was told that her claim had been passed from incapacity benefit to income support and they were awaiting a medical certificate. The client was totally unaware that they had been waiting for her to provide this.

A young woman suffering epilepsy had been asked to submit her payslips with her JSA claim. Her last one had been lost and as requested, she'd submitted a letter from her employer to the local office. She heard nothing more about her claim and only when she phoned to chase it was she told that the letter had not been received by the processing centre. They advised that despite it being their fault, she would have to get another one. The processing officer told the CAB the same thing and only when the adviser tried to escalate the case did they manage to agree that Jobcentre Plus would contact the employer direct.

Hardship caused by delay

In areas where average processing times are well above the targets (see figure 7), hardship faced by claimants waiting for money is inevitably very serious. Bureaux encounter many cases of people waiting weeks for money to come through, getting into arrears with rent and council tax and unable to make ends meet.

In Peterborough where income support processing times during 2006/07 were on average taking three and a half weeks, one family had to stay with friends in cramped conditions. The father

Figure 8: Most common causes of delay spring 2007

Papers lost by Jobcentre Plus	62%
Poor communication about what evidence was required	58%
Claimant fails to provide all the evidence to support the claim	45%
Not clear	39%
Other	41%

Figure 9: Options that are not offered at all

	Autumn 2006	Spring 2007
Crisis loans	32%	27%
Interim payments	56%	53%
Any advice	37%	46%

Base: 125 respondents, CAB autumn 2006 survey and 161 claimants, CAB spring 2007 survey

could not work due to illness and they had to wait for over three months for any benefit payment.

In Basildon, the fourth slowest district for benefit processing in 2006/07 a CAB reported a family whose delayed benefit payments resulted in him facing rent and council tax arrears. He had received a court summons regarding his council tax even though he was entitled to full benefit.

There is no evidence to suggest Jobcentre Plus put any systems in place to help claimants during the months they were unable to process benefits to target times. Almost half of bureaux reported that clients facing long benefit delays were often not offered any further advice at all. For example:

A single, unemployed man with four dependent children visited a CAB when he was denied an interim payment while his income support claim was being processed. The CAB money adviser was in no doubt that he would be entitled to the payment. Instead he was given a crisis loan, which he had to repay at £18 a week – a considerable dent in the family’s disposable income. The client and his family had to rely on food vouchers from social services while his claim was being sorted out.

Where advice was offered to claimants, they were most likely to be:

- advised to seek help from their local CAB (57 per cent)
- advised to apply for a crisis loan (31 per cent).

Base: 161 respondents, CAB spring 2007 survey

Inadequate liaison arrangements with bureaux and ineffective numbers for contacting benefit processing centres often meant they were ill equipped to help. Sending claimants to bureaux for support appeared therefore to stem less from a desire to help clients and more from a desire to pass the buck.

Benefit processing delays have played a part in increasing the demand for crisis loans. In 2005/06, 35 per cent of crisis loans were given as alignment payments for general living costs.²⁸ We have for some time argued that the crisis loan scheme should not be used to support delays in making decisions on applications for income support and other benefits. Following the recognition by Jobcentre Plus of the need to reduce inappropriate use of crisis loans we hope for a swift improvement in practice.²⁹

In the next section we examine how successful liaison has been between Jobcentre Plus and bureaux over the last year.

28 DWP, Annual Report on the Social Fund 2005/06 cm6856

29 Letter to Citizens Advice from Jobcentre Plus Director of Benefits and Fraud, 12 June 2007

Section 3: Liaison between Jobcentre Plus and Citizens Advice Bureaux

In order to be able to effectively help clients it is vital that bureaux have good liaison arrangements with Jobcentre Plus offices. Advisers must have good access to processing centres to progress claims; contacts at management level to escalate problems where necessary; regular liaison at district level with representatives from the district, and both the contact and processing centres.

Bureau advisers have a lot to contribute to consultations on necessary changes to Jobcentre Plus services, both from their clients' experiences and their own experience of supporting clients in dealing with Jobcentre Plus. Without their input Jobcentre Plus risks losing the voice of the most vulnerable claimants in the design of their services. Liaison at both national and local level must deliver:

- a well-defined formal relationship, with named contacts
- agreed escalation routes for advice work, referral protocols and data sharing arrangements
- a mechanism for discussing in advance proposals for significant service changes, and evaluating the potential impact of changes on vulnerable groups and on business volume.

3.1 Maintaining a formal relationship

In a survey of bureaux liaison in 2004, we found that just over half (54 per cent) had regular liaison with Jobcentre Plus. In September 2004 Citizens Advice and Jobcentre Plus jointly produced a good practice guide to local liaison to promote the benefits of working together at a local level. Less than two years later, further restructuring saw the introduction in April 2006 of external relations managers in every Jobcentre Plus

District. Our autumn survey found that just under half of bureaux (47 per cent) reported that they had regular liaison with Jobcentre Plus. Of the bureaux that had regular liaison, it was most common for them to meet quarterly with their local office officials (40 per cent) and with district office representatives on an ad hoc basis (36 per cent). Fourteen bureaux reported meeting with their district offices quarterly. Only 17 bureaux reported ever meeting with representatives of benefit processing teams, 12 of those met on a quarterly basis.

In autumn 2006, Jobcentre Plus nationally went further than *encouraging* districts, to *committing* them to set up liaison in their areas. They went as far as to say that they would ensure that that all regular and formal local liaison would be in place by the end of November 2006. "The nature of these arrangements varies: for example, some districts hold meetings more frequently than others but our expectation is that all will meet local needs."³⁰

Our second survey found only a small rise in the overall liaison with 49 per cent reporting that they met regularly with Jobcentre Plus. Thirty per cent reported meetings had started in the previous six months. Many bureaux reported that liaison had or was about to restart after a year or more of little formal contact.

The value of positive liaison arrangements

It is clear from the comments provided by bureaux in both surveys that the reorganisation of Jobcentre Plus services resulted in a break down on many liaison relationships – often just at a time when it was most necessary. Where relationships had been renewed, bureaux were more likely to report a positive view of Jobcentre Plus, even when delays and telephone problems were still causing their clients problems.

A bureau in Wales who had seen major processing delays at the end of 2005 reported that: "although there are still delays in some benefit areas there has been some improvement particularly since our North Wales local liaison has developed."

"We have a very good working relationship with our local Jobcentre Plus office. If clients say that they have had poor service we contact the front line customer service manager and flag it up ASAP. This has resulted in some staff retraining. We also have had some very positive experiences with the customer management system particularly with vulnerable clients who are rung back at the CAB at a pre arranged time. CMS staff have given their name and direct contact numbers to us even though they state they are not allowed to do this." A Leicestershire CAB, autumn 2006

concerned about the depth of commitment having spent months pressing for meetings, were suddenly invited to meetings at very short notice. They had no opportunity to contribute to the agenda let alone the aims and objectives.

"Staff at liaison level appear to have been instructed to operate liaison but don't seem to give it much priority. As processing is driven more and more by standard operating models the staff seem to have less and less authority to work around these even when it is the standard models that are causing problems. Meetings are arranged but rearranged/cancelled, follow up action is promised but does not happen." A Surrey CAB, spring 2007

"Liaison is just marketing of their products, this bureau does not attend as it has now lost its usefulness." A Hampshire CAB, spring 2007

West Berkshire CAB was so agitated by the poor service from Jobcentre Plus, they wrote a report, contacted their MPs and met with the then Work and Pensions Minister Jim Murphy MP. Following a renewed liaison relationship with Jobcentre Plus they set up exchange visits. The manager and deputy manager of Newbury Jobcentre Plus visited West Berkshire CAB. The CAB commented that "It was a good opportunity for our advisers to meet them and for them to find out more about how we work. CAB staff had visited Newbury Jobcentre Plus last November so this was a return visit."

It is clear that further work needs to be done in specific areas to follow up why meetings are not taking place and to ensure that where they do exist that all the relevant parties are invited to contribute and participate in setting the agenda.

"Meetings stopped about three years ago. We have been in touch with the external relations manager but they feel they will not be in a position to re-start liaison meetings until 2008." A Hampshire CAB, spring 2007

Weaknesses in liaison arrangements

The degree of the satisfaction with new liaison arrangements was varied. Some bureaux,

"Used to have a meeting with local Jobcentre, but although requested by us to continue this has now stopped. Main

Figure 10:

	Winter 2004	Autumn 2006	Spring 2007
CAB with regular liaison	54%	47%	49%

Base: 200 respondents, winter 2004, 123 respondents, autumn 2004, 161 respondents, spring 2007

agency in York did set up a meeting but only once." A Yorkshire CAB, spring 2007

It is clear that the 'how' of liaison is vitally important. Partnership working must start with jointly discussing and drawing up aims and objectives and terms of reference. Officials involved must have the power to make decisions and ensure that discussions are more than just information exchange. In North Wales the structure and frequency of meetings changed without the agreement of bureaux who do not feel able to support the new frequency. One bureau reported that they will no longer attend, making it clear that the issues need resolving for the benefit of both organisations. In other Jobcentre Plus regions, East and Yorks and Humber, joint protocols for working together have already been discussed and drawn up.

We are currently developing a partnership agreement to set out a national commitment to improve links between Jobcentre Plus and the Citizens Advice service in England and Wales. We hope that one of the agreed outcomes will be to ensure more effective working arrangements in each Jobcentre Plus district in a way that suits them, whilst following a model of best practice.

3.2 Agreed contact routes for resolving client problems

The value of appropriate contact arrangements

Bureaux with direct dial numbers to processing departments were able to intervene on the client's behalf. This meant claims could be processed faster, directly helping Jobcentre Plus meet their processing targets as well as alleviating hardship for their clients. The following cases show the value of CAB involvement, and the need for direct contact with the processing centres.

[A woman suffering from mental health problems had been waiting several](#)

[weeks for her IS/IB claim to be processed and been told several times by Jobcentre Plus that it would be processed 'soon'. After four weeks she sought help from her local CAB who chased the claim and requested an interim payment. Within 48 hours she had received a giro payment worth four weeks money.](#)

[A man with severe mental health problems had been sleeping rough for five weeks. His benefits had suddenly stopped and he hadn't eaten for two days. Neither he, nor the bureau could get through to Crisis Loans Direct despite many attempts. The message suggested trying at a later time but he was running close to the 2.30pm deadline after which no payments will be made. With the bureau's persuasion the local Jobcentre Plus office contacted the crisis loan office call centre on their direct line and got someone to ring the bureau so client's claim could be submitted and paid that day.](#)

Jobcentre Plus has committed to ensure that all benefit delivery centres provide bureaux with a direct dial number for escalating problems. This would be staffed by more experienced benefit processors who that in most cases the enquiry will be able to be resolved there and then. Whilst this commitment is very welcome, it is clear from our survey results that there is much more work to be done to ensure that this actually happens in practice.

Less than a quarter of bureaux in our autumn survey reported that they had effective direct dial numbers to get through to Jobcentre Plus staff in processing centres. In addition 56 per cent reported that although they had direct contact numbers they often could not get through on them. The percentage of bureaux with effective direct dial numbers had marginally increased in the second survey but the majority were still without them (see figure 11).

Figure 11

	Autumn 2006	Spring 2007
Have up to date contact numbers for benefits processing department and we got through	22%	26%
Have up to date numbers, but we often can't get through	56%	53%
Have no up to date numbers for benefits processing department	22%	21%

Base: 133 respondents, CAB autumn 2006 survey and 162 respondents, CAB spring 2007 survey

The absence of correct contact details is particularly frustrating and time-consuming for bureaux. For example:

“We only have 0845 numbers for us to use, the staff manning these lines have told us that they have been instructed not to give out any other numbers to bureaux or other organisations.” A Hertfordshire CAB, spring 2007

“They email and send new phone numbers and contact details – safe for them to do this as the numbers are pretty useless.” A Buckinghamshire CAB, autumn 2006

“Overall, the service to clients is appalling. We as a bureau have been assured, once we involved the local MPs, things are being re-organised. They even gave us direct telephone numbers to contact should we experience difficulty with the public line number. None of them work.” A London CAB, spring 2007

The numbers bureaux had for escalating cases were predominately within the districts rather than the benefit processing departments. The staff they contacted would then contact staff in the benefit processing centre who would call the CAB advisers. This was an effective but unnecessarily long route to resolution.

“We feel that our contact at management level is excellent, and we are fortunate in that the manager at Newbury is prepared to intervene on our behalf. We continue to have problems contacting Canterbury benefit delivery centre.” A Berkshire CAB, spring 2007

“Advisers have called telephone numbers previously given by Jobcentre Plus and been referred through five or six different telephone numbers, without being able to resolve a matter. In these instances we have spoken to the Communication officer, who has arranged for the relevant office to call back.” A Hampshire CAB, spring 2007

Where bureaux did have arrangements for contacting benefit delivery centres they found they were difficult to manage as they were sometimes subject to frequent change or the staff answering were not expecting calls from advisers.

“The bureau was provided with direct line numbers of officers in the various departments. However, whenever we contact any of the officers, they are very rude and start questioning as to how we got the number and why are we calling or, why can't the customer contact them directly.” A London CAB, spring 2007

“Jobcentre Plus management has deluged us with escalation numbers, and these kept changing, which caused confusion. These mostly work but we have just had an incident where the benefit delivery centre person resented our phoning.” A Hertfordshire CAB, spring 2007

3.3 Consultation mechanism

In advance of the transformation programme, Jobcentre Plus promised to consult at district level with their local advice agencies on any planned changes to local services, including office closures. The extent to which this happened was variable. Some bureaux campaigned to keep offices open when they felt that replacement services would not prove adequate.

Only 29 per cent reported that their bureaux had been involved in consultation relating to the transition to Jobcentre Plus services in their area. Even fewer bureaux reported that they had been kept fully informed about the roll out of the customer management system and how changes to service delivery would affect both them as intermediaries and their clients directly:

- Only 16 per cent of bureaux reported that they had been fully informed.
- 52 per cent said that they had been partially informed of changes.
- A third said that they had not been informed at all.

Base: 123 respondents, CAB autumn 2006 survey

Section 4: Conclusions and recommendations

The problems faced by Jobcentre Plus contact centres in the summer of 2005 have been recognised and well documented. The Government believe that as they are achieving their efficiency savings whilst meeting their customer service targets, rollout of Jobcentre Plus services has been largely successful. Such claims undermine the serious failure within some districts to meet customer service targets at all in 2005/06. They don't take account of the failure to meet benefit processing targets and persistent problems with crisis loans. Inadequate recognition has been given to the difficulties the new system poses for people unable to use the phone.

Over the last two years concern about the quality of benefit delivery has increased dramatically. Bureaux across England and Wales have written reports, and contacted their MPs highlighting the impact of the re-organisation on both their clients and their advice work. Thousands of families have been left without money for weeks at a time and struggled to get explanations for the delays in their claims as the phone systems were constantly engaged. Reductions in local level customer support has led to increased numbers seeking help from bureaux. Advice work is much harder and more resource intensive as advisers are also tied up in phone queues.

Despite DWP's commitment to maintaining customer service throughout the reorganisation process, bureaux in both surveys thought that service had got worse. CAB clients are not necessarily representative of the whole of the Jobcentre Plus customer group. This makes these findings even more serious as bureaux are much more likely to represent Jobcentre Plus' most vulnerable customers.

The improvements in benefit processing times over the last year are very welcome but the

range of average processing times across regions and districts as well as for individual cases is still quite large. Bureaux advisers express concerns that claimants with more complicated circumstances, or who are less able to deal with their claim, may suffer the longest processing times.

Vulnerable groups have been failed by the new model which has had such a focus on delivery by telephone. There appears to be insufficient mechanisms to routinely monitor and evaluate the extent of exclusion and poor service to those for whom the telephone is inappropriate. Jobcentre Plus has now carried out an evaluation exercise looking at the impact on their customers of introducing telephone services. This was a commitment in their Disability Action Plan and though very welcome, in our view, appears very late in the day. We hope that the introduction of the diversity impact assessment tool will ensure that future changes to service delivery will recognise the potential impact on vulnerable claimants in advance of implementation.

Access to the crisis loan claims line was of greatest concern to bureaux surveyed. We welcome the announcement of the Improvement Plan, and hope it will result in improved access. We will continue to monitor progress. Though introducing telephone claims has resulted in higher numbers of crisis loans being awarded, there is insufficient information at present to judge whether these are meeting previously unmet need. Are the most vulnerable groups being excluded through a combination of being refused an alternative means of applying and an inability to get through by phone? Does the system favour applicants who can use a landline in their own home?

Our recommendations cover four areas where further work needs to be done:

1. Immediate short-term measures to improve customer service before completion of roll-out in March 2008.
2. Improving service quality for vulnerable groups.
3. Improving access to crisis loans.
4. Improved liaison between Jobcentre Plus and advice agencies.

1. The rollout of the standard operating model is not due for completion until March 2008. In the interim we recommend that:

- Jobcentre Plus provide extra short term resource in areas where telephone access to benefit processing departments is difficult, giving claimants and advisers an option to make contact by email.
- resources are provided to Citizens Advice Bureaux and other advice agencies to back up the extra support they are providing for claimants during the final stages of roll out. This could be provided by six month funding contracts for advice agencies in the last areas to be rolled out.
- there is a review and publication of more performance and other information. This should include an analysis of telephone problems at benefit delivery centres.

2. Improving service quality for vulnerable groups

- Jobcentre Plus must make an assessment on the proportion of its customers that will not be able to deal with a telephone service. Following this assessment, Jobcentre Plus must demonstrate that this proportion of new claims is being dealt with via face-to-face or on paper. A figure of ten per cent has often been used as an estimated

proportion of customers who need an alternative. In the interim Jobcentre Plus should use this figure to allocate their resources.

- **The standard operating model should be amended and local resources increased to assume face-to-face as the usual route for claiming benefits for certain groups of people.** Scripts, guidance and training should reflect this to ensure that alternative claim routes are easy to access. The current script guidance for contact centre staff only mentions deaf claimants (see section 1) as likely to need an alternative to the telephone. The purpose of the guidance should be to equip advisers to spot those with more complex needs that are more difficult to recognise over the telephone, such as various mental health problems.
- **Jobcentre Plus should ensure that the initial phone message makes it clear that calls to their 0800 number from mobile phones will not be free.** It should tell customers that they can request a call back. Staff should also routinely offer call backs to mobile phone users.
- **We recommend Jobcentre Plus undertake an analysis of the benefit claims that are processed outside the average processing times.** This should look at whether particular claimant groups are more subject to benefit delays than others. It should also provide analysis of the causes of delay in relation to complexities in the case – such as right to reside cases.
- **Review the criteria for assessing performance against the customer service target.** The criteria must fully reflect the new service delivery model. It must assess the service provided outside the standard operating model – such as service by the local office when claimants without appointments drop in for help. Mystery shopping scenarios must include

provision for claimants unable to use the telephone.

- The Disability Action Plan commits to undertaking a publicity campaign to publicise alternative methods of contacting Jobcentre Plus. **This campaign should extend beyond Jobcentre Plus. We recommend that all customer representative groups be written to, to highlight the services available for claimants unable to use the phone.**

3. Access to crisis loans

- **We recommend the Jobcentre Plus undertake an analysis of crisis loan applications** to assess whether telephone claiming disadvantaged claimants who find using a telephone difficult or impossible.
- **Jobcentre Plus should continue to work to improve the capacity of its telephone systems to cope with demand.**
- **Given the urgency with which crisis loans are needed, there must be a clear process for dealing with crisis loan applications at all local offices.** Jobcentre Plus must be able to demonstrate that local offices are helping claimants make crisis loan claims in person.
- **Jobcentre Plus must review the number and spread of locations at which crisis loan decisions and payments can be made.** Claimants in rural areas can find themselves having to travel long distances on public transport and at significant cost to access crisis loan payments. Plans to extend the opening times to 4.30pm will help claimants having to make long journeys but this will not help with the cost. Better use of travel warrants or systems for enabling claimants to collect payment from more locations, such as the Post Office must be considered.

4. Improved liaison

- A joint protocol between Jobcentre Plus and the Citizens Advice service must have high level support and buy-in and should include:
 - **Improved and consistent liaison and partnership working.** Liaison must represent genuine partnership working, have clear goals and give all parties a chance to contribute to the agenda. It is important that meetings are arranged well in advance and attended by representatives from each of the three Jobcentre Plus directorates – processing, districts and contact centres.
 - **Dedicated contact numbers and protocols for all bureaux.** Jobcentre Plus must agree and communicate escalation routes with bureaux and this must comprise contact name and discrete line which must be staffed by the most qualified officers in benefit processing.
 - **Meaningful, consistent and prompt consultation.** Bureaux must be alerted in advance of all service changes and given the opportunity to make client and service delivery impact assessments so that the needs of the most vulnerable clients are represented.

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