

Making a Charter work for jobseekers

Why the DWP Charter doesn't work

March 2010

What Consumer Focus does

Consumer Focus is the independent champion for consumers across England, Wales, Scotland and (for postal consumers) in Northern Ireland. We operate across the whole of the economy, persuading businesses and public services to put consumers at the heart of what they do.

Consumer Focus was formed through the merger of three organisations – Energywatch, Postwatch and the National Consumer Council (including the Scottish and Welsh Consumer Councils). We have the power to take action where markets are failing consumers and to ensure a fair deal for all – especially the vulnerable and disadvantaged.

What Consumer Focus found

Our research into how Jobcentre Plus delivers services to its customers started in 2009. We found that customers often experienced inconsistent levels of service, dependent on the member of staff they saw that day, and found it difficult to find out how to access the full range of services available. In conclusion we said the generic Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Customer Charter should be changed to cater more specifically for the needs of jobseekers.

In our latest research¹ we looked into what jobseekers thought of the DWP Customer Charter, developed as a generic Charter to apply to all its services, and whether they thought it could be improved to help deliver a service that better meets their needs. Customer charters are an important customer tool across a wide range of services. A charter should lay out what customers can expect when they access a service (their rights and responsibilities) and what they can do when things go wrong.

Jobcentre Plus customers had a lot of ideas about how to develop the DWP Customer Charter to help deliver a first class service. They told us they wanted the Charter to be more relevant to them as jobseekers. Most of all they wanted it to commit to helping them find work. They also wanted Jobcentre Plus to live up to its commitments in the existing Charter, which they did not believe it was currently doing.

This briefing lists the ten key issues customers want a Charter to address and indicates where the Charter is currently failing to deliver. In our summing up we press DWP to rebuild the Charter on a stronger foundation of responding to customer priorities, building the service around them and valuing those aspects of the service customers find important.

¹The research consisted of four focus groups of between five and seven people, in three locations in the UK. Further details are available in the full report (<http://www.consumerfocus.org.uk/publications-reports>).

What jobseekers told us they wanted

We found the DWP Charter did contain important commitments that customers valued, but they were too general to address the specific things jobseekers need from the Jobcentre Plus service, or reflect how they interact with staff.

Here we list the ten key themes which emerged from talking to jobseekers about what they wanted a Customer Charter to include. They want:

1. to be treated as an individual not a number

People told us they felt processed by an automated or robotic service that did not treat them as individuals. They felt sometimes that staff spent more time communicating with their computers than they did with the person in front of them.

'They just treat you like a number.'

2. enthusiastic staff who care and listen

People wanted personal advisers to take an interest in their situation and proactively help them look for work. They wanted to see the same adviser, so they knew who to expect and were able to build a relationship with them.

'I should walk out of there feeling they care [and I don't].'

3. more than a 'lowest common denominator' service

Customers appreciated that it must be a challenge for staff at Jobcentre Plus to deal with such a wide range of customers, who had different levels of motivation. But they also felt it was wrong for staff to treat everyone the same, no matter how motivated customers were to return to work.

Customers felt the security at Jobcentres was often aggressive and challenged customers unnecessarily.

'You walk in and a security guard comes up and says "Yeah, what do you want?" and you think "Well I'm just coming in to sign on!"'

4. a degree of privacy

Customers told us they wanted more privacy; they were uncomfortable talking about personal information in the open environment of the Jobcentre.

5. they want a service that asks for information once and uses it effectively

Despite Jobcentre Plus seeking to capture information at the outset, there were many stories which centred on the need for better 'corporate memory'. People didn't want to repeat the same information to different people, either when they first went to the service; or having to tell different advisers their situation every time they attended.

'The thing I don't get with the phone calls is that you ring them up and tell them everything you need to know and as soon as you get down the Jobcentre you have to tell them it all again.'

'I have a criminal record and they asked me, one of the first things, have you got a record? I told them yeah, I told them what it was for etc, and then later on they talk to me about a vacancy at a bank or a jewellery store...'

6. staff who pay attention to customers' circumstances and aspirations

Customers, graduates in particular, showed the needs for a personalised service that takes account of their circumstances and their aspirations. This includes not just their career aspirations but also where they wanted to go with their lives.

'So they put down three things that I'm looking for, there was retail and bar work which is not what I want to be doing and she didn't listen to me.'

7. they want accurate records of their personal data and information

We heard about mistakes in processing benefits claims or just registering with Jobcentre Plus. This not only caused distress but also set off the relationship with Jobcentre Plus on the wrong foot.

'They naffed the forms up and...lost them, sent us out more, then they gave my missus some dead bloke's National Insurance number, so every time we went to sign on it didn't register, so we ended up having to get crisis loans every other week.'

8. Jobcentre Plus staff to take customers' efforts to find work seriously

Customers wanted to return to work quickly and wanted their job search taken seriously. But they told us it often wasn't.

'While you're signing on they don't even look at your job search. They just sign you in, that's it, they don't even speak to me.'

Jobseekers told us they wanted personal advisers to be professional in their manner, and in one example someone told us they wanted personal advisers to be professional in appearance.

'I don't think they should be wearing trainers and tracksuit bottoms and things like that looking very scruffy.'

9. staff to tell them about the help and advice that is available and not wait to be asked

Customers' knowledge of the support available at Jobcentre Plus was patchy, and they were often surprised when we told them what services they could actually access. We found they wanted to know what was available up-front so they could make the decision themselves, without having to rely on a personal adviser to tell them later, if at all.

'It's like some people get told but some don't.'

10. staff to keep appointment times

There was a strong sense that as Jobcentre Plus repeatedly emphasised that customers should keep appointments, it was only fair that Jobcentre Plus should make a greater effort to keep to them as well.

'They expect you to be there at a certain time and if you're late for signing on they mess about with you for that, yet they can have you sat there for 20 minutes. It should work both ways. They're not very good role models are they?'

Views of the DWP Customer Charter

Jobseekers told us the Charter did not tell them how they could use it to identify what they were entitled to at Jobcentre Plus, what was expected of them, or how to hold the service to account. The biggest problem was the absence of any reference to helping customers find work. Here is what else jobseekers had to say about the Charter.

Our customer charter

It's not yours it's ours! Whose Charter is this, does it belong to customers or DWP?

Right treatment

Customers told us they are not being treated with respect as individuals whose circumstances differ.

Right result

Customers don't know what services are available so don't know what outcomes to expect. Crucially there is no reference to helping customers find work.

On time

It's not always about the quickest time; customers want the right amount of time to help them find work, not just get processed through the benefits system. They also told us Jobcentre Plus doesn't make clear what is on offer at the time when customers want the information.

Easy access

Customers wanted cheaper access by phone, and when they attend a Jobcentre they want security to treat them with respect and not challenge them for attending appointments.

Customers want to be told earlier on what is available, so they, rather than Jobcentre Plus, could decide what they need to access.

You can find out more from...

No, you can't – the link doesn't take you to a related page. There's no email, telephone or other follow-up contact details, without clicking further.

Our Customer Charter

Our Commitment

**We will give you the right
clear what you can expect
responsibilities are in return**

You told us what is important to you.



Right Treatment

We will do our best to help you, listen to you and make sure you feel comfortable dealing with us.



Right Result

We want you to have confidence in our decisions. If the outcome is not what you hoped for, we will explain why and tell you what will happen next.



On Time

We will deal with you as quickly as we can. We will tell you how long we will take and do our best to keep to the time we have said.



Easy Access

We will make sure you can contact us in ways that are simple and easy to understand. We will tell you about other services that may help you.

You can find out more from
www.direct.gov.uk/DWPCharter

We work closely with HM Revenue & Customs to support our customers.

Consumer Charter

Information, making it from us and what your return.

We ask you to:

- tell us if your personal circumstances change
- keep any appointment you have with us, or let us know as soon as possible if you can't
- treat our staff with courtesy
- tell us if you need to communicate with us in a different way.

We will also:

- protect your personal information – our Information Charter tells you how
- use your feedback to improve our services
- take any complaints seriously – our leaflets, website or staff can tell you how to complain
- protect public money – we will not tolerate fraud
- measure how well we meet these standards and publish the results.

Jobcentre Plus, The Pension Service, and Disability and Carers Service are part of the

DWP Department for Work and Pensions

Tell us if your personal circumstances change

Customers told us they have to repeat information all the time, regardless of whether their circumstances change or not.

Keep any appointment...

Customers felt Jobcentre Plus does not live up to this commitment, and should keep its appointments, just as they expect customers to do.

Communicate with us in a different way...

The willingness to communicate in different ways should extend to providing more privacy, more of the time. Customers worry about sensitive information being overheard in the Jobcentre.

Protect your personal information

Customers want the Charter to recognise Jobcentre Plus makes mistakes with their personal information and explain how to put that right.

We will measure how well we meet these standards and publish the results

Where is this information? And what are the specific standards for Jobcentre Plus?

DWP logo

Customers didn't feel the Charter particularly applied to either Jobcentre Plus or to DWP because it was too general. They did not think it was relevant to their situation and so did not think it would be able to help them in their job search. And as there is no mention of redress there is no clear route to hold the service to account or to be part of a feedback loop to inform service improvements.

Conclusions and recommendations

This research reinforces our earlier conclusion² that the current DWP Charter fails to meet the needs of jobseekers. Jobcentre Plus customers have told us they do not consistently experience high levels of customer service, and our research shows how the existing Charter fails to act as a customer tool to hold services to account and drive up standards.

We believe customers need a specific jobseekers' Charter. This could be part of a suite of customer documents, sitting below the generic DWP Charter in a similar way to the 'Shared Promise' which covers customers in the Flexible New Deal. A jobseekers' Charter should set out what customers can expect and what is expected of them, as well as how to access redress when things go wrong. Jobcentre Plus customer needs are not the same as customers receiving only benefits or pension services. They often have a greater need for ongoing, in-depth contact which should be recognised in a Customer Charter, and which other DWP customers may not require.

Customers need a Charter they can understand, which clearly identifies other relevant documents or information and makes access to them simple. This needs to go much further than providing a link to an unrelated page on the direct.gov website as the current DWP Charter does, and which is of little use to customers. The Charter:

- needs to be well-publicised
- needs a profile that demonstrates its importance and which ensures customers are aware of it from the start of their customer journey
- should provide a mechanism for customers to tell Jobcentre Plus where it is failing so it can learn from mistakes and improve the service or put things right

We are aware of the depth of customer research DWP undertook to develop the current Charter but feel the impact for jobseekers has been lost through its final development into a generic instrument³ for all their services. Customers should be involved in the entire design process to make sure the final Charter is relevant and useful to them. If customers are not aware that there is a Customer Charter, or do not think it is relevant to their needs then they either won't know how to use it or won't care to use it.

The DWP Charter could play a role in transforming the culture of DWP and helping Jobcentre Plus staff towards improved customer service delivery, but to achieve this DWP will need to provide a Charter with increased relevance and purpose to the jobseekers who will use it. DWP also need to encourage and enable its customers to see the Charter as a tool they can use and benefit from. After all, the Charter is for customers, not for the DWP.

² *At the centre: Finding the Plus for unemployed people during the recession*. November 2009 (<http://www.consumerfocus.org.uk/publications-reports>)

³ It is our understanding DWP research involved customers of all of its agencies not solely jobseekers

Recommendations

We make four key recommendations for DWP to make a Customer Charter that works for Jobcentre Plus customers.

DWP should:

Change the Charter

Revise the generic DWP Customer Charter to make it more user focused so it can take greater account of what customers value in service delivery and provide jobseekers with their own customer charter.

Involve customers

Involve customers from the beginning to the end to ensure the end product: resonates with them; meets their needs as service users; and sets a clear path to give feedback into service improvement and to seek redress where service commitments are not met. This means engaging them not just in designing the principles around the Charter but in how these appear in the Charter itself, and through to the final design process.

Promote all services

Support a robust customer-facing charter by providing comprehensive and easily accessible information on all the entitlements and services available through Jobcentre Plus, and make sure customers are informed about how to access them through DWP information services.

Raise awareness of the Charter and its benefits

Promote the Charter widely to Jobcentre Plus customers by including a copy in the information packs provided to new customers. Raise awareness of the charter among staff and other stakeholders such as external partners. A strong and effective Customer Charter, combined with easier access to the results of DWP's performance standard measure, will help to address many of the customer service weaknesses that customers told us about and would support Jobcentre staff by making their role and responsibilities clear too.

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