



Jobcentre Plus: changes to service delivery

A view of how the changes have affected claimants and advisers at local advice centres

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Part 1

Introduction

This report is based on detailed feedback from seven independent agencies providing welfare rights advice and advocacy services to members of the public and who have therefore had direct experience of the impact of the new claiming structures on benefit claimants for those below pension age. It also contains additional evidence and comments obtained from two other agencies.

CPAG decided that there was a need to monitor the quality of service by Jobcentre Plus (JCP) in depth following the introduction of a new system. CPAG gave evidence to the Work and Pensions Select Committee in writing and orally at the end of 2005 and the start of 2006. The decision to provide evidence to the select committee and the ongoing survey was a direct response to the criticisms of the service we heard in the course of providing our telephone support service to advisers and at training courses we provided on social security law.

It is vital that those on low income or needing wage replacement benefits have access to an effective service. Equally since government policy is focused on encouraging people into work (with an 80% employment aspiration) the effective role of Jobcentre Plus in facilitating work focused social policy is crucial.

The agencies which participated are listed at the end of the report and reflect experience in the following areas: London; central and southern England; Suffolk; Yorkshire and Edinburgh.

Methodology

To collect information over a period of time the questionnaire was sent out three times: the first in late February 2006; the second in March 2006; and the third in June 2006. The dates to which we refer in the report relate to month in which we received the feedback. Usually where we had no feedback since a completed form in March or May we have tried to update findings via telephone contact with the agencies concerned to check if their experience is changing. Several agencies provided us with two returns, one with three and several we have contacted by phone to check their latest assessment.

This is a small study, drawing on the experiences and expertise of advice agencies in selected areas, it is not necessarily fully representative but it is indicative of wider problems which require serious investigation.

The questionnaires have provided CPAG with direct evidence of what is happening to some claimants in some areas as a result of the development of a centralised service via the introduction of the Customer Management System (CMS), Contact and Processing Centres. We hope the findings will be useful to Jobcentre Plus in its plans to develop further reforms.

Our thanks are due to those advice centre staff who gave their time to provide this evidence.

How the new system is intended to work

The current system (though still being phased in places) was introduced in early 2005 and replaced a system in which contact with JCP was normally with the local office.

Contact Centre

The claimant makes an initial telephone claim to the Contact Centre (CC). There are around 70 Contact Centres throughout the country, some new centres are opening and others are closing. These centres take the initial inbound call in which the claimant provides basic information to the CC about circumstances including name, address, family etc. The CC then agrees a call back time in order to gather more in-depth information relating to the claim.

The call back telephone interview takes approximately 35- 45 minutes. The information collected by telephone is put on the CMS. A date for a Work Focused Interview (or in the case of a claim for JSA a compulsory interview) is set. In the case of a claim for JSA the claimant will also have to go to the jobcentre to sign on. A record of the initial and call back calls is sent to the claimant to check, correct (if necessary) and sign.

Where appropriate the Contact Centre should facilitate a claim for child tax credit by taking details in the return call and sending the claim via the e-portal to the HMRC. If insufficient details are obtained during the telephone interviews with the Contact Centre, the information will be held at the eportal until the claimant provides the necessary details at the interview with the financial assessor at the Jobcentre Plus local office. When the eportal was out of action jobcentre staff were asked to send the claim to the HMRC by courier in order to maintain the policy of fast tracking claims for CTC.

Local office outlet (local office)

The claimant takes the signed and corrected (if applicable) record of the calls to the local office (LO) and sees a financial assessor (FA) who checks the record and any evidence that is required. If the information is wrong the FA will amend the record held on the CMS and the information is then transferred to the appropriate benefit computer records. The local office is responsible for checking evidence requirements and if necessary the claimant will have to return with the necessary documentation. The claimant has their work focused interview (WFI) after their meeting with the FA.

Changes of circumstances would normally be reported to the local office which would then be forwarded to the Processing Centre.

Processing Centre

The claim or change of circumstances reported is then forwarded to the Processing Centre to assess the claim and make a payment if the claimant is eligible, or make changes to the award as necessary. If a question arises about right to reside the case is forwarded to a specialist office in Wick to decide this question.

Clerical claims

Although the system assumes that claimants will make telephone claims claimants retain the right to ask for a clerical claim form.

The computer system

The new CMS holds the personal details of claimants and information in connection with claims for social security benefits. We understand that information is kept on the CMS for up to a month and then transferred to the specific benefit computer programmes after claimants have been interviewed by the financial assessor at the local JCP office. At the same time claims are logged on the common enquiry service computer which records current and past claims. The information is also put on the departmental index computer record.

Interim payments

Interim payments may be made to claimants by the contact centre but Contact Centre staff are more likely to suggest the claimant requests a crisis loan.

Pilots

Pilots are being developed that may change the way in which the claim is made and which would avoid the need for a call back and claimants would make one call on a free phone number. Changes to the way in which contact is made with the Glasgow Processing Centre is also being trialled. We understand that developments depend on the extension of the telephony system for Processing Centres

Carers Allowance and disability benefits.

These benefits are already administered by a central agency under DWP but claimants may initiate a claim via a Contact Centre or the local office of JCP.

Key findings

- The reliance on a system of distance claiming by phone does not make adequate provision for those with special needs: those with language difficulties either because of illiteracy or because they have limited or no knowledge of English; and those with physical and mental health disabilities that make communicating by phone difficult.
- The system does not take account of the fact that many claimants because of low income do not have a land line phone and may have to rely on mobiles or some may have no phone at all. This has cost implications for claimants who make calls to 'free' numbers and where there are call backs some people may have to pay to pick up voice mail messages on a mobile.
- The phone systems at all levels of the system have been inadequate making it difficult for claimants and advisers alike to get through.
- The staff of JCP have been inadequately briefed about the nature of the changes and which contact and processing offices are responsible for clients in their area. This has been a particular issue where there has been a change of offices. Information about the changes is also not systematically made available to those in the independent advice sector.
- Staff have been and still are in some areas unaware of the fact that claimants have a right to make a claim on a paper claim form rather than making a

claim by phone. In practice it is unclear whether staff in local offices have supplies of clerical claim forms or whether these can only be obtained via the Contact Centre. The initiative for obtaining a clerical claim form appears in practice to lie with independent advisers rather than with the staff in local offices. It would appear that the experience in Edinburgh has been considerably more positive with staff at the local office generally willing to send clerical claim forms to the advice centre to complete with their clients.

- The staff at the Contact Centres appear to be inadequately trained to deal with the telephone claiming system. In addition the CMS script may be inadequate to provide the necessary support to staff in the contact centres. As a result claims may be wrongly recorded, or claimants wrongly advised. There is some evidence that claimants are not advised about claiming CTC in some areas and the claims for CTC which should be made via the Contact Centre and fast tracked to HMRC are left to the claimant to do at a later date.
- The structure is fragmented and therefore no one person is responsible for ensuring a claim is dealt with. The process is repetitive and requires continual cross checking.
- The new system has increased delays and claimants often need to access social fund crisis loans for basic subsistence as a result. Interim payments would appear to be rarely suggested.
- There is some evidence that claims are lost and claimants are then having to make repeat claims.
- Claimants have generally been denied access to make an application for a crisis loan at the local office– it appeared they might however be able to make an appointment via the warm phone *if* they were able to get through. Until recently it was common practice to require claimants to wait until their Work Focused Interview before deciding the crisis loan application, a wait of at least three weeks.
- The role of advisers assisting claimants appears to have been ignored and many advisers have had to battle to obtain direct numbers in order to assist their client with their claim.
- The new system, where fully implemented, improved over time in some areas but not without claimants having experienced long delays without benefits because of administrative backlogs and overload.
- There are considerable delays before the decisions of tribunals are implemented and when they are implemented claimants may not be paid arrears.

Recommendations

The findings above raise a series of important issues about the quality of service provided by JCP. Action needs to be taken urgently to ensure that the claiming process works and that claims are not delayed leaving claimants in hardship. There are clearly major problems relating to communication between offices and between jobcentre plus staff and members of the public and advisers.

Our recommendations concern staffing, the quality of the telephony system, the need for a workable alternative to a claims system based on the telephone, communication issues for independent advisers and staff within Jobcentre plus at all levels, the quality of CMS and the question of adequate training for staff.

The following reforms are needed urgently:

- ***An acceptance by the JCP that a telephone claiming system is inappropriate for a significant percentage of the population that needs to claim benefits.*** Claimants on low incomes without phones or reliant on mobile phones only and those with special needs (because of disability, learning difficulties and language difficulties) cannot reasonably be required to depend on a telephone claims service. A well publicised and workable alternative paper claims scheme must be made a practical reality as well as stated policy. Date stamped claim forms should be available from local offices and face to face interviews available. Use of this option should depend on individual choice.
- ***The new JCP structure with distant offices at Contact Centres and Processing Centres requires much better communication between staff at the different offices.*** Managers and supervisors exist for a purpose and it is important that those staff can have direct access to those in the Processing Centres in order to check on the progress of difficult or delayed cases. They should not have to rely on a system of emails to contact the Processing Centres.
- ***More telephone lines and a better telephony system are required to enable effective access to both CCs and PCs for both claimants and independent advisers.*** Reliance on a system involving call backs is often unworkable and inconvenient for claimants. Telephone claims should be made at one go to a free number but with access to a non telephone claim option (as above). Part of the solution should also be the provision of more phones in local offices for those who *do* want to make a phone claim but do not have a landline. Such a resource should take account of the need to provide an environment which protects the privacy of the claimant's call to the Contact Centre.
- ***The computerisation system needs speedy improvement and in particular the records on the CMS need to be retained for a longer period to ensure that claimants do not have to make repeat claims because records are lost.*** Further investigation is needed to establish the reasons for the need for the repeat claims and whether there is a problem elsewhere – for example information in connection with a claim being sent by the local office to the wrong processing centre.
- ***Adequate staff training and more staff are also essential to deliver an effective system, particularly at a time of change.*** It is arguable that staff working with an 'intelligent script' but with little detailed understanding of the complex benefits system will not always be able to deliver correct information to claimants and correct records of interviews. There will be mistakes and serious omissions in the process – in particular the failure to tell claimants about CTC and to fast track such claims. An inaccurate record of the telephone claim and wrong advice will then result in a duplication of work at the local office. ***CPAG recommends that staff work to guidance and not***

only to a script system but this will require a more highly trained staff and we believe this to be essential.

- **The new system should take better account of the vital role played by the independent advice sector in providing assistance to claimants and facilitating the right information reaching the different offices of JCP.**

The existing system has made it difficult and sometimes impossible for staff to access the appropriate offices of JCP in the process of assisting claimants. The independent advice sector has specialist knowledge across the spectrum of social security benefits and tax credits and is therefore well placed to provide support and advice to claimants, particularly those with special needs. It is, however, impossible for small advice agencies to re-organise their work load to deal with a process of benefit claiming that provides no effective access to the relevant offices and relies heavily on a system of call backs. Advice agencies need access via ex directory numbers if they are to be able to contact JCP offices and provide effective advice and support to claimants. CPAG recommends that JCP meet with representatives of the independent advice sector to work out more effective means of communication in the immediate term.

- **A system of interim payments should be well advertised and notified to claimants.** It is not appropriate to use the social fund crisis loan budget as a stop gap to a decision on a benefit claim. It is also clear that JCP need to review the operation of the delivery of social fund payments from local offices. Claimants should be able to obtain urgent face to face interviews to obtain crisis loan payments. We understand that the current operation of crisis loans has also been a matter of concern to the Independent Review Service. The Social Fund may not be directly related to government priorities to return claimants to work but it *is* part of a system of support for those without any savings and deserves more attention both in terms of the standard of delivery and the scope of the help provided.

Conclusions

Our conclusion, from this small qualitative survey, is that the new system was introduced too hastily and without the recognition that a sizeable number of JCP claimants have special needs who cannot access a telephone claims process because of language and disability barriers. Its introduction has caused hardship to some claimants who have been reduced to reliance on food parcels or haphazard social fund crisis loans while awaiting the outcome of long delayed benefit claims. It has also undermined the role of advisers who play an important role in ensuring that some of the most vulnerable in society obtain the benefits to which they are entitled.

There appears to be a mismatch between official statements about policy and what happens in practice.

Advisers have reported improvements in some areas. The variable experience of different advice centres in different areas deserves further examination. Why was the experience in Edinburgh generally better and the service more flexible than in parts of central England? It is unclear why parts of the service improved over time in central England but there appear to have been few improvements in Bradford.

Claimants have paid a heavy price for the government's decision to deliver the benefits service by reducing staff and centralising records and delivery. There may be a good argument for a phased centralisation of processing – the experience of some London boroughs that have used a Processing Centre in Glasgow for more than 10 years is favourable. But advisers with past experience of the Glasgow Processing Centre warned that it was essential to have good access to the relevant staff to discuss cases and this access was now being removed or restricted.

There are longer term implications for accuracy and take up if claimants continue to experience long delays confusion and mistakes. If HMRC and JCP are to share the responsibility for delivering financial support to claimants with children it is vital that staff in both departments are adequately briefed about both tax credits and benefits.

Whilst there may be a need to change the emphasis in the way the service is delivered CPAG urges the Government to rethink its strategy and consult on the best way of reforming the system of delivery of benefits. An effective service can be as important as the content of the law to ensure that those on lowest incomes obtain the benefits to which they are entitled to help lift them out of poverty.

Part 2 - Feedback

In the following feedback we refer to the area as well as the date when the feedback was received as some of the findings have changed over time. Not all the questions in the questionnaire were answered by all advice agencies. The evidence provided here is either directly quoted or paraphrased from the advisers who replied to our survey.

The initial claim process (not including those with special needs)

This covers problems with phone access to the Contact Centres and whether claimants were properly advised in connection with their claims.

Access to the claims process

There were problems for advisers and claimants getting through. (Milton Keynes, Warwickshire, Oxford, Bradford, Lewes and Seaford and Edinburgh.)

Some agencies have reported improvements over time.

Milton Keynes

In March it was reported that it was very difficult to get through but had been getting worse since the new system was first put in place. By April it was still difficult to get through: for one client it took two hours. Many repeat calls were needed because the system told the person to try again later but if they pressed the 'speak to a person' button they were cut off. In May the problems remained but senior management

staff at JCP said there were sufficient staff to take calls but recommended calling late afternoon.

Warwickshire

In April they reported that there were problems getting through and it was getting worse. The amount of time varied but the phone was often engaged. They said that sometimes calls were re-routed to other centres but were told that JCP was coping. By July it was easier to get through but claimants still had problems gaining access to *warm phones* (phones in local offices for the use of the public) to make the calls to the Contact Centre.

Oxford

In May it took approximately 4-10 minutes to get through and repeat calls (varying from one to four or sometimes more) were needed but it was slightly better than when the system had been introduced. By August access was much better for advisers.

Claimants complain that the phone system is impersonal. Many do not have landlines and need to use or accept calls on mobiles which can be inconvenient, the battery could be flat or network may be down.

Bradford

In March there were problems getting through to make the initial call and this has continued to be an issue right down to August. Moreover claimants had been told that there were no phones available for their use at the local JCP office. Further problems arose because claimants were misadvised by the local office and were being sent away with clerical claim forms when they were in an area which required the claimant to make the claim by phone. When the claimant sent in the paper form it was either lost or returned to the claimant.

By August the adviser reported that repeat calls were still needed in order to get through but it could take all day to get through. 'It is getting better but it was extremely bad before!' In this area the telephone claims system was restricted for a spell because of computer problems. Claimants were issued the clerical claim form for a short time until the full telephone service was resumed. There was no notification to advisers when this happened – they found out when claimants came to them to say they had completed a paper claim form.

Comment from adviser: 'there is a difficulty for claimants using phones. Many only have mobile phones and sometimes no money to buy credit.'

Lewes and Seaford

In March the outreach and benefits worker reported that the JCP had reinstated paper claim forms sometime after the start of the new system was introduced – they were told this was due to overload and because the JCP had been unable to cope. When claimants had to phone the contact centre they could not get through for days.

The adviser echoed the point that there was a general problem for 'impoverished clients who have problems paying for phone calls'.

Edinburgh

In March they reported that there were problems getting through – the average time to get through was 10 minutes – they might need 4-5 repeat calls.

Response of Contact Centre to initial claim

The Contact Centre should advise on whether a claim can be made, whether another benefit might be paid in addition to the one claimed, advise whether the partner might be entitled to a benefit, advise whether an interim payment should be made, ensure that a claim is made for CTC where appropriate and fast track the claim.

Milton Keynes

In March the Contact Centre was indicating whether the person could make a claim; by May the Contact Centre was arranging CTC claims, and advising on what a partner might claim.

Warwickshire

In April the staff at the Contact Centre picked up the basics but those handling the initial calls were not expert enough to understand entitlements. It was hit and miss whether the right forms were sent out if a secondary benefit entitlement (one other than that claimed) was identified. Contact Centre staff did not know about CTC and therefore did not arrange to make claims. On secondary benefits the staff at the Contact Centre were not expert enough and the script was not good enough so they were unable to tell a person about what their other entitlements might be. If the adviser was with the client at the time of the inbound call they could ensure that the right claim form for another benefit was sent out or at least they were more likely to ensure this.

By July the Contact Centre staff were still not making the CTC claims where appropriate but they were advising on whether a partner might get another benefit – 'but not always'.

Oxford

In May the Contact Centre did not always make it clear that a person could claim, they did not arrange the CTC claim, did not advise on secondary benefits but did sometimes suggest when a partner might qualify for one of the more obvious benefits like JSA.

By August the Contact Centre was still not making CTC claims but the independent advisers were helping claimants complete the form and send it to the HMRC.

Bradford

The Contact Centre advised on whether the person might get another benefit and whether a partner may qualify for a benefit. They were also aware of several clients who had not been advised to claim CTC nor has a claim been made for them.

In their August response the adviser comments that the advice from the Contact Centre could be wrong:

In one case a lone parent who had previously been incapable of work but failed the Personal Capability Assessment did not want to appeal this but instead made a claim for IS as a single parent but was told [incorrectly] that she had to claim JSA.

Another problem with claims made by phone was that claimants did not realise they were making a claim when they rang the Contact Centre. Claimants did not query the date from which they were paid. If they did not request backdating to the date of the original call they might lose benefit.

Lewes and Seaford

When the telephone claiming system was in place the Contact Centre did indicate whether the person could claim. However there was a lot of confusion in the case of claims relating to incapacity and whether it was a claim for IS or incapacity benefit and in the case of lone parents between those who qualified for IS on the basis of incapacity and those who qualified purely on their lone parent status. Many claimants were confused about their own financial /benefit situation and did not understand what they were claiming and what they were having to report as they did not understand the questions asked.

Edinburgh

In March they reported that the Contact Centre did indicate whether a person could claim but did not pursue the CTC issue and did not advise on secondary benefits that might be paid.

The initial phone call could go wrong where there was limited understanding of procedures as in the case of an appointee below:

Parent who is an appointee for son has had the claim delayed by three weeks after initial phone call because JCP insisted that son be there even though the person phoning was the appointee. The JCP said they would contact the son by phone and then get back to her. The social worker chased up the case three weeks later as there had been no call from the Contact Centre.

Call back issues

This covers call back time, the length of time before the call back is made, difficulties with access to the call back and whether the claimant receives a correct record of the calls.

Call back process

The timescale of this process varies considerably.

Milton Keynes

In May they reported that the call back lasts approximately 40- 45 minutes. Call back was normally made within 24 to 48 hours but it could be as much as two weeks after the first call. Staff at Jobcentre Plus have commented that the software was inadequate and that some of the claims made electronically were rejected for a variety of reasons. People could be asked for a second call back interview but they had no experience of this.

Warwickshire

The call back interview usually lasts about 30 minutes. Claimants were sometimes asked for a second interview. The call back was normally made after four days. The waiting time had been reduced by July and the call back was now within 2- 3 days and there was not usually a need for a second interview. 'It is much improved.'

Oxford

In May the advisers reported that the call back took 30 – 40 minutes, they did not know of second interviews and claimants were normally called back within 7 days. In most cases appointments for Work focused interviews were made or deferred if necessary. The adviser commented that the quality of the call back interview was unknown. By August the call back procedure had much improved and they would call back either on the same day or within a day or two.

Bradford

They reported that the call back lasts 45 minutes. Sometimes a second call was required, but by August this did not happen. By August it took them four days to call back but when it was introduced it took weeks.

Lewes and Seaford

The phone based system is only partially in place so there is no call back system. The Contact Centre could not deal with the calls because of overload which led to huge delays before claimants were called back.

Edinburgh

It could take up to 10 days for the call back.

Access to phones for call back

Milton Keynes

In March they reported that claimants without phones were at a severe disadvantage.

In one case the advice agency persuaded the Contact Centre to phone back the claimant at a neighbour's home at an agreed time.

By May the agency reported that if claimants could not use the phone then they could have a face to face appointment and the claim would then be dealt with clerically. (However the agency confirmed (August) that in practice there remained problems for those who wanted to make a clerical claim as they still had to get the claim form which was only available from the Contact Centre!)

In May the advisers reported that the Contact Centre was willing to call back the adviser if the claimant was present at the advice agency. However this meant that the adviser and the claimant had to wait for the call back. *“This is a busy bureau and it is not convenient to do this”.*

Warwickshire

They reported that the Contact Centre insisted on calling back on a different day – this had implications for those with special needs (see later section).

Oxford

In May they reported that the Contact Centre would call back the adviser’s office if the claimant was present – claimants were given a time slot for the call back but in practice they might be made later or earlier than the agreed time. This meant the advice agency could only do this in exceptional cases because of the work load. By August the experience of advisers of the call back system was much improved and the Contact Centre would phone back when the claimant was with a member of staff at a time agreed with the independent adviser.

Bradford

In March the Contact Centre were willing to call back the CAB if the claimant was present. This meant having to make another appointment for the person which was draining on the CAB’s resources and was not always possible. Moreover call backs were not always made when promised. By August this problem was still persisting and the adviser commented:

“We do not have the capacity to wait for the calls and have to ring the Contact Centre to re-arrange another time – clients then usually have to find someone else to help with the call as our appointments are booked up too far in advance.”

Edinburgh

Although the Contact Centre was willing to ring back the advice centre if the claimant was present, it could go wrong. In one case although the adviser had arranged for the claimant to come into the office the Contact Centre phoned the claimant at home instead. The adviser had to call the Contact Centre to correct information given.

Records of phone interviews and quality of advice given by Contact Centre

Warwickshire

In April they reported that the record of interviews were not always correct but by July the advice centre stated that they were *not aware* of problems with records of telephone interviews.

Oxford

In May the agency reported that claimants were sometimes sent blank forms which might indicate a computer failure. The general quality of the call back records was not known but advice was sometimes wrong:

Examples:

- A claimant was told they were not eligible to claim but in fact they were.
- Simple mistakes on the records might be made – the advice agency would ask those with literacy difficulties to bring the completed form into the advice agency for checking prior to going to the local office.

Bradford

In March the CAB reported that there were many mistakes made in the call back records including basic mistakes. In one case the person was deemed to be male even though the name was unambiguously female. Where claimants did request that the benefit was backdated in two cases they knew of there was no mention of this on the posted record sent to the claimants to check.

By August the situation had not improved –

“the record of the interview is often wrong. For example details of bank accounts are often wrong and may contain details of accounts that clients have never had. Also personal details may be wrong such as the date of birth. Clients report making several corrections to the record and spending up to two hours checking the information. Obviously their confidence in the telephone claiming process is undermined by this.”

Examples of mistakes:

- A client who was terminally ill but still employed was told that her claim could not be processed unless she produced a P45
- Employment details could be wrong when a person was off sick
- Income was missed off. The adviser commented that unless this was picked up later at the Financial Assessor interview this could lead to an overpayment.
- A client had done a short training course at work and was asked to provide certificates and other proof as officer had appeared, according to adviser, to have gone down the wrong part of the script.

- Two examples of people being told (wrongly) that they could not put in a claim for IB as they are still in receipt of pay.

Edinburgh

The record of the calls made to claimants was usually correct.

Processing Centres issues

This covers questions of telephone access to the Processing Centres, authorisation problems, the ability or otherwise of advisers to discuss problems with or the progress of a claim and the problem of lost claims.

Authorisation: The JCP normally require advisers to obtain written authorisation from claimants which is then sent to the appropriate office of JCP in order to enable discussion of cases with JCP staff. Otherwise claimants must be with advisers at the time of any conversation with JCP staff about their case. The policy of 'implied consent' which enabled many advisers to talk with JCP staff in the past appears to have lapsed with the introduction of the new structure. However we understand that the DWP are encouraging the use of the 'implied consent' principle where appropriate to facilitate assistance to claimants.

Access and communication

Milton Keynes

In March they reported that they could not get through to the office to discuss problems relating to claims.

In May they reported they expected to be able to get through when new phone lines were established.

There were problems with authorisation in order to be able to discuss cases. The Processing Centre's staff did not seem to be aware of the policy of implied consent according to the CAB.

Warwickshire

In April they could get through but the lines were often busy but sometimes the Processing Centre did not reply at all. There were also problems with authorisation in order to be able to discuss cases.

In July access was better but the Processing Centre asked not to be rung on Fridays and Mondays as they were very busy then. There were no problems discussing cases as long as authorisation had been sent. However in August they added that

authorisation was sometimes destroyed as soon as the immediate contact had been made so new authorisation had to be sent.

Oxford

In May they reported not being able to get through to discuss problems about cases or to get through to the appropriate section. This was still a problem in August. In particular they pointed to the fact that Processing Centre at Roebuck House had one telephone line and no fax facility.

Bradford

In March it could take hours to get through to the Processing Centre but they had been issued with direct line numbers. There were also problems with authorisation for the purpose of taking up cases on behalf of clients. But by August access to the Processing Centre had improved and there were no longer problems about establishing identity in order to discuss cases.

They were concerned that although they had direct line numbers to enable them to make enquiries this access route might be lost. In late August they reported that they were encouraged to ring the general enquiry line but they could never get through. With persistence they could get through on the ex-directory numbers for advisers even if they did not ring the correct one. (These were divided according to benefits.)

There seemed to be poor communication between the Contact Centre and the Processing Centre.

Example:

- Client claimed IB and IS clerically due to computer blip. He sent his sick note to the Processing Centre with a letter to confirm that he made his claim. The IB section returned this to him because no claim had been received according to their computer. The independent adviser suggested that the speak to the Contact Centre to clarify but they said they could not do this and if a claim had been received it would be on the computer.

Newham

There were authorisation difficulties for the purposes of discussing a case. Telephone contact improved as advisers were issued with a list of team managers as a first point of contact. However authorisation forms being lost was an issue. There were new email facilities for advisers which was welcome but advisers were not always getting a reply within the promised timescale.

Edinburgh

They were able to get through to discuss claims.

Other problems with Processing Centres

Milton Keynes

In May they reported that Processing Centres did sometimes lose claims and the claimant then had to make a fresh claim. There was also a problem where it was not clear which Processing Centre was dealing with a case. Having had a meeting with JCP officials advisers were assured that the Regional External Partnerships Manager for JCP would ensure that claimants would not have to phone round to find where their claim was – it would be the responsibility of the Cosham Processing Centre to trace the lost claim. But in August they reported that in fact it was the CAB that in practice had to find out where the claim has gone.

Only if the first two stages of the claim (via Contact Centre and local office) were completed could the local office send the claim through to the Processing Centre. It was taking a long time to process incapacity benefit – more than 8 weeks.

Warwickshire

They reported cases where on contacting the Processing Centre it appeared that claimants' records were lost or did not exist. There were cases where it was not clear which Processing Centre was responsible. It was also unclear where records were kept at an earlier stage in a claim – whether on CMS via the Contact Centre or at the local office or whether they have been passed to the Processing Centre.

Oxford

Records or papers were lost in some case and claimants then had to make fresh claims. Sometimes it was not clear which Processing Centre was dealing with a case.

A further problem related to changes in office responsibilities. The IB office used to be at Aylesbury. Evidence would naturally be sent to the office address at the top of the letter requesting it – this was not forwarded to Cosham so claims were stopped. In August they stressed that processing issues were the major problem area – claims were taking up to two months to get to the processing stage at Cosham.

Bradford

In March the CAB reported that the inadequate length of time records were kept on CMS had caused problems where there was a delay dealing with the case. This was getting better. People however routinely had to make claims again because papers or records were lost. Nor was it clear which Processing Centre was responsible when it was moved from Sheffield to Halifax, but this was not an issue by August.

In August the CMS records remained an issue; clients were being told to provide details more than once. The adviser was also aware of two recent examples where paper claim forms were issued, completed and returned but then lost somewhere between the Contact Centre and the Processing Centre. The adviser was concerned about the delays of several weeks processing claims, and leaving people without money for long periods. 'This is a problem that is not improving.'

Newham

In May they reported that claimants had to make fresh claims because papers or records were lost. For example sometimes claimants were told the claim/ record

was lost when it was still in the Jobcentre awaiting more information from the claimant. The claimant was then asked to make another claim unnecessarily. Medical Certificates were being lost without being logged on the system. This was leading to both IB and IS being stopped.

Edinburgh

They had cases where claimants were told to make fresh claims because records were lost – this usually happened when the Processing Centre has not written 'clerical case' on the claim form. Also the date of the request for the paper claim form was usually omitted. (This agency deals with a large number of clients who have learning difficulties and has persuaded the contact office to send out paper claim forms.)

It was not always clear which Processing Centre was dealing with a case – particularly where the claim was being dealt with by the under 18s adviser at local offices. When the advice centre phoned the Processing Centre they were told that they did not have the file and that they should contact the financial assessor at the local office. This official was more helpful and was able to tell them when information had been sent to the Processing Centre. The Advice Centre have said that when they informed the Processing Centre that they definitely *did* have the information the file would mysteriously be found. Whatever the explanation this happened they said on three or four occasions.

Claimants with special needs

Issues include access to clerical claim forms, inability of claimants to communicate by phone, attitude of JCP staff to those with special needs, call back problems for those with special needs, and access to interpreters. This section includes cases illustrating how those with disabilities or with language difficulties are unable to access the telephone claiming service and may as a result lose benefit.

Access to clerical claim forms, recognition of need for additional support

Milton Keynes

March

The general position was that the JCP had to be asked to send out a paper claim form but there was no guarantee that that this would happen. In contrast IB forms were sent out automatically. They would sometimes send out IS claim forms on request but were not sure if they would be willing to do this in the case of a JSA claim.

There was a problem for people claiming whose first language was not English. The JCP would sometimes refer these claimants to the CAB to complete a paper claim form.

From later reports the situation in Milton Keynes appeared to improve with more awareness of special needs claimants.

April

Arrangements were to be put in place for people who could not communicate over the phone. The advisers understood that if a claimant requested an interpreter they were to be called back at an agreed time with an interpreter.

May

They reported that where a claimant could not use the phone the JCP would arrange a face-to-face appointment and the claim will be then be made clerically.

Face-to-face interviews with interpreters should also have been arranged but the advisers reported that this did not always happen. Instead the JCP sent the client to the CAB to arrange and pay for an interpreter. The CAB then had to send the claimant back to the local office having made a phone call asking the local office to book and pay for an interpreter.

Warwickshire

The welfare rights service runs a half day advice session aimed at people whose first language is not English and also does home visits to disabled people. (They comment that the workers are thus ideally placed to assist the take up of benefits and this is now made more difficult by current procedures.)

April

Language barriers:

The way the new system was operated was rigid. The Contact Centre staff insisted that they had to do the 'start up' call even if this meant ringing back at a time when there was no interpreter.

Disability

If the adviser was making a home visit and wished to assist with the claim the Contact Centre would insist that they would have to call back. This meant the adviser was no longer with the disabled person.

Example:

A client had just come out of residential care and the adviser was on a home visit. The Contact Centre insisted they would have to call back and would not send out forms. The adviser could not make a fresh visit to the person's home just to be there

for a call back. Again the JCP appeared concerned that they should do the start up interview so that they could then put the information on CMS.

July

Arrangements were now in place to deal with people who did not speak English – the Contact Centre would usually arrange the call back with an interpreter present although they might take some basic details at the initial call.

They were also now sending out paper claim forms and they did not have to be asked to do so by the local advice service.

There were no reports of problems with forms not processed /accepted by the local jobcentre because not authorised /stamped.

Oxford

May

It was difficult for those with speech impediments or hearing difficulties to access the service. People with mental health problems were often unable to use the phone and became confused without face to face contact.

Paper claim forms were usually sent to clients who were unable to complete claims over the phone for instance because of disability, mental health problems or if English was not their first language.

The advisers asked people who could not read or write to come into the advice centre with their records of the call back interview so that they could check for mistakes.

For those who found it difficult to cope with conversation over the phone they were now generally sending out paper claim forms but sometimes they had to be asked to do so.

Claimants were sometimes seeking advice after the claim had been made because mistakes had been made as a result of communication or comprehension difficulties.

There were problems because the local office refused to process forms that were not authorised or stamped.

August

There were still problems for people with special needs particularly those whose first language was not English – even when they went to the local office they were not told they could use the language line. (As a result claims might be totally misunderstood and fall by the wayside because of a lack of understanding, staff commented.)

Bradford

March

There was a general problem that clients were not being given the option to claim via paper claim forms although occasionally, with prior arrangements, they heard of one or two in exceptional circumstances.

'There is not yet a breakdown of the system but its on its way – clients with serious illnesses /language barriers are not able to access the telephone to make claims'.

On inbound calls: there appeared to be a general lack of understanding of the additional needs of people with mental health or other communication difficulties.

The adviser commented: 'The Contact Centre will sometimes agree to go through a third person but to my knowledge there is no paper claim alternative. Sometimes they will agree over the phone to defer the WFI when asked but the client may then be sent one'. The question of clients with special needs was raised at a liaison meeting but the CAB was told that there were no plans to meet these special needs. Some of the JCP staff expressed surprise that people with special needs could face problems.

August

There has been some movement on the issue and some flexibility has been introduced.

Advisers could inform the Contact Centre in writing of changes in circumstances.

The Contact Centre have agreed to accept paper claim forms when asked to do so by the CAB for people with mental health or language problems or with other special needs. The adviser added: ' *I am aware of two recent examples where paper claim forms were issued, completed and returned but then lost between the Contact Centre and the processing centre.*'

Paper claim forms were not issued automatically to people with special needs; they still had to be requested and it could be a struggle to obtain the paper claim form and /or the face to face interview for a client. Sometimes to get a result they had to involve managers.

Claimants were sometimes worried about using the phone for claims.

Example: A client who was illiterate wanted face to face help with making his claim. He was worried that he would have to read information out over the phone or write things down and he would not be able to do so.

Newham

May

Newham council advisers were completing paper claim forms for some disabled people with communication difficulties such as those with learning difficulties. These were initially being rejected by the Benefit Delivery Centre (Processing Centre) and only accepted when a complaint was received. Advisers were downloading forms from the internet if they were available, but these forms were not date-stamped and therefore the start date of the claim was delayed.

Arrangements were not in place to deal with claimants with special needs or those who could not communicate by phone.

The JCP were not prepared to send out paper claim forms unless faced with a complaint as above.

There were also problems where the JCP were not accepting paper claim forms on the basis that they were not authorised and they were then not being processed.

Claimants were seeking advice after making the claim because of problems of communication.

Examples:

- A woman with a learning disability visited the JCP office to get help to initiate a claim for IB and IS as she was unable to make a claim via phone to the Contact Centre. She was turned away from the JCP office because she did not have an appointment and was unable to use the warm phone facility because of her disability. As a result no benefit claim was made. She sought financial support from her elderly parent with hardship resulting. The case came to the attention of Newham advice services when the elderly parent died and the person with a learning disability sought help as she had no income.
- A Bangladeshi woman could not deal with the call back for her IS claim. She did not speak English but the Contact Centre was able to provide an interpreter via language line. However the adviser was told that if she was not able to provide an interpreter for the interview at the jobcentre then she would have to wait three weeks before an appointment could be arranged for her. Social Services were able to provide an interpreter and JCP was able to arrange an appointment for a week later. The adviser was told that people who were unable to provide an interpreter would have to wait longer for an appointment. The explanation was that it would take more time to interview someone if they had to use a language line interpreter.

August

There was an urgent need to resolve the question of access to clerical claim forms for certain claimants. For example where the claimant was housebound it was not normal policy for JCP to make home visits. The disabled claimant would be expected to make a claim by phone. People were still being turned away from the local JCP when they sought to make a clerical claim by being interviewed at the local office. The officers had promised to resolve this issue two months ago and JCP had said that advisers should ring the Contact Centre for claim forms. But there was no procedure in place for those not in touch with an adviser. The local JCP did not have the claim forms to give out and claimants might not be able to ring the Contact

Centre to ask for one. The advice centres in Newham are expecting an answer to some of these problems in September.

Lewes and Seaford

The telephone claims system had broken down around March 2006.

When the telephone system had been in operation there had been no arrangements put in place to deal with special needs claimants.

Before paper forms started being sent out again as a matter of course there was enormous difficulty getting paper claim forms even where they were absolutely essential because of the mental health problems of the client and the fact that the client would be unable to deal with the call back interview.

Having to make telephone claims was a problem for clients with mental health problems who needed a support worker with them at the time. Many claimants were very confused about their own financial and / or benefit situations and did not understand what they were claiming and what they were having to report as they did not understand the questions.

Edinburgh

Arrangements were in place to send out paper claim forms but they only sent these out on request.

Many of their clients did not have the skills to make an initial telephone claim because of learning difficulties. Despite this there was an insistence that a claim should be made by the claimant rather than the appointee. Claimants also sought advice after the claim had been made because of communication/ comprehension difficulties.

The local office did sometimes refuse to process paper claim forms that were not stamped/authorised.

They sometimes sent out incorrect paper claim forms. This happened when a claim form for incapacity in youth was requested. The official at the Contact Centre had put an asterisk on the form saying 'Social Worker was insistent on getting clerical forms and not using CMS'. The social worker was in fact a member of staff at the advice centre. To get the correct form they phoned the local office who insisted the advice agency call Dundee again, but then they relented and managed to locate the form at another local office and sent it to the advice centre.

Delays

Delays occur throughout the process or sometimes in one part of the system although what has caused the delay may be difficult to identify because the system is fragmented and based at different places.

Before March there were extensive delays leading to great hardship. The JCP was not ready to introduce the changes. More alarming is the fact that in some areas although there have been improvements serious delays continue to occur and in some areas there seems to be little improvement.

Milton Keynes

In March the advice agency gave the following examples of delays.

- A February case: a claimant's benefit took three months to process.
- Claimant claimed in mid October 2005. Advised the week before Christmas to claim again as original claim was lost. Nothing had been received by 20 February; Cosham Processing Centre promised it would be processed that week but nothing received by the end of February. Cosham explained they had a large backlog.
- Early February saw family who had been awaiting payment of JSA since before Christmas and were told that they were no longer eligible for a crisis loan to tide them over.
- Claim made in October 05 – delay sending this to Cosham and benefit not received until December – after 38 working days.
- Delay getting the date for the WFI or compulsory interview in the case of JSA. The claimant was made redundant on 10 February; applied for benefit 13 February; interview due 27 February and only then would benefit be processed. He would have no money left before that date. He could not access the social fund so the agency used their ex directory numbers to arrange for a time for the claimant to go to the office to apply for a crisis loan.

In April they reported:

- Client applied for JSA in Jan 06. He came to the advice centre in March 06 for money advice. His wife worked part time and the client had been told by JCP that his application was complete and there seemed to be no reason for the delay in paying the JSA. He was advised to return to the Jobcentre and ask for a definitive decision regarding JSA and return for advice, if refused.

In May the CAB reported:

- There were delays and problems for people claiming without national insurance numbers. The JCP had stopped taking applications for national insurance numbers at Milton Keynes. Instead claimants had to go to Aylesbury, Oxford or High Wycombe. Advisers commented that this cost people time and money they often did not have. It was not clear whether any of these clients had their fares reimbursed.
- It took 'an inordinately long time to process IB claims – 8 weeks or more. For JSA there could a long time between the initial call and the interview requiring crisis loans to be paid.'

- It normally took a week or two to get a WFI.
- The length of time records were kept on CMS created problems because if the initial claim was not completed in time then the claim was shut down. The claimant then had to start again from scratch.
- If evidence, checked at the local office, was not supplied within the period in which the information was held on CMS then the claim dropped out of the system and had to be started again. If there is a problem producing the evidence e.g. the last wage slip from the employer, then the electronic claim has to be printed off, sent physically for processing and the claim would then be dealt with clerically.

Warwickshire

When the scheme had been introduced calls sometimes had to be rerouted at the initial stage of the claim to other contact centres– this ought not to matter but different offices appeared to access different information on CMS. It was not clear why this happened.

WFI delay of approximately 2 weeks- slightly reduced by July

Oxford

In some areas served by the advice agency there had been a virtual breakdown of the system and call backs were not being made and no WFI offered. Clients had to make repeated claims and suffered delays as a result.

Claims for IS and IB took an exceptionally long time to get to Cosham Processing Centre from the local office and processing was longer than government recommendations. This caused hardship and claimants were often told they could only have between one and three crisis loans during the processing waiting period.

The fact that CMS records were only held for a month caused problems where there were delays dealing with the claim. Due to delays in processing it was common for the claim to be backdated to the date the form was signed rather than to the date of the initial phone call.

In August the delays for information to reach the Processing Centre continued to be a problem.

Bradford

In March it was weeks before people got a date for the WFI.

The adviser also referred to the problems created by the limited time the information was kept on CMS, although this was reducing. There were still cases where a claim had been lost on the way to the local office and then no record was held on CMS so the client had to start again – this could be months later.

By August there were still delays of several weeks processing claims and the CAB were seeing more people who had been left without money for long periods. *"This aspect of the JCP service does not seem to be improving." It takes two to three*

weeks between the date of the initial inbound call and the date of the WFI. This creates hardship for claimants. Some are threatened with eviction and / or have no money for food."

Social fund issues

Claimants may need to obtain an emergency payment while they await the outcome of the claim for benefit. There are two alternatives; an interim payment or a social fund crisis loan. However most Contact Centres do not offer claimants interim payments but they may be offered a discretionary social fund crisis loan if they apply. There is a ceiling on the amount that can be paid because the social fund is a cash limited scheme. Claimants may therefore find they are restricted to a few crisis loan payments regardless of the length of time it takes to process the claim for the main benefit.

Job Centre Plus official policy

The target for processing an application for a crisis loan is two days. Departmental figures show that for May 2006 the period taken was 1.4 days. [email from JCP Partnerships Division 11 August 06]

These figures however ignore the fact that it may take the claimant a considerable number of days or even weeks if they have to wait for the WFI to make the application. Access to make the application should not be restricted to phone applications- to quote JCP:

"Although JCP advocates the greater use of telephones, customers must not be compelled to make their application for a loan by telephone. Customers who have difficulty making themselves understood on the telephone must be offered an interview so that the application can be taken face to face" [ibid]

The following is what was reported as happening in practice.

Milton Keynes

In March crisis loan system was no longer worked- the person had to ring a special number and there was no one person who had responsibility. Claimants were not allowed to go to the local office to claim SF payments. They were not processed within 24 hours. The advice centre advisers said:

"A new system started on 9 Feb 06 - to telephone only for crisis loans. I was assured that more lines were put in to cope with this but all are engaged or you get cut off."

This problem of delays leading to reliance on the social fund was brought to the attention of senior staff of the JCP, in particular that the waiting times for processing led to people reaching their 'crisis loan maximum'. There had been no response to this criticism from JCP senior staff.

Some people had been forced to rely on food parcels (see examples in the delays section of this report.)

Examples reported in March/April of cases in which claimants needed to ask for crisis loans:

- A 20 year old who applied for JSA on 6 Feb came to the bureau for help on 21 March 06.
- He wanted to apply for a crisis loan and the jobcentre had given him a telephone number to ring to make an appointment which he had tried calling endlessly but was not able to get through.
- At the time the claimant was staying with a friend who had provided him with accommodation; the client paid no rent, but he still needed to eat and clothe himself. He was waiting to do a course at local MK college.
- The client returned to the bureau having been to the local office. The CAB gave him a crisis loan form to complete (they sometimes downloaded forms that were available on the internet) but the local office of JCP would not deal with the application that day. He had not been given an appointment for his JSA claim interview.
- Adviser rang the Manager for the SF Crisis loans to give her the client's details. She agreed to get someone to ring the client today on his contact number.
- The independent adviser filled out an information sheet for the client. Advised the client to go back to the JCP and show them the sheet. Advised that the client should ask them to let him apply for the crisis loan that day and that he should also ask for an interview date for his JSA claim.
- The adviser tried calling the Salvation Army for food parcels but they had closed at 12.30 pm and the client would not reach their office on time. They also tried calling the food bank but they did not do parcels for Tuesday.
- Another client who had returned from abroad, aged 32, applied for JSA. She had had two telephone interviews and the date for her personal interview is 28 March. She came to the CAB on 21 March because she had no money. (The date at which she first contacted the JCP is not known).
- She asked JCP for an interim payment but was refused. She was not given any information about crisis loans. It was possible that some of the delay was caused because she had come from abroad. The CAB advised the client to apply for a crisis loan. However the response on the main number 0800 731 9091 was 'all advisers are busy please try again later'. The call was then cut off. The CAB adviser rang the SF manager and the JCP Regional Manager but neither was available. Two hours later the CAB tried to contact staff again via the ex-directory number and they promised to call the client direct. They said that she might not be entitled to a crisis loan because she was living with her parents.
- Two days later the CAB phoned the SF again and spoke to an official who agreed that there was a problem getting through on the 0800 number. He could not suggest a solution to this. Client was offered a food voucher but refused this.

Milton Keynes

In April/May claimants were still not allowed to go to the local office for a loan. Had to wait for a WFI. Not processed within 24 hours of original application. They hoped to see an improvement when they received a list of ex directory numbers.

In August they the advice centre reported that they understood the Independent Review Service was very concerned about the inadequate service provided to claimants who asked for crisis loans. In April an important change was introduced so that if claimants were unhappy with the review decision from the local office the person could then apply direct to the social fund inspector at the Independent Reviews Service. [IRS Journal No 33 Spring 2006 and the IRS website.]

The local JCP office at Bletchley did not have a 'warm phone' on which calls relating to social fund requests could be made. So the person was sent away to another office to make a call where they might or might not get through.

Warwickshire

In April claimants were not being told about crisis loans. If they went to the local office they were turned away and were not allowed in. They sometimes had to wait for the WFI and the application was then not processed in the 24 hours.

Oxford

In May claimants were not allowed to go to the local office to make an application for a crisis loan. They had to wait for a WFI. Normally waited for 1-3 days *after* claim actually made for decision and payment.

It was impossible to get through to the crisis loan section on the 0800 number. To quote the adviser:

'I have never managed to do this straight away. If you send claimants to Oxford Floyds Row, they are often told to use the warm phone at JCP and then still cannot get through. Making a claim is very difficult.'

And:

'Crisis loans are ridiculous. It is impossible to get through to make a claim. This is supposed to be a last resort for those in a crisis and it is NOT working.'
(their emphasis)

Claims for IS/IB sometimes took an exceptionally long time to get from Oxford JCP to Cosham Processing Office – claimants were often told they could only get 1-3 crisis loans during the processing waiting period.

Oxford

In August claimants were still required to go to the office to make a call for an appointment to make a claim for a crisis loan. An appointment would be made *before* the WFI so that had improved.

Bradford

In March claimants were not allowed to go to the local office. The application was being processed in 2-4 days but only once the application was actually made.

Gate-keeping by phone was very common. Claimants were told they would not qualify for a crisis loan before the application had actually been made. Claimants routinely believed that they had made a real claim and that they had been refused.

Bradford

In August claimants were still not being allowed to go to the local office and had to wait for the WFI. SF claims were being processed within 24 hours but the gate-keeping issue and the fact that people thought they had made an application when they had not done so remained.

However the JCP said that they would *not* pay crisis loans when claims were pending.

Newham

There was a problem with Ilford JCP (which is not in Newham) where there was a long wait to get appointments for crisis loans. A client of Newham Council Homeless Persons' Unit had applied for JSA. The claimant was referred by the Council to get an appointment for a crisis loan on 21 April. Ilford JC said she could come back on 25 April to see if there was a SF appointment cancellation. If there was no cancellation the next appointment would be 2 May.

The advisers were told that a crisis loan telephone claim system was to be started in Newham.

Lewes and Seaford outreach

Claimants *were* allowed to go to local office for a crisis loan. (This is an area where the telephone claim system has broken down and is only partially in operation.)

Edinburgh

Claimants were allowed to go to the local office to make applications for loans.

Other general comments from advisers

Advisors gave us their general comments on the new scheme. Some comments have been included in the relevant sections above but additional points are made below.

Milton Keynes (August)

There was now a disturbing trend of those claimants who did go to appeal and won having to wait two to three months for the decision of the tribunal to be implemented by JCP but who might even then not get the arrears of benefit paid to which they were entitled. In some cases these were people who were suffering from illnesses and whose appeal reversed a decision that they were not entitled to incapacity benefit.

Oxford (May)

There were particular problems of communications between offices, for example the fact that papers/letters returned to Aylesbury were not forwarded to Cosham so that claims were stopped.

One of the main problems was that following the WFI the claim was sent to the wrong office, there were long delays processing claims plus the fact that advisers could not get through by phone. Communication was a major issue.

Now most of the procedures relating to call centres seemed to be OK but there were still minor problems – such as the need for training in other benefits for call centre staff.

People needed to be told about other benefits to which they were entitled. Families needed to be told about their right to claim CTC. Pregnant women needed to be informed about the Sure Start Maternity Grant and those who had mortgages should be sent the forms M 112 after the waiting period.

Oxford (August)

Claims were taking two months to get to the processing stage at the Cosham office. The fact that the Cosham office only had one line and no fax meant that advisers continued to have problems contacting the office. The District Manager could facilitate contacts in a few cases but generally the service was bad. They understood that senior staff had no direct access to Processing Centres except by email so they were not in a position to follow through claims.

An independent adviser who has been involved in benefit advice either within the former DSS or as independent adviser for 20 years and was now based in Oxford said: *'It's now worse than dealing with the CSA. The DWP have learnt nothing. We now feel powerless as advisers to help our clients through the administration process.'*

On appeals he commented: *'Although the central appeals team is helpful they can only email through their instructions to the Processing Centre – they have no means of ensuring that the decision is implemented.'* He added that he understood that

where cases went back more than a period of three months there was a need to find the paper records for a case and that these may have been put into storage units in old DWP/JCP offices that are no longer used by the public. He said that he understood that the files were not stored centrally except for DLA records so no one knew where to look for them.'

Bradford (March)

An adviser commented: '*The system is cumbersome, claimants are making initial calls lasting up to 45 minutes (at their expense) and then having to go through the same information on the outbound call. Call centres are robotic.*' They were unlikely to do anything other than go through the script and then make mistakes– eg. telling a client they couldn't make a claim because the claimant was working where in fact the person would have qualified because of their hours and wages.

Bradford (August)

There seemed to be inconsistency and lack of communication between offices.

Recently when ringing the Contact Centre using the number issued, the CAB would be routed to a centre in a different part of the country which would then tell them they shouldn't be speaking to them. There was also a problem of communication between the Contact Centre and the Processing Centre.

The adviser, also with many years of experience, said that the new systems reflected a new culture in the DWP and this was not helping claimants. It was the worst she had ever experienced.

Newham

Communications between local offices and the Benefits Delivery Centre (Processing Centre) could be improved. Claims were being lost in the post between the JCP office and the Processing Centre. The adviser felt that this paper element of the system should be eliminated and the claim made totally electronically.

Lewes and Seaford Outreach

The availability of paper forms was essential for people who found it difficult to understand and provide grounds for a claim and the ability to answer questions. She added: '*Fortunately we are back to the paper system for all applicants which makes life much easier for the adviser trying to assist the claimant.*'

Edinburgh

In Edinburgh CMS had been introduced gradually since January on a post code basis – this was very confusing for claimants and advisers.

Example:

- The client tried to make an initial claim at the local office only to be told they now had to go through to the Contact Centre in Dundee. After phoning

continuously for 10 minutes they got through and were put in a queue. When the Contact Centre adviser took the details, they then informed the client that they should not have come via the Contact Centre as the local office was still their contact point. The adviser had to phone back the local office again who were very apologetic.

Suffolk

In Suffolk the telephone system had broken down and the area had returned to a clerical form system. Advisers did not report the same problems as elsewhere. Here most of the problems stemmed from being in a rural area with long distances between offices and an inadequate public transport system.

Examples:

- The local social fund office was in Lowestoft and this meant that some claimants had to make a journey of 16/17 miles. However once an application was made the SF crisis loan was processed immediately (if the claimant was at the local office) or otherwise within 24 hours of the application being made. There was no question of having to wait for a Work Focused Interview in order to make an application for a social fund loan as was the experience in some other areas where the new centralised system was in place.
- The system originally broke down because the delays simply became unmanageable.
- There had been some confusion about Processing Centres and it was unclear which office would be dealing with processing benefit claims. This had since been resolved but some delays were occurring:

Example:

- The person claimed IS on 8 June and has been paid interim payments but there was still no decision on the actual claim. It is coming up to eight weeks but there was no confirmation of the person's entitlement to incapacity benefit.

FEEDBACK ON PILOT SCHEMES IN NORTH LONDON

There were a number of different pilots taking place to test different models of service delivery.

Workers with the homeless and the mentally ill reported various issues as they were based in pilot areas in which new methods of contacting the Processing Centre were being trialled and the phone contact with the Contact Centre was by one call – to a free number so that the claimant did not have to make arrangements for a call back. The interview process was completed in one go. However they understood this could still be a problem for some claimants. Some needed an adviser to be present and deal with the call, others might make the call on a mobile phone and there might

be a cost to the call depending on the arrangement with that mobile phone company. They understood that if the person made the call on a mobile phone the JCP would normally call back.

In one area there was an alteration to the method of contacting the Processing Centre. The adviser had to ring on the public phone number which gave a choice of three numbers. These put the person through to the telephone team. The team members did not have access to much information and would in most cases have to email the section dealing with the case and ask the relevant person to ring back the adviser. The advisers reported their frustration at not being able to communicate with the right official having had an effective means of communication direct with the relevant sections in the past. (Parts of London have been served by a centralised processing office for the last decade.) The relevant person might or might not phone back or if they did the adviser might be out or engaged dealing with a client. A new barrier to communication had been raised without apparently thinking through the consequences for claimants, they said.

Another change in parts of North London was the introduction of a change in the claim process. In this case the claim bypassed the local office and went direct from the Contact Centre to the Glasgow Processing Centre. The claimant was still sent the statement to check that it was correct; this was manually corrected, signed and then sent to Glasgow Processing Centre. In this model the Work Focused Interview was automatically deferred for 8 weeks.

Particular comments about the pilots were:

- the system was fragmented with no one person responsible for seeing through a claim.
- It was getting worse – every day there was a change to the procedure and staff were not notified of the changes.
- Authorisation is required or the person has to be present in order to take up the case with the Processing Centre. 'But claimants cannot wait three hours for a call back to see what has happened to their claim – yet it was once so easy to deal with Glasgow and they were efficient'.
- There were not enough telephone lines allowing communication with the Processing Centre.
- It was difficult dealing with the new system for homeless claimants – they often didn't have phones, hostels might allow use of a communal phone but then there was no privacy, and it might be complicated to arrange a call back from JCP. Often the claimants had specific health needs as well and it had been much simpler to go with the claimant to complete a form at the local office. Getting payment depended on which was their local office—'residents in one area sometimes had to go to two offices in order to get a payment, in another office people could wait all day just to get payment'.

JOBCENTRE PLUS QUESTIONNAIRE

Contact name

Organisation

Address

Telephone number

Email

Please return within two weeks of receipt to Beth Lakhani at CPAG, 94 White Lion Street, London N1 9PF

Email: blakhani@cpag.org.uk Tel 020 7812 5220 / Fax: 020 7837 6414

Tick boxes as appropriate and/ or add comments where requested. Additional space at end of form for comments and examples.

1) Name of your local contact centre(s)

2) Name of your local processing centre(s)

3) At what level is the new CMS operating in your area?

- Is the contact centre sending out paper claim forms after initial contact made by phone?
 Yes
 No
- Does the contact centre follow up the inbound call with a call back to the claimant, followed by a record of the telephone interview for the claimant to sign?
 Yes
 No
- Are claimants asked to report changes of circumstances to the Contact Centre?
 Yes
 No
- Are there any other arrangements?

4) Where CMS and telephone contact centres are only partially in operation

- If paper claim forms are sent out after the initial contact by phone
 - has this been the case right from the start of telephone claiming?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Did the area start with a full telephone claiming system and then reinstate the issuing of paper claim forms?
 - Yes
 - No

Add additional comments – for example if you know why the paper claim forms were reintroduced?

In some areas there was a virtual breakdown of the system – *please give examples of how claimants were affected if this happened in your area.*

(If claim forms only are sent out to certain claimants see later question)

5) Making the initial inbound call

- Are there problems getting through?
 - Yes
 - No
- Average time it takes to get through [] minutes.
- How many repeat calls are needed? []
- Is this getting
 - better?
 - worse?
 - no change?
- Do claimants report problems gaining access to a phone? If claimants have to use the 'warm' phone in the local Jobcentre Plus office are there queues for its use?

Please give examples and any comment.

- Do claimants have problems or like using the phone as a way of making the initial claim?

Please give your comments with examples

6) Content of the inbound call

In your experience does this cover the following?

- Address and basic details of claimant
 Yes
 No

- Indicate whether the person can claim
 Yes
 No

- Arrange for a claim for child tax credit to be made (this should then be couriered to the Revenue)
 Yes
 No

- Advise on whether the person might be able to claim a secondary benefit (the Jobcentre Plus give as an example bereavement payment)
 Yes
 No

- Whether a partner (if any) might qualify for a benefit
 Yes
 No

Please add additional comments about the above – are there particular difficulties in relation to certain claimants eg, a person without a NINo, a person who may/may not satisfy the right to reside test etc?

7) Call back for long telephone interview (if applicable in your area)

- How long does the call back interview usually take? [] minutes

- Are claimants sometimes asked for a second interview?
 Yes
 No

- How long does it take before the call back interview takes place? *[we have heard it can take anything from three days to four weeks]*
[] days

[] weeks

- Is the Contact Centre willing to call back your office if the claimant is with you?

Yes

No

- How does this work in practice? *Add comments and examples of problems.*

8) Record of the call back interview

- Is this usually correct?

Yes

No

Add examples/comments where there are mistakes

- Quality of the call back telephone interview: does it appear to be comprehensive or do the financial assessors at the local office of Jobcentre Plus have to ask additional questions when the claimants go for interviews at the local Jobcentre Plus office?

Add comments and examples of problems

9) People who cannot cope with telephone claims (eg because of disability or English is not first language etc)

- Have arrangements have been put in place to deal with the special needs of certain claimants who cannot communicate on the phone?

Yes

No

- Are contact centres arranging to send out paper claim forms?

Yes

No

- Do they have to be asked to do so?

Yes

No

- Are claimants seeking advice after the claim has been made and mistakes have been made because of communication or comprehension difficulties?

Yes

No

- Do you/have you had problems with forms sent out by contact centre which the jobcentre plus local office refuse to process as they are not 'authorised'/stamped?
 Yes
 No

Add comments with examples.

10) Delays being allocated a work focused interview

- Are there delays before claimants are referred to the local office for a work focused interview?
 Yes
 No
- What is the average time scale between the initial inbound claim and the date for the work focused interview?
[] days
[] weeks

Add comments with examples.

11) Applications for social fund payments

- Are claimants allowed to go to the local office to apply for a crisis loan or other social fund payment?
 Yes
 No
- Do they have to wait for the work focused interview?
 Yes
 No
- Are social fund crisis loan applications being processed within 24 hours of the initial application?
 Yes
 No
- How long does it take to get a crisis loan?

Additional comments

12) Backdating of benefits

- Are claims being backdated to the date of the initial phone call to the contact centre?
 Yes
 No
- Is the date of claim treated as the date on which the person signs the record of the outbound phone call?
 Yes
 No

Add comments and examples

13) Length of time record of claim held on CMS

(We understand that these records are only held on CMS for approximately a month.)

- Has this caused you or your clients problems where there have been delays dealing with a claim?
 Yes
 No

Comments and examples

14) Processing Centres

- Are you able to get through to discuss problems with claims?
 Yes
 No
- Are there difficulties establishing identity and the right to discuss a case on behalf of your client?
 Yes
 No
- Have you had cases where claimants have had to make fresh claims /been told to make fresh claims because the papers/ records have been lost or do not exist?
 Yes
 No
- Have there been cases where it is not clear which Processing Centre is dealing with a case?
 Yes

No

Comments and examples

Any additional comments you have on the current system

Agencies that participated

- Bradford CAB
- Lewes and Seaford CAB Outreach and Welfare benefits worker.
- The Action Group Edinburgh
- Milton Keynes CAB
- Warwickshire Welfare Rights Advice Service
- Newham Council Social Regeneration Unit
- Beccles, Bungay and Halesworth CAB
- Barton Advice Centre, Oxford.
- An advice service in North London

About CPAG

CPAG is the leading charity campaigning for the abolition of poverty among children and young people in the UK and for the improvement of the lives of low income families. CPAG aims to: raise awareness of the causes, extent, nature and impact of poverty and strategies for its eradication and prevention; bring about positive policy changes for families with children in poverty; and enable those eligible for income maintenance to have access to their full entitlement.

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