

Independent Review Service

IRS Disability Equality Scheme

Results from 2009 Customer Survey.

Background

The Disability Discrimination Act was amended in 2005. This now places a “general duty” on public authorities, when carrying out their functions to promote disability equality. Most public authorities are also subject to certain “specific” duties. These include an obligation to publish a Disability Equality Scheme by a specified date. The Independent Review Service (IRS) needed to meet this obligation. The initial survey was carried out in September 2006 and the results had to be published no later than 4th December 2006. This target was met. During the designated period in September 2006, 684 surveys were issued to all IRS customers and other service users. The survey was issued to all users not just those known to be disabled. This enabled data to be collected from a wide cross section of IRS customers.

Following on from the first survey, the IRS needed to review the scheme and make any necessary adjustments. This action had to be completed “not more than three years “from the initial review” and then at the same interval for future surveys. One of the essential elements remained involving disabled people to help to further develop the scheme.

Methodology

Initially the equality survey form used in 2006 was scrutinised and analysed. (A copy of this form can be found at Appendix One to the 2006 survey). A number of small amendments were then made.

As in 2006, the form was issued to all customers and not just to those with known disabilities. It was also possible that some able bodied customers might have helped or represented people with disabilities. They could therefore offer useful feedback on issues facing disabled people. Also some IRS customers may have significant health problems but do not consider themselves disabled.

The survey included an explanation of what is meant by “disability”. The customer was then asked to say whether or not they considered themselves to be disabled. Examples were given of various disability categories such as physical impairment, blindness and learning disabilities and respondents were asked to indicate which category or categories they came into or alternatively to advise if they were not disabled.

Subsequent questions asked customers to comment on how they had initially contacted the IRS and about their experiences in dealing with the organisation. They were also asked for feedback on how the IRS might improve existing services – including ensuring disabled people can fully access the complete range of services on offer. A list of the services currently available was included in the survey.

The survey also asked about issues such as raising awareness of the problems facing disabled people, and how the IRS could ensure disabled people were treated equally. Respondents were asked if they would use the IRS again and if not the reasons for this.

While the previous survey in 2006 had only been for a period of two weeks, on this occasion it was decided to issue the survey throughout the month of April 2009. The survey was issued with each decision letter sent out during the month including those from the Customer Service Team (CST) and to other service users including those attending internal and external workshops.

Survey Results

Response rate

A total of 2,173 questionnaires were issued. These resulted in 179 counted responses or a response rate of 8.23%. This compares to 684 questionnaires issued in 2006; which resulted in 42 responses or a response rate of 6.1%. A further 13 blank responses were returned which contained no information at all.

These additional responses have not been included in the survey results.

A higher number of forms was issued as the period was extended from two weeks to a month. In addition, the IRS workload in April 2009 was also significantly higher than in September 2006.

152 or 84.9% of the respondents considered themselves to have one or more disability. This compared to 78% in 2006. A further 5 respondents from the remaining 26, stated they had significant health problems but did not consider themselves disabled.

Accessing the IRS and using IRS Services

166 (92.7%) of the respondents had no problems accessing the IRS and using the various services available. Indeed many respondents commented on what a good service they received and how easy it was to contact the IRS.

Of the 13 who were dissatisfied, three were clearly unhappy with the result of their review rather than the service they received and one was unhappy with the length of time it took for their award to arrive. (This is outside the IRS' jurisdiction as all payments are sent out by Job Centre Plus (JCP) . There were comments from a further 9 respondents. 4 advised the process took too long and 5 that it was difficult to get through on the phone. Two people suggested the review process could be speeded up if Inspectors phoned them to find out more information rather than sending a written letter.

The 5 who had problems with the phone all said the number was constantly engaged. Some suggested the phone team should be expanded. Two people said they had mental health problems and found it hard to make phone calls. Getting a constantly engaged number made them feel more stressed. Higher levels of work recently received by the IRS have increased the number of phone calls received and may also have contributed to decisions taking longer to clear.

Several respondents stated that while they had no difficulties contacting the IRS by phone, they were unhappy they had to pay to phone from a mobile phone. Some did not have landlines and their mobile was the only phone

available. Even though the telephone response team will call them straight back, these respondents felt that there should be a free phone number for mobiles, as there was for landlines. However no mobile phone service provider has such a facility nor is there any chance of this becoming available in the short term.

Ways of communicating with IRS

Although most respondents were happy with contacting the IRS by phone or in writing, there were a number who wanted a face to face interview in their own home. Reasons behind this included;-

- Difficulties expressing themselves on the phone or in writing.
- The lack of anyone to help with the review such as a representative.
- A visit would enable the Inspector to understand their specific disabilities better.
- A visit would enable the Inspector to see their living conditions / why items were needed.

Generally, Inspectors find it is possible to conduct a fair review without the expense of a face to face interview; but in exceptional circumstances Inspectors will visit an applicant if this is necessary to allow a fair review or to resolve evidential problems.

A respondent, who was blind, was unhappy that the decision and survey form were in small print. It is possible for documents to be printed in a larger font if requested. However this customer and one other stated they would have liked their correspondence to be sent by E Mail as his computer can convert documents into larger print. There are data security implications associated with sending confidential information by e-mail, but we intend to explore whether other options are available.

Although the IRS has had the mini com system for use by deaf and hard of hearing people for some time, this has never been used. One deaf respondent did ask if the IRS could have a text phone. This system has replaced the mini com in some places and is a lot easier and simpler to use. We plan to explore replacing the mini com with a text phone.

Since the previous survey in 2006, IRS decision letters have been greatly simplified. Furthermore in April 2009, the majority of inspectors were doing even shorter and simpler decisions. In 2006 three customers felt the language in decisions was difficult to understand. No one mentioned this in the current survey returns. However one respondent did say they found the claim form (SF300) too complicated and another two customers said they were only able to submit claims because they had help from representatives. These were all people with mental health problems who said filling in the forms made them stressed. The claim form is produced by JCP, but we will consider this feedback when we next comment on the claim form.

The amount of paperwork sent out by the IRS has also significantly reduced since 2006 and copies of the papers sent in by JCP are only sent out on request. Only one person complained about the paperwork sent to them, but this person was disgruntled about every aspect of the review process.

Raising Awareness of Disability

Several customers felt that many people particularly those with disabilities were not aware that the IRS existed. One said she had only recently found out about the service and would have claimed in the past if she had known before. Suggestions for providing more information about the organisation included:

- A television publicity campaign.
- Advertising on public transport
- More information being available in places like the CAB.

A few respondents said it was still hard to get details about the IRS from the DWP or JCP. However, being able to apply directly to the IRS for an Inspector's review has made the process easier.

Two correspondents said that there was little point in making claims to the IRS as they wanted a grant but received Incapacity Benefit only. They both felt it would have stopped them wasting their time if they had had more information showing that only those who got specific benefits could receive a grant. These benefits are Income Support, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), income related Employment Support Allowance (ESA) and Pension Credit.

One correspondent felt the IRS would have a better understanding about the problems of those with disabilities, if disabled staff were employed. The IRS values diversity among its staff, and the contribution that disabled members of staff can make. A number of our staff, including Social Fund Inspectors, are disabled.

Over the past eight years the organisation has actively promoted IRS workshops for external organisations and the DWP. This has included workshops for people representing those with disabilities. A high number of marketing packs are issued each year to a range of different organisations. These include various Charities and Disability Groups who have met with the Social Fund Commissioner.

Since April 2007 the Commissioner has met with:-

- Help the Aged
- Age Concern
- The Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Family Welfare Association
- The CAB
- Scottish Association of Mental Health

This is in addition to meetings before April 2007 with other organisations including MIND, RNIB, RNID and MENCAP. Some of these meetings have led to awareness sessions for IRS staff and additional workshops. Overall this work is aimed at raising awareness and to give staff a better understanding about the issues facing disabled people.

Most respondents were pleased that IRS staff took part in awareness sessions about disability. However there were ten comments that IRS staff still did not understand their particular problem. Amongst the specific comments were; -

- IRS staff don't know what it is like to have mental health problems.
- Disabled people are not treated the same as other people.
- I get upset easily and this makes it hard for me to speak on the phone.
- It would be better if you had spoken to my GP about my condition so you know what this is like.
- You should have asked my doctor for my records.

Some publicity may need to be given to the fact that doctors will not as a matter of course provide medical details to a third party and even if a GP writes a report, the patient could have to pay for this service.

The most commonly expressed view from the survey was that IRS staff needed more knowledge about mental health problems. The only other condition specifically alluded to was someone who felt the consequences of their arthritis were not understood.

Earlier in 2009, awareness sessions were held with a worker from MIND about the effects of mental health problems and other health related sessions are planned. The worker suffers from mental health problems and has extensive experience of working with people who have mental health problems.

In the past, sessions dealing with conditions such as AIDS, drug addiction and cystic fibrosis have also been held and all inspectors have access to information packs that give details about various conditions and further information can be obtained via the internet. Despite these awareness sessions, respondents that were otherwise very positive about their dealings with the IRS, still believed there was a lack of understanding about the effect of health problems particularly mental health conditions.

Use of IRS in the future

149 of the respondents (83.2%) said they would use the IRS again. This included a few people who had clearly not received what they had applied for. Of the remaining 30 replies, only 20 or 11.2% of the total would not reapply. The remaining 10 were undecided.

Over the coming year the Management Team at the IRS will both consider the specific points and results the survey has raised and also how the service to those with disabilities can be improved as part of any business initiatives. The Disability Equality Scheme for the IRS will also be updated by December 2009.

November 2009.